



-A UNA-USA Fact Sheet-

**Selecting a United Nations Secretary-General:
A Context for Reform?**

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Background

Against the backdrop of the recent turmoil at the United Nations—including the mismanagement of the Oil-For-Food Program—and the intense process of reform currently underway, the upcoming leadership transition of the United Nations Secretary-General could be the most important succession in the organization’s history. This year marks the end of Kofi Annan’s tenure as secretary-general, and the UN’s next leader will likely play a pivotal role in setting the course of the world body in the years ahead.

The *UN Charter* identifies the secretary-general as the “chief administrative officer,” while also empowering him to “bring to the attention of the Security Council any matter which in his opinion may threaten the maintenance of international peace and security.” The office of the secretary-general has evolved to encompass both administrative and diplomatic portfolios, at once managing a mammoth bureaucracy and forging consensus among oft-polarized member states.

Despite these far ranging responsibilities, the *UN Charter* provides minimal guidance on the process of selecting the UN’s top diplomat, stating simply that “the Secretary-General shall be appointed by the General Assembly upon the recommendation of the Security Council.” There are no explicit criteria or qualifications for the post, including term limits or country of origin. In practice, this has given the five permanent members of the Security Council (China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom and the United States) veto power over the selection process within the council since the UN’s founding. The General Assembly has had the theoretical power to override the council’s selection by failing to give the recommended candidate the necessary majority vote; nonetheless, to date, the General Assembly has never rejected a candidate referred by the Security Council.

Due to a lack of official guidelines, some precedents have emerged over the years with respect to choosing the secretary-general. The post’s tenure lasts either one or two terms of five years. The selection is based on a geographical rotation, and it is generally accepted that the secretary-general should not originate from one of the permanent five member states.

Previous secretaries-general include: Trygvie Lie of Norway (1946-1952); Dag Hammarskjöld of Sweden (1953-1961); U Thant of Burma/Myanmar (1961-1971); Kurt Waldheim of Austria (1972-1981); Javier Perez de Cuellar of Peru (1982-1991); and Boutros Boutros-Ghali of Egypt (1992-1996). Kofi Annan of Ghana began his first term in 1997; his second term ends in December 2006.

Current Debates

In recent years, so-called precedents for selecting the secretary-general have been criticized as privileging political considerations over the selection of the most qualified candidates. Permanent members have used their veto toward political ends in three of the past six elections in which an incumbent secretary-general sought a renewed mandate. Most recently, in 1996, the United States used its veto to block the re-election of Boutros Boutros-Ghali—despite its support of his selection in 1991—in order to quell domestic political opposition to the Clinton administration. Then presidential candidate, US Senator Bob Dole, famously declared: “When I’m president, no American soldier will be forced to serve under Boutros Boutros-Ghali.” Many UN observers saw the lone American veto as a domestic electoral ploy by the incumbent president to assuage the concerns of conservative voters. (For details on the politics of voting and selecting other secretaries-general, see UNA-USA’s fact sheet: “An Historical Overview on the Selection of United Nations Secretaries-General.”)

Such overt politicking has prompted larger calls to reform the process of selecting the UN’s top position. Prominent ideas that have emerged include: establishing a more open, deliberative process of nominating candidates through public hearings or a nominating committee; foregoing the geographical rotation of candidates which privileges country of origin over individual capabilities; and eliminating gender barriers that have historically been tied to the office.

The Reform Angle

A re-examination of the process of electing the secretary-general can be viewed as a component of the larger effort of UN reform underway. At this pivotal juncture in the organization’s history, a strong, capable leader is needed to ensure the implementation of reforms and to guide the transformation of the UN into a more efficient and effective body. The choice of a new secretary-general will have a lasting impact on the organization and, indeed, the world. An open, responsible selection process must reflect the immense weight of such a decision.

In this context, UNA-USA, the United Nations Association of the United States of America, is undertaking an initiative to examine the agenda, role and responsibilities of the next secretary-general. Under the co-chairmanship of Thomas Pickering, former US Ambassador to the UN and US Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs, and Sir Brian Urquhart, former UN Under Secretary General for Special Political Affairs, this effort aims to: (a) think through what should be the priority agenda for the next Secretary-General; (b) shed light on how to best improve the selection process; and (c) clarify the appropriate roles and responsibilities of the Secretary-General (and possibly the Deputy Secretary-General).

For more information, contact Peggy Atherlay, UNA-USA Communications Director, at 212-907-1320 or patherlay@unausa.org