Update: The Campaign for a United Nations Parliamentary Assembly
by Andreas Bummel

Ten years ago the Campaign for a United Nations Parliamentary Assembly (UNPA) was launched to advocate democratic representation of the world's citizens at the United Nations. Usually, UN bodies are composed of officials who are appointed by the executive branches of national governments. By contrast, a UNPA would for the first time give elected representatives and members of the opposition a formal role in the world organization. The assembly would directly represent the world's citizens -- not governments. Supporters envisage that it would act as an independent watchdog and as an engine for UN reform, including a progressive democratization of global governance.

According to the campaign, states initially could choose whether their UNPA members would come from national (or regional) parliaments, reflecting their political spectrum, or whether they would be directly elected. Eventually, all members should be directly elected. Step by step, the assembly should be provided with rights of information, participation and oversight vis-à-vis the UN and the organizations of the UN system.

The idea of a UNPA has been put forward again and again ever since the UN was created. Today, however, it is has become hard to argue against it since important regional organizations such as the European Union, the African Union, or the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (which actually spans across the whole Northern hemisphere) all include a parliamentary component, and because a majority of UN member states are now democracies. The European Parliament which over decades developed into a legislative body of the EU is considered an important example to draw upon.

By now, a UNPA has been endorsed by thousands of politicians, former UN officials, distinguished scholars, cultural innovators, representatives of civil society organizations, and committed citizens from all walks of life. In particular, the campaign was supported by nearly 1,500 members of parliament from over 100 countries (around half of which are still in office). Among them are Federica Mogherini, today's European Union Foreign Minister, Justin Trudeau, who is now Canada’s Prime Minister, and Gabriela Michetti, now Vice-President of Argentina. The full list is published on the campaign’s website. One of the most important advocates was former UN Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali. When the campaign was launched he wrote that the establishment of a UNPA “has become an indispensable step to achieve democratic control of globalization. “Other former UN officials who took a stand include former Under-Secretary-Generals Ibrahim Gambari, Shashi Tharoor,
Brian Urquhart and Heitor Gurgulino de Souza. Ten current and former UN experts elected by the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva are on record as well. According to Maina Kiai from Kenya, who endorsed in 2016 and was until recently the UN’s rapporteur on rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association, “one weakness of the United Nations is that its member states are represented solely through the executive branch. The involvement of additional actors such as parliamentarians and civil society is critical to democratizing the UN.”

Recent additions to the ranks of UNPA Campaign supporters include several Nobel Laureates: the Dalai Lama (peace), John Hume (peace), Richard J. Roberts (medicine), Eric S. Maskin (economy), and Mohamed Fadhel Mahfoudh from Tunisia who received the Nobel Peace Prize in 2015 on behalf of the Quartet for National Dialogue. “We need to act now and implement democratic principles at the largest scale of government if we want them to survive the recent rise of nationalism that is threatening peace and international understanding,” Mr. Mahfoudh stated when he endorsed the campaign in December 2016. All in all, the campaign has identified around 25 Nobel laureates who at some point have supported a citizen-elected UN body, among them Albert Einstein.

The overall goal of the campaign is to mobilize government support for the establishment of a UNPA. One possibility is a vote of the UN General Assembly according to Article 22 of the UN’s Charter, which allows the General Assembly to create subsidiary bodies. To get there, we advocate the proposal vis-à-vis parliamentarians and civil society organizations and work towards achieving popular awareness of a UNPA as a response to the global democratic deficit.

The adoption of a pro-UNPA resolution by the Pan-African Parliament, the African Union’s parliamentary body, was one of the highlights of the previous 12 months. In addition, the campaign organized two panels on the question of a world parliament that featured eight speakers at the conference on “New Topics in Global Justice” at Yale University.

Following numerous bilateral meetings in New York, an off-the-record information session on a UNPA was held in early May 2017 in collaboration with the permanent mission of Canada to the UN. Representatives of 12 government delegations participated.

At the meeting, representatives of civil society organizations, among them the World Federalist Movement, argued that a parliamentary UN body would make the UN engage directly with elected representatives in discussing global governance and thus help strengthen support for the UN’s work. An important new topic under consideration is the creation of a UN Parliamentary Network (UNPN) as a preliminary step towards a UNPA. This was advocated in the 2015 report of the Commission on International Security, Justice and Governance, chaired by former U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright and former Nigerian Foreign Minister Ibrahim Gambari.

Andreas Bummel is International Secretary-General of the Campaign for a United Nations Parliamentary Assembly.

Documents, links, and other items referenced in the June 2017 issue of Mondial are available at http://www.wfmcanada.org/mondial-links-june-2017/