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Democracy: A Newly Recognized Imperative

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## Democracy: A Newly Recognized Imperative

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*Boutros Boutros-Ghali*

**T**he founding of the world organization followed a terrible war in which the “united nations” defended the processes and principles of democracy. The word *democracy* does not appear in the United Nations Charter, but its opening words are “We the peoples of the United Nations.” The notion of democracy—that political legitimacy derives from the people—is therefore central to the foundational document of the United Nations.

During the Cold War, ideological division precluded consensus on the issue of democracy. But human rights, the protection of which is closely linked to the process of democracy, became recognized as an international matter. Through establishment of universal standards, and machinery for upholding them, one of the fundamental achievements of the United Nations has been the adoption of a framework for the protection of human rights. Whereas raising the issue of human rights in a sovereign state once was regarded as interference in its internal affairs, today the international community has accepted that the promotion of the rights of the individual is one of the tasks of the United Nations.

The United Nations now has the capacity to discuss, investigate, make recommendations, and even condemn a member state for violations of human rights. The ancient concept of the worth of the individual has been transformed into a process for the universal recognition and protection of human rights.

But while progress in human rights has been visible throughout the first half-century of the United Nations, democracy has only recently emerged from an embattled position around the globe. At the opening of this decade, the long quest for pluralism succeeded in ending a period of confrontation and stalemate. Today, the promotion of democracy is once again seen as a legitimate matter of concern to the international community, as one of the keys to a peaceful and stable world.

The promotion of democracy is both an end in itself and part of the responsibility of the United Nations to maintain international peace and security. It should be pursued for its own sake, and also because democracy is one of the pillars on which a more peaceful, more equitable, and more secure world can be built.

With democratic participation, social advances are shared, economic freedoms are protected, and political rights are guaranteed by institutions. Individual involvement in the political process enhances the accountability and responsiveness of governments. Democracies are likely to be peace-loving and not likely to wage war on other democracies. The promotion of peace and security, the promotion of economic and social development, and the promotion of democracy are all, therefore, part of the same process.

Through the United Nations, the people of the world can work together to improve and strengthen democracy. What does this imply for the practical work and the day-to-day operations of the United Nations? The issue of democracy presents the United Nations with new tasks: first, recognizing the importance of democracy and assisting states that wish to develop it; and second, promoting democratization among states, in international institutions, and through all levels of the international system.

### **Recognizing the Importance of Democracy**

Democracy as an ideal belongs to all of humanity. While today's world-wide movement toward democracy is unprecedented in its depth and extent, its origins are as ancient as history itself. The idea of individual worth is common to many traditions. Although the practice of democracy may take many forms and differ from culture to culture, it can be found in all parts of the world, and in many different philosophies and religions.

It is doubtful whether any regime can long remain just if its citizens cannot take part actively and substantially in its public life. No democratic system can fully cater to all social demands or satisfy every discontent or difference. But a law-bound government of open access and expression offers the least oppressive, most responsive method for shared social organization and progress. The gap between expectation and response can best be bridged where citizens are encouraged to participate in a framework in which no one wins or loses all the time. Every compromise is built on the expectation of overall mutual benefit over time.

The globalization of the economy and communication has produced high levels of economic expectation and political awareness around the world. People everywhere wish to have a say in the important decisions affecting their lives. People everywhere are now more conscious of the distribution of economic and political power than ever before. They are aware that their lives could be different. Many are aware that they have little or no say in changing the conditions affecting their lives.

With the end of the Cold War, it was recognized that many regimes misappropriated the name of democracy while acting in utterly undemocratic ways. And in this new era, a recognition is growing that many who

argue against democracy as inefficient or chaotic, or as an ideal that must be postponed until later, hope to provide prosperity while withholding freedom—a bargain that cannot last long.

As a result of these recognitions, people in nations around the world have become more insistent in their demands for democracy. Although developing countries and countries in transition have felt them most strongly, virtually no country has been unaffected by such pressures. Today, evidence of a worldwide movement toward democracy can be found in every part of the globe.

This worldwide drive for democracy is more than a search for an ideal. In this new age of instant communication, the freedom of thought, the right to property, and the impetus to creativity are all elements of practical economic progress—and they are best fostered and protected within systems of democracy.

### **Assisting States' Move Toward Democracy**

The drive for democracy must originate and be empowered by the people themselves; no outside effort can provide it. Once that drive is under way, however, support from without can become vital for the educational, electoral, and institutional foundations that a thriving democracy requires.

United Nations experience in peacemaking and peace building has shown that unless there is prior agreement among the parties that the result of the election will be respected, there will be no democracy and peace will be jeopardized. In South Africa, for example, it took three years of negotiations for an election before one could take place successfully.

Already, the United Nations is actively involved in the promotion of democracy within member states. Between January 1992 and June 1994 the United Nations system received requests for electoral assistance from fifty-two member states. Of those member states requesting assistance, twenty-nine were from Africa, ten from Eastern Europe, twelve from Central and South America, and one from Asia.

Electoral assistance provided by the United Nations covers a broad range of operations, from the organization and conduct of an electoral process (as was the case in Cambodia), to the supervision of an electoral process (as in the case of Namibia), to the verification of an electoral process (as in Nicaragua, Eritrea, and El Salvador), to the provision of support to national observers (as in Mexico), to the coordination and provision of support to international observers in cases where several countries and intergovernmental or nongovernmental organizations have accepted an invitation from a government to send observers for the electoral process (which was the case in Kenya and Malawi). In addition, the United Nations undertakes technical

assistance missions in such electoral matters as law, logistics, education, training, budgeting, and communication.

Today, many states are committed to democracy and free elections, but simply holding an election does not make a democracy. The voting outcome must be guaranteed and fulfilled by political processes and judicial structures and given life by the ongoing participation of the peoples involved. Support for democracy cannot, therefore, be limited to support for electoral processes alone, important though these are.

States that seek the assistance of the international community in building democracy should be assisted not only during but also before and after the holding of elections. Democracy draws substance from its citizens, who in turn exercise their will through procedures and institutions, which must be shaped, sustained, and strengthened on a continuing basis.

This is a long-term process. A newly elected government may have to contend with resistance from a corrupt bureaucracy, a police force lacking commitment to fundamental human rights, biased media, and profound distrust between groups. Help from the international community in reforming these key institutions can be of the greatest importance. Electoral assistance must be coordinated with technical and development assistance.

For these reasons, the international community must recognize that a long-term commitment is necessary in order to support construction of the civic institutions required for any functioning democracy. El Salvador and South Africa in 1994 provide two illustrations of such long-term commitment. The culmination of the peace process in El Salvador was the peaceful conduct of elections at the presidential, national, and local levels on 20 March and 24 April 1994, under verification by the United Nations Observer Mission in El Salvador (ONUSAL). The elections mark the achievement of a fundamental goal of the Salvadorian Peace Accords—the transformation of the Frente Farabundo Marti para la Liberacion Nacional (FMLN) from an armed movement into a political party integrated into the national political process. Although ONUSAL reported flaws in the organization of the elections, these had no impact on the results; nor were there any major acts of violence related to the elections. The FMLN accepted the results of the elections despite the several weaknesses in the system that must now be rectified.

The UN Security Council, in Resolution 772 (1993), authorized the deployment of UN observers to monitor political violence and to facilitate the process embarked upon by the South African people for the establishment of a united, nonracial, and democratic South Africa. The council anticipated that the deployment of UN observers would become the basis for a role in the electoral process in the country.

The Security Council, in Resolution 894 of 14 January 1994, having considered my report on the detailed resource requirements and the modalities

for a role in the electoral process in South Africa, decided to send 2,840 observers on the United Nations Observer Mission in South Africa (UNOMSA). With this resolution, the UNOMSA assumed coordination of the core group of electoral observers provided by the Organization of African Unity (150 in number), the Commonwealth (120), the European Union (326), and other intergovernmental organizations and governments. In the event, no fewer than 2,120 men and women took part in monitoring the elections, constituting the largest electoral mission ever mounted by the United Nations.

On 6 May 1994 the UN Independent Electoral Commission proclaimed the results of the elections and declared them to have been "sufficiently free and fair." Following a similar endorsement by the international observer missions, I issued a statement welcoming the declaration, expressing appreciation for the UNOMSA's accomplishment, and pledging the continued commitment of the United Nations to South Africa.

While the United Nations takes pride in its contribution to the advent of a nonracial democracy in South Africa, it now moves forward to address the huge economic and social disparities resulting from decades of apartheid. It is also essential for all parties to undertake a commitment to accept the results of the elections and to embark on the path of national reconciliation, which has become a prevailing trend throughout the entire region.

In South Africa and elsewhere, responsibility for sustaining the democratic process must be shared internationally. Many actors must be involved. Within the UN system, many programs and agencies have a contribution to make. The United Nations Development Programme, for example, is now directing increasing resources toward capacity building, and enhancing the institutions and procedures of governance of states. Outside the United Nations, other groups, such as parliaments, electoral commissions, monitoring groups, the mass media, and popular movements, are involved and play important roles in the democratic process.

No democracy can fulfill its promises instantly. Frustration may boil over into public anger if rightful claims are ignored. Failure to fulfill political promises weakens representative government and encourages political apathy, manifested, for example, by the people's failure to vote. Cynicism can be the enemy of democracy. Support for positive change and patience are both needed.

Individual member states will, needless to say, complement the efforts of the international community with their own bilateral efforts. The government of Sweden has proposed the establishment of an international independent electoral institute. Its main purpose would systematically involve the various actors in these processes in information gathering, research, capacity building, consultancy, and assistance. The proposed institute is envisioned as a complement to the work of the United Nations Electoral

Assistance Unit. It would cover new ground but also bring together the capacities of the different actors in a way that is not being done today.

### Promoting Democratization Among States

People everywhere are more aware of their common humanity. The globalization of economic forces is being followed inexorably by the globalization of political aspirations and ambitions. New movements are therefore arising. These include new networks linking individuals and groups across boundaries of nations and states. There is a vast and growing movement of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) around the world dealing with virtually every issue of concern to the human condition.

The emergence of these new forms of political expression cannot be ignored by the international community. Their very existence shows that existing channels may not always be adequate for the expression and articulation of people's needs and aspirations. They are the first signs of an emerging transnational democratic politics, active in spheres where governments formerly acted almost alone. The activities of the political "internationals," including the Socialist International, the Liberal International, and the Christian Democrat International, are also increasing in scope. These are all aspects of the response of people to new forms of global change, and they bring to light the democratic deficiencies of the existing international system.

The world must not fail to take account of, and work constructively with, these new democratic trends. Under some political conditions, the thirst for change can be manipulated to lead not to democracy but to oppression and confrontation. When state authority falters, individuals may seek refuge from the impersonal forces of globalization by defining themselves not as part of a shared human society but as members of an exclusive cultural, linguistic, religious, or ethnic group—groups that too often define themselves in opposition to others.

Seeking cultural identity, and expressing it, is legitimate and admirable; we all have reason to be proud of the traditions from which we have sprung. But defining oneself by what one is not—and by making enemies of those who are different—is to deny the rights of others as well as to endanger international peace and security.

The alternative is democracy. To have a voice in the arrangements that control one's daily life is to act and be recognized as a human being. To be denied that right is to be rejected, to be alienated, and eventually to turn against society and its institutions.

If the international community encourages democratic movements within states, it must also attempt to practice democracy itself. Within the

international system, all nations—large and small, powerful and weak—should be able to make their views heard and to participate in decision-making. The norms, practices, and values of democracy—including a spirit of dialogue, a readiness to discuss and share, a willingness to accept decisions arrived at democratically, a reluctance to force through unacceptable policies, and a general spirit of cooperation and community—should be extended to the international arena.

But democracy has not featured in the history of the international system of states. Sovereignty, rather than democracy, has been its guiding principle.

For nearly three-and-a-half centuries, since the Treaties of Westphalia in 1648, the state has been the foundation stone of the international system. The creation of the world organization in 1945 was a triumph for the state as the basic element of the international system.

Today, there is increasing recognition that a fundamental conceptual transformation may be under way: the democratization of the international system can be seen as both necessary and possible. It is becoming increasingly evident that it is beyond the capacity of any one state, acting on its own, to provide all the services and protection that its citizens require, or to meet all their demands. Action to combat disease, international crime, pollution, and other threats to the environment, for example, can be effective only if it is undertaken by nations acting together.

In addition, the democratically expressed wish of the people of one country can be affected by actions taken by other governments, or by international actors other than states—such as international currency traders—as well as by preventable natural or man-made disasters.

The question thus arises: Could action taken by the international community to extend democracy beyond the frontiers of the sovereign state to cover those actors and forces that are, at present, beyond the bounds of democratic accountability?

If states are to acquire, or retain, the capacity to provide an enabling environment for their citizens—an environment in which they may seek their own fulfillment through work, education, and family in conditions of economic, social, and political peace—the state will have to extend its influence to affect those factors beyond its control that help to determine the conditions of life within it. In a sense, therefore, states will only be able to remain fully sovereign to the extent that they extend their sovereignty into new areas. Such an extension of sovereignty will be effective only if it is conducted internationally; and it will be legitimate only to the extent that it rests upon mechanisms of democratic accountability.

The United Nations is “based on the principle of the sovereign equality of all its members” (Article 2), and equal membership is therefore available to all “peace-loving states” (Article 4). Whether or not all its member

states are democracies themselves, they are joined in a structure of equal representation in the General Assembly. As the sovereignty of the individual state is strengthened by the legitimacy that democracy provides, so the assembly of sovereign states will gain through its increasing democratization.

### **Democratization at All Levels of the International System**

Today, democracy in the international community of states remains at a very rudimentary stage. It is necessary to bring behavior into line with the generally accepted, but still largely unapplied, norms and values of international life. The time has come to move forward to democratize the international system at all levels of state and nonstate involvement.

The challenges of today's world cannot be met by the United Nations system or by governments alone. A multiplicity of other actors—such as the media, NGOs, parliamentarians, and international lawyers—have indispensable roles to play. Acting at various levels of the international system, they are all mechanisms for democracy. They need to be considered as such and recognized as essential elements in the democratization of the international system.

The media helps guarantee freedom of thought and the unimpeded flow of ideas. A free and responsible media can be an indispensable vehicle for promoting dialogue among peoples and nations by disseminating information on events, issues, concepts, and demands. But information and awareness alone are not enough. Action is required.

Through nongovernmental organizations, citizens act on their own. NGOs provide a framework that enables citizens, amid the practical challenges of concrete situations, to mobilize themselves in favor of common purposes and common ideals. NGOs help make it possible for these complex and diffuse aspirations to take form and to flourish. In this way, NGOs increase popular participation and carry out an essential representational role; they are an indispensable part of the legitimacy without which no international activity can be meaningful. And NGOs can be directly involved in the birth and development of democratic institutions within states. They can serve as vigilant monitors, helping to guarantee respect for democracy throughout the world.

Parliamentarians serve as representatives of the people to various levels of government—local, national, and international. As direct representatives of the wills and aspirations of their constituents, parliamentarians foster communication, stimulate thought, and, in the development of legislation, find common ground among many, often competing interests. The

tools of the parliamentarians—dialogue, debate, and agreement—are not only the essence of democracy, they are also the principal means through which the society of states and the world community of peoples can express common will and achieve common progress.

International lawyers work to enshrine these expressions and conclusions into lasting documents. They work to codify existing practices that have gained international acceptance and to reconcile differing national legal systems. They work to give enduring expression to a broader set of rules—applicable to a wider body of people. The international law that they create promotes mutual respect among peoples and nations. It presents a rigorous analytical framework within which to address problems of mutual concern, and it provides a powerful base from which to take multilateral action. Each of these elements makes international law an essential tool for furthering democracy at all levels.

Through the United Nations, peoples can find support for their rights, groups can be recognized for the communities of concern they represent, states can get support for elections and institutions of representative justice, and the international community can find the forum and framework for an increasingly legitimate and effective common action. ☸

### Note

Boutros Boutros-Ghali became the sixth secretary-general of the United Nations on 1 January 1992. At the time of his appointment, he had been deputy prime minister of foreign affairs for Egypt since May 1991 and had served as minister of state for foreign affairs from October 1977 until 1991. He has had a long association with international affairs as a diplomat, jurist, scholar, and widely published author. In two recent reports, *An Agenda for Peace* (1992) and *An Agenda for Development* (1994), he has presented his visions for post-conflict peace building and development in an increasingly complex world.