Managing Instability in Senegal

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Alicia Ramos Garcia



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Managing Instability in Senegal: The Casamance Conflict as One of Africa's Longest-Running Low-Intensity Conflicts

Introduction: Senegal's Reputation as a Success Story

Located on the coast of West Africa, Senegal stands out as one of the few countries never to have experienced a military coup. As opposed to the Coup Belt countries, Senegal has experienced political stability

with peaceful political transitions, continuous levels of economic growth, and international competitiveness (Evans, 2002). Notably, the Senegalese economy was the fourth largest in West Africa in 2019 (Randy Aikins, 2026). Although the COVID-19 pandemic imposed hardships upon the strong economic prospects, the recovery was fast, with estimations that GDP will more than quadruple by 2043 (Randy Aikins, 2026). A factor for such success is correlated with the Emerging Senegal Plan (PSE), a long-term development strategy introduced in 2014 by former president Macky Sall, aimed at infrastructure investment and achieving sustainable economic emergence by 2035 (Sall, 2019). Notwithstanding, Senegal faces a series of structural challenges. Increasing environmental hardships combined with a highly informal economic sector and elevated unemployment levels among the youth, are some of the pull factors for high emigration rates (Randy Aikins, 2026).

While these structural challenges are actively researched and receive the cooperation between Senegalese actors and international development organisations, less attention is drawn to the Casamance conflict. However known for its peaceful stability, for over 40 years, a low-intensity conflict in the Casamance area, within the Ziguinchor region, persists, leaving – particularly the southern region of Senegal – at a situation of "neither war nor peace" (Lemmi & Simoncelli, 2023). Since 1982, the separatist movement 'Mouvement des Forces Démocratiques de Casamance' (MFDC) has been demanding independence from the Senegalese government in the shape of an armed conflict that is one of the longest low-intensity war in the continent (Ngom & Sene, 2021; Lemmi & Simoncelli, 2023). Consequently, while the underreported nature of the conflict makes precise figures difficult to quantify, there have been over 5,000 deaths, and tens of thousands of displacements (European Institute for International Relations, 2023). Since the beginning of the conflict, there have been numerous attempts at peace negotiations, the latest peace agreement signed in February 2025, but questions remain as to when the conflict will ever fully conclude (ADF, 2025). The Casamance conflict case study is a delicate one as, although it doesn't have the same intensity of violence seen in neighbouring countries, nor demanded large-scale humanitarian or international intervention, it nevertheless remains unresolved (Evans, 2002). This article will research why the Casamance low-intensity conflict has persisted over four decades rather than escalating or resolving.

Background of the Casamance Conflict

To understand the conflict, there are a number of geographic, historical, ethnic, religious, and ideological characteristics of key relevance. Firstly, Senegal's configuration is distinctive as Casamance is separated from the rest of the country, standing just under the Gambia, and above Guinea-Bissau.

Secondly, although Senegal is a former French colony, the country was first colonized by Portugal in the 15th century (Fall, 2010). French colonial power strengthened in the region during the mid-19th century, pushing the Portuguese southwards and into Guinea-Bissau (Fall, 2010). The colonial presence of the Portuguese in Casamance was longer than in the rest of the country. Consequently, Casamance was administered differently from 1854 to 1939, and only integrated with the rest of the country shortly before independence in 1960 (Charpy, 1994, as cited in Fall, 2010).

Furthermore, the country has a wide diversity of ethnic groups, constituting (among others) the Wolof (44% of Senegal's population), Fula, Serer, and the Joola (4% of Senegal's population) (McGregor, 2021; Hitch, 2023). Moreover, 97.2% of the Senegalese population is Muslim (CIA World Factbook, 2023). Nevertheless, in the southern region of the country, right under the Gambia, the Joola ethnic group (also referred to as Diola) predominates – stemming from the Gabou Empire – with a majority Christian population (Sax, 1997). Such differences consequently led to resistance from the Casamançais against the Senegal building process post independence. For instance, unification policies implemented by the first presidencies such as promoting the use of one language was faced with rejection, seen as "discriminatory or elitist" (Fall, 2010). Additionally, further social and economic grievances of the Casamance people added onto the desire for independence, and the containment of the conflict (Collier & Hoeffler, 2004; Fall, 2010).

Applying Theory to the Conflict and the Role of Stakeholders

There has been a theoretical shift in the field of international relations regarding the understanding of war. 'Old wars' refers to conventional, state-vs-state wars driven by state-defined political goals and with the aim of defeating the adversary's military (Rice, 1990; Kaldor, 2013). Many of the wars that developed after 1945 are contrastingly referred to as 'new wars' or 'wars of the third kind', and categorized as conflicts within states, often as a consequence of the post-colonial state creation (Rice, 1990; Kaldor, 2013). The Protracted Social Conflict (PSC) theory introduced by Edward Azar in the early 1970s develops from this new understanding, and further studies its persistence. The PSC theory states that violent and prolonged conflicts within states stem from a deprivation of basic needs such as "security, recognition and acceptance, fair access to political institutions and economic participation" (Azar, n.d. as cited in Ramsbotham, 2005). Additionally, there are four identifiable variables for conflict emergence and escalation within states according to this theory which will be consequently analyzed in application to the long-lasting contentment of the Casamance case (Avruch, 2020). In so doing, the role of the different stakeholders in the conflict will be further delved into.

Communal Content

Firstly, Azar identifies communal content – or the lack thereof – mainly in 'multi-communal' state compositions, as a characteristic to PSC (Ramsbotham, 2005). In Casamance, these dynamics are deeply rooted in the colonial history of Casamance which developed differently to the rest of the country. Consequently, deep identity clashes were revealed, ranging from the mentioned ethnic, cultural, and religious differences. The creation of statehood during the 1960s received resistance when aiming to impose common policies upon different communal groups (Fall, 2010).

Importantly, the identification of Casamance as different from the rest of Senegal was actively shaped during the colonial period. French local administrators and traders fostered the idea of a unified and distinct Casamance identity, voicing that there was territorial, geographical, and human coherence (Awenengo-Dalberto, 2008; Ndiaye, 2015). Demanding autonomy of this region from the rest of Senegal stemmed from political and economic motivations, not nationalist ideologies (Awenengo-Dalberto, 2008). As the governors saw no advantage in this project, they instead focused on unifying the administrative system, but nonetheless left a legacy of different practices and perceptions, and a lasting imprint on local identity formations (Awenengo-Dalberto, 2008).

Post-independence, efforts to consolidate a unified Senegalese nation continued under President Léopold Sédar Senghor. To mitigate the possible perceived threat that ethnic nationalism could pose, processes often described as "Wolofisation" were incentivised through policies aimed at fostering national cohesion (Sax, 1997). For Casamance, however, these strategies were often perceived as political and cultural domination (Collier & Hoeffler, 2004; Awenengo-Dalberto, 2008). The grievances that were consequently formed illustrate how communal divisions deeply rooted in history can become a central driver of conflict persistence in PSC contexts.

Human Needs

Secondly, deprivation of human needs further motivates PSC (Ramsbotham, 2005). These human needs range from basic survival needs to inequalities regarding equal access between ethnic groups to economic or political opportunities, which, if perceived as unequal, can lead to resentment and grievances.

Educational inequality is a notable example. Before and during the early post-colonial period, many Joolas were forced to migrate north to pursue the colonial school system in order to improve their professional prospects (Awenengo-Dalberto, 2008). Only during the 1980s were there construction for schools beyond the primary level, and such a delay fueled a sentiment of marginalization as aspiring civil servants found themselves confined to lower-level positions (Awenengo-Dalberto, 2008).

This argument, however, is contested. During the presidency of Senghor, there were efforts to increase representation of the terroirs that didn't make up the four primary communes which concentrated the administrative capital (Dakar, Rufisque, Gorée and Saint-Louis) (McGregor, 2021; Ngom &

Sene, 2021). Regionalist parties were set up to communicate the demands of the terroirs to the capital. The MFDC was originally the name of the regional party representing Casamance, initially set up in 1947, and much before it started serving as an independence movement (Sene, 2018, as cited in Ngom & Sene, 2021). The early prominence of the MFDC suggests that efforts by the Senegalese government to integrate all regions and reduce marginalization sentiments did exist.

The persistence of grievances, therefore, is attributed both to the State and to the independence movement. The relatively egalitarian organizational structure of the Joola, rooted in its identity and culture, contrasted with the hierarchical structure of the Senegalese state, potentially discouraging the Joola from participating in the political system (Fall, 2010). This resistant relationship to cooperate from both sides highlights an important dynamic about PSC. Deprivation of human needs in PSC contexts is not only material but relational and perceptual, where a mutually reinforced sense of exclusion leads to the containment of the conflict. With increasing climate threats throughout Senegal and particularly Casamance due to its geographical location, a lack of political cooperation and resource distribution further enhances Casamançais grievances (Ngom & Sene, 2021; European Institute for International Relations, 2023).

Government and the States Role

A third variable to PSC is the role of the government in meeting the basic human needs of its population (Ramsbotham, 2005). Although representation of the Casamançais faced challenges prior to the rebellion formation, the Senegalese governments' response has evolved, reflecting the different strategies rather than a consistent resolution framework over time. The first response under President Abdou Diouf was characterized by repression, prioritizing security responses (Fall, 2010). However, Abdoulaye Wade followed with a more moderate strategy through discussion and negotiation-based approaches (Fall, 2010). Macky Sall's introduction of the PES attempted to mitigate the conflict and address the underlying socio-economic grievances through development-oriented strategies, investing on infrastructure, agriculture, and reintegration programmes (Sall, 2019). This last strategy remains ongoing.

However, with time, resolving the conflict diplomatically becomes increasingly complicated. A critical turning point was the death of the first leader of the MFDC, Abbé Diamacoune (Ngom & Sene, 2021). The MFDC became fragmented into the division under three known rebel leaders; Salif Sadio, César Atoute Badiate, and Mamadou Nkrumah Sané (Ngom & Sene, 2021). These factions' approaches and objectives all differ (Ndiaye, 2015). Herein is a key reason to the prolongation of the conflict, as any peace agreement now requires the cooperation of the different fragmented groups. Senegal's evolving but incomplete strategies combined with rebel fragmentation, actively sustain the conflict rather than resolve it.

International Linkages

Lastly, Azar identified international linkages as a last variable to PSC, highlighting that an economic dependency and client relationships on the international economic system leads to a state having to neglect the needs of communal groups, instead serving those of the state to reach agreements with international systems (Ramsbotham, 2005). The international community has not been largely involved in the Casamance conflict. While regional actors such as Guinea-Bissau and The Gambia have played more tangible roles, broader international engagement has remained limited and indirect through development projects and humanitarian support, particularly through UN agencies and NGOs operating in sectors such as education, agriculture, and refugee aid (Evans, 2002; Thakur, 2023).

At the regional level, the identity of Casamançais resonates with that of the countries it is situated between. Indeed, some governments such as the Military Junta led by General Ansumana Manneh, in Guinea Bissau reportedly aided the MFDC campaigns (Minteh, 2009, as cited in Fall, 2010). Equally, President Yahya Jammeh from The Gambia has been linked to armament provision and the facilitation of smuggling routes (Fall, 2010; McGregor, 2021). These forms of involvement highlight how a combination of aligned pre-colonial ethnic identities and weak border security controls can sustain insurgent capacity. The cooperation – or lack of – from these two strategic state partnerships, however, largely depends on the head of state, as the election in Guinea-Bissau of President Umaro Sissoco Embaló, an ally of the former President Macky Sall, enabled cooperation agreements between the two countries (McGregor, 2021)

Equally, Senegal's position as a growing economy and increasingly competitive ambitions appear to incentivize a "soft power" approach to the conflict, which following Azar's PSC theory, could aim to preserve its international stance and investment climate. Joseph S. Nye's (1990) "soft power" approach could explain why the conflict has not escalated, as national military action could trigger increasing violence. However, such a military approach is also attributed to Senegal's military culture of professionalism based on democratic values and initiatives for trust-building programs to incentivise collaboration between civil society, the military, and the government, such as the 2019-launched Justice Security Dialogue (JSD) (Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2023; Baba Ndiaye, 2026).

Nevertheless, as the conflict continues, a war economy has most recently developed as rebels fund the war through a rosewood and cannabis trafficking business (Ndiaye, 2015; McGregor, 2021; Lemmi & Simoncelli, 2023). These activities enable the rebel groups to sustain themselves, thus entrenching the conflict and further distancing the capacity to reach resolution. Consequently, international linkages may offer an explanation as to why Senegal restricts itself to diplomatic strategies with the MFDC rather than taking stricter military action, even though it means running the risk of losing control over the development of the conflict.

Conclusion

Senegal has been identified as one of the most economically developed countries in Africa, particularly given ongoing infrastructure projects that attract international investment. Nevertheless, the southern region of the country has been facing one of Africa's longest low-intensity conflicts in the continent. This article relies on the modern understanding of conflicts as 'wars of the third kind' which diverges from the more notorious 'old wars', to introduce Edward Azar's understanding of Protracted Social Conflicts (Azar, n.d. as cited in Ramsbotham, 2005). By applying the four variables leading to PSC, the case study of the Casamance conflict driven by the MFDC movement in search of independence from Senegal has been examined to understand why it has persisted for over four decades rather than escalating or resolving.

While the underreported nature of this case study challenges possible policy recommendations, this article highlights that to prevent future contentment it is crucial to focus on the roots of the conflict. Firstly, international displaced people who are unable to return given the presence of landmines require the assistance of neighbouring states, international organizations, and the continuation of civil society and government collaboration (Evans, 2002; McGregor, 2021). Second, sustained investment in Casamance should prioritize security alongside education and economic opportunities to tackle the roots of the grievances. Lastly, given the fragmentation and increasing war economy of the MFDC, regional negotiations with the cooperation of The Gambia and Guinea-Bissau are crucial to implement effective controls against trafficking networks that finance and sustain the conflict.

This article acknowledges the constraints on data availability to report about the Casamance conflict, while also suggesting that future research could usefully examine in greater depth the role of civil society as a unique and increasingly relevant stakeholder in the resolution of the conflict (Foucher, 2007).

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