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Annan attends inauguration of Sudan's new National Unity Government. Credit: UN photo.

Kofi Annan

During a meeting on the reform of the United Nations, one of the participants said that the UN Secretary General should be a General rather than a Secretary. The first three SGs – Trygve Lie, Dag Hammarskjöld and U Thant – had been leaders, taking political initiatives.

They had been criticized, but could not be seen as pawns of the big powers. Their successors, Kurt Waldheim and Javier Perez de Cuellar, acted like Secretaries of the Security Council and did not stick their necks out. As a result, during the seventies and the eighties the UN system weakened. The next SG, Boutros Boutros-Ghali, was not accustomed to receiving instructions from superiors and took far-reaching initiatives, in the political as well as the socio-economic field. The US in particular did not agree with his initiatives and vetoed a second term.

Would his successor, Kofi Annan, become a Secretary or a General? He had been the favourite candidate of the US and many people foresaw that he would dance to the American tune, fearing his predecessor's fate. But Kofi Annan gradually became his own man. In the beginning he was careful, but became progressively stronger during his first term in office, becoming a world-ranking leader. One of the highlights of his career was his leading role in the process of preparing the Millennium Declaration. Under his leadership, political leaders all around the world

looked backwards – 'What went wrong during the century behind us? Where did we fail?' – in order to look forward: 'Which common values do we accept in order to guarantee a sustainable future? Which goals, in order to guarantee equal access for all people, irrespective of their background, present people and the yet unborn?' The Declaration went far beyond the acceptance of the well-known Millennium Development Goals. It was a clarion call, fresh in content, wider in scope than previous declarations, and worded in new and powerful language of obligations and rights.

Annan's speeches, though soft-spoken, were intellectual high spots, rhetorically unmatched. They were politically smart, and reached out beyond the usual political audience to people who felt themselves addressed by Annan, simply as citizens of the world. Kofi Annan was able to inspire young people, for example, who saw in him the personification of a value-based system they shared. He was trusted and followed, at a time when national political leaders were failing to live up to their promises, and were becoming less and less popular.

In 2004 Kofi Annan invited me to join him on a tour through East Africa, visiting Presidents and Prime Ministers. This was so he could introduce me to these leaders as his Representative in Sudan. I had been appointed to lead the peace operations there. When we were in Addis Ababa, Annan addressed the Annual Meeting of the African Union (AU). He spoke about power, and commented:

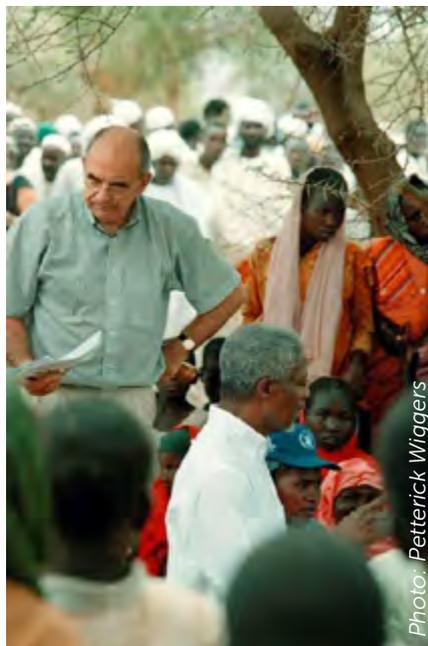
The time is behind us that power can stay in the hands of one party or one person only. The wisdom of a statesman lies in a peaceful transfer of power. Once chosen, power should not be used to change the constitution in order to get a new term and stay in power. The statesman knows the right moment to hand on the torch to a new generation.

Deby from Chad, Museveni from Uganda and other Presidents who had bent the laws of their country, sat in the front rows in the audience for this speech, and yet like Obama's similar speech at the AU more than ten years later, in 2016, this speech by Annan received an ovation. Annan had touched a tender spot in the consciences of African political leaders.

During discussions and negotiations with political leaders around the world, Kofi Annan spoke smoothly, never loudly, compelling people to listen attentively to him, and in this way getting his message heard. When necessary he could be razor-sharp. On one occasion I witnessed how he drove into a corner the Minister of Foreign Affairs of one particular country that had been making a habit of violating

international agreements. Annan left this Minister no room for manoeuvre whatsoever. On another occasion, I accompanied Kofi Annan to a meeting with an African President who blamed the UN for everything that had gone wrong. When he tried to bully the Secretary General, and used abusive language, we knew that the blame for his country's situation lay mainly with himself. Yet far from returning the blame, Annan persisted in arguing calmly and rationally, rebutting all the arguments made, one by one. Kofi Annan had made it crystal clear that he stood for his people, for the UN system and for its values, which he represented even in the face of hostility and rejection.

This he also did in contacts with the big powers. It took him some time, but he did publicly declare that the US invasion in Iraq was illegitimate and a violation of international law. He also knew that the Americans, who had supported his election to Secretary General during Clinton's Presidency, would not forgive him for what they saw as betrayal. And this was indeed to be the beginning of the end of Annan's tenure. The Bush administration wanted to get rid of him, and worked hard to poison the political



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climate, by making false accusations at the personal level. In the eyes of many, the Secretary General had simply defended a rule-based international order. Survival of this rule-based system should, after all, be seen as crucial for all those across the world seeking common answers to the cross-border challenges of the 21st century.

One of those who tried to undermine Kofi Annan as Secretary General was John Bolton, US Ambassador to the United Nations. This same Bolton is now acting in his present capacity as National Security Advisor to President Trump. His actions are now paving the way towards dismantling the entire UN system of agreements and cooperation. This is the real tragedy of Kofi Annan; during his second term as UN Secretary General, he was leading a system that was in decay, not because it had become outdated, but because the big powers started to undermine it, brush it aside and starve it of funds.

Kofi Annan became a General rather than a Secretary of the world's powers. When necessary he chose to withstand their influence. During his second term, this struggle for UN values of rule of law and human rights became a bitter battle, and ultimately one he could not win. In the hearts of many people today, all round the world, however, Annan had become the President, not the General. He was the President for those who felt they could trust him more than their own leaders in their own country.