

# The misunderstood Asian who helms the UN

Tommy Koh For The Straits Times  
Published 27 August 2016

**Confucian gentleman Ban Ki Moon is a mystery to Western media and has suffered for it, says the writer. He will be in Singapore to deliver the 8th Ho Rih Hwa Leadership in Asia Public Lecture on Monday.**

Ban Ki Moon is the eighth secretary-general of the United Nations. He was elected in 2006 and re-elected to serve a second five-year term in 2011. He will step down at the end of this year.

He is the second Asian to occupy this important post. The first was U Thant of Myanmar, who served as the third secretary-general, from 1961 to 1971.

The job of the secretary-general is a thankless one. If he is too independent-minded and too proactive, the permanent members of the Security Council would be unhappy. On the other hand, if he is too timid and passive, the wider UN membership and the international community would be unhappy. The challenge for any secretary-general is to balance the realities of Big Power politics with leadership, conviction and quiet diplomacy.

## FROM MR CHARISMA TO CONFUCIAN GENTLEMAN

Mr Ban Ki Moon succeeded Mr Kofi Annan, who was very popular and was often treated like a rock star by the media. Mr Annan is good-looking, speaks well and exudes charisma. He understands the importance of the media and cultivated it effectively. As a result, he has enjoyed good press.



ST ILLUSTRATION: MANNY FRANCISCO

In contrast, Mr Ban is a Confucian gentleman. He is humble, disciplined, hard-working and self-effacing. He does not go out of his way to cultivate the media. He believes that history will judge him on the basis of his performance and not on his popularity or his image in the press.

The Western media is largely unfamiliar with Asian civilisations. It does not understand the values and traditions of a Confucian gentleman. The Western media does not like Mr Ban and has written negatively about him from the moment he took office. For example, in March 2007, three months after he became secretary-general, the US magazine Newsweek had him on its cover with the caption: "Why This Man Will Fail!" That was very unfair but the Western media's negative narrative about him has persisted to this day. It has influenced the perception of many Western intellectuals towards Mr Ban.

## **KOREAN WORKAHOLIC**

The Koreans are a very hard-working people. Mr Ban is a workaholic. He is on duty 24/7 and his phone is never switched off. He will accept telephone calls from the world's leaders at any time of the day or night. He prepares himself conscientiously for every meeting that he chairs or attends. On some days, he makes as many as 10 speeches.

He has tried very hard to be helpful to the member states, especially when they are faced with adversity. Thus, when a member state is hit by a natural disaster, its call for help will always be answered by him. He went to Pakistan when it was struck by devastating floods, to Myanmar after Cyclone Nargis, to Haiti after the earthquake, to Chile, Sichuan, and so on. He wanted to express the UN's solidarity with the victims of the natural disaster, to mobilise the assistance of the UN system and to call for the help of the world's leaders.

**Mr Ban is humble, disciplined, hard-working and self-effacing. He does not go out of his way to cultivate the media. He believes that history will judge him on the basis of his performance and not on his popularity or his image in the press.**

Mr Ban is a good friend of Asean. He has expressed his friendship and respect for Asean by coming personally to meet our leaders at our annual summits. He has also been a good friend of the small states and their grouping called the Forum of Small States (FOSS). No previous secretary-general has given as much time and attention to the small states. FOSS honoured him on the occasion of its 25th anniversary as a "Friend of FOSS".

The image of Mr Ban in the media is that of a timid man. He is cautious, prudent and circumspect. He is, however, not lacking in conviction or courage. He believes passionately in the principles of the UN Charter. When he feels strongly that a political leader has committed egregious violations of the human rights of his people, he has not hesitated to speak out. He has, on several occasions, publicly called upon President Bashar al-Assad of Syria "to stop killing your own people". He has also not hesitated to criticise member states for their failure to comply with the decisions of the UN and their obligations under the UN Charter.

## **PEACEMAKER**

Mr Ban is a diplomat by profession and nature. He believes that diplomacy can be used to narrow the gap between parties to a dispute. He believes that when diplomacy is used in a timely manner, it can prevent war. He has used the office of secretary-general to convene meetings of leaders who are locked in disputes and to prevent the disputes from escalating into conflicts.

Mr Ban is good at quiet diplomacy. He does not take credit for his successes. In January 2008 there was a crisis in Gaza, following the Israeli invasion. The leaders of the world tried unsuccessfully to persuade the two parties to agree to a ceasefire. To break the impasse, Mr Ban came up with the idea of a sequential instead of a simultaneous ceasefire. He persuaded then Prime Minister (Ehud) Olmert of Israel to declare a unilateral ceasefire. This was followed by a ceasefire by Hamas. This has brought peace to Gaza.

What has Mr Ban achieved during his 10 years as the secretary-general of the UN? When asked by Tom Plate, the author of the book, *Conversations With Ban Ki Moon*, Mr Ban said that he wanted to be remembered for his work on global warming, gender equity and the reform of the management of the UN.

Mr Ban is convinced that global warming poses a dire threat to humanity. This issue has been on the top of his agenda. He has used his moral authority and the moral power of the UN to urge the international community to take collective action. He has spoken on this issue to all the leaders of the world. He has convened meetings, big and small, to forge a consensus. He played a significant role in Paris, working closely with France and other key stakeholders, to bring about a consensus. This is one of his achievements.

## **WOMEN LEADERS AT THE UN**

South Korea is a great success story. However, gender equity is not one of its achievements. It is, therefore, unusual for a Korean secretary-general to bring about a revolution at the UN on women.

When Mr Ban took office, he found very few women in senior positions in the UN Secretariat. He increased the number of women with the rank of under-secretary-general by 60 per cent and the number of women with the rank of assistant secretary-general by 40 per cent.

He recruited Ms Michelle Bachelet, the current President of Chile, and the former prime minister of New Zealand, Ms Helen Clark, to fill two senior positions. He appointed Ms Valerie Amos as the under-secretary-general for humanitarian affairs and emergency relief coordinator. He appointed a Singaporean, Dr Noeleen Heyzer, as the first woman to head the UN Economic and Social Commission for the Asia-Pacific. When asked whether he would like to see a woman succeed him as the ninth secretary-general, Mr Ban said it was high time a woman did so.

Reforming the management of the UN Secretariat and the UN system is a formidable task. It is hard to bring about change because of the vested interests of important member states and constituencies. They will oppose any change which threatens their interests.

There are many admirable and idealistic men and women who work for the UN. However, there are also some others who are there because of their political connections. Two distinguished Singaporeans, who had served in the secretariat, were victimised even though they had done no wrong. The system is riddled with politics and does not reflect the best international standard of good governance.

Mr Ban has had some small victories. He created the UN Ethics Office. He managed to merge four separate organisations to form UN Women: UN Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women. I regret to say that his legacy on this issue is not as impressive as on the other two issues.

As an Asian, I am proud of the records of U Thant and Mr Ban as the third and eighth secretaries- general of the UN respectively. Mr Ban can look back on his tenure with pride and satisfaction.

**The writer served as Singapore's Permanent Representative to the United Nations, in New York, from 1968 to 1971 and from 1974 to 1984.**

A version of this article appeared in the print edition of The Straits Times on August 27, 2016, with the headline 'The misunderstood Asian who helms the UN'.