

ADDIS ABABA — A high-stakes diplomatic gamble by the African Union chairmanship has backfired, leaving former Senegalese President Macky Sall's bid for United Nations Secretary-General in a state of "limbo" after a massive procedural mutiny by 20 member states.

The African Union (AU) Commission confirmed on March 27, 2026, that a draft decision to endorse Sall was formally rejected. The collapse of the candidacy marks a "rare procedural rupture" within the 55-member bloc, exposing deep fractures that link the halls of diplomacy to the escalating military conflict in the Great Lakes region.

The crisis was triggered by Burundian President Évariste Ndayishimiye, who assumed the rotating AU chairmanship in February 2026. On March 2, Burundi's Permanent Mission in New York notified the UN General Assembly that it was nominating Sall as the official AU candidate, a move that reportedly took other African heads of state by "surprise" as no prior consultation had occurred.

Reports indicate that, in an attempt to secure retrospective approval, Ndayishimiye utilized a "silence procedure," giving member states an "unreasonably short" 24-hour deadline to object. The mechanism allows a decision to pass if no objections are raised, but the maneuver was quickly condemned as a "diktat."

"Everything was wrong from day one," said Rwanda's Foreign Minister Olivier Nduhungirehe, describing the process as a "gross breach of procedure" and a "flawed" attempt to force an endorsement.

Willy Nyamitwe, the Burundi Permanent Representative to the AU, has rejected Rwanda's criticism as "regrettable in both tone and substance," arguing that it misrepresented established procedures while "unnecessarily personalizing" a routine process.

On the Silence Procedure, Burundi further maintains that the mechanism is an "established African Union decision-making tool used on numerous occasions". Nyamitwe specifically stated that the "use of the silence procedure is neither new nor irregular" and that the Chairperson acted "in line with his mandate".

Nyamitwe asserted that "the fact that some Member States chose to break the silence does not constitute a crisis," but instead demonstrates that the AU's system is functioning. He warned that claims of rules violations were "exaggerated" and

suggested that differences should be addressed in a “spirit of collegiality and mutual respect”.

The diplomatic fallout is inextricably tied to the deteriorating security environment on the DRC-Burundi border. In December 2025, Rwanda-backed M23 rebels briefly captured the strategic city of Uvira, forcing thousands to flee into Burundi and prompting Gitega to shut its borders.

The U.S. Treasury added to the tension on March 2, 2026, the same day as Sall’s nomination, by imposing sanctions on the Rwanda Defence Force (RDF) and senior commanders for their “direct operational involvement” in the capture of Uvira. Rwanda has utilized the AU procedural dispute to strike back, accusing the Burundian chairmanship of tarnishing the continental body.

Perhaps the most significant blow to Sall’s international ambitions came from his home country. The current Senegalese administration, led by President Bassirou Diomaye Faye, explicitly distanced itself from the bid, stating it was “at no stage” involved in the initiative.

Dakar’s refusal to back Sall is rooted in lingering domestic tensions. The former president faces allegations of overseeing “violent crackdowns” during his final years in office, as well as accusations from an IMF team that his government misrepresented budget deficits and public debt between 2019 and 2023.

As the race to succeed António Guterres continues, Sall remains a registered candidate but enters the April interactive dialogues at the UN without a unified continental mandate.

Regional experts warn that the failure to coordinate an African position could weaken the continent’s leverage. While Sall maintains his quest, he faces stiff competition from other official nominees, including; Rafael Grossi (Argentina): Current IAEA Director General, Michelle Bachelet (Chile): Former President and UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (though support is reportedly waning after Chile withdrew its backing), and Rebeca Grynspan (Costa Rica): Secretary-General of UNCTAD.

Interactive dialogues for the candidates are scheduled for the week of April 20, where the world’s diplomats will weigh vision statements against the backdrop of Africa’s internal discord.