

**People and Parliaments:
Towards a Human Security Agenda**

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**Address to Citizens for a
United Nations People's Assembly**

San Francisco, June 4, 2005

My task is to discuss the importance of developing a Parliamentary Assembly at the United Nations. I do this in the context of the theme of this meeting: “Creating a United Nations People’s Parliamentary Assembly.” For I believe strongly that the rise of civil society is one of the landmark events of our time.

We should celebrate the fact that civil society has already become a new force in world affairs. To tell the truth, governments are afraid of it. The media does not understand it. The name itself seems vague, and describing what it means is hard to do. Yet it has the potential to drive political processes everywhere toward implementing the elements of a culture of peace. Throughout history, most great social movements, from the abolition of slavery to women’s equality, have begun not with governments but with ordinary people. The rise of global civil society in the twenty-first century is preparing the way for a new kind of governance across the world.

The gains that have so far been made in achieving limited disarmament agreements, aid to the developing countries, environmental protection, and advancement of human rights would not have occurred without the push exerted by civil society. Any examination of social progress over the past number of decades will show that leading members of

civil society provided the impetus to push governments forward. This was particularly noticeable during the cycle of world conferences of the 1990s and the development of the Landmines Treaty along with the International Criminal Court.

Civil society activism in advancing social justice has reached a new level of involvement and is now empowering millions of persons around the world in bringing forward their concerns. This was obvious in the highly visible global dialogue preceding the 2003 Iraq war, in which civil society questioned the very legitimacy of the war itself for close to one year before it was actually waged. Around the world, literally millions of people of all ages, political opinions, and cultures took to the streets in peace marches and demonstrations in the days before the attacks began. Never before had this happened on such a grand scale before a war actually started. Robert Muller, former Assistance Secretary-General of the U.N. and Chancellor Emeritus of the University for Peace, sees this as a stunning new era of global listening, speaking, and responsibility. He said:

No matter what happens, history will record that this is a new era, and that the 21st century has been initiated with the world in a global dialogue looking deeply, profoundly and responsibly as a global community at the legitimacy of the actions of a nation that is desperate to go to war.

Two broad characterizations of civil society might be said to be those who work within the structural processes of the U.N., and those who work outside the traditional systems. They are not mutually exclusive by any means. The fluidity of civil society is one of its hallmarks.

The first track of civil society participates in governmental arenas in an effort to influence governmental decisions. They crowd the basement corridors of the U.N. headquarters in New York where they lobby delegates, hold seminars and workshops, and track various U.N. committee meetings. Sometimes, accredited delegates with special competence address the meetings. When the U.N. holds international conferences on various themes, NGOs spearhead parallel meetings where experts suggest new ideas. To get along with the institutional process, NGOs must constrain their criticism and put up with the tedious tenets of diplomacy in which progress is often measured in the minutest details of draft texts.

This patience does have its rewards. Just before the 2000 U.N. Millennium Year, Kofi Annan, clearly a friend of and believer in NGOs, convened a five-day NGO Forum to provide input into the governmental summit to take place a few months later. Annan called the gathering “the NGO Revolution” because it went far beyond protesting against the dark side of globalizations; civil society can become the “new superpower,” he

said, in building worldwide campaigns to strengthen multilateral norms and develop legal regimes.

The second track of civil society is less disciplined, less constrained, often volatile in its criticism, and frequently deeply creative. Nowhere is this collection of civil society more visible than at the World Social Forum, which has been meeting for several years in Porto Alegre, Brazil.

The style of the WSF is somewhat eclectic. It operates in a decentralized fashion without any locus of power. The social movements represented at Porto Alegre maintain their own programs, drawing their unity in the common conviction that the work of promoting human rights, social justice, and democracy has many starting points. Forum participants say their experience in such a joyful, robust setting offers the hope that overcoming violence, wars, subjugation, hate, and fear in the world is more than an idealistic dream.

The two tracks of civil society – those working inside the government systems and those working against – are each sending out essentially the same messages. They address the need for a just and lasting peace in the world, the eradication of poverty, a course of sustainable development for humanity while protecting a shared environment, and the upholding of

human rights. These are, of course, the values of the culture of peace, and they hold the promise of making globalization benefit all.

Which route is more likely to achieve the goal? The U.N. Millennium Forum represents an evolutionary approach; Porto Alegre a radical one. The first is tame, respectful, and somewhat elitist; the second is brash, irreverent, and loud.

The first wants to inspire and co-operate with governments; the second distrusts and confronts them. The U.N. route waits to be recognized by officials; Porto Alegre waits for no one. Porto Alegre at the U.N. is hard to imagine.

A choice between the two is not necessary. The U.N. route has the potential for improving, in a more human way, the work of the structures. Porto Alegre wants the very structures – at least those of the international financial institutions – changed. The clamour and pressure from without increases the opportunity of those within to be heard. Both the U.N. and Porto Alegre routes are needed.

Without a doubt, radical change in international politics is essential to reverse the present trend lines of the war culture. The poor of the world and those being killed in the endless parade of wars need someone to speak up on their behalf. The modern crises demand a profound reform of all the

international institutions and strengthening of the U.N. system. “We the peoples of the United Nations” deserve a multilateral system based on universal ethical principles. It is doubtful that this can be realized only from within government systems. Yet there must be links to the systems, and that is what the U.N. route provides.

The very potency of civil society – whether working in or outside the political system – has already produced a backlash within governments. Some States in Africa, Asia, and Latin America find NGO prodding and exposure of human rights violations annoying. Some powerful European, North American, and East Asian states resent NGO pressure for economic justice, disarmament, and global democracy. In the disarmament field, the major States severely limit the access of NGOs that, in many instances, know considerably more about the details of disarmament discussions than the delegates. This was particularly apparent at the recent Review Conference of the Non-Proliferation Treaty, where NGOs were prohibited access to the delegates at the closing plenary in order to hand a sunflower to each as a symbol of peace.

The Report of the Panel of Eminent Persons on United Nations – Civil Society Relations (Cardoso Report) pointed to this concern: “Governments do not always welcome sharing what has traditionally been their preserve.

Many increasingly challenge the numbers and motives of civil society, organizations in the United Nations – questioning their representivity, legitimacy, integrity or accountability.” While it made the case for widened entry points of civil society at the U.N., the Cardoso Report also stressed: “The unique role of the United Nations as an intergovernmental forum is vitally important and must be protected at all costs.”

The Cardoso Report went nowhere near the idea of a U.N. People’s Parliamentary Assembly (or World Parliament). It said only that the U.N. General Assembly should establish a better mechanism to enable systematic engagement with civil society organizations. That, of course, would be no small gain. For its part, the Secretary-General’s High-Level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change endorsed this recommendation, noting: “We believe that civil society and non-governmental organizations can provide valuable knowledge and perspectives on global issues.” Issuing his report, “In Larger Freedom,” to kick-start the General Assembly debate for the 60th Anniversary of the U.N., Kofi Annan also backs more systematic engagement. Indeed, the Secretary-General added: “The goals of the United Nations can only be achieved if civil society and governments are fully engaged.”

These high-level voices, though cautious, do point the way forward. To calm government fears that civil society would soon be marching through the halls of the U.N., Annan has stopped talking about the “new superpower” and U.N. attention has shifted to strengthening the role of parliamentarians at the U.N.

The Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), an international organization of 144 Parliaments of sovereign States founded in 1889, has been granted Observer Status at the U.N. Through annual meetings of parliamentarians at the U.N. and its other assemblies, dealing with the full range of human security issues, the IPU is positioning itself to play the role of a Parliamentary Assembly at the U.N. It took years of lobbying and the direct intervention of Secretary-General Annan to get this far. The creation of a Parliamentary Assembly is still a long way off.

Parliamentarians are not, of course, “civil society.” They are for the most part elected representatives who play a law-making role. Too often they are controlled or manipulated by their own governments. Therefore, the full interests of civil society may well be served better by their own People’s Assembly. Nevertheless, a parliamentary assembly may well be a necessary forerunner for a People’s Assembly. In considering the even more ambitious “People’s Assembly,” it is instructive to examine the problems the

parliamentarians will have to solve before even they can cross the new frontier.

First, would a Parliamentary Assembly be composed of representatives of existing parliaments? If so, what about countries that do not have democratically elected legislators? Or would it be composed of representatives directly elected by constituencies around the world? How big would such an assembly be? Who would organize this, and, even more importantly, pay for it?

A Parliamentary Assembly comprising parliamentarians elected to their national assemblies would be easier to achieve at the outset. They could claim legitimacy of election. Yet the different election cycles of parliaments around the world could de-stabilize the U.N. work. Could a uniform election to the U.N. Parliamentary Assembly be held at the same time as elections to national assemblies? Finally, would the U.N. Parliamentary Assembly actually pass legislation or would it act in a consultant capacity, its resolutions amounting to recommendations without any binding element? What kind of secretariat would it have and to whom would it be accountable? When these practical questions start to be considered, the goal of a directly elected world parliament with competency as the full expression of global democracy appears a long way off.

The achievement of the European Parliament may provide a blueprint. Developing out of the Parliamentary Assembly of the European Coal and Steel Communities, founded in 1952, the consulting function of the early European Parliament was widened to include the right to be heard in legislative processes. Since 1975, the EP has been allowed to co-decide with regard to the budget. At the beginning, the EP consisted of representatives of national parliaments, but since 1979 direct election has taken place.

Today, the EP has the same rights as the European Council with regard to most legislation. Under the European Convention of 2003, the EP acts regularly together with the Council of Ministers, has equal rights as the Council on budgetary expenditure, and elects the President of the European Commission. The parliamentarians of the European Parliament have developed a moral authority based on electoral and democratic legitimacy. One must hope that they will be able to rise above the current turmoil caused by the French and Dutch voters' rejection of the European Constitution. Doubtless, the success of the European Parliament stimulated the open letter sent February 9, 2005 by 108 members of the Swiss Parliament to Secretary-General Annan pressing for the creation of a U.N. Parliamentary Assembly with consultative status to the General Assembly.

Because the Inter-Parliamentary Union has developed a high level of expertise on the mainline security issues of disarmament, development, the environment, and human rights, it sees itself as capable of taking on the duties of a U.N. Parliamentary Assembly. The Cardoso Report seems to have a preference for the IPU to move ahead at the U.N. It recommended that the U.N. Secretariat work with national parliaments and the IPU to convene experimental global policy committees to discuss priorities for the global agenda. It suggested a five-year experimental period, and IPU is now developing this concept. The Committee for a Democratic U.N. has, in fact, suggested that the IPU be “transformed” into a U.N. Parliamentary Assembly in the form of a Secondary body or special organization.

But what about other associations of parliamentarians, e.g., Parliamentarians for Global Action, which has developed over the past two decades into a feisty group pushing national governments on the hot-button issues of peace, development and democracy? Then there are the Parliamentary Assembly of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe and the NATO Parliamentary Assembly, and the formative parliamentary assembly of the World Trade Organization? These groups would also stake a claim to a structured innovation to advance their views on the human security agenda.

I have cited these problems in the way of the creation of a U.N. Parliamentary Assembly in order to illustrate the multi-dimensional problems awaiting the creation of a People's Parliamentary Assembly. Those who propose such an assembly see it as something that will evolve from an ad hoc annual event into a permanent organization established perhaps through a Charter Amendment. But the financial limitations of the U.N., the deluge of crises and world problems that sap the time and energy of the organization, and the government resistance to any encroachment on their authority are formidable obstacles. For the moment, the annual two-day briefing of civil society by U.N. officials may be as much as the system can offer. The institutional crisis the U.N. is currently passing through and the efforts to reform the institution, notably the Security Council, have, it seems, exhausted thinking on further change.

The question of thinking – and acting – for further change is precisely my point. The General Assembly is bound to remain the true legislature of the U.N. for some time to come. Some kind of advisory or consultative parliamentary assembly is possible, but not probably as far out on the horizon as we can see. The inauguration of a People's Assembly seems even more problematic. However, strengthening the consultative status of NGOs at the U.N. and all its agencies can be achieved relatively soon.

In the meantime, we must think beyond such formalistic terms. What the best of civil society wants to do is bring about policies for true human security – the making of a world that is human centered and genuinely democratic, a world that builds and protects peace, equality, justice, and development, a world where human security replaces armaments, violent conflict and wars, a world where everyone lives in a clean environment with a fair distribution of the earth’s resources, and where human rights are protected by a body of international law.

These goals already articulated at the Civil Society Millennium Assembly remain valid. They must be promoted and pushed onto the agendas of national governments. This work must go on with or without a U.N. People’s Assembly. The urgency of making progress on the nuclear disarmament agenda ought to be at the top of everyone’s list. The failed 2005 NPT Review Conference shows how deeply the world is now divided between the nuclear haves and have nots. As the U.N. Secretary-General’s High-Level Panel noted, the world is threatened with a “cascade” of proliferation of nuclear weapons. Nothing else is going to matter if we don’t solve this problem soon. The Presidents and Prime Ministers attending the Summit in September for the 60th anniversary of the United Nations must become seized of this issue. Civil society must force them to act.

The vision, the energy, the drive, of rising civil society movements must find new and creative ways to challenge the political elitism that has caused so much discord and suffering. The continuing challenge to the status quo to make the culture of war give way to a culture of peace must be uppermost in our minds. A new spurt of social activism, fed by instant worldwide electronic communication, provides hope for change.