

## **Enter Mr Ban - The UN's new secretary-general**

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Might a grey man from Korea be exactly the right choice to succeed Kofi Annan?

IT IS not yet official but now it is all but certain. Ban Ki-moon, South Korea's long-serving foreign minister, will become the United Nations' new secretary-general when Kofi Annan quits at the end of the year. The choice does not set the pulse racing. In Korea Mr Ban's nickname is Ban-chusa—a loose translation of chusa being “administrative clerk”. This double-edged moniker, used by friends and foes alike, hints not only at Mr Ban's fastidiousness, attention to detail and highly regarded administrative skills but also at a lack of charisma and a supposed willingness to bend to the will of his superiors. Many will say that the UN's opaque selection procedure has alighted upon the lowest common denominator: a yes-man who will shrink from standing up to the big powers and driving overdue reforms through the world body.

It would, however, be wrong to write off Mr Ban prematurely. For one thing, the UN could sorely use a spot of fastidious administration just now. Mr Annan was not the venal incompetent that some of his critics in America tried to paint him as. But he has certainly been a weak manager. An investigation a year ago by Paul Volcker into the UN's mishandling of the Iraqi oil-for-food arrangement in the 1990s concluded that the programme was riddled with waste and corruption, and that this reflected the absence of “a strong organisational ethic”. As the UN's chief administrative officer, the man with ultimate responsibility was the secretary-general. Mr Annan was lucky to hold on to his job. If Mr Ban moves swiftly to overhaul the UN's administration, bring in new talent and restore bureaucratic morale, doubts about the faceless chusa from Korea could swiftly subside.

But shouldn't the secretary-general of the UN be much more than just an able bureaucrat? Up to a point. Dag Hammarskjöld showed in the 1950s that the right man in the right circumstances could indeed use the job to become a powerful international statesman, troubleshooter and problem-solver. Arguably, the need for that sort of secretary-general has lately become more pressing. After the divisions in the Security Council over the Iraq war, and given the divisions that may now open up over intervention in Darfur and Iran's nuclear programme, there exists a great appetite the world over for a UN that lives up to the aspirations of its founding charter as a rule-setting body and arbiter in international relations. Such a body needs to stand proudly independent of both the superpower and any collection of individual states. And that would in turn seem to demand a top diplomat with supreme confidence and moral authority, not a little-known official who boasts of having spent his 35-odd years of public service being “basically a harmoniser”.

Charisma and its limitations

And yet it is a harmoniser, not a tub-thumper, the UN most needs. Many people think of the UN as a sort of world government, laying down international law with the same

authority as a national government lays down domestic law. It is of course nothing of the sort, since it lacks both the legitimacy of an elected government and—except when its members choose to provide it—any means of enforcement. A secretary-general who thought otherwise would bump at once into the realities of power. Remember that even the admired Hammarskjöld made a quiet start, proving his worth as a mediator behind the scenes before earning the trust of the big powers.

Nothing in his past suggests that Mr Ban will turn out as well as that. The job may just be too big for him. But he starts with some advantages, one of which is that he owes his selection in part to the support of both the United States and China. If he is the yes-man his critics say he is, he will soon discover the impossibility of saying yes both to the established superpower and to its emerging rival. But if he is the bridge-builder he claims to be, and can combine building bridges with sound management, he stands a better chance than his predecessor of promoting reform. He deserves to be given a chance.