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BOY GENIUS HEADS UN ASSEMBLY

Tanzania's Salim Ahmed Salim has become president of the United Nations General Assembly - at the early age of 37. He believes the fundamental challenges facing the UN remain the violation of human rights in various forms and racism in South Africa. Gemini News Service profiles the new president.

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United Nations, New York

Approx. 800 words.

As diplomats go, the new president of the UN General Assembly is something of a boy genius.

Salim Ahmed Salim of Tanzania, the second-youngest diplomat to hold the Parliament of Man's highest elective office, was 22 years old when he began his ambassadorial career in Cairo in 1964. Even now, he is only 37 and just two months older than the youngest-ever Assembly president, the 1974 session's Abdelaziz Bouteflika of Algeria.

Despite his youth, the ebullient Salim already is being mentioned as a possible successor to the UN secretary-generalship when Dr Kurt Waldheim's term expires at the end of 1981. But the president, immersed in more immediate responsibilities, reacted coldly to the suggestion when it was raised at his first press conference here.

"We already have a secretary-general of the United Nations", he retorted, "He is doing a superb job in an extremely difficult situation. I think we must not add to the burden of his responsibilities by indulging in idle speculation."

Nevertheless, the very fact that Salim, until now Tanzania's UN ambassador, has been singled out for speculation reflects his stature in the UN community.

The recognition that propelled him into the Assembly presidency by acclamation did not come all at once. When he presented his Un ambassadorial credentials over nine years ago at the age of 28, he was considered a fire-breathing radical whose speeches were hallmarked by intemperance if not extremism.

The years have mellowed his style, and today he is respected as one of the UN's most adroit and effective diplomats.

But his convictions of what he considers to be the fundamental challenges facing the United Nations remain unaltered. The point was clear from his first pronouncements as Assembly president, when he outlined his assessment of key global problems and "root causes" of international conflict, among them:

"The violations of human rights in various forms", including the "internationalised racism" of apartheid in southern Africa.

The Middle East conflict, whose "core"...is the continued denial of the inalienable rights of the Palestirian people to self-determination, including the right to establish an independent state". (At the same time, alluding to Israel), he defended the "right of all states in the area to an independent existence").

- The world's 10 million-plus refugees ("a crying testimony of man's inhumanity to man") who are fugitives from political, economic or religious persecution or deprivation.
- The need for fundamental structural changes in the international economic system to modify the existing development strategy, which has "miserably failed" to halt the widening of the gap between the world's rich and poor.
- The tendency of government's to use the UN as "an instrument of convenience" instead of as an organisation uniquely structured as a "perpetual instrument for the promotion of peace, security and international cooperation".

Along with apartheid, the challenge with which Salim's UN career is most closely identified is decolonisation. From 1972 until he was elected Assembly president, he was chairman of the powerful Special (Decolonisation) Committee of 24.

In fact, he linked the two issues in his presidential speech to the Assembly when he pointedly deplored the fact that "the twin evils" of apartheid and colonialism "still prevail in southern Africa". But he also broadened the target of his cor to include additional populations in the Middle East and Asia who are suffering from the humiliation of being subject people under colonialism, racism and other forms of domination and indignities".

Among Salim's other UN assignments dealing with decolonialisation have been the chairmanship of a special mission that visited the South Pacific island of Niue, a dependency of New Zealand, and the vice presidency of an international conference on Zimbabwe-Rhodesia and Namibia. (South West Africa).

He was also chairman of the Security Council's committee on sanctions against Rhodesia and, in Oslo, chairman of the political committee of an international conference to support victims of colonialism and apartheid in southern Africa.

As the ambassador of non-aligned Tanzania, Salim has been a delegate to conferences held by the neutralist bloc, most recently the summit of the non-aligned countries in Havana, Cuba.

Speaking as Assembly president, Salim praised the movement for playing "a vanguard role in the struggle for democratisation of international relations" and as a force in implementing the new international economic order.

Despite his natural preoccupation with the problems of Africa, Salim has gone farther afield in his career. He has, for example, served as Tanzania's ambassador to Peking and Pyongyang. From the early 1970s until his election to the Assembly presidency, he was ambassador to Cuba and, concurrently, high commissioner to Guyana, Barbados, Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago.

Born in Zanzibar on January 23, 1942, Salim was educated at Lumumba College there, at the University of Delhi and at New York City's Columbia University School of International Affairs.

Some delegations, notably those of Israel and South Africa, have privately expressed scepticism about Salim's ability to preside even-handedly over the Assembly in view - as a press conference question put it - "of your stated positions on the Middle-East and some African questions." Unperturbed, the president replied:

"The positions I have taken on both those issues are positions that have been articulated, defended, espoused, championed and reiterated in the General Assembly year in and year out; and in that respect, I do not see that it should be in any way difficult to me to maintain impartiality"-
GEMINI.

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