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Delivering the UN from despotism

THAT the United Nations is undemocratic has long been a mantra for most of its members, apart from the major powers. The General Assembly may have grown as the imperialism of old unravelled but each newly independent member nation merely joined the ranks of the marginalised. While holding the UN in the highest esteem, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has complained of inequality within the world body for at least a decade. It is then not altogether surprising to have Secretary-General Kofi Annan repeat his sentiment. The UN's five veto-wielding members in the Security Council do not reflect present political and economic realities. Some of the vanquished have outdone one or two of the Second World War's victors.

There is little doubt that those who fathered the organisation had cherished a paternalism that placed nuclear force at the helm, which simply means that the guiding principle remains "might is right". At the time of the UN's inception, it was determined that the five mightiest would dictate the direction of the world and the veto power vested in each of them is testimony to this quest. The Bush administration's unilateralism, however, showed an impatience even with this narrow distribution of ultimate authority. Action by any one of the five permanent members on its own is "what makes the UN so weak," according to Tan Sri Razali Ismail, former president of the General Assembly and a veteran UN diplomat.

Yet, to free the UN and make it live up to its Charter is no easy feat. It is well and good to suggest that the Security Council be made democratic, that permanent membership is outdated and that the power of veto is nothing but an immobilising instrument. Instead, membership of the Security Council, it is argued, ought to be one of regional representation, that geography should play a pivotal role in determining its make-up and that representation be realised through direct elections.

The issue is whether the democracy so envisioned could happen at all. Firstly, would the United States support the UN financially if it is not guaranteed veto power in its highest policy-making body? And, will the undisputed superpower be willing to play the game if its interests are not served? We don't believe so. Democracy in the UN is indeed necessary but can only be achievable if the now subordinate powers step up and the US consents to step down. This may still be pie in the sky, but a start has been made with Annan's long-delayed admission.