

## UNGA Revitalization and selecting the next Secretary-General

*By Elena Marmo*

In 2007, the UN General Assembly (UNGA) established an Ad Hoc Working Group on the revitalization of the work of the General Assembly (AHWG) which in recent years has addressed the selection process of the UN Secretary-General (S-G). The current S-G Antonio Guterres' five-year term is set to expire on 31 December 2021 and Member States have begun activities for the 2021 [selection and appointment](#) for the UN S-G position, including a thematic debate on the selection process on 23 April.

In 2015, [A/RES/69/321](#) established reforms to the S-G selection process and affirmed that it must be guided by transparency and inclusivity. These changes brought wider participation in a spirited and well-attended appointment process in 2016. The UNGA held several rounds of interactive and informal dialogues and town hall meetings, some with Member States in addition to a dedicated public town hall with civil society participation. This public town hall was also [televised globally](#) by the Al Jazeera Media Network.

This year's selection process has not been as public facing nor has there been the same participation from other stakeholders, as there is only one official candidate, the incumbent. On 7 May the UNGA will hold an interactive dialogue with current S-G Guterres where he will present his [Vision Statement](#) and answer questions from Member States and [potentially civil society](#).

### Member State comments – 23 April

On 23 April, Member States convened a thematic debate on the 2021 S-G selection process, at which many expressed some concerns regarding the 2021 process as well as potential reforms to reinvigorate the process in 2026. These include: greater public and/or civil society participation and consultation in the selection process, a call to require more than one candidate presented per selection year, greater geographic and gender balance among both S-G appointees and UN leadership more broadly, and possible term-length changes.

Miguel Mourato Gordo, UN Director of Human Resources, presented [data on gender and geographic balance](#) achieved since 2016. The UN has not achieved parity overall, with 59 percent men, 41 percent women across the UN secretariat staff overall and among field location staff 69 percent are men and 31 percent are women. He added, however, that "gender parity has been reached at the USG level, among Resident Coordinators and overall in the majority of the entities". Further, he stated that women currently hold 69 percent of all senior appointments, meaning 31 out of 45 total.

This report kick-started conversations amongst Member States. While the S-G was congratulated on progress with regard to gender parity achievements, many reiterated calls for additional candidates and terms for enhancing the selection process going forward.

A prominent voice in the discussion has been the Accountability Coherence and Transparency ([ACT Group](#)), a cross-regional group of small and mid-sized countries promoting accountability. Members include: Austria, Chile, Costa Rica, Estonia, Finland, Gabon, Ghana, Hungary, Ireland, Jordan, Liechtenstein, Luxembourg, Maldives, New Zealand, Norway, Papua New Guinea, Peru, Portugal, Rwanda, Saudi Arabia, Slovenia, Sweden, Switzerland, Uruguay and Denmark.

Among their requests was for greater civil society participation in the selection process:

“ACT encourages all candidates to interact with civil society organizations throughout the process, and we call on the President of the General Assembly to facilitate that interaction and ensure the active and significant participation of civil society throughout the process, both in general and especially in this session’s process.”

This request was bolstered by other Member States and groupings including: Mexico, Korea, United Kingdom, Peru, Chile, Liechtenstein and the European Union.

Chile, an ACT Group member, also recalled progress in transparency and participation made in the 2016 selection process, [noting](#) that “A/RES/69/321 included groundbreaking changes to an appointment process that was somehow blurry and opaque. This led to unprecedented public dialogues with the candidates, that tested a broad set of skills, providing the UN membership as well as a global audience with an insight into the thinking of candidates. While we welcome all the progress made, there is still a need to add additional layers of quality control and procedural certainty in the selection process.”

A primary concern remains that there is only one official Member-State nominated candidate for the position. In their statement, South Africa [highlighted](#) several recommendations including: “that the Security Council in the future be encouraged to submit more than one name for the General Assembly’s consideration; and that the General Assembly in future seriously reflect on and consider appointing future Secretaries-General for a longer, but single, non-renewable term”. This concern was also voiced by the ACT Group, Afghanistan and Japan.

Costa Rica was among Member States that called for a woman to be appointed, stating: “the time has come to select a female S-G. As we all know, for 75 years the organization has been led by men. We believe that should qualifications among candidates be equal, we should choose a woman by doing this, we would uphold the principle of equality and empower the women of today and tomorrow.”

Japan cited concerns related to the absence of detailed rules: “We have encountered some stumbling blocks due to the fact that detailed rules applying to aspects of the appointment process are arguably not in place.” They noted that while the timeline may not allow for reform or additional rules for the current S-G selection process, that Member States should consider bringing these broader concerns related to term length, rules of engagement, and applicants who lack an official Member State

endorsement to a process and “aim at arriving at an agreement within a year or two on a new set of additional rules that are that will apply to the process of appointing the S-G”.

### **Calls for democratizing the selection process**

These Member State discussions have been accompanied by various campaigns and networks that have been weighing in on the selection process. A campaign called [Forward](#) held global “primaries” for the S-G amongst civil society between 1-3 May, motivated by concerns regarding the transparency of the selection process. They stated

“The next United Nations S-G is about to be chosen. They will not be elected but selected...The people will have no say. There will be no free and fair, popular, democratic exercise but rather backroom deals involving - in particular - the Permanent five nations of the Security Council.”

On 4 May, the Forward group [announced two recommended candidates](#) who garnered the most support: Rosalía Arteaga Serrano, former President of Ecuador and Paula María Bertol, former Ambassador of Argentina to the Organization of American States.

Forward cannot officially nominate these candidates themselves, as candidates must be nominated by their respective governments in the General Assembly. This problem was noted by another civil society campaign, 1 for 7 billion which released [a discussion paper](#) on the “unsettled elements” of the 2021 selection process. Their primary focus is on vague wording in recent resolutions that would suggest a Member State nomination is not explicitly the exclusive route for official nomination.

To date these discussions have not been taken up amongst Member States and efforts have not been undertaken to broaden language to include self-appointed candidates or civil society appointed candidates as “official submissions”.

### **Time for a woman S-G?**

This debate regarding 2021 as the “time” to appoint the first ever woman S-G has also reverberated across news outlets and civil society networks. The two requirements for Forward candidates were: they must not be a man; and that they embody a progressive vision for the world.

Pass Blue made this argument as well, running an article in February 2021 titled, “[The UN Must Select a Woman S-G Now, Not Later](#)”. This reported that in the 2016 selection process, 13 candidates were nominated by countries overall, 7 women and 6 men. [Human Rights Watch](#) has echoed this call for more women candidates in the advancement of SDG 5, “achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls”.

Pass Blue identified [six potential women candidates](#) for the role from Latin America and the Caribbean, traditionally next in the rotation. Among them are Michelle Bachelet, current High Commissioner for Human Rights, Alicia Bárcena, current Executive Secretary for ECLAC, María Fernanda Espinosa, former President of the General Assembly, Christiana Figueres, Costa Rican diplomat and 2016 S-G candidate, María Emma Mejía, former Secretary-General of the Union of South American Nations and Colombian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Silvia Rucks former Chilean Resident Coordinator and recently appointed

Brazilian Resident Coordinator. These six women hold diverse positions, have demonstrated successes and have advocated for progressive policies underpinned by voices of the people and respect for Human Rights.

With only one candidate officially in the 2021 race, next steps in reforming the process move ahead to the 2026 appointment process.

### ***S-G Appointment process: How it works***

Beginning in January 2021, the Presidents of the General Assembly and Security Council [began the S-G appointment process](#), which will follow these steps:

1. Member States submit candidates (nationals of their countries) for the S-G Position which are distributed to all Member States in the UNSC and UNGA.
2. Candidates for the position present a vision statement and participate in an informal dialogue with Member States.
3. In May or June, the UNSC will recommend one candidate to the General Assembly for consideration. Since 1996, UNSC members have voted unanimously, although Permanent 5 members do hold the power to veto any candidate.
4. Through a resolution (typically adopted by consensus), the General Assembly appoints the S-G at least three months before term start date (1 January 2022).

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