

I. INTRODUCTION

Even though the Charter opens in the name of "We, the peoples . . .", the United Nations is not a world government, nor is the General Assembly a world parliament. It is an organization of sovereign nation states or, in the words of the Charter, "a centre for harmonizing the actions of nations". Nevertheless, not unlike parliamentary democracy, the General Assembly of the United Nations, in its philosophy, atmosphere and operation, has always been dominated by the interplay of majority and minority and by a high degree of regulated confrontation between them. This confrontation has over the years taken a number of successive forms -- between the Communist states and the rest, between colonial and anti-colonial states, between the developing and the industrialized countries. Earlier confrontations have tended in time to become less harsh as the membership has expanded and new priorities have emerged; throughout, the United Nations has built up practices and procedures that have helped to win freedom for dependent peoples, to keep the peace in regional conflict, and to promote global co-operation on matters of universal concern.

It may be worth while to recall that in 1964 confrontation reached the point -- because of a controversy over member-state contributions -- where the General Assembly was paralyzed and resolutions could not be put to the vote for fear of pushing the organization over the brink; the only proposals that passed at that Assembly were those adopted by consensus or acclamation. The fact that large majorities now endorse propositions that may be objectionable to us does not mean that we can pick up our briefcases and go home. The issues will not go away even if the UN ceases to exist. Indeed, they would then become more difficult and dangerous than ever.

Today the United Nations faces one of its greatest challenges. The majority of the 147 member states are demanding a greater share of the world's economic opportunities and of the process of international decision-making that helps to shape these opportunities. Previous confrontations in the United Nations have been essentially political in nature; they have developed out of familiar international circumstances and values and have been resolved in time by reference to the generally-accepted principles and spirit of the Charter. The challenge cast by the developing countries to the industrialized states is not likely to be settled in this way. If the former cannot obtain greater advantage from international organizations such as the UN, they may be persuaded to form their own organizations and, if the rich countries are pressed too strongly to make immediate and substantial concessions, they may come to believe that "interdependence" is a concept they cannot afford.

Much of the recent history of the United Nations stems from the "spirit of Algiers", which emanated from the fourth conference of heads of non-aligned countries held in Algiers in the summer of 1973. Its results were embodied in a "political declaration" of a general character, a "declaration on the struggle for national liberation", an "economic declaration" and an "action program for economic co-operation", together with a number of supplementary resolutions on specific subjects. These documents presented for the first time comprehensive and interrelated political and economic objectives, which have since inspired the policies of the non-aligned and developing