Campaigning From Within

On UN Officials Running for the Role of Secretary-General

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On Thursday, 23 July 2026, the (at that time) six candidates "running" for the position of United Nations Secretary-General (UNSG) came forward in the General Assembly Hall in New York to publicly present their visions for the organization's future and answer questions, as part of the "UN Town Hall." Several of the candidates are current and former senior officials of the UN and related agencies. Michelle Bachelet previously served as the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (2018-2022) and executive director of UN Women (2010-2013). Two other candidates, Rafael Mariano Grossi and Rebeca Grynspan Mayufis, currently hold senior posts, serving as the Director General of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and the Secretary-General of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), respectively. Accordingly, they are campaigning for the top job while serving the organization – or, in Grossi's case, the wider institutional family – they hope to lead.

The nomination of current and former senior officials reflects an emerging pattern: during the 2006 selection, one current and one former Under-Secretary-General were nominated (out of seven candidates total), and in 2016, five out of ten candidates had either served or were actively serving at the Assistant Secretary-General level or above. Only once has a serving UN official been selected as UNSG, when Kofi Annan was elected in 1996. At present, the likelihood of this repeating in the upcoming election seems to be high.

Drawing on these developments, this post will explore the nature and procedure of the UNSG appointment, the challenges that arise when senior officials "run" for the highest office, and propose recommendations to mitigate these concerns.

The UNSG Appointment Procedure

Article 97 of the United Nations Charter sets out the basic procedure for the appointment of the UNSG. Accordingly, the General Assembly appoints the UNSG upon the recommendation of the Security Council. Over the years, however, the details of this process have been outlined in General Assembly resolutions, most recently A/Res/79/237 (2025).

The appointment process takes approximately a year, beginning with a joint letter by the Presidents of the General Assembly and the Security Council to the Member States announcing the commencement of the process and inviting states to present their candidates (para 42(a)). States then nominate candidates. They can do so individually or as a group, but are only permitted to support one candidate, unlike other UN election processes (para 42(d)). States may withdraw their candidate at any time (para 42(f)), as the Maldives recently did to the candidacy of Virginia Gamba – who until recently was also a senior UN official.

In line with the principles of transparency emphasized by the resolution, information about the candidates is made publicly available on the UN website. They, in turn, are asked to provide a "campaign financing disclosure," a vision statement, and curriculum vitae (paras. 42(g), 42(h) and 42(j)).

Additionally, the resolution explicitly states that to provide the "opportunity to present her or his vision," the President of the General Assembly will convene "webcast interactive dialogues" with the candidates (para 42(g)) and has also been tasked with convening other "informal [...] meetings" (see para 42 of resolution A/Res/69/327). The manner in which these should be conducted is at the discretion of the

President, though they are understood to need to take place before the Security Council deliberations. Accordingly, these have included individual "webcast interactive dialogues," which took place in April and June, as well as the "Town Hall," a form of public debate among all the candidates. The Security Council has also raised the option to hold "informal dialogue" with the candidates, as per its previous practice.

Traditionally, the Security Council only recommends one candidate to the General Assembly. The recommendation is transferred through the incumbent UNSG, with the numbered results. The General Assembly then votes by secret ballot in a public meeting. This entire process must be done by the last quarter of the year, before the newly designated UNSG assumes office, to allow for preparation (para 42(l)). Accordingly, as António Guterres's term will end on 31 December 2026, the Security Council took its first straw poll on 30 July 2026, and the appointment must be made by December 2026.

Appointment or Election?

Article 97 and subsequent resolutions refer to the process as an "appointment", rather than an "election". This was not an obvious choice: while the Dumbarton Oaks Proposals suggested the term 'elected' be used, the San Francisco Conference chose the term 'appointed' to emphasize the role's administrative character. However, as commentators have noted, "[t]hese terminological issues masked the intensely political nature of the appointment process, a process in the end dominated by the permanent members of the [Security Council]." These "masks" have since been slowly linguistically removed. The language in the resolution expressly states candidates' "campaigns" (paras 42(j) and 42(i)), and the "appointment" wording has sometimes been softened to "selection."

This question stems from an underlying question relating to the UNSG's roles and required qualifications. The Preparatory Commission has grouped the functions into six: "general administrative and executive functions, technical functions, financial functions, the organization and administration of the International Secretariat, political functions and representational functions." Accordingly, Article 97 defines the UNSG as "the chief administrative officer of the organization." He or she is part of the Secretariat, but also carries broader responsibilities. On the other hand, the UNSG also has political functions, which stem from the "other functions" (Article 98) and the discretion to determine a threat to peace and security (Article 99). This includes representation of the institution and, it has been argued, "norm entrepreneurship."

While there are no formal required qualifications, there have been some calls for criteria in General Assembly resolutions. Some emphasized the need for a "commitment to the purposes and principles of the Charter of the United Nations, extensive leadership, and administrative and diplomatic experience," others "the highest standards of efficiency, competence and integrity," (that is, that candidates for the Secretary-Generalship must be measured against the same basic criteria laid down for Secretariat staff in article 103), and "proven leadership and managerial abilities, extensive experience in international relations and strong diplomatic, communication and multilingual skills." Recently, calls for regional and gender representation have been made by the General Assembly.

The Complexities of Running from Within

Importantly, the resolution clearly states that "[c]andidates holding positions in the United Nations system should consider suspending their work in the United Nations system during the campaign, with a view to avoiding any conflict of interest that may arise from their functions and adjacent advantages" (para 42(i)). Similar rules apply, with varying degrees of strictness, in many domestic political systems, and are intended to maintain the political neutrality of the civil service. Such rules are often accompanied by restrictions on public expression, as is the case for United Nations staff members, who are expected not to publicly support or oppose candidates for the UNSG position.

The steps contained in para 42 of the resolution 79/327 reflect a wider attempt to democratize the selection of the UNSG and to introduce safeguards to

protect the integrity of the organization during leadership transitions. However, the guidance contained in para 42 of the resolution is imperfect and raises several challenges. First, for certain roles, including those held by the current candidates, it is simply not realistic, and may even be undesirable, for some candidates to suspend their current work. It is one thing for a staff member, up to and including a director-level role, to take temporary leave; it is another altogether for an Under-Secretary-General or Assistant Secretary-General, or the head of a related organization, to do so. Officials appointed by the Secretary-General to these roles (and indeed, those elected to their positions by States) depend on repeat engagement with States and other stakeholders to effectively fulfill their mandate, meaning their roles have dual political and administrative functions. Additionally, the leadership of an organization has an important impact on its culture and agenda, and its absence may negatively affect the work.

Second, candidates occupying senior roles find themselves in a complex position, as they must maintain the impartiality and independence demanded of international civil servants (which, although required, is not always practiced) even as they navigate the political nature of State endorsements for the UNSG position. They also need to communicate their vision for the future of the organization, extending beyond their current portfolios. They are incentivized to publicize the work of their organizations: although this is a logical campaign strategy in the abstract, doing so runs the risk of politically exposing their organizations. They may also be incentivized to downplay shortcomings and possibly to be defensive toward constructive criticism that is instrumental in ensuring improvement of any work. These complexities are heightened if candidates are unsuccessful in securing the UNSG role, but their tenure in their current position continues during the appointed UNSG's term.

A Path Forward

The guidance contained in para 42 of resolution does not sit comfortably with the nature of most senior roles. It is unrealistic for people in these roles to withdraw from their duties, and they are required to navigate a particularly dense web of competing interests during the pre-selection process. The abovementioned challenges are side effects of a partially democratized system that imports elements of electoral due process without fully committing to a liberal democratic model, or indeed to an "election" proper. They reflect an increased public and international interest in the Secretary-Generalship, which has re-shaped the balance between its political and administrative nature. As the guidance mostly does not consist of strict rules, this raises the question of how these challenges ought to be navigated.

In our view, the following expectations are realistic for senior officials to commit to as part of the appointment process:

First, while it is understandable that senior candidates cannot be expected to suspend their work, they should ensure that their professional impartiality and the independence of their agency or organization are not influenced by the selection process.

Second, such candidates should not use their positions as a tool in the selection process and, insofar as possible, keep their roles separate from their candidacy. Their current roles and their candidacy must not become a means of securing State support for either. They must demonstrate an overarching commitment to preserving the political neutrality and impartiality of the UN and its related organizations.

Third, candidates holding senior leadership roles within the United Nations must be particularly careful in communicating their personal views, including on the organization's current state and future trajectory. They should take particular care to demonstrate their fidelity to the United Nations and to the incumbent UNSG.

Fourth, candidates holding senior leadership roles should, if they are unsuccessful in securing the UNSG appointment, engage directly and in good faith with the UNSG elect in order to determine whether continuing in their current role is tenable.

In our view, these simple steps would help safeguard the political neutrality of the international civil service. They will contribute to ensuring that the

campaigns of senior officials are conducted in a manner that preserves the required independence and impartiality of the United Nations and related organizations. They strike a balance between enabling international civil servants to be considered for the top leadership role and reducing the risks of taking undue advantage of their present position. The General Assembly and Security Council could, for future selection processes, give these or similar expectations a more authoritative form.

Of course, none of this suggests that a candidate "from within" should be expected to undermine their own viability. They, like every other candidate, are free to campaign – but their position requires particular care in doing so. This is true today and will remain true if and when the UNSG process becomes more fully democratized. Member States should remain engaged in refining the selection process and continue their efforts to develop guidelines and rules for candidates that preserve the integrity of the United Nations itself.

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