



First Informal Plenary of the General Assembly on Security Council Reform Underway

by Lydia Swart
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Yesterday, the President of the General Assembly, Miguel D'Escoto Brockmann, presented the results of the preparatory discussions held during the last three months in the Working Group on Security Council Reform to an informal plenary of the General Assembly. His statement also contained information on the road ahead, and marks the beginning of a new chapter in the long history of Security Council reform.

Following General Assembly resolution 62/557 (Sept. 2008), the Open-ended Working Group on Security Council Reform was asked to undertake preparatory discussions on how to start and conduct intergovernmental negotiations in an informal plenary of the General Assembly. Intergovernmental negotiations are usually understood as negotiations on actual substance, and in this case, for example, on whether or not to add new permanent members.

According to resolution 62/557, the Working Group, which consists of all Member States, had a strict deadline. The last deliberation meeting of the Working Group on the framework and modalities for the intergovernmental negotiations and the first meeting of the informal plenary on the results of these discussions both had to be concluded by 1 February 2009 (the last meeting of the Working Group was held on 26 January). Intergovernmental negotiations in the informal plenary must then commence no later than 28 February 2009.

From November through January, during heated discussions in the Working Group, Member States often clashed over the significance of the change in setting to an informal plenary. To reach consensus on the resolution in September 2008, countries had deliberately left several parts rather murky and open to interpretation, and so many questions during this preparatory phase of the Working Group seemed to evolve around the rules of procedure applicable to negotiations in an informal plenary. In the Working Group, for instance, there had long been a common understanding that decisions should be reached by consensus. Many countries inquired whether this should also be the case during the intergovernmental negotiations in an informal plenary. At the UN, there are rules of procedure for plenary sessions in the General Assembly, but as to what governs negotiations outside this forum, there is little clarity.

The Uniting for Consensus faction (UfC), which opposes adding new permanent members on the Council - and especially their regional rivals - certainly felt that decisions should continue to be based on consensus. And the faction's core members, Italy, Pakistan, South Korea, Spain, Mexico, Argentina, Turkey, Canada and Malta, argued tirelessly that Member States should all agree on an agenda establishing rules of procedure for the process before embarking on further negotiations. During the debates, several UfC members also presented a number of written proposals.

Germany, Japan, Brazil and India in the Group of Four (G4), who seek permanent seats for themselves, argued on the other hand that the rules of procedure for the General Assembly could apply and voting therefore accepted. In essence, while the UfC fears that they might come up short in a vote, the G4 is afraid that insistence on consensus could continue to stall the process.

The big question at the meeting on Thursday, which would be the first informal plenary of the General Assembly, was therefore what the General Assembly President's statement would include. How had he interpreted the results of the last few months' debate and how would he plot the course ahead?

The GA President Delivers his Statement

At the meeting, which in effect would hand over the process from the Open-ended Working Group to the informal plenary, GA President D'Escoto began his statement by remarking that many had derided this group for its long-windedness, "however," he said, "even though it was a long and winding road, this Working Group and no other led the United Nations to the now imminent intergovernmental negotiations."

The President then continued with a fairly factual account of what had transpired in the Working Group since its first meeting in November 2008. He noted the many constructive and useful suggestions on what rules of procedure should apply and on how to lead further negotiations, but refrained from choosing sides.

"Our lodestar will of course be decision 62/577 [...] and your input through the Open-ended Working Group," he said directed at Member States. "Input such as the useful elements in suggestions from all different corners, whether conveyed through oral statements or written proposals."

In conclusion, the President announced that intergovernmental negotiations will commence on 19 February with the presentation of a work plan, which will provide further "clarity on the terms and modalities," as well as a short-term schedule of meetings. In this work, D'Escoto added, he will be assisted by the permanent representative of Afghanistan, Ambassador Zahir Tanin.

Reportedly, the statement was well-received by Member States, as an important starting point for the intergovernmental negotiations. Nevertheless, as no clarity on the rules of procedure was included in the President's statement a flurry of diplomatic activity is expected during the next three weeks as Member States will undoubtedly attempt to influence the contents of the upcoming work paper. The following analysis provides an update to chapter 1 on Security Council reform in "Managing Change at the United Nations," and covers events and Member States dynamics in the Open-ended Working Group and in the Security Council during the 62nd General Assembly session, and - as the Open-ended Working Group is about to meet on 11 November 2008 - also on the road ahead.

Unless attributed to a specific source, all expressions of opinion in this analysis are those of the author. The Center for UN Reform Education does not endorse any particular reform proposals.