

VOTED OUT by SAURABH SHUKLA

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Even before the 15 members of the UN Security Council (UNSC) had voted in a crucial straw poll in New York on October 2 for the Secretary-General's sweepstakes, in New Delhi's South Block a 'secret' telegram had predicted Indian candidate Shashi Tharoor's fate. Despite several false starts, Tharoor was a close second after South Korean Foreign Minister Ban Ki Moon, who had led three straw polls held in July and September.

When the UNSC members met for the last informal poll on Monday morning, a discouraging vote from one of the five permanent members, who vote on blue slips, dashed Tharoor's hopes of securing the UN's top job. The thumbs down effectively signals a veto and for Tharoor, the end of the road.

Election to the top UN post requires the Security Council to recommend a single name to the 192-member UN General Assembly by consensus, which then endorses the name of the Secretary-General as mere formality. Technically, the veto from a permanent member derailed Tharoor's plans. Further, with Ban securing 14 votes and only one no-opinion from a non-permanent member, it is clear Tharoor has run out of steam. Present Secretary-General Kofi Annan's term ends on December 31 and Ban is set to succeed him from January 1 next year.

Ironically, despite the ballot being confidential, there were strong indications that India's newest strategic partner, the US, had ended Tharoor's home run. And the veto was not without a background. Last month, with the race for the UN Secretary-General's post poised for a photo finish, the stakes were high. In the last week of September, Tharoor met the chief US interlocutor, Under Secretary of State Nicholas Burns, to seek his support. Sources say Burns bluntly told him that he did not have the requisite political experience for the job, and that the US would be unable to back him.

An "agitated" Tharoor is believed to have shot back that it would have an adverse impact on Indo-US ties, an insinuation that did not go down well with the top US diplomat, the sources told India Today. A few days later when the then foreign secretary Shyam Saran visited Washington for bilateral meetings with Burns, the US diplomat expressed his unhappiness, telling him that Tharoor did not stand a chance. Providing details of his parley with Tharoor, Burns told Saran that the US wanted a candidate with political experience in a national government. Besides, Burns also pointed out, Washington could not support a candidate from the UN bureaucracy as the US was keen on cleaning it up in the wake of a series of scandals. Back home, Saran conveyed Burns' comments to Prime Minister Manmohan Singh. Notably, in the earlier straw polls, the US had voted against Tharoor-but not on a blue slip.

However, even as Indian officials were coming to terms with the disappointment, there was more surprise in store. Barely an hour after the straw poll, in New York Tharoor announced his decision to bow out of the race to the dismay of the Foreign Office which had received no prior intimation of his move. Tharoor claimed he had informed the prime minister. Back in Delhi, hounded by the media, red-faced Ministry of External Affairs (mea) officials took refuge in the alibi that the prime minister was away in South Africa.

"We had endorsed him as our candidate. How could he have announced his withdrawal before the Government of India had announced it? This was not a formal poll, it was just a straw poll. In the

past, too, candidates have won despite receiving a discouraging vote from a permanent member in the straw poll," a senior MEA official told India Today. Sources pointed out that even when Annan was elected, one of the permanent members had given him a thumbs down, but he scraped through following persuasion from other permanent members. Besides Ban has courted some controversy over alleged vote buying allegations. So, officials contend, Tharoor could have had a chance.

Later, in a letter to Ban, Tharoor wrote, "It is clear that you will be our next Secretary-General... I entered the race because of my devotion to the United Nations." Various interpretations of this are floating in the South Block, and many are of the opinion that Delhi has strained its ties with Ban who has several India connections: he served as a diplomat in India and his daughter is marrying an Indian. Diplomats feel that Ban could have been cultivated had Tharoor not parachuted in as the Indian candidate, but now it will have to start from scratch. There is already an air of anxiety over Tharoor's plan B. Ban may reshuffle his pack and Tharoor, UN Under Secretary-General for communications and public information, has indicated he may consider returning to India. When asked, Tharoor said: "That is a possibility."

The final poll is set for October 9 and technically, there is still time to introduce new candidates. But analysts believe it is unlikely, especially in the light of the strong support Ban enjoys among the 15 council members.

While Delhi has sought to present a brave face, Tharoor's debacle has spelt embarrassment for the Government as a huge amount of political and diplomatic capital had been invested in his campaign. Tharoor's candidature was met with opposition from the Foreign Office, which was eventually forced to fall in line. While Tharoor had led several road shows to all 15 members of the UNSC and a big one at the African Union summit in Banjul earlier this year, Manmohan had pushed his case very strongly with the world leaders at the G-8 summit in Russia and addressed letters to all 15 UNSC members seeking support for the Indian hopeful. The Prime Minister had also dispatched former diplomats as his special envoys to half-a-dozen countries, but not many came forward to support Tharoor. Quite apparently, the Indian strategy suffered from a degree of inconsistency, raising the pertinent question: was Tharoor's candidature thought through and strategically calibrated or was it just foisted by a section of officials in the PMO? The idea was sold even to Congress chief Sonia Gandhi. What had obviously not been taken into account was that a loss would damage India's other big campaign: a seat at the UNSC.

Tharoor's defeat effectively neutralises the ground India had covered following its record win with 171 votes in the election to the UN Human Rights Council early this year. In all fairness, while Tharoor would have won a debate among the candidates, the race for the UN's top job was a high-stake game and even bigger so for India, but it was lost due to narrow parochial interests which prevailed over larger strategic interests. Surely, some accountability needs to be brought to the fore in order to delineate how such pivotal decisions are taken, especially if India is to play a larger role in the international arena.

Tharoor's candidature was not calibrated-it was pushed through by the PMO and NSA M.K. Narayanan, though the MEA opposed it.

The prime minister sent former diplomats-Savitri Kunnadi to Peru, V.K. Grover to Greece and Slovenia, C.R. Gharekhan to Qatar-as special envoys to lobby support but had limited result.

India failed to convince the US, its "strategic" ally, to support Tharoor.