



Study of Internal Conflict (SOIC) Case Studies

Researcher: Patrick Schmidt
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Study Sequence No. 1

Senegal Casamance 1982–2022

Executive Summary

Casamance is a region in southwestern Senegal separated, except on its eastern flank, from the rest of Senegal by the Gambia. Ecologically different from most of Senegal, economic and political development in the region differed as well.¹ While the remainder of Senegal is predominantly Muslim, the population of the Casamance region is largely Christian and animistic. The population of the Casamance region in 2024 is approximately 1.5 million people, comprising between 8 and 9 percent of the overall population of Senegal of approximately 17.32 million.

As Senegal's economic development following World War II aggregated in the northwest largely around the capital, Dakar, the people of Casamance felt increasingly detached from, neglected by, and poorly represented by colonial and local leaders.² On December 26, 1982, the Movement of Democratic Forces of Casamance (MFDC) organized a large protest in the regional capital Ziguinchor. The movement's supporters replaced Senegalese flags on government buildings with ones symbolizing Casamançais independence.³ The MFDC and Senegalese government forces clashed in December 1983 in the first relatively large-scale instance of violence of the conflict. Over the next several years, the regime in Dakar invested in improvements to infrastructure in the region and deployed military forces to quell the independence movement and assert control.⁴ In 1990, the MFDC declared that armed insurgency was the sole way to obtain independence. The MFDC then fractured into several different factions in the years following, some of which, such as the Front Nord (North Front), were more accepting of resolutions to the conflict short of secession from Senegal.⁵ A peace agreement was signed in December 2004, but clashes continued in 2007, and hostilities persisted on a small scale between government forces and the MFDC Front Sud (South Front).⁶ In April 2014, the MFDC and the Dakar regime agreed to another ceasefire and peace talks but did not reach a conclusive deal.⁷ In 2021, government forces carried out two large counterinsurgency operations in the Casamance region, seizing caches of weapons and rebel bases with light resistance. Government and most rebel forces signed a peace agreement in August 2022.⁸ Some observers were skeptical as to whether it would hold, as there remain thousands of displaced persons along with minefields from the conflict.⁹ In the two years since the agreement, however, guerilla activity has been negligible.

Assessing the Five Factors

1. Was the country at the time of the conflict considered a nation?

Yes. Although there are quite a few prominent ethnic groups in Senegal, they largely see themselves as Senegalese above all. Notably, around 60 percent of the population of Casamance is Dyola, an ethnic group comprising about 5 percent of the total population of the country.¹⁰ The conflict is largely based upon a lack of Casamançais representation, however, and not along ethnic or religious divides.

Approximately 92 percent of the population of Senegal resides outside the Casamance region and is predominantly Muslim, while the population of Casamance remains mostly Christian and animistic.

2. Was the government perceived as legitimate by 85 percent of the population?

Yes. The population of the Casamance is about 1.5 million today, just around 8 percent of Senegal’s total population of 16.9 million. There was no support for the independence of Casamance outside the region, and most of the population of Senegal believes current president Macky Sall to be legitimately in power.

3. Did the government maintain or achieve control over roughly 85 percent of the country’s population?

Yes. The MFDC never exercised a great degree of control in the Casamance, largely sticking to forested and marsh areas difficult for government forces to pursue in.

4. Did the rebel movement have persistent access to external sanctuary in a neighboring country to a militarily significant degree?

No. Although the MFDC utilized border areas along the Gambia for protection and smuggling operations, the Gambia did not provide sanctuary to any significant degree.¹¹

5. Was there a government army or armed constabulary force in existence at the start of the conflict?

Yes. The Senegalese military early on was deployed to Casamance to combat the MFDC and, more recently, the gendarmerie has taken on much of the security work to reduce military presence in the region.¹²

Outcome

Government victory. In October 2024, the Study of Internal Conflict moved this conflict from “ongoing” to “concluded.” The peace deal signed between government and MFDC forces in August 2022 was stronger than previous agreements and ceasefires, and rebel activity has dropped dramatically. Although hostilities have largely subsided, some rebels remain in the forests and marshes of Casamance, and minefields laid by both sides still claim lives and limbs in the region.¹³ The Senegalese government under Sall appears to have taken steps to end the conflict following the August peace agreement. This conflict supports the Five Factors model.

SENEGAL CASAMANCE 1982–2022	
NATIONAL IDENTITY	YES
GOVERNMENT LEGITIMACY	YES
POPULATION SECURITY	YES
EXTERNAL SANCTUARY	NO
EXISTING SECURITY FORCES	YES

Endnotes

1. Robert Baum, “Religious Roots of the Casamance Conflict and Finding a Path Towards Its Resolution,” *Cadernos de Estudos Africanos*, no. 42 (July-December 2022): 237.
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3. Lawrence S. Woocher, “The ‘Casamance Question’: An Examination of the Legitimacy of Self-Determination in Southern Senegal,” *International Journal on Minority and Group Rights*, 7, no. 4 (2000): 345.
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5. Woocher, “Self-Determination,” 347.
6. Reuters, “Factbox: Casamance Region Suffering from Conflict, Isolation,” Reuters, February 25, 2012, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-senegal-casamance-factbox/factbox-casamance-region-suffering-from-conflict-isolation-idUSTRE81009I20120225>.
7. David Seyferth, “Senegal: An End to One of Africa’s Longest Civil Conflicts?,” *AfricaSource* (blog), Atlantic Council, July 9, 2014, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/africasource/senegal-an-end-to-one-of-africa-s-longest-civil-conflicts>.
8. Babacar Dione, “Senegal Signs Peace Accord with Separatist Rebels,” Associated Press, August 5, 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/africa-senegal-macky-sall-b1bfb8a554442d03a89a7772f7e28a9d>.
9. Davide Lemmi and Marco Simoncelli, “Rebel Conflict in Senegal’s Casamance Region Far from Over,” DW, January 9, 2023, <https://www.dw.com/en/rebel-conflict-in-senegals-casamance-region-far-from-over/a-64326724>.
10. Woocher, “Self-Determination,” 344.
11. Lemmi and Simoncelli, “Rebel Conflict.”
12. Boucar Baba Ndiaye, “In Senegal’s War-Torn Casamance, a Dialogue Builds Stability,” United States Institute of Peace, August 17, 2022, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/08/senegals-war-torn-casamance-dialogue-builds-stability> (site discontinued).
13. Lemmi and Simoncelli, “Rebel Conflict.”



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