

Public Panel Discussion on “Reform or Collapse of the UN?”
An Intervention from Gigi Francisco, DAWN / IGTN
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Addressing the question of global governance is a necessary process that must be carried out. This is a point of agreement I have with others. We live in a period of unprecedented changes and a dramatically altered international context. Certainly we know that an anachronistic, inefficient and bureaucratized multilateral organization such as the present United Nations cannot assure us of the enjoyment of our human rights, development and security in the 21st century.

Elsewhere I have said that: *in the 1990's many of us believed that this process (of rearranging global institutional arrangements and now its architecture) was being pulled and defined by states persons, global leaders and institutionalists who were dedicated to seeing a new world order, with the principles of human rights and democracy squarely at its center. Now we know better. And we are afraid of what we are seeing – a rush by states to make quick-win deals and with it, a compressing of the scope and meaning of rights if not its total trade-off for market access and state-centered security. Marketization with its focus on capital mobility, growth, efficiency, privatization and liberalization has taken over the imagination of most of our world's leaders, including those who claim to “represent the south and the poor”. And because such marketization is also marked by hyper-rapidity – or a rush to “make things move”, an increase in the democratic deficit is also unfolding* (Panel on Women's Human rights and the Global Agenda at the 6th International Inter-Disciplinary Congress on Women, Seoul, July 2005).

What we need is a huge amount of reconstructive imagination, democratic participation and political will to craft and put in effect a radical UN Reform plan and process. Unfortunately, none of these prerequisites had been adequately realized. The UN knows this, no less than Kofi Anan's office. All of the member-countries also know this. The Secretary General's Report (March 2005) and that of the High-Level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change (December 2004) are peppered with aspirational language on human rights, development and security but its proposed re-structured organization for the UN does not go far in freeing the UN from the clutches of inter-state realpolitik that had undermined its ability to enforce treaties and human rights standards for the longest time.

Indeed the “devil is in the detail”! Antonio Papisca's paper (Human Rights Centre, University of Padua, August 2005) mentions a number of these: (1) Proposals on expanding the permanent and non-permanent members of the Security Council while preserving the veto powers of the 5 Permanent Members; (2) Rather than strengthen the UN's role as a decisive guarantor of collective peace and security, the proposed changes gives more leeway for states to launch wars against other states in response to “imminent attacks”; (3) ECOSOC's unequal status to that of the Security Council and silence on its authority over the Breton Institutions; (4) the silence on the role of civil society

organizations and the International Court of Justice; (5) the narrower and highly restrictive (even exclusionary) Human Rights Council concept; and many more.

In the lead-up to the UN Summit next week, the international community day by day becomes more pessimistic and uncertain that a minimalist document around which painstaking consensus had been slowly built among the member countries would ever see its light. Of course Bolton's explosive dismissal of what he termed as the so-called "MDGs" is being hyped about as the cause of the "disruption". But I wonder how deep and real the American challenge to the Summit is. Given the recent "bad boy" antics played by the USA in the recent UNCSW Session on Beijing Plus Ten that effectively held hostage the international community to one week of stalemate thereby losing precious time to address critical issues and progressively move commitments to women's human rights, empowerment and development, I tend to think that this is but another ploy to get everyone scampering unto the bandwagon of the MDGs and the UN Reform architecture. Once they are in, then the real hard-nosed negotiation (and may I say the arms twisting) will begin. When this happens without effective resistance from the other member states, we can expect a global agreement that will have a minimalist agenda for development, a human rights regime that had been transmogrified by various temporal and self-interested interpretations, and an architecture of the UN that continues to be captured by narrow state interests.

In April this year, I participated in a conversation entitled Women's Voice on UN Reform that was organized by Latin American feminists during the UNCSW Session on Beijing Plus Ten. At that meeting, I expressed pessimism on the whole UN Reform process. I continue to hold on to this pessimism. I would like to end my intervention with exactly the same thoughts with which I left the audience at the March event. "For the UN to become truly forward looking, it would need to rid itself of the "fear of change" that still reverberates across the institution."

Unfortunately, given institutional constraints and a highly discredited leadership, the UN at best is aiming for a win-win scenario in which the power and wealth of a few nation-states remain intact even while increased concessions are given to developing countries. Such a pragmatist win-win scenario cannot make a dent to systemic global inequality and injustice. A step-by-step reform is not what the times demand. Rather it is a radical breakthrough in transnational global governance that reaffirms the principles of human rights, collective security, just and people-centered development and substantive democracy.