## The Race For UN Secretary General Rigged

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http://thecable.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2014/11/14/is\_the\_race\_for\_un\_secretary\_general\_rigged\_you\_betcha

The U.N. secretary-general is the world's chief diplomat, but most of the world doesn't get much say in who gets the nod. In the end, it's the U.N. Security Council's five permanent veto-wielding powers (the P5) -- Britain, China, France, Russia, and the United States -- that decide.

With elections still nearly a year and a half off, eager hopefuls have begun positioning themselves to succeed Ban Ki-moon as the U.N.'s secretary-general, a job high on prestige but low on real power. At this stage there is no clear front-runner. But diplomats say the candidates include a Lithuanian president, a pair of former prime ministers from Australia and New Zealand, and presidents and foreign ministers from several Latin American countries. They are facing mounting calls from a coalition of governments and advocacy groups to make their case to the wider world through public debates and addresses to the U.N. General Assembly in addition to their back-channel talks with the United States and other major powers.

"The secretary-general is not only the secretary-general of the P5 or of the Security Council -- it's the secretary-general of all of us," Switzerland's ambassador to the United Nations, Paul Seger, said in an interview. The rest of the U.N. membership, he said, should "at least have a viewpoint, or give an indication, or even make recommendations to the Security Council about who could be a good candidate."

For now, at least, the race for the premier diplomatic job is playing out discreetly in midtown Manhattan coffee bars, diplomatic missions, and foreign-policy conference halls. Only a handful of the candidates' governments have publicly announced their candidates' plans to campaign. Those who let on publicly that they are pursuing the job run the risk of exposing themselves to an early elimination. "None of us would be prepared to say publicly, 'Yes, we're running,' because there is a risk that if you get exposed too early, everybody will shoot at you," said one well-known candidate -- who spoke on condition of anonymity. "But we have been running into each other at airports and speaking at the same conferences."

Opening up the selection process may sound like a modest proposal. But in a process that bears more similarities to the appointment of a pope than to the rough-and-tumble canvassing associated with democratic elections, it would be groundbreaking. In the view of some big powers, it could constitute a breach of the U.N. Charter, which invested the five big powers with the authority to block any candidate.

"The five permanent members have the great power of the negative vote. A candidate who is acceptable to a majority but attracts a veto is dead in the water," said Shashi Tharoor, an Indian lawmaker and former U.N. official whose candidacy for secretary-general was ended by an American veto. The job went instead to Ban, a low-profile former South Korean minister of trade and foreign affairs who mounted an active international campaign for the job.

"I believe the candidate's vision is important, and that is why I took the trouble to spell out mine," said Tharoor. "But at the end of the day, the SG [secretary-general] race is neither about vision nor about the most relevant résumé, language skills, administrative ability, or personal charm. This is a political job, and the decision to select an SG will be a political one, made principally by the P5."

Tharoor -- India's official candidate in 2006 -- secured 10 expressions of support for the job in the 15-nation Security Council, trailing Ban by a couple of votes. Nine votes are required for electing a U.N. chief, as long as no one casts a veto. But John Bolton, then the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, quashed Tharoor's candidacy in a secret vote. Years later, Bolton [acknowledged](http://books.google.com/books?id=C0qRKaPeio4C&lpg=PP1&dq=Surrender%20Is%20Not%20an%20Option%3A%20Defending%20America%20at%20the%20United%20Nations&pg=PP1" \l "v=onepage&q=%22unwritten%20conventions%22&f=false" \t "_blank) in his [memoir](http://www.amazon.com/Surrender-Is-Not-Option-Defending/dp/B002YX0BDM%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank) that the Indian's candidacy broke "one of the UN's unwritten conventions, namely that SGs should come from smaller fry [countries]."

Bolton wrote that U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice had confided to him that in choosing Ban she was underscoring America's preference not only for a candidate from an allied country but for an individual who was weak. "I am not sure we want a strong secretary general," Bolton claimed she said.

There is no set script for choosing the top U.N. diplomat. The rules for selecting the U.N. chief are laid out in one simple sentence in [Article 97](http://www.un.org/en/documents/charter/chapter15.shtml%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank) of the U.N. Charter: "The Secretary-General shall be appointed by the General Assembly upon the recommendation of the Security Council." In practice, the U.N. General Assembly has done little more than rubber-stamp the Security Council's decision. Traditionally, the secretary-general post has been shared by [five regional groups](http://www.un.org/depts/DGACM/RegionalGroups.shtml%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank) -- the Western European and Others Group, the Eastern European Group, the Latin American and Caribbean Group, the Asia-Pacific Group, and the African Group -- through an informal process of regional rotation. Eastern Europe is the only region that has never produced a secretary-general, and many think the next top diplomat will come from that region.

For decades, the utter lack of a democratic process in the elections for the premier diplomatic job has fed raw resentment among the vast majority of dignitaries at Turtle Bay. It has also reinforced a perception that the U.N. chief is beholden to the powers that put him in office, not to the wider world. Ban traveled the globe to win broad international support for his bid in 2006, but in the end, it was Bolton, following closed-door talks with his Chinese counterpart, Wang Guangya, who decided Ban's fate, barring the way forward for Ban's main competitor.

Current speculation is focused on Eastern Europe, the region that has never produced a U.N. leader. The first candidates out of the block include Lithuanian President Dalia Grybauskaite and two Bulgarians -- Irina Bokova, UNESCO's executive director, and Kristalina Ivanova Georgieva, a European commissioner, an economist, and a former World Bank vice president. Slovakian Foreign Minister Miroslav Lajcak and Jan Kubis, a former Slovakian foreign minister and the current U.N. special representative for Afghanistan, are also in the running. Danilo Turk, a former Slovenian president and onetime top U.N. official, and Vuk Jeremic, a former Serbian foreign minister and a former U.N. General Assembly president, have also begun promoting their candidacy. "The smart money in 2016 will be on an East European acceptable to Moscow and supported by the rest of the P-5," Tharoor said in an emailed response to questions from Foreign Policy. "Anyone who doesn't fit that description will start the race with a crippling (but not necessarily insuperable) handicap."

Not everyone is certain that the Security Council's key powers, deeply divided over Ukraine, will agree on an Eastern European candidate. The prospect of deadlock has encouraged aspirants from other parts of the world to explore a possible candidacy.

"Any candidate in Eastern Europe will be seen as too close to Russia or too close to the West," said one U.N. official. "The well has been poisoned."

Russia may block candidates like Bulgaria's Georgieva who either come from European Union countries or are too closely associated with Western Europe. Jeremic, whose country, Serbia, is pursuing EU membership but has friendly ties to Russia, faces a possible Western veto. One European diplomat said Jeremic would ascend to the top U.N. job "over the P3's dead body." (The P3 is a reference to Britain, France, and the United States.)

Helen Clark, a former prime minister of New Zealand and currently the head of the U.N. Development Program, is believed to be running a stealth campaign for U.N. chief from her day job.[Kevin Rudd](http://www.thesaturdaypaper.com.au/news/politics/2014/04/19/rudds-long-plot-replace-ban-ki-moon/1397829600%22%20%5Cl%20%22.VGD6Oed2wcs%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank), a former Australian prime minister who recently took up an appointment at the Asia Society in Manhattan, providing him a perch for lobbying U.N.-based dignitaries, has also expressed some interest in the job, according to a senior New York-based diplomat.

Neither is in a position to publicly declare his or her candidacy as long as the Eastern Europeans are still under consideration, according to diplomatic observers. Clark declined through a spokeswoman to comment for this article. A Clark spokeswoman, Christina LoNigro, told Foreign Policy that "Helen Clark has stated consistently that she loves the job she currently has as the administrator of the U.N. Development Program."

But the two former prime ministers' prospects may be buoyed by the fact that a candidate from the Western European and Others Group has not held the secretary-generalship since the 1980s, when Austrian Kurt Waldheim's second term ended. In making the case for Clark's candidacy, New Zealand has also noted the importance of appointing the first female U.N. secretary-general in history.

"It's high time that the U.N. had a woman as secretary-general," New Zealand's prime minister, John Key,[told](http://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/news/article.cfm?c_id=1&objectid=11274594" \t "_blank) the *New Zealand Herald* in June. "I think it would be a very proud day for New Zealand if [Clark] became the next secretary-general."

Still, Key also played down Clark's chance of winning. "Those jobs are Herculean tasks to win and there's so much politics at play that it's not straightforward, but in the event that she ran, we would definitely support her," he told the newspaper.

Clark has said her gender would boost the profile of the world's most visible diplomatic post. "There will be interest in whether the U.N. will have a first woman because they're looking like the last bastions, as it were," she[told](http://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2014/jan/27/will-helen-clark-be-first-woman-to-run-united-nations%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank) the *Guardian*. "If there's enough support for the style of leadership that I have, it will be interesting."

In recent months, Clark has been trying to earn a reputation as a reformer by launching a belt-tightening campaign that has led to rare staff cuts at the U.N. Development Program. But her candidacy took a hit in October when the United States' congressionally created watchdog responsible for monitoring U.S. funds for the payroll of Afghan police sharply[criticized](http://thecable.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2014/10/06/us_watchdog_un_misspent_hundreds_of_millions_of_dollars_in_afghanistan%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank) the U.N. Development Program for mishandling hundreds of millions of dollars in foreign assistance for the Afghan National Police. The U.N. agency countered that it had drawn the world's attention to the misuse of funds but that it had limited authority to guarantee that Afghan authorities used the funds correctly.

But Clark and[Rudd](http://www.lowyinterpreter.org/post/2014/04/28/Why-Kevin-Rudd-wont-be-the-next-UN-Secretary-General.aspx?COLLCC=3249214405&" \t "_blank) may face a far steeper hurdle than the Afghan payroll problem. Latin American governments believe they may have a claim on the top U.N. job, noting that Westerners have held the top U.N. job for longer than any other region. Among the names of potential candidates being floated in New York's diplomatic circles are well-known leaders, including Brazilian President Dilma Rousseff and Chilean President Michelle Bachelet. But Bachelet, a popular candidate within U.N. corridors, will still be Chile's president when a U.N. leader is selected. Besides, the P5 has shown a particular allergy for appointing prominent world leaders for the top U.N. job, preferring less well-known foreign ministers and former U.N. envoys. A head of state has never been elected U.N. secretary-general. Other names floating include Alicia Bárcena, a Mexican national who once served as former Secretary-General Kofi Annan's chief of staff; Rebeca Grynspan, a former Costa Rican vice president who has held top U.N. posts; and Colombian Foreign Minister[María Ángela Holguín Cuéllar](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mar%C3%ADa_%C3%81ngela_Holgu%C3%ADn_Cu%C3%A9llar%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank).

William R. Pace, executive director of the World Federalist Movement, which has been leading a campaign to open the election process for U.N. chief, said that the likeliest choices would be from Eastern Europe. "But there is also huge interest in having a woman candidate."

Pace noted that other international organizations, including the World Health Organization and the World Trade Organization, have taken steps to include more countries in the process of selecting their top officials, a step the United Nations has yet to take. He is among a group of a dozen nonprofit groups that have appealed to U.N. General Assembly members to reform the selection process.

"The selection of the new Secretary-General in 2016 will be one of the most important decisions the General Assembly will make in the next ten years," according to a letter the group wrote to U.N. member states. "It is crucial that the best and most highly qualified candidate is selected to become UN Secretary-General."

The group called for establishing "formal selection criteria, a call for nominations and a clear timetable for the selection process that enables adequate assessment of candidates, including through an official list of candidates and the submission of candidate vision statements."

That type of politicking would be a major shift for the world body, where few have ever campaigned openly for the job.

Javier Pérez de Cuéllar, a reserved Peruvian diplomat, found political campaigning unseemly and refused appeals by his own government to travel to New York to meet with key ambassadors responsible for determining whether he would be named secretary-general. This reticence "reflected my long held view that a candidate make no promises or commitments or become indebted to a particular country or group of countries that could later prejudice his or her judgment and action," he wrote in his memoir, *[Pilgrimage for Peace](http://www.amazon.com/Pilgrimage-For-Peace-Secretary-Generals/dp/0312164866%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank)*. He ultimately got the job.

Brian Urquhart, one of the U.N.'s first employees, seemed appalled at the spectacle of open competition in 1969 when a Finnish diplomat decided to embark on a public campaign, [writing](http://books.google.com/books?ei=BFFmVPLUOOrasATtjIGoAw&id=naVQAQAAIAAJ&dq=%22the+quest+for+the+secretary+generalship+began+to+deteriorate+into+a+disorderly+and+often+bizarre+political+struggle%22&focus=searchwithinvolume&q=%22began+to+deteriorate+into+a+disorderly%22" \t "_blank) in his memoir, *[A Life in Peace and War](http://www.amazon.com/Life-Peace-War-Brian-Urquhart/dp/0393307719%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank)*, that "the quest for the *S*ecretary-Generalship began to deteriorate into a disorderly and often bizarre political struggle." But he acknowledged in the book that the traditional closed-door selection process often led to "a candidate who will not exert any troubling degree of leadership, commitment, originality, or independence."

Egyptian Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali, one of the most independent of the U.N. top leaders and certainly one of the most honest, was more pragmatic. Faced with the prospect of Bill Clinton's administration blocking his bid for a second term, Boutros-Ghali appealed to U.S. Secretary of State Warren Christopher to win the White House's backing. To drive home his case for American support, he reminded Christopher that he had given plum U.N. jobs to American officials. "I had done so, I said, because I wanted American support to succeed in my job," he [wrote](http://books.google.com/books?id=AnB3RlGuqtgC&lpg=PA6&ots=BjIkwVbnPd&dq=%22I%20had%20done%20so%2C%20I%20said%2C%20because%20I%20wanted%20American%20support%20to%20succeed%20in%20my%20job%22&pg=PA6" \l "v=onepage&q=%22I%20had%20done%20so,%20I%20said,%20because%20I%20wanted%20American%20support%20to%20succeed%20in%20my%20job%22&f=false" \t "_blank) in his memoir, *[Unvanquished](http://www.amazon.com/Unvanquished-A-U-S-U-N-Saga/dp/0812992040%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank)*.

It is precisely this kind of backroom dealing that has fueled bitterness over the entire election process.

"I wouldn't call it rigged, but it's very politicized," Switzerland's Seger said of the election process. He said a more open campaign could contribute to a "merit-based selection" process. As a first step, he suggested that candidates could come before the General Assembly for a hearing and take questions on their "goals and objectives."

Sitting in his Midtown Manhattan office, Seger handed out a small stack of General Assembly resolutions dating back to August 1997 that call for greater transparency in the election, granting the General Assembly a role in sending candidates to the Security Council, and holding public hearings with candidates so they can describe their visions for the United Nations. None of the steps was ever implemented, but Seger suggested that doing so could at least theoretically make a difference.

"The ballgame will be quite a different one," he said. "It will be more difficult for the P5 just to handpick someone [when] the wider membership was able to express its views."

If recent history is an example, handpicking the next secretary-general is exactly what might be the likeliest outcome. Ban introduced the modern campaign process into the U.N. secretary-general race, with the South Korean government moving aggressively on his behalf by signing trade deals with Security Council members and promoting his prospects in key big-power capitals. Tharoor said the 2006 election had an "unprecedented level of public exposure for the candidates," though that didn't seem to make much of a difference.

"The eventual winner … did not participate, confirming that public campaigns had minimal impact on the outcome," he said. "The only government which undertook a yearlong, well-structured, and amply financed campaign among the 15 Security Council members, including announcements of bilateral development assistance, was South Korea -- and its candidate won."