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# UN80 and the Struggle for a Renewed World Organization

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It is a worn out cliché to say that the United Nations is in a crisis. The world organization hardly ever sailed in calm waters and maybe never will in its current form. Still, at its 80th anniversary, the financial and political stress is high. This stress is a reflection of the world's situation and developments in individual states as well as their relationships. Over fifty UN members are categorized as fragile states at the level of high warning or worse, indicating they are dealing with major domestic issues<sup>1</sup>. According to the UN's Secretary-General, António Guterres, the UN in 2025 was faced with the highest number of conflicts since its foundation. It's the third year that one of the Security Council's permanent members, the Russian Federation, is waging a war of aggression against its neighbor, Ukraine, in a blatant breach of international law and the UN Charter. In this conflict and many others, like the war between Hamas-controlled Gaza and Israel, the UN's ability to make any difference is not obvious, putting in doubt its relevance in maintaining international peace and security, the UN's main pillar.

There is a clear relationship between democracy and a functioning international order. The last decade's continuing trend of democratic backsliding and autocratization in many countries<sup>2</sup> is contributing to a worsening geopolitical situation and a downhill trajectory of multilateralism. Governments that avoid and deny accountability at home are less likely to accept international accountability and norms. Autocratic powers are busy with hollowing

out the multilateral system from within<sup>3</sup>. Their perceived influence is getting stronger, including at the UN. Populist nationalists are capitalizing on the UN's weaknesses and help undermine the organization further.

The ripple effects of Donald Trump taking power in the United States for a second time in 2025 across international diplomacy are disastrous. In particular, legislation in the US Congress provides for discontinuing US funding of the UN. The US is the UN's largest contributor. The share of the regular budget is 22 percent. Whether or not, and to what degree, this will happen, is hard to predict. Anticipating the worst case, the UN Secretariat launched the so-called "UN80" initiative, an across-the-system push to cut staff and expenditure at an unprecedented magnitude of one fifth. The additional objective to consolidate the UN's byzantine structure across many dozens of "entities" is overdue and an opportunity. But ultimately, the project is about saving money and doing "less with less".

Streamlining can keep the UN machinery running and make it more effective, but major underlying problems will remain. Civil society and experts argue that strengthening the United Nations, including through new sources of funding and a related budget increase, must go hand in hand with greater legitimacy and oversight. The degree of greater legitimacy that is needed can be achieved through new institutions and mechanisms that broaden representation and participation

beyond today's exclusive circle of member state governments. UN80 is a good occasion to review developments in this area.

The creation of a UN Parliamentary Assembly (UNPA) has been a key proposal to strengthen the democratic character of the UN by including elected representatives. There are many different ways how this can be achieved. The pragmatic approach foresees an establishment by the UN General Assembly as a formally subsidiary body according to Article 22 of the UN Charter with an initial membership made up of national legislators while offering the option of direct elections<sup>4</sup>. The idea of a global parliamentary body has a long history and predates the UN and even the League of Nations<sup>5</sup>. In the early 1990s, the World Federalist Movement played an important role in bringing it into the shape and form of a consultative UNPA as an initial, strategic step. The Millennium Forum of civil society in 2000 and many other organizations and platforms endorsed it. In 2007, an international appeal for a UNPA was launched as a joint platform for the proponents of the proposal. The late former UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali supported the project as an "indispensable step toward democratic control of globalization" and numerous other UN experts and former officials followed. From then to the mid-2010s momentum was building. The number of individual parliamentarians across party lines who signed the appeal grew to over 1,500 from over 120 countries. The African Union's Pan-African Parliament adopted supportive resolutions in 2007 and 2016; the Latin-American Parliament in 2008; the Parliament of Mercosur in 2011; and the European Parliament in 2011, 2017 and 2018<sup>6</sup>. The idea was that parliamentary and civil society support would make it appropriate for governments to pick up the proposal. The foreign minister of Malta spoke in favor of it at the 2013 Commonwealth Summit. Support from national parliaments

was hard to come by, however, primarily due to the negative stance taken by the Secretariat of the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) which considers itself in charge of the "parliamentary dimension" of international cooperation. Proponents of a UNPA, many of which have IPU experience, keep emphasizing the complementary nature of the proposed new UN body and the IPU. Assessments made by the IPU itself appear to indicate they are realizing that the influence they can achieve at the UN in the current setup is marginal<sup>7</sup>.

In 2015, the Albright–Gambari Commission on Global Security, Justice & Governance, convened by The Hague Institute for Global Justice and the Stimson Center, recommended establishing a UN Parliamentary Network under Article 22 of the UN Charter as a practical way to strengthen UN-citizen relations. Though details were not fleshed out, the idea was to find a pathway forward below the threshold of a full-fledged assembly. No doubt those behind this initiative were hoping to establish support from the US administration following the US elections in 2016. What happened instead was the surprise success of Trump under a nationalist "America first" platform. Internationally, one of the first things he did was quitting US' support of the Paris climate agreement. International diplomacy turned into crisis mode. In view of democracy coming under increasing pressure in many countries, it became apparent that efforts for democratizing and strengthening the UN are connected to defending and strengthening democracy at the level of UN member states too. Based on this insight, Democracy Without Borders was established. A 2018 call to action signed by dozens of parliamentarians, among them the former foreign ministers of Malta and Germany, pointed out that "the UN, the multilateral order and democracy are under attack." A UNPA was needed to help counter this trend, the statement argued. Eyes now

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turned to the UN's 75th anniversary in 2020 as the next potential opportunity for far-reaching reforms. The plenary assembly of the World Federation of United Nations Associations convened in the Dominican Republic in 2018, for instance, called for a "UN 2020 summit that considers comprehensive reform measures, including the creation of a UN Parliamentary Assembly."

On 30 January 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared an international public health emergency and some six weeks later, a global pandemic. The WHO later estimated that COVID-19 led to nearly 15 million excess deaths globally in 2020 and 2021. Many more people got infected. The pandemic brought health systems to the brink of collapse and countries competed over getting hold of medical supply and vaccines. In many places, public life came to a halt. Convening a meaningful UN summit in September was no longer possible. The UN nonetheless managed to conduct public consultations on the occasion of its 75th anniversary, claiming that more than 1.5 million people participated online or in other ways. The UN's report notes that the most frequently ideas raised by participants to renew the UN included a UNPA and "citizen proposal initiative", among others<sup>8</sup>. Both were also endorsed in the "UN75 People's Declaration and Plan for Action" issued by the UN2020 civil society platform which is now the Coalition for the UN We Need (C4UN). From 2021 onwards, advocacy was broadened by launching the "We The Peoples" platform to promote three complementary proposals: the UNPA, a UN World Citizens' Initiative (UNWCI) to let citizens place items on the UN agenda, and a UN Envoy to facilitate access of civil society. More than 300 groups from across the world endorsed the platform, from small local initiatives to large international networks. A statement signed by over 100 parliamentarians in 2022 encouraged states

to establish a "Group of Friends for Inclusive Global Governance" that works to advance these proposals.

As an outcome of UN75 commitments adopted by the UN General Assembly, the Secretary-General presented a report on "Our Common Agenda" which paved the way for the UN convening a "Summit of the Future" (SOTF) and adopting a "Pact for the Future". This was promoted by the UN as a "once in a lifetime" opportunity to address global governance transformations. Under the leadership of C4UN, the Bahá'í International Community and others, civil society groups immediately engaged with the process and organized their own consultations over the course of two years. At one of these events, the foreign minister of Malaysia endorsed a UNPA<sup>9</sup>. One outcome was the People's Pact for the Future<sup>10</sup> which mirrored the sections of the intergovernmental document. Among other things, it recommended enhancing global governance legitimacy and expanding participation through a UNPA, UNWCI, a civil society envoy – and global citizens' assemblies (GCAs). Ahead of SOTF, a joint civil society letter urged governments to include these measures in the Pact.

In C4UN's People's Pact, GCAs were described as "composed of individuals selected by civic lottery and demographically representative of the global population, to deliberate and make recommendations on matters of global concern." This innovation entered the UN context in 2021, when a civil society-organized process convened 100 randomly selected participants worldwide to deliberate on climate and ecological risks in connection with the UN's climate negotiations in Glasgow. A similar undertaking is pursued at the 2025 negotiations hosted by Brazil. A recent joint policy brief by Democracy Without Borders and Democracy International recommends that the

UN should establish a permanent framework that enables “UN bodies and entities to set up and operate different ad hoc GCAs as needed”<sup>11</sup>.

The SOTF process showed that the influence and space of civil society at the UN is shrinking despite all rhetoric. Civic space at the UN has become a contested terrain. When the Sustainable Development Goals were drafted and negotiated, the process was open and civil society representatives were in the room. In this case, consultations between member states and those with non-governmental groups were kept strictly separate. Civil society relied on “friendly states” for inside information. Over 350 groups signed a letter raising concern that civil society input was being overlooked. The Pact negotiations were additionally set up in a way that filtered out any ambitious proposals to begin with: language had to be accepted by member states by consensus. Action 55, the relevant one in the field of participation, says that “We recognize the importance of the United Nations engagement with national parliaments and relevant stakeholders, while preserving the intergovernmental character of the Organization.” It is to be ensured “that relevant stakeholders can meaningfully participate, in their respective roles and responsibilities.”<sup>12</sup>

At the 2024 Nairobi UN Civil Society Conference “in support of the Summit of the Future”, as it was called, a number of coalitions were established, one of which to advocate for UN Charter reform. At the same time, the Global Governance Forum started convening a study group which presented a draft “Second UN Charter” on the occasion of the SOTF<sup>13</sup>. Among other things, the draft integrates a Parliamentary Assembly as a new principal body alongside the General Assembly. If it were to be done under the current Charter, adopting amendments according to Articles

108 or 109 would require approval not only by two thirds of UN members, but also by all five permanent members of the Security Council. Innovative thinking is ongoing on how to possibly circumvent this requirement if there was sufficient support on the part of other member states like legally creating a new Charter treaty rather than amending the old one. It is still a long way, however, to build common ground among governments on what exactly Charter changes should entail. Most attention and interest is devoted to Security Council reform but even after more than 30 years, the matter is still bogged down in the Intergovernmental Negotiations. Documents coming out of that process still illustrate familiar divergences.

International opinion surveys indicate that majorities of people in most countries are supportive of proposals aiming at increasing representation and participation at the UN. They often prefer institutional designs that make the UN more authoritative and less unequal in representation<sup>14</sup>. Researchers suggest that “relevant reform efforts can build on widespread public endorsement.”<sup>15</sup> This includes support of different forms of a UNPA and a global parliament.<sup>16</sup>

For sure, if it was possible to set up a UNPA via Charter reform immediately, the step of creating it first as a subsidiary body of the General Assembly should be skipped. In the meantime, both approaches are complementary. It remains to be seen which one will pick up more momentum, if any, among member states. Trump’s return to the White House in January 2025 amplified the disruptive dynamics first seen after 2016. On the one hand, the global political environment is worse than 15 years ago. On the other, it is increasingly clear, even to many governments, that the UN requires fundamental changes. The Pact for the Future pledged “a new beginning

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in multilateralism” and stated that “If we do not change course, we risk tipping into a future of persistent crisis and breakdown.”

The UN80 project is an immediate short-term response to an anticipated funding shock. It is not about renewing the UN. Yet, at some point, it will become impossible to avoid the larger issues the UN is suffering

from. UN80 is an opportunity for civil society to continue emphasizing that strengthening the UN must involve setting up institutions and mechanisms like a UNPA, UNWCI and GCAs. This will require some investment but the benefits will be much larger. Finally, the tool of citizens’ assembly could be used ad hoc even in a process like UN80 to capitalize on the common sense of the world’s people.

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3. Flonk, Daniëlle, and Maria J Debre. 2025. “Hollow Multilateralism: How Autocracies Contest the Norms and Procedures of International Organizations.” *International Affairs* 101 (4): 1463–82.
4. Brauer, Maja, and Andreas Bummel. 2020. *A United Nations Parliamentary Assembly: A Policy Review of Democracy Without Borders*. Democracy Without Borders.
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6. In the European Parliament’s case building on previous resolutions passed in 1994, 1999, 2004 and 2005. Resolutions reprinted in: Brauer/Bummel.
7. See Leinen/Bummel, pp. 161-3.
8. United Nations. 2021. “Shaping Our Future Together: Listening to People’s Priorities for the Future and Their Ideas for Action. Concluding Report of the UN75 Office.” *un75*.online, pp. 65-6.
9. But two months later he was no longer in office due to snap elections.
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16. See also Leinen/Bummel, pp. 464-6.