

The Other Election

The Secretary General of the United Nations and Democratic Debate

By Marieke Louis

The name of the new UN Secretary-General, António Guterres, was revealed in October 2016. Although the transparency of this election has been celebrated, no democratic debate has really taken place concerning the programs of the different candidates, which have received very little press coverage.

[This text is a modified version of an essay published in French on October 3rd, 2016, before the election of António Guterres.](#)

After several months of campaigning, the name of the successor to the current UN Secretary-General—South Korean Ban Ki-moon, elected in 2006— was revealed last October in the person of António Guterres from Portugal and former UN High Commissioner for Refugees. The stakes were not insignificant: This was no more, no less than the election of the man or woman who will be heading a 70-year old institution (Césari and Maurel, 2016) that to this day has brought together almost all the nations of the world (193 states), and that is supposed to guarantee peace and collective security. While in a democratic context an election is the occasion for a pluralistic debate concerning the programs and visions of the candidates running for office, what will be remembered from this election is mainly the unprecedented debate on the conditions for appointing the future Secretary-General. By contrast, the programs of the different candidates have been the subject of very little discussion.

How can one explain the extra attention given to procedure at the expense of political debate, in which different visions of the role of the UN could have been confronted? In order to answer this question, I shall examine the issues at stake in the appointment process for the

Secretary-General in the context of the broader objective of democratizing the United Nations, and then inquire into the conditions of possibility for democratic debate, in terms of both publicity of debates and media coverage of this election.

Secretary-General: Mission Impossible?

The person described by the UN Charter as “the chief administrative officer of the Organization” (article 97) who occupies “the most difficult job in the world”—to use the phrase of the Norwegian Trygve Lie, first UN Secretary-General from 1946 to 1952—is responsible for defining, in consultation with the Member States, the orientations of the institution for the next decade (the term of office is five years renewable once). Thus it was the charismatic Kofi Annan (from Ghana), Secretary-General from 1997 to 2006 and laureate of the Nobel Peace Prize in 2001, who launched the Millennium Development Goals, aimed at reviving economic and social cooperation in accordance with the mandate of the institution. These goals, which are better known by their acronym “**MDGs**,” have in a sense set the international development agenda: eradicating extreme poverty and hunger, achieving universal primary education, promoting gender equality, reducing child mortality, improving maternal health, combating HIV and malaria, protecting the environment, and fostering corporate social responsibility. In matters of development, Ban Ki-moon followed on from Kofi Annan by launching, in 2015, the **Sustainable Development Objectives**, which now number 17 and place greater emphasis on the environmental dimension.

UN Secretaries-General from 1946 to 2016

Trygve Lie (1946-1952), Norway
Dag Hammarskjöld (1953-1961), Sweden
U Thant (1961-1971), Myanmar
Kurt Waldheim (1972-1981), Austria
Javier Pérez de Cuéllar (1982-1991), Peru
Boutros Boutros-Ghali (1992-1996), Egypt
Kofi Annan (1997-2006), Ghana
Ban Ki-moon (2007-2016), South Korea

In addition, the Secretary-General heads an institution that is supposed to coordinate a plethora of specialized agencies—such as the World Health Organization, the United Nations Development Program, the United Nations Organization for Education, Science and Culture,

the International Labor Organization, which form the so-called “UN system”. However, this expression wrongly points to some sort of unity considering how difficult coordination has proven to be (Devin, 2016).

But above all, the Secretary-General can “bring to the attention of the Security Council any matter which in his opinion may threaten the maintenance of international peace and security” (article 99). This diplomatic formula has translated very differently into practice, ranging from the openly critical position of the Egyptian Boutros Boutros-Ghali, notably towards the United States in the early 1990s (his term, for that matter, was not renewed), to the allegedly more passive attitude of the current Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon. Interviewed in 2010 by *The Guardian*, Thomas Weiss, professor of political science at the City University of New York, felt that Ban Ki-moon had set a new standard for being invisible. That same year, the *Foreign Policy* magazine ran a headline that unequivocally read “Good Night Ban Ki-moon,” and demanded the resignation of the Secretary-General. This is in fact what led some members to hope that the next Secretary-General would better fulfill his or her leadership functions.

Not only is the Secretary-General expected to be a visionary, a leader, and the manager of an administration of more than 40,000 people¹ (Kille, 2006), he or she is also supposed to intervene in international conflicts as a mediator endowed with some moral authority. It was the Swede Dag Hammarskjöld, Secretary-General from 1953 to 1961 and a complete unknown at the time of his election, who gave respectability to this function. He paid for this commitment with his life, since he died in a plane crash on September 18, 1961 en route to Northern Rhodesia (now Zambia), when trying to solve the civil war in Congo. To this day, the circumstances of the accident have been only partially clarified, and an **investigation** is still under way.

Without adhering to the quasi-mythological narrative that surrounds the function of UN Secretary-General, one can at least agree that this election has covered important issues.

The Candidates

This list was updated on September 22, 2016 based on the **UN website**, which publicizes the candidates’ CVs, programs and hearings (“vision statements” and “informal dialogues” in UN language).

Running

Mr. Srgjan Kerim (Macedonia)

Mr. Danilo Türk (Slovenia)

Ms. Irina Bokova (Bulgaria)

¹ According to UN data, these are not all international officers: <http://www.un.org/en/sections/about-un/secretariat/index.html>

Ms. Natalia Gherman (Moldova)

Mr. António Guterres (Portugal)

Ms. Helen Clark (New Zealand)

Mr. Vuk Jeremić (Serbia)

Ms. Susana Malcorra (Argentina)

Mr. Miroslav Lajčák (Slovakia)

Withdrawn

Ms. Vesna Pusić (Croatia)

Mr. Igor Lukšić (Montenegro)

Ms. Christiana Figueres (Costa Rica)

An Institution Facing a Legitimacy Crisis

There exists a body of admirable international officials, symbolized by the Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld who died in the Congo. In terms of political content, this is the permanent violation of a great human dream.²

These harsh words from Romain Gary, France's representative to the UN in the 1950s (an experience that inspired him to paint a satirical picture of the institution in *L'homme à la colombe* in 1958), still resonate deeply today. Given the institution's mandate, which has been expanding from one decade to the next, and its budget that is both too modest and too unstable to fulfill this mandate (Larhant, 2016), it should come as no surprise that so many criticisms have been made of the UN's inefficiency. In the light of recent events, the institution has been condemned either for its inconsistent and harmful interventionism or, on the contrary, for its wait-and-see attitude. On the one hand, one thinks of the responsibility of UN peacekeepers in the outbreak of the cholera epidemic in Haiti in 2010, or in the cases of sexual abuses in the regions where peacekeeping operations have been deployed. On the other hand, the UN has been frequently denounced for its immobility before the refugee crisis (a point regularly mentioned during the campaign), but also the Syrian chaos, and this despite the fact that the institution has the mandate to intervene, in accordance with Chapter VII of its Charter which provides for action in the event of threats to the peace, breaches of the peace and acts of aggression.

Besides, this acknowledgement of powerlessness was relayed last March by *The New York Times*, which opened its columns to a resigning senior UN official, Anthony Banbury. In a column entitled "I love the UN, but it is failing," Banbury denounced, among other things, a

² Romain Gary, *La nuit sera calme*, Paris, Gallimard, 1974, p. 166.

politicized and fossilized management of UN personnel that results in a lack of reactivity in the field.

While Ban Ki-moon's balance sheet after ten years seems mixed at best, one should note that these critiques do not date from yesterday, and that they are in fact contemporaneous with the first years of the institution. Thus, the UN's disconnect from citizen concerns, the institution's dependence on the Five Powers—China, the United States, France, the United Kingdom and Russia (also known as the “P5”)—and, above all, the resulting institutional paralysis have all been regularly denounced.

Although a number of studies have contributed to repairing this image which fails to take into account the multiple achievements of the institution (Reinalda, 2009; Devin and Smouts, 2011; Maurel, 2015), one of the issues at stake in the current election is the UN's demonstration of its ability—or not—to live up to the expectations it generates. Through its (relative) visibility, the election of the UN Secretary-General provides the institution with the opportunity to respond to at least one of the criticisms being leveled against it: the undemocratic nature of its decision-making process.

For, as is often recalled in the press, it is the Security Council that *de facto* appoints the Secretary-General, with the General Assembly merely endorsing the recommendation made by the Security Council, notably following negotiations between the five permanent members. Indeed, while each of the fifteen members who make up the Security Council today theoretically has one vote, the permanent members can oppose a vote that does not satisfy them by using their right of veto. Therefore, the candidate who is not vetoed and who receives the most votes (a minimum of nine out of fifteen is required) is the one selected by the Security Council, before being officially sworn into office by the General Assembly.

In the absence of a clear vision of the direction that the institution should take in the next ten years, a consensus seems to have emerged on the need to “democratize,” or, at the very least, to improve the UN decision-making process—beginning with the appointment of the Secretary-General—as part of the institution's perpetual quest for exemplarity. This is reflected in the numerous internal memos and reports of the UN (available online) that describe in detail the conduct of the election and the history of the reforms of the appointment process (Security Council Report, 2016).

The Keywords of the Campaign: Publicity, Women, and Democracy

As has been highlighted by all the newspapers covering the election, the General Assembly's holding of public hearings with candidates constitutes a major innovation in the appointment process for the Secretary-General. The most detailed articles on the subject, published in *The Guardian* and *The International New York Times*, describe the conduct of those hearings, the content of statements, the (under) performance of some candidates during the Q & A sessions with the Member States, as well as the reactions posted on social networks and relayed via Twitter, reproducing as best as possible the atmosphere of a classic electoral campaign. The articles, which appeared mainly in the first half of April after the public hearings, are thus marked by a certain enthusiasm for the first phase of the election, during which the press advocated for a renewal of practices that was supposed to reduce the UN's legitimacy deficit.

Although a public hearing mechanism was already implemented in some specialized agencies of the UN,³ this innovation—which the institution itself never fails to put forward—has attracted most of the media's attention, wherein the **transparency** of debates in the UN General Assembly is opposed to the **opacity** of the Security Council's criteria for selecting candidates as well as that of its unwritten rules.

As a reminder, these rules imply in particular that the Secretary-General must not originate from either of the "P5" states (the five permanent members), and that the election must respect the principle of equitable geographical representation. This should, in principle, favor a candidate from Eastern Europe, which explains the large number of candidates from that region. However, the **straw polls** held by the Security Council (on July 21, August 5 and 29, and September 9) with the aim of deciding, on a gradual and informal basis,⁴ between the different candidates suggest a first infringement of these rules. Indeed, the principle of regional rotation has not stopped the Portuguese António Guterres, former United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (2005-2015), from topping the fourth ballot on September 26, ahead of the Serb Vuk Jeremić and the Slovak Miroslav Lajčák, and this for the fourth consecutive time, making him the front-runner for the last round of voting on October 5.

The possibility that a woman might be leading the institution has also been widely reported. Thus, the magazine *Challenges* ran a headline that read: "A woman at the head of the United Nations?" A few laudatory portraits were dedicated to the New Zealander Helen Clark, the Bulgarian Irina Bokova, the Croatian Vesna Pusic and the Costa Rican Christiana Figueres

³ This was notably the case for the election of the new Director-General of the International Labor Organization in 2012. One can also mention the World Health Organization, which drew up a new protocol providing in particular for the organization of a candidate forum to appoint its Director-General in 2012.

⁴ With "votes" expressed as follows: "encourage," "discourage," "no opinion."

in *Le Monde* and *The Guardian*. Last April, *Le Figaro* reported for its part that the UNESCO Director-General Irina Bokova was the “great favorite,” but without mentioning that she would very likely be disavowed by the United States for having supported the UNESCO’s recognition of the Palestinian state (which was highly publicized at the time). In addition, “hopes” (as described in the title of the latest article in *The International New York Times*) for a woman to become Secretary-General have faded day by day in view of the **outcome** of the straw polls held by the Security Council—with Irina Bokova coming only fifth, and the other three women closing the pack (Susana Malcorra came seventh, Helen Clark eighth, and Natalia Gherman ninth). It appears that political dynamics have taken precedence over gender considerations in the deliberations of the Security Council.

This campaign was also the occasion for the (re)emergence of another critique: that of the Security Council’s democratic deficit, as opposed to the greater legitimacy of the UN General Assembly in which the 193 states are equally represented.

Historically, this critique has been shared by the formerly colonized countries at the UN— these forming a majority in the Assembly but a minority in the Council—as well as by many specialists (Gastaut, 2010; Maurel, 2015) who consider this mode of selection to be anachronistic in view of the current criteria for democratic representation. Indeed, not only does the General Assembly have no control over the process of appointing the Secretary-General— hence the very favorable response to the public hearings of candidates—but it is also left in the dark regarding Security Council deliberations: The rules of procedure of the Security Council effectively sanction the secret nature of the sessions during which questions pertaining to the appointment of the Secretary-General are discussed. It is a resolution adopted in 1946 that, to this day, has provided that the Security Council may propose only one name to the General Assembly in order to prevent debate. While the possibility has been raised that the Security Council might indicate several names in the form of a short list, a Council **report** mentioned that it was “most unlikely” that this request will be met. Politics is therefore deliberately circumvented, on the grounds that it would undermine the smooth functioning and continuity of the work of the United Nations.

The denunciation of this process is also based on the reflection conducted by a coalition of 750 NGOs, such as Amnesty International and the International Federation for Human Rights, which launched a campaign entitled **1 for 7 billion**, calling for an in-depth reform of the method for appointing the UN Secretary-General (see box below).

Reforming the Election of the UN Secretary-General

A number of civil society organizations, which were already mobilized in 2006, came together in a coalition that for over a year and a half has led an intense campaign named “1 for 7

billion,”⁵ calling for a reform of the selection process for the Secretary-General. Their proposals, some of which have been partly implemented given the holding of hearings by the General Assembly and the publication of candidates’ CVs, are as follows:

- 1) A transparent call for nominations with a closing date
- 2) Formal selection criteria
- 3) A clear timetable
- 4) The publication of an official list of candidates and their CVs
- 5) Regular debriefing sessions about the hearings
- 6) A program for each candidate, indicating his or her vision and mandate objectives
- 7) The holding of public hearings
- 8) The cessation of secret deals with members of the Security Council
- 9) The submission of at least two names to the General Assembly by the Security Council
- 10) The limitation of the Secretary-General’s term of office to seven years non-renewable

The opposition between the legitimacy of the General Assembly, on the one hand, and the illegitimacy of the Security Council, on the other, must nevertheless be nuanced. The idea that the Security Council is fundamentally anti-democratic because it is in the hands of the Great Powers, whereas the General Assembly is democratic because all states are equally represented within it (in accordance with the principle of one-state-one-vote), is a simplistic one. Indeed, despite the principle of equality of states, significant power differentials persist within the General Assembly (the national permanent representations being unequally advantaged). Moreover, if one considers that it is the individual and not the state that is the source of democratic legitimacy, the democratic character of a principle that fails to take into account population differences between states, and hence treats countries such as Luxembourg and Brazil equally, becomes problematic. In addition, the idea that the General Assembly represents “the peoples,” as opposed to the Security Council which is deemed a mere “directorate of the Great Powers,” is also debatable: It misses, among other things, the fact that the Security Council emanates from the General Assembly, which elects two-thirds of its members irrespective of economic or military power, on the basis of the principle of equitable geographical representation. Thus, countries such as Angola, Senegal, Spain, Uruguay, etc., sit next to the permanent members in the Security Council.

This is not to defend a problematic *status quo* that sanctions a deep imbalance in the distribution of powers within the United Nations. There is no doubt that a reappraisal of the role of the General Assembly in relation to the Security Council could strengthen the legitimacy of UN decisions. For all that, the ongoing debates and proposals aimed at democratizing the

⁵ <http://www.1for7billion.org/why/> [last accessed on 09/14/2016].

United Nations, notably among the supporters of cosmopolitan democracy (Archibugi, 2010), cannot be summed up in a series of binary oppositions such as “General Assembly vs. Security Council” or “large vs. small countries”.

What Is Transparency For?

If, despite the recent character of the event, one tries to adopt a reflective stance on this election, one can only acknowledge the limited character of innovations that were too rapidly presented as conducive to a more democratic election.

First, a certain number of contradictions were to be observed in the conduct of this election, starting with the announcement in July of the candidacy of the Costa Rican Christiana Figueres (who became renowned for her skills during climate negotiations), namely three months after the hearings of candidates were held before the General Assembly in April. The Argentinian Susana Malcorra and the Slovakian Miroslav Lajčák also announced their entry in the competition after the closing date. A public hearing was rapidly organized on July 14 in order to ensure that the procedure was respected. Yet the possibility that candidates may be appointed after the holding of public hearings initially scheduled for April indicates that the United Nations pays little heed to the spirit of this measure, which is aimed at encouraging deliberations and at giving this election the appearance of genuine campaigning and fair competition between candidates. It should be noted, moreover, that Christiana Figueres withdrew her candidacy during the summer...

Thus, while the holding of public hearings in principle fosters the democratization of the United Nations, through making the appointment process more visible and allowing candidates to highlight their backgrounds and competencies, the question of their real influence on the candidate’s appointment by the Security Council must be raised, lest one endorse what some might call a simulacrum of democracy. Transparency in this election appears to have moved from being an instrument favoring the circulation of information to being an ideal in and of itself.

The other observation, which sounds like a paradox, is that the election of the Secretary-General has never been so widely covered, while also remaining as little known to the general public as ever. Since the launch of the campaign for the Secretary-General’s election and the first hearings of candidates in April, the number of articles published in the (French- and English-speaking) mainstream newspapers, as listed using the Factiva digital portal, has not exceeded twenty, and these have been limited to one or two short items per paper⁶ —with the

⁶ The French newspapers most often published dispatches from Agence France Presse.

notable exception of *The International New York Times* (formerly the *International Herald Tribune*).

It may be objected that the secret character of Security Council deliberations does not facilitate such coverage. Besides, all journalists insist on the fact that the final say rests with the permanent members of the Security Council in any case. Echoing Francesco Paolo Fulci, the Italian ambassador to the UN in the 1990s, *The International New York Times* correspondent Somini Sengupta cleverly described this election as a “diplomatic version of the conclave of cardinals to select a pope.” However, while the hearings held since July by the fifteen members of the Security Council have taken place behind closed doors, making it difficult to debate ideas, those conducted last April before the members of the UN General Assembly allowed the candidates to announce the programs they wished to see implemented by the institution in the decade to come. According to the President of the General Assembly, the members addressed no fewer than 800 questions to the candidates in three days. These hearings were also filmed and broadcast on the UN website and on YouTube.⁷

Yet while, on the one hand, the crisis of the media (Cagé, 2015)—which hardly cover international affairs anyway—and, on the other, the crisis of the UN can partly explain this relative indifference, it should be noted that several inexpensive and easily accessible sources have been available to ensure even minimal journalistic coverage of this election. Institutional sources include the *UN News Center*, which produces the UN’s official news and allows for tracking the selection process, as well as detailed reports published by *What’s in Blue* on the basis of Security Council reports. The latter disclose not only ballot results but also the internal debates taking place in the Security Council, providing both a history of the decisions and dynamics that presided over the selection of former Secretary-Generals and an overview of the trends and reversals that have accompanied the different straw polls. Among non-institutional sources, the entitled 1 for 7 billion campaign website also constitutes a mine of information about this election. Some diplomats finally agreed to express themselves, sometimes under cover of anonymity, offering a view from the inside that helps to “take the pulse” of the campaign. It should also be noted that, in the absence of internal sources, some newspapers and magazines like *Jeune Afrique* have opted to interview academics specializing in the issue.

In addition, it is to be noted that media framing (Gerstlé and Piar, 2016)—that is, the selection and presentation of information in such a way as to suggest a certain interpretation—has been more or less the same from one medium to the other. Newspapers and magazines as diverse as *Time*, *La Tribune de Genève*, *The Guardian*, *La Croix*, *Le Monde*, *Libération*, *Le Figaro*, *Challenges*, *L’Express* and *Jeune Afrique*, which regularly clash on national and international issues, have similarly framed the election, focusing exclusively on the appointment process for the Secretary-General, its greater transparency and the possible appointment of a woman, and acknowledging the decisive role played by the Security Council. For example, *La*

⁷ Irina Bokova’s hearing barely gained 2,000 views on YouTube, even though she was considered “the favorite” last April. [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gey7SFEh-eQ>, last accessed on 09/20/2016].

Croix, *Le Figaro* and *La Tribune de Genève* ran, one day apart from each other and using highly French-centered references, headlines about the “*grand oral*” (key hearing) of candidates for the position of Secretary-General. In most of these newspapers, this was the only article dedicated to the election.

One medium stands out in this regard: *The International New York Times*, whose New York correspondent, **Somini Sengupta**, has been providing since March regular, in-depth and fairly engaged coverage of the campaign, in favor not so much of one candidate as of the reform of the institution. Already in 2006, during the election of Kofi Annan’s successor, this newspaper had covered the campaign by publishing interviews with candidates under the title “**Why I Should Run the UN.**”⁸

Should one lament this poor quality of information? After all, the renewal of Christine Lagarde’s mandate at the head of the International Monetary Fund and that of Jim Yong Kim’s (the only candidate for his own succession) at the head of the World Bank were met with complete indifference, which was not the case for the election of the UN Secretary-General.

One may nevertheless wonder whether the superficial treatment of news related to international organizations might not contribute to reinforcing the idea of a growing disconnect between these institutions and citizens (“them” and “us”), which the often silent media are then the first to denounce. In this way, the myth is maintained that citizens are not concerned by what happens in international organizations. Yet, if one admits that national and international events are closely intertwined because they are embedded in relations of interdependence, indifference is indefensible. Moreover, if media coverage of an election were to depend on the participation of citizens, why give so much coverage to the US presidential campaign in which only US citizens will be allowed to vote?

Independently of the decision that was announced by the Security Council and then validated by the General Assembly to elect António Guterres, the conditions for a democratic debate around the election of the Secretary-General were not met. This speaks as much to the inability of the UN and its members to truly play the democratic game, as it does to the failure of democratic institutions like the press to address international issues and enable citizens—and not only the readers of *The International New York Times*—to address them in turn.

⁸ One can also mention the issue dedicated to the UN in the weekly *Le Un*, published on October 21, 2015, on the occasion of the institution’s 70th anniversary.

Further Reading

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