

“Selecting the Next UN Secretary-General: Opening up the Process”

*A Panel Discussion Sponsored by the Elders and the Accountability, Coherence, and Transparency Group
26 September 2015*

Panelists: Luis Guillermo Solís-Rivera (President of Costa Rica); Marina Kaljurand (Foreign Minister of Estonia); Gro Harlem Brundtland (former Norwegian Prime Minister, the Elders); Ernesto Zedillo (former Mexican president, the Elders)

On September 26th, 2015, the cross-regional Accountability, Coherence, and Transparency (ACT) group of Member States and the civil society group “the Elders” sponsored a panel discussion on the selection and appointment of the UN Secretary-General. Natalie Samarasinghe, a co-founder of the “1 for 7 Billion” civil society campaign, moderated the discussion, and H.E. Kai Sauer, the Permanent Representative of Finland to the United Nations, provided concluding remarks. Participation in the debate included high-level representation from capitals.

There was broad support for the reforms adopted through the new General Assembly resolution 69/321, with several speakers emphasizing the need to implement the resolution in a timely and effective manner. At the same time, many speakers felt that further improvements should be made; in particular, several expressed support for a single, non-renewable term of appointment. In addition to addressing the process itself, panelists, governments, and civil society representatives alike reflected on the qualities which would be desirable in the next Secretary-General.

Panel Discussion

In her capacity as moderator, *Ms. Natalie Samarasinghe* introduced the *1 for 7 Billion* campaign, “a global movement...of NGOs and individuals committed to securing a fair, open and inclusive selection process”. She stated that the campaign advocates “sensible proposals” which would not require an amendment to the UN Charter.”

In his remarks, *President Solís-Rivera (Costa Rica)* stressed four basic principles: transparency, equality, democracy, and independence. These were the principles upon which the United Nations had been founded, and which he believed should be reflected in the process to appoint its Secretary-General. Solís-Rivera linked these principles to specific proposals to reform the process, such as dialogues with candidates, the recommendation of multiple candidates by the Security Council, and the appointment of the Secretary-General to a single, non-renewable term.

Foreign Minister Kaljurand (Estonia) discussed whether a better process would guarantee an effective Secretary-General. Kaljurand argued that transparent and inclusive decision-making was just as critical at the international level as at the national or local level, emphasizing that such processes have “much bigger potential for the best possible outcome than a concealed process with exclusive participation.”

Dr. Brundtland (the Elders) raised the question of what makes the “strongest possible” candidate, noting that while there is a “shared consensus that the best possible candidate should be chosen...there is far less understanding about what actually makes the best possible candidate.”

Mr. Zedillo (the Elders) concentrated on the value of capable global leadership, noting that recent years have witnessed an increase in violence and conflict which could only be addressed by an effective United Nations. However, an effective UN would require the right leadership: a Secretary-General “with vision and the capacity to steward the decisions that have to be taken” at the United Nations.

The panelists welcomed the reforms recently adopted by the General Assembly through resolution 69/321, which they felt would contribute to greater transparency and inclusivity in the appointment process. Zedillo emphasized

that the selection of the Secretary-General should be “a rules-based process, an inclusive process, and a competitive process”, and characterized the resolution as a “first step in the right direction”.

Solís-Rivera expressed support for specific provisions of the resolution, such as the circulation of candidate information by the Presidents of the General Assembly and of the Security Council, and the establishment of dialogues with candidates. He was pleased that Costa Rica’s proposal inviting Member States to nominate highly qualified female candidates had been reflected in the resolution.

Kaljurand emphasized the need to effectively implement the resolution, observing that close cooperation between the General Assembly and the Security Council would be required to ensure the resolution was put into practice. In order to provide sufficient time for all provisions to be implemented, Kaljurand proposed that the “joint letter”, or official call for nominations by the Presidents of the General Assembly and Security Council, be issued by the end of 2015. She stated that the ACT group looked to Spain and the United Kingdom—who would serve as Security Council presidents in October and November, respectively—to ensure that the letter would be issued in a timely manner.

However, the panelists agreed that the resolution did not go far enough. In order to ensure that the Secretary-General was chosen in a “truly democratic manner,” Solís-Rivera envisioned a “more active and robust role” for the General Assembly, in which the General Assembly would appoint a Secretary-General from two or more candidates recommended by the Security Council. Zedillo noted that not all of the proposals put forward by the Elders group had been incorporated into the resolution, and hoped that the other measures would also be considered.

In particular, the panelists expressed support for a seven-year, non-renewable term of office. Brundtland and Solís-Rivera argued that appointing the Secretary-General for a single term would enhance the independence of the office and discourage the post-holder from making undue promises in exchange for a second term.

Brundtland explained that the current practice of appointing the Secretary-General for a renewable five-year term is not mandated by the Charter. She argued that when the General Assembly adopts a resolution to appoint the next Secretary-General, the resolution could specify a single, longer term. While encouraging all Member States to consider the possibility of a single term, Brundtland noted that candidates could also advance the proposal by declaring that they would not seek re-election as part of their campaign platform.

Kaljurand stated that the ACT group hoped for a discussion of the single term proposal, and observed that such a discussion would not only be desirable, but was required by previous resolutions. Solís-Rivera noted that the newest resolution included a commitment to discuss all issues pertaining to the appointment of the Secretary-General next year through the *Ad Hoc Working Group on the Revitalization of the General Assembly*.

In addition to the procedures themselves, the panelists also addressed the qualities and characteristics they felt the next Secretary-General should possess. Solís-Rivera characterized the Secretary-General as the “most important international figure of the world,” looked up to by international community for “guidance, leadership and solutions to the world’s deepest and gravest crises.” Zedillo emphasized that the Secretary-General could not simply be the “minimum common denominator of the P5,” as had sometimes occurred in the past.

Brundtland proposed that “vision, proven leadership, and independence” should be among the most important qualifications for the post, as well as “political discernment...born out of character and experience”. In light of the position’s strong administrative component, she noted, managerial skills should be “a given”.

Brundtland also addressed the role of regional and gender diversity in the appointment process, stating that the UN “cannot preemptively exclude candidates from consideration” based on their gender or geographical origin. However, she felt that after eight male Secretaries-General, the time had come to seriously consider female candidates.

Moreover, although the UN could not “afford to limit its search to one region,” the UN had a responsibility to select Secretaries-General from diverse regional backgrounds over time. In order to ensure geographic balance, she suggested that the Deputy-Secretary-General and Secretary-General could hail from different regions.

Following these statements, Samarasinghe asked the panel to further comment on how the best candidate for the position could be identified. Given that the Secretary-General stands for the world’s seven billion people, she observed, “surely we should be having a global conversation about what kind of person” should be appointed.

Brundtland emphasized that in order to find the best candidate, there must be a search process conducted in a “systematic and transparent” manner, followed by opportunities for candidates to be properly assessed and scrutinized. Solís-Rivera underscored the necessity of being able to actually interact with candidates. While it would be important to hear answers from candidates, he argued, it would be just as vital to ask the right questions.

Kaljurang focused on the need to ensure adequate time to implement a robust process, with a nomination period, public hearings, and time to discuss the candidates. She also addressed the role of regional and gender considerations when making the appointment, stating that while no Secretary-General had ever been appointed from the Eastern European group, she agreed that the chosen candidate must be the “best one”. In the same vein, if a male and female candidate were equally qualified, she felt that the female candidate ought to be appointed.

Interventions

Like the panelists, many speakers expressed their support for the newly adopted General Assembly resolution, including Colombia, Brazil, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom. *Brazil* described the establishment of informal meetings with candidates as “truly transformative,” noting that for the first time all Member States would have the opportunity to interact with candidates. Through these hearings, the most qualified candidates could be easily identified. *Switzerland* called for the letter of the resolution to be turned into action, insisting that the process must start in due time so that the next Secretary-General would have the benefit of a smooth transition into the office.

Several speakers discussed efforts by the Security Council to improve the selection process, highlighting the critical role of the Security Council in implementing the resolution. As Security Council presidents in October and November, *Spain* and the *United Kingdom* addressed the proposal to begin the nominations process with a joint letter. *Spain* stated that although the program of work for the month was still being finalized, it planned to organize an open debate on working methods which could be used to discuss the appointment of the Secretary-General. *Chile* agreed that the debate would be a good opportunity to exchange views on the subject.

The *United Kingdom* noted that Spain and the UK had already begun to discuss the joint letter proposal. The UK also reaffirmed its willingness to host an Arria-formula meeting with candidates in the Security Council, and explained that such a meeting would be informal in order to allow all to participate.

Other speakers raised issues which had not been addressed by the resolution or in the Security Council. Speaking for the *1 for 7 Billion* campaign, the World Federalist Movement-Institute for Global Policy raised the issue of improper pressure placed on candidates by the permanent members of the Security Council to appoint the nationals of their countries to key Under-Secretary-General positions, and emphasized that this practice must not continue during the 2016 appointment process. *Brazil* noted that many changes to the process would not require a resolution at all, but could be achieved through “concerted political action”. The General Assembly could, for instance, engage in “civil disobedience” by requiring a vote to appoint the candidate recommended by the Council, or could insist on being presented with multiple candidates to consider.

In response to the comments of the panel, some speakers addressed the possibility of appointing the Secretary-General for an extended, non-renewable term. The *United Kingdom* explained that it had not taken a formal position on the proposal, but expressed concerns that a single term could make the Secretary-General a “lame duck” rather than strengthen the independence of the position. Samarasinghe responded that the best way to avoid a “lame duck” Secretary-General would be to establish a strong selection process resulting in the appointment of an effective Secretary-General.

Liechtenstein also disagreed with the “lame duck” argument, emphasizing that a single term would provide the Secretary-General with a clear timeframe in which to develop and enact a vision for the UN. *Liechtenstein* further observed that there was likely a reason why former Secretary-General Kofi Annan supported the proposal as a member of the Elders group.

Both governments and civil society reflected on the significance of the office of the Secretary-General, as well as the qualities and qualifications which the UN should seek when making the appointment. The *Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect*, a New York-based NGO, noted that the Secretary-General plays a crucial role in bringing situations involving the risk of mass atrocity crimes to the attention of the Security Council, and emphasized that the Secretary-General must keep human rights at the heart of the organization. *Sweden* suggested that the balance of power at the UN makes the Secretary-General particularly important for smaller and medium sized states.

Observing that this is “not a one woman, one man world,” *Sweden* also argued that the Secretary-General must be a team-builder who can lead by example and inspire UN staff around the globe. *Bulgaria* noted that the Secretary-General must be able to communicate the work of the UN to the public and to mobilize resources for UN initiatives. *Brazil* emphasized that the “best candidate” should not only be highly qualified, but should possess the right qualities for “the moment the UN is going through”; in its view, 2016 would require a candidate well-suited to handle the “peace and security deficit” at the UN.

Several speakers noted the importance of giving due consideration to gender parity when making the appointment. *Colombia* highlighted its initiative, the Group of Friends in Favor of a Woman for Secretary-General, and noted that 45 Member States had joined the group. *Sweden* emphasized that the appointment must be merit-based, and encouraged the nomination of qualified women as candidates. The *United Kingdom* stated that all else being equal, the time had come to appoint a woman as Secretary-General. *Brazil* proposed that greater gender balance could be introduced by appointing a Deputy-Secretary-General of the gender opposite that of the Secretary-General. A similar approach could be applied to regional representation, ideally by appointing one post-holder from the Global South and the other from the North.

Regional representation was also addressed in the interventions. The *United Kingdom* expressed concerns about regional rotation, emphasizing that merit should be the primary consideration. *Bulgaria* underscored its belief that it was “high time” for a member of the Eastern European group to be appointed. It further noted that it was prepared to present a candidate which it believed to be the best fit for the post.

Several speakers noted the contributions of civil society to the reform conversation, including Brazil, Chile, Colombia, and Liechtenstein. *Liechtenstein* and *Brazil* highlighted the efforts of the *1 for 7 Billion* campaign to raise awareness of the deficiencies of the appointment process, and to build momentum for reform. The *United Kingdom* emphasized that an individual in a position as essential as that of the Secretary-General must be able to present her or his views to the “wider global population,” including civil society as well as the full UN membership.

This report is not an official record and has been created for informational purposes only. For further detail, please see the complete webcast on UN Web TV.