

Policyweekly

IPOB Factions, Contest for Dominance in the South East and Implications for the 2023 Presidential Elections



Policy Recommendations

- 1** Security deployments for the election should target the flashpoint areas like the South East in terms of manpower and equipment deployment.
- 2** Civic education agencies like the National Orientation Agency and the political education arm of INEC should integrate teaching communities the value of sharing security information with law enforcement agencies.
- 3** Security agencies should design a special partnership programme for clean elections with community leaders.
- 4** There are ongoing online petitions and litigation plans against Mr Simon Ekpa by different Nigerian Igbo groups in Nigeria and the Diaspora. This is an opportunity that Nigerian security agencies could leverage to institute legal actions against every group that constitutes security threats.

Introduction

Nigeria is inching very close to the 2023 presidential elections. Yet, there are increasing signs of major challenges to safety during the election across the country. Such challenges chiefly revolve around possibilities of violence by different non-state actors and armed groups. In the South East region of the country, for instance, one of the major sources of electoral violence is the secessionist group that claims to be agitating for the sovereign state of Biafra. There are several such groups, but the most assertive and visible is the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB). Despite its pertinence in determining the tenor of peace and conflict in the South East region, IPOB has split into factions.

Nevertheless, each of the factions remains operative in the region, and security agencies have linked some violent attacks in the area to them.

Several recent attacks have been carried out on the facilities of the election management body, the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC). During the voter registration exercise, [separatist agitators shot](#) and killed an INEC worker in Imo State. Between November and December 2022, [four arson attacks took place in South East within three weeks](#), and security agencies also placed their responsibility on [IPOB](#). However, [IPOB denied responsibility for the attacks](#) and accused security agencies of masterminding the incidents to smear IPOB. What is unclear is which of the factions of IPOB is the culprit behind the crime.

A faction of IPOB led by one [Simon Ekpa](#), based in Finland, had declared a five-day compulsory sit-at-home on the 9th, 10th, 11th, 12th and 14th of December 2022 in the entire South East. In response, the [Nnamdi Kanu-led faction of IPOB](#) condemned and repudiated the declaration. Following the [death of three](#) persons and destruction of properties while implementing the five-day sit-at-home at Enugu, the Nnamdi Kanu faction sued Simon Ekpa for his violent activities and [crimes against humanity in the South East of Nigeria](#). Thus, the split of IPOB into opposing factions and their contest for dominance in the South East invite concerns regarding the forthcoming election. On that note, this week's edition of Nextier SPD Policy Weekly explores issues related to factionalisation in IPOB and its effects on the forthcoming 2023 presidential elections.

Rise of the Factions and Implications for the 2023 Elections

It is important to note that the very [earliest formation of IPOB was not by Nnamdi Kanu](#). He rather joined the association when it was under the leadership of the late Justice Eze Ozobu. Later, Kanu announced a sack of the organisation's leadership and then [registered IPOB in the United Kingdom](#). Following the organisation's registration, Kanu commenced a [style of media broadcast](#) characterised by agitation and incendiary

content. His message resonated with persons who share a perception of being ethnically persecuted by the Nigerian state, mostly the Igbo. This development made the IPOB registered by Kanu to become widely known.

In [2020](#) the group became divided following a disagreement between Kanu and his deputy, Mr Uche Mefor, over the method of running the association. The two main points of division were human rights and accountability issues. For human rights, Mefor was reported to be opposed to how the Kanu-led IPOB violated the rights of the Igbo. Regarding accountability, Mefor was said to have been forced out of IPOB when a faction of the UK chapter, which he led, asked for an account of raised funds. The demand was reported to have made Kanu abolish the position of deputy leader, which was Mefor's office. Under the pressure of expulsion, Mefor exited the IPOB and formed the [Biafra Human Rights and Freedom Radio](#) purporting to defend the rights of Ndi-Igbo being violated by the Kanu-led group. He later joined Asari Dokubo, the former Niger Delta militant, in March 2021 to collaborate on the Biafran project. Jointly, they formed the Biafra Customary Government headed by Dokubo.

Another pro-Biafran project representing the second split in the IPOB is the [Biafran Freedom Awareness Channels](#), an internet broadcast media managed by Mr Simon Ekpa, a self-acclaimed disciple of Nnamdi Kanu. Mr Ekpa came to public reckoning after the arrest of Mr Nnamdi Kanu in June 2021. In July 2021, he was appointed to broadcast on Radio Biafra to fill the media vacuum occasioned by Kanu's arrest. The appointment was, however, terminated after a short while based on the accusation that Mr Ekpa failed to observe the rules of operation on Radio Biafra. Despite the termination of the appointment, Mr Ekpa persisted with his social media engagements on Biafra on behalf of IPOB. Besides, just like the Kanu-led group of IPOB has the Eastern Security Network as its armed wing, Mr Ekpa has his group of fighters called the [Autopilot](#). After the stoppage of Ekpa from acting on behalf of IPOB on media responsibilities and his refusal to conform with the group, the Kanu-led group began to counter the orders of the Ekpa group and deny IPOB's

connection with any directives of Ekpa, including the recent order for a five-day sit-at-home. The Kanu group has accused Ekpa of [terrorising people in the South East](#). He is also alleged to use the name of Kanu's IPOB for his broadcasts and fundraising activities.

While there is also another faction called the DOS (Directorate of State), which has also been identified with violence in the South East, the most visible and active in terms of their effect on peace and security in the South East are the Kanu-led IPOB and Simon Ekpa Autopilot. Security in the forthcoming elections would depend greatly on what the major factions decide to do or ignore. Indeed, they have fairly contrasting positions about the election. While Mr Ekpa had declared that there would be [no election in the Biafraland \(South East\)](#) after his declared five-day sit-at-home, the Kanu group had declared that they have [no plans to disrupt the elections in the South East](#) even as they would not participate in it.

There are pockets of bandits operating in the South East outside of these factions of IPOB but claim to be secessionists and carry out their nefarious activities under the shadows of IPOB. Such groups are likely to become active during the elections. Equally, political thugs who are usual hirelings of politicians would also wish to be identified as IPOB, perhaps to take advantage of the secessionist group's fearsome image to easily scare voters and peaceful citizens. Unscrupulous politicians may leverage this ability of the thugs to stop genuine voters from exercising their right to vote. Ultimately the division in IPOB deepens the status of the South East as one of the several security flashpoints in the imminent 2023 presidential election.

Pathways for a Peaceful 2023 Presidential Elections in the South East

Like other troubled parts of the country, the South-East should be regarded as a security flashpoint in terms of election planning. The potential for disrupting the

election by non-state armed actors is evident. This situation is worsened by the competing drive of the various factions of IPOB to assert their dominance in the region. Therefore, planning for better outcomes in the next presidential elections in the region requires the following steps:

1. Security deployments for the election should target the flashpoint areas like the South East in terms of manpower and equipment deployment. But, more importantly, thrust should be given to intelligence gathering and its use to defuse possible security challenges before they escalate into major obstacles to the elections.
2. Civic education agencies like the National Orientation Agency and the political education arm of INEC should integrate teaching communities the values of sharing security information with law enforcement agencies in their contents and strategies for the safe sharing of such information so that citizens are not unduly deprived of their voting right in the forthcoming elections.
3. Security agencies should design a special partnership programme for clean elections with community leaders, especially the traditional rulers and President Generals of town union associations in the South East. Town union association is one of the South East's most powerful grassroots mobilisation platforms. Therefore, security partnerships should necessarily integrate their leadership.
4. There are ongoing online petitions and litigation plans against Mr Simon Ekpa by different Nigerian Igbo groups in Nigeria and the Diaspora. This is an opportunity that Nigerian security agencies could leverage to institute legal actions against every group that constitutes security threats to the 2023 elections and beyond.

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Conclusion

The existence of non-state armed groups across the country and the various interests they pursue are the most potent sources of threat to the forthcoming presidential elections in 2023. In the South East, what the IPOB decides to do regarding the election is key to peace during the period. However, the organisation has become factionalised into mutually opposing groups. Their activities and opposition to one another not only threaten their mutual factions but also affect the peace of the South East. Overall, these developments represent a danger to the presidential election in February 2023.

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