

SECESSIONIST CONFLICT IN THE CASAMANCE REGION OF SENEGAL AND THE ROLE OF ECOWAS IN SOLVING THE CONFLICT

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Abstract

The secessionist conflict in the Casamance region of Senegal has been a significant challenge to national unity and regional stability in West Africa. This article explores the origins of the conflict, the role of the Movement of Democratic Forces of Casamance (MFDC), and the intervention efforts by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) in resolving the crisis. Using a qualitative research approach, the study examines the historical, socio-political, and economic factors driving the Casamance secessionist movement and evaluates ECOWAS's mediation and peacekeeping efforts. Post-colonial theory serves as the theoretical framework to understand the root causes of the conflict, emphasizing the colonial legacy of arbitrary borders and ethnic divisions. The findings highlight the complexity of the conflict and the limited success of ECOWAS's interventions, suggesting that a more comprehensive approach is necessary for long-term peace and stability in the region.

Keywords: Secessionist Conflicts, Casamance Region, Conflict Resolution, ECOWAS

Introduction

The Casamance region of Senegal, nestled in the southern part of the country and separated from the rest of Senegal by The Gambia, has been the epicenter of one of West Africa's most enduring secessionist conflicts. This conflict, which erupted in the early 1980s, has its roots in deep-seated grievances over marginalization, economic neglect, and cultural disconnection from the central government. At the forefront of this struggle is the Movement of Democratic Forces of Casamance (MFDC), a separatist group that has consistently advocated for the independence of Casamance, citing historical, ethnic, and economic injustices as the basis of their demands.

The impact of the conflict on the Casamance region has been devastating. Over the years, the conflict has resulted in significant human suffering, including loss of lives, displacement of populations, and the destruction of communities. Families have been uprooted, livelihoods destroyed, and the once-vibrant agricultural economy of Casamance has been severely disrupted. Beyond the immediate human toll, the conflict poses broader challenges to Senegal's stability and the security of the West African region. It has created an enduring sense of instability, attracting international attention and prompting calls for a sustainable resolution.

Despite numerous attempts by the Senegalese government to address the crisis through negotiations, military interventions, and economic incentives, peace in Casamance remains elusive. While periodic ceasefires and dialogue have brought moments of hope, they have often been short-lived, with violence reigniting due to unresolved grievances. The MFDC's persistence reflects the complexity of the conflict, underscoring that it is not merely a matter of political dissent but also a deeply rooted struggle tied to historical injustices and systemic inequalities.

In this context, regional organizations like the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) have sought to play a role in addressing the Casamance conflict. ECOWAS, established with the aim of fostering economic integration and political stability among its member states, has expanded its mandate over the years to include conflict resolution. Its involvement in Casamance has ranged from diplomatic mediation to broader peacekeeping efforts aimed at restoring stability.

However, the effectiveness of ECOWAS's interventions remains a topic of debate, with questions about whether its approaches adequately address the underlying causes of the conflict or merely aim to contain its symptoms.

This study embarks on an in-depth investigation of the Casamance secessionist conflict, tracing its historical roots and examining the role of ECOWAS in resolving the crisis. Employing a qualitative research approach, the study relies on archival records, with key stakeholders, and a comprehensive review of existing literature to provide a nuanced understanding of the conflict. The research is guided by post-colonial theory, a critical framework that situates the conflict within the broader legacies of colonialism.

Post-colonial theory offers valuable insights into how the colonial past continues to shape contemporary realities in Africa. In the case of Casamance, it highlights how colonial boundaries, governance structures, and economic systems laid the groundwork for the region's marginalization and subsequent unrest. By applying this theoretical lens, the study seeks to uncover the deeper dynamics of the Casamance conflict, exploring how colonial legacies have not only fueled secessionist aspirations but also complicated efforts at conflict resolution.

Therefore, this study underscores the importance of understanding the Casamance conflict as more than a localized struggle for autonomy. It is a conflict rooted in historical injustices and perpetuated by structural inequalities that demand comprehensive and inclusive approaches to resolution. Through an exploration of the role of ECOWAS and the application of post-colonial theory, this research contributes to a broader understanding of the Casamance conflict and its implications for regional peace and stability in West Africa.

Conceptual Clarifications

To thoroughly understand the topic, *Secessionist Conflicts in the Casamance Region of Senegal and the Role of ECOWAS in Conflict Resolution*, it is essential to elucidate the key concepts embedded within it. Each term carries distinct significance that shapes the discourse surrounding this complex issue.

Secessionist Conflicts: Secessionist conflicts arise when a particular group or region seeks to sever ties with an existing state, aspiring to establish an independent political entity. Such conflicts are often fueled by historical grievances, ethnic differences, economic disparities, or cultural alienation. In the Casamance region, the secessionist conflict has been driven by a combination of these factors, primarily spearheaded by the Movement of Democratic Forces of Casamance (MFDC), which has sought independence from Senegal since the 1980². The secessionist conflict in the Casamance region, spearheaded by the Movement of Democratic Forces of Casamance (MFDC) since the 1980s, has been fueled by a complex interplay of historical, cultural, economic, and political factors. Historically, the region's integration into Senegal was marked by colonial-era decisions that ignored the distinct identity of Casamance. During French colonial rule, the region was treated differently, with limited integration into the administrative framework of what became Senegal. This historical marginalization laid the groundwork for resentment against the central government after independence.

Culturally and ethnically, the Casamance region is predominantly inhabited by the Jola people, who feel distinct from the majority Wolof ethnic group dominating Senegal's political and social landscape. The MFDC has leveraged this sense of cultural alienation to build a narrative of independence, arguing that the Jola and other minority groups in the region have been sidelined in national governance and policy-making.

Economically, Casamance has been marginalized despite its fertile lands and significant contributions to the country's agricultural output. Many residents believe that the region has not received its fair share of development projects or investment from the central government, further exacerbating feelings of neglect and exclusion.

Politically, attempts at addressing grievances through dialogue have often been sporadic and insufficient. Periods of negotiation between the MFDC and the Senegalese government have frequently broken down, as the parties have struggled to agree on key issues, including autonomy versus independence. The MFDC's internal divisions have also complicated the peace process, making it difficult to establish a unified position during negotiations.

This combination of historical grievances, cultural alienation, economic marginalization, and political stalemates has provided fertile ground for the MFDC's independence movement. The conflict continues to persist due to the inability to resolve these underlying issues comprehensively.

This concept encompasses not only the violent confrontations but also the deep-seated structural issues that sustain the conflict.

Casamance Region: Geographically distinct from the rest of Senegal, the Casamance region lies south of The Gambia, making it isolated from the country's northern regions³. The region is characterized by its lush agricultural potential and a predominance of the Jola ethnic group, whose cultural and religious practices differ markedly from the majority Wolof population of Senegal. This geographic and cultural separation has been a significant factor in fostering the region's aspirations for autonomy or independence. The geographic and cultural separation of the Casamance region from the rest of Senegal has fostered aspirations for autonomy or independence by reinforcing a distinct identity among its inhabitants. Geographically, the region is isolated from northern Senegal by The Gambia, creating a physical barrier that limits integration. Culturally, the predominance of the Jola people and their unique traditions contrast with the Wolof-dominated culture of the rest of Senegal, deepening feelings of exclusion and alienation. This combination has fueled the perception of being a marginalized and distinct entity, driving demands for greater self-determination.

Conflict Resolution: This term refers to the systematic processes and mechanisms aimed at addressing and resolving disputes between conflicting parties⁴. Conflict resolution goes beyond merely ceasing hostilities; it involves tackling the root causes of conflicts, rebuilding trust, and fostering sustainable peace. In the context of Casamance, conflict resolution has included peace negotiations, ceasefire agreements, and dialogues mediated by various national and international actors.

ECOWAS: The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) is a regional bloc established in 1975 to promote economic integration and foster peace and security among its 15 member states⁵. ECOWAS has expanded its mandate to include conflict prevention, management, and resolution, recognizing the direct link between security and regional development. It has played significant roles in addressing conflicts in West Africa through diplomatic interventions, peacekeeping missions, conflict resolution, and post-conflict reconstruction.

ECOWAS's role in conflict resolution extends to mediation, facilitation of peace agreements, deployment of observer missions, and support for local reconciliation initiatives.⁶ In the Casamance conflict, ECOWAS has been pivotal in fostering dialogues between the Senegalese government and the MFDC, providing a platform for negotiation, and advocating for inclusive solutions that address the region's grievances.

These conceptual clarifications form the backbone for analyzing the Casamance conflict and evaluating the effectiveness of ECOWAS's interventions. Understanding these terms provides the necessary lens to delve deeper into the complexities of the situation.

Theoretical Framework: Post-Colonial Theory

Post-colonial theory offers a useful lens through which to understand the roots of the Casamance conflict. The theory critiques the colonial legacies that have shaped contemporary political and social dynamics in Africa. In particular, post-colonial theorists argue that the arbitrary borders drawn by

colonial powers often ignored the ethnic, cultural, and political realities on the ground, leading to tensions and conflicts after independence⁷.

In the case of Casamance, the colonial borders imposed by the French created a situation where the region was geographically separated from the rest of Senegal and its cultural and ethnic ties with neighboring Guinea-Bissau were ignored⁸. This division created a sense of alienation and marginalization among the people of Casamance, which has been a key factor in the rise of the MFDC and its demand for independence. The division between Casamance and the rest of Senegal, marked by geographic isolation and cultural differences, has fostered a sense of alienation and marginalization among its people. This perceived neglect and exclusion from national governance and development have fueled resentment, providing a strong foundation for the Movement of Democratic Forces of Casamance (MFDC) to emerge. The MFDC capitalized on these grievances to demand independence, framing the region's struggle as a fight against systemic inequality and cultural suppression.

Post-colonial theory also emphasizes the importance of local governance structures and the impact of colonial policies on the relationship between the state and its citizens⁹. The failure of the Senegalese government to adequately address the grievances of the Casamance region is rooted in this colonial legacy.

Historical Roots of the Casamance Secessionist Conflicts

The roots of the Casamance conflict are deeply intertwined with the colonial history of Senegal, where colonial policies sowed the seeds of division and marginalization. During the French colonial administration, Casamance was administratively and culturally distinct from the rest of Senegal. Its integration into Senegal ignored the region's historical, cultural, and geographical ties to neighboring Guinea-Bissau, as French colonial authorities prioritized consolidating control over the broader Senegalese colony. Unlike other regions of Senegal that witnessed significant political mobilization during the independence struggle of the 1950s and 1960s, Casamance was politically sidelined, left in a state of relative isolation and neglect.

This marginalization persisted after Senegal gained independence in 1960. The people of Casamance, particularly its distinct ethnic groups such as the Diola and Mandinka, found themselves underrepresented in national governance structures. Policies enacted by the central government in Dakar failed to account for the cultural and political uniqueness of the region. The resulting sense of exclusion was compounded by economic neglect, as the region's fertile agricultural lands and resources did not translate into proportional investments in infrastructure or development. This neglect became emblematic of the broader inequities faced by Casamance, creating fertile ground for grievances.¹⁰

By the early 1980s, these grievances coalesced into organized resistance, culminating in the formation of the Movement of Democratic Forces of Casamance (MFDC). The MFDC emerged as a vehicle for expressing the political, cultural, and economic aspirations of the Casamance people, advocating for independence from Senegal. The movement's demands were rooted in the belief that Casamance had been historically overlooked and deliberately marginalized by the central government. As the conflict escalated, the MFDC transformed from a political movement into an armed insurgency, intensifying the instability and deepening ethnic divisions in the region.¹¹

This historical trajectory is aptly explained through the lens of post-colonial theory, which underscores the enduring impact of colonial legacies on post-independence state-building and governance. The arbitrary borders drawn during the colonial era, often ignoring cultural and historical realities, created states with deeply entrenched internal disparities. In the case of Senegal, colonial policies reinforced Casamance's separation from the rest of the country, laying the groundwork for its post-independence marginalization. Furthermore, the dominance of the Wolof ethnic group in Senegalese politics mirrors the post-colonial dynamic where the colonial "center" perpetuates hierarchies at the expense of peripheral regions. Post-colonial theory thus provides a critical framework for understanding the

Casamance conflict, as it highlights how colonial structures of exclusion and domination persist in contemporary governance, fueling resistance and demands for autonomy.

The Role of ECOWAS in Conflict Resolution

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has been at the forefront of efforts to resolve the protracted Casamance conflict, engaging in a combination of diplomatic and peacekeeping initiatives aimed at fostering stability in the region. Since the early 1990s, ECOWAS has undertaken various measures, including shuttle diplomacy, facilitating peace talks, and proposing peacekeeping interventions. However, despite these efforts, the organization's success in achieving lasting peace in Casamance has been limited, underscoring the complex nature of the conflict and the challenges inherent in regional conflict resolution.¹²

ECOWAS's initial engagement in Casamance was marked by its diplomatic mediation between the Senegalese government and the Movement of Democratic Forces of Casamance (MFDC). Through shuttle diplomacy and facilitated dialogues, ECOWAS sought to bridge the divide between the central government in Dakar and the separatist movement. These peace initiatives reflected ECOWAS's broader mandate to promote peace and stability in West Africa. However, one of the major obstacles to meaningful progress has been the fragmented nature of the MFDC itself. The organization is not a monolithic entity but a coalition of factions with differing political objectives and strategies. This internal disunity has complicated ECOWAS's ability to mediate effectively, as the absence of a unified leadership within the MFDC has made it challenging to secure agreements that are binding on all factions.

In addition to these difficulties, the Senegalese government's reluctance to grant the MFDC any form of political autonomy or territorial concessions has further hindered the peace process. From the perspective of post-colonial theory, this stance can be seen as reflective of the centralized state structure inherited from colonial rule, where power is concentrated in the capital, often at the expense of peripheral regions. The colonial legacy of imposing arbitrary borders and disregarding local identities has contributed to the centralization of authority, making it difficult for modern states like Senegal to accommodate regional demands for autonomy without perceiving them as existential threats to national sovereignty.

ECOWAS's role in peacekeeping has also faced significant limitations. While the organization has provided critical diplomatic support, its capacity to deploy a robust peacekeeping force in Casamance has been constrained by logistical and operational challenges. The region's fragmented geography, combined with its remoteness, has posed significant hurdles to effective peacekeeping operations. Moreover, ECOWAS's limited resources and competing security demands across West Africa, such as in Mali and the Sahel, have further curtailed its ability to prioritize the Casamance conflict.

Despite these setbacks, ECOWAS has remained committed to advocating for a negotiated settlement to the Casamance conflict. The organization has emphasized the need for dialogue and reconciliation, recognizing that the conflict is not merely a localized issue but part of broader regional dynamics of instability. The interconnectedness of conflicts in West Africa, often stemming from colonial legacies of marginalization and underdevelopment, underscores the relevance of post-colonial theory in analyzing ECOWAS's role. By addressing the systemic inequalities and historical injustices that underpin conflicts like Casamance, ECOWAS seeks to fulfill its mandate of fostering regional stability. Post-colonial theory offers a critical lens through which to understand the structural challenges that ECOWAS faces in its peace efforts. The arbitrary borders drawn during colonial rule, which ignored cultural and historical realities, created states with deeply entrenched regional disparities. The centralization of power in capitals like Dakar, a hallmark of colonial governance, has persisted in post-independence states, exacerbating regional inequalities and fueling separatist movements. ECOWAS's role in Casamance, therefore, must be seen as part of a broader effort to dismantle the legacies of colonialism and build more inclusive governance structures in West Africa. While the road to peace in

Casamance remains fraught with challenges, ECOWAS's continued engagement highlights its recognition of the need to address these deep-rooted issues in pursuit of lasting regional stability.

Challenges to ECOWAS's Effectiveness in resolving the Casamance conflict

Several factors have contributed to the limited success of ECOWAS in resolving the Casamance conflict. First, the limited success of ECOWAS in resolving the Casamance conflict is partly due to its constrained resources and military capacity. While ECOWAS possesses a peacekeeping force, deploying it effectively in Casamance has proven challenging. The region's dense forests and rugged terrain complicate logistical operations, making it difficult for troops to establish a sustained presence. Additionally, member states have shown limited political will to allocate the necessary financial and military resources, prioritizing other regional conflicts over Casamance. This combination of operational and political challenges has hindered ECOWAS's ability to intervene decisively.

Second, ECOWAS's mediation efforts have often been undermined by the fragmented nature of the conflict. The lack of a unified voice within the MFDC has made it difficult for ECOWAS to broker a comprehensive peace agreement. The regional organization has also been hampered by Senegal's reluctance to accept external intervention in its domestic affairs, which has limited ECOWAS's influence in the conflict. The fragmented nature of the Movement of Democratic Forces of Casamance (MFDC) has been a significant barrier to ECOWAS's mediation efforts. The MFDC is not a cohesive entity but rather a collection of factions with varying political and strategic objectives. This internal division means that even when ECOWAS engages in negotiations, agreements reached with one faction may not be accepted by others, undermining the possibility of a unified resolution.

Additionally, Senegal has often viewed the Casamance conflict as an internal matter and has been resistant to external interference. This reluctance stems from concerns over sovereignty and fears that international mediation could legitimize the MFDC's secessionist agenda. Consequently, Senegal has limited ECOWAS's role to diplomacy, restricting the regional organization's ability to deploy peacekeepers or enforce agreements effectively. These dynamics have collectively weakened ECOWAS's ability to mediate and resolve the conflict comprehensively.

Finally, the Casamance conflict is deeply rooted in historical and socio-political grievances that cannot be easily addressed through diplomatic negotiation alone¹². The central government in Senegal has made some efforts to address these grievances, such as providing greater autonomy to the region and promoting economic development. However, the underlying issues of political exclusion and ethnic marginalization remain unresolved, and the government's failure to fully integrate Casamance into the national political system has perpetuated the sense of alienation that drives the separatist movement.

Conclusion

The secessionist conflict in the Casamance region of Senegal is a complex and deeply rooted issue that has been shaped by historical, ethnic, and political factors. While ECOWAS has made important contributions to conflict resolution through diplomatic mediation and peacekeeping efforts, its interventions have had limited success due to the fragmented nature of the conflict and the resistance of the Senegalese government to external involvement. The conflict underscores the challenges faced by regional organizations like ECOWAS in addressing long-standing political and social grievances. For a lasting resolution to the Casamance conflict, a more comprehensive approach that directly addresses the underlying issues of marginalization and political exclusion is crucial. These issues have been at the heart of the conflict since its inception and have contributed to the persistent instability in the region. A successful resolution must take into account the following key elements:

1. Inclusive Political Dialogue and Representation

The first step toward resolving the Casamance conflict is to create a more inclusive political dialogue between the central government in Dakar and the people of Casamance. Over the years, the region has felt marginalized both politically and economically. The distinct ethnic groups of Casamance, including

the Diola and Mandinka, have often been underrepresented in national governance structures. This political exclusion has fueled feelings of alienation and has been a driving force behind the separatist movement led by the MFDC. A genuine and inclusive political dialogue that includes all factions of the MFDC and the various ethnic groups in Casamance is essential for building trust and finding common ground.

2. Decentralization of Power

A central aspect of the conflict is the concentration of political and economic power in Dakar, which has led to the neglect of Casamance's development. A more decentralized system of governance that grants greater autonomy to the region could help address the grievances of Casamance's people. Devolving decision-making powers to regional authorities would enable the people of Casamance to have more control over their own affairs, particularly in terms of economic development, cultural preservation, and local governance. Such a move would go a long way in alleviating the feelings of marginalization that have fueled the separatist agenda.

3. Economic Investment and Development

Economic underdevelopment has been one of the driving factors behind the Casamance conflict. The region has historically been neglected in terms of infrastructure, education, healthcare, and other vital services. To address this, a comprehensive economic development plan for Casamance is essential. The government of Senegal, along with international donors and organizations, should invest in the region's infrastructure, create job opportunities, and promote sustainable development. By improving the standard of living and reducing the economic disparity between Casamance and other parts of Senegal, the government can help reduce the appeal of separatism and encourage long-term peace.

4. Cultural Recognition and Autonomy

The people of Casamance have a unique cultural identity that has often been overlooked by the central government. The region's distinct languages, customs, and traditions are integral to its sense of self and autonomy. Recognizing and respecting this cultural identity is key to building a sense of belonging and solidarity among the people of Casamance. The government should take steps to preserve and promote the region's cultural heritage, including integrating local languages and traditions into the national education system and public life. By acknowledging the cultural diversity of the country, Senegal can foster greater unity while respecting regional differences.

5. Security Sector Reform and Disarmament

Security in the Casamance region has been severely impacted by the ongoing conflict. Armed groups, including the MFDC factions, have continued to engage in violent acts, further exacerbating the instability. A comprehensive peace agreement would need to address the disarmament of combatants and the reintegration of former fighters into society. Additionally, reforming the security sector to ensure the protection of civilians and the promotion of human rights is essential. The presence of security forces should be carefully managed to prevent abuse and ensure that the local population feels safe and protected.

6. Regional and International Support

While ECOWAS has played a role in trying to mediate the conflict, a broader regional and international approach is needed for a lasting solution. Neighboring countries like Guinea-Bissau, which share cultural and historical ties with Casamance, should be included in the peace process. Furthermore, international organizations, such as the United Nations, can provide technical and financial support for post-conflict reconstruction, human rights monitoring, and peacebuilding initiatives. A multilateral approach would not only enhance the legitimacy of the peace process but also provide the necessary resources for long-term stability in the region.

Therefore, resolving the Casamance conflict requires more than just a ceasefire or temporary peace agreements. It necessitates addressing the root causes of the conflict—marginalization, political

exclusion, economic disparity, and cultural alienation—through inclusive dialogue, political decentralization, economic investment, cultural recognition, security sector reform, and regional cooperation. Only by tackling these underlying issues can Senegal hope to achieve a lasting and sustainable peace in the Casamance region.

ENDNOTES

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