



Addressing Secession Agitations

Revise repression as a strategy
Seek Dialogue as an Alternative
Move towards True Federalism and Restructuring
Fix Insecurity

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Overview

Nigeria is experiencing substantial secessionist crusades across many locations, especially in the southern part of the country. The movement for a [Biafran nation](#), currently championed by the proscribed Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), a predominantly Igbo separatist organisation, remains the most daring. The group has created a parallel regional security apparatus known as the Eastern Security Network. The Nigerian Police has [indicted](#) them for the unprecedented scale of attacks on state institutions in the South East region of Nigeria. While the group have denied the accusations, it routinely issues sit-at-home orders to residents in the region to protest the continued incarceration of its leader, Nnamdi Kanu. The region has lost millions of naira from these sit-at-home orders. A similar separatist organisation, the Yoruba Nation Movement led by Sunday Igboho, operates in the South-West region of Nigeria. Other secessionist struggles include the relatively sedate Biafra Customary Government (BCG), Movement for the Actualisation of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB), Niger Delta Republic, and the Oduduwa Republic.

Such secessionist movements have become more violent in Nigeria's recent history. Data from Nextier SPD Violent Conflict Database²⁶ shows that in the twelve months to September 2021, Nigeria recorded 74 alleged secession-related violent incidents in the South-East and South-South regions of Nigeria, resulting in 352 casualties (comprising of 98 civilians and 78 security agents), 17 persons injured, and two persons kidnapped. In addition, Amnesty International reports that between 2015 and 2016, Nigeria's security forces killed about [150 pro-Biafran protesters](#) across Southeast Nigeria.

The Government of Nigeria remains unfazed and maintains that the nation's unity is "[not negotiable](#)." As a result, the IPOB leader and the campaigner for the Yoruba Nation Movement are currently facing charges in Nigeria and Benin Republic, respectively. Similarly, the government continues its repressive security operations in the secession hotspots.

Drivers of Secession Agitations

²⁶ Fatality figures were culled from the Nextier SPD Violent Conflict Database which sources its data from media reported violent conflicts. The database categorizes the conflicts into banditry, terrorism, farmers-herder crisis, extra-judicial killings, cultism, armed robbery, domestic violence, civil unrest, piracy, communal clashes.

While Nigeria has often had groups seeking to secede on account of marginalisation, the recent secessionist agitation is rooted in the current state of insecurity in the country. In the twelve months to September 2021, South-West Nigeria recorded 135 out of the 890 violent incidents resulting in 402 casualties (comprising 364 civilians and 38 security agents), 46 persons were injured, and 117 persons kidnapped. The agitators accuse the Federal Government of its [refusal or inability](#) to deal with the criminal groups operating in the region decisively. For instance, the Yoruba Nation Movement [hinges](#) its secessionist call on the constant attacks, rapes, robberies, and kidnap incidents in [Iganggan](#) community, Oyo state by suspected Fulani herders, and the seeming inability of the Federal government to restrain the suspected culprits. Apart from insecurity, the South-East region predicates their calls for secession on the region's [relegation](#) to the fringes of political power since the end of the Nigeria Civil War in 1970.

Prior Intervention

Nigeria's response to secessionist movements is primarily the use of [military operations](#) to suppress the agitation. The government insists on the country's indissolubility. This approach [fuels more resentment](#) towards the government and invigorates the self-rule agitators. The violent clashes between security actors and agitators escalate the crisis resulting in accusations and counteraccusations, closing avenues for a positive resolution of the differences. However, evidence suggests that military repression may not provide a lasting solution. For instance, the Movement for the Actualisation of the Sovereign State of Biafra alleges that the Federal Government killed over [2,020](#) members. Such action did not stop the emergence of IPOB.

Recommendations

Revise repression as a strategy

[Repression](#) seems to be fuelling continued agitations and shutting possible avenues for resolving the issues, and deepening the level of distrust between the government and the aggrieved separatist groups. The government should allow room for peaceful protests while ensuring public safety and creating safe spaces for [conversations](#) within the provisions of the law. Peaceful protests should not be met with military force. Two decades of democracy is enough time to let go of the military disposition that sees any form of dissent as an attack on the State. The United Kingdom, Spain, France, Canada, and many other countries have groups calling for secession. Recently, legislators from three counties in the State of Maryland in the United States filed a letter requesting to secede and join the neighbouring State of West Virginia.

Similarly, over 20 countries in Africa have secessionist groups. There is enough evidence that military highhandedness does not address the issues; rather, it may turn them violent. The government should consider other strategies, besides repression, to engage with the various groups.

Seek Dialogue as an Alternative

The government needs to consider [dialogue approaches](#) in dealing with the various secessionist agitations. The notion that Nigeria's unity is non-negotiable leaves little room for dialogue. Therefore, the government should deploy a conflict expert group to create a path for communicative engagement to enable engagement between the Nigerian state and secessionist groups.

Commit to True Federalism and Restructuring

The various secessionist groups in Nigeria achieve support and momentum when they frame their argument as group grievances over perceptions of systemic marginalisation and unfair resource allocation. The government can weaken this argument used in recruiting more secession supporters by committing to transition from the current lopsided federal political structure to one that reflects a true federal character.

Fix Insecurity

Ineffectual securitisation and politicisation of security threats increase group consciousness to the detriment of statehood. Citizens know to protect themselves in the face of mounting terror. Such trends trigger the formation of ethnic militias seeking to protect group interests, safety and to pursue other socio-political gains. For instance, the Eastern Security Network (ESN) created by IPOB is purportedly to protect the southeast from insecurity and attacks by alleged killer herders. The [reform](#) of the security forces, increasing security deployment, emphasis on early warning, and government presence in ungoverned spaces will provide the needed security and nullify the arguments for such outfits. However, in the absence of verifiable efforts in that regard, such regional outfits will remain attractive to people who desire improved security in their locale.