UN secretary-general selection

Update, three plausible scenarios



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ANALYSIS



HENRY WONG/SCMP

Earlier on October 30, 2026, in New York, the UN Security Council conducted its seventh straw poll to arrive at a consensus for recommending the next Secretary-General to the General Assembly, to commence her or his first term in office from January 1, 2027. To reach consensus, a candidate must receive at least nine (out of 15) favorable votes from Security Council members, including either an "encourage" or "no opinion" vote from all five of the Council's veto-wielding permanent (P-5) members (China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom and the United States).

During the sixth straw poll, on October 16, Rebeca Grynspan continued to lead the pack of contenders with nine "encourage" and five "discourage" votes. As this was the first time the Security Council employed color ballots, attention turned to how two of Ms. Grynspan's negative votes were issued by P-5 members (though it's unclear exactly which members, given the secret nature of the balloting). She was followed by her close competitors over successive rounds, Carolyn Rodrigues-Birkett and Rafael Mariano Grossi, who each obtained eight "encourage" and six "discourage" votes (yet, as with Ms. Grynspan, two P-5 members each signaled a negative position toward their respective candidacies).

In the most recent straw poll, the Council returned to non-color ballots, and Rebeca Grynspan's lead expanded to 11 "encourage" and only four "discourage," making her the clear front-runner, with Dr. Grossi trailing in second with nine "encourage," four "discourage," and two "no opinion". A very recent entrant into the race, Lana Nusseibeh, despite much fanfare (mixed with controversy) and an arguably strong showing at her General Assembly Interactive Dialogue, only mustered seven "encourage," six "discourage," and two "no opinion" votes (coming in fourth just behind Amb. Rodrigues-Birkett).

Since the Security Council returned to non-color ballots on October 31, one can only guess whether any of the "discourage" votes for these leading candidates is from a P-5 member, leaving the door open for introducing additional candidates late in the process, which would, in effect, re-set the race. For instance, besides the recent late entry of Ms. Nusseibeh, the media reports signal possible interest in the UN's top post by Hungary's former prime minister Viktor Orbán. Since the writing of this article, Turkey's former foreign minister (and current secretary-general of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe) Feridun Sinirlioglu has already joined the race. To make matters even more complex, some are speculating that Russia may not allow a straw poll during Latvia's Security Council Presidency in November, meaning that it may be early December (under Liberia's Presidency) that we see the next straw poll.

Rafael Mariano Grossi was considered the early front-runner heading into the Security Council's first straw poll held on July 30, 2026. Rebeca Grynspan's strong performance in this straw poll turned her overnight into the actual front-runner, only to be eclipsed by Carolyn Rodrigues-Birkett during the second straw poll held on August 21. Ms. Grynspan quickly returned to the lead with one more "encouragement" vote during the third Security Council straw poll held on September 18 — a position she subsequently held during the next three straw polls (September 29 and October 7 and 16).

Three plausible scenarios for the way ahead

To break through the present impasse within the Security Council, there are three scenarios for possible ways forward:

• **GRULAC Unites!:** Given the genuine threat that a candidate from outside their region will now be selected, countries in the UN Group of Latin America and the Caribbean (GRULAC) are highly incentivized to come together to rally a consensus around one of their own and, in doing so, strive to preserve the long-held custom of regional rotation.

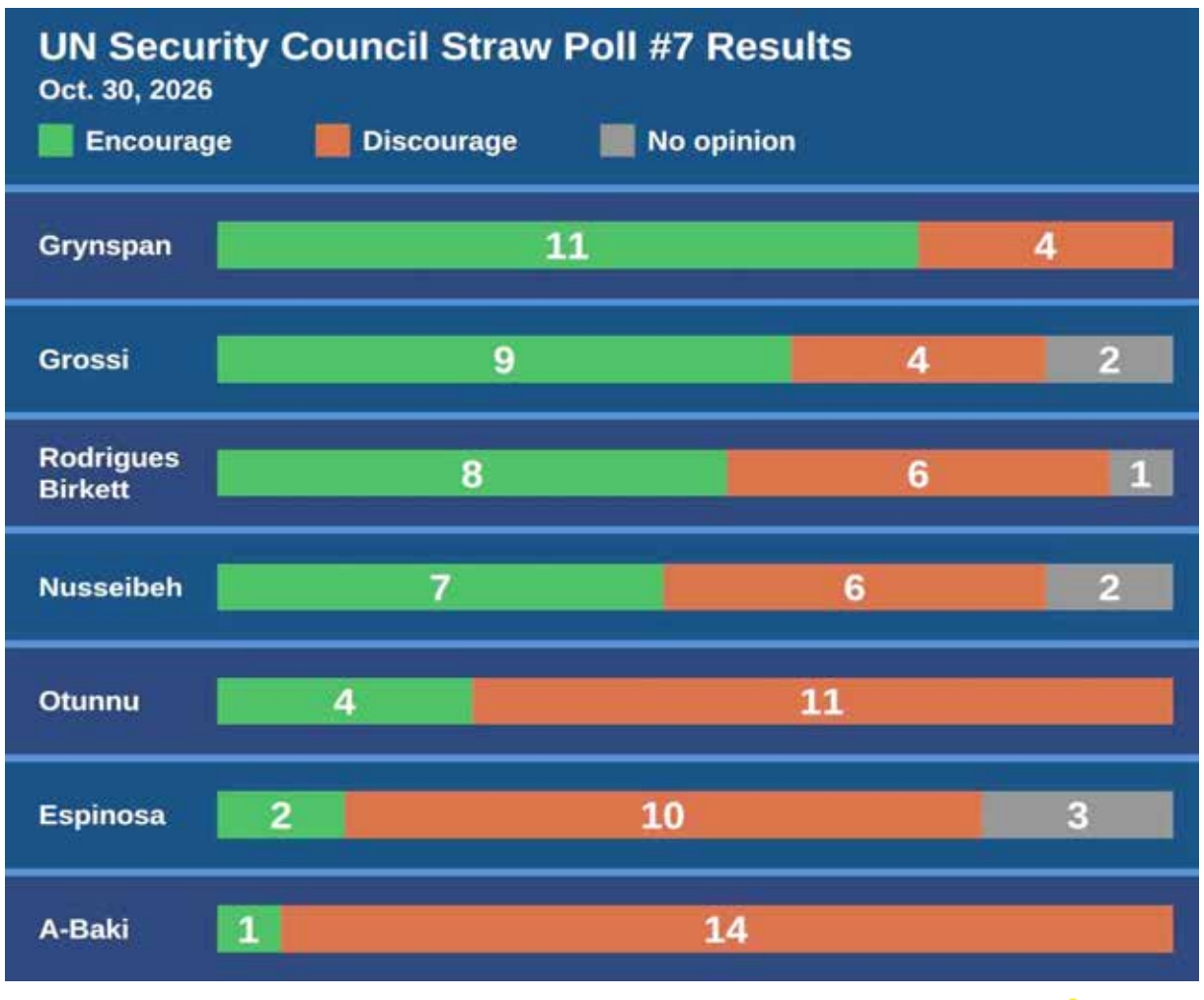
• **More "Non-LAC dark horses" may enter the race:** Especially if the Latin American and Caribbean states fail to quickly rally around their strongest regional candidate, more dark horse candidates, including those mentioned above, as well as former Bulgarian foreign and defense minister (and Director-General for the US-led Board of Peace) Nickolay Mladenov, could enter the race. If this scenario were to become viable, deals would likely be struck between the GRULAC region and an ascendent new front–runner — involving perhaps a commitment to appoint a deputy secretary–general from the region.

• **A "compromise candidate" hiding in plain sight:** The least likely scenario, in the event that the current P-5 "discourage" votes against the front-runners become "unflippable," is for the Permanent Members and at least four elected members of the Council to arrive at a "compromise candidate," such as the highly experienced, reform-oriented contenders, María Fernanda Espinosa or Olara Otunnu, from further down the pack.

Alongside efforts to promote and preserve the legacy of UN Secretary-General António Guterres, including through delivery of his UN80 Initiative and the even more ambitious (and Member States-driven) Pact for the Future, the race to succeed Mr. Guterres has reached a new level of intensity. To ensure that his successor has sufficient time to prepare a proper transition before January 1, 2027, and that the selection process accords with widely shared international principles of transparent, open, and fair competition and a meaningful role for the General Assembly, it is important now to honor the vigorous stages to date (animated by a remarkable group of highly vetted candidates, who have courageously put themselves forward to lead the world body) and arrive soon at a broad, consensus-based decision — one that best prepares the UN, and the world it serves, for the myriad challenges ahead.

The article was first published by the Stimson Center.

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