
**THE NIGERIAN FEDERAL STRUCTURE AND THE AGITATION FOR
SEPARATION AND SECESSION**

¹MARCUS BIGLAND O. JOSEPHS

Department of Political Science
Nigerian Defence Academy, Kaduna
Marcdubal@yahoo.com

²DAVID OLUWATOBA ALABI, PhD

Department of Political Science
Nigerian Defence Academy, Kaduna

Abstract

This article centers on the increasing spread of separatism, secession and its impact on government systems and structures. Particularly on modern states. The implications of separatism on national unity, development and cohesion of any state will be negatively affected due to the struggles, actions, and activities of non-state, and state other involved actors. In Nigeria, the implications of separatist, and secession can be vastly felt in and around the six geo-political regions of the country. Through its destabilizing effect that has had a ripple effect on security, economic and political activities, and social cohesion of the people and state. The theoretical consideration focuses on the theory of federalism, to explain the reason for the rising adoption, spread and demand of separatism and secession by groups within Nigeria, its assumption is that the current Nigeria federal system of government is a bastardized version, that has brought about disillusionment for the Nigerian state by the citizens.

Key Words: Separatism, Secession, Federalism, State

Introduction

The proliferation of separatist struggles in the postcolonial world, in the past decades has prompted a surge of scholarly interest since 1980 in nations and nationalisms” (McKenna, 1998). Separatist groups, nationalist movements and the urge for autonomy are all inter-related factors motivated towards self-rule, governance and independence from within a state, federation or union bloc. According to Reinares (2005: 119) “separatist and nationalist movements often include political organizations seeking the separation of a certain territory and its society from the state or states to which these both formally belong”. These separatist

and national movements could also be comprised of individuals, ethnic, religious or cultural groups as also other similar affiliations. The implications of separatist groups, movement and struggle are largely based on secession. Bishai (2005: 93) explains the phenomenon as “the concept of ‘self-cession’: the unilateral withdrawal of territory and people from a state. The assumption therefore is that secession is always disputed by the parent state”. As there is the opportunity for recognition as well as acknowledgement of their existence and determination of the separatist groups; and sometimes, something more like political, economic or socio-cultural needs and differences.

This state of affairs of separatist struggle and secession, is mostly now a common place feature occurring in Europe, Asia, the America’s and in especially in Africa. Where there has been “a revival of secessionist movements” (Lehning, 2005: 1), and an “attempt by aspiring nations to wrest control of a proclaimed national territory from” (McKenna, 1998) the central or federal government’s. Lehning (2005: 1) asserts “the revival of secessionist movements, and the related current revival of nationalism, is a still more widespread phenomenon, ‘and’ a mistake if the questions raised by the phenomenon of secession is labeled or categorized as limited to a certain geographical area like within the borders of the present European Union, or relevant only to a specific part of Europe”. Such as the incidences of the secessionist struggle of Biafra in Nigeria and in Ethiopia and “recent calls for secession in Catalonia, Iraqi Kurdistan, Scotland, Québec, South Sudan, and even from within the United States reveal multiple political contexts in which questions have been raised about how best to balance competing claims for autonomy, interdependence, political voice, and exit” (Ryan, 2017: 123).

Theoretical Considerations

The theory of “federalism is context-dependent. This is because it is highly varied in practice than in theory” (Amadi et al, 2017: 42). Hence, “most of the studies on federalism center around the legislative, financial and administrative relations between the Centre and the States, and very little attention has been paid to the theory” (Paleker, 2006: 303). Accordingly, the attempts to explain the concept of federalism have given rise chiefly to three categories of the theories of federalism which are,

‘The classical theory tries to explain what federalism is, through its clear distinction between, and independence of each government from the other in a dual polity of two levels of government, general and regional, is central to the classical

theory. The original theory of federalism explains the circumstances favorable to the establishment of a federal system, and which thereby seeks to define federalism in terms of the circumstantial factors and forces. It is sustained by three categories of definitions (I) sociological theory, (II) the multiple-factor theory, and (III) political theory' (Paleker, 2006).

However, due to the inadequacies of the theory of federalism proposed by Wheare in the context of Nigeria. As it failed to take into cognizance the sociological 'behavioral' makeup of the federal state as emphasized by William Livingston (1869). That "the essence of federalism lies not in the institutional or constitutional structure but in society itself, by which the federal qualities of the society are articulated and protected" (Amadi et al, 2017: 43). Hence, such as its culture, language, religion, and in federal states like Nigeria ethnicity, which are all inherent attributes of any federal state.

Thus, these contradictions in Nigeria's federalism that has resulted to calls for secession, separatist groups, and agitations are as a result of years of misnomer in the federal practice, disregard for the rule of law, pedestrian political reform, military rule, ethnic and leadership corruption, and economic resources mismanagement. That has degenerated into a power politics game influenced and advocated through political parties and groups in the country.

Thoughts on Federalism

Accordingly, federalism is not just a system of government. More than that, it is the mechanism for harnessing the powers of two or more levels of government into a common, coordinate political jurisdiction (Onu and Okoli, 2024, p 2). Further, "the teleological import of federalism lies in its potential to wield different sub-nationalities into a functional national union, with a view to fostering shared progress" (Onu and Okoli, 2024, p 2). Therefore, the federal principle is an organizing principle and its fundamental purpose is essentially moral, as its *raison d'être* is to furnish the basis for order and stability but in a framework that formally acknowledges, protects and promotes human dignity, difference and diversity; as this is its moral content and purpose" (Burgess, 2006: 3). This is significant in the sense that over countless decades "human beings forge different forms of unity, different collectivities, which are structured and institutionalized in order to convert human goals and intentions into human achievement., 'and the residue resultant' creative tension that arises out of this predicament, the dual goal of unity and diversity, gives the federal principle its special appeal" (Burgess, 2006: 4). Which is in

addition to it been a noteworthy guiding principle that covers and articulates the roles, functions, obligations and essence of each level of governments, as finding a balance between governments at each level as well as between the levels of governments and their duties to the citizenry, as this is the true and distinct fundamental nature of federalism.

Federalism is universally acknowledged as the division of power, responsibilities between the central government and its component units, region and states. This idea correlates with that of Rozell and Wilcox (2019, as cited in Jega, 2020), “that federalism is the principle; some would say a conceptual or institutional framework, which defines ‘the division of authority among national and subnational governments’ in a given country, hence, such a country is referred to as a federation, or as operating in a federal system” (p. 1). Also, Jega (2020) agrees with this principle of federalism, stating that “whether the subnational governments were priory independent and came together voluntarily to form / create a federation, or federal system, or they were compelled by historical circumstances (such as colonization and conquest) and forced into such a union. The subnational governments have, by legal, constitutional arrangement, become the ‘federating units’, which have coordinate, or shared, responsibilities with the national government” (p. 1). It is also fundamental to note that the principles of federalism include according to Othman, Osman and Mohammed (2021): autonomy, common purpose, interdependence, intergovernmental solidarity, democracy, constitutionalism, and non-subordination”. These principles are not only essential but also indispensable to the practice of federalism” (Onu and Okoli, 2024, 3).

That the major aspects of interest within the principle of federalism have always been the division and sharing of powers between the central and component units and regions. This has also been a dicey and contentious aspect of federalism that has most often resulted in its dissolution and demise. Nonetheless, any other idealism will be very much contrary to the major objective of a federal system, which is non-conflictual management of diversity and sharing of power and resources for stable societal progress and socioeconomic development. Jega (2020) acknowledges “that both in law and in practice, most federations strive, and take care, to ensure equity and justice in the division of authority and resources among the federating units and in compliance with the rule of law, because doing this, nurtures conducive environment for peaceful coexistence, proactively blocks irredentist tendencies, and facilitate stable socioeconomic development, especially in the context of good, democratic, governance” (pp. 1&2).

Giuseppe and Matteo (2024), observed that “federalism appears to be in constant evolution. In this sense, the very scope of the analysis of federalism, its function and the sphere of its application has historically been debated and this is also due to the different historical emanations of the federal principle. After all, federalism has several purposes; indeed, the federal formula can be seen as a multi-functioning device that depends on the issues that characterise the political context” (p. III). Kymlicka (2005) explains that “since federalism is a notoriously flexible system, it can accommodate the fact that different groups desire different levels or forms of self-government” (p. 110), and can be accountable to them all. In his explanation of federalism, particularly as it concerns the practice and principles of federalism in a largely multinational state, comprised of major and minor ethnic groups such as in Nigeria.

Nigerian Federalism and Separatism

As Nwawube, Ezugworie, Igwe, Ugwu, and Ediba (2023) noted, Nigeria’s federalism evolved out of a series of historical accidents engineered by the British government. It is traceable to the colonial period” (p. 13). Initially, according to Umoh & Adeyi (2019) “federalism was adopted for Nigeria to effectively manage her multi-nationalities through negotiations and compromises on issues of political and national importance. Since, it allows for the existence side by side, of a myriad of groups differentiated by culture, history, norms, and so forth and necessitates forging a common identity unclouded by ethnic cleavages as a prelude to national growth and development” (p. 1). Nonetheless, Onu and Okoli (2024) observed that federalism in Nigeria has been an arcane hodgepodge whose essence appears to be in contention with its end. Motivated principally by imperative of fostering ‘unity in diversity’, Nigerian federalism has, over the years, witnessed myriads of contradictions and crises that have not only negated its purpose but also threatened its existence” (p.3).

Jega (2021) argues that ‘there are no perfect federations or for that matter “true federalism”, ‘because’ every federation is a product of the dynamics of its historical evolution and inter-group (ethnic, religious, linguistic, cultural, etc.) relations” (p. 2). But notes that,

“Nigeria is one of the worst models of political accommodation of diversity, as well as power and resource sharing. Implying that, unlike most relatively stable federations, the efficacy of Nigeria’s federal system has been undermined, essentially by an imbalance, as well as inequities in the allocation of responsibilities, and distribution of power and resources,

between the national and subnational units. This imbalance is a product of (1) Nigeria's colonial experience, (2) subsequent post-colonial authoritarian military rule, and (3) a series of reckless, bad, and essentially undemocratic governance, especially in the 21 years of civil 'democratic' rule" (Jega, 2021: 2&3).

Onu and Okolie (2024) also suggest same, that "although there is no such thing as 'true federalism', such a value-based, prescriptive phraseology suggests invariably that what is being practiced as federalism in some climes may, as well, have been a contradiction in terms" (3). Nevertheless, in the case of a multiethnic state like Nigeria, federalism as a system of government is a form of security guaranteed in a nation of diversity, that's why this guaranteed security remains the "predominant reason for the formation of 'federal' communities and ultimately states" (Winkler, 2003: 14). Nevertheless, in Nigeria the subscription to federalism has remained shaky.

Particularly, with the steady increase in occurrences of conflict of one form or the other, related to separatist agitations and secession. Which has often been pursued in disjointed ways, and motivated by either political, economic/financial, socio-cultural and religious factors, as well as other changing circumstances as they occur. However, through all these many altered forms and goal of separatist agitations and secessionist movements in Nigeria, one unaltered circumstance has held firm in the separatist agitation and secessionist movements, especially within the southeastern geo-political zone of the country amongst the Igbo's. That the federal system of governance practiced in Nigeria is skewed and biased, and does not reflect the true federal character, an essential and undisputed component of the theory of federalism. Hence, the uprising of separatist groups and the threats of secession ongoing in the south-eastern geo-political zone of Nigeria has been blamed on the factors stemming from the imbalances characteristic in Nigeria's federalism, and structure. Including the additional factors of marginalization, alleged bias and perceived political discrimination.

Through disregard of federal character principles, resource management, religious and ethnic manipulations, and ineffectual political reforms have resulted in proliferation of separatist groups, agitations, and particularly armed political violence not only in the southeastern part of Nigeria, but every other geo-political zone of the country. Therefore, Nigeria's mismanaged federalism has worsened national insecurity, particularly due to the exacerbation of separatist groups, and various agitations. Specifically, as a result of the insincerity of political state actors

in their role and duties in governance affairs. A situation that threatens the attainment of enduring political, economic, and socio-cultural policy objectives in Nigeria. National objectives which have somewhat continued to be a mirage of possibilities for successive governments. Especially as observed that the internal security situation in Nigeria by Nwagboso (2018: 15&29) is “currently more worrisome, as it has been difficult to address by the National Security Policy, and impacted negatively on the country's desired socio-economic development. This pathetic situation has resulted in multiferation of several criminal groups agitating one thing or the other against the local, state, and federal governments in Nigeria”.

Secession and Separatism in Modern states

Secession is alleged to be an “idea antithetical to the modern state. It is opposed almost without exception, because it involves the withdrawal of territory, the lifeblood and defining characteristic of the state. Territorial withdrawal by a disaffected group not only risks weakening a state economically and politically but also redefines the very meaning and identity of the state in question” (Bishai, 2005: 93). With the global rise in secessionist groups and secession, the persistent argument for and against secession has not really resolved the issues connected to the phenomenon either in theory or in practice. Then there are the many arguments about the reasons and methods of its attainment, motivated either by democratic or ethnic sentiments. If it should be acknowledged, and rightly embedded in the constitution as well as recognized by national and international laws. Accordingly, Lehning (2005) writes that among “political theorists of secession a variety of theories are at present available, of which one can distinguish three broad approaches ‘of secession’; the anti-secessionists, who oppose the right to secession, except under certain conditions; the pro-secessionists, who support it, subject to certain conditions; and those who support or oppose secession, depending on a balance of considerations” (p. 2). There is a point of correlation amongst all three theories or approaches to the phenomenon of secession, which is that the all pre-suppose that there are always conditions that may necessitate and determine the option of secession of a state, unit from a federal arrangement. These conditions are fundamental particularly if there are attached concerns of other ethnic identities situated within the secessionist group, such as border remapping, and resource sharing.

In Africa secessionist clamor, separatist groups, and agitations are on the increase, and as noted have influenced reactions in several nations like Sudan, Nigeria, Ethiopia, and Somalia. Thomas and Falola (2020: 1) claim that,

“African secessionist conflicts of the postcolonial era remain rare and, in many ways, exceptional phenomena, that have blended politics and violence in ways unlike any other struggles on the continent. The structure and goals of these conflicts have evolved over the course of four decades of independence and been continually shaped by the experience of the preceding separatist wars, the international reaction to their prosecution, and the broader global political trends”.

Such that the uprising of self-determination, separatist agitations and secessionist trends may continue in Africa, resisting subjugation or control. Especially as many African countries have a foundation of the prerequisite of ‘the mixture of politics and violence’. Thomas and Falola (2020: 2) liken this to the famous observation of Clausewitz that “war is the pursuit of politics by other means. Therefore, war is the ultimate expression of political violence, an organized effort to drive forward a political ideal, supported by a political body and carrying forth a conscious or unconscious ideology”. Which in the case of separatist agitations and secession, may necessitate or result to political protest, crises against the state to achieve their objectives.

After sixty years of Nigeria’s independence, there are still strong and persistent agitations by some interest groups in the polity, demanding for the immediate restructuring of the existing political arrangement. Their agitations are coming on the heels of the Nigerian federalism that has totally assumed the attributes of a unitary system of government” (Odalonu, 2024, 8). The recent upsurge in agitation for separatism and secession in Nigeria, particularly exemplified by movements among the Igbo, Yoruba, and other ethnic groups, including groups such as, “the Odu’a People’s Congress (OPC), Movement for the Sovereign State of the Ogoni People (MOSSOP), Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB), Arewa Consultative Forum (ACF), and the nascent Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB)” (Onu and Okoli, 2024, 4&5). Highlights, a significant socio-political phenomenon based in historical grievances and bias, ethnic rivalries, and political-economic marginalization and disparities.

The complex scope of Nigerian politics, famously shaped by British colonial legacies and a problematic post-independence governance structure of nepotism has led to persistent clamour and demand for political restructuring, self-determination, and autonomy. Recently, the

separatist sentiments and agitations by the Indigenous People of Biafra IPOB in the southeast region motivated by the perceived political-economic marginalization and disparities especially in federal character principles, has resulted to protracted conflicts, crises, numerous deaths and killings, destruction of properties and insecurity as illustrated in the diagram.

Table 1: Insecurity and Resultant Deaths between Jan 2021- June 2023 in Southeast states from Nigeria Security Tracker (NST)

STATE	January 2021	2022	June 2023
Abia	76	55	16
Anambra	227	201	95
Ebonyi	272	109	33
Enugu	81	141	18
Imo	295	121	104

Source: Kehinde Ogunyale (ICIR, 2023)

Causes of Separatism and Secession in Nigeria

Ethnic and Political Competitions: Ethnicity plays a critical role in Nigeria's political landscape, often serving as a facade for deeper intra-elite struggles for power and resources. While elite groups leverage ethnic identities to advance their agendas, the broader populace increasingly views ethnicity as an ideological lens through which governance issues are assessed” (Adibe, 2017). Also, this is compounded by Nigeria's political-historical structure, with the divide along and among regional major ethnic groups of Hausa-Fulani, Yoruba, and Igbo has intensified rivalries, particularly in regards of competition for the control of the central government, and its associated economic benefits” (Agbeze, 2025, Mbachu, 2021).

Socioeconomic Issues and Grievances

Socioeconomic conditions also contribute significantly to the rise of separatism in Nigeria. Many marginalized groups perceive systemic discrimination and unequal resource distribution from the federal government, leading to frustrations that separatist leaders exploit to mobilize support” (Abasili, Ezeneme, and Ewokike, 2023). The glaring lack of adequate infrastructure in many parts of the country, nepotic and poor governance, bias and alleged neglect, particularly in southeastern Nigeria. Worsens these grievances and gives power to demands for greater autonomy or secession (Abasili et al., 2023, Nwanike, 2022). The demographic divide in support for separatism reveals that those most affected by poverty and unemployment are

more likely to endorse separatist agendas, while support wanes among more affluent populations” (Nwanike, 2022)

Actions of Separatist Groups

Current separatist movements in Nigeria, including those led by figures such as Nnamdi Kanu of the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) and Sunday Igboho in the southwest, have been galvanized by feelings of insecurity and the perception of federal government discrimination” (Abasili et al., 2023). These movements draw on shared narratives of victimhood and injustice to foster ethnic solidarity and mobilize support” (Adibe, 2017). Moreover, the broader context of global separatist movements underscores that such agitations are often a response to local grievances magnified by historical and sociopolitical factors” (Abasili et al., 2023).

Tensions and Faults within Separatist Groups

Notwithstanding, the outward show of unity among individuals and groups agitating for separatism, there exist multiple internal bickering within these movements. Issues such as competition for leadership, differing opinions and visions for the separatist groups, and doubt concerning effectiveness of separatist strategies may undermine their cohesiveness” (Adibe, 2017, Abasili et al., 2023). Consequently, while separatist sentiments may rise in response to immediate grievances, the sustainability of these movements is uncertain, particularly if the country's democratic framework evolves and addresses the underlying socioeconomic challenges” (Abasili et al., 2023).

Impacts of Separatism

In Nigeria, various separatist movements in are not only showing proof of regional ambitions for self-government, it also reveals problems of identity, governance structure, and fiscal/resource distribution. The steady increase in occurrences of conflict of one form or the other, related to separatist agitations and secession, which although have been pursued in disjointed ways, motivated by either political, economic/financial, socio-cultural, and religious factors, as well as other changing circumstances as the occur. However, thorough all these many altered forms and goals of separatist agitations and secessionist movements in Nigeria, one unaltered circumstance has held firm in the separatist agitation and secessionist movements, especially within the southeastern geo-political zone of the country amongst the Igbo. That the federal system of governance practiced in Nigeria is skewered and biased and does not reflect the true federal character, an essential and undisputed component of the theory

of federalism. Hence, the uprising of separatist groups and the threats of secession ongoing in the south-eastern geo-political zone of Nigeria have been blamed on this misnomer.

Conclusion

Specifically, the implications of these failings have “impacted negatively on the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) of Nigeria were grossly affected, thereby resulting to unemployment, poverty and their attendant implications” (Nwagboso, 2018). As individuals and groups masquerading as state and non-state actors struggle to attain, grab political power, national resources, and revenue of the country. At the expense of millions of other Nigerians. Leading to disequilibrium, and dissatisfaction with the status quo that will create unrest, agitations and insecurity. As witnessed with the increased worsened spate of insecurity within all six geo-political zones of the country.

Necessitating, my recommendations that firstly; the government and representatives of the people act quickly, decisively and proactively to institute far reaching incisive political reforms, and laws that will impact on the wellbeing of the people, drive human development, sustainable growth. Secondly, infrastructural expansion around the country to curtail the instances of dissatisfaction with the Nigeria federal system that fosters insecurity.

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