



SECESSION: ENGAGE AND DEFUSE - Part 1

Policy Recommendations

1. The Federal Government must be seen to exercise restraint in its use of coercive instruments against the agitators.
2. The leaders of the secession movements should be encouraged to seek a legal path to present their grievances and political demands.
3. The Federal Government of Nigeria can defuse most of the agitations by providing evidence of inclusivity.

Nextier SPD Policy Weekly provides an analysis of topical conflict, security, and development issues and proposes recommendations to address them. It is a publication of Nextier SPD.

For further discussion of pragmatic implementation of the recommendations, please contact

Nextier ^{SPD}
www.nextierspd.com
info@nextierspd.com,
+234 701 002 7301

Almost half a century since the end of the Nigeria-Biafra Civil War, youths in the South-East region of Nigeria are still clamoring for secession. The initial attempt at secession led to the declaration of the Republic of Biafra on May 30, 1967 by the late Chukwuemeka Odumegwu-Ojukwu. The secession which lasted for thirty months, resulted in the death of about 3 million people and displacement of several million others. The renewed secession campaign has led to heightened tension and security challenges in the region which have prompted repressive responses from the government. This edition of **Nextier SPD Policy Weekly** examines youth involvement in secession movement, state responses, and policy recommendations.

Secession is the act of formally withdrawing from a larger entity that is typically driven by political or economic grievances.

Typically, it takes the form of agitations for independence, autonomy, resource control, and horizontal equity in the power-sharing and distribution of resources. It is executed either

through violent or peaceful means. Around the world, there are a number of regions that are currently arguing for their rights to secede: Venice (Italy), Catalonia (Spain), Quebec (Canada), Wroclaw (Poland), Crimea (Ukraine), etc.

Age is not typically a significant factor in such secessionist movements.

However, the current pro-Biafra agitations are led and executed largely by youth groups including (but not limited to) Movement for the Actualization of Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB), Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), Biafra Zionist Federation (BZF), etc. It is instructive that many of these agitators did not witness the Biafra Civil war but are more fervent in their views than those who fought in the war.

Agitations for secession are driven mainly by political and economic grievances.

Some of the grievances outlined by the pro-Biafra agitators include allegations of marginalisation of the region in federal appointments, distribution of development projects, and creation of states and local

government councils. Other drivers include deficient and dilapidated infrastructure, rising and widespread unemployment in the region (Obasi, 2015).

Economic grievances (more than political ones) are the primary drivers of the current secessionist movements in South-East Nigeria.

These agitations are loudest in the urban cities which [also have the highest unemployment rates in the region](#). For instance, [South-East cities of Aba and Onitsha](#) have the [largest pro-secession supporters; mostly young people](#). A [number](#) of analysts have linked this youth phenomenon to the economic state of the cities: [decline in trade and business activities, decline in the growth of small and medium-scale enterprises](#), as well as deplorable public infrastructure especially roads. Youth unemployment in Nigeria is at [52.7 percent](#) (and rising) as at the fourth Quarter of 2017.

In line with global trends for dealing with secession movement, Nextier SPD proposes the following steps to address the complex but resolvable situation in South-East Nigeria:

1. Exercise Restraint: The Federal Government must be seen to exercise restraint in its use of coercive instruments against the agitators. This will demand significant tolerance in the face of provocations. The government must make genuine efforts to engage the agitators in genuine discussions. The various reports of extra-judicial killings and incarceration without trial help to harden the positions of many of the youths. This recommendation may require that the government works with experienced conflict resolution professionals to create resolution strategies and tactics for the engagement. It will require training (and retraining) of the security professionals on how to engage with aggrieved civilian populations.

2. Follow a Legal Path: The leaders of the secession movements should be encouraged to seek a legal path to present their grievances and political demands. The leaders in the region (such as South-East Governors' Forum, Ohaneze Ndigbo, and other leaders of thought) should assist the agitators to articulate their positions and present same to both the Federal Government, Nigerians, and members of the international community. There are various models were separatist movements (in Quebec, Flanders, Wales, Scotland) have been able to argue their case through their elected representatives (Beary, 2018). However success is defined, it can be achieved through a robust engagement of the current institutions of governance in the country.

3. Create a common destiny: One of the core drivers of conflict around the world is when a group of people feel that they are being marginalised. Whether real or not, there is wide-spread perception that the South-East region of Nigeria is marginalised. The Federal Government of Nigeria can defuse most of the agitation by providing evidence of its efforts to create a common identity and destiny for all Nigerians through increased equitable distribution of national resources and appointments to minimise existing or perceived horizontal inequalities. A lot can be achieved through improvements in communication between all parties.

Considering the challenges with Nigeria's security architecture, there is need to deemphasize combative or military solutions. Nigeria is already embroiled in a lot of conflicts and does not need to open up new theatres of conflict. The Federal Government could work with its development partners to implement programmes and projects that are targeted at the South East region. Clear signs of inclusivity are required to engage all stakeholders in an effort to resolve the crisis.

References

- Beary, B. (2008). "Separatist Movement: Should nations have rights to Self-determination?", CQ Global Researcher, Vol.2 Issue. 4
- Joireman, S.F. (2003). Nationalism and Political Identity, London: Continuum
- Obasi, N. (2015). "Nigeria's Biafran Separatist Upsurge", Crisis Group, December 4
- Sorens, J. (2017). "Crack down on independence movements is a bad idea", Aljazeera, December 21
- Tayo, S. and Mbah, F. (2017). "Calls for Biafran Independence Return to South East Nigeria", Chatham House, November 9