



The appointment of the UN Secretary-General and other executive heads: opportunities for reform

- 10 actionable ideas to strengthen UN appointment processes
- A detailed analysis on interruptions to an SG's term of office

Ben Donaldson, UNA-UK, June 2023

About UNA-UK

UNA-UK is a British charity and a leading source of analysis on the UN. It aims to build support for the UN amongst policymakers, opinion-formers and the public. The organisation is a co-founder of the 1 for 8 Billion campaign which was instrumental in transforming the 2015/16 Secretary-General selection process, until 2022 the campaign was called 1 for 7 Billion. In 2022 UNA-UK co-launched “Blue Smoke” - a working group created to shine a light on elections and appointments to senior positions within the United Nations. The working group consists of UNA-UK, Plataforma CIPÓ and Strategy for Humanity and relies on the expertise of a wide network of experts, advisors and sources. Blue Smoke’s monthly newsletter is kindly hosted by our media partner PassBlue.



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Cover image:

First-ever televised live debate in the General Assembly Hall with candidates for the position of Secretary-General. Credit: UN Photo/Evan Schneider

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Executive summary

After 70 years of secrecy, the 2016 process to select the UN Secretary-General (SG) marked a watershed moment for transparency and inclusivity. Facilitated by [Resolution 69/321](#), for the first time in the UN's history the process had an official start point, a call for candidates, a basic person specification, the publication of candidates' names, and vision statements and hearings for each candidate in front of the General Assembly (GA). The official process was complemented by informal Security-Council discussions with candidates and engagement from civil society and media outlets, including through hustings and questionnaires on candidates' priorities. Senior diplomats have [described](#) the reforms to the process as having been instrumental to the outcome of the 2016 race.

In 2021, these reforms were consolidated through their reimplementation during the selection process by which António Guterres was appointed for a second term.

The reforms have also been built on, notably through [Resolution 75/325](#) which states that "nominations of candidates must be submitted by at least one Member State", leaving open the option for states to jointly nominate a candidate.

It also recognises the complementary role played by civil society and encourages states to "publicize the call for nominations, including with civil society and other stakeholders with the aim of identifying potential candidates." This raises the prospect of innovations such as states collaborating with civil society to find and nominate candidates from different backgrounds. And for the first time in the UN's history, the resolution also highlights

the striking unbroken pattern of male SGs and calls for states to "bear this in mind" when nominating candidates.

However, there are multiple outstanding reform proposals that warrant careful discussion ahead of the next selection process, expected for 2025-6. These proposals should be an urgent priority for the [Ad-Hoc Working Group on the Revitalization of the work of the General Assembly](#) (AHWG) as part of its focus on "selection and appointment of the Secretary-General and other executive heads". The biennialisation of the AHWG's work means that this session's resolution, expected to be adopted in September 2023, may well be the last opportunity to make progress ahead of the hurly-burly of the next selection process.

Recently, the AHWG's focus within this cluster has been on the Secretary-General appointment process, with the related issue of other executive heads being largely overlooked. Given the severe lack of transparency surrounding the appointment process for other top UN jobs and the continued de facto monopoly on certain jobs by powerful states, attention by the AHWG on this aspect is long overdue.

This report addresses issues related to both the appointment of the SG as well as top UN jobs in general. It describes 10 proposals that enjoy a degree of General Assembly support - measures based on improving transparency and inclusivity, addressing undue influence by Member States, and reducing the barriers to civil society participation in General Assembly processes.

ON THE SG SELECTION PROCESS, THE GA SHOULD:

- 1 Call for transparent campaign financing
- 2 Schedule a dedicated discussion on multiple candidates
- 3 Schedule a dedicated discussion on term length and renewability
- 4 Propose a timetable, including a start date for the next SG selection process
- 5 Call for states to only consider nominating qualified female candidates and work together to submit joint nominations
- 6 Request that the President of the Security Council keep all Member States and the public well informed at all stages
- 7 Clarify arrangements for interruptions to an SG's term of office

ON THE APPOINTMENT OF EXECUTIVE HEADS, THE GA SHOULD:

- 8 Reassert the unacceptability of ringfencing senior posts and call on all states to desist from actions which could compromise the independence of the SG
- 9 Call on the SG to significantly enhance transparency for appointments of senior officials, including around term lengths, and for good practice to be mainstreamed throughout the UN system

WITH REGARDS TO THE ROLE OF CIVIL SOCIETY, THE GA SHOULD:

- 10 Deepen the participation of civil society in appointment processes and drive up standards on wider civil society access

The report appendix gives special attention to arrangements for an SG's early departure from office (point 7 above) since this is an area that has been almost entirely absent from formal discussions at the UN in recent history.

The report draws on the knowledge and wisdom of a wide group of diplomats, current and former UN officials and civil society experts. However, the policy positions and conclusions reached are entirely those of the report author and UNA-UK. The range of proposals is not intended as an exhaustive manifesto of action required to solve the myriad issues with appointment processes at the UN. Rather, the scope is anchored by opportunities within the General Assembly, focussing on reforms and scenarios whose implementation does not require any amendment to the UN Charter or other "big bang" transformation.



10 actionable ideas for the General Assembly

The AHWG resolution to be agreed during the 77th session could well be the final opportunity to establish reforms ahead of the political hurly-burly of the next SG selection process.

By the 79th session (the next time the AHWG will negotiate a resolution on the issue), the expectation is that the next Secretary-General selection process will either be officially underway or be on the brink of beginning - either way, the atmosphere will not be conducive to the sober consideration of new reforms.

In [recent discussions](#), attention within the “selection and appointment of the Secretary-General and other executive heads” cluster has focused on the SG appointment process, with other executive heads being overlooked. A lack of scrutiny of these appointments has

enabled undue state influence to go largely unchecked, leading to de facto monopolies on certain jobs by powerful states.

Increased transparency and accountability is imperative. Far from further politicizing the process, public scrutiny of the way top UN jobs are awarded can help push against inappropriate political influence.

For these reasons, greater public scrutiny is relevant to all senior appointments, whether the roles in question are appointed by states (such as the SG) or by the SG under state influence (as with other executive heads) or by some combination.

The 10 reform opportunities for the General Assembly’s consideration are outlined on the following pages.



Meeting of the AHWG on the Revitalization of the work of the General Assembly in 2018. UN Photo/Loey Felipe

1

SG SELECTION: A CALL FOR TRANSPARENT CAMPAIGN FINANCING

The General Assembly should call for all Secretary-General candidates to disclose their campaign funding sources

as a prerequisite of their candidacy, along with a commitment to declare any further funding as the race develops. During the 2016 SG selection process, following requests to all candidates from 1 for 8 Billion, some candidates voluntarily disclosed this information. In an [exchange on twitter](#), SG candidate Danilo Türk stated that his campaign was funded by the Government of Slovenia and had a spending limit of EUR 40,000. Such information is highly relevant to scrutinise any possible conflicts of interest in relation to candidates' vision statements.

On 9 February 2023, this issue was raised in a formal discussion for the first time in the AHWG's history. During the event, the Accountability, Coherence and Transparency group (ACT) welcomed the steps taken by some previous candidates to voluntarily disclose funding sources relating to their candidatures, [stating that](#) "this adds an indispensable element of transparency to the selection process and such practices should

become condition sine qua non for the future processes".

The need for financial disclosures from senior staff is well established within the UN system, indeed, confidential financial disclosure statements are already required for senior staff positions. The UN Ethics Office administers the [UN's financial disclosure programme](#) and reviews these statements for conflicts of interest. Furthermore, the Secretary-General encourages voluntary public disclosure of such statements by senior officials. At a minimum, candidates for Secretary-General should be held to the same standard.

A measure calling for transparent campaign financing should be enshrined in a General Assembly resolution as a vital addition to the health and credibility of the next SG selection process. The resolution could ask the President of the General Assembly (PGA)'s office to collect this information and publish it alongside candidates' vision statements and CVs on the UN's website. In the absence of such a call, candidates should voluntarily publish this information.

RECOMMENDATION

The GA should call on all candidates to disclose their campaign funding sources as a prerequisite of their candidacy. In the absence of such a call, candidates should voluntarily publish this information.

2

SG SELECTION: DISCUSSION ON MULTIPLE CANDIDATES

Since 2016 the UN Security Council has experienced a significant reduction in its ability to find consensus,

particularly among its permanent members.

The result of this has been a change in relations between the General Assembly and Security Council and an adoption of new working methods, including a revitalisation of the Uniting for Peace process and the adoption of the [Liechtenstein mechanism](#) for holding Security Council members to account for their use of the veto.

The selection process for the Secretary-General should keep pace with the development of new norms and be alert to the fact that there may well not be a consensus candidate from the Security Council next time around.

[Article 97](#) of the UN Charter states that “the Secretary-General shall be appointed by the General Assembly upon the recommendation of the Security Council”. However, the number of candidates to be considered is a matter that the General Assembly has addressed and feels competent to address, as is clear from the wording of GA [Resolution 11\(1\)](#) adopted in January 1946 which states: It would be **desirable** for the Security Council to proffer only one candidate for the consideration of the General Assembly....” (emphasis added). By stating that they felt in 1946 that one candidate

would be desirable (something they may no longer feel to be the case) they made clear that recommending more than one candidate would be an option.

The Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) has argued that the resolution is outdated and that the General Assembly should request to be presented with more than one candidate. The Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) - as well as a host of states in their national capacity - have also declared their support, [while ACT](#) “strongly encourages discussion on the prospect”.

The only states to actively oppose this reform have been the UK, USA, France, China and Russia (P5) plus one or two outliers. However, the P5 pushback doesn’t stop there. Multiple state representatives have [claimed](#) that P5 states are not only against the reform, but are using their influence to stop the issue from even being debated within the GA.

[Resolution 75/325](#) calls on the GA “to explore possible steps to improve future processes, including the collaboration between the Assembly and the Security Council, consistent with Article 97 of the Charter.” This year’s resolution could build on this language by scheduling dedicated discussions on the convention whereby the Security Council only recommends a single candidate for consideration by the General Assembly.

RECOMMENDATION

The GA should schedule a dedicated discussion on the convention whereby the Security Council recommends a single candidate for consideration by the General Assembly.



RESOURCES

- [1 for 8 Billion’s mapping of country positions on the proposal that the Security Council nominate multiple candidates](#)
- [1 for 8 Billion’s briefing containing further information on the multiple candidates reform \(pg 13\)](#)

3

SG SELECTION: DISCUSSION ON SINGLE TERM

While there is not yet consensus among states about the desirability of the future Secretaries-General being appointed for a non-renewable, potentially longer, term of office, the vast majority of states would like the General Assembly to hold a discussion on the issue.¹

The proposal also has the support of former Secretaries-General, former High Commissioners for Human Rights and former UN staff that witnessed the complications caused by re-election processes. With minor variations, proponents argue that during an SG's first term they must work under the shadow of pressures to be re-appointed. While to some degree SGs are always beholden to the influences of Member States, reappointment, which requires the support of all five Permanent Members of the Security Council, presents a particular opportunity for an SG's independence to be compromised.

Javier Perez de Cuellar, former Secretary-General, wrote:

"I believe that future Secretaries-General should be appointed to a seven-year, non-renewable term to lessen their vulnerability to pressure from Member States."²

Sir Brian Urquhart, a former Under-Secretary-General who served under five Secretaries-General, co-wrote the following with former senior UN official Erskine Childers:

"A single term of seven years would have many advantages. It would give

a Secretary-General the opportunity to undertake far-reaching plans, free from undesirable pressures. It would make possible a more orderly and considered process for selecting the best possible successor [...] The seven-year, single term of office is the key to improving the appointment process. It should be established as soon as possible."³

The length of term of the Secretary-General is clearly open to revision. In 1946, the General Assembly, which is assigned the responsibility of appointing the Secretary-General under Article 97 of the UN Charter, assumed its authority to set the term length. The Assembly decided that the term of office for the first Secretary-General should be five years with the possibility of a further term of five years ([Resolution 11\(1\)](#)). However, the resolution also specified that "there being no stipulation on the subject in the Charter, the General Assembly and the Security Council are free to modify the term of office of future Secretaries-General in the light of experience".

The convention of a term of five years, renewable once, has mostly been observed, but there have been exceptions. Trygve Lie was re-appointed for three, not five years. U Thant was initially appointed for a year as Acting Secretary-General, then appointed for a further four years and subsequently reappointed for five more. Kurt Waldheim had support from some Member States when he ran (unsuccessfully) for a third term.

In early 1996 there was strong support in the General Assembly for establishing a single term, including for a maximum of seven years.

¹ 1 for 8 Billion's [mapping of state positions](#) shows that NAM, ACT and CELAC have all called for discussions on the proposal for future Secretaries-General to serve a single term.

² The United Nations in the 21st Century: [The Role and Selection of the Secretary-General](#), Report of the Delphi Symposium, Delphi, 2010, p. 9.

³ Brian Urquhart and Erskine Childers, *A World in Need of Leadership: tomorrow's United Nations*, Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation, Sweden, 1996, p. 30, first published in 1990.

3 CONTINUED

The Assembly was close to reaching consensus when discussions were overshadowed by disagreements about the possible reappointment of then Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali. In 1997 the General Assembly agreed that “the duration of the term or terms of appointment, including the option of a single term, shall be considered before the appointment of the next Secretary-General”.⁴

However, consideration of the issue did not take place before the appointment of Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon in 2006 and subsequent attempts to hold a thematic discussion among states on the matter have been thwarted. In a similar vein to the

proposal for multiple candidates, the P5 plus a handful of outliers are the only states publicly opposing the reform, with P5 states [reportedly](#) using their influence to block discussions on this proposal.

As with the multiple candidates proposal, the General Assembly should schedule a debate on SG term length and renewability in time for the reform to be implemented ahead of the next selection process, should sufficient support be garnered.

In the absence of any such reform we hope and trust that Member States and civil society will challenge candidates running for selection as Secretary-General in 2026 to pledge to only serve one term if chosen.

RECOMMENDATION

The GA should schedule a dedicated discussion on SG term length and renewability.



RESOURCES

- [1 for 8 Billion’s mapping showing state support for a single term of office \(June 2021\)](#)
- [1 for 8 Billion’s briefing on the appointment of the Secretary-General for a longer single term](#)



Vitaly I. Churkin, then-President of the Security Council, following the UN Security Council’s unanimous recommendation that the General Assembly appoint António Guterres as UN Secretary-General. UN Photo/ Amanda Voisard 2016

⁴ [A/RES/51/241](#)

4

SG SELECTION: SCHEDULE A START DATE FOR THE NEXT SG PROCESS

A more structured process with a timeline agreed in advance is needed to add predictability and transparency to the

next SG selection process. This would help potential candidates prepare their campaigns and would enable states, civil society and media organisations to better organise and collaborate.

General Assembly Resolution [75/325](#) tasked the current session of the AHWG with making progress on the proposal to put forward provisional timelines for SG selection processes:

“[The General Assembly] Reiterates the possibility of providing the process of selection and appointment of the Secretary-General with provisional timelines in accordance with paragraph 72 of its resolution 72/313, and decides to further discuss this issue during its seventy-seventh session in the Ad Hoc Working Group;”

NAM and ACT have both called for a more structured process, specifying that it should include a clear timetable for the different stages. The EU has also called for a well-structured process. A simple and achievable reform in this regard is to enshrine the date on which the process begins. In practical terms, a date could be set for the sending

of the joint letter from the Presidents of the Security Council and General Assembly - the mechanism which invites states to submit nominations while laying out the process.

In 2015, the [joint letter](#) which began the selection process was sent out on 15 December (twelve and a half months before incumbent Ban Ki-moon’s second term ended). In 2021, the [joint letter](#) was sent out on 5 February (just under eleven months before incumbent António Guterres’ first term ended).

According to ACT’s suggested timetable, future joint letters should be sent no later than October of the year preceding the appointment. This would allow at least fourteen months for the process to be carried out.

In determining the timing of the joint letter, consideration should be given to the new element agreed in General Assembly Resolution 75/325:

“[The General Assembly] Recommends that the President of the General Assembly and the President of the Security Council, in future joint letters on the Secretary-General selection process, encourage Member States to publicize the call for nominations, including with civil society and other stakeholders with the aim of identifying potential candidates;”

ACT’S PROPOSED TIMELINE FOR FUTURE SG SELECTIONS

OCTOBER of the year preceding appointment: Joint letter from the PGA and the PSC to all Member States encouraging nominations of qualified candidates.

MARCH 31ST of the appointment year: deadline for the submission of candidatures to enable sufficient time for candidates to consult widely and communicate their vision.

JUNE 30TH of the appointment year: deadline for the completion of General Assembly hearings with all candidates.

OCTOBER 1ST: Deadline for the Security Council recommendation and the resolution from the General Assembly regarding the appointment of the SG.

4 CONTINUED

A start date no later than October of the year preceding the appointment published well in advance would allow time for:

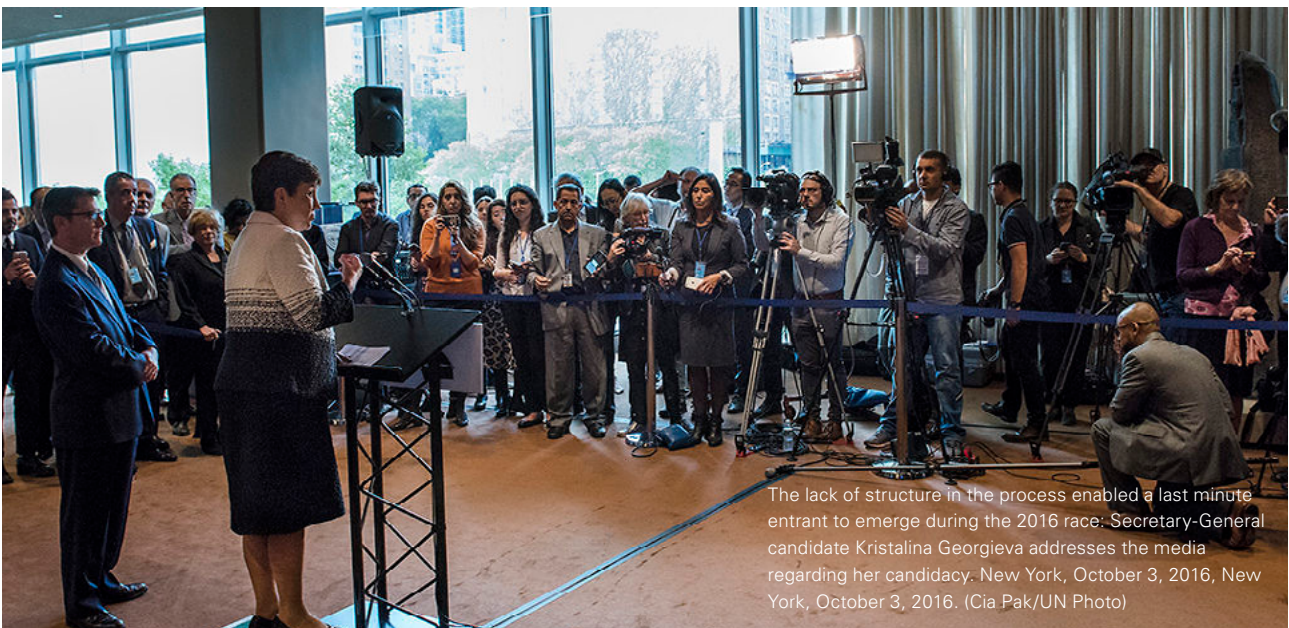
- Potential candidates to make arrangements for their campaign, possibly widening the pool of senior leaders able to make themselves available for the role
- Discussions on the qualities and priorities for the next SG among civil society activists, parliamentarians, the public and other relevant stakeholders
- Widespread dissemination of the call for nominations
- Innovative 'add-ons' such as informal primaries to identify candidates from different backgrounds or candidate hustings - organised through collaboration between states, civil society and media
- Nominated candidates to take part in consultations and widely communicate their vision

Establishing a cut-off date for the nomination of candidates could also be desirable, making it clear from the outset that candidates must be presented by states in a timely fashion. Doing so would help quash the "dark horse" tactic of holding back nominations in order to wait and see how things are panning out.

The common criticism of the cut-off is that there needs to be an opportunity to consider new candidates should the Security Council be unable to agree on one or more candidates to recommend to the General Assembly. This could be solved with some simple wording enabling, under exceptional circumstances, nominations to be reopened with the agreement of the Presidents of the General Assembly and Security Council.

RECOMMENDATION

The GA should propose a timeline for the next selection process, including a date for the issuance of the joint letter.



The lack of structure in the process enabled a last minute entrant to emerge during the 2016 race: Secretary-General candidate Kristalina Georgieva addresses the media regarding her candidacy. New York, October 3, 2016, New York, October 3, 2016. (Cia Pak/UN Photo)

5

SG SELECTION: PROGRESSIVE NOMINATIONS: A CALL FOR STATES TO NOMINATE WOMEN AND WORK TOGETHER TO JOINTLY NOMINATE

The next SG should be a woman. To start to unpick the discrimination that pervades the international system and to inspire gender equality around the world, the 80-year spell of male leadership must be broken. The GA should call for states to only consider nominating qualified female candidates.

While anodyne in its formulation, language in [Resolution 75/325](#) heralds the first time a General Assembly resolution has recognised the glaring pattern of male Secretaries-General:

“Notes that there is yet to be a woman Secretary-General and invites Member States to bear this in mind in the future, when nominating candidates for the position of the Secretary-General;”

According to diplomats, this language was hard fought over, and the outcome represented an achievement by progressive diplomats.⁵ That such timid language on gender should prove such a struggle to agree on serves as an alarm to advocates of gender equality. Despite the broad support for a female SG as witnessed in recent GA

discussions,⁶ the path to a female SG is not a given and vigilance is required. The language of 75/325 should be built on through an explicit call for states to consider only nominating qualified female candidates and such a call should be reinforced in the next joint letter.

An aspect of the nominations process which could be strengthened through practice relates to joint submissions. As well as collaborating with civil society to identify potential candidates, states should cooperate to jointly nominate a female candidate. Not only could this be a positive way to demonstrate the breadth of support for a candidate, but also a way to dispel the unhelpful misconception that states can only nominate their own nationals. The wording of Resolution 75/325 already provides room for this:

“nominations of candidates must be submitted by **at least one Member State**, in accordance with the ongoing practice” (emphasis added)

While beyond the scope of this report, when it comes to other executive heads, a major overhaul is required to improve female representation.⁷

RECOMMENDATION

The GA should call for states to only consider nominating qualified female candidates and should encourage states to work together to make joint nominations.



RESOURCES

- [Blog on the struggle within the GA to agree strong language promoting the nomination of female candidates during its 2021 negotiations](#)
- [GWL Voices' report "47 | 335" comprehensively maps women's leadership in multilateral organisations](#)

⁵ Ben Donaldson, [Secretary-General selection process and the P5 stranglehold on power](#), Ethics & International Affairs, 2021.

⁶ [Significant appetite for further reforms in the General Assembly](#), 1 for 8 Billion, 2023.

⁷ See [GWL Voices report "47 | 335"](#) for a comprehensive mapping of women's leadership in multilateral organisations for more information (the figures refer to the number of female vs male chiefs across a wide range of international organisations).

6

SG SELECTION: TRANSPARENCY IN THE SECURITY COUNCIL

The GA should call for the Security Council to enhance transparency during its deliberations on candidates. In

particular, the practice of holding ‘straw polls’ without officially announcing the results casts a shadow over the process and should be discontinued.

After the transparency of the early stages of the 2016 process (including the publication of candidates’ names and hearings in the GA), secrecy descended once again when the Security Council began their deliberations. From 21 July - 5 October 2016, six ‘straw polls’ were held, during which each Council member cast an anonymous ballot for each candidate stating “Encourage”, “Discourage” or “No Opinion Expressed”. The sixth and final straw poll used coloured coded ballots to differentiate between the elected and permanent members of the Council. This differentiation is a means of indicating where potential vetoes may scupper a candidate’s chance of becoming the Security Council’s recommended candidate.

In 2016, despite pressure from the media, civil society and the President of the General Assembly, support within the Security Council for publishing the outcomes of the straw polls was not unanimous.⁸ The results therefore were not publicly announced. However, some actors took matters into their own hands and leaked the results to the media immediately

after they took place, making the SC’s secretive stance appear farcical.

In a detailed review of the Security Council’s role, Japan’s then Permanent Representative Koro Bessho wrote in his personal capacity about the straw polls. Based on his experience, including as Council President for July when the first straw poll took place, he advocates that straw polls be scrapped in favour of return to official votes conducted at private Security Council meetings. These meetings, he argues, should use secret ballots and the tallied results made public by the President of the Council. According to Mr Bessho, doing so would enable the Council to respond to calls for transparency “which were brought to a higher level than ever before by the informal dialogues of the General Assembly.”⁹

States in the General Assembly have remained seized on this issue. Earlier in 2023 both ACT and NAM called for transparency in the Security Council and specifically asked for the results of straw polls to be officially announced.

This year’s AHWG resolution should call on the President of the Security Council to keep all Member States and the public well informed at all stages of the SG selection process, including by promptly circulating the results of any straw poll or any similar deliberative mechanism to promote principles of transparency and inclusivity.

RECOMMENDATION

The GA should call on the President of the Security Council to keep all Member States and the public well informed at all stages of the SG selection process, including by promptly circulating the results of any straw poll or any similar deliberative mechanism to promote principles of transparency and inclusivity.



RESOURCES

- [1 for 8 Billion’s listing of 2016 straw poll results](#)
- [SCProcedure’s analysis on Bessho’s letter covering straw polls & other procedural issues](#)

⁸ Loraine Sievers and Sam Daws, [The Procedure of the UN Security Council](#), 4th Edition, Oxford University Press, 2014.

⁹ Loraine Sievers and Sam Daws, [Japanese letter addresses parameters of Secretary-General appointment process](#), [The Procedure of the UN Security Council](#), 4th Edition, Oxford University Press, 2014.

7

SG SELECTION: INTERRUPTIONS TO TERM OF OFFICE

While succession planning was a live issue in the 1990s, when the post of Deputy Secretary-General (DSG) was established,

institutional memory on this matter has faded. To enhance organisational preparedness, it is useful to rekindle the discussion and clearly communicate a plan of action for the hypothetical situation whereby a Secretary-General becomes unable to discharge their duties.

At a time of disruption, uncertainty should be minimised. Preparations should therefore be made to ensure that if there is an interruption to the term of office of a Secretary-General, a predictable, transparent process is automatically triggered. The process should be geared towards the earliest possible return to standard operations.

[Resolution 52/12B](#), which establishes the post of DSG, designates the DSG as the officer-in-charge during a period of absence of the Secretary-General. This designation could come into play should a Secretary-General remain in role but be indisposed for health reasons, for example. Although the resolution does not explicitly specify that the DSG would assume the functions of the SG in the case of the post becoming vacant, it would be reasonable to use the resolution as the basis for treating the DSG as such in keeping with best practice on delegation of authority within the Secretariat.¹⁰

During this period the DSG could exercise the full legal functions of the office until such time that the General Assembly appoints a new Secretary-General or the term of the indisposed SG expires. States may take

the view that Security Council and General Assembly endorsement of the Deputy Secretary-General would be desirable, appointing them as “Acting Secretary-General”, but this is not strictly necessary and could introduce an opportunity for unhelpful wrangling.

Whether or not the interim arrangements are endorsed by states, the focus should be on carrying out a robust selection process as soon as possible. The inclusivity brought in by an open selection process enables candidates to come into office with a widely tested policy vision and a broad support base, adding legitimacy, independence and accountability to the incomer and strengthening their mandate to act. In turn, this can strengthen their effectiveness; a stronger process can lead to a stronger SG.

While there are myriad factors that affect an SG’s political capital - their current relationship with the membership, the proximity to the end of their tenure, whether they are engaged in critical mediation work - there is a specific boost that the postholder gets from having come through a robust selection process.

An incomprehensive Secretary-General selection process that misses out key elements would be inadvisable. It would deny the next post-holder access to the potential legitimacy boost described above. And if current conventions on term lengths are observed, a rushed process could also saddle the UN with (up to) a decade of a Secretary-General with stunted authority.¹¹ Naturally states may feel there is utility in demonstrating support for the interim arrangements, but this is no substitute for a robust process.

¹⁰ Secretary-General’s bulletin including rules on delegation of authority in the administration of the staff [ST/SGB/2019/2](#), 2018.

¹¹ According to recent convention, two five-year terms of office is a common timespan for Secretaries-General to serve.

7 CONTINUED

The smoothness of the contingency plan will be reliant on its widespread acknowledgement and understanding ahead of the political swirl which will accompany any requirement for its use. Therefore, while new decisions are not

necessary to enact the arrangements outlined above, having a General Assembly resolution which confirms such scenario planning is advisable to circumvent potential future disputes or misperceptions of irregularity.

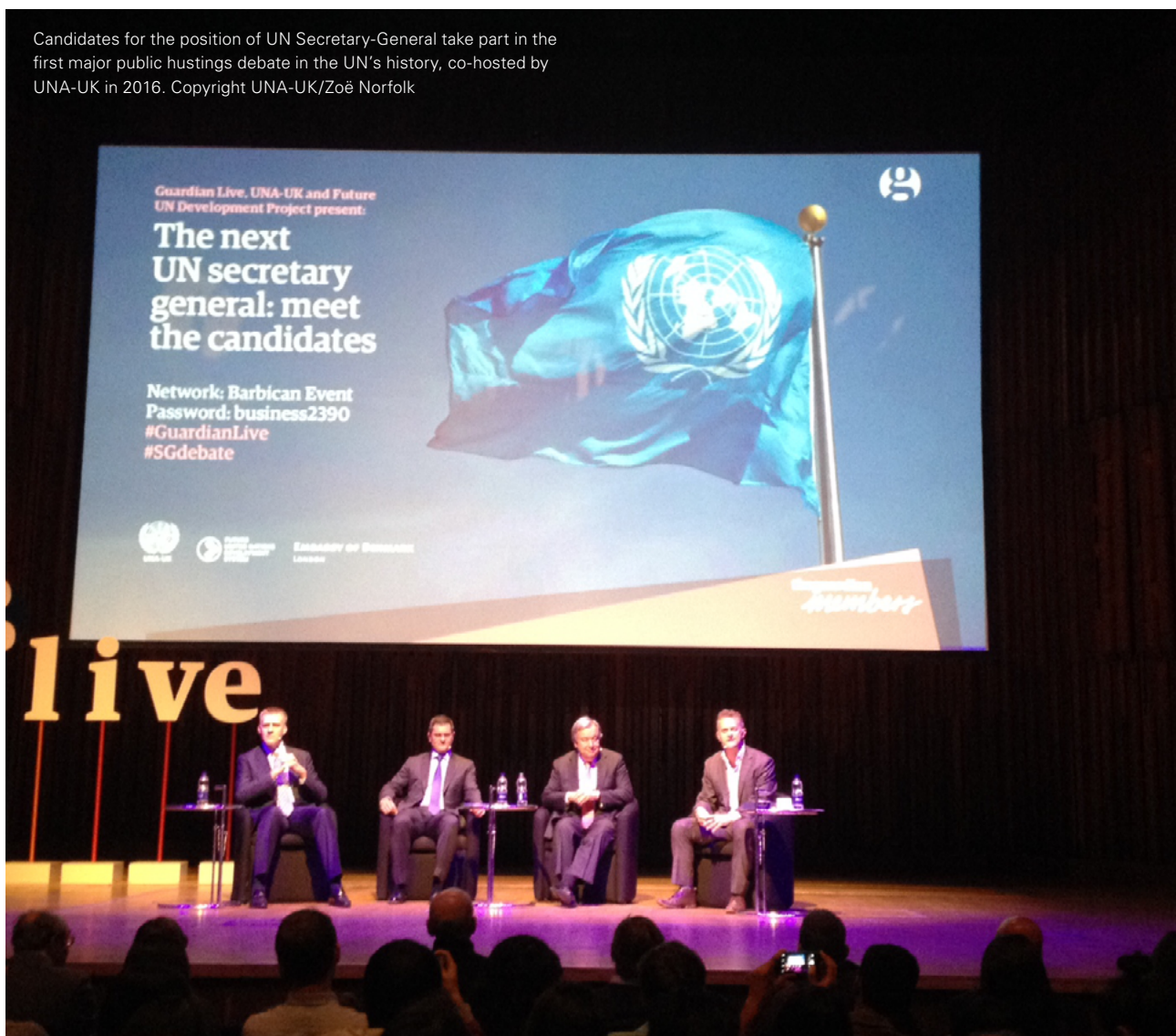
RECOMMENDATION

The GA should agree on concise language laying out the contingency plan for an interruption to an SG's term of office.

APPENDIX

See Appendix for a detailed analysis of this issue including a dedicated set of recommendations.

Candidates for the position of UN Secretary-General take part in the first major public hustings debate in the UN's history, co-hosted by UNA-UK in 2016. Copyright UNA-UK/Zoë Norfolk



8

EXECUTIVE HEADS: MUCH STRONGER LANGUAGE ON RINGFENCING

Ringfencing - the widespread practice of appointing individuals from specific states to specific roles - damages

the credibility of the United Nations, severely limits the pool of talent available, and fuels ongoing resentments from many nations that the organisation only represents powerful states.¹² It is also in clear contravention both of the general provisions of the UN Charter for international civil servants to be geographically diverse and answerable to no nation, and specific decisions of the General Assembly, such as the call in [46/232](#) that “as a general rule, no national of a Member State should succeed a national of that State in a senior post.”

Recent General Assembly resolutions have demonstrated a significantly greater degree of timidity with respect to the Secretary General on this matter. In addition, under the present leadership, this practice has become even more deeply entrenched. With minor and inconsequential changes, the same roles that were ringfenced well over 15 years ago are still ringfenced today. It’s one of the UN’s worst kept secrets that you must be from the US to get the job of running the prestigious Political and Peacebuilding Affairs office; that you need to be Chinese to get the Department

of Economic and Social Affairs, British to get the humanitarian affairs office, Russian to get the Office of Counter-Terrorism and French to lead UN Peacekeeping.

The Secretary-General ringfences these roles for the powerful – often for powerful men – despite over 15 General Assembly resolutions since 1980 instructing the SG to end the practice. This year’s resolution is an opportunity to re-take up this issue and to do so with more force. The GA could do this by not only repeating the relevant wording in Resolution 46/232 in full, but to strengthen it by adding an instruction for the Secretary-General to publish an explanation as to why this rule has not been followed in every instance of non-compliance.

This particular issue is also intimately linked to the SG selection process. Despite positive reforms in 2015/16, the P5 continue to [wield an outsize influence](#). In the past, P5 members have been able to extract promises to reserve senior UN posts for their own nationals from candidates in exchange for support for their candidacy, thus bypassing properly competitive selection procedures and requirements. The practice was [condemned](#) by the independent group of global leaders, the Elders, in 2015.

20%

ACCORDING TO THE NYU-CIC SENIOR APPOINTMENT DASHBOARD: DESPITE REPRESENTING LESS THAN 3% OF MEMBER STATES, THE P5 RECEIVED MORE THAN 20% OF SENIOR APPOINTMENTS MADE BETWEEN 1995-2022.

IN THIS TIME THE US RECEIVED MORE THAN HALF OF P5 APPOINTMENTS (11% OVERALL) AND THE UK MORE THAN A QUARTER (5.3% OVERALL)

¹² See more in the Blue Smoke briefing: [Ringfencing and the General Assembly](#) and the 1 for 8 Billion briefing: [No backroom deals, an end to monopoly](#).

8 CONTINUED

Another dynamic driving this issue relates

to how the UN finances its activities, especially the UN's increasing reliance on earmarked contributions. The correlation between major state funders and the receipt of top UN jobs by individuals of the same nationality as the funder suggests

undue influence is at play and the SG's independence is being eroded.

A call for all states to desist from such practices and for all SG candidates to avoid any clandestine appointment-related arrangements should be included in this year's resolution.

RECOMMENDATION

The GA should reassert that no national of a Member State should succeed a national of that State in a senior post and strengthen it by adding an instruction for the Secretary-General to publish an explanation as to why this rule has not been followed in every instance of non-compliance. The GA should also call on all states to desist from undue influence which could compromise the independence of the Secretary-General, or candidates for that position, with respect to senior appointments.



RESOURCES

- [Blue Smoke's 2023 briefing: Ringfencing and the General Assembly](#)
- [1 for 8 Billion's briefing on how this issue effects the SG selection process: No backroom deals, an end to monopoly](#)

Graphics from the Blue Smoke report *Ringfencing and the General Assembly*, which looks at the continued ringfencing of senior roles for member states.



9

EXECUTIVE HEADS: TRANSPARENCY ON TERM LENGTHS OF ALL SENIOR OFFICIALS

Currently the term length of some senior officials is known, for example [the SG has always announced the tenure for the head of UNFPA](#). For other senior officials this information is made available inconsistently and in other instances the term lengths are entirely unknown. For example, when the current Under-Secretary-General for UN Peacekeeping was appointed, their term length was made explicit. However, upon reappointment, their renewed term length was not specified, and no reappointment announcement was made. One of the primary reasons why there is so little information regarding term lengths of senior officials is because the Secretary-General only rarely announces the reappointment of a senior official.

This absence of transparency regarding a fundamental aspect of senior appointments is damaging to the UN's credibility and to the quality of its senior leadership. Without clear recruitment timelines, global leaders of the calibre the UN needs cannot plan their potential term of service. And the current irregularity of information regarding posts can lead to inadvertent discrimination whereby individuals of the same rank, accountable to the same person, are employed on different terms and with different levels of stakeholder understanding of their longevity.

In 2011 the JIU recommended that Secretaries-General make information on term limits public. In response Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon accepted the argument in principle and [declared](#) that "The five-year rule will be

applied across the board" - in other words that all subsequent appointments would be for a five-year term. However, this has not been adhered to in subsequent practice.

The AHWG should push for transparency in this important area by:

- Noting the importance of consistency and transparency with respect to the term lengths of executive heads, and to that end the importance of making a public statement when an executive head is reappointed;
- Encouraging all UN entities and states to work to ensure best practice on this issue is mainstreamed throughout the UN system, beyond areas under the Secretary-General's immediate purview.

The AHWG could also consider the recommendation made by Sir Brian Urquhart and Erskine Childers in their landmark book "A World in need of Leadership" that:

"A standard policy of non-renewable terms of office, and a single seven-year term, should be adopted for all executive head posts throughout the UN System"

On a related matter, clear timelines, as recommended in the [JIU report](#), need to be adopted with respect to all Executive Head appointments within the UN System as well as for the election process of the President of the General Assembly. The last two appointments of a [High Commissioner for Human Rights](#) in particular have been damaged by alarmingly late and ad hoc processes.

RECOMMENDATION

The GA should call on the Secretary-General to publish the term lengths of all executive heads and encourage all UN entities and states to work to ensure best practice on this issue is mainstreamed throughout the UN system.

10

CIVIL SOCIETY INCLUSION IN APPOINTMENT PROCESSES AND BEYOND

Civil society played an important role in the 2015-16 SG selection process. The 1 for 8

Billion campaign was described by former PGA Mogens Lykketoft as “instrumental” in achieving the reforms. During the process itself, civil society played a widely acknowledged role in publicising the call for nominations, enhancing knowledge of candidates through informal hustings events, participation in the GA’s informal dialogues and mobilising public interest in the role of the Secretary-General.

States should encourage such practices in future SG selections. Additionally, states should support deeper collaboration, including by working with civil society to identify potential candidates from different backgrounds with a view to bringing them into the official selection process. This could either be done ahead of the issuance of the joint letter, which serves as the official starting gun for the selection process, or in its early stages (providing the joint letter is sent out in a timely manner – see section 4 above). Enhancing inclusivity in this manner is also well within the spirit of [Resolution 75/325](#), which suggests that the joint letter should “encourage Member States to publicize the call for nominations, including with civil society and other stakeholders with the aim of identifying potential candidates”.

Much of the best practice from the SG selection process should be applied to other senior appointments, and this is no different with regards to civil society engagement. While there have been glimmers of healthy civil society collaboration in appointments

such as WHO Director-General and the UNHCR,¹³ the default is that civil society is excluded. Despite the widespread understanding that senior jobs are frequently awarded based on politics, not merit, the Executive Office of the SG treats them as internal recruitment processes outside of the legitimate scrutiny of civil society or the media. The standard line from the EOSG when asked for basic details, is that this is “confidential information”.¹⁴ Blue Smoke – a working group, comprising UNA-UK, Plataforma CIPÓ and Strategy for Humanity – recently called the UN’s position “unsustainable”.¹⁵

There is also an opportunity through the AHWG to address a broader point related to the civic space at the UN. Civil society engagement with the General Assembly remains piecemeal - with participation in negotiations, consultations and high-level events usually determined on a case-by-case basis. Considering that civil society organisations are constantly under attack in different parts of the world, it is vital that the UN sets a positive example by protecting and expanding opportunities for meaningful civil society participation within the UN system.

In 2021, in [Our Common Agenda](#), the Secretary-General encouraged Member States to give serious consideration to the creation of a new resolution to define how the General Assembly relates to civil society. In the absence of such a resolution to strengthen inclusion, UN processes such as this year’s AHWG resolution can be used to develop best practice on civil society access that goes beyond using the restrictive ECOSOC-accreditation as the basis for participation.

¹³ Nan Buzard, [Appointment of UNHCR Chief and Other Senior Roles Could Learn from Recent UNSG Process](#), in Strengthening civil society engagement with the United Nations, UNA-UK, 2017.

¹⁴ [Letter from E. Courtenay Rattray](#), UNA-UK, February 2023.

¹⁵ Blue Smoke Newsletter, [It’s Confidential](#), Blue Smoke, March 2023.

10 CONTINUED

RECOMMENDATION

The GA should welcome the participation of civil society in previous selection processes and encourage enhanced participation in future selection processes, including deeper collaboration between states and civil society during the nominations phase and a more active role in the GA candidate hearings. The GA should also drive-up standards on civil society access, including by ensuring all future modalities resolutions go beyond using the restrictive ECOSOC-accreditation as the basis for participation.



RESOURCES

UNA-UK's briefing on reform proposals for civil society inclusion in General Assembly processes is available on demand – please contact info@una.org.uk



Press at the first major public hustings debate in the UN's history, co-hosted by UNA-UK in 2016. Copyright UNA-UK/Zoë Norfolk

Summary of Recommendations

The General Assembly should act urgently to improve appointment processes at the UN. There is considerable appetite for progress and a better process will help to revitalise the UN and enhance its effectiveness and credibility.

THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY SHOULD:

1. Call on all candidates to disclose their campaign funding sources as a prerequisite of their candidacy. In the absence of such a call, candidates should voluntarily publish this information.
2. Schedule a dedicated discussion on the convention whereby the Security Council recommends a single candidate for consideration by the General Assembly.
3. Schedule a dedicated discussion on SG term length and renewability.
4. Propose a timeline for the next selection process, including a date for the issuance of the joint letter.
5. Call for states to only consider nominating qualified female candidates and encourage states to work together to submit joint nominations.
6. Call on the President of the Security Council to keep all Member States and the public well informed at all stages of the SG selection process, including by promptly circulating the results of any straw poll or any similar deliberative mechanism.
7. Agree on concise language laying out the contingency plan for an interruption to an SG's term of office.
8. Reassert that no national of a Member State should succeed a national of that State in a senior post and strengthen it by adding an instruction for the Secretary-General to publish an explanation as to why this rule has not been followed in every instance of non-compliance. The GA should also call on all states to desist from undue influence which could compromise the independence of the Secretary-General, or candidates for that position, with respect to senior appointments.
9. Call on the Secretary-General to publish the term lengths of all executive heads and encourage all UN entities and states to work to ensure best practice on this issue is mainstreamed throughout the UN system.
10. Welcome the participation of civil society in previous selection processes and encourage enhanced participation in future selection processes, including deeper collaboration between states and civil society during the nominations phase and a more active role in the GA candidate hearings. The GA should also drive-up standards on civil society access, including by ensuring all future modalities resolutions go beyond using the restrictive ECOSOC-accreditation as the basis for participation.

APPENDIX

Arrangements for an interruption to an SG's term of office

An understudied scenario

Implementation of the reformed selection process for a Secretary-General is clear if the SG fulfils their term of office as expected. However, the question of what to do in the scenario of an interruption to an SG's tenure has been almost entirely absent from formal discussion between states.

The following section explores this scenario in the spirit of striving for an institutionalised, well-structured appointment process robust enough to withstand all eventualities.

The timing of the report is not based on any expectation that contingency planning will be needed in the near future - rather, it is intended to provoke discussion at a neutral moment to support preparedness should such a moment ever arise in the future.

In looking at this issue, there are two historical precedents: Trygve Lie's resignation and the death of Dag Hammarskjöld while serving as Secretary-General.

Historical precedents

FIVE MONTHS OF UNCERTAINTY

Trygve Lie was initially appointed for five years, from 1 February 1946 - 31 January 1951. In late 1950, the General Assembly **extended his tenure by a further three years** by a vote of 46-5-8.¹⁶ This extension took place without a further recommendation from the Security Council, which was unable to reach a decision on the way forward. However, 14 months and three weeks ahead of the end of his term (on 10 November 1952), Trygve Lie **submitted his resignation** via letters to the PGA and the President of the Security Council. Lie made a resignation speech to the GA on the same day in the presence of the foreign ministers of the P5, hoping that this would facilitate a

quick agreement on his successor. His hopes were dashed - for the next five months the P5 wrangled over who should be his successor.

Progress was eventually made and the General Assembly officially accepted Lie's resignation **on 7 April 1953**.¹⁷ The same General Assembly meeting took up the recommendation from the Security Council to appoint Dag Hammarskjöld. The decision was passed by secret ballot (57 in favour, 1 against, 1 abstention) resulting in Hammarskjöld's appointment as the next Secretary-General.¹⁸

While Lie's resignation was not official until

¹⁶ [A/RES/492 \(V\)](#), 1 Nov 1950.

¹⁷ UN General Assembly [7th session 423rd plenary](#), 7 April 1953.

¹⁸ UN General Assembly [7th session 423rd plenary](#), 7 April 1953.

April 1953, for the five-month interval between Lie announcing his resignation and it being accepted the UN was in leadership limbo. During this period Lie continued to make some decisions on the administration of the UN,¹⁹ including a controversial move under pressure from a US Administration in the grip of McCarthyism: in January 1953 Lie allowed the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) into the UN building to investigate all US members of the Secretariat for the sake of “convenience” given the large number of Secretariat officials

who would have to be interrogated and fingerprinted.²⁰

The turmoil at the end of Lie’s time in office shows that by this stage his authority was highly compromised. While it is unclear how much of this can be attributed to the absence of a clear process to appoint his successor, such uncertainty would have made forward planning impossible while contributing to a power vacuum at the top of the UN at a time during when stability was urgently needed.

U THANT AS ACTING SECRETARY-GENERAL

Following Hammarskjöld’s death on 18 Sept 1961, Burma’s permanent representative to the United Nations, U Thant, took on the role of Acting Secretary-General from 3 November 1961 when he was unanimously appointed by the General Assembly, on the recommendation of the Security Council, to fill the unexpired term of the late Secretary-General (Hammarskjöld’s term of office was set to end on 9 April 1963).²¹ U Thant was subsequently recommended by the Security Council and appointed Secretary-General by the General Assembly on 30 November 1962 for a term of office ending on 3 November 1966.

Hammarskjöld’s death left the UN in shock.

One of his close advisors described it as “leaving an aching void at the United Nations”.²² Leadership during the six-week period between Hammarskjöld’s death and U Thant’s appointment as Acting Secretary-General was ad hoc, with senior officials close to the former SG, including Ralph Bunche, Andy Cordier and Brian Urquhart taking the reins (without any formal investiture of the Secretary-General’s power).²³ More generally, relevant under-secretaries-general retained authority over their own “sphere of competence”. Cordier resigned the following year amid Soviet allegations that he had been trying to run the United Nations singlehandedly.



UN Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld's Installation in 1953. UN Photo/AK

¹⁹ For example, in December 1952 Lie requested the International Red Cross to facilitate the repatriation of POWs in Korea and in January 1953 Lie appointed a 9-member committee looking at funding for economic development.

²⁰ Brian Urquhart, [Hammarskjöld](#), W. W. Norton & Company, 1985.

²¹ Dag Hammarskjöld Library, [The UN Years](#), Department of Public Information (DPI), accessed 2023.

²² Brian Urquhart, *A life in Peace and War*, HarperCollins, 1987, p. 175.

²³ Brian Urquhart, *A life in Peace and War*, HarperCollins, 1987, p. 175.

Predictability at a time of upheaval

Past interruptions to the tenures of Secretaries-General have resulted in haphazard, ad hoc transitions to a new leader.

In the case of Lie, the early conclusion of his term was a symptom of the difficult political circumstances he was in. Having lost the support of the P5, the lack of clarity over when his successor would be appointed exacerbated uncertainty. The administration stumbled on in caretaker mode while Permanent Members spent five months wrangling over who would take over. In the case of Hammarskjöld's death, the absence of protocol demanded a needs-must emergency arrangement with senior officials stepping in to discharge the Secretary-General's responsibilities without a firm institutional basis.

At a time of disruption, uncertainty should be minimised. Preparations should therefore be made to ensure that when a Secretary-General is unable to discharge their duties, a predictable, transparent process is automatically triggered. The process should be geared towards the earliest possible return to standard operations.

The full restoration of the Office of the Secretary-General after an early departure of an incumbent SG requires two things: (1) the investiture of the institutional powers of the office to a new incumbent and (2) the legitimacy of that incumbent having come through an open and fair selection process.

The first element is straightforward: an individual needs to be legally recognised as having responsibility to discharge the powers of the office. The second relates to the legitimacy accrued by an SG as a result of having prevailed in a rigorous, competitive contest against their peers. The reformed selection process requires Secretaries-General

to produce a vision statement and stand before all countries in the General Assembly to defend it - elements that now enjoy consensus as an indispensable part of the process.

During the 72nd session (2017-2018), GA resolution [A/RES/72/313](#) described the candidate hearings as "an important part of the selection and appointment process". This year NAM described them as "essential" while ACT called them "crucial" and stated that "all candidates must take part".^{24 25} It's clear that states strongly support the reformed SG process and expect all candidates to participate fully in order to be considered for the role of SG.

The inclusivity brought in by an open selection process enables candidates to mobilise states and the public around their stated priorities. Coming into office with a widely tested policy vision and a broad support base adds legitimacy, independence and accountability to the incomer and strengthens their mandate to act. In turn, this can strengthen their effectiveness; a stronger process can lead to a stronger SG.

While there are myriad factors that affect an SG's political capital - their current relationship with the membership, the proximity to the end of their tenure, whether they are engaged in critical mediation work - there is a specific boost that the postholder gets from having come through a robust selection process.

An incomprehensive Secretary-General selection process that misses out key elements would be inadvisable. It would deny the next post-holder access to the potential legitimacy boost described above. If current conventions on term lengths are observed, a rushed process could also saddle the UN with a Secretary-General with stunted authority

²⁴ [Statement](#) delivered by the Delegation of the People's Democratic Republic of Algeria on behalf of the Non-Aligned Movement, at the AHWG Thematic debate on the "Selection and appointment of the Secretary-General and other executive heads", 9 February 2023.

²⁵ ACT's 2023 Non-Paper [On the selection and appointment of the Secretary-General and Executive Heads of the United Nations](#).

for (up to) a decade.²⁶ It is understandable that states may feel there is utility in demonstrating member-state support for the interim arrangements, but this is no substitute for a robust process, see the relevant section below.

If a Secretary-General becomes suddenly indisposed, evidently there will be a period of time that the Office of the Secretary-General will be led by someone who has not come through a rigorous selection process. During this period the Office of the SG will likely operate with reduced political and moral authority. The office holder may operate in something akin to “caretaker mode” and may steer away from new policy programmes and avoid major staffing or organisational decisions. This will persist, at minimum, for the length of time necessary to complete a

robust Secretary-General selection process.

Given the importance of conducting a process to regularise business as rapidly as possible, states will likely want to trigger a full selection process promptly, rather than leaving the interim arrangements in place for the remainder of the SG’s unexpired term.²⁷ The exception would be if the unexpired term is not longer, or not significantly longer, than the time required to conduct a full selection process. In such circumstances a selection process would already be underway or would be imminent, so rescheduling would be unnecessary. The other possible exception is the other extreme, if in the very early stages of a SG’s first term in office they become indisposed, states may decide to rekindle the recent selection process and return to deliberations on other candidates.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- *A plan should be in place and widely communicated ahead of any requirement for its use*
- *Any interim arrangements should be in place for the minimum amount of time necessary*
- *Unless the indisposed SG was at the very beginning or very end of their term, a full selection process should be promptly initiated*
- *If states decide to demonstrate their support for the interim arrangements, this should not obviate the prompt need for a full selection process.*

²⁶ According to recent convention, ten years is a common timespan for Secretaries-General to serve (two five-year terms of office).

²⁷ While this differs from the U Thant precedent (who was initially appointed to fill the unexpired term of the late Dag Hammarskjöld) the comparison is not instructive since his appointment predates the modern selection process (and the establishment of the role Deputy Secretary-General).

What should happen while a robust selection process is being carried out?

While the selection process for the next fully fledged Secretary-General is underway, disruption must be minimised. This means that the institutional powers of the Secretary-General must be conferred as seamlessly as possible to an interim post-holder. There is some debate about the minimum length of time required to conduct a robust secretary-selection process. While compressing the process would incur a trade off in terms of comprehensiveness, in exceptional circumstances it may be possible to conduct a process in the range of 6 - 12 months (see Section 4 earlier in the report for more on this).

This means that the interim postholder will likely be in the role for at least 6 months and

possibly a year or more. The only precedent for an interim Secretary-General is U Thant, whose appointment in 1961 followed the process laid out in the UN Charter:²⁸ he was recommended by the Security-Council and appointed by the General Assembly. While he was appointed “Acting” Secretary-General, legally he held the same power as any other Secretary-General.

For the case of an interim postholder, the need for the General Assembly to make the appointment on the recommendation of the Security Council became no longer necessary following the establishment of the position of Deputy Secretary-General in 1998 and based on relevant rules on delegation of authority.

Egriselda Aracely González López, Permanent Representative of El Salvador, co-chairs a 2021 meeting of the Ad Hoc Working Group on the Revitalization of the Work of the General Assembly. Credit: UN Photo/Eskinder Debebe



²⁸ Article 97 of the UN Charter states “The Secretary-General shall be appointed by the General Assembly upon the recommendation of the Security Council”.

The Deputy Secretary-General of the United Nations

Shortly after taking office as Secretary-General, Kofi Annan initiated a review of the organisation's effectiveness, which culminated in a report "Renewing the United Nations: A Programme for Reform" to the General Assembly in July 1997. A major focus was the establishment of a new leadership and management structure consisting of a Senior Management Group, a Strategic Planning Unit and establishment of the position of Deputy Secretary General (DSG).²⁹

While not present in the official case for the creation of the DSG, a further, more sinister impetus may have played a role. In February 1993 New York City suffered a terrorist attack: the World Trade Center was bombed by Ramzi Yousef and his conspirators, killing six people and injuring thousands.³⁰ Later that year an alleged plot to bomb the United Nations, the Hudson River tunnels and other New York City landmarks was thwarted when US government officials arrested a group of suspected terrorists with apparent links to those behind February's attack on the World Trade Center.³¹

Naturally this led to speculation and consideration on what would happen if the United Nations' leadership were to be caught up in such an attack.

In January 1998 the General Assembly took up the Secretary-General's recommendation and the role of Deputy Secretary-General was established in General Assembly Resolution 52/12 B. The resolution authorises the DSG to "act for the Secretary-General at United Nations Headquarters in the absence of the Secretary-General and in other cases as may be decided by the Secretary-General" and also states that the "term of office of the Deputy Secretary-General will not exceed that of the Secretary-General".

At the UN, there are three types of situations in which an official takes on the functions of another official:

- 1 Officer-in-charge:** Applicable when the individual in question is on leave or on travel status and designates someone else to perform functions during the period of absence.
- 2 Officer ad interim:** The post in question is vacant and someone occupying a different post performs the functions during the period of vacancy.
- 3 Acting officer:** The post in question is vacant and someone is temporarily assigned to the post until a selection process is completed.

Consulting relevant staff regulations is instructive in determining best practice for postholder absence at the UN. The most recent Secretary-General's bulletin on the delegation of authority under the Staff and Financial Regulations and Rules specifies that "When an officer-in-charge or an officer ad interim is assigned to a function, the authorities of the official holding that function shall automatically be delegated on a temporary basis to the officer-in-charge or the officer ad interim, unless otherwise specified formally by the official who designated the officer-in-charge or the officer ad interim."³²

Paragraph 1(b) of Resolution 52/12B designates the DSG as the officer-in-charge during a period of absence of the Secretary-General. This designation could come into play should a Secretary-General remain in role but be indisposed for health reasons, for example. Although the resolution does not explicitly specify that the DSG would serve as officer ad interim in the case of the SG post

²⁹ [Renewing the United Nations: A programme for reform](#), UN, 1997.

³⁰ [FBI.gov, World Trade Center Bombing 1993](#), accessed 2023.

³¹ [Ralph Blumenthal, Tapes Depict Proposal to Thwart Bomb Used in Trade Center Blast](#), The New York Times, 1993.

³² [ST/SGB/2019/2](#) paragraph 2.6

becoming vacant, it would be reasonable to use the resolution as the basis for treating the DSG as such in keeping with best practice on delegation of authority within the Secretariat.³³ This means that the DSG could exercise the full legal functions as “Secretary-General ad interim” until such time that the General

Assembly appoints a new Secretary-General. Of course, the DSG would only be able to serve as Secretary-General ad interim until the expiration of the Secretary-General’s term of office, as stipulated in the appointment (or reappointment) resolution passed by the General Assembly.



Secretary-General Kofi Annan (right) announced the appointment of Louise Frechette (Canada) as the first Deputy Secretary-General. Credit: UN Photo/Milton Grant

³³ [ST/SGB/2019/2](#)

Security Council and General Assembly involvement

Unlike in the 60s when U Thant was swiftly appointed Acting Secretary-General, the UN now has a mechanism to deal with the situation via the Deputy Secretary-General. In the absence of the Secretary-General the DSG could automatically act as either SG officer-in-charge or SG ad interim (depending on the circumstances) - this means there is no technical requirement for the Security Council or the General Assembly's immediate involvement. This is reinforced by the [addendum](#) referred to in the Resolution that established the role of DSG, which makes it clear that the DSG derives their power automatically from the delegation of the SG's authority:

"the Deputy Secretary-General would derive his/her authority by delegation from the Secretary-General. It would not be necessary, therefore, for the Deputy to be elected, appointed or confirmed by the General Assembly."

It is understandable that states may take the view that Security Council and General Assembly endorsement of the Deputy Secretary-General would be desirable, appointing them as "Acting Secretary-General" while a full selection process is conducted. Naturally, the Charter also allows the General Assembly, on the recommendation of the Security

Council, to appoint someone other than the DSG as "Acting Secretary-General" for this period. In either case, once a new resolution is passed appointing an Acting Secretary-General or Secretary-General, the indisposed Secretary-General's term will be considered to have ended and therefore the DSG would cease to derive their authority from the delegation of the former SG's powers. Instead, they would assume the direct authority if appointed or cease to hold any authority in the case that someone else is appointed.

While not legally necessary, it may be felt politically important to take the step of Security Council and General Assembly involvement. A careful weighing up of the situation would be required since the step could result in disagreement over who the interim appointee should be or the terms of their appointment. It could also distract from the open selection process that is essential to restore the full political authority of the Office of the Secretary-General. Therefore, whether or not an Acting SG is appointed, or the DSG serves as the SG ad interim, the priority should be for states to hold a comprehensive process to appoint the next Secretary-General. In that selection process, there is nothing to stop a state nominating the DSG as a candidate to become the next Secretary-General.

Consolidating and communicating this process

While succession planning was a live issue in the 1990s, when the post of DSG was established, institutional memory on this matter has faded. To enhance organisational preparedness, it is useful to rekindle the discussion and clearly communicate a plan of action

for the hypothetical situation whereby a Secretary-General becomes unable to discharge their duties.

The smoothness of the DSG contingency is reliant on its widespread acknowledgement and understanding

ahead of any requirement for its use. Without transparency and comprehensive communication of the plan, its implementation could come as some surprise, introducing uncertainty at a precarious moment and opening the door to political interference. Therefore, while new decisions are not necessary to enact the DSG contingency process outlined above, having a General Assembly resolution to confirm such scenario planning is advisable since it would circumvent future disputes or misperceptions of irregularity.

The sensitive issue should be grasped head on outside of the political swirl of any possible requirement for its use. There is an opportunity to do this during the 77th session of the General Assembly through the Resolution of the [Ad-Hoc Working Group on the Revitalization of the work of the General Assembly](#) (AHWG) - which will produce a resolution with a focus on the selection of the Secretary General and other executive heads.

RECOMMENDATION

The General Assembly should agree concise language laying out the contingency plan for an interruption to an SG's term of office. This should include the automatic DSG contingency (whether as SG officer-in-charge or SG ad interim) and the priority to promptly conduct a full SG selection process irrespective of any step taken to appoint an Acting SG.

Summary of recommendations relating to interruptions to an SG's term of office

RECOMMENDATIONS

- *A plan should be in place and widely communicated ahead of any requirement for its use*
- *Any interim arrangements should be in place for the minimum amount of time necessary*
- *Unless the indisposed SG was at the very beginning or very end of their term, a full selection process should be promptly initiated*
- *If states decide to demonstrate their support for the interim arrangements, this should not obviate the prompt need for a full selection process*
- *The General Assembly should agree concise language laying out the contingency plan for an interruption to an SG's term of office. This should include the automatic DSG contingency (whether as SG officer-in-charge or SG ad interim) and the priority to promptly conduct a full SG selection process irrespective of any step taken to appoint an Acting SG.*



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