

# Ring out the old and ring in the new

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*Sagarika Dutt comments on the appointment of the Spaniard Federico Mayor Zaragoza as the new Director-General of UNESCO.*

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On 18 October 1987, after a dramatic and suspense filled contest, Federico Mayor Zaragoza, a Spanish biochemist, was nominated as Director-General of UNESCO by the Executive Board. On 7 November his nomination was approved by the General Conference. This brought to an end the 13 year reign of Amadou Mahtar M'bow, the 66 year old Senegalese who had over the years acquired a notoriety for what were deemed to be his extravagant tastes, arrogant ways, high-handed policies and his mismanagement of UNESCO as well as his alleged anti-Western bias. For a number of years now the organisation has been sailing on troubled waters. In 1984 the United States withdrew and in 1985 Britain and Singapore followed suit. These withdrawals deprived UNESCO of more than \$64 million a year. Various other countries such as Canada, the Netherlands and Japan had also threatened to withdraw and for some time the very existence of UNESCO seemed threatened.

The new Director-General has therefore inherited not only a financially crippled organisation but also one whose international image has been considerably damaged. It will need a lot of effort to restore confidence in UNESCO and woo back the members who have been alienated. For several years UNESCO has had to face criticism from many quarters. What is necessary now is for all concerned including the new Director-



*Federico Mayor Zaragoza*

General to face bravely this criticism and strive to rescue this organisation from going down the drain of history.

On 28 December 1983, the American Secretary of State, George Shultz, sent the UNESCO Director-General a letter notifying him of the withdrawal of the United States from the organisation with effect from 31 December 1984. The withdrawal of the United States from UNESCO created what is commonly referred to as the 'UNESCO Crisis'. The United States was a major financial contributor and its withdrawal from the organisation was thought by many to be the last straw for an organisation already beset with problems. The United States used to contribute 25 per cent — \$47 million in 1984 — of the UNESCO budget. However, besides the obvious financial implications of the withdrawal, it also meant the elimination of United States official political, intellectual and diplomatic leadership and presence in

UNESCO. Moreover, the United States withdrawal also had an international demonstration effect; in other words, the United States set an example which was followed by two more countries, Britain and Singapore, and was also contemplated by several others. The withdrawal of Britain meant a further loss of \$17.5 million and that of Singapore a loss of \$365,000. As a result the 1986-87 budget had to be reduced from \$374 million to \$307 million.

### Three reasons

The Reagan administration has offered three major reasons for its decision to withdraw from UNESCO:

- Politicisation of almost every issue
- UNESCO's statist concepts
- Unrestrained budgetary growth and poor management.

It has been charged by the United States that, 'Unesco's programmes and personnel are heavily freighted with an irresponsible political content and answer to an agenda that is consistently inimical to U.S. interests.'<sup>1</sup> The American Department of State has particularly characterised UNESCO programmes of disarmament studies, collective rights and education of Palestinian refugees as politicised. The United States' UNESCO policy review states that, 'recent years have also seen increasing use of Unesco as a forum for Soviet peace and disarmament propaganda.'<sup>2</sup> UNESCO had been criticised for exhibiting an 'endemic hostility towards the basic institutions of a free society, especially a free market and a free press, coupled with the promotion of statist theories of development.'<sup>3</sup>

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Statist concepts included UNESCO's version of the New International Economic Order and the New World International Communication Order, especially the latter which has for quite some time been one of the major causes for the United States' dissatisfaction with UNESCO. UNESCO was accused by the United States press of encouraging censorship, state control of the press, licensing of journalists by the state, and in general of being the arch enemy of the press.

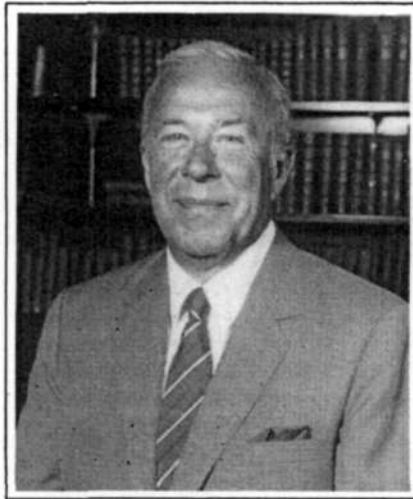
As regards budgetary growth the United States complained that while most United Nations agencies responded to the United States' call to restrict real programme growth by holding 1984-85 programme growth close to zero, UNESCO was the major exception, continuing its excessive programme growth rate. Another objectionable fact was that 80 per cent of its personnel are based in Paris, and only 20 per cent of UNESCO's resources are expended in the field.

### American audit

In March 1984 the United States Congress ordered its General Accounting Office to carry out an audit of UNESCO. Just before the GAO began its investigations there was a fire at the Paris headquarters which some felt was deliberately started in order to destroy some incriminating documents. Whether this is true or not nobody knows for sure but it did nothing for UNESCO's image.

The GAO's report, which was ready by the end of 1984, noted several shortcomings in UNESCO's management. Firstly, it found that UNESCO exhibits a tendency to over-centralise decision-making and a reluctance to delegate authority. While supporting staff in the Secretariat carry out the detailed reviews and analyses of issues and make proposals on actions to be taken, the Director-General makes most of the substantive and routine decisions concerning operations, such as making top appointments, approving extensions of employee contracts, granting promotions and approving requests for funds for certain programmes.

Secondly, the GAO's report states that in each of the major management areas reviewed, it found indications of a need for more effective oversight by the governing bodies, ie, the General Conference and the Executive Board. As regards personnel management, it was found that there are lengthy delays in the filling of staff vacancies. UNESCO has also been charged with the selection of poor quality staff, low morale and promotions on bases other than professional competence. The GAO report also charged that UNESCO has no effective system for evaluating the effectiveness of its programme activities nor adequate means for co-ordinating activities among its programmes to avoid unnecessary duplication.<sup>4</sup>



*George Shultz*

### Temporary committee

Meanwhile it was being increasingly recognised at UNESCO that some reforms had to be made. At the 119th session of the Executive Board held in Paris from 9-24 May 1984 on the initiative of Britain and France, a special 13 member temporary committee was set up which has as its mandate the job of presenting to the Executive Board recommendations and concrete measures designed to improve the functioning of the organisation. The Director-General also appointed five consultative working groups composed of UNESCO staff and outside experts to consider analysis of the programme, personnel matters, budgeting techniques and presentation, evaluation of programmes and public information activities.

The Temporary Committee submitted its first report containing 116 recommendations to the Executive Board at its 120th session. Its main recommendations were that the authority of the two main UNESCO bodies, the General Conference and the Executive Board, should be strengthened, especially with regard to decisions concerning the general orientation of the organisation and

approval of its work programmes; there should be the widest possible use of consensus particularly with respect to adoption of work programmes and budget; a decentralisation process should be initiated, which among other things would promote a greater degree of mobility between headquarters staff and those based in the field; there was also a necessity for rationalisation of UNESCO programmes, including improved evaluation techniques, avoiding duplication of activities undertaken by other agencies of the United Nations system and revision of existing guidelines for publications and documentation.<sup>5</sup>

### Implementation action

The Executive Board adopted the recommendations of the Temporary Committee and also passed a resolution requesting the Committee to ensure the implementation of the Board's decisions on the basis of the Temporary Committee's recommendations and to report to the Board on the matter at its 121st and 122nd sessions. However it was clear that the American government was dissatisfied with the recommendations. These were variously described by American representatives as 'politically weak' and 'a vote of confidence for M'bow'.

The reform process continued in UNESCO and at the Executive Board's 121st session the Temporary Committee submitted its second report which contained a plan and a timetable for the implementation of all relevant decisions taken by the Executive Board and by the Director-General. And while the United States was dissatisfied with the reforms, the Soviet Union in a letter to the Director-General described the United States demands for change as a 'noisy propaganda campaign' aimed at 'bending Unesco to suit their national interests' and 'distorting its noble image in the sight of international opinion and undermining its ability to contribute to the solution of world problems.'

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### Politicisation problem

So although efforts were being made to tackle management problems and to achieve maximum economy in the organisation's budget — steps have been taken towards drafting a zero-growth budget for 1988-89 — the problem of politicisation remains. Of course given the heterogeneity of member states, as expressed in their commitment to differing goals and strategies, some amount of politicisation is perhaps inevitable. To quote Victor-Yves Ghebali, 'international organization constitutes a channel of communication between the political units (member states), interacting in both co-operative and conflictual situations. Consequently, all intergovernmental institutions — whether specialised agencies or not — are exposed to politics . . . and their work reflects the prevailing political climate.'<sup>6</sup> Thus the functionalist idea that specialised agencies can perform their tasks as purely co-operative institutions and in complete isolation from political turmoil is a distant one.

It has also rightly been pointed out that UNESCO has been endowed with too wide a field of competence and with purposes difficult to define. The purposes of the organisation as stated in the constitution of UNESCO are broad enough to cover almost anything and everything under the sun. This, coupled with the fact that the founders of the organisation were naive enough to believe that men whose outlook on the world, whose ideology, values, beliefs and culture are different, if not in conflict, can work harmoniously and intellectually together, has increased the scope for politicisation.

At its inception UNESCO was dominated by Western ideology and its constitution reflected the values and ideals of the Western democracies. However, with the passage of time these values and ideals have been re-interpreted and challenged by new members, something which Western democracies especially the United States have definitely not liked. The United States does not accept this as something natural in a diverse and ever changing world but as straying far from fidelity to the ideals to which UNESCO was originally dedicated.

### Major task

East-West tensions and the North-South breach are all reflected in the work of UNESCO. Thus one of the major tasks that the new Director-General has before him is to maintain a balance between the East and the West and the North and South. It is generally thought that he will be able to tackle this problem well since he is Spanish and Spain is considered to be a 'middle country' between the developed world and the developing world.

Another fundamental problem concerning UNESCO's relations with ad-



*Amadou Mahtai M'bow*

vanced Western countries and especially the United States is the principle of one country/one vote. The founding assembly was ideologically dominated by the Western democracies, who conceived of an organisational structure where each member would have one equal vote, although the member's contributions would depend mainly on their respective per capita wealth. As a result, today 70 countries contribute a nominal 0.01 per cent of UNESCO's budget, while the United States — at the time of its withdrawal — contributed about 25 per cent of the budget and the seven leading OECD countries together contributed about 60 per cent. But when it comes to decision-making the United States and the OECD countries are in a minority and more often than not the priorities and measures favoured by the new political majority are perceived as detrimental to the interests of the minority of richer countries.<sup>7</sup> The notion of voting based on financial contribution, now being at least half-seriously canvassed in the United Nations mother-body, also has its adherents in UNESCO.

### M'bow's legacy

Besides alienating member states and losing their good will for quite some time now, M'bow's autocratic management of UNESCO has demoralised the Secretariat and created feelings of uncertainty, fear and distrust among employ-

ees of UNESCO. Mayor will therefore have to tackle this problem as well.

All in all the new Director-General does not have too easy a task before him. However the very fact that M'bow has been ousted means that half the battle is won (in at least psychological terms). What is needed now is a pragmatic approach and facing up to the realities of the present day. What is not needed is parochialism and ethnocentrism, dogged standing on principle and using UNESCO to further sectional political purposes, something which all parties, whether Third World countries or super-powers like the United States and Soviet Union, are guilty of to some extent. Ironically enough, although UNESCO came into being with the ultimate aim of eliminating war and conflict, it has now itself become an arena for conflict. It therefore remains to be seen what the new Director-General makes of this trouble-torn organisation.

### NOTES

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2. United States/UNESCO Policy Review in the Report of a Staff Study Mission, 10-23 Feb 1984, to the Committee on Foreign Affairs, US House of Representatives, p.102.
3. Newell, p.55.
4. 'Improvements needed in Unesco's management, personnel and budgeting practices', US General Accounting Office, 1984.
5. Executive Board document 120 Ex/3, 'Report of the temporary Committee of the Executive Board responsible for reviewing the functioning of the Organization'.
6. Victor-Yves Ghebali, 'The Politicization of UN Specialised Agencies: A Preliminary Analysis', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, vol 14, no 3, p.318.
7. Richard Sack, 'Unesco — From Inherent Contradictions to Open Crisis', *comparative Education Review*, vol 30, no 1, Feb 1986, p.113.