



The Turtle Bay Runway, BY COLUM LYNCH | OCTOBER 5, 2010

The lights may have gone out at this year's U.N. General Assembly, but it's the glittering fashions -- even more than the orations -- that keep on shining.



When Hamid Karzai made his first appearance at the United Nations as Afghanistan's president in 2002, he seemed to impress New York's fashionistas as much as he did his fellow world leaders. "The most chic man in the world," declared designer Tom Ford after Karzai took to the U.N. podium dressed in his astrakhan fur hat and traditional silk *salwar kameez*.

No one would mistake the U.N.'s East Side digs for SoHo, of course, but the annual General Assembly session is always a reminder that a sense of the sartorial is an essential diplomatic skill: Clothing worn by dignitaries can be used to signal prestige to one's competitors, or underscore authenticity to one's own public. This year's get-together -- sandwiched as it was between the New York and Milan international fashion shows -- invited special scrutiny of world leaders' choices of formal wear.

A distinct emphasis on national heritage seemed to be the running theme. The Burmese foreign minister, Nyan Win, turned out in a pink ghaung paung -- a traditional national turban -- whereas in previous years he dressed in sensible business suits. Nigeria's newly minted president, Goodluck Jonathan, turned out in a black tribal shirt

suit and a wide-brimmed black hat from his native Niger Delta region. Further examples abounded in the halls of the United Nations. The fashion statements weren't coordinated, but, in many instances, they did appear to be a nod to upcoming national elections.

For other leaders from the developing world, fashion choices bore a more aggressive intent. Libyan strongman Muammar al-Qaddafi's flowing Bedouin robes, or Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's tie-less shirts, are intended to be symbols of defiance against would-be imperialists. Sudanese dignitaries, including former envoys Elfatih Erwa and Abdalhaleem Mohamad, donned billowing white robes with wrapped white turbans as debates over U.N. sanctions against their country heated up in the Security Council.

Of course, Western powers have their own traditional national costumes, but they are unlikely to make a debut at the United Nations. If German chancellors own lederhosen, they don't bring them to New York. Nor would a U.S. president sport a cowboy hat or farmer's overalls at the U.N. podium. Britain's former Prime Minister Gordon Brown, who hails from Scotland, reserved his kilt for private occasions, while donning Savile Row at the General Assembly. "I would never wear something called Irish national dress," Mary Robinson, the former Irish president, told **Foreign Policy**. "The gear that the West is wearing is basically now Western national dress."

Here's a photo exhibit of some of the most daring fashion statements at this year's U.N. General Assembly, and what they might mean.

(Above: Karzai at the 2008 General Assembly. Photographs courtesy of the United Nations.)



Burma may be one of the world's most repressive military regimes, with more than 2,000 reported political prisoners, including Nobel Peace Prize laureate Aung San Suu Kyi, but the junta's foreign minister, Nyan Win, chose to show his softer side, donning a pink Burmese turban, or khaung paung, and other native Burmese garb.

Traditionally, the khaung paung should be the same color as the *tike pon*, or overcoat, but Burma's senior leader, Than Shwe, has been instructing his senior officials

to wear the pink ghaung paung at state ceremonies. A recent article in the newspaper *Irrawaddy* discusses how Burma's top military rulers have been increasingly shedding their traditional military uniforms in an effort to pose as "civilians" in the run-up to the country's elections, slated for November. "No one has seen a group of military rulers dressed in such costumes in the past two decades, since the current regime staged a coup in 1988," writes the *Irrawaddy's* Kyaw Zwa Moe. UN Photo/Rick Bajornas



Nigerian President, Goodluck Jonathan, may look like he'd be perfectly comfortable playing the clarinet in a New York City jazz club with this black shirt and his trademark brimmed hat, but it's actually an outfit that reflects his ethnic roots from Nigeria's Niger Delta region.

Previous Nigerian presidents have also worn costumes representing their region and ethnic groups, including Olusegun Obasanjo, who wore the flowing gowns common among his Yoruba tribe. One Nigerian observer, called Eskimo, quoted in an opinion piece out of Lagos, Nigeria, suggested it was time to develop a truly national costume. "For a country of over 250 nationalities and 300 languages not to talk of religions, Eskimo desired that a neutral national dress code should be made into law." UN Photo/Devra Berkowitz



Sri Lanka's Sinhalese President, Mahinda Rajapaksa, led his country last year to a decisive military victory over one of the world's most rapacious separatist movements, the Tamil Tigers, in a 30-year war that caused the deaths of up to 30,000 civilian Tamils, prompting calls from human rights groups to conduct a commission of inquiry into war crimes. But Rajapaksa's flowing white gown, accessorized with a blood-red scarf, is designed to convey rural simplicity, not martial triumphalism. The *Guardian* newspaper **noted** that the scarf is the color of *kurakkan*, a rough millet grain eaten by poor farmers in southern Hambantota, Rajapaksa's home region. "Worn with the sarong and spotless white robe, Rajapaksa's look also implies a devout Buddhist faith," the *Guardian* wrote. "He came to power in 2005 on a vote from rural communities and with key backing from hardline Buddhist groups." UN Photo/Aliza Eliazarov



Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad will be best remembered for using this year's General Assembly speech to promote a conspiracy theory suggesting that elements within the U.S. government orchestrated the 9/11 attacks to defend Israeli interests in the Middle East. But Ahmadinejad's everyman look of unfitted suit coat and tie-less shirt are reflections of another part of his speech: the new world order that he imagines will emerge after the United States and its well-tailored European allies have fallen from grace and power.

"After about one hundred years of domination, the system of capitalism and the existing world order has proved to be unable to provide appropriate solutions to the problems of societies and thus is coming to an end," Ahmadinejad told the assembly. "The world needs to be governed by virtuous people like the Divine Prophets." Presumably, none of the prophets wore ties -- and neither have Iranian officials after Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini discouraged wearing them during Iran's 1979 Islamic Revolution. UN Photo/X



Evo Morales, president of Bolivia, wears his indigenous heritage on his sleeve, in this case a smart brown jacket, embroidered stripes, and the tie-less look that has become popular with critics of the West. Morales thundered in his speech about the ills of capitalism and the U.S.-sponsored "style of totalitarianism" that he claims has deprived Bolivians of their rights. On first glimpse, the Bolivian leader's jacket recalls the look of a marching-band conductor, but it's certainly more fetching than his signature outfit, the striped polo sweater.

A former impoverished llama herder and scrappy soccer player -- he kneed an opponent in the groin this week -- Morales has always eschewed fine Western tailoring. Beatriz Canedo Patiño, Bolivia's top fashion designer, crafted for Morales a baby-alpaca jacket embroidered with a pre-Hispanic design for his inauguration in 2006. It was a formal look, but one that drew from his cultural roots as an Aymara Indian -- and it became the model for the suit he wore to this year's General Assembly. "I wanted something Aymara and Aymara culture is very rich," Canedo Patiño told the *New York Times* in 2006. "I respect that he does not put on a tie. But there are things that he can do to dress for the world." UN Photo/Rick Bajornas



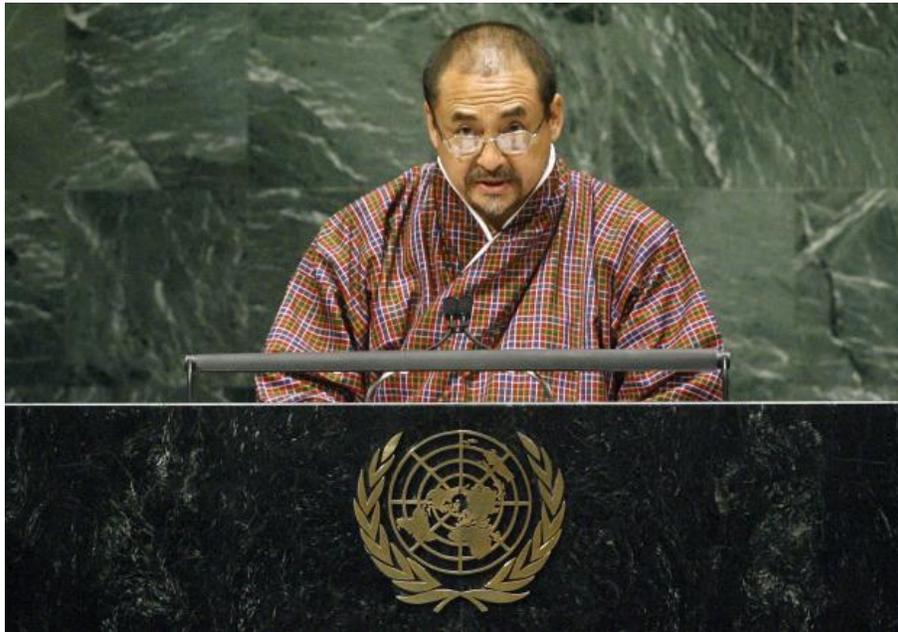
Sheikh Hasina, prime minister of Bangladesh, won praise in her homeland in September 2009, for ordering government officials to stop wearing suits, jackets, and ties -- a move that was apparently aimed at reducing air-conditioning demand at the height of an electricity shortage in the capital, Dhaka. But she also won praise for having struck a blow at the colonial legacy of Western garb.

"Wearing suits and stuffing our necks with a tie, in spite of ourselves, is a sartorial fashion we have borrowed from the British who were our colonial rulers," Maswood Alam Khan wrote in the *New Nation* newspaper last year. "Our ancestors enjoyed punishing themselves by mimicking the British style and fashion, which was seen as synonymous with being chic and modern. They wanted in vain to be 'brown sahibs!'"

Other observers say Hasina first began to wear modest long-sleeve blouses and black scarves and carry prayer beads in the 1990s to curry favor among devout Muslim voters. But the outfits have taken on far more colorful hues since she became leader. UN Photo/Devra Berkowitz



Liberian President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, Africa's first elected female head of state, is also the first lady of Liberian fashion, with a collection of traditional African headdresses that must require a modest warehouse to store. Sirleaf earned her moniker "Iron Lady" during her years of opposition to Liberian warlord and former president Charles Taylor -- which saw her do several stints in a Liberian jail. But she has also done time in Western and international institutions, including Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government, Citibank, the United Nations, and the World Bank. Sirleaf's clothing choices conceal her Western pedigree, drawing a connection to her Liberian birthplace. She also frequently dresses lavender, a traditional symbol of African royalty. UN Photo/Rick Bajornas



Daw Penjo, foreign secretary of Bhutan, dresses here in a stylish *gho*, a traditional Bhutanese outfit that could double as a sauna robe at a posh Manhattan hotel. The gho plays a central role in preserving the distinct identity of Penjo's tiny, landlocked country, which is surrounded by regional giants China and India. In Bhutan, civil servants, teachers, and other officials are required to wear the gho, though Penjo often wore a traditional two-piece suit when he served as Burma's U.N. ambassador. UN Photo/Rick Bajornas



For the sons of the Persian Gulf's oil-rich sheikhs, summer vacations in London are all about custom-tailored suits, fine food, and fleets of Ferraris, Maseratis, and Maybachs. But September in New York is all about tradition. Sheikh Nasser al-Mohammed al-Ahmed al-Sabah, prime minister of Kuwait, and other Gulf leaders turned out in their traditional white desert robes, or *thobes*, adorned with gold embroidery, and starched white headdresses, or keffiyehs, fastened with a black cord, called an *iqal*. But they eschewed the more recent fashion among younger Gulf men of rakishly turning up the edges of their keffiyehs, "cobra style" -- the closest thing to the popped-collar look popular with the country-club set in the Hamptons. UN Photo/Devra Berkowitz



Oman's Sayyid Badr bin Hamad al-Busaidi, state minister for foreign affairs of Oman, offers a break from the white robes worn by the Arab leaders of Kuwait, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia. Here, he shows off a traditional black and white Omani robe with a colorful turban, or *mussar*. Omani dignitaries typically leave their curved daggers, or *khanjar*, back home when they attend the General Assembly session. UN Photo/Aliza Eliazarov



Maite Nkoana-Mashabane, South African minister for international relations and cooperation, sports a brightly colored brown and yellow gown and a hairstyle that may remind some of black power icons like Angela Davis. The outfit was of a piece with Nkoana-Mashabane's speech, which tried to assert South Africa's role on the world stage, pressing for an end to the U.S. embargo against Cuba and demanding that the U.N. Security Council extend permanent membership to an African candidate, presumably South Africa. "It remains indeed a travesty of justice that Africa, which constitutes a large portion of the work of the council, is not represented in the permanent category," she said.

UN Photo/Devra Berkowitz



Salva Kiir Mayardit, leader of Southern Sudan, will not be allowed to address the U.N. membership at the General Assembly's green Italian-marble podium until -- make that if -- his country survives a politically fragile independence referendum, scheduled to take place in January. But it's likely that he would wear his ubiquitous black cowboy hat, which he dons for most high-level meetings (including this official sit-down with U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon last month).

The last time Kiir appeared hatless in public was in 2006 at the White House. It was during that visit that U.S. President George W. Bush -- whose administration directed negotiations that led to the 2005 pact which set the stage for Southern Sudan's independence -- presented Kiir with the outsized hat. He has rarely taken it off since. In his final White House meeting with Bush in 2009, Kiir said Southern Sudan "will never forget him for what he has done for them." UN Photo/Eskinder Debebe



Mamadou Tangara, minister for foreign affairs of Gambia, dresses here in a golden-brown traditional Gambian kaftan. Tangara's address to the General Assembly reflected the grievances shared by many poor countries that feel excluded from the world's main decision-making bodies, from the U.N. Security Council to the G-20. It is "high time to stop consigning Africa to a fate of second-class membership at the United Nations," he said.

UN Photo/Aliza Eliazarov



Mouctar Ouane, Mali's minister for foreign affairs and international cooperation, almost always wore a business suit when he served as ambassador to the United Nations from 1995 to 2002. But as foreign minister, he is rarely seen without his outsized *boubou* and the embroidered skull cap worn by many African Muslims. UN Photo/Ky Chung



Not all tie-less world leaders are allied against the West. José Ramos-Horta, Nobel Peace Prize laureate and president of East Timor, took issue with Ahmadinejad's 9/11 remarks. "What President Ahmadinejad said in this forum in regard to the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center was an obscenity," said Ramos-Horta, dressed in a snazzy gray Nehru jacket. "He went too far as he has done many times before in this assembly and in other fora, as when he questioned the facts of the Holocaust."