

# Democratizing the United Nations: Establishing a UN Parliamentary Assembly

## Introduction

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Critics often point to a “democratic deficit” within the U.N. system. They note the advantage given to veto-wielding permanent members in the Security Council, the inequitable single vote given to both large and small nations in the General Assembly [GA], and the tyranny of regional voting blocks. The result is too often an organizational inability to effectively address serious issues, including mass atrocities, nuclear proliferation and climate change. An important effort is now underway to establish a body within the U.N. with the political gravitas needed to address these deficits: a United Nations Parliamentary Assembly [UNPA]. This effort is supported by the European Parliament, the Canadian House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, the Pan-African Parliament, and the Latin American Parliaments’ Commission on Political Affairs.

Parliamentary assemblies are found in many regional organizations, such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization [NATO], the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe [OSCE], the African Union and the European Union. In fact, the United Nations is one of the few international organizations that does not have a parliamentary assembly. A parliamentary assembly could initially function as a consultative body within the U.N. Like those assemblies of other international organizations it would be comprised of representatives from national parliaments. National delegations could be proportionally sized (based on population) with representation from minority and majority factions of individual member states. The creation of a parliamentary assembly would be a practical step to make the U.N. more effective.

A U.N. Parliamentary Assembly could help:

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- foster international co-operation and draft treaties and conventions;
  - build support for the U.N. back in national capitals;
  - reinforce the trend toward democracy in the countries of the world.
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The UNPA would be able to shine a spotlight on the need to act in cases of mass atrocities. The U.N. has proven itself ineffective in issues such as nuclear non-proliferation and climate change, but a Parliamentary Assembly could draw attention to these issues and make recommendations. The UNPA could represent the needs of common people rather than just the executive branches of government that are represented in the GA. A UNPA would decrease the democratic deficit within the U.N., provide democratic oversight to crucial U.N. organizations, and could be established without a change in the U.N. charter.

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## Current Parliamentary Assemblies

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Current parliamentary assemblies function to opinion on crucial issues within their organization, provide organizational oversight, and build parliamentary awareness. The NATO Parliamentary Assembly [NATO-PA] is composed of members of the parliaments of the 26 NATO member nations. The NATO-PA presents formal policy recommendations or declarations on matters that need immediate attention or are of long-term importance . Nato’s Secretary General sees the reports and recommendations and provides a written response.

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# FACT SHEET

The OSCE Parliamentary Assembly [OSCE-PA] encourages involvement by national parliaments in the OSCE. The OSCE-PA assesses implementation of OSCE objectives, and develops and promotes mechanisms for prevention and resolution of conflicts. The OSCE-PA supports the strengthening and consolidation of democratic institutions in OSCE states. Like the NATO-PA, the OSCE-PA issues declarations, resolutions, and recommendations.

In the first stage of its existence, the UNPA would function as a consultative body of elected officials who report their work and findings to the U.N. Once established, it could be possible for governments to convert it into a genuine parliament. Steps toward building a UNPA would be politically pragmatic, done gradually, and would not require a change in the U.N. charter.

## Decreasing the Democratic Deficit

According to the Campaign for a UNPA,

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*To ensure international cooperation, secure the acceptance and to enhance the legitimacy of the United Nations and strengthen its capacity to act, people must be more effectively and directly included into the activities of the United Nations and its international organizations. They must be allowed to participate better in the UN's activities. We therefore recommend a gradual implementation of democratic participation and representation on the global level.*

The UNPA could allow parliamentarians to group by political rather than national divides. For example, liberals from France could group with liberals from Burma and libertarians from Canada with libertarians from New Zealand. Since the UNPA would be closer to the citizens, it would benefit from increased credibility and legitimacy. Parliamentarians would ultimately only be responsible to their constituents. Parliamentarians would encourage GA member governments to take faster actions concerning worldwide crises.

## Providing Democratic Oversight

A UNPA would be able to provide democratic oversight to insufficiently representative international organizations. The voice of the citizens would act as a counterbalance not only to the voice of governments within the U.N., but also to that of international organizations such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank Group which do not benefit from any oversight from an outside body (not even from the GA).

## Conclusion

Throughout the world, NGO's, parliamentarians, and members of civil society support the need for a UNPA. The number of supporters continues to grow every day. It is in the United States' interest to support the creation of this new body that would help bring the U.N. into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Representative parliamentary assemblies are at the core of successful inter-governmental organizations throughout the world. There is no reason the U.N. cannot follow suit and create one also.

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For more information on this fact sheet, please contact Abigail Long, Edward Rawson Program Fellow, at [along@globalsolutions.org](mailto:along@globalsolutions.org), or (202) 546-3950 x 105 or Don Kraus, CEO, [dkraus@globalsolutions.org](mailto:dkraus@globalsolutions.org) (202) 546-3950 x 103

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