

Is the United Nations Racist?

Western countries occupy almost all powerful and big-budget posts at the UN

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Western countries occupy almost all powerful and big-budget posts in the organisation, and sadly developing countries, despite their numbers, have allowed the bias to persist

Ask it quietly, but ask it we must. Is the United Nations racist, either deliberately or unconsciously? Many years ago, the late Sergio Vieira de Mello, universally admired as one of the brightest and best U.N. officials, was pulled out of the Balkans because the Europeans would not accept a non-European as head of the U.N. mission there. This despite the fact that in personality, outlook and ways of thinking, he was more European than most Europeans. Their stance might have had credibility if, by the same logic, Europeans excused themselves from serving as heads of U.N. missions outside Europe. In fact, westerners dominate this category.

Double standards

We have seen the same double standard, rooted in the belief in the innate superiority of the westerners, in the choice of the chief executives of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. The former is always headed by an American. On any objective measure, the U.S. nominee last year would not have made it to the short list against the other two main candidates from Africa and Latin America. But under the cosy EU-U.S. arrangement, the American candidate got the job. This causes neither Americans nor Europeans to blush when they lecture others on good governance norms.

When Dominique Strauss-Kahn had to resign in the wake of a sex scandal, his successor as IMF chief was another French nominee. Again without blushes, where all the years previously they had justified the self-serving arrangements on grounds of how well Europe had done economically, this time it was because only a European could understand the grave crisis afflicting the eurozone and lead the IMF.

The position of U.N. Secretary-General (SG) is protected against such shenanigans by the rotation principle whereby each continent gets its turn for the top job. But almost all the top U.N. posts after that, at the ranks of deputy, under and assistant secretary-general, are within the personal discretion of the SG to fill. The same applies to the large number of his special representatives and envoys.

Unlike the parliamentary system of government, the top ranks of this international civil service are not filled by career officials. Instead the practice is closer to the U.S. system where the President gets to choose his own senior people. But in the U.S. system, senior appointments, including ambassadors, are subject to independent confirmation by the Senate. The U.N. practice does not have any comparable check on whimsical and unsuitable

appointments.

Ban Ki-moon has been commendably conscious of and good at appointing women to the senior ranks. But both he and the system are yet to be sensitised to the fact that the top-level under-representation of non-westerners is even worse. The situation persists not just because western donor countries use money power and are more focussed in lobbying for their nationals. An even more telling explanation is that the developing countries fail to act in pursuit of their collective interest, are not equally committed to backing their own, and do not wish to jeopardise their own individual chances of a cushy U.N. post.

Remarkably, many commentators seem to believe that the alleged waste, inefficiency and corruption in the U.N. system is rooted partly in affirmative action policies that prioritise incompetent and unqualified personnel from developing countries in recruitment and promotion. When I looked into the statistics almost a decade ago, I was astonished at the reality as compared to the myth. Almost all the powerful and big-budget senior posts in the Secretariat and in the U.N. system are filled by westerners, including peacekeeping, political and humanitarian affairs, management, development and environment programmes, children's fund, refugees, etc. I suspect that for the same ability, qualifications and experience, western U.N. officials can expect to retire two ranks higher than the rest.

Asians contribute about half the U.N.'s total peacekeepers and one-quarter of its regular and peacekeeping budget (although most of this comes just from Japan). They have also suffered around one-quarter of total U.N. peacekeeping deaths. Yet a decade ago, two-thirds of senior peacekeeping officials were westerners. In the U.N. Secretariat overall, Asians comprised a mere 17 per cent of senior U.N. staff at the grades of director and above. This for a continent that accounts for well over half the world's population, is not short of experienced and sophisticated diplomats, and has many high achievers. Between them, Canada and the U.S. had the same number of senior staff in the Secretariat as all of Asia, when they account for 5 per cent and 60 per cent of the world's population respectively.

I no longer have access to U.N. data and cannot guess what the numbers might be today. But another set of figures is publicly available. A decade ago, Asians comprised a mere 12 per cent of high-level representatives. Today, according to the list available on the U.N. website, of the total of 94 special representatives/envoys of the SG, 16 per cent are Asian, 30 per cent African (almost all dealing with African crises), 2 per cent from Latin America and the Caribbean: and 52 per cent from Europe, North America and Australia with nine out of ten of them dealing with non-western and global problems. This is like western scholarship. If you are western, you can tackle any topic or region. If you are non-western, you are expected to inhabit the intellectual ghetto of your own country or continent.

Consider three specific examples. To avoid being misunderstood: my comments do not apply to particular individuals. I am interested only in the patterns of over and under-representation and the consequences for the U.N.'s legitimacy and effectiveness. We would have been rightly outraged if the first two heads of U.N. Women had been men, no matter how capable the individual might have been.

Why is there no matching outrage and unacceptability when the head of the Development Program is a westerner? No matter how well intentioned, they cannot possibly know the political and social imperatives driving development strategies and policies. This is compounded by having an American as a special adviser on development goals. A practising

economist from a developing country would be an infinitely superior choice, instead of people whose knowledge of development is derived from books or as an aid donor. The developing-country background and experiences of Mahbub-ul Haq and Amartya Sen were crucial, not incidental, to the emergence and enduring appeal of the notion of human development.

The only part of the system that has its global headquarters in Asia is the U.N. University. Only one of its six chiefs to date has been Asian, when equity and justice would have seen only one non-Asian. On every table of university rankings, the Asian universities (although not, alas, Indian universities) have made the most dramatic progress. Asian university presidents and vice chancellors must be doing something right. How then to explain the bias against them?

Or take a third example, the responsibility to protect (R2P). The likely sites and targets of intervention in the foreseeable future will be developing countries. It is their people who will suffer if mass atrocities being committed are not stopped, or if geopolitical and commercial interventions are masked in humanitarian language. Conversely, people in developing countries will primarily benefit if interventions are motivated mainly by humanitarian concerns and executed responsibly. The interveners can come from advanced and/or developing countries. Conversations on R2P should occur therefore first among the civil societies and governments of developing countries, and secondly between developing and advanced countries.

Norm hijacked

And the SG's special adviser on R2P should be a powerful (public) intellectual from the global South. Instead we have had an American and now a Canadian. This is not going to help as sentiment firms that the norm, in whose origins Africans (Kofi Annan, Francis Deng, Mohamed Sahnoun) have played the most crucial roles, is being hijacked and appropriated by the West to serve the old and discredited humanitarian intervention agenda, or to pursue regime change (Libya, Syria).

Why, with numbers to put a stop to it, do developing countries put up with such clear and heavy bias and permit it to persist? One dispiriting answer might be that a particularly insidious consequence of the century of European colonialism is that non-westerners have themselves internalised the sense of racial superiority of westerners. My own extensive experience suggests that the immigration, customs and security officials in developing countries are more obviously racist than in the West.

Part of India's national identity is the self-belief in being a champion of developing countries. Is it prepared to take the lead in demanding an explanation-cum-correction of this anomaly in the U.N. system?

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