

GLOBAL AND NATIONAL LEADERSHIP IN GOOD GOVERNANCE

By AMITAV BANERJI

The United Nations can claim many achievements over the 70 years of its existence. In preventing another World War, it has done what the League of Nations singularly failed to do. It can legitimately take credit, however, for much more—for upholding human rights, promoting the rule of law, providing international dispute settlement mechanisms, protecting the environment, eradicating diseases, and bettering the living conditions of millions of people around the world. Just in the last five months it has shown its enormous convening power and consensus-building capacity—in New York last September when the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development was agreed, and in Paris in December 2015 when the Paris Agreement on climate change was adopted.

But there are many problems the United Nations has not managed to resolve, and it can hardly sit on its laurels. It must address many new challenges and much unfinished business. A few are enumerated below.

The graph of conflict across the globe, which had been in significant decline at the turn of the millennium, has turned the wrong way again. As Jean-Marie Guéhenno pointed out recently in his article in *Foreign Policy*, “for twenty years after the end of the Cold War, deadly conflict was in decline. Fewer wars were killing fewer people the world over. Five years ago, however, that positive trend went into reverse, and each year since has seen more conflict, more victims, and more people displaced. 2016 is unlikely to bring an improvement from the woes of 2015: it is war—not peace—that has momentum.”¹

East-West rivalry is back, both direct and by proxy. Ukraine and Syria both offer testimony of this. Who would have predicted that NATO would seek to reinvent itself at the 2014 Wales Summit? Likewise, how many would have foreseen that the G-8 would revert to the G-7?

AMITAV BANERJI is a former diplomat and international civil servant. He is currently Projects Director at the Global Leadership Foundation.

The seemingly inexorable advance of democracy appears to have stalled and is even being reversed in some places. There are more and more examples of elections not being held on level playing fields, of powerful executives seeking to control the legislature and/or the judiciary, and of leaders who pay no heed to term limits.

Violent extremism is showing its most ugly face and the mix of extremist ideology and politics is more toxic than ever before. The combination of rising extremism, radicalization of young people and inward migration is testing societies the world over and strengthening the hands of right wing political parties and those that seek to erect new barriers.

According to the World Bank, 12.7 per cent of the world’s population still lives at or below US \$1.90 a day. The World Food Programme estimates that some 795 million people in the world do not have enough food to lead a healthy active life, i.e., about one in nine people on earth, and that poor nutrition causes nearly half of deaths in children under 5 years of age—3.1 million children each year.

These are only some of the daunting challenges the world must confront. There are others: the menace of terrorism, cybercrime, the existential threat to several small island developing States from global warming, and the continuing inability to bring fundamental reform to a United Nations that was crafted to reflect the global realities of seven decades ago.

Whatever the challenges that need to be met, two propositions remain of abiding relevance. Firstly, multilateralism must remain central to global consultation, decision-making and leadership. Secondly, the quality of national leadership for good governance is key to creating nations that are at peace with themselves and that can offer a better life for their citizens.

Notwithstanding the deficiencies of the United Nations system or other multilateral agencies, it is indisputable that none of the world’s challenges can be confronted without effective international organizations and without the show of political will that must go hand in hand with belonging to them. Some of the problems that afflict individual nation states—such as environmental degradation, combating terrorism or commercial crime, or dealing with the impact of migration—can only be addressed and resolved through global cooperation. The system of global governance represented by the United Nations, warts and all, thus remains crucial to global order, peace and development.

The logic of good governance and strong, enlightened leadership within nations is equally compelling, but this is a more complex matter. The expression “good governance” has entered the lexicon in a big way since the fall of the Berlin Wall and the almost contemporaneous dismantling of apartheid in South Africa. Former United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan is widely quoted as observing

that “good governance is perhaps the single most important factor in eradicating poverty and promoting development”.

There is, however, no universally accepted definition of good governance, nor any globally agreed mechanism that sits in judgement on whether governance is “good” or “bad”. It is salutary to remember, in this context, that every perpetrator of a coup d’état and every dictator known to history has acted with the avowed aim of bringing salvation to the country and delivering people from inept governance.

There have been attempts to define good governance. The most cited definition has come from the United Nations itself, which deems it to have eight major characteristics. According to this definition, good governance is participatory, consensus oriented, accountable, transparent, responsive, effective and efficient, equitable and inclusive, and follows the rule of law. Furthermore, it seeks to ensure that corruption is minimized, the views of minorities are taken into account and that the voices of the most vulnerable in society are heard in decision-making. It is also responsive both to the present and future needs of society.²

Here again, there are differences between international development institutions and political bodies. For example, the World Bank and other multilateral development banks look at good governance from an economic perspective and through the lens of public sector management, highlighting transparency and accountability, regulatory reform, and public sector skills and leadership. Other organizations built on political collaboration, such as the United Nations, European Commission, and the Commonwealth, focus on democratic governance, the rule of law and human rights. There is a significant degree of consensus across the board that good governance relates to political and institutional processes and outcomes that are deemed necessary to achieve the goals of development.



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A precarious return to a more normal life in Mogadishu. A street scene of Hamar Weyne Market in the Somali capital Mogadishu. When the militant group Al-Shabaab withdrew from Mogadishu in 2009, the country's capital began to re-establish itself and a sense of normality started to return. Al-Shabaab remains a threat, however, attacking targets in the city and elsewhere.

A number of organizations around the globe offer indices of governance, some looking at specific aspects while others offer a more holistic assessment. Thus, Transparency International seeks to measure the extent of corruption in countries, while Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International assess respect for human rights. The Committee to Protect Journalists measures media freedom. The Human Development Index of the United Nations Development Programme offers a measure of the quality of life, while the Ibrahim Index of African Governance offers an assessment in the broadest sense, defining governance as “the provision of the political, social and economic goods that any citizen has the right to expect from his or her state, and that any state has the responsibility to deliver to its citizens”.³

Many countries still treat organizations such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch as pressure groups linked to western Governments and taking a Eurocentric view of the world. At the same time, the philosophical debate about whether open and democratic societies more seamlessly generate development rages on. Critics, both academics and practitioners, often juxtapose the economic performance of the controlled Chinese economy over the past two decades against the relatively slow growth during that period of democratic India. The examples of Singapore and Malaysia in Asia are often put forward as role models for telescoping growth. Similarly, in Africa, the experience of Rwanda is hailed by many as an example of an accountable Government delivering economic growth and return on investment, notwithstanding its controversial human rights record.

Many international organizations have come a long way from the days when the principles of sovereignty and non-interference in internal affairs made it all but impossible to be intrusive or interventionist, even when there were obvious excesses against citizens. Whether it is the United Nations concept of the Responsibility to Protect, or efforts by the Commonwealth and La Francophonie to devise measures to police the implementation of fundamental political values, these have often foundered because of inability to generate the necessary broad-based political support within the organization. The recent experience of the African Union with Burundi vividly illustrates the point.

What is considered beyond dispute is that national leaders can make a big difference. Developing countries looking to fast-track sustainable development in particular need visionary and strong leaders. Being a visionary leader requires not just a clear and attainable vision of what is sought to be achieved, but also the ability to look beyond himself or herself to the longer term interest of the nation—and hence the will to bequeath a legacy that includes strong institutions as well as an enabling environment that allows other leaders to step into their shoes once they leave office.

Vision apart, there are many requisites of a great leader. Effective leadership requires motivation and commitment, courage of conviction but also the ability to be inclusive and build consensus, being a good communicator, being able to motivate a team, to be flexible and not hidebound, to accept responsibility as well as accountability, to be honest and to rigorously promote probity and integrity in public life, and to put the national interest above self.

There is no school that churns out effective national leaders. When the buck stops with them, Heads of Government must learn the hard way what they have not already learned in their political careers. This includes accepting good advice and rejecting bad counsel and taking difficult decisions in the national interest.

Help is available from former peers such as Jimmy Carter, Bill Clinton and Tony Blair—among several others—who have set up organizations that offer policy advice to current leaders. Some of them are run as commercial organizations. Then there are groups like The Elders, the Club de Madrid and the InterAction Council, which largely do public advocacy on current issues of global concern. Bodies like the Kofi Annan Foundation do both global advocacy and targeted engagements.

The Global Leadership Foundation, established by F. W. de Klerk in 2004, is unique in that it offers more discreet, confidential and hands-on support to current leaders who could benefit from the advice of former peers that have experienced similar challenges in their own countries. The agenda is always determined and owned by the Head of Government seeking the advice, not by those offering external support. Advice is available on a range of policy areas—be it governance in the broadest sense, or political, economic or social. And the fact that a leader is being offered advice is never put in the public domain, unless that leader wishes that to be the case.

The United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development represents a collective global investment in the future well-being of humanity. It states, *inter alia*, that “there can be no sustainable development without peace and no peace without sustainable development”. That is a self-evident truth, but that peace must surely be more than simply the absence of conflict. The onus on today’s leaders, both on the global stage and on every national one, is to build a sustainable peace. And for that, good governance will always be a crucial requirement. unc

Notes

- 1 Jean-Marie Guéhenno, “10 Conflicts to watch in 2016”, *Foreign Policy*, January 2016.
- 2 United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, “What is good governance?”. Available from <http://www.unescap.org/sites/default/files/good-governance.pdf>.
- 3 Mo Ibrahim Foundation, Ibrahim Index of African Governance. Available from <http://www.moiibrahimfoundation.org/iiag/> (accessed 24 February 2016).