

Former Senegalese president Macky Sall has withdrawn from the race to become the next United Nations secretary-general, leaving Uganda's Olara Otunnu as the only African candidate still in the contest.

Sall announced his decision on Saturday, October 17, a day after a confidential UN Security Council straw poll exposed the difficulties facing candidates seeking support from the world's major powers.

Sall was nominated by Burundi, but his candidacy had also faced controversy over the African Union's endorsement process. This could provide additional context for the political significance of his withdrawal.

He said the results showed a preference for a candidate from Latin America and the Caribbean, possibly a woman.

"Since the beginning of the process, the results of the various straw polls have indicated a preference for a candidate from Latin America and the Caribbean, possibly a woman," Sall said in a statement issued from Marrakech, Morocco.

"I have decided to withdraw my candidacy for the position," he added.

Sall said he had consulted Burundi's President Évariste Ndayishimiye, who sponsored his candidacy, and Senegalese President Bassirou Diomaye Faye before making the decision. He expressed hope that his withdrawal would help the Security Council agree on a candidate to succeed António Guterres, whose term ends on December 31, 2026.

Otunnu faces uphill task

Sall's exit leaves Otunnu, a former UN under-secretary-general, as Africa's sole remaining candidate. But the Ugandan diplomat faces a difficult path to the top UN job.

The latest straw poll gave Otunnu four "encourage" votes, 10 "discourage" votes and one "no opinion". Sall also received 10 votes against his candidacy before withdrawing.

Otunnu's latest tally marked a slight improvement from the October 7 ballot, when he received three "encourage" votes and 12 "discourage" votes. Even so, the results indicate that he has yet to build sufficient support within the council.

A candidate needs at least nine votes from the 15-member Security Council to be recommended for the post. Crucially, the candidate must also avoid opposition from any of the five permanent members — the United States, China, Russia, Britain and France — all of which hold veto powers.

Sall's withdrawal does not guarantee that his supporters will back Otunnu. The Ugandan candidate must still win over council members, including the permanent powers whose opposition could block his nomination.

Latin American candidates in front

Costa Rica's Rebeca Grynspan emerged as the leading contender in the latest poll, securing nine "encourage" votes, five "discourage" votes and one "no opinion".

Grynspan heads the UN Conference on Trade and Development. Argentina's Rafael Grossi, director-general of the International Atomic Energy Agency, and Guyana's Carolyn Rodrigues-Birkett, a former foreign minister and current UN ambassador, were also among the leading contenders.

However, the latest ballot showed that none of the seven candidates had secured the backing of all five permanent members. Grynspan, Grossi and Rodrigues-Birkett each received two "discourage" votes from permanent members, according to diplomats familiar with the confidential results.

The figures leave the council without a clear consensus candidate, despite the stronger showing by the Latin American contenders.

The region is widely considered to have a strong claim to the position under the UN's informal practice of rotating the post among geographical regions. There is also growing pressure to appoint a woman for the first time in the organisation's more than 80-year history.

Only one Latin American, Peru's Javier Pérez de Cuéllar, has previously served as secretary-general, from 1982 to 1991.

Trump administration leaves door open

The lack of consensus has raised the possibility that new candidates could enter the race, with the administration of US President Donald Trump signalling reservations about the current field.

US Ambassador to the UN Mike Waltz said Washington wanted a secretary-general who would focus on peace and security and help reform an organisation it believes has taken on too many responsibilities.

Waltz and Russia's UN ambassador, Vassily Nebenzia, have both left open the possibility of additional candidates entering the contest.

Names mentioned by diplomats as possible contenders include Nickolay Mladenov, the high representative for Gaza under the US-backed Board of Peace; Lana Nusseibeh, the United Arab Emirates' minister of state for foreign affairs; and Feridun Hadi Sinirlioğlu, secretary-general of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe.

However, the Trump administration has not formally announced a new candidate of its own. The possibility of fresh entrants reflects the continuing deadlock rather than a confirmed US nomination.

Any new contender would face the same challenge as the existing candidates: securing at least nine votes in the Security Council while avoiding a veto from any of its five permanent members.

Sall calls for greater African influence

Despite leaving the race, Sall urged African countries to continue pressing for a greater role in global governance.

"Africa, which is at the heart of peace, security and development challenges, must also continue to make its voice heard and pursue its efforts to occupy its rightful place in global governance," he said.

Sall governed Senegal from 2012 to 2024. He said his candidacy had been driven by a desire to place nearly four decades of public service at the disposal of the United Nations.

He also called for changes to the organisation's working methods as it confronts conflicts, geopolitical rivalries and economic pressures.

"I wish every success to the person who will be called upon to assume the high responsibilities of secretary-general of the United Nations," he said.

The Security Council is expected to continue consultations and informal voting before recommending a candidate to the 193-member UN General Assembly for appointment. The next secretary-general is due to take office on January 1, 2027.