

# **The United Nations in the Twenty-First Century: Prospects for Reform**

---

*Razali Ismail*

The United Nations is in urgent need of reform, but there is no agreement on what should be done or how this can be achieved, particularly between the developed and developing countries, but also within the UN itself. In particular, the five permanent members and the developing countries differ over the future of the Security Council and the role of the veto. UN peacekeeping is over-stretched, and the member states need to reassess what it can and cannot be expected to do. The UN must work more closely with non-governmental organisations, as in the eradication of poverty and achieving sustainability.

I am honoured to be asked to deliver the first Erskine Childers memorial lecture. Erskine Childers was a true multilateralist who never detracted from attempting to bring about a United Nations committed to a 'world community living in peace, under the laws of justice'. There were others similarly committed, and there are compatriots now who at every milestone in the development of the UN, try to give effect to these aspirations. As an insider, if I may call myself one, often frustrated and jaded by the mundane manner in which business in the UN is usually conducted, I cannot but be impressed by the tenacity of such committed globalists and multilateralists.

## **The Need for Reform**

Many who have observed the operations of the UN have concluded that the world organisation is in need of reform. Proposals for revamping the UN have proliferated in recent years. Some say that almost everything about UN peacekeeping in the post-Cold War environment needs to be reconsidered and reconstructed. Others contend that the Security Council needs to be refashioned to rectify long-standing imbalances; that the UN's development activities need to be streamlined and redirected, the Economic and Social Council needs to be recast, the organisation's finances and accounting practices have to be improved, the international civil service needs to be reduced in size, and the UN needs to be depoliticised and pruned, primed and prodded, toward greater efficiency. The case for better efficiency, co-ordination, and streamlining of the UN Secretariat and its principal organs and specialised agencies is incontrovertible.

The system has, however, proved impervious to change. The complex and diffuse nature of Secretariat operations, run often in semi-independent fashion by various agency chiefs, with competing or duplicating mandates, frustrates purposeful and effective direction. Successive Secretaries-General have been unable or unwilling to impose authority, sometimes for fear of offending a major power. The fault lies on both sides of the house, especially when member states pursue equivocal policies, asking for new mandates and therefore resources for the organisation.

Listening to all this discourse, there is considerable *déjà vu* in today's penchant for UN reform. Talk of reform has been continuous for almost 45 years, although in differing degrees. What is striking is that little by way of reform has actually been accomplished, beyond creeping incremental adjustments. Resistance, inertia and lack of consensus for change have time and again prevailed, and reform has remained much more of an aspiration than a fact. If the UN is to adjust to reflect the twenty-first century and to cope with new demands, it is important that all should share a common premise of what constitutes reform in order to lend the requisite authority to

## The UN and its Future in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

the UN as a multilateral system, to extend its legitimacy and to strengthen its promotion and compliance with international law. For this purpose it is necessary to assess and come to terms with the UN's inception and history.

### **The Past**

The current politics and structure of the UN continue to bear a strong imprint of its foundation. The establishment of the UN arose from a post-world war situation, with the ideas and institutional force originating from either side of the Atlantic. The ideals and values expressed in the UN Charter were, and remain, the ideals and values of the group of victor nations of the Second World War led by the United States. The headquarters of all the principal agencies and the parent institution itself, stand grouped on either side of the Atlantic, shaping the UN political culture. Of the first four UN Secretaries-General, three came from Western Europe. Only one of the five permanent Security Council members (the P-5) came from outside that frame of reference.

The Cold War also reflected the inter-play of politics of the Atlantic. The two superpowers purposefully chose not to repose the conduct of their vital national security interests in the UN. The collective security that the UN system could theoretically provide was not considered in any way adequate to the protection of essential superpower concerns. Regional military alliances, which underpinned their respective leadership of opposing blocs, were preferred over the uncertain and increasingly disparate framework of the UN. For example, when some measure of nuclear arms control was finally judged to be in mutual superpower interest, it was done so by bilateral means and not within the UN framework.

In the context of the UN reform process at the moment, it is evident that the founder members of the UN place a high premium on the fact that reform should not in any way or manner affect their rights, prerogatives and status. Major powers also fear that they may lose access to senior positions in the

## The UN and its Future in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

UN Secretariat, where common practice assures key jobs for P-5 nationals. In the UN vocabulary, the extended rights and privileges of the P-5 are called the 'cascade effect', and even extend to permanent representation on the International Court of Justice. The Secretary-General has the power, if he is willing to use it, to change these practices.

### **Values and Practicalities**

As the twenty-first century draws nearer we are witnessing an era where foreign policy and international relations are increasingly values-driven. The United States and other major countries form the vanguard of what amounts to a universal crusade to spread doctrines and practice of their version of good governance and democracy, in tandem with wider acceptance of liberal market economic policy as the pathway to modernisation. But a profound paradox emerges here. As the world grows more democratic, so the UN becomes less democratic - or at least mired in ways of governance reflecting its formative period, which fail to mirror today's world and relative global influence. Realists argue that there is no correlation between a more democratic world and a more democratic multilateral system; that no intrinsic linkages exist. That is an argument that rests upon the distribution of power and those that want to maintain their built-in advantage. The signs are that the fundamental logic of such an argument will be put to the test sooner rather than later in the century ahead.

Critical reflection drives us to the conclusion that despite urgency and obvious need, the UN is probably not going to be reformed in a meaningful way. Differences among member states stemming from power-political rivalries and 'ideological' antagonisms have been fundamental obstacles to UN reform. These differences continue today. Even as the debate between East and West lapsed into obsolescence, the debate between North and South continues, with emphasis on conflicting claims on fundamental values and perspectives. The UN remains a stake and a prize in this

## The UN and its Future in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

escalating debate. Every proposal for change in the organisation is assessed in the light of advantages bestowed upon one or the other side, and every recommendation for reform offered by one is predictably resisted by the other. Such a situation has tended to cause political gridlock everywhere.

The developing countries of the South regard the UN as a place of last recourse, not having the Group of 7 (G-7) or the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, and having to bend to the conditionalities imposed by the Bretton Woods institutions (the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund). These countries believe in the centrality of the UN being a universal house, where they plead their case every September at the General Assembly (GA). They have not accepted the so-called 'division of labour' between the UN and other multilateral bodies like the World Bank, IMF, and the World Trade Organization, where the World Bank is accorded primacy in finance and development, the IMF in structural adjustment, and the WTO in trade and investment regimes. The UN is only allowed to articulate the normative description of 'soft issues' such as sustainable development, population and refugees, human rights and humanitarian issues.

The frailty of such a role for the UN is most recently evident in the outcome of the GA special session in June 1997, which reviewed implementation of Agenda 21 and the commitments of the Earth Summit. The outcome reflected the inability of the UN to grapple with failure of governments to meet commitments and its weakness in being able to catalyse the means and resources to operationalise sustainable development. The UN has precious little to translate words into real action.

Enthusiasm for reform is also unevenly distributed within the UN itself. For many of those Secretariat officials who have been busy 'reforming' for the last 15 years, the possibility of genuine change is greeted with cynicism. For others in the bureaucracy, the prospect of change is threatening, and the tendency to delay or derail reform via resistance from the inside is quite real.

## **Peacekeeping and the Security Council**

The one huge task accorded to the UN is the maintenance of international peace and security. But this is within the parish and exclusive control of the Security Council, which is very much an elitist structure that the developing countries see in need of urgent reform in order to level the playing field and to broaden the decision-making process. If the UN was created by states to serve the interests of states, the states of the South are now insisting on their rights to be counted in the name of sovereign equality. Every aspect of UN reform has to factor in this consideration.

The Working Group on the reform of the Security Council is an amphitheatre for the above. It is not merely about the addition of permanent members to those that can pay for Council seats. The developing countries have waited four decades to become permanent members, and this has been made possible by Germany and Japan making their own justifiable claims to become permanent members, and the concurrent interest of the present permanent members to gain wider support for reducing their financial contributions to both the regular and peacekeeping budgets. This working group must wrestle with the question of the veto - the most intractable issue of reform which personifies the inherent inequality of the majority of members, who would like to see its scope limited and eventually eliminated. The reform of the Security Council hangs on the ability of the P-5 to make the necessary adjustments, at least by voluntary constraint, not to abuse use of the veto as they have done since 1945 for their own imperatives.

An important aspect of the reform of the Security Council has to do with the concerns of a dozen or so important countries who have traditionally supported the multilateral thrust and philosophy of the UN in all its aspects, but who themselves will not profit from an expansion of the Security Council and particularly the addition of new permanent members. I refer

## The UN and its Future in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

here to countries like Canada, New Zealand, Italy, Spain, Mexico and others in the developing world who aspire to be permanent members but who may well lose in the race. Their position ensures further division within the UN when Security Council reform is instituted.

All aspects of UN reform have to relate to the overall backdrop of the international scene today. It must be recognised that the gap between the legal and political sovereignty of states and their ability to give that sovereignty concrete shape has never been larger than at present, for example, the transboundary nature of environmental pollution, refugee flows across national borders, transnational crime, illicit flow of arms and drugs and global communication webs that defy national controls. Even as this gap widens, there is no corresponding international machinery to do the job. The UN, standing for that international machinery, is not up to the challenge, whether the global problems relate to the traditional peace and security area or to the economic and social fields. Regional machinery such as the Association of South-East Asian Nations, Mercusor and the European Union fare much better, pointing the directions for future linkages between the UN and these bodies.

Despite structural difficulties, the UN has performed well and has an impressive record of past achievements. The UN has rendered many services of incalculable value to its members and to the world community such as overseeing de-colonisation, eliminating *apartheid*, action in peacekeeping and peacemaking efforts, defending human rights, providing assistance to refugees, ensuring the development and extension of international law, and the promotion of collective action on such common problems as resource depletion, demographic strain, and so on. But how well has the UN done in managing today's problems?

The UN appears to suffer from two fundamental problems: the ambiguity of its role in the world and its inability to adapt as the world changes. While the causes and effects of most major challenges facing governments are international, the authority for dealing with such problems remains vested

## The UN and its Future in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

in states. Furthermore, the UN was established to prevent acts of international aggression, but it is now being asked to solve deep-seated, often seemingly intractable internal problems of vulnerable states and their implosion. Today's wars are often wars within a particular state, civil wars fuelled by easy access to cheap weaponry sold mostly by the major powers, where conflicts make no distinction in the death and misery they bring, making humanitarian needs greater now than before.

The UN is currently over-stretched in areas of peacekeeping and enforcement operations more than it has ever been in its entire history, though this only adds up to about 20 per cent of the UN's total activity. In addition the UN is now suffocated by criticism and doubt, derived in part by internal discontent, but also because it is mired in a variety of conflicts for which there are no easy or obvious solutions, for example, Cyprus, Western Sahara, Bosnia and Haiti. The UN's collective security apparatus has been compelled to improvise in these situations. As a result it has frequently found itself confined to the margins of dangerous conflict, unable to even fulfil the more modest tasks of mediation or peacekeeping. It is also clear that national sovereignty and the principle of non-interference can no longer be used as a mask for actions that violate universal values. This means that states and peoples need to readjust their views of what the UN can and cannot do in relation to internal conflicts. The debate at the UN on the reform process, in the context of the working group on an Agenda for Peace, blows strong and hard with proponents of inviolability and sovereignty frustrating consensus in the name of the 'principle of consent' in preventive diplomacy.

The UN was established to provide a co-ordinating core for international activity, but it has a staff no larger than that of major municipal authorities. All the problems on the UN's agenda today require enormous military, financial, physical and staff resources, but these have to be fought for because member states do not have, or are unwilling to place them, at the

## The UN and its Future in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

disposal of the Secretary-General or the Security Council. At the same time member states are not yet accustomed to thinking that multilateral initiatives are the key to world peace and security, and not just an optional extra.

The challenge facing the UN in being able to deal with today's problems is not necessarily one of scope, but of knowing how to steer a course between inaction and over-commitment. It is about procedures for responding to and managing crises while laying the foundations for preventing such crises in the future. It is also about developing new ways of doing international politics so that potential problems are surfaced and solved. This requires an acknowledgement that the great bulk of the UN's work is not in crisis management, the restoration of peace or peacekeeping, but in the less acknowledged work in the areas of development, disarmament, human rights, humanitarian and refugee relief, and environmental protection.

It is not clear how strongly countries really want UN reform. The sort of reform being addressed, important as it is, is not intended to shape the UN to reflect the world as it is, nor to strengthen the rule of international law. Neither is its purpose to equip the UN to sanction countries that fall to meet international treaty obligations - whether they be enforcement of human rights, trade in nuclear fissile material or mandatory financial payments to the UN itself. This is attributed to the selectivity and power politics applied by permanent members of the Security Council over, for example, Chechnya and Cuba. Neither do the major states accept the International Court of Justice as a principal buttress for the rule of law in international affairs. In fact the reforms which are now the subject of inter-governmental debate in the UN (except for Security Council reform), are not intended to make the UN more democratic, but cost-effective, leaner, more efficient and co-ordinated. The present reform objectives have in some ways diverted attention from the UN's real function and responsibilities, and for some, that is their precise purpose.

The UN Charter embodies universal values but the promotion of such

## The UN and its Future in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

values borders on its politicisation. This is further sharpened to the extent that liberal global values are now promoted to include not only human rights, but also democratic governance and orthodox free market economics. The claim that such a blend of comprehensive and interrelated values provide coherent answers to all the problems of humankind is a notion over which many, and not just those in Asia, will harbour deep reservations. While the equivalence of all human rights is a consensual principle, the primacy accorded to civil and political rights at the expense of social and economic rights would, however, carry with it complex repercussions for industrialised economies at a time when environmental protection and sustainable development have risen to the top of the international economic agenda; when the 'polluter pays' principle is more assertively proclaimed; and when the poverty gap between the rich and the least developed is widening. The facts speak for themselves: 1.4 billion people now live in absolute poverty, 40 per cent more than 15 years ago. When these facts are added to increasing insecurity about basic needs such as access to food and clean water supplies, it is clear that combining the economic and social agenda with the political and civil is no longer an option but a necessity.

### **Sovereignty: More or Less?**

Future historians may come to view the last years of the 1990s as an age of paradox, in which international politics has been dominated by two contradictory facts - increasing nationalism and decreasing national power. The time would seem ripe for adapting international equipment to meet the challenge of such a paradox. But is this possible given the multiplicity of factors involved in composing a solution? And would such a composition place the UN at the centre of the solution?

Over the last several years the UN has been increasingly incapacitated by an identity crisis which prevents it from articulating a coherent vision of its role in today's world, that is at once compelling and attractive to a balanced

## The UN and its Future in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

majority of its members. It is a crisis rooted in the evolution of the UN's political ethos over 50 years. Uncertainty about what a practical UN role should be has prevented member states from developing and refining the UN's central structure. Even if there were stronger agreement about the UN's specific role, the UN would be poorly equipped to exercise it without a change in its core structure and approach.

The United Nations has always been both less and more than what was hoped for. Proponents lament its inability to persevere and be more effective in the face of persistent conflict, oppression and inequalities. For them it is a failed, or at best, failing opportunity for a better world order. Critics lament its over-extended involvement in international affairs, its regulatory policies and practices. For them the UN is a borderline world government with too much power and too few ideas for its own good and for the good of others. Both views overstate their case and provide too many misguided assessments of the actual and the potential role of this institution.

Any accurate appraisal of the UN must start with the recognition that it is an institution run by 185 directors, five more equal than others, all with little in common except that they all possess sovereign statehood and a recognised right to participate in the UN. Any discussion of UN reform must proceed from recognition of the very real political and economic constraints under which the organisation must operate. The UN and the global community face a set of problems that were neither anticipated nor planned when the UN was established 51 years ago. Only with a clear idea of the source of difficulties that have confronted the UN will it be able to meet the challenges of the future.

The UN remains the rock upon which to build the most encompassing structure of governance; its global reach remains indispensable. Certainly, the UN faces some serious problems in the areas of finances, legitimacy and effectiveness, yet in many areas the most significant reform must take place in the capitals of member states, where the vital ingredients of

## The UN and its Future in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

political and material support for the UN and multilateralism requires unambiguous governmental and public commitment. No amount of institutional reform will guarantee that the UN will continue to receive these in the future.

The UN will have to transform itself from an organisation serving the interests of states to an organisation serving the interests of people living in an interdependent and global society. It will have to provide opportunities for the articulation of grievances and some kind of participation of non-state actors. It could and should serve as a clearing house for a network of Non-Governmental Organisations and stakeholders, whose work and interests are directed towards achieving greater understanding of the complexities of inter-group conflict and developing concrete solutions for the eradication of poverty, for the building of social equity and ensuring sustainability.

Eventually it is essential that supportive member states work together with NGOs to generate the political pressure necessary to convince reluctant and belligerent governments of the need to maintain the UN, recognising that it is the most viable opportunity for the articulation and management of global co-operation. Greater public interest in international affairs is required, particularly amongst the publics of major countries. This would allow for a resurgent voice for multilateralism, so that the voice of the vocal minority who publicly malign the UN is no longer heard unchallenged.

I sincerely hope that my statement is not out of line with the aspirations and vision of Erskine Childers. I have had the honour of knowing him to some extent, catching a glimpse of his convictions and quest, seeing the man un-Colossus-like but tenacious, an Irishman who drew perhaps from his own wellsprings an empathy for the cause of the South, the weak and the marginalised.

(Delivered 30 June 1997)