The Election of the Next UN Secretary-General

Mains: *GS II – International Organisation*

Why in News?

The process to select the next Secretary-General of the United Nations (UN) is currently underway, marking a crucial moment for global governance.

What is the importance of the secretary-general's role?

- **Administration** – The Secretary-General is the highest administrative officer of the UN, as defined by the UN Charter.
- **Implementation** – The Secretary-General oversees the UN Secretariat and implements mandates given by key UN organs such as the General Assembly, the Security Council, and the Economic and Social Council.
- **Diplomacy** – Crucially, the Secretary-General has the authority to bring to the Security Council's attention any issue that threatens international peace and security.
- Often described as the world's "chief diplomat," the Secretary-General represents the moral voice of the international community, addressing global challenges such as climate change, armed conflict, inequality, and humanitarian crises.
- **Appointment** – The office also allows for the appointment of Personal Envoys to mediate conflicts, as seen in ongoing crises in West Asia.
- Thus, the Secretary-General plays a central role not only in administration but also in diplomacy, conflict resolution, and norm-setting in global governance.

How is the Secretary-General Elected?

- **Two step process** – The UN Charter outlines a two-step process for the appointment of the Secretary-General.
- **Recommendation by the Security Council** – The process begins in the UN Security Council, which plays the decisive role.
- The Council discusses candidates through a series of closed-door consultations and informal "straw polls."
- These polls are used to assess the level of support each candidate enjoys and to identify any opposition.
- A crucial aspect is the role of the five permanent members (P5) — China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States.
- Each of these countries has veto power, meaning that any one of them can block a candidate, even if the candidate has broad support from other members.
- Therefore, the eventual nominee must be acceptable to all five permanent members.

- **Approval by the General Assembly** – Once the Security Council agrees on a candidate, it formally recommends that individual to the UN General Assembly.
- The General Assembly then votes on the recommendation.
- The voting is typically a simple majority.
- Traditionally, the Assembly has endorsed the Security Council's choice without opposition, making this step more of a formal confirmation.
- **Recent Developments** – In recent years, efforts have been made to make the selection process more transparent and inclusive.
- Candidates now participate in public hearings and interactive dialogues with member states in the General Assembly, where they present their vision and answer questions.
- However, despite these reforms, the dominant influence of the Security Council—especially the P5—remains unchanged.

What are the key considerations in the selection process?

- **Regional Rotation** – By convention, the post rotates among *five geographical regions* — Africa, Asia, Eastern Europe, Western Europe, and Latin America and the Caribbean.
- The current cycle is widely seen as the turn of Latin America and the Caribbean.
- **Term Limits** – While not formally mandated, Secretaries-General have generally limited themselves to two terms since 1981.
- **Geopolitical Balance** – The preferences of major powers and regional blocs significantly shape the outcome.
- **Gender and Representation** – There is growing advocacy for gender parity and better geographic representation within the UN leadership.
- **Professional Experience** – Candidates are evaluated based on diplomatic experience, leadership credentials, and ability to navigate complex global issues.

Who are the candidates in the fray?

- **Michelle Bachelet** – Former President of Chile and former UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, known for her focus on human rights and social equity.
- **Macky Sall** – Former President of Senegal, bringing experience in governance and African diplomacy.
- **Rafael Grossi –** Director General of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), with expertise in nuclear diplomacy and international security.
- **Rebecca Grynspan** – Head of the UN Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), with a strong background in development economics and multilateral cooperation.
- The diversity of candidates reflects a mix of political leadership, technical expertise, and multilateral experience.

Why this election matters now?

- **Financial Constraints** – Delayed and reduced contributions from member states have led to budgetary shortfalls.
- This has resulted in staff layoffs, restructuring, and downsizing of operations.
- **Security Council Paralysis** – Increasing use of veto power by permanent members

has hindered decisive action on key global conflicts.

- **Global Conflicts** – Ongoing crises in regions such as Gaza, Ukraine, Sudan, and Lebanon have raised questions about the UN's effectiveness in maintaining peace.
- **Development Challenges** – The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are off track, with only a small percentage of targets likely to be achieved by 2030.
- **Humanitarian Strain** – Rising conflicts and climate-related disasters are overwhelming humanitarian systems.
- Given these challenges, the next Secretary-General will need to not only manage the institution but also rejuvenate its credibility and effectiveness.

*The UN is at a critical juncture, nearly **80 years** after its establishment. It faces both financial and political crises*

What are the campaign priorities of the candidates?

- **Preventive Diplomacy** – All candidates emphasized the need to prevent conflicts through early intervention and dialogue.
- **Michelle Bachelet** – She highlighted strengthening UN field presence and prioritizing climate action.
- **Rebecca Grynspan** – She focused on integrating conflict prevention with human rights and proposed significant institutional reforms within the first 100 days.
- She also stressed protecting least-developed countries from funding cuts.
- **Macky Sall –** He emphasized migration as a critical global issue and supported stronger accountability for violations of international law.
- **Rafael Grossi** – He underlined the importance of strengthening cooperation between the UN and financial institutions like the World Bank.
- Additionally, all candidates committed to gender parity in UN leadership.
- Bachelet also emphasized improving geographic diversity within the workforce.
- On Security Council reform, Grynspan and Sall suggested publicly calling out violations of international law by permanent members, while Grossi focused on adherence to the UN Charter.
- Bachelet proposed building political momentum for long-term reform.

What will be the future process?

- The election process now moves into a more decisive phase.
- The Security Council will conduct closed-door deliberations and informal "straw polls" to gauge support for candidates.
- These polls help identify candidates who may face vetoes or lack sufficient backing.
- By around October, the Security Council is expected to recommend one candidate to the General Assembly.
- The Assembly will then vote to confirm the recommendation by a simple majority.
- The newly elected Secretary-General will assume office on January 1, 2027, succeeding the current officeholder.

What lies ahead?

- The selection of the next UN Secretary-General is not merely a routine leadership change but a defining moment for the future of multilateralism.
- At a time when global cooperation is under strain, the Secretary-General must act as both an effective administrator and a visionary leader.
- The challenges ahead, from conflict resolution and climate change to institutional reform and financial stability, demand a leader capable of restoring trust in the UN system.
- The outcome of this election will significantly shape the trajectory of global governance in the years to come.

Reference

The Hindu| Election of UN Secretary General

