

## The Politics and Dynamics of Secession in Nigeria<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract:

From its inception, the different components that constitute Nigeria have lived in mutual fear and suspicion of one another. The British colonial government, through its racialised and politicized system of indirect rule, sowed the seed of discord among the different ethnic groups and regions such that even before gaining independence in 1960, both the majority and minority ethnic groups were sceptical of the capacity of an independent Nigeria in protecting their interests and rights. The religious, linguistic, socio-cultural and political fault lines among Nigeria's plural society have created tension and conflict throughout its existence as a political unit. This has often led to secessionist and self-determination drives and movements that reached their peak less than a decade after independence (1967-70) with Nigeria experiencing a bitter and costly civil war with the Igbo separatist nation of Biafra. Although Nigeria survived the breakup attempt, it continues to face threats of secession that manifest even at the sub-group level. The injustices that are ingrained in Nigeria's political system remain a strong push factor, but in many cases the secessionist drives are elites' manipulation to further their own interests and political survival. Based on the resurgence of secessionism in Nigeria, this article critically examines the politics involved in secession in Nigeria as well as the dynamic nature of selected secessionist movements, comparing or charting the trajectories from historical to contemporary secessionist movements

### Keywords:

Secession, Nigeria, self-determination, IPOB, Niger Delta.

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## *Introduction*

In the decade before Nigeria gained political independence from Britain, the process of decolonization of Africa started. This was marked by a heightened political consciousness among former European colonies and a sharp demand for self-government. By 1960, Nigeria and 16 other African countries had gained their political independence, making 1960 the 'Year of Africa'. Arguably, the Second World War (WWII) sparked the spate of the demand for political independence. WWII with its undesirable outcomes had badly damaged the reputation and economies of European colonial powers and contributed to the decline in their influence. More so, there was now very little support from the United States, one of the major powers that emerged economically and militarily stronger from the war, for colonial empires. Although the fight for independence was marred by violent struggle in some countries, the greater majority of African countries gained their independence peacefully. The few countries that gained their independence through war with the colonial powers include French colonies of Algeria and Madagascar; and all former Portuguese colonies including Angola, Mozambique and Guinea-Bissau. A few other countries such as the British colony of Kenya and Belgian colonies of Congo-Kinshasa, Burundi and Rwanda have elements of war of independence that do not involve a clear-cut struggle between the colonies and their former colonial powers, but nonetheless are still part of that process of disengaging from the control of the former colonial powers. Despite gaining independence, the new African states remain an arbitrary creation of former European powers.

The arbitrary nature of African states remains a controversial subject until today. The controversy stems from the argument by some scholars that the arbitrariness of state creation is responsible for the plethora of conflicts in the continent (Ekeh, 1975; Suberu&Diamond, 2002; Englebert&Tarango, 2002; Falola, 2009; Ikome, 2012). Interestingly, African states have not shown enough effort or mustered the will to redraw their artificial boundaries (Mbembe, 2000) and there have been very minimal inter-state wars in Africa (Asiwaju 1984). On the contrary, there has been an overwhelming number of civil wars and wars of self-determination and secession. Although the popular notion is that the assembling of different cultural and political groups has contributed to the sheer magnitude of internal conflicts in the continent, not everyone accepts that. Collier and Hoeffler (2002) argue instead that a high degree of uniformity in the ethnic composition of a society has a greater chance of leading to civil war than a much more diverse cultural group. Akin to that, Mamdani (2001) questions the idea of a pre-colonial homogenous society. He argues that there were multiple forms of territoriality with social ties, and consequently, of rights that did not match with cultural, linguistic and religious identities in pre-colonial Africa (Mamdani, 2001). Regardless of the competing thoughts about the arbitrariness of state creation in Africa, the artificial mapping and demarcation of Africa by European colonial powers in the Berlin Conference of 1858 continue to have adverse effects on inter-ethnic relations, creating fissures, tensions and conflicts that are endemic and enduring. This article begins with a brief conceptual clarification of the concept of secession and then proceeds with the discussion of the historical manifestations of

secessionist drives in Nigeria. The next section considers the resurgence of secessionism in Nigeria and the last section analyses the political and dynamic nature of secessionist drives and movements in contemporary Nigeria.

### *Secession: A Conceptual Clarity*

It is important to clarify the concept of secession as it is often used synonymously with self-determination. Since the French Revolution and the American Declaration of Independence, self-determination has come to be associated with the right of nations to statehood and sovereignty. But self-determination as a concept of political rights can be traced to political consciousness evident in ancient Greece and Rome (Bereketeab, 2012). Since the end of World War Two (WWII), self-determination has found greater expression as a universal right in the United Nations (UN) Charter. Article 1(2) of the UN Charter states that:

To develop friendly relations among nations based on respect for the principle of equal rights and self-determination of peoples, and to take other appropriate measures to strengthen universal peace;

There seems to be an obvious contradiction as the UN Charter, Article 2(4) prohibits the 'threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state. Self-determination is defined as 'the right of a people to freely determine their government' and this can take several forms including forming an 'independent state (political independence), joining another state (union); or an autonomy within a state (cultural independence)' (Bereketeab, 2012, p.2). Secession therefore can be defined as a form, or severe form of self-determination. It involves the 'separation of a part of [a] state from the rest of its territory leading to political withdrawal of a region from an original state' (Bereketeab, 2012, p.2). Self-determination is generally perceived positively, whereas secession is frowned upon and seen to be negative in international law (Bereketeab, 2012; Walter & von Ungern-Sternberg, 2014). Although that is the case, international law 'neither prohibits nor authorizes secession' (Walter & von Ungern-Sternberg, 2014, p.3). Some scholars even invite us to consider situations where secession is morally justifiable, especially in an overwhelmingly unjust state (Buchanan, 1991, 1998; Philpot, 1995, 1998; Patten, 2002, 2014).

Contrary to the popular assumption about the obvious incongruity between the right to self-determination and protection of territorial integrity in international law, some scholars do not find these two incompatibles (Brilmayer, 1991). According to Brilmayer, 'secessionist claim involves, first and foremost, disputed claims to territory' (ibid, p.178). Brilmayer shares the sentiment of many scholars in her argument that 'the plausibility of a separatist claim does not depend primarily on the degree to which the group in question constitutes a distinct people' (Brilmayer, 1991, p.178; see Collier & Hoefler, 2002; Mbembe, 2001; Mamdani, 2001; Moore, 1998). The post-WWII elaboration on the concept of the 'peoples' emphasized in the Wilsonian construction of self-determination as the political independence of ethnic or



national communities does not refer to 'ethnic or national groups, but rather multi-ethnic people under colonial rule' (Moore, 1998, p.3). In other words, a territory does not necessarily have to correspond with a homogenous group of people. Secessionist claims should therefore be based on the need to correct a historically disputed territory and not on the high moral ground of self-determination which concerns the relationship between the state and the people. In terms of the latter, self-determination can be pursued by a group that claims to be suffering 'discrimination and massive human rights violations committed by the mother state' (Walter & von Ungern-Sternberg, 2014, p.2). However, 'the mere fact that the secessionist group constitutes a distinct people does not by itself constitute the right to secede' (Brilmayer, 1991, p.179). More importantly, there must be a justifiably territorial claim. This is 'important in the group's conception of itself as a nation' (Moore, 1998, p.3). It is rarely the case that the identity of a geographic or territorial unit corresponds, with the people in the territory sharing the same ethnicity with no significant minority group. In most cases,

the definition of "the people" and the territorial units in which self-determination is to occur are contested, and the possibility of alienated minorities within the state, stranded minorities on the other side of the border, contested homelands, and mobilized unionist groups against the possible secession are very real indeed' (Moore, 1998, p.3-4),

### ***A History of Secessionist Drives, Trends and Movements in Nigeria***

Nigeria is a pluralistic society like many African states. It is therefore subject to the pull and push forces of the consequences of the arbitrary creation of states. Even before independence, the different components have either threatened or attempted to secede. For instance, in his autobiography, *My Life*, Ahmadu Bello, the Sardauna of Sokoto and leader of Northern People's Congress, boldly defended the north's resistance against self-government and independence in 1960. In defending the northern opposition to Nigeria's independence, Ahmadu Bello asserts: 'I considered that independence must wait until a country has the resources to support and make a sense of independence' (1962, p.viii). Bello's stated concern fails to conceal the real fear which is 'replacing European domination with southern domination' (Ibrahim, 2000, p.45). It was clear in the years leading up to independence that the Eastern and Western region had great comparative advantage (in terms of skillset) over the north (Maier, 2000). The only way that the north could maintain a balance with the obviously more developed south is to gain control of the centralised political power. It is therefore not surprising that the north rejected the proposed 'representational ratio of 45:33:33 for the North, West and East' at the 1950 Ibadan Constitutional Conference. The north wanted 50 percent of the seat or secede from the country' (Tamuno, 1970, p.568). The north eventually gained control of the federal government through the help of the British who expressed preferential treatment towards the Fulani. Before then in the Lagos Conference of 1953, the Northern House of Assembly and House of Chiefs had demanded for confederation and separation as denoted by the passing of an eight-point resolution (Tamuno, 1970, Ibrahim, 2000). There was also indication of secession in the Western region.

Although the Western region with its Action Group political party played a prominent role in the struggle for self-government and independence for Nigeria, it would, in the Lagos Constitutional Conference of 1954, 'demand that a secession clause be inserted in the Constitution, but it was then opposed by the NPC and NCNC' (Ibrahim, 2000, p.45; Tamuno, 1970). The historical alliance, in the decade before independence and a few years into independence, between the Northern People's Congress (representing the Hausa-Fulani interest) and the National Council of Nigerians and the Cameroons (representing the Igbo interest) was based on strategic reasons. The country's economic mainstay at the time, prior to the discovery of crude oil in the late 1950s and its dominance in the 1960s, was cocoa that was produced entirely in the Yoruba Western region. The political alliance 'between the two natural resource-scarce tribes [was] to enforce the sharing of the rents on cocoa production' (Collier&Hoeffler, 2002, p. 17). The control of Lagos, an important port and trading route, which was situated in the Western region, also spurred the strategic collaboration between the NPC and NCNC (Tamuno, 1970).

In the early 1960s, the Western region was a theatre of political contestation and struggle between the regional and federal government and internecine war between different political factions loyal to the Yoruba leaders Chief Obafemi Awolowo and Samuel Akintola respectively. The tension and crisis in the Western region degenerated into violent conflict that attracted the intervention of the federal government, who declared a state of emergency in the Western region and deployed the military to quell the riot (making it the second time that the military was used in internal security in an independent Nigeria). The first time the military was deployed for internal security was against the Tiv people in 1964 (Maier, 2000). Military intervention in Nigeria's internal security and politics would become normalised a few years later when the military seized power from the civilian government in a coup d'état in 1966. Like the Yoruba and AG, the Igbo people with the NCNC party were instrumental to the attainment of self-government and independence. Interestingly, the Igbo, the third largest ethnic group in Nigeria, despite not having expressed separatist tendencies in the years leading up to independence, as demonstrated by the Yoruba and the Hausa-Fulani, would, unlike the other two major ethnic groups, actually attempt secession. Although, there were few Igbo leaders such as Michael Okpara, the Premier of the Eastern Region and Frank Okpigo, a Member of Parliament representing NCNC who publicly favoured the secession of the Igbo people, this was not a major Igbo or NCNC stance (Tamuno, 1970).

Nigeria experienced another historical secessionist attempt in February 1966, shortly after the first military coup. The secession attempt was carried out in the Niger Delta region by Isaac Adaka Boro, who belonged to the Ijaw group, the fourth largest ethnic group in Nigeria. Boro declared the Republic of Niger Delta on 23 February 1966 but crumbled to the combined force of Major General AguiyiIronsi's central military government and Colonel Ojukwu's Eastern regional government, after just 12 days of revolution. The centrepiece of the revolution is the gross underdevelopment of a region that is ironically home to the nation's oil wealth and fear of Igbo domination in an independent Biafran state. Boro's secessionist attempt may have



been politicized and encouraged by the northern elites (Nwajiakwu-Dahou, 2009). This is not far-fetched considering that Boro would fight on the Nigerian side during the Civil War.

However, a more serious threat of secession would occur within the first decade of gaining independence. Within six years of gaining independence, Nigeria succumbed to the separatist tendencies as it experienced one of the worst civil wars of the Twentieth Century. In 1967, a year after Nigeria had survived two costly military coups, the January 1966 coup led mostly by Igbo military officers and a July 1966 counter-coup led mainly by northern military officers, Nigeria engaged in a bitter civil war with Biafra, the Igbo separatist nation. The Eastern region with majority Igbo people withdrew from the Nigerian state and declared itself an independent nation. The reprisal killings of hundreds of Igbo military officers and thousands (up to 30, 000) of Igbo civilians in the northern region in the July 1966 counter-coup motivated the Igbo secessionist drive. Unfortunately, the January 1966 coup, carried out chiefly by Igbo military officers, although planned without an ethnic bias, resulted only in the murder of key leaders in the Northern and Western regions, with a conspicuous absence of any notable Igbo leader casualty. While the unlawful killings of thousands of Igbo civilians in the north and the displacement of millions are enough motivation to drive Biafra secession, there is perhaps a higher incentive that is largely material in nature. Oil had been discovered in the Eastern region in the late 1950s and by the 1960s, it was clear that oil was significant to Nigeria's economy. It is therefore very likely that Biafra was 'not a war of ethnic identity [but] a natural resource grab' (Collier & Hoeffler, 2002, p.17-18).

The war lasted for three years (1967-70) and resulted in victory for the Nigerian state, but led to the death of 3 million Igbo people. Although Nigeria suppressed the secessionist attempt of the Igbo nation and reintegrated the Eastern region and the Igbo people into Nigeria, the cost of the victory seems to be very high. The death of 3 million Igbo people and the persistent unjust treatment and political marginalization of the Igbo people continue to be a spanner in the works regarding unity, peace and progress in Nigeria. The ghost of Biafra continues to haunt Nigeria as several pro-Biafra groups have emerged in the predominantly Igbo dominated southeast within the last two decades since Nigeria returned to civilian government. The two major groups include the Movement for the Actualisation of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) and Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB).

### ***A Resurgence of Secessionist Drives and Movements***

Nigeria has seen resurgence in the demand and struggle for self-determination and secession from groups in the oil-rich Niger Delta, Yoruba groups in the former Western region, Igbo secessionist movements in defunct Biafra and several groups in northern Nigeria. The self-determination and secessionist drives and movements became more pronounced in the current democratic dispensation, Nigeria's Fourth Republic (1999-till present). Nigeria returned to democratic government in 1999, after 16 years (1983-1999) of consecutive military rule. The return to democracy restored hope as well as created opportunities for

aggrieved groups to express their grievances, which were largely suppressed by the previous military regimes. Unfortunately the nascent democratic state's underwhelming response to the riots and protests ignited the rise of self-help or armed vigilante groups. In the Southwest, we saw the establishment of the O'Odia People's Congress (OPC), in the Southeast, Bakassi Boys, Mambilla Militia group in Middle Belt state of Taraba and the Hisbah Police in the north. The capacity of law enforcement and the Nigeria Police Force has been greatly undercut by the long years of military rule. The armed non-state groups rose to fill the security vacuum created by the underperforming police, and enjoyed the support of the host state. But the need to confront insecurity that was palpable in the absence of effective law enforcement was not the only factor. The return to democratic rule also increased tensions between ethnic groups such as Ife/Modakeke and Ijaw/Itsekiri; and between ethnic-based and religious-based groups and the Nigerian state.

In the Southwest, for instance, from 1993 to 1998, during the military regime of General Sani Abacha, the largely Yoruba pro-democracy group, NADECO (National Democratic Coalition) engaged the junta government of Abacha in a violent struggle that led to a 'few noteworthy politically-motivated-indeed, terrorist attacks' (Giroux&Nwankpa, 2019, p.414). These included series of bombings in major cities including Lagos, Kaduna, Illorin and Onitsha. NADECO's unifying mission was to restore the mandate of Moshood Kashimawo Abiola (MKO), a Yoruba businessman, whose Presidential election victory was annulled by President Ibrahim Babangida in 1993. OPC was established in 1994, the same year as NADECO. Unlike NADECO that had broad support from a coalition of Nigerian pro-democracy activists from other ethnic groups, OPC was purely a Yoruba establishment created to promote and protect the interests of the Yoruba people. Although OPC has always expressed self-determination, this was more pronounced in the ideology of the more radical and militant splinter group that emerged from the split in 1999. The militant OPC led by Gani Adams expressed goals that include: 'self-determination, social emancipation for the Yoruba, regional autonomy, self-government and self-management' (Adebanwi, 2005, p.344). Although there was no outright call for secession, the goals of Gani Adams-led OPC are nothing short of secession. OPC would however play a major role as an informal but state-endorsed security outfit in the early years of Nigeria's Fourth Republic (1999-2002). OPC continues to operate in many Southwest Yoruba states, but its activities have been downgraded due to a combination of factors that include the infighting between the Gani-Adams faction and the moderate faction led by the original founder, Dr. Fasehun; and loss of the overwhelming state support it enjoyed during the early years.

Historically, there has always been a high ethnic and regional consciousness among the ethnic nationalities that comprise Nigeria's multi-cultural and multi-ethnic state; and this predates Nigeria's political Independence from Britain (Tamuno, 1970). Chief Obafemi Awolowo, one of the founding fathers of Nigeria established Egbe Omo Oduduwa (Yoruba: "Society of the Descendants of Oduduwa") in 1947 in Nigeria, having originally started the group in 1944 whilst studying in London. Egbe Omo Oduduwa was formed to promote the culture and unity of the Yoruba people. Egbe Omo Oduduwa provides the rallying ideology for





a wide array of Yoruba groups, well over 100, which have been created over the years. One of such influential groups is the Yoruba World Congress (YWC). YWC is, according to its website, ‘the umbrella body of Yoruba people and groups across the globe’ whose ‘aims are to promote, defend and achieve the collective growth and developmental aspirations and interests, prosperity, security, wellbeing, welfare and sustenance of Yoruba People and culture’ (<https://yorubaworldcongress.org/about-us/>). YWC, now known by its indigenous name, *Ilana Omo Oodua*, represents the face of Yoruba secession. Other Yoruba groups such as the Yoruba Global Alliance (YG) strongly promote Yoruba secession. In line with its commitment to protecting the Yoruba communities from the invasion of the Fulani herders and the perceived planned domination by the Fulani, YWC, in conjunction with Southwest states’ Governors, established Amotekun in Nigeria in 2019. Amotekun is, like OPC, an informal state-endorsed armed vigilante group. Several other prominent Yoruba groups and leaders have disassociated themselves from the demand for a Yoruba nation and caution against such move.

Similarly, during the military regime of President Ibrahim Badamosi Babangida (IBB), the Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP) emerged in 1990 in the Niger Delta region. The emergence of MOSOP represents the beginning of contemporary conflict in the Niger Delta. MOSOP was led mainly by the Ogoni ethnic group, a tribe of about half a million people. The objective and scope of their grievance are couched in the ***Ogoni Bill of Rights*** (1990) presented to the military government of IBB and Royal Dutch Shell (the major oil company in the region at the time). Article (20) of the Ogoni Bill of Rights states that:

The Ogoni people wish to manage their own affairs. NOW, therefore, while reaffirming our wish to remain a part of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, we make demand upon the Republic as follows: That the Ogoni people be granted POLITICAL AUTONOMY to participate in the affairs of the Republic as a distinct and separate unit by whatever name called, provided that this Autonomy guarantees the following: (i) Political control of Ogoni affairs by Ogoni people; (ii) The right to the control and use of a fair proportion of Ogoni economic resources for Ogoni development (MOSOP, 1991, *Bill of Rights*, p.5-6).

MOSOP’s modus operandi was a non-violent approach. Unfortunately, MOSOP’s leader, Nobel Prize nominee, Ken Saro-Wiwa and other eight Ogoni leaders were murdered in 1995 in a ludicrous trial by General Abacha, the then Head of State. The murder of Ken Saro-Wiwa remains a watershed in the Niger Delta crisis, as it paved way for the emergence of more militant groups. The Ijaw ethnic group (the fourth largest ethnic group in Nigeria, constituting 10 percent of Nigeria’s 170 million populations) spearheaded the next wave of resistance in the Niger Delta. In 1998, the Ijaw Youth Council (IYC) published the ***Kaiama Declaration***, declaring their intent for self-determination and resource control as evident in Article 10: ‘we agreed to remain within Nigeria but to demand and work for Self-Government and resource control for the Ijaw people’. Like MOSOP, IYC pursued a non-violent campaign. However, between 2003 and 2009, a full-blown insurgency emerged in the Niger Delta with the establishment of armed groups such as the Niger Delta People’s Volunteer Force (NDPVF),



Niger Delta Vigilante (NDV) and the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND)-an umbrella organisation for over 100 smaller militia groups.

From 1998 to 2003, the oil-rich region experienced a yearly average of 400 acts of vandalism on oil companies' facilities, and another 581 between January and September of 2004. The oil revenue loss during this period is set at USD \$1 billion annually. In 2006, when MEND emerged, we witnessed about 19 attacks on foreign oil operations in the first 6 months. From January 2006 to around mid-year 2009, over 400 expatriate oil-worker hostages have taken place; over 12,000 oil pipeline acts of vandalism and over 3000 oil spills (Joab-Peterside, Porter & Watts, 2012, p.8). Since the summer of 2009 when 30,000 ex-militants received Presidential Amnesty, relative peace has returned to the region. Yet, incidents of crime, oil theft and piracy have spiked, but usually underreported. For instance, from October 2012, Nigeria is accused of hijacking 12 ships, kidnapping over 30 sailors, and killing a number of oil workers. From 2011 to 2016, a total of 90 actual and attempted piracy and armed robbery attacks on ships occurred in Nigeria (International Chambers of Commerce-International Maritime Bureau, ICC-IMB, 2016, p.5). MEND is likely behind these attacks. In recent times, there has been a resurgence of militancy and increase in new militia groups, such as the Niger Delta Avengers. The latest development is a response to the abortive plan by the administration of President Buhari not to extend the amnesty programme.

In the Igbo Southeast, the ghost of Biafra continues to haunt the Nigerian state and threaten its stability. Since the return to democratic rule in 1999, there have been several secessionist groups that have emerged in the former Eastern region with the aim of recreating the defunct independent state of Biafra. Two groups stand out-Movement for the Actualisation of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) and the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB). MASSOB was established in 1999 by Chief Ralph Uwazuruike, an Indian-trained lawyer. IPOB was formed in 2012 by Mazi Nnamdi Kanu, a British-dual citizen of Nigeria. Both MASSOB and IPOB adopt a non-violent approach in their struggle for the creation of an independent Igbo nation. The Igbo secessionist group is based on 'perceived sense of injustice and marginalization of the Igbo ethnic group in Nigeria's socio-economic and political space' (Nwankpa, 2021, p.53). MASSOB's modus operandi involves staging mass rallies and peaceful protests, part of a 25-stage campaign that will culminate with an UN-supervised referendum. But, at the height of its campaign, MASSOB hoisted Biafran flags in different locations in the Southeast and re-introduced the Biafran currency and Biafran passport. MASSOB has often clashed with the Nigerian security forces leading to the detention and killing of many of its members; and multiple arrests of its founder who was accused of treason in 2011.

IPOB's activities include demonstration of mass protests and rallies, boycotting of elections, grounding of economic activities through its sit-at-home orders, media propaganda, primarily through its London-based Radio Biafra, an online radio that has been in existence since 2009, and demand for referendum to decide Igbos' exit from the Nigerian state. Like its predecessor, IPOB often clashes with the intolerable government of President Buhari, leading to mass



incarceration and extra-judicial killing of members of IPOB, arrest and imprisonment of Nnamdi Kanu and the proscription of the group as a terrorist organisation in 2017—an action that has attracted widespread condemnation from the local and international community. However, in 2020, IPOB joined the Southwest in creating an informal security unit. IPOB established the Eastern Security Network to protect the Igbo people and Southeast from the threats and attacks from Fulani herders. Although Eastern Security Network, just like Amotekun, is a direct response to the insecurity created by an expanding and armed Fulani herder community and perceived subtle attempt by the Fulani to dominate other ethnic groups in Nigeria, it is seen as the armed wing of IPOB. IPOB's activities have scaled down since June 2021 due to the extra-legal extradition of Nnamdi Kanu by the Kenyan Government (on the instruction of the Nigerian Government). Kanu is currently under the custody of the Nigerian Government facing several charges including terrorism and treason.

In Northern Nigeria, the most visible evidence of secession is found in the widely publicized joint communiqué by the Arewa Youth Consultative Forum on 6 June 2017 with several other northern groups including Arewa Citizens Action for Change, Arewa Youth Development Foundation and Arewa Students Forum. This is known as the Kaduna Declaration. The Declaration reflects an anti-Igbo sentiment and is couched as a reaction to the incessant push by IPOB for Biafra. The position of the group is stated below:

- 1. From today, June 6, 2017, when this proclamation is signed, the North, a critical player in the Nigerian project, hereby declares that it will no longer be disposed to coexisting with the Igbos and shall take definite steps to end the partnership by pulling out of the current federal arrangement.*
- 2. This conclusion is necessitated by the realization that it since ceased to be comfortable or safe to continue sharing the same country with the ungrateful, uncultured Igbos who have exhibited reckless disrespect for the other federating units and stained the integrity of the entire nation with their insatiable criminal obsessions.*
- 3. Rather than certain sections holding the whole country to ransom at every stage, each should be allowed to go its own way as we categorically proclaim today that the North is fed up with being the same country with this pack of acrimonious Igbo partners.*
- 4. The North hereby openly calls on the authorities and other national and international stakeholders to acknowledge this declaration by taking steps to facilitate the final dissolution of this hopeless union that has never been convenient to any of the parties (Kaduna Declaration, 2017).*

While the Kaduna Declaration represents an unequivocal statement and intent for northern secession, it is neither the only nor the first secessionist attempt in contemporary northern Nigeria. The brazen adoption of Shariah criminal code by 11 northern states in the early years of the Fourth Republic (2000-2003) can be interpreted as a secession attempt. Likewise, Boko Haram's attempted exit from the state and its terrorist campaign against the Nigerian state since 2009 can be described as a form of secession.

## *The Political and Dynamic Nature of Contemporary Secessionist Movements in Nigeria*

Virtually, every region in Nigeria has expressed desire for self-determination, but it is not always clear what they mean by self-determination. In one instance, it can signify aspiration for self-governance and autonomy within the existing federated union. In another case, it can denote an outright demand and attempt at separating from the union. Clearly, secessionist drives in Nigeria are dynamic and complex. They are often based on genuine or perceived grievances. Yet, they conceal other motives and agendas. In other words, contemporary secessionist drives and movements in Nigeria are framed in a legitimate and undeniable framework of injustice and grievance, but often betray the elitist political interests. This section focuses on the politicised and dynamic nature of contemporary secessionist movements in Nigeria.

For instance, while not denying the contribution of the pro-democracy campaign in the waning years of military rule in Nigeria, it is safe to argue that the political activism pursued primarily by Yoruba Southwest activists during Abacha's regime was driven largely by the need to restore the denied mandate of MKO. The emergence of Obasanjo, a Yoruba man and former military Head of State (1976-1979), as the President (1999-2003; 2003-2007) was therefore a calculated attempt to pacify the Yoruba for the annulment of MKO's electoral victory and his suspicious death in prison. The People's Democratic Party (PDP) machinery and the Northern oligarchy 'went to get him [Obasanjo] from prison and made him president instead of Alex Ekwueme', according to Commodore Olawunmi, a former military General that I interviewed in 2021. Whether the Yorubas were pacified by the choice of Obasanjo is debatable, considering the underwhelming support Obasanjo received in the Southwest. At the end of the day, some of the pro-democracy activists 'have abandoned civil society today using the money they made from CSO to join politics', according to Miliki, a Human Rights Activist in Kogi State that I interviewed in 2016. However, since 1999, many Yoruba socio-cultural groups have sprung up in struggle for Yoruba's cultural independence and self-determination. Again, the heightened insecurity in the country, particularly the expanding threat and criminality (including banditry and kidnapping) from Fulani herders who are emboldened by the ambivalent and weak response of President Buhari's (a Fulani man) government, has motivated the renewed demand for restructuring or self-determination, and in extreme case, secession. The perceived threat and claim of colonization and Islamization by the Fulani are however not rooted in reality and facts (Nwankpa, 2021)

More so, the multiplicity of Yoruba socio-cultural groups and their divergent positions on self-determination reveal the myth behind the notion of cultural commonalities. The divergence between pro-secessionist and anti-secessionist groups proves the conceptual ambiguity between self-determination and secession (Osaghae, 1999). It is usually very difficult to distinguish between the need to protect Yoruba ethnic identity and the attempt to separate from the federation. For example, the Draft of the O'Odua Region Yoruba



Constitution that was prepared in 2017 by the Egbe Omo Odua, a group that is historically known for promoting the Yoruba culture and unity, presents the desire for restructuring of Nigeria's federation that would give the Yoruba nation greater autonomy over its affairs as evident in Article 1(1):

Yorubaland existing as an autonomous nation in a union of Nigerian constituent nationalities shall be known and styled as "Oduduwa Region" (EgbeOmoOdua, June 30, 2017, <https://www.thenigerianvoice.com/news/253666/draft-of-the-oodua-region-yoruba-constitution.html>)

The proposed Oduduwa Region with the constitution resembles the federal system practiced in Nigeria in the early years of political independence (1960-66), with each of the three regions: Western, Eastern, Northern, and later fourth region, Mid-West having greater autonomy and regional constitutions alongside the Federal constitution. Yet, the demand for regional control of the federal armed forces and the specific condition expressed in Article 1(4) that: '90% of which personnel shall be indigenes of the region' raises the problematic dichotomy between indigene and settler, or how citizenship and access (as well as restriction) to benefits, including protection would be delineated. In my interview with Murtala, a conflict analyst with Humangle in 2021, Murtala, in his rejection of the constitution of state police, poses salient questions: 'how do we define who would be in a state police force, especially in a country like Nigeria where you have state of origin? Are you going to use your state of residence? Article 1(4) of the constitution of the proposed Oduduwa region confirms Murtala's point. Since 1960, the demographics of the Southwest have changed drastically due to migration of millions of Nigerians from other regions and ethnic groups, who have settled in Yoruba land. Inter-ethnic marriages have also expanded the socio-cultural ties and integration of ethnic groups. The Yoruba nation made up of a people with homogenous identity and common goals is far from reality. Historically and preceding colonialism, the Yoruba people have always engaged in wars among themselves for control and dominance. Therefore, the Oduduwa nation will likely present greater challenges than the existing federal structure. Although the proposed constitution seeks an autonomous Yoruba nation that exists within the Nigerian federation, but with a weakened Central Government that 'shall have no power to interfere nor intervene in the affairs of the Oduduwa region'. The demand for an Oduduwa region is therefore nothing short of secession. The renewed quest for restructuring, confederation and secession betrays a political calculation that southern political elites seek to leverage on for their own political gain in 2023 elections (Nwankpa, 2021).

Unlike the southwest, where there is significant elite support for the self-determination of the Yoruba people, the drive for secession and self-determination of the Igbo people has not received any significant support from the Igbo elites. In the early years of the Fourth Republic, the Igbo vigilante group, the Bakassi Boys enjoyed the State Governments' patronage and support. The Eastern Security Network does not enjoy similar support. To a great extent, the relationship between the Igbo secessionist groups and Igbo political elites including the Southeast States Governors and the Ohaneze – the traditional umbrella socio-cultural Igbo

organisation that was established to promote and protect the interests of the Igbo people has been frosty. IPOB's frequent sit-at-home orders, election boycott, rallies and marches have often grounded commercial activities in the region and pit the proscribed group against the Southeast Governors. There is no denying the fact that the Igbo people are marginalized politically. There has not been an Igbo President in Nigeria since the early years of Independence when Dr Nnamdi Azikiwe was the nominal President of the Parliamentary (1960-63) and Republican Governments (1963-66) and General Aguiyironi headed the first military government (1966). The Igbo people have been strategically side-lined and as Miliki boldly asserts, 'there can't be peace when there is no basic justice'. IPOB is therefore driven by genuine grievance, but IPOB 'is not as organized to achieve the objective they set out to do. But 80 percent of their failure is due to the politicians from the southeast themselves', according to Commodore Olawunmi.

Although the self-determination of the Igbo people is driven by non-state groups such as IPOB, this has not stopped the Igbo elites from exploiting IPOB for their own political survival and interest. The detained leader of IPOB, Mazi Nnamdi Kanu (MNK) remains a bargaining tool for both the Nigerian government and the Igbo political elites. As MNK is battling terrorism and treasonable charges in the Nigerian Federal Court, there are ongoing informal negotiations between the President Buhari-led Federal government and the Igbo elites. The Igbo elites have at best maintained an ambivalent disposition towards the IPOB-led struggle for Biafra. On one hand, the Igbo elites have unequivocally condemned IPOB's demand for an independent Igbo nation and, conspicuously refused to speak unanimously against the widely condemned proscription of IPOB as a terrorist organisation or act against the military occupation of Igboland and killing of unarmed protesters. On the other hand, the Igbo elites have played a mediatory role between IPOB and the Federal Government and empathized to a certain degree with IPOB's cause. For example, the Igbo elites, specifically the South-east Senate Caucus led by Deputy Senate President, Ike Ekweremadu, had met MNK's stringent bail conditions and secured his freedom from federal detention in 2017. MNK had been in detention from 14 October 2015 until his release on 25 April 2017 by Justice Binta Nyako. The Ohaneze Ndigbo, and the Igbo Youth Movement (IYM) and the Eastern Consultative Assembly (ECA) supported MNK's release. Also, the Southeast Governors met with MNK in August 2017 amidst IPOB's directive for election boycott and the plan by the Court to revoke MNK's bail. MNK also met with the leadership of Alaigbo Development Foundation, a pan-Igbo elite group of academics and professionals based in Nigeria and abroad. There have also been other muted meetings and private support particularly when IPOB had momentum before the extradition of MNK that indicate that the Igbo political elites were willing to cooperate with IPOB or at least soften its tough stance against the group. IPOB offered the opportunity for the Igbo political elites to bargain for the Presidency in the upcoming 2023 election.

The Niger Delta case, which is considered Nigeria's only 'serious secessionist rebellion' (Collier&Hoeffler, 2002, p.18), like the other regions, is based on legitimate grievances. To a large degree, the Niger Delta rebellion provided a more united front in the struggle for self-



determination and resource control. The creation of MEND, an umbrella insurgent body made up of a coalition of smaller insurgent groups, was instrumental in the effective and coordinated campaign against the Nigerian state. The Presidential Amnesty of 2009 and the emergence of Goodluck Jonathan, of Niger Delta extraction, as the President of Nigeria, 2010-2015, mitigated against the Niger Delta insurgency. Although relative peace has returned to the region due to the Amnesty, the Presidential Amnesty was nothing short of bribery and pay-off to warlords (Nwankpa, 2014). This should however not take away the laudable surrender of arms by up to 30, 000 ex-militants in exchange for training, capacity building and monthly stipends. Yet, the overwhelming beneficiaries of the Amnesty programme are militants from the Ijaw ethnic group, and also overwhelmingly male. The Amnesty programme neglected the other groups including women, the Ogoni and Itsekiri. The relative peace that the Amnesty programme secured also masks the perennial inter-ethnic conflict in the Niger Delta region, particularly between the Ijaw and Itsekiri. Although there is relative peace in the region, lasting peace remains elusive as long as inter-ethnic tensions and the developmental challenges of the Niger Delta remain unaddressed.

In the north, religion has played a massive role in the drive for secession, both as a means to an end and an end in itself. For non-state armed groups such as Boko Haram, where the establishment of a “pure” Islamic state is a declared goal and whose over a decade old terrorist campaign has caused the death of thousands, displacement of millions and destruction of livelihood, it may be difficult to identify them with any legitimate grievance. However, the rise of Boko Haram can be traced to legitimate concerns against perceived northern elite corruption, double standard and the need to withdraw from such a society to practice a “pure” form of the Islamic religion (Besenyő&Mayer, 2015). Although Boko Haram’s idea about an ideal Islamic state may be based on an ignorant and discredited view,

When they started initially, they were running away from the Nigerian state. They were not fighting the Nigerian state. Muhammad Yusuf was running. They were trying to create an ideal Islamic state...It was actually the Nigerian state that was responsible for radicalizing the Boko Haram people, in the manner they misunderstood them, in the manner they killed Mohammed Yusuf, and in the manner they subsequently handled the post-Mohammed Yusuf. So the Nigerian state essentially radicalized Boko Haram and turned them hostile (2014 Interview with Baba Ahmed, Federal Permanent Secretary and member of the Presidential Committee on Dialogue and Peaceful Resolution of Security Challenges in the North)

In contrast to Boko Haram’s exit attempt from the Nigerian state, the adoption of the criminal Shariah code by 11 northern states in 2000-2003 was driven by a political motivation—the need to protect the political interest of the northern geopolitical zones against the unbridled ambition of a southern President and its unpopular policy against the north. This action however constituted a threat to the unity of the country and can therefore be described as a secession attempt. Similarly, the Kaduna Declaration, despite its dangerous and unbridled threatening language, is nothing but a political move to protect the northern interest.

## **Conclusion**

The Nigerian state is in crisis as it battles with a growing surge in the demand for self-determination and secession by several ethnic groups in the country. In the former Eastern Region, groups such as MASSOB and IPOB are trying to restore the defunct Biafra nation; several groups in the Yoruba-dominated Southwest rally round the ideology of Awolowo as they pursue self-determination and, in extreme case, an independent Yoruba nation. Although largely defused due to the Presidential Amnesty of 2009, the struggle for self-determination and autonomy in the oil rich Niger Delta remains alive. In northern Nigeria, there is sub-group secession and challenge to the unity of the country by Jihadist groups, mainly Boko Haram (Besenyó&Mayer, 2015), as well as secessionist threats from northern elites-backed groups. The motivations for these groups range from marginalization, political exclusion, underdevelopment and neglect, to insecurity. The Nigerian state battles with legitimacy as it is not able to guarantee prosperity and security for millions of its citizens. More so, there are historical injustices that have been left unaddressed. The political history of the country particularly the colonial history and the inherited absolutist political structure presents as a source of tension and conflict between the multiple ethnic groups. These often lead to centrifugal tendencies.

Yet, underneath the legitimate grievances that drive many of the demands for self-determination and secession is a sophisticated elite manipulation and politicization. Elites in Nigeria exploit group identities and grievances for the advancement of their own personal interests and political gains. Interestingly, this kind of behaviour is always observable close to elections, at the cusp of transition from one administration to another. This is however not a simple and straightforward process. The nature of secessionism in Nigeria is complex and dynamic as it shows interplay between the country's socio-political histories, culture and greed. The political elites in Nigeria have managed in the past to keep Nigeria one through the principle of consociation-a conflict-regulating mechanism that involves affirmative action to achieve a balance of power among different groups in a plural society. Usually, these take any of these forms: "grand coalition", "mutual veto", "proportionality" and "segmental autonomy" (Lijphart, 1969). In Nigeria, this entails applying the principle of 'federal character' which is proportional representation that aims for ethnic balance in federal appointments. It is therefore very likely that the elites would be able to find a compromise that would prevent the breakup of the country, but the prospect of finding a lasting solution to the centrifugal elements and fractious inter-ethnic relations remains dim.

## **Conflict of Interest**

The author hereby declares that no competing financial interest exists for this manuscript.





## Notes on Contributor

Dr Michael Nwankpa is the Founding Director / Director of Research at the Centre for African Conflict and Development in London. He holds a PhD in Sociology from the University of Roehampton. His main research area is the nexus between conflict and development, including the concept of a human rights-based approach to development. His other research interests relate to counterinsurgency, counterterrorism, foreign and security policy, and African security.

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He teaches students registered on Liverpool John Moore University's (in partnership with Unicaf) online master's degree programme in International Relations. Additionally, he supervises PhD students registered with Unicaf University. Dr Nwankpa held two prestigious fellowships at the Baker Institute for Public Policy, Rice University, and at the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism, University of Maryland.

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