Civil society participates in historic informal dialogues with candidates for post of UN Secretary-General

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(New York) - For the first time in the history of the UN, candidates to the role of UN Secretary General have participated in informal dialogues with Member States ahead of the election. In a significant move, the President of the General Assembly ensured that civil society representatives were also part of this process, acknowledging that civil society are indispensable to transparent, accountable UN processes.

To date, nine candidates have put themselves forward for what the President of the General Assembly Mr Mogens Lykketoft called ‘the most difficult interview for the most difficult job in the world’. The majority are from Eastern Europe, a region that has never before had a Secretary General. Four of the nine declared candidates are women, with a number of States and civil society organisations calling for the appointment of the first ever female Secretary General to be appointed. The dialogues mark a significant change in a process that has previously been cloaked in secrecy, including in regard to those standing for the position.

Process of choosing civil society questions

In designing this landmark process, the President of the GA foregrounded the participation of civil society, requesting that the UN’s Non-Governmental Liaison Service to facilitate a process enabling civil society to submit questions to be asked to candidates. Over 1000 questions were submitted from over 70 countries. A Civil Society Committee then shortlisted 30 questions from which two or three were posed to each candidate.

‘ISHR was privileged to be part of the Civil Society Committee convened to select a small number of questions from the many provided by people all over the world. The questions chosen covered a wide range of concerns related to the mandate and functioning of the UN, and included several related to safeguarding the space for civil society globally and at the UN,’ said ISHR’s New York Office Co-Director Eleanor Openshaw.

For example Indian human rights defender Celine Paramunda asked candidates about how they would combat the impunity of corporations and individuals who violate the rights of human rights defenders globally. Jane Alver from YWCA Australia asked how candidates would ensure that civil society participation is valued and not further eroded.

‘The inclusion of questions from civil society in this landmark process is a significant acknowledgment of the vital, relevant and indispensable part they play in multilateral fora,’ said Ms Openshaw.

During the dialogues, several States, including Japan and the UK, welcomed the inclusion of civil society in the process. The UK’s Ambassador to the UN, Matthew Rycroft, included questions coming through on twitter among the questions he posed to candidates.
Visions of candidates

The majority of the candidates spoke of the importance of the participation of civil society in the UN. Both the head of the UN Development Programme, Helen Clark, and former UN High Commissioner for Refugees, Antonio Guterres, spoke of the need for the UN to develop strategic partnerships with civil society. Irina Bokova, the Director-General of UNESCO, spoke of the need to forge ‘new partnerships for innovative action’ with civil society to build ‘a new multilateralism for the 21st century.’ Both Dr Srgjan Kerim, former Foreign Minister of Macedonia, and Vuk Jeremic, former Foreign Minister of Serbia, spoke of their support for civil society during their respective tenures as Presidents of the General Assembly. Mr Jeremic added his opinion that a standard process was required to enable participation at the UN – implying acknowledgement of the current ad hoc, time consuming process of negotiating modalities for civil society participation at UN meetings. Former Slovenian President Danilo Turk noted that, if elected as Secretary General, he would hold a consultation to define new ways of developing civil society participation ‘that go beyond what we have today’.

What were the key elements discussed in the debates?

Civil society participation was an issue highlighted by a number of States in their questioning of candidates. The Nordic group of states asked all candidates a question on safeguarding civil society space at the UN. Chile asked candidates how they would coordinate a more effective response by the UN to violence against journalists.

The dialogues served as a platform for questioning and reflecting upon the purpose of the UN in the 21st Century, including questions on UN reform, Security Council reform, climate change, the Sustainable Development Goals, the use of Article 99 of the UN Charter (a rarely used provision enabling the Secretary General to refer issues to the Security Council), the implementation of Resolution 1325 on women and peace and security, and the managerial skills required of a Secretary General.

Gender inequality was frequently cited as a problem by States, including in regard to UN top positions. 56 States from across all regions spoke as the ‘Group of Friends in Favour of a Woman Candidate for Secretary General of the UN.’

Only one candidate, former Croatian Deputy Prime Minister Dr Vesna Pusic, highlighted the importance of protecting the rights of LGBTI people. ‘Culture is not cast in stone’ she said, responding to objections voiced by Saudi Arabia and Algeria to what they called ‘the imposition of social norms’. It is important ‘to bring issues to the fore’ to prompt respectful human rights debate, said Dr Pusic.

Participation of civil society should be widened and deepened at UN

Reflecting on the process, ISHR’s Eleanor Openshaw noted, ‘The commitment of the President of the General Assembly to including civil society in this process must be acknowledged. We would like to see him continue to deepen his commitment, by encouraging member states to abide by UN values, principles of transparency and procedural fairness in regard to accreditation for NGOs and establishing modalities of participation in UN meetings. We would like to see him encouraging the deepest participation of NGOs and NHRIs in General Assembly processes.’

The process for the election of the Secretary General will still involve the Security Council recommending a single candidate to the General Assembly to endorse. The Security Council will begin its selection by the end of July 2016, and a new SG will need to be in place by the end of the year.

‘We hope the new Secretary General will use her or his good offices to defend the space for civil society to operate and advocate for a deepening of their participation in UN spaces,’ said Ms Openshaw for ISHR.

Contact: Eleanor Openshaw, Co-Director of New York Office, ISHR on e.openshaw@ishr.ch