

# **Strings of Identity: A Short Instrumentalist Analysis of the Casamance Separatist Movement**

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## **Introduction**

This paper argues that the emergence of the Movement of Democratic Forces of Casamance (MDFC) is best understood through instrumentalist theory, which reveals how political elites mobilised ethnic identity to achieve separatist goals. While grievances such as economic marginalisation provided fertile ground for unrest, it was the elite-driven manipulation of the Jola identity, economic grievance, and ethnic marginalisation that transformed these conditions into an organised insurgency.

## **Context**

The Casamance region consists of several regions in Senegal; the Kolda, Sedhiou, and Ziguinchor, the area is uniquely situated in the south of the River Gambia and often referred to by its natural area name 'Casamance'. The area is home to the Jola (Diola), and Bainuk people, with minorities like the Balanta, Mande, and Fulani. In 1982, a peaceful protest in Casamance over economic and political grievances was violently suppressed by the Senegalese military (Lambert, 1998). The MDFC under Augustin Diamacone Senghor called for an independent Casamance, claiming that it was never part of Senegal due to ethnic marginalisation and economic disparity between Casamance and the main capital Dakar (de Jong, Gasser, 2005). Following the military crackdown, the MDFC militarised and engaged in guerilla warfare as part of their separatist cause (Trzcinski, 2005). Since then, both parties have been in low-level conflict, ceasefires and peacemaking attempts were short-lived due to MDFC factions (Evans, 2000). While economic grievances provide a backdrop, instrumentalism reveals how MDFC elites exploit these grievances through identity politics.

## **Instrumental Theory**

Instrumentalist theory provides a robust framework in understanding the emergence of the MDFC and Casamance conflict. Instrumentalist theory argues that ethnic identity is used by political elites to mobilise support and achieve specific goals such as power and resources (Dunn, Englebert, 2017). Unlike constructivism, which emphasises on the evolving nature of identity, instrumentalism focuses on how elites exploit identity in response to political and economic opportunities. The MDFC was able to capitalise on historical grievances related to Jola's colonial experiences, where inhabitants of Dakar were granted different citizenship rights than the Jola under French colonial rule (Ngom, Sene, 2021). This legacy of ethnic differentiation was then politicised by MDFC leaders as

one of ethnic marginalisation, with support from other leaders like accused Jammeh of Gambia (Michaloupoulos, Papaioannou, 2016, p. 1810). Furthermore, Casamance's geographical and colonial split created a sense of semi-isolation which allowed for the MDFC to directly appeal to conflict (Clark, 2011, p. 154). This narration of marginalisation and isolation provided fertile ground for the MDFC to turn a general historical and economic grievance into an ethnically charged separatist movement.

### **Greed and Grievances**

Although instrumentalism offers a compelling explanation, alternative theories like greed and grievances offer additional explanations. Greed and grievances theory instead argues that conflicts arise from a combination of greed-driven motivations and grievance-based discontent, with resources being main drivers of conflict (Collier, Hoeffler, 2004). As mentioned above, protests in Casamance began because of economic grievances over land ownership, which was controlled by the Senegalese government under the 1964 *loi sur le domaine national* law (Evans, 2004). This economic alienation created a fertile ground for the rise of the MDFC, which framed its separatist movement around economic marginalisation by the Senegalese government's policies. Greed continues as lucrative economic resources such as fish, illegal timber, and other crops have continue to finance the armed wing of the MDFC (Lemmi, 2023).

However, while economic grievances were central to unrest in Casamance, the MDFC framed grievances within an ethnic narrative. Poor economic development and exploitation of ancestral Jola lands in Casamance allowed MDFC leaders to capitalise economic grievances (Clark, 2011, p. 155). As a consequence of elite-driven ethnic narratives, economic areas such as mines in Casamance have been politicised under ethnic lines, with MDFC elites claiming Jola ownership of land and mines instead of a unified Casamance rhetoric (Fent, 2021). This framing turned broad economic grievances in Casamance into an ethnic cause (under the Jola identity), which therefore galvanised support for the MDFC. Without elite-driven mobilisation, resource grievances may have remained localised.

### **Primordial Theory**

A critique of instrumentalism is that it treats identity as fluid and dynamic, which may not consider the historical, cultural and ancestral aspect of MDFC and its supporters. Primordial theory treats ethnicity as a fundamental and ingrained aspect of a person's

identity, which is inherited and unchangeable (Dunn, Englebert, 2019). For instance, a primordial argument can be the case between Jola and Wolof tension. The Wolof majority make up around 39 percent of the total Senegalese population, while the Jola make up around 4 percent and speak different languages (Minority Rights Group, 2017). These differences in ethnic identities between the Jola and Wolof is the reason for conflict because the MDFC is largely led and represented by the Jola while the Senegalese government is controlled by the Wolof. It would also explain the sense of isolation that the MDFC argues in its cause, therefore suggesting that Wolof and Jola tensions have long existed (Osemeka, 2011).

However, primordialism oversimplifies the dynamics of identity, ignoring how colonialism also politicised ethnicity. Historical records suggest that the Jola and Wolof were also influenced by the politicisation of identities under colonialism. Prior to colonialism, ethnic groups in Senegambia were not isolated from one another, trade and interactions were made (including between the Wolof and Jola) which contradicts the notion of fixed ethnic tensions (Mark, 1983). Although both theories emphasise on identity, instrumentalism offers a better explanation of the conflict by highlighting that grievance narratives pushed by MDFC elites allowed for a Jola identity-based support in the Casamance conflict.

## **Conclusion**

Instrumentalist theory provides a nuanced and robust framework in explaining the Casamance conflict and MDFC's emergence. Highlighting the strategic agency of elites in the MDFC, Jola identity was mobilised to achieve separatist goals. While economic grievances and marginalisation contributed to the conflict, MDFC leaders framed these issues within an ethnic narrative. Unlike greed and grievances or primordialism, instrumentalism effectively captures the role of MDFC elites and explains how historical and economic grievances were leveraged to construct a Jola identity-based separatist conflict.

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