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How to reform the U.N.

By Jayantha Dhanapala

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Years ago, during the Cold War, Secretary of State John Foster Dulles wise-cracked that, "The United Nations was not set up to be a reformatory. It was assumed that you would be good before you got in, and not that being in would make you good."

Years later, the United Nations has been exposed as having some bad eggs, many structural rigidities and lots of room for change. Perhaps no more so than the corporate world, or more to the point, no more than other multilateral institutions like the European Commission and the International Olympic Committee. But we have, rightly, come to expect the highest standards of efficiency and ethical conduct from the United Nations. To be sure the United Nations is more than the sum of its 192

member states, and, after all, as Shakespeare has written, "Lilies that fester smell far worse than weeds."

"Reforming" has a clearly pejorative implication -- unlike "changing" -- when in fact all human institutions should undergo change to ensure responsiveness to fresh challenges and to avoid obsolescence. Change need not always be a response to the discovery of malfeasance. The imperative for the improved and modernized governance of the U.N. system is irrefutable.

The United Nations has attempted to change its structures and procedures before and it will -- and must -- have such efforts in future, especially under a new secretary-general with a fresh mandate in 2007. The curtain can never come down on change. But the latest demand for change comes in the wake of a political crisis at a time of serious adjustment in the global multilateral order to the countervailing imperatives of a world that is both unipolar and globalized and where the global consensus on international peace and security remains fragmented.

The other distinguishing feature of this wave of change is the need to manage it so that it is seen to benefit the 192 member states equitably. Sadly, some changes have been misperceived as attempts to upset the basic equilibrium underlying the charter and the relations among the principal U.N. organs, especially the General Assembly and the Security Council. The reform agenda has also been seen as an attempt to shift long-established priorities of importance to developing countries in which the

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secretariat's impartiality is being doubted.

In this politically charged atmosphere, the United Nations has fortunately taken several steps away from the brink of a crisis brought on by the cap on expenditure and the disastrously divisive vote of April 28 in the 5th Committee, repeated on May 8 in the General Assembly, to reject some of the proposed changes. The cap is now off and fresh attempts at compromise are possible with renewed efforts to bring the U.N. staff on board more fully. This comes precisely at a time when the world keeps looking to the United Nations for help -- as happened recently with the call for a cessation of hostilities and a peacekeeping force in Lebanon -- while humanitarian assistance from the United Nations continues to be provided to so many parts of the world. And so a fresh opportunity is available to resume the reform agenda.

Already much has been achieved. The Peace Building Commission has been established and has conducted its first meeting. So has the Human Rights Council. An Ethics Office has been set up; whistleblower and financial-disclosure policies are finalized; the internal oversight office has strengthened its capacity; a Central Emergency Response Fund has been created; and many other administrative reforms have been accomplished.

Of the unfulfilled agenda, the reform of the Security Council -- of which its expansion is but one element -- remains outstanding. Until there is a reasonable hope of united action this will remain controversial. Meanwhile, all concerned must explore other viable models beyond the two proposed by the High Level panel and recycled by the secretary-general.

The restructuring of institutions in the development, humanitarian-assistance and environment fields must await a report of the panel co-chaired by the prime ministers of Mozambique, Norway and Pakistan due in September. U.N. Economic and Social Council reform, a counterterrorism strategy including a definition of terrorism and other agreed secretariat reforms have still to be finalized.

Underlying all this is the vital need for close consultations with the staff on all aspects of the proposed secretariat changes, including a selective "buyout." Member states, too, cannot be expected to buy into the logic of reform unless they see how it will be beneficial to their interests. The compelling argument for change must be communicated more effectively. There is also much that can be retained while the bathwater is drained.

The United Nations' capacity to generate ideas that benefit people must continue. Its ability to adopt synoptic views transcending member states' national interests must not be curbed. The United Nations is not only a platform and a forum; it is a repository of universal values and an incubator of ideas that must motivate a dedicated staff and benefit people.

A few days before the first -- and so far only -- Asian Secretary-General, U Thant, relinquished office in December 1971, he said: "To the impatient voices from all quarters calling for an end to the United Nations and its replacement with a more dynamic and more effective instrument for peace, this Secretary-General can only reply: Take care; in today's troubled world there might not be a chance to establish a new international organization -- much less one better than the United Nations. Cherish it, improve it. But do not forsake it!"

We would do well to heed this advice.

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