

# Economic inequality lies behind growing calls for secession in Nigeria

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The rise of ethnic and religious nationalism in Nigeria in the last decade has led to such high levels of tension that it's prompted people to ask if it will [survive as a country](#). Or if Nigeria is on the brink of another [civil war](#).



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What's behind the growing tensions is [unequal](#) distribution of the country's wealth. Inequality has caused mistrust among ethnic groups. This, in turn, has led to conflict and violence.

Nigeria has in fact been at war with itself for some time – a war that has become intensified in the last two decades.

A number of events illustrate this. For instance, militancy in the oil rich Niger Delta region started after the 2003 general elections where arms and ammunition were purchased by some politicians and handed to young people in an attempt to influence the elections. But after the elections, many young Nigerians, angered by high rates of unemployment, turned the weapons against their sponsors and the [Nigerian state](#).

Another example is the role played by the Oodua Peoples Congress, a group that advocated for an autonomous region for the Yoruba speaking southwest Nigeria. The congress started its agitation in 1994, a year after the annulment of the 1993 presidential election won by M.K.O Abiola, a member of the Yoruba ethnic group. Their dominant message was the alleged marginalisation of the [Yoruba ethnic group](#).

And in 2009 the Boko Haram insurgency erupted after [the brutal murder](#) of Mohammed Yusuf, an Islamic cleric based in Maiduguri who had started a movement seven years earlier to push for an end to corruption and action against inequality. He also supported Islamic practices in the northeast region of Nigeria. Yusuf was arrested by the police and died in custody in 2009. Many members of his sect immediately staged a peaceful protest. Protests later became violent when they started targeting police offices and police posts across the North.

Now there is a resurgence of opposition in Biafra. It echoes back to 1967 when the then military governor of the Eastern region of Nigeria, Col. Emeka Odumegwu Ojukwu declared the Igbo speaking East independent from Nigeria. This followed Igbos in the North being targeted after the first military coup d'etat that ended Nigeria's first republic. The 1966 coup, mostly led by military officers from the Igbo speaking east of Nigeria, was perceived by many in the North to have specifically targeted and killed many Hausa/Fulani politicians from the Northern region.

Economic inequality cannot be separated from the root of all these developments. Nigerians are frustrated because they can see [economic inequality growing at a faster pace than ever before](#) and no one seems to be doing anything about it.

Will these agitations lead to an outright war in the scale of the 1960s civil war? There is no categorical answer to that. But I doubt that there will be another civil war on the scale of 1967-1970, although there may be large scale violence.

## A history of violence

Violence has always been part of the history of economic and political marginalisation in Nigeria.

Examples can be drawn from the mass violence that led to the 1967-70 civil war as well as the ethno-religious violence of the 1970s, 1980s, 1990s and the 2000s. These included the [Zango Kataf conflict](#), [Maitatsine riots](#) in the North between 1980 and 1985, the Agbekoya farmers uprising in the West 1968-70, the first iteration of the resurgence of Biafra by the Ralph Uwazurike-led [Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra in 2000](#) and the national protests against the annulment of the June 12, 1993 [presidential election](#) won by Chief M.K.O. Abiola.

Many of these mass actions started as protests against perceived injustice. But they were aggravated by the forceful response of the Nigerian government. The protests all paralysed state activities. But none threatened the survival of the Nigerian state more than the oil related conflicts in the Niger Delta.

Beginning with the state murder of Niger Delta rights activist [Ken Saro Wiwa in November 1995](#) and crystallising in the insurgency against oil corporations and the state, protest action in the Niger Delta have affected the production and sale of oil which is the mainstay of the [Nigerian economy](#).

## How Nigeria got here

The resurgence of ethno-religious protests in Nigeria can be traced to the fact that wealth circulates among a small group of elites. Although they come from all ethnic and religious [groups](#), they resort to fanning ethno-religious sentiments when they feel there's a threat to their wealth. Cries of marginalisation becomes the dominant cry when they're out of power.

The election of President Muhammadu Buhari in 2015 triggered new tensions. This is because he is considered a member of the Northern elite. Immediately after his election protests began supporting self-determination or secession by various groups from the South. These included the [Indigenous People of Biafra](#) in the South East as well as groups such as the [Niger Delta Avengers in the South-South](#).

Control of Nigeria's oil resources in the Niger Delta always comes into the mix. Recent clashes involving the Biafra group in Port Harcourt – capital city of oil rich Rivers State – must be understood in that context. It is no surprise that once again, the Niger Delta is at the heart of the current clamour for secession just as it was between 1966 and 1970 when oil extraction started taking root in Nigeria.

But there are important differences between today's protests and those staged earlier in Nigeria's history. The main ones include the fact that people are mobilised differently, and the way in which information is disseminated and consumed.

News travels faster than it used to and unfounded rumours spread like wildfire. Fuelling the tensions is the fact that hate speech is rife. The state is as guilty as the agitators. Voices of reason and objective analysis are lost in the noise especially now that everyone with a smart phone has become a 'journalist'. In the confusion, the road to anarchy looms large over Nigeria.

## What's to be done

An inclusive economic and political system is the only solution. The current public discourse is focused on political restructuring along ethnic lines. The calls for a political arrangement where major ethnic groups will have control over their geographical areas as well as resources therein might help. The danger is that rather than unify Nigeria, it would further divide the country along [ethnic and religious lines](#).

What's missing in the conversation is the fact that the environment for violence and oppression of most Nigerians has come about because of the way in which the country's economy is structured. The elitist economy cuts across all ethnic groups. The disenfranchisement, marginalisation and exploitation defy ethnic colouration.

For restructuring to be meaningful, Nigeria must create an inclusive economic and political system where ethnic and religious affiliation will no longer be a defining factor in economic and political participation. What Nigerians need, and are clamouring for, is a country that will accommodate them regardless of ethnic or religious creed. Political, religious and ethnic tolerance is the key to economic and political success, therefore economic and political inclusivity must account for greater tolerance for it to be effective.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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