

BETWEEN ETHNIC MARGINALISATION AND FREEDOM. UNDERSTANDING SECESSIONIST AGITATION IN THE SOUTHEAST, NIGERIA

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Abstract

Freedom is ingrained in human history, and when it is threatened, humans usually improvise ways to safeguard it. One of such ways is to fight or build a resilient mechanism to properly adjust to the threat. This study examined ethnic marginalisation-secession linkage in the context of Southeast Nigeria. Previous studies have focused on collective memory of lost war, ideology and systemic exclusion. While these causes are outgrowths of marginalisation, they were limited in their focus on specific measures that empirically test marginalisation. This study drew its data strengths from the pool of secondary sources, including government reports, newspapers, articles, books and archival records.

The study found that three strands of marginalisation influenced secessionist agitations in the region: political, economic, and social. The study therefore recommends a sovereign regional conference that will bring together critical stakeholders, including representatives of government, international bodies, youth, traditional rulers, civil society, and the media, for a roundtable discussion on issues of marginalisation, sincere solutions, and committed implementation. The critical role of the region's political elites in light of entrenched socio-economic backwardness was also recommended.

Keywords: ethnic marginalisation; freedom; Nigeria; secession; Southeast

Introduction

The secessionist agenda in the Southeast, Nigeria, is one of the burning issues in the national discourse, not least because it led to the first-ever civil war in Nigeria. While historical, it appears to have intensified in the post-independence period, as reflected in the daily casualties, wilful destruction and enforced disappearances recorded across the region, following virulent and persistent confrontation between the separatists and the Nigerian authorities. For instance, Amnesty International reported that between 2021 and 2023 alone, 1,844 lives were lost in a clash mainly between the state and non-state actors². The state's inability to manage the situation has not only led to a frightening security crisis in the region but also created opportunities to be exploited by different violent groups to advance their individual and group agendas, often separate from the broader secessionist struggle. For instance, the environment has contributed to the rise and proliferation of armed groups, including the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) and its security wing, the Eastern Network,

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² Amnesty International, *Nigeria: A Decade of Impunity: Attacks and Unlawful Killings in South-East Nigeria*, 2025, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/afr44/9363/2025/en/> (12.11.2025)

the Unknown Gunmen, and the state-backed paramilitary outfit commonly referred to as the “Ebube Agu”¹.

Previous studies have focused on a range of intersecting causation factors, such as the collective trauma of the loss of the civil war², Nigeria’s systemic and structural complexities, which determine who is excluded and included³ and the state’s repressive inclination⁴. For instance, Opara and Amadi situated the re-emergence of Pro-Biafran secessionist agitation within the context of structural, historical and political legacies of the Nigerian Civil War. Drawing comparatively from secessionist struggles globally, the authors maintained that only a strategic recalibration would address the crisis.⁵ Nwangwu observed that harassment, arrests, killings, abductions, proscription, torture and extraordinary rendition are responsible for the resurgent Biafran agitation.⁶ While these perspectives identify vital mediating dynamics, they paid little or no attention to the fundamental role of marginalisation as a driver of secessionism, particularly when examined through the lens of the pool of documentary evidence.

The relationship between marginalisation and secession is well established in both theory and international legal discourse. International instruments, such as the United Nations Charter and the African Union Charter⁷, recognise rights to secession, particularly in regard to oppression and domination, from which marginalisation is derived. For instance, Article 20(1) of the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights (the African Charter) stipulates that “all peoples shall have (the) right to existence. They shall have the unquestionable and inalienable right to self-determination”⁸. Article 20(2) further states that “colonized or oppressed people shall have the right to free themselves from the bonds of domination by resorting to any means recognized by the international community”⁹. These provisions underscore the nexus between systemic marginalization and secession, while situating secession within the broader context of resistance to internal and external domination and oppression.¹⁰ Within the global context, the increasing wave of secessionist agitations in countries such as Crimea, Catalonia, Kosovo, and the Southern Cameroon and South Sudan, reflects the enduring significance of these provisions. While some have attained statehood

¹ Emeka F. Obi, Daniel A. Ndom, Okey Mbionwu, *The Role of State and Non-State Actors in Governance in South East Nigeria*, “Journal of the Management Sciences”, Vol. 61, No. 9, 2024, pp. 131-141

² Onyedikachi Madueke, *Reimagining Biafra: Between Historical Memory and Political Reality*, “The Round Table”, 2025, pp.1-21, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00358533.2025.2559888>; Olajide Oloyele, *Biafra in the Present: Trauma of a Loss*, “African Sociological Review”, Vol. 13, No.1, 2009, pp. 2-25

³ Peter O. Mbah, Chikaodiri Nwangwu, Sam C. Ugwu, *Contentious elections, political exclusion, and challenges of national integration in Nigeria*, “Cogent Social Science”, Vol. 5, No. 1, 2019, p. 1565615

⁴ Amaechi K. Justin, Jackson T. Jack, *From Civil to 'Uncivil' Society? Separatist Social Movements and the Shrinking Civic Space in South-East Nigeria*, “International Journal of Comparative Studies in International Relations and Development”, Vol. 10, No. 1, 2024, pp.1-18

⁵ Opara I. Gerald, Amadi C. Godwin, *The Resurgence of Biafra Agitation: Historical Legacies, Contemporary Politics, and the Quest for Self-Determination*, “Ofuruma: Journal of the Humanities”, Vol. 2, No. 1&2, 2024, pp.18-29

⁶ *Idem*

⁷ African Union, *Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Establishment of an African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights*, 1981, https://au.int/sites/default/files/treaties/36390-treaty-0011_-_african_charter_on_human_and_peoples_rights_e.pdf (9.11.2025)

⁸ *Ibidem*, p.6

⁹ *Ibidem*, p.6

¹⁰ Alex. C. Ekeke, *The Right to External Self-Determination of the South-East People of Nigeria: A View from International Law*, “Journal of African Law”, Vol. 69, 2025, pp. 441–457

(for instance, South Sudan, Kosovo, Eritrea), others are yet to (for example, the Biafran agitation in Southeast Nigeria, Catalonia, Crimea and Southern Cameroon).

This study investigates the ethnic marginalization-secession nexus in the context of the Biafran agitation in Southeast Nigeria. It makes a case that while the wave of secession is not peculiar to Southeast Nigeria alone (for example, it also sweeps through the Southwest and South-South among Ogoni people and Igbo-speaking Deltans), its virulence has continued to produce an existential threat to residents in Southeast, observers and the Nigerian state. Methodologically, the study adopts a descriptive survey research design that prioritises data from secondary sources, such as published articles, books, newspapers and organisational reports. Theoretically, a just-cause or remedial theory of secession is deployed to demonstrate how marginalisation, which produces grave injustices, political exclusion, systemic discrimination and repressive tendencies, triggers the secessionist agenda in the South East, Nigeria. The strength of the study rests on its capacity to contribute to the growing scholarship on global secessionism, with particular focus on how marginalisation can influence secessionist struggle beyond the popular discourse of the previous loss of war, the quest for resource control, the collective trauma of past events and the expansion of ideology.

The Context

The region known as Southeast Nigeria (commonly referred to as the Igboland by its inhabitants) can be contextualised from geographic, economic and political dimensions. Geographically, the Southeast region is one of Nigeria's six geopolitical zones. It comprises five states: Imo, Anambra, Enugu, Abia, and Ebonyi. The region occupies a strategic location, given that it is bounded by the River Niger (the largest river in West Africa and the third-longest in Africa) on the West, the Cross River to the east, the flat North Central to the north, and the riverine Niger Delta to the south.

Ethnically and linguistically, the Southeast is predominantly Igbo. The region covers about 76,358 km² and has an estimated population of 22 million people¹. According to Okali, Okpara and Olawoye², about 70 per cent of the population of the region lives in rural areas. As a result, it is known for the production of key agro-products such as palm oil, yams, cassava, maize, rice and cocoyam. Some of these products, particularly yams, have a cultural symbol that depicts strength, wealth, prosperity and identity, as reflected in the annual cultural celebration of *Iri Iji* (New Yam Festival) in most parts of the region³. The zone is also rich in mineral resources, such as crude oil, iron and tin, which explains the complexity of the secessionist agenda and the state's response to address it.

Economically, the people of the region are also known for entrepreneurial skills. Nnewi, one of the commercial hubs in Anambra State, is often regarded as the "Japan of Africa" due to its vibrant commercial and trading networks.⁴ However, the entrepreneurial skills have not significantly translated to human development outcomes, as poverty, unemployment, and hunger remain persistent challenges. For instance, evidence suggests that

¹ The Guardian, *Only 7m of South East's 22m Population with NINs*, 2022, <https://guardian.ng/technology/only-7m-of-south-east-22m-population-with-nins/> (10.11.2025)

² David Okali; Enoch Okpara; Janice Olawoye, *Profile of South-Eastern Nigeria and Description of the Study Area*, United Kingdom, International Institute for Environment and Development, 2001, p.12

³ James N. Nnoruga, *The Preservation of Agricultural Heritages: A Prerequisite Factor Towards Economic Nationalism in the South-East of Nigeria*, "Aku", Vol. 5, No. 2, 2024, pp. 59-69

⁴ The Guardian, *Nnewi's Manufacturing Sector's Potential as the 'Japan of Africa'*, 2024. <https://guardian.ng/opinion/nnewis-manufacturing-sectors-potential-as-the-japan-of-africa/> (10.11.2025)

the region recorded the highest unemployment rate among Nigeria's geopolitical zones in 2023 at 9.03%, followed by the South-South at 7.24%, and the Southwest at 5.07%, while the northern zones recorded lower rates. This suggests a disproportionate employment distribution in Nigeria, with the Southern zones, particularly the Southeast, disproportionately affected¹.

While the broader Nigerian socio-economic challenges could be blamed for the disproportionate development outcomes, the significant impact of insecurity, particularly the enforcement of the Monday sit-at-home, cannot be overemphasized. Evidence has suggested that between 2020 and 2025, the region lost approximately N7.6 trillion, in addition to systemic disruption in education, governance and livelihoods. Commercial hubs, like Onitsha main Market, one of the largest markets in Africa, have been forced into closures, resulting in lost transactions and business uncertainties for both traders and consumers. Attempts at resisting compliance with the order have often led to grave human rights violations, with reports indicating hundreds of casualties linked to enforcement-related clashes².

Politically, the Southeast region is the only region which has engaged in a civil war (popularly known as the Biafran War) with the Nigerian government. The conflict claimed many lives on both sides of the Biafran people and the Nigerian state. The war was driven by a complex combination of colonial legacy, inter-ethnic rivalry and the leadership dynamics of key figures, such as Late Chief Odumegwu Ojukwu (the leader of the Biafran nation) and Yakubu Gowon (the Nigerian Head of State). As a result, any mention of the Igbo or Southeast not only resonates a consciousness of a people once branded rebellious for seeking a separate state for themselves, but also a people who strive for freedom from a persecuting state, depending on one's perspective³. The combination of these geographic, economic and political markers reinforces the ethnic marginalization of the region, thereby providing a robust understanding of the subsequent sections that support the narrative of marginalization-secession linkage in the Southeast region.

Ethnic Marginalization, Freedom and Secession: A Conceptual Linkage

Ethnic marginalization typifies a distinct yet significant form of exclusion beyond other socio-demographic categories, such as gender, religion, occupation, and class. To fully grasp the concept, it is important to disaggregate it into two components: ethnic and marginalization. The term 'ethnic' or simply 'ethnicity' refers to a group of people who identify with one another based on shared history, ancestry, language, religion and traditions.⁴ In other words, ethnicity is deeply embedded in human association and identity. Though socially constructed, it fosters in individuals and groups a sense of belonging, interaction, communication and acceptance. While every person naturally has an ethnic affiliation, when it is politicized, it assumes a stereotypical dimension, reinforcing inclusion and exclusion, and providing fertile ground for ethnic conflicts and wars.⁵

¹ Agora Policy, *Highlights of Nigeria's Latest Labour Force Reports, 2024*, <https://agorapolicy.org/our-blogs/189-highlights-of-nigerias-latest-labour-force-reports.html> (10.11.2025)

² *Idem*

³ Faluyi O. Temitope, Samuel K. Okunade, Ebenezer O. Oni, Leo O. Asumu, *Interrogating the Secession Struggle of Biafra in Nigeria Within the Context of the Agitation and Emergence of South Sudan*, "Bandung", Vol. 13, No. 1, 2026, pp. 46-72

⁴ Donald L. Horowitz, *Ethnic Groups in Conflict*. University of California Press, 1985, p. 53

⁵ Rehana S. Hashmi; Gulshan Majeed, *Politics of Ethnicity: A Theoretical Perspective*, "A Research Journal of South Asian Studies", Vol. 30, No.1, 2015, pp. 319-331

On the other hand, marginalization, according to Verma and Gayathri,¹ rests on the principle of exclusion, whereby individuals or communities are deprived of their rights due to endogenous (ethnicity, gender, religion, linguistic) and exogenous factors (poverty, geographical location, lifestyle, history). Both sets of factors combine to reinforce varying degrees of deprivation. Chandler and Munday² defined marginalization as a process of social exclusion in which individuals or groups are pushed to the margins, denied economic, political or symbolic power. Andersen adds that marginalization must be understood from both perspectives: that of the marginalized and those who marginalize.³ Therefore, ethnic marginalization can be broadly described as the political, social, and economic exclusion of an ethnic group based on endogenous and exogenous factors, to the extent that it is regarded as an 'outsider'.

Freedom is a core human rights principle, globally recognised in the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)* (1948)⁴ and enshrined in national constitutions. In Nigeria, Article IV of the 1999 Constitution (as amended) guarantees rights, such as freedom of expression, assembly, association, movement, and religion⁵. Haller describes freedom as the most essential basic political value, equally vital in personal, social, and economic life. Its essentiality explains the revolutions recorded throughout history, suggesting the centrality of freedom to human existence. Three strands of freedom are often highlighted:

- Democratic freedom (Kantian moral autonomy): This component argues that people are free when they are self-governing and subject to rules they establish for themselves by reason rather than outside influences or their own wants.⁶ This requires a public legal framework that ensures every citizen's equal freedom to be "masters of themselves" by being liberated from the capricious will of others.⁷ In order to provide this equal freedom, the state must ensure that citizens are held responsible for their behavior and moral character.
- Economic-liberal: This component is rooted in liberal thought. It stresses individual liberty, private ownership of property and minimal state intervention in the economy. It emphasizes a free market economy whereby individuals are allowed to pursue their own economic interests. This would engender harmony through efficient allocation of resources.⁸

¹ Geeta Verma, S. Gayathri, *Marginalisation, Inclusion and Empowerment - Understanding the Relationship and Processes in Lives of Girls*, Proceedings of INTCESS14- International Conference on Education and Social Sciences Proceedings, 3-5 February 2014- Istanbul, Turkey, 2014

² Daniel Chandler, Roy Munday, *A Dictionary of Media and Communication*, Oxford University Press, 2011

³ Martin B. Andersen, *Unraveling the Patterns of Marginalization: Four Quantitative Studies on Students' Experience of Social Marginalization in Danish Public Schools*, Aalborg Universitetsforlag, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.54337/aau561775934> (12.11.2025)

⁴ United Nations, United Nations Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), 1948, <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights> (8.11.2025)

⁵ Nigeria, 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999, <https://nigeriarights.gov.ng/files/constitution.pdf> (8.11.2025)

⁶ Immanuel Kant, *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, in Immanuel Kant, *Ethical Philosophy*, James W. Ellington (trans.), Hackett Publishing Co, Indianapolis, IA, 1785, 1983

⁷ Edward Demenchonok, *Learning from Kant: On Freedom*, "Revista Portuguesa de Filosofia", Vol. 75, No.1, 2019, pp. 191–230

⁸ Omar Hernandez, *Economic Freedom and Prosperity: A History of Liberal Thought and Its Institutional Impact*, 2024, <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.5118247> (3.11.2025)

- Socialist freedom: It emphasizes positive liberty, linking freedom to human happiness and self-organization in both personal and economic life.¹ Instead of focusing only on the lack of external restraints (negative liberty), it views freedom as necessitating social ownership of the means of production to permit true individual and communal self-determination. It relates freedom to the corporate capacity of a society to govern its own conditions, such as the livelihood of workers.^{2 3}

While these philosophic foundations offer distinct perspectives regarding the concept of freedom, they, however, emphasize the compelling importance of constitutionalism, liberty, autonomy and self-determination as the nitty-gritty of human existence. In the context of ethnic relations, ‘freedom’ extends beyond individual civil liberties, to include collective political freedom, whereby a group participate collectively in governance, exercises the right to interact and demand equal access to national patrimony. This analytical distinction is vital because secessionist movements rarely emerge from socio-economic dissatisfaction. Instead, it stems from perceived exclusion, profiling, and unequal treatment. While ethnicity is a social construct that carries no significant value beyond identification, it assumes an exclusionary dimension when dignified with power. In such situations, grievances become politicized, and the state’s legitimacy may become eroded.

In the context of Southeast Nigeria, due to perceived institutional and systemic injustices, freedom has been framed as not just the enjoyment of constitutional rights, but the capacity of a people to exercise meaningful political agency, preserve collective dignity and influence decisions affecting their common existence. Secession, therefore, is not just a separation, but a commitment to address lost autonomy, systemic domination and entrenched exclusion. Thus, the connection between freedom and secession transcends philosophical premises to include institutional and political dimensions. In the context of ethnic marginalization, freedom is denied, and basic human rights are deprived.⁴ It contrasts with the aphorism that ‘all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights’. Against this backdrop, the denial of political freedom serves as a critical analytical capsule between ethnic marginalization and secessionist mobilization

Secession is a contested concept despite its centuries-long practice⁵. While definitions vary, consensus on its core elements remains elusive, and theories continue to emerge to explain the causes and implications of secession. Rodríguez-Pose and Stermšek perceived secession as a fashion⁶. Pavković traces the word ‘secession’ to the Latin word “secessio”, meaning “to go away” or “depart”, first used in 494 BCE to describe the withdrawal of the Roman people from the senate and the city of Rome to the Sacred Mount. In contemporary usage, Pavkovic defines secession as a withdrawal (detachment) of territory and its people from an existing state⁷. Shikova sees secession as a political movement aimed at a specific

¹ Paul Raekstad, *Freedom, Socialism, and Property-Owning Democracy*, “Journal of Applied Philosophy”, Vol. 39, No. 4, 2022, pp. 664-681

² Kandalla Balagopal, *What Is “Socialist Freedom”?* “Economic and Political Weekly”, Vol. 24, No. 31, 1989, pp. 1761-1763

³ Max Haller, *Freedom, in Radical Values: The Interests of People and Their Social-Political Implementation*, Springer, Wiesbaden, 2025

⁴ Aret Karademir, *Butler and Heidegger: On the Relation between Freedom and Marginalization*, “Hypatia”, Vol. 29, No.4, 2014, pp. 824-839

⁵ Natalija Shikova, *The Phenomenon of Secession*, in *Self-Determination and Secession*, Springer, 2023

⁶ Andres Rodríguez-Pose, Marko Stermšek, *The Economics of Secession: Analysing the Economic Impact of the Collapse of the Former Yugoslavia*, “Territory, Politics, Governance”, Vol. 3, No.1, 2015, pp. 73–96

⁷ Aleksandar Pavković, *Secession*, In Mortimer Sellers; Stephan Kirste (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of the Philosophy of Law and Social Philosophy*, Springer, Dordrecht, 2023

population within a defined territory seeking to establish itself as a new independent state¹. This definition, though simple, captures a complex phenomenon that has continued to test the sovereignty of nations globally.

In a separate study, Shikova contends that secession possesses unique dynamics. Secessionists will attempt to persuade their target group that the state they currently inhabit is alien, promising enhanced protection from injustice, greater political influence, and increased economic resources in their own state. In the context of Southeast Nigeria, secessionists nurture hopes for improved representation should the secession materialize, given the region's abundant human and natural resources². Yet, as Shinkova rightly notes, such calculations are frequently irrational and may lead to depression, trauma and regret when unrealized. Moreover, once demands for secession are articulated, secessionists typically seek external support, shifting their international efforts toward legitimizing their cause. The parent state, however, employs various strategies to counter secessionist movements, often with backing from the international community³.

Ker-Lindsay outlines six reasons why the parent country opposes secessionism: emotional connection to the land; displacements of populations within their own territory; financial considerations; historical and cultural significance; apprehension regarding additional secession; and national pride⁴. The economic consequences of secession can be very severe. Bari et al. discovered that the secession of South Sudan resulted in approximately a 72.00% increase in food prices in Sudan, jeopardizing national food security.⁵ Similarly, Reynaerts and Vanschoonbeek argue that secession can reduce the GDP of the parent state by as low as 20%⁶.

It is important to note that marginalization, as used in this paper, does not merely refer to feelings of dissatisfaction or relative deprivation, but it denotes a persistent and deliberate pattern of structural exclusion, visible in the contexts of political representation, resource allocation, public institutions and national power configurations. This distinction is necessary because not all socio-economic grievances produce reverse feelings of secessionist agitations. Secessionist movements occur when a group perceives structural and systemic deprivation that makes equal participation and representation practically difficult. In the context of Southeast Nigeria, secessionist tendencies are reinforced by empirical structural indicators, such as disparities in access to executive power, social belonging and interaction, state creation, local government distribution, infrastructure development and resource allocation. These conditions transform ordinary grievance into a collective feeling of exclusion.

Furthermore, the concept of freedom as used in the paper moves beyond just liberty to emphasize collective political freedom. It deliberately moves beyond theoretical illuminations as provided by democratic, liberal, and socialist thinkers, to a more practical premise of the capacity of a people to fully participate in the political affairs of a nation, freely relate with others and determine their socio-political destiny without structural, systemic, and/or institutional constraints. By this, freedom is not just individual civil liberties, but collective

¹ Shikova, *Op.cit.*, p.101

² Natalija Shikova, *The Dynamics of Secession, in Self-Determination and Secession*, Springer, 2023, pp.109-132

³ *Ibidem*, p.109

⁴ James Ker-Lindsay, *Understanding State Responses to Secession*, "Peacebuilding", Vol. 2, No.1, 2014, pp.28-44

⁵ Abdul Bari, Khalid Bin Kamal, Mohammad Osman Gani, Ghulam Dastgir Khan, Mohammad Ajmal Khuram, Shamsul Hadi Shams, *Exploring the Impact of Secession on Food Prices: A Case Study of Sudan*, "Agricultural and Food Economics", Vol. 13, No.52, 2025, p.1

⁶ Jo Reynaerts, Jakob Vanschoonbeek, *The Economics of State Fragmentation: Assessing the Economic Impact of Secession*, "Journal of Applied Economics", Vol. 37, No.1, 2022, pp. 82–115

inclusion that strengthens the sense of 'self' or 'selves' within a national political geography. The denial of such a collective inclusion creates political and psychological conditions for secessionist tendencies to sprout and undermines the state's legitimacy to provide inclusive governance. Secessionist mobilization, therefore, becomes an alternative political project aimed at reclaiming self, autonomy and dignity amid perceived injustices.

Generally, the ethnic marginalization-freedom-secession nexus, therefore, presents a complex case that merits detailed study. Freedom, as a core component of human existence, embodies equality and individual liberty and is protected by national laws. Conversely, issues of grave injustice, oppression and human rights abuses threaten individual or group freedom to exist or associate with others within or outside national boundaries, thereby linking ethnic marginalization to secession. While the latter may have profound socio-economic consequences for both the seceding and the parent states, such costs may not deter agitation, since nothing can be equated to freedom, the force that reignites a sense of *self*, whether in-group or out-group.

Theoretical Underpinning

Several theories explore the cause, conditions, and implications of secession. Buchanan classified the theories into two broad categories: Primary Right theories and the Remedial Right Only Theories. Primary Right theories contend that a group has a general right to secede even in the absence of grave injustice, provided certain conditions are fulfilled.¹ The paper adopts the Just-cause or remedial theory of secession to demonstrate how marginalisation, rooted in grave injustices, political exclusion, systemic discrimination and repressive tendencies, triggers the secessionist agenda in Southeast Nigeria. The Key proponent of this theory is Allen Buchanan, alongside associated scholars such as Wayne Norman, George Kyris and Maurice Brisland. The theory holds that secession is a *last resort*, justified only when a group's fundamental rights have been severely violated, and all other avenues for redress have failed. In other words, the theory argues that a group has a right to secede in response to oppression, unlike other theories such as Primary right" or "Choice" theories and Plebiscitary" theories, which argue that a group can secede without prior injustice or oppression. As Pérez and Sanjaume rightly note, remediless place the burden of proof of secession on the secessionists².

Norman, however, contends that instead of remedial or just-cause secessions, secessionists should pursue a constitutional right of secession, given that it may be a difficult task to determine who qualifies for a just because that requires an arbitrator. A constitutional right of secession, though demanding, such as requiring a majority referendum, may provide a clearer legal pathway.³ Buchanan counters that constitutional provisions are only one possible instrument for an unjustly treated group, and their relevance depends on the specific situation.⁴ Other remediless, such as Sunstein, argue that secession belongs only in the domain of moral principles, rather than legal rights. They see secession as a form of resistance that can be justified only when used against an extremely unjust government, much

¹ Allen Buchanan, *Theories of Secession*, "Philosophy & Public Affairs", Vol. 26, No.1, 1997, pp. 31-61

² Lluís Pérez; Marc Sanjaume, *Legalizing Secession: The Catalan Case*, "Journal of Conflictology", Vol. 4, No.2, 2013, pp. 3-12

³ Wayne Norman, *The Ethics of Secession as the Regulation of Secessionist Politics*, in Margaret Moore (ed.), *National Self-determination and Secession*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1998

⁴ Allen Buchanan, *The Morality of Political Divorce from Port Sumter to Lithuania and Quebec*, Westview Press, Oxford, 1991

like revolution or civil disobedience. However, it should not be “legalized” as an instrument for resistance¹.

Corroborating Buchanan and others, who emphasize the role of geographic, political and social factors, secession in the Southeast region has taken on a forceful tone, due to the Nigerian government’s posture over the years. Nigeria, though democratizing, still exhibits vestiges of authoritarianism, long after thirteen years of military rule. In addition to the colonial legacy, the post-military governance has been combative, exclusionary and intolerant of dissenting voices, repressively managing internal security challenges. Thus, the virulence of the secessionist agenda in the Southeast can be understood through the prism of those whose enduring agitation for justice has consistently been met with severe resistance. As subsequent sections demonstrate, the remedial theory has become a tool of last resort after decades of marginalization. While the Nigerian government may dismiss the issue of marginalization of the Southeast, as is always the case, historical and empirical evidence paint a picture of a region that has been treated as an ‘outsider’ through various legal and institutional processes that undermine its collective sense of self, belonging and freedom of association.

The History of Agitation for Secession in Southeast Nigeria

The provenance of secessionism in Southeast cannot be fully understood without tracing it to colonialism. In fact, much of the identity crisis in Nigeria stems from the activities of the British colonialists, whose main objective was not to develop the already thriving regions but to exploit them for their economic gains. Before they came to Nigeria, communities co-existed in peace and harmony, strengthened and sustained by intercommunal trade, shared norms, cultural exchange and mutual respect. No ethnic group claimed superiority; rather, cultural uniqueness was celebrated as a source of tourism, respect and influence. While communal clashes did occur, they were largely outcomes of sustained interaction and communication, often resolved through customs, traditions, and peacekeeping measures². At this time, ethnicity functioned merely as a mark of identification, while inter-ethnic rivalry was reduced to competition for growth and development. The political systems reflected cultural needs, even though they varied.³ This rich cultural diversity was disrupted by British colonialists, who replaced and imposed a foreign culture that was rooted in the capitalist ideology of expropriation, accumulation, and unhealthy competition⁴.

In 1914, the British government lumped together over 250 distinct cultures into one entity for administrative convenience and economic interest. The retention of existing traditional institutions under the guise of the indirect rule model became a ploy to lure the traditional institutions into the extractive colonial capitalist system.⁵ ⁶ Subsequent

¹ Cass R. Sunstein, *Constitutionalism and Secession*, “The University of Chicago Law Review”, Vol. 58, No.2, 1991, pp. 633-670

² Ejitu N. Ota, Chinyere S. Ecoma, *The Presentness of the Past: Pre-Colonial Inter-Ethnic Relations and the Challenges of National Integration in Contemporary Nigeria*, “Saudi Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences”, Vol. 6, No.8, 2021, pp. 277- 284

³ Victor C. Ebonine, *Secession Bid in the Southeastern Nigeria: Issues and Prospects*, in Ali Farazmand (ed.), *Global Encyclopedia of Public Administration, Public Policy, and Governance*, Springer, Switzerland AG 2021, pp.1-6; Godfrey N. Uzoigwe, *Evolution and Relevance of Autonomous Communities in Precolonial Igboland*, “Journal of Third World Studies”, Vol. 21, No. 1, 2004, pp. 139–150

⁴ Toyin Falola, *Colonial Societies, in Understanding Colonial Nigeria: British Rule and its Impact*, Cambridge University Press, 2024

⁵ Oluwatosin S. Orimolade; Hyacinth N. Iwu, *Explaining the Lineage of Capitalist Development in Nigeria*, “Canadian Social Science”, Vol. 12, No.11, 2016, pp. 42-51

constitutional developments, from the Clifford constitution of 1922 to the Lyttleton Constitution of 1954, deepened regional discord, fostering ethnic domination and rivalry. The political parties became regionalized, and politics became zero-sum, rather than variable-sum¹. Economically, the Southeast embraced the capitalist ideology more vigorously than other regions, due to its early exposure to trade. Olutayo recorded that by 1965, about 200 Igbo entrepreneurs had emerged. In addition, migration sustained this economic prosperity, in 1921, there were 3,000 Igbos in the North; by the year 1931, 12,000; and by 1952, 130,000². In Lagos, they constituted more than half of the total non-indigenous population.³ The economic prosperity also translated to increased educational enrolments in that by 1952, there were 115 Igbo students compared to 118 Yoruba students. By the year 1959, the Eastern region had a greater number of pupils and teachers at the University College, Ibadan, than any other region. The Igbo also held the highest ranks within the military. In 1964, they held 270 out of 431 senior positions in the Nigerian Railway Corporation; 73 of the 104 senior roles in the Nigerian Ports Authority; and occupied three-quarters of Nigeria's foreign service. They were also the heads of the universities in Ibadan and Lagos.⁴ The prosperity elicited resentment, particularly in the North, and even the British suspected that the Southeast region might provide effective leadership after independence in 1960.

Independence intensified ethnic divisions. Notwithstanding, the federal civil service remained meritocratic, with Igbos still dominating, followed by the Yorubas. Fears of domination led to the introduction of the Northernization Policy in the early 1960s, championed by the Premier Ahmadu Bello⁵. The policy sought to reserve a significant number of positions for the Northerners in the civil service, even if it meant hiring foreign expatriates temporarily, rather than the Southern people. By 1964, the major ranks in the military had been occupied by Southerners, with Major General Aguiyi Ironsi, an Igbo, rising to the rank of General Officer Commanding (GOC). The "Hausa-Fulani political elite, already suspicious of Southern influence, viewed this development with deep anxiety, interpreting it as a form of Igbo overreach into their sociopolitical space"⁶.

On 15 January 1966, the first recorded coup in Nigeria presented itself as a 'just cause' to attack the Igbos. Led by a group fronted by Major Chukwuma Kaduna Nzeogwu, the coup targeted major Northern elites, including the Prime Minister, Tafawa Balewa and the Sardauna of Sokoto, Ahmadu Bello, while spearing key Southeastern elites.⁷ Barely six months later, the northerners led a counter-coup in July 1966 that brought General Yakubu Gowon to power. Soon afterwards, what appeared as an Igbo pogrom ensued: Men, women

⁶ Ebonine, *Op.cit.*, p.2

¹ Victor C. Ebonine; Tope S. Akinyetun, *From "There Was a Country" to a "Nation Under Siege": Explaining the Oxygenation of Insecurity in Southeast Nigeria*, "Romanian Intelligence Studies Review", Vol. 28, 2022, pp. 35-65

² Deborah O. Obor, Emeka E. Okafor, *Social Networks and Business Performance of Igbo Migrant Traders in Ibadan, South-West Nigeria*, "The Nigerian Journal of Sociology and Anthropology", Vol. 12, No.2, 2014, pp. 63-81

³ Paul Anber, *Modernisation and Political Disintegration: Nigeria and the Ibos*, "The Journal of Modern African Studies", Vol. 5, No.2, 1967, pp.163-179

⁴ Onyia, P.C, *Kinship: The Bedrock of African Political System with Particular Reference to the Igbo South Eastern Nigeria*, "International Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities Reviews", Vol. 10, No.1, 2020, pp. 91-99

⁵Jide M. Balogun, *The Route to Power in Nigeria: A Dynamic Engagement Option for Current and Aspiring Leaders*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2009

⁶ *Ibidem*, p.5

⁷ Lasse Heerten, Dirk A. Moses, *The Nigeria-Biafra War: Postcolonial Conflict and the Question of Genocide*, "Journal of Genocide Research", Vol. 16, No.2, 2014, pp. 169-203

and children were targeted across the Northern states, in their homes, marketplaces, and churches. Properties were destroyed and millions displaced. A conservative estimate put the death toll at about 30,000. survivors fled back to the Southeast without any clothes.¹ The Igbos saw the event as beyond political, but a deliberate attempt at genocide. Mistrust grew, particularly as Yakubu Gowon failed to prosecute perpetrators.

The military Governor of the Eastern Region, Chief Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu, decided to leverage his political clout and charisma to declare a separate state of Biafra on May 30, 1967, setting the stage for the first civil war in Nigeria.² The declaration was met with jubilation in the Southeast, as Igbos felt it was the only path to liberation, while it was perceived as an insurrection by the Nigerian government. The early stage of the war saw the Biafran forces make significant progress in pushing the Nigerian forces backwards and recording some tactical victories. However, superior military power and economic blockade enabled the Nigerian forces to gain control of the war. The Times of London on August 2, 1968, reported that “the Nigerian forces opened fire and murdered 14 nurses and patients in the wards”³. It was also reported that Colonel Adekunle, a Nigerian soldier, said that “(Biafran aid is) misguided humanitarian rubbish ... If children must die first, then that is too bad, just too bad”⁴.

The war soon began to elicit global sympathy. For instance, France provided humanitarian and military assistance to Biafra, even though it was suspected that it was meant to ward off the Soviet presence and protect its interest in the oil-rich Niger Delta.⁵ Meanwhile, countries like Britain, Russia and Egypt provided diplomatic support for Nigeria. The support, alongside the declining infrastructure, resource shortages and internal division in the Biafran ranks, helped the Nigerian forces to consolidate military gains. The end of the war on 15 January 1970 left a feeling of regret among Igbos, as reports claimed that between 1 million and 3 million lost their lives⁶.

The Rise of Non-State Actors and Post-Civil War Secessionist Agitation

The collective memory of the loss of the Biafran war and the continued marginalization of the Igbos have given rise to the emergence of non-state actors. At the end of the war, the Nigerian government, in line with its ‘no victor, no vanquished’ slogan, introduced the 3Rs policy, Reconciliation, Rehabilitation and Reconstruction, as an effort to heal the nation and reintegrate the defeated Igbos into national life. However, the policy was poorly implemented. Those whose property was destroyed were given a paltry 20 pounds as compensation, leaving the people to grapple with their losses. Post-war suffering, compounded by systemic marginalization, as discussed in the next section, fueled secessionist agitation in the region. Unlike the original Biafran movement led by Odumegwu Ojukwu, this new wave was spearheaded by multiple non-state actors with commanding voices.

Ralph Uwazuruike’s the Actualisation of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) of 1999 was the first of such groups. The group pursued the actualisation of Biafran with

¹ Chinua Achebe, *There Was a Country: A Personal History of Biafra*, The Penguin Press, New York, 2012

² Ebonine, *Op.cit.*, p.11

³ Achebe, *Op.cit.*, p.137

⁴ Colin Campbell, *Starvation Was the Policy*, The New York Times, 1987, <https://www.nytimes.com/1987/03/29/books/starvation-was-the-policy.html> (10.11.2025)

⁵ Oluchukwu I. Onianwa, *1968 French Declaration on Biafra during the Nigerian Civil War: A Historical Analysis*, “Turkish Journal of African Studies”, Vol. 2, No. 2, 2025, pp.128-146

⁶ Heerten, Moses, *Op.cit.*, p.170

determination. Rather than seek dialogue with the group and address the remote and immediate cause of the renewed agitation, the Nigerian government arrested and prosecuted its leader. This repression spurred the emergence of other groups, including the Biafran Zionist Movement (BZM) and, more prominently, the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) led by Nnamdi Kanu, who has been in the custody of the Nigerian government since 2015¹. Unlike the original Biafran agitation, these neo-separatist agitators lacked the backing of the regional political elites, probably due to fears of political marginalization, legal implications, and commitment to national cohesion. Their tactics focus on civil disobedience, media campaigns, mass mobilization, and internationalization of the struggle, exploiting popular discontent and historical memory.

Beyond these groups, other militant groups have taken advantage of the growing consciousness to pursue their own agenda. The Unknown Gunmen, often linked to IPOB, have continued to terrorize every part of the region, mostly targeting Nigerian institutions, personnel and property. High-profile victims include Ahmed Gulak, the former special adviser on politics to President Goodluck Jonathan, murdered in Owerri, Imo State, while en route to the airport; Justice Stanley Nnaji, the former judge of the Enugu State High Court, murdered in Enugu; Linus Owuamanam, a well-known businessman, killed in Ibadan; Okiemute Mrere, the Chief Provost of the Nigerian Immigration Service in Imo, killed along Owerri-Port Harcourt Road². Beyond the Unknown Gunmen, the Eastern Security Network (ESN), a security wing of the IPOB, has consistently clashed with the government-backed Ebube Agu security network, leaving residents caught in the crossfire. The Nigerian government has remained indifferent, often employing the divide-and-rule tactic to weaken cohesion among the groups and delegitimize their cause.

Regardless of oppression, the neo-secessionist agitation appears to be enjoying growing popularity and support across the region. Allegations against Nnamdi Kanu include receiving international support from Igbos in diaspora to finance terrorism in Nigeria, highlighting the international dimension of the struggle. Tuki discovered regional disparities in support for secession, Igbos residing in the Southeast show stronger inclinations toward secession than those living elsewhere. This may be attributed to their dependence on the region for livelihood, weaker social ties with other ethnic groups and greater reluctance to accept non-Igbo neighbors compared to their counterparts outside the region³.

The Political and Socio-economic marginalization and Secession Linkage in Southeast Nigeria

As earlier emphasized, marginalization is the key driver of secessionist agitation in Southeast Nigeria. The marginalization is historical, and manifests across political, economic and social spheres. While colonial marginalization can be debated, primarily due to the economic prosperity the Igbos enjoyed during the period, it was also evident that the colonial governance was designed to favor the North over other regions. For instance, under the Macpherson Constitution, both the North and West had bicameral regional legislatures (the House of Chiefs and the House of Assembly), while the Southeast was restricted to a unicameral House of Assembly legislature. It took sustained agitations by Southeastern representatives in the House of Representatives before the region was allowed to have a

¹ Daniel Tuki, *Regional Differences in Support for Secession Among Members of the Igbo Ethnic Group in Nigeria*, "Nationalism and Ethnic Politics", Vol. 31, No.3, 2025, pp. 425-439

² Tope S. Akinyetun, Victor C. Ebonine, Iyase O. Ambrose, *Unknown Gunmen and Insecurity in Nigeria: Dancing on the Brink of State Fragility*, "Security and Defence Quarterly", Vol. 42, No.2, 2023, pp.16–34

³ Tuki, *Op.cit.*, p. 425

bicameral legislature. This is not to mention the imposition of Warrant Chiefs, who later became tyrants that exploited the colonial system as Court Messengers and Court Clerks¹. The Civil War marked a turning point in Igbo political and socio-economic history. As previously pointed out, before the war, the Igbos were among the most flourishing ethnic groups in Nigeria due to their exposure to Western education and participation in the import-export economy. Post-war realities entrenched exclusion. A remarkable interview granted by the former Abia State Governor and current serving senator of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, Orji Uzor Kalu, stated thus: "since the civil war, Igbos have not been fairly treated. I don't hide in saying it. Nigerians need to reassure the Igbos and play by the rules so that everyone will be equal and the country can develop. My children came back here, and when they went out to go around, they said, Oh, the way they talk about Igbo people in this country, I say, well, that is what it is. Igbos have not committed an offence. I didn't know how the Civil War started. I didn't know how it ended. And we should forget about that. Look at small Rwanda with all the hatred in that country. You can see the progress they have made. We should be able to leave this tribalism of a thing, leave religion, leave ethnicity. The Igbos have not been forgiven"².

From a political standpoint, the region is the only geopolitical zone with five states. While most have six states, the North West has seven states. This disparity also extends to Local Government Areas (LGAs), the North West has 186 LGAs; the South West has 137; the South-South has 125; the North East has 113; the North Central has 112, and the Southeast has 95, barely half the number in the North West.³ This imbalance reduces the region's revenue allocation, representation in the National Assembly, ambassadorial appointments, the positions in the Federal Executive Council and other institutions. Moreover, despite political leadership alternating between the North and South, the Southeast has largely been limited to ministerial roles or symbolic representation⁴.

The most profound example of political exclusion is that no Southeasterner has held the position of President or Vice President since the Civil War. Critics argue that the presidency or vice presidency is contested and not served on a golden plate to any region, suggesting that the region has failed to play its political game as effectively as others. Yet, the Federal Character Principle enshrined in the 1999 Constitution mandates fairness, equity and justice in political representation.⁵ Thus, federal appointments must reflect Nigeria's ethnic diversity. More so, there is an informal political arrangement established by political parties called 'zoning.' Zoning is a rotational political arrangement whereby elective positions are distributed based on regions before elections.⁶ This arrangement has enabled the North,

¹ John D. Hargreaves, *Colonial Rule in Southern and Eastern Nigeria* [Review of *The Evolution of the Nigerian State: The Southern Phase, 1898-1914*. In Tekena N. Tamuno, Adiele E. Afigbo (Eds.), *The Warrant Chiefs and Indirect Rule in Southeastern Nigeria*, "The Journal of African History", 1973, pp. 512-514

² Daily Post, *Igbos Unfairly Treated in Nigeria, Haven't Been Forgiven—Orji Kalu*, 2025, <https://dailypost.ng/2025/10/08/igbos-unfairly-treated-in-nigeria-havent-been-forgiven-orji-kalu/> (11.11.2025)

³ Business Day, *Marginalization of the South East is Much More Than Just "Appoint Me"*, 2017, <https://businessday.ng/columnist/article/marginalization-south-east-much-just-appoint/> (11.11.2025)

⁴ Rotimi Adeforiti, Sunday O. Abang, *No Victor, No Vanquish in the Nigerian Civil War: Analysis of the Recurrent Biafra Separatist Agitation in Southeastern Nigeria*, "Pan-African Journal of Education and Social Sciences", Vol. 5, No. 2, 2024, pp. 28-37

⁵ Edmund A. Egbah, Chidozie B. Obiorah, Victor N. Mokwunyei, *Federal Character and Service Delivery in Nigeria.*, "Nnamdi Azikiwe Journal of Political Science", Vol. 42, No.2, 2023, pp. 73–87

⁶ Babayo Sule, Usman Sambo, *Power Sharing and Zoning Formula for Managing Nigeria's Diversity: A Case of the Fourth Republic*, "Lentera Hukum", Vol. 9, No.3, 2022, pp. 397-434

Southwest and South-South to produce three, two and one presidents, respectively, while the Southeast has been sidelined¹.

Political marginalization also extends to security institutions. Evidence suggests that the Igbos have produced only one Chief of Army Staff (General Azubuike Ihejirika, appointed by President Goodluck Jonathan) and Inspector General of Police (Ogbonnaya Onovo, appointed by the late President Umaru Yar'Adua). Both faced incessant political interference that undermined their effectiveness. The narrative that Igbos are unwilling to take their military slots seriously has been strongly contested within the region. Many have questioned the sincerity of the army in protecting the interests of the Igbos when enlisted, only to send them to volatile hotspots to be deliberately eliminated by violent armed groups².

Economically, the region is home to Nigeria's poor infrastructure. This reality has a historical antecedent. The region was abandoned immediately after the war despite the promise of the 3Rs. Notwithstanding that, through entrepreneurship, self-reliance and commerce, the vanquished (Igbos) were able to rebuild the region. However, these attributes have not translated into significant, region-wide development, as the responsibility for providing such development rests solely with the Nigerian government. Though President Ahmed Tinubu's government has proposed the creation of development commissions for each region, including the Southeast, to address poverty and long-standing infrastructural decay, the initiative has continued to generate mixed reactions. Some have hailed the move as a step in the right direction for the region's resuscitation, while others view it as a political strategy to secure electoral support in the 2027 Nigerian general elections³. In addition, some have also questioned the viability and sustainability of the proposed commission in light of the country's current economic challenges. Estimates suggest that the region requires \$10 billion annually over the next 30 years to match its infrastructural needs⁴.

Despite being the hub of economic activity in Nigeria, the region has some of the worst road infrastructure relative to other parts of the country, an issue that the federal government has also acknowledged.⁵ Also, it has no functional seaport, despite being traversed by the River Niger, which would require only sustained and committed dredging. This challenge carries significant economic and logistical implications, including constraints to regional development, increased costs of doing business and reduced competitiveness. The militarization of the region under the guise of fighting insecurity also has a profound economic implication. Evidence has shown that in 2022 alone, the region lost approximately N21.8 billion (approximately \$16 million by current exchange rate) to military extortion⁶. One would imagine the significant development impact of such an amount if reinvested in the economy.

¹ The Nation, *Presidential Poll, Southern States and Zoning*, 2023, <https://thenationonlineng.net/presidential-poll-southern-states-and-zoning/> (21.02.2023)

² Vanguard, *Igbo Youth and Nigerian Army*, 2025, <https://www.vanguardngr.com/2025/04/igbo-youth-and-nigerian-army-by-ochereome-nnanna/> (12.11.2025)

³ This Day, *The Southeast Development Commission*, 2025, <https://www.thisdaylive.com/2025/03/16/the-south-east-development-commission/> (4.11.2025)

⁴ Voice of Nigeria, *South-East Dev't Commission Targets \$200bn Regional Economy by 2035 – MD*, 2025, <https://www.pulse.ng/articles/news/local/south-east-devt-commission-targets-dollar200bn-regional-economy-by-2035-md-2025021217462291641> (4.11.2025)

⁵ Daily Post, *South East Roads Worst in the Country - Nigerian Government*, 2017, <https://dailypost.ng/2017/11/24/south-east-roads-worst-country-nigerian-government/> (4.11.2025)

⁶ Vanguard, *Police, Military Extorted N21.8 bn at Southeast Roadblocks in Two Months-Intersociety*, 2025, <https://www.vanguardngr.com/2025/01/police-military-extorted-%E2%82%A621-8bn-at-south-east-roadblocks-in-two-months-intersociety/> (4.11.2025)

Socially, Igbos experience systemic stereotyping, often linked to the legacy of the Civil War, that limits their access to certain infrastructure in Nigeria. They have often been portrayed as social misfits, rebels, and outsiders by other ethnic groups. In the aftermath of the war, Igbos several taunts from the victorious factions, to the degree that some concealed their Igbo identity in public interactions.¹ The most recent event that underscored deep ethnic divide, mistrust and entrenched stereotypes was the 2023 presidential election. The Labor Party (LP) candidate, Peter Obi, an Igbo, gained widespread popularity for his measured engagement with national issues and effective use of social media. which galvanized a large support base, known as “obedient”. However, his growing popularity was accompanied by hostile rhetoric, widely interpreted as a calculated strategy to undermine his candidacy. Rabiun Musa Kwankwaso, former Kano governor and presidential candidate, rejected running as Peter Obi’s deputy, citing northern resistance to an Igbo president.², while reports of threats against Igbos in Lagos deepened their marginalization and fueled secessionist agitation³.

Internal Elite Failure and Governance Crisis in Southeast Nigeria

It is important to provide a balanced view of marginalization discourse in the region. While it is largely cross-regional, attributing the entire cause to the center oversimplifies a complex political reality in which local elites are also accomplices. This is the view expressed by critics who contend that, despite genuine underrepresentation and neglect of the region, the Southeast political elites have not demonstrated enough leadership commitments, quality and regional cohesion necessary for the region’s development. Unlike other regions that have strategically positioned themselves in relation to the politics of the center through political alliances, strategic positioning and consensus, the Southeast regions have continued to triangulate mutual suspicion, political survival and inter-elite rivalry with underdevelopment. The implication is that regional cohesion and robust bargaining power are weakened within the broader Nigerian politics.

Ukiwo noted that the zone has witnessed a “crisis of leadership” and “criminalization of politics and governance”⁴. In a particular regional summit held in 2011, it was agreed that: “the Southeast has been afflicted by a group of political leaders who are mostly opportunistic, self-serving and lacking in vision for the public good... In most parts of the region, elections have become an organized crime in which political actors deploy violence, bribery and subterfuge to hijack state power for the sole purpose of diverting public treasuries to satisfy personal ends. This creates an environment in which governments are neither accountable nor responsive to the aspirations of the people”⁵.

Several instances buttress the points raised above. Politically, the Southeast elites are fragmented in terms of political affiliation and ideology, explaining the inability to reach consensus on economic and security policies. The Governor of Enugu State, Peter Mbah,

¹ Victor Anazonwu, *The Making of an Identity Crisis: How “I am Not Igbo” became a Nigerian Ethnic Label, “The Renaissance”*, <https://therenaissance.com.ng/the-making-of-an-identity-crisis-how-i-am-not-igbo-became-a-nigerian-ethnic-label-by-victor-anazonwu/> (4.11.2025)

² Sahara Reporters, *Northerners Won’t Vote Peter Obi for President Because of Biafra Agitations in South-East – Kwankwaso*, 2022, <https://saharareporters.com/2022/07/04/northerners-won-t-vote-peter-obi-president-because-biafra-agitations-south-east/> (04.07.2022)

³ Jephthah E. Unaegbu, *Igbophobia in Lagos and Nigeria 2023 Elections: Myth or Reality?* “Amamihe: Journal of Applied Philosophy”, Vol. 21, No. 4, 2023, pp.54-71

⁴ Ukoha Ukiwo, *Framework For Improving Governance and Security in South East Nigeria*, in Ukoha Ukiwo, Innocent Chukwuma (Eds.), *Governance and Insecurity in South-East Nigeria*, CLEEN Foundation, 2012

⁵ South East Summit, *Communique Issued at Strategy Meeting on Democracy and Governance in the South East, Owerri, Imo State*, 2011. (7.11.2011). p. 3

belongs to the All-Progressive Congress (APC), Alex Otti of Abia State belongs to the Labour Party (LP), Hope Uzodinma of Imo State belongs to the APC, Charles Soludo of Anambra State belongs to the All-Progressive Grand Alliance (APGA), and Ebonyi State under Francis Nwifuru. Though some of them belong to the same party, it is largely based on individual political survival amid a crisis of legitimacy and possible political ostracism¹. Additionally, it also explains the lethargic position of the governors to present a common agenda regarding insecurity in the region. The proposed regional security network, nicknamed “Ebube Agu”, though perceived in several quarters as a political strategy to checkmate the IPOB, has failed to materialize. While security outfits in other regions, particularly Amotekun in the Southwest, are being commended for their efforts in decimating criminal groups, a lack of political will, funding, and suspicion among locals has impeded the takeoff of Ebube Agu². Therefore, blaming the central government solely for the region’s security challenges is an oversimplification.

Furthermore, critics have also contended that the claims of the region’s socio-economic backwardness bear the footprint of internal sabotage rather than being centrally induced. Issues such as corruption, poor fiscal management, poor investment in public infrastructure, patronage politics and abandoned projects have undermined development efforts despite the region’s entrepreneurial and human capital bases. For instance, the former governor of Anambra State, Willie Obiano, is being investigated for laundering N4 billion from the state government's coffers. Similarly, former Governor of Abia State, Okezie Ikpeazu, is being alleged to have diverted about N10 billion for the Airport Project.³ Aba and Onitsha markets are regarded as the two most commercial powerhouses in West Africa. Yet, the regional governments could not improve their internally generated revenue base through taxes. In 2025, with Enugu (N406.8 billion), Abia (N66.9billion), Anambra (N54.2 billion), Imo (N36.7 billion), and Ebonyi (N23.2 billion), the entire Southeast states trailed zones like the Southwest and South-South in regional comparisons, with the notable exception of Enugu’s recent explosive growth⁴.

At the individual level, the Southeast entrepreneurs’ preference for investing outside the region has some economic consequences. It improves the revenue base of the host nations and creates employment for their youths, while leaving Southeast economically disadvantaged and less industrialized. Similarly, the enforcement of the Monday sit-at-home order has continued to cripple the regional economy and created an opportunity for de-industrialization. Reports suggest that between 2021 and 2026, the order has cost the region an estimated N17 trillion⁵. Similarly, Nigeria’s \$93,284,945,10559 billion foreign direct

¹ Ikem C. Olisah, Ogechukwu C. Okafor, *Political Parties and Governance of Southeast States, Nigeria: The Emergence of Four Political Parties in 2023*, “South East Political Science Review”, Vol. 8, No.1, 2023, pp. 99-109

² Ezinwa V. Chi, Naomi A. Phinos, *Issues and Challenges Facing the Creation of Ebube Agu Security Outfit in the South East Region of Nigeria*, “South-South Journal of Humanities and International Studies”, Vol. 4, No. 2, 2021, pp. 171-183

³ Premium Times, *How ex-Anambra governor allegedly used unlicensed companies to embezzle N4 billion – Witness*, 2025, <https://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/top-news/776610-how-ex-anambra-governor-allegedly-used-unlicensed-companies-to-embezzle-n4-billion-witness.html> (24.02.2025)

⁴ Premium Times, *Enugu IGR rises to N406.8billion in 2025 – Official*, 2026, <https://www.premiumtimesng.com/regional/ssouth-east/855327-enugu-igr-rises-to-n406-8billion-in-2025-official.html> (9.02.2026)

⁵ International Centre for Investigative Reporting (ICIR), *Sit-at-home Crisis Cost S’East over N17trn As Businesses ‘Cautiously’ Return*, 2026, <https://www.icirigeria.org/counting-the-loss-sit-at-home-crisis-costs-seast-over-n17trillion-as-businesses-cautiously-return/> (17.02.2026)

investments (FDI) between 2013 and the first quarter of 2020, the Southeast region got the least, amounting to a paltry \$203,898,690 million and representing just less than one per cent (0.22%) of the total investments.¹ These facts indicate that the central government cannot be totally implicated in the region's socio-economic challenges. Notwithstanding, these internal deficiencies do not in any way invalidate the broader argument of ethnic marginalization. Rather, it demonstrates the complex dynamics of crisis in the Southeast involving both the central and regional forces. The intersection between external and internal dynamics has collectively shaped the environment driving secessionist movements. As a result, any sustainable solution must move beyond issues of socio-political exclusion and restructuring, to issues relating to misgovernance, lack of accountability and sabotage within the Southeast region.

Conclusions. Toward a Sovereign Regional Conference (SRC)

Secession does not occur in a vacuum. It is often rooted in perceived breaches of constitutional rights or sustained grave injustices against a particular group. In the context of Southeast Nigeria, such agitation is a product of historical and systemic marginalization, which has consistently manifested in political exclusion, socio-economic neglect and uneven development outcomes. Within this context, the Nigerian government is perceived as bearing significant responsibility for the grievances, particularly where responses have been selective and exclusionary. Over time, this has evolved from a narrowly defined self-determination struggle to a more complex security challenge, shaped by multiple groups which seek relevance within the agitation space. This raises critical questions about whether this troubling trajectory can be addressed and whether the historical secessionist ambition can be de-escalated. The outcome, however, significantly depends on the degree of commitment, political will and sincerity of the Nigerian government.

Against this backdrop, the paper proposes a sovereign regional conference that will bring together critical stakeholders in a committed roundtable discussion regarding the causes of the agitation. The stakeholders should comprise the representatives of the Nigerian government (both at the federal and state levels), youth groups, leaders of relevant non-state actors (IPOB, Ebube Agu, ESN), traditional rulers, civil society, the media, the regional community (ECOWAS, African Union) and a supra-national body like the United Nations. The international representatives shall serve as both observers and mediators, neutrally ensuring that issues are highlighted and discussed amicably. In addition, to build confidence before the conference, the government shall ensure that prisoners of conscience like Nnamdi Kanu are released unconditionally and allowed to participate in the meeting to encourage trust and meaningful participation. The conference should also be guided by a timeline for the implementation of agreed resolutions, which shall convey a sense of seriousness and commitment. This paper believes that Nigeria requires a process of national healing that is rooted in good governance, inclusion, dialogue and justice. In this regard, Southeast remains a critical component of the national project, and addressing their agitations is critical for long-term stability, unity and development. Acknowledging possible divergent resolutions from the SRC, the paper envisages recommendations that may focus on constitutional restructuring and institutional re-arrangement, economic integration and symbolic reconciliation. Constitutional restructuring and institutional re-arrangement connote reforms

¹ The Guardian, *How South East Lost Out in \$93b Foreign Investments*, 2020, <https://guardian.ng/news/how-south-east-lost-out-in-93b-foreign-investments/> (12.08.2020)

aimed at achieving genuine federalism, equitable state creation, political representation, rotational power-sharing arrangements and resource allocation. The idea of true federalism rests on equal representation and delineated fiscal mechanisms, which the government enjoys the exclusive authority to constitutionally provide for such arrangements.

The robust constitutional and institutional re-arrangements would provide the needed economic integration for regional development. As the economic hub of the state, the region requires targeted infrastructural investments, industrial support systems, development of transportation networks and seaports. Regardless of the submissions from the diverse groups in the SRC, the interventions should not be perceived as political concessions, but as a constitutional responsibility of the state to all federating units. This will foster a sense of belonging and improve the government's legitimacy in the eyes of the people. In terms of symbolic reconciliation and restorative justice, there is a need for the establishment of initiatives such as public acknowledgement of historical grievances, inter-ethnic truth-telling fora, and civic inclusion programs aimed at procuring national healing and rebuilding people's confidence in the state. The media and civil society groups should play a big role in this aspect by elevating such initiatives beyond mere ideological conception to a practical, daily national discourse in diverse languages for broad participation and reach.

Beyond the SRC, the region's political elites have a big role to play in converting internally-generated assets and revenues, and federally-generated revenues to tangible governance outcomes. While ethnic marginalization can spur political realignments to the center for political survival, political elites should prioritize individual and group survival and regional sustainability. The face of any region is the quality of its representatives, in terms of robust representation and negotiation. Politics has a strong link with negotiation, which only the powerful brokers, such as political elites, can engage in. Rather than leave political struggle to the people only, the region's political elites can help negotiate appointments, infrastructural interventions and constitutional reforms that will provide the needed development. Through robust coalition-building, policy advocacy and strategic political engagement by the political elites, the region can be placed at the center of national consideration, which will concomitantly diminish any forms of secessionist ambitions.

Ultimately, addressing secessionist movements does not depend on the deployment of kinetic measures but on constructing a political order for inclusive political participation. When governance is perceived as inclusive, just and equitable, secessionist tendencies lose their appeal, necessitating preference for the nation, consensus building and mutual respect.

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