

South Africa is battling Morocco to lead UN rights body, in a rare African split

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A forum of the UN Human Rights Council in November 2023 led by Iran, leading some members to boycott the session. (Photo by Siavosh Hosseini/SOPA Images/LightRocket via Getty Images)

South Africa is fighting Morocco over control of the UN Human Rights Council - which is rarely contested.

SA says Morocco violated rights in Western Sahara, and so can not run the council.

The vote, due this week, looks too close to call.

South Africa and Morocco are at loggerheads over the presidency of the United Nations' top human rights body ahead of a vote on Wednesday, with SA saying Rabat has committed violations in Western Sahara and has no credibility to lead the body.

For only the second time in the UN Human Rights Council's 17-year history, it has been left without a president at the start of the year and it will select one in a secret ballot.

It is a rare public dispute in the African group whose turn it is to lead the 47-member council. It normally strives to take decisions as a bloc.

Diplomats say the result is too close to call for the annual presidency - a prestigious but mostly symbolic post that can help turbo-charge the political careers of ambassadors.

Morocco claims sovereignty over Western Sahara, where the Algeria-backed Polisario Front is seeking independence. It has denied allegations of rights abuses against its opponents there.

As part of a broader strategy, Morocco has been courting countries, including African neighbours, to build up support for its policies for the former Spanish territory.

But it has not won over South Africa which helped to organise an event to promote self-determination for the Sahrawi people in Geneva last year.

South Africa's ambassador Mxolisi Nkosi told Reuters that its record of overcoming apartheid and its reputation as a bridge-builder made it a strong candidate.

In contrast, he said Morocco was the "antithesis of what the council stands for".

"For a country with all these challenges to aspire to be the face of Human Rights Council and, God forbid if they get elected, this will shatter whatever shred of legitimacy this council ever had."

Morocco's candidate ambassador Omar Zniber said Rabat had received African Union backing months ago as the sole candidate and that it was a law-abiding country that had made significant progress on human rights. He dismissed criticism of its Western Sahara policies as "lies and propaganda".

The council meets several times a year in Geneva. It is the only intergovernmental global body to protect human rights worldwide and can increase scrutiny of countries' human rights records and authorise probes.