

Portugal's António Guterres as Ban Ki-moon's successor as UN Secretary General?

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Theme: [United Nations](#)

"Millions of people need its sanctuary and protection. History will frown on those who do not build." — Editorial, *The Guardian*, Aug 15, 2011

There was very little in the manner of elaborateness on this occasion. There were no hysterics, though there was some surprise from pundits behind the selection of Portugal's António Guterres as Ban Ki-moon's successor for Secretary-General of the United Nations. Where, went this line of alarm, was the woman? After all, seven out of 13 candidates were vying for the position.

The position itself has become more of a bauble of over the years, while the organisation has slid into the background, seemingly broken. The United Nations remains a beast held captive, for the most part, by the Permanent Five, powers vested with the killing strength of a veto. Wars continue to rage with merciless execution, exercised through proxy theatres and actors, while the organisation takes the next battering on its chin.

As for contenders, it seemed that the punters got it wrong again, this, in a season when they have been mistaken about so much in terms of elections. The talking heads chewed off each other's ears suggesting that the next Secretary-General would be a competent female, or from Eastern Europe, or both.

Even Ban decided to weigh in, claiming it was "high time now" for a female Secretary-General. The straw polls yielded rather different results, the first placing the head of Unesco, Irina Bokova of Bulgaria, third, before subsequently dropping to fifth.

When the announcement came, The Campaign to Elect a Woman UN Secretary-General expressed "outrage" at the decision. "There were seven outstanding female candidates and in the end it appears they were never seriously considered." [1] That's diplomacy for you.

Guterres seemed beat his fellow contenders with some imaginary stick of competence, convincing the Security Council to unanimously back him. "What we are looking for," claimed British ambassador Matthew Rycroft, "is a strong secretary general... who will take the United Nations to the next level in terms of leadership, and who will provide a convening power and a moral authority at a time when the world is divided on issues, above all like Syria." [2]

Much wishful thinking there, and thoughts more dissimulating than not. An active, strong Secretary-General is exactly the sort of chap these powers do not want. Damning praise is code for not rocking the boat. By all means, venture a criticism here and there, but generally keep matters afloat and civil as a servant to the countries at the UN.

During Ban's tenure, powers, often of the brutish variety, have been given a decent white wash, in some cases gruesomely so. Burma, Sri Lanka and China, at various stages, have benefited from Ban's efforts to, as Human Rights Watch claims, "portray oppressive governments in a positive light." He may well have put it down to the daily seediness of diplomacy.

The point is always to be wary of anything stemming from a permanent Security Council member. US ambassador to the UN Samantha Power insists on someone who can "mobilize coalitions" and avail himself of "creaky" yet necessary "tools" to cure the international dysfunction that has risen, even if her role in aggravating that state of affairs is undeniable. Within the ramshackle organisation, aggressive, spoiling powers cause mischief and sow ills without discrimination.

The backers of the Secretary-General sometimes misjudge their man, finding that the office is occupied by overly active, if not ambitious figures. For one, a decision was made in 1945 to limit the office-holder's powers to bring to the attention of the Security Council violations of international law. In other words, the SG was meant to avoid doing something seemingly essential to the office: guarding the Charter with its lofty aspirations.

The Security Council seemed to buck that trend in August 2001, adopting Resolution 1366 which recognised "the essential role of the Secretary-General in the prevention of armed conflict and the importance of efforts to enhance his role in accordance with Article 99 of the Charter of the United Nations." [3]

Kofi Annan also went well outside his remit, devising the millennium goals while embracing that fraught philosophy known as the Responsibility to Protect. Previously, such figures as Dag Hammarskjöld proved steely in his resolve, so much so there remains more than a hint he was done away by way of a plane crash on his way to cease-fire negotiations in the Congo.

It was Hammarskjöld, deemed by some a virtual prime minister of the organisation, who came up with the notion that the UN Secretariat should be working on the edge of progress, ever engaged in preventive diplomacy. The current office holder has often, by way of contrast, seemed on the edge of an abyss, indifferent to conflagration and calamity.

For all the bad press over the years, the UN can, at stages, do better than the imperial powers that claim to have mastered the art of governance. UN peacekeeping missions cost a fraction than those of standard forces of brutal, even clumsy occupation. Preventive diplomacy can yield less destructive results. Whether such scope afforded the new SG, who intends to bring "swift decisions which the troubled world we live in demands" is hard to envisage in a post-Ban world.

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Notes

[1] <https://twitter.com/She4SG>

[2] <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-37568433>

[3] <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N01/524/48/PDF/N0152448.pdf?OpenElement>

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