

The Democratic Republic of Congo and Rwanda are stepping into a quiet but high-stakes diplomatic contest over the future leadership of the Organisation internationale de la Francophonie (OIF), the global body representing French-speaking nations.

Rwanda has formally announced its intention to back Louise Mushikiwabo for a third term as OIF Secretary-General. The election is set to take place during the Francophonie Summit in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, in November 2026. In an interview with *Jeune Afrique*, Rwandan Foreign Minister Olivier Nduhungirehe said the decision follows strong support from several OIF member states during last year's ministerial conference in Kigali.

Ms Mushikiwabo, Rwanda's former foreign minister, has led the OIF since 2019. She is widely regarded as a strong contender, with backing from both African and non-African member states. Supporters highlight her experience, institutional knowledge, and record of reform within the organization. Critics, however, have questioned whether a third term aligns with the spirit of leadership renewal within the OIF.

Meanwhile, officials in Kinshasa, Africa's largest French-speaking nation, have made it clear that the DR Congo plans to put forward its own rival candidate for the OIF leadership. Diplomatic commentators have said the move sets the stage for a potentially tense contest, with one observer saying the contest "Goes beyond a simple leadership race. It unfolds against a backdrop of an already strained regional situation, driven by ongoing conflict in eastern DR Congo and long-standing accusations between the two countries over support for armed groups and destabilization efforts,"

The broader context of the rivalry is shaped by longstanding security disputes in eastern Congo. Rwanda accuses the DRC of supporting the Forces démocratiques de libération du Rwanda (FDLR), a militia composed in part of former perpetrators of the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi, while Kinshasa has accused Rwanda of backing the M23 and the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), both armed groups active in eastern Congo. These mutual accusations have intensified the political tension and added another layer of complexity to the OIF leadership contest.

Mushikiwabo's bid for a third term has sparked debate among member states, particularly over whether it aligns with the OIF's norms and the need to bring fresh leadership into the organization. For Rwanda, the nomination represents continuity

in a “reform-oriented approach” and reinforces its position as a country capable of holding senior roles in major international institutions. Kigali dismisses Congolese objections as politically motivated, arguing they aim to internationalize a bilateral dispute rather than engage with Mushikiwabo’s performance.

From Kinshasa’s perspective, continued Rwandan leadership could give Kigali an additional platform to enhance its international image. Observers suggest that the Congolese initiative is part of a broader effort to assert influence within multilateral institutions, using the Francophonie as a diplomatic arena alongside forums like the UN Security Council and the African Union.

The contest exposes divisions within the OIF itself. Some member states favour stability and fear turning the organization into a political battleground, while others call for open debate on the limits of politicization and the organization’s role in promoting governance, development, and security. European members, particularly France who’re yet to make a comment, now face a delicate balancing act, managing an Africa-Africa dispute in a space long regarded as an extension of French cultural and political influence.

As the election approaches, the race for the OIF Secretary-Generalship has become more than a competition for a post. It highlights the depth of the diplomatic rift between Kinshasa and Kigali, shifting the dispute from indirect military and regional tensions into multilateral diplomatic arenas. Political analysts note that both capitals are expected to intensify lobbying and negotiation in the months ahead, with the outcome likely to reshape internal balances within the Francophonie and test the organization’s ability to remain neutral amid member conflicts.