

## Annan and after

The United Nations searches for a secretary-general who can be a secretary to some and a general to others

May 25, 2006

The Economist

Original Source: [http://www.economist.com/agenda/displaystory.cfm?story\\_id=E1\\_GJGJPJR](http://www.economist.com/agenda/displaystory.cfm?story_id=E1_GJGJPJR)

Seven (not) just men			
Possible candidates	Country	Strength	Weakness
Surakiart Sathirathai	Thailand	Early favourite	Early favourite
Jayantha Dhanapala	Sri Lanka	Former ambassador to US	Sri Lanka falling apart
Ban Ki-moon	South Korea	America respects him	Korean conflict a distraction
Vaira Vike-Freiberga	Latvia	First woman	Russian veto
Kemal Dervis	Turkey	Respected economist	Says he doesn't want it
Zeid al-Hussein	Jordan	Middle Easterner	UN insider
Bill Clinton	America	Political genius	American

Source: *The Economist*

THE corridors of the United Nations building in New York echo with gossip about the succession to Kofi Annan, the secretary-general, who steps down late this year. Among the possible candidates already being talked up and talked down are an Asian diplomat, a Jordanian prince, a Turkish economist, a woman head of state, even a former American president. But entertaining as such speculation might be, the right question to ask at this stage is not who the next secretary-general might be, but what sort of job the UN will allow him (or her) to do.

The terms of appointment are vague. The UN charter says only that the secretary-general is the organisation's "chief administrative officer". He "may bring to the attention of the Security Council" matters which threaten world peace. In effect, he relies on his moral stature and his powers of persuasion to get anything done, which has not proved a particularly reliable formula. Out of seven secretaries-general since 1946, only two have made much of a mark on the organisation—Dag Hammarskjöld and Kofi Annan. The first died tragically in the line of duty. The second, once hugely respected, will step down diminished by internal scandal and by the UN's weakened role in world events.

The big everyday problem for any UN secretary-general is the fight to bring coherence to a fractious organisation that pulls in all sorts of directions at once. The contradictions and the horse-trading between different groups of countries—set against each other by size, by wealth,

by geography, by ideology, by sheer cussedness—are dictating now the process of choosing the secretary-general, as they do everything that the UN touches.

Formally, the UN Security Council—a standing committee representing 15 countries—proposes the candidate for the secretary-general. The name goes for approval to the General Assembly, where each of the UN's 191 countries has one vote. Within the Security Council, five permanent, veto-wielding members dominate: America, Britain, France, China and Russia. In the past, a deal between these five has determined the successful candidate, without much dissent from the other (temporary) members of the Security Council or from the General Assembly.

This year, the process may be a touch more contested. The G77, a block of 132 developing countries, wants much more of a role. Many of its members are annoyed that a proposed reform of the Security Council, launched last year, seems to have stalled. The reform might have added some permutation of India, Brazil, and one or two big African countries to the Security Council, along with Japan and Germany. Instead, there is still only one G77 member, China, with a permanent seat.

The stalling of reform in the Security Council has encouraged renewed bickering over the distribution of power everywhere within the UN. The poor countries say they are under-represented when decisions are made. The rich countries say they get a rough deal too, because the UN costs them too much and brings them too little.

As the jostling to succeed Mr Annan gets underway, India has proposed that the Security Council should send not one name, but three, to the General Assembly, and so give the General Assembly a real say in the appointment. A process such as this would, not incidentally, make the secretary-general more beholden to the General Assembly. At present, India complains, the secretary-general is prone to act as a secretary to the Security Council and a general to the General Assembly. John Bolton, America's ambassador to the UN, has said that India's scheme would amount to a "charter crisis", stripping the Security Council of its designated role.

A tough secretary-general working closely with the General Assembly would tend to increase the UN's supranational character—anathema to America and other big powers. It is commonly said that the permanent members of the Security Council would quietly prefer a weak secretary-general, and thus a weak UN, whereas the G77 would prefer a strong one.

The argument is not so simple. Here and there the positions are reversed. The oil-for-food scandal, when Iraqi oil quotas administered by the UN were diverted for private profit, and other lesser fiascos, have given weight to the arguments of America and other rich countries that the UN is stuffed with unsackable and unsuitable time-servers. One way forward might be to give the secretary-general more power to fix problems by hiring and firing personnel and moving budgets around. Mr Annan duly introduced such a proposal. But G77 countries sidetracked it, fearful that their own interests and placemen might suffer, and it is likely to stay that way until Mr Annan goes.

As for the candidates themselves, these are early days, but traditionally the job has rotated between regions. Asia claims its turn now. The last Asian secretary-general was U Thant of

Burma, whose term ended in 1971. America and Britain counter that the sole criterion for appointment should be the quality of the candidate—and, by the way, central and eastern Europe has never had the job. The Chinese are politely, if predictably, insisting on the Asian variant, and they, of course, have a veto.

The result has been to focus attention on several declared Asian candidates (see table). These include Thailand's deputy prime minister, South Korea's foreign minister, and a Sri Lankan ex-UN bureaucrat. Other names being talked up unofficially include Jordan's well-regarded ambassador to the UN, the Turkish head of the United Nations Development Programme, and the president of Latvia, who would be the first woman in the job. The name of Bill Clinton has been muttered here and there, a magnificent possibility but surely a very slight one.

The office left behind by Mr Annan will be a tiny bit tarnished. An independent investigation cleared him personally of any misconduct in the oil-for-food scandal, but it did worry about a lack of effective oversight, not to say some questionable dealing by Mr Annan's son. Still, Mr Annan has been eloquent, sharp, charismatic, and beloved within the organisation. He managed for a long time to bridge gaps between north and south, poor and rich, while speaking credibly for reform. Finding a successor with those skills and qualities, let alone more besides, will not be easy.