



By: *Sharmila Devi*

Race to head the UN set to heat up



Four candidates who are seeking to replace Antonio Guterres as the next **UN secretary-general** will face a grilling from member states and civil society at a series of “interactive dialogues” in New York on 21-22 April.

Many would say whoever becomes the UN's 10th chief in its 80-year history faces a poisoned chalice, with great power divisions causing gridlock in the Security Council, steep funding cuts forcing a shrinking of programmes, and low staff morale.

Four candidates were nominated by member states by the informal deadline of 1 April: Rafael Grossi of Argentina, Rebeca Grynspan of Costa Rica, Michelle Bachelet of Chile, and Macky Sall of Senegal.

The winner is picked through a process of secret ballots in the Security Council, where its five permanent members - the US, Russia, China, Britain and France - must agree. In 2016, it took six straw polls to reach a consensus on Guterres.

Whoever wins will have to navigate Washington's shake-up of the international order as the post-war liberal consensus fragments and rising nationalism and populism are leading to a decline in the multilateral foundation of the UN.

“The 10th **Secretary-General** will be like a ‘Galactic Chancellor of the Star Wars’ universe. The Chancellor does not govern a unified empire but presides over a complex republic composed of diverse systems, interests, and power centres, and nudging them towards shared purpose and procedures,” said the SAIS Review of International Affairs.

Grossi and Grynspan

One betting platform currently gives Grossi a 44% chance of success and Grynspan 27%, although it is early days, and the odds are likely to shift significantly over the course of this year before the winner takes up their post next January. More candidates may also emerge.

Grossi and Grynspan both hold positions in the UN: he is director-general of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), and she was head of UN Trade and Development (Unctad), although she recently stepped down.

She sought to claim the moral high ground by heeding a resolution from the General Assembly last year that asked UN officials who wanted the top job to suspend their roles to avoid conflicts of interest. She said it was not a “difficult decision” to step down in the name of accountability, according to the PassBlue web site.

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Grossi, whose high-profile work at the IAEA encompasses verification of Iran's nuclear ambitions, said he needed to stay on because of “the nature and responsibilities of my position.”

It is unclear if **Grynspan's** virtuous behaviour will help the former vice-president of Costa Rica whose centre-left politics may not win approval in Washington. However, she is a woman, and last year's UN resolution noted “with regret that no woman has ever held the position of secretary-general” and encouraged countries to “strongly consider nominating women.”

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Bachelet and Sall

Bachelet saw her own country of Chile withdraw its support for her last month under

the new hard-right presidency of Jose Antonio Kast, but she does have the backing of Brazil and Mexico.

“The fragmentation of candidacies among Latin American states and the differences with some of the key players shaping this process render this candidacy and its eventual success unviable,” the Chilean foreign ministry said in a statement, while adding it would not back another contender if Bachelet stayed in the race, and so far, she is still a player.

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But Bachelet, a former president of Chile, was outspoken when she was head of both UN Women and the UN High Commission for Human Rights, and she angered several member states.

Sall, a former president of Senegal, does not have united African support. Senegal told the African Union (AU) it had not endorsed Sall, who was nominated by Burundi. Some 20 AU members have also rejected his bid.

European objections and US cuts

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Devex reported Guterres will leave it to his successor to make the appointment while European countries privately make objections to Luke Lindberg, the US undersecretary of agriculture for trade and foreign agricultural affairs, replacing Cindy McCain at the WFP.

The top WFP job has gone to an American for more than 30 years, but Washington has sharply cut its cash to the UN. The WFP has seen its funding cut in half and the lay-off of a third of its staff following US cuts to international aid.

“There needs to be an alignment between your political support, your financial commitment and the role you want to play in the UN system,” a European diplomat told Devex.

Such global pushback to Trump’s re-ordering of diplomatic norms may well play a big role as the UN race plays out this year.