

Special Report: African Secessionism and Human Rights



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This briefing document summarizes the key themes and facts from the provided sources regarding secessionist movements in Africa, with a particular focus on the Anglophone Crisis in Cameroon, and includes insights into other significant cases like Cabinda, Biafra, Tigray, and Western Sahara.

Subject Details

Overview of Secessionist Demands in Africa

Secessionist movements in Africa are a complex political phenomenon with roots dating back to the decolonization era of the 1960s and 1970s. While some emerged in territories denied outright independence (e.g., Western Sahara, Namibia, Eritrea), most sought secession for regions that were separate colonies at decolonization, often arguing for a unique colonial history. These movements typically invoke the right to self-determination, driven by "political grievances, sentiments of marginalization, historical narratives, and economic projects." (Forniès, 2022, p. 7).

Categories of African Secessionism (Schomerus, Englebert, and De Vries, 2018:

1. Aspirational: Solution to broader crises (marginalization, identity, representation).
2. As Grievance: Result of "promises made and broken" in post-colonial history.
3. As Performance and Posturing: Used for political leverage.
4. As Disenchantment: Separation does not necessarily solve problems.

Common Causes for Secessionist Demands:

1. Existence of a separate administrative region pre-colonial independence (e.g., Southern Cameroons, Somaliland).
2. Perception of being a "betrayed region" by the postcolonial state.

3. Struggle for land and resources (e.g., Western Sahara, Cabinda).
4. Articulation of group interests by regional elites.
5. Violent response by state authorities to sub-state demands.
6. History of different educational trajectories.
7. Mobilization based on "identity markers" like language, religion, and culture.
8. Support from diaspora communities.

State Responses to Secessionist Demands:

States employ a "repertoire [that is] impressive in its diversity," predominantly involving "crackdowns, arrests of leaders or diaspora activists, controlling access to natural resources or the media" (Forniès, 2022, p. 9).

Less common responses include creating internal factions within movements, offering improved development, or political appointments.

Devolution, autonomy deals, and self-determination referendums are rare, often occurring after decades of war (e.g., Eritrea, South Sudan).

No African secessionist movement has achieved outright independence or a self-determination referendum since South Sudan in 2011.

Active Secessionist Movements (Last Decade):

Approximately 20-25 movements have garnered significant attention. Notable cases include:

1. West Africa: Azawad (Mali - decentralization talks mostly unimplemented), Casamance (Senegal - talks ongoing), Biafra (Nigeria - resurgence), Western Togoland (Ghana), Oduduwa Republic (Nigeria - Yoruba aspirations).

2. Northern Africa: Western Sahara (Sahrawi demands vs. Moroccan repression), Nafusa (Libya – cultural autonomy), Kabylia (Algeria – repression), Rif (Morocco – re-establishment of republic).
3. East Africa: Somaliland (de facto independent but unrecognized), Tigray (Ethiopia – armed conflict with federal forces), Oromia (Ethiopia – autonomist/pro-independence demands), Somali State (Ethiopia).
4. Central Africa: Southern Cameroons (Ambazonia – armed conflict), Cabinda (Angola – armed conflict), Lunda Tchokwe (Angola – autonomy/secession demands met with repression).
5. Southern Africa: Barotseland (Zambia – claims non-honored devolution deal), Mthwakazi (Zimbabwe – Matabeleland secession based on perceived discrimination), Cape (South Africa – Afrikaner/Boer groups seeking separate entities).

Case Study: The Anglophone Crisis in Cameroon

The Anglophone Crisis, also known as the Ambazonia War of Independence, is an ongoing armed conflict in Cameroon's English-speaking Northwest and Southwest regions. It escalated from protests in late 2016 against the marginalization of the Anglophone minority to a full-scale guerrilla war by late 2017.

Historical Background and Roots of the Conflict:

Colonial Legacy: Cameroon was a German colony, partitioned between French and British mandates after WWI. Approximately 80% became French Cameroun, while 20% became British Cameroons, administered through Nigeria. (Pelican, 2022, p. 9).

1961 Plebiscite: Southern Cameroons voted to join independent Francophone Cameroon, not independence or union with Nigeria, leading to the formation of the Federal Republic of Cameroon. This decision was influenced by fears of Nigerian domination and the UN/UK deeming independence unviable. (Anglophone Crisis - ; Origins of the Anglophone Crisis -).

Erosion of Autonomy: President Ahmadou Ahidjo gradually dismantled the federal system (1961-1972) in favor of a unitary state, which was formalized by a controversial 1972 referendum. This, along with the 1984 change of the country's name from "United Republic of Cameroon" to "Republic of Cameroon" by President Paul Biya, was perceived by Anglophones as an attempt to undermine their identity and assimilate them. (Angove & Willis, 2022, p. 17; Pelican, 2022, p. 9).

Growing Grievances: Since the 1970s, Anglophone regions have experienced "well-documented history of (actual and perceived) marginalisation... in terms of political representation and socioeconomic under-development." (Angove & Willis, 2022, p. 17). This includes underrepresentation in the public sector and the predominance of French language in governmental institutions. Calls for federalism or outright secession, such as the Ambazonia Movement (Fon Gorji Dinka, 1985) and the Southern Cameroons National Council (SCNC, mid-1990s), emerged. (Angove & Willis, 2022, p. 18; Pelican, 2022, p. 13).

Escalation of Violence and Human Rights Violations
(2016-Present):

2016 Protests: Strikes by Anglophone lawyers and teachers against perceived marginalization of English practices in courts and schools were met with state violence.

Government Crackdown: The Biya regime responded with "indignation and police force," deploying military, imposing internet shutdowns, and arresting activists, leading to further radicalization and a shift from federalism to secession demands.

Declaration of Independence: In October 2017, secessionist groups declared the Anglophone regions independent as "Ambazonia." The government declared war and deployed its army.

Casualties and Displacement: Estimates vary, but reports suggest thousands killed (e.g., 4,000 by Al Jazeera, 6,000 by ICG as of 2022), with independent sources suggesting up to 10,000 total deaths by 2019. As of November 2023, Cameroon hosts over 1.06 million internally displaced persons, with 638,420 in the Northwest and Southwest Regions, and 63,600 refugees in Nigeria.

Humanitarian Crisis: The conflict has caused significant economic decline in Anglophone regions, with 5 million people needing humanitarian assistance. Cameroon has been listed among the world's most overlooked humanitarian crises.

Human Rights Abuses by Government Forces:

"There is overwhelming evidence that the Francophone-dominated government of Cameroon is committing war crimes against its Anglophone civilians..." (Global Campaign for Peace and Justice in Cameroon, 2020, p. 1). These include:

1. **Unlawful Killings:** Widespread extra-judicial killings and massacres of civilians (e.g., Ngarbuh massacre, Missong village).

2. Property Destruction: Systematic burning of hundreds of villages, homes, and businesses, often to punish communities suspected of harboring separatists.
3. Sexual Violence: Credible reports of security forces committing frequent acts of sexual violence against female civilians, described by some as a "weapon of war."
4. Restrictions on Freedoms: Consistent violation of freedoms of speech, assembly, and press. Journalists are arrested for investigating abuses and often self-censor.
5. Arbitrary Detention and Torture: Illegal detention of activists and critics, prolonged pre-trial detention, and "forced disappearances." Detainees report inhumane conditions and torture, including beatings, drownings, and electrocution.
6. Criminalization of Dissent: The state labels secessionists as "terrorists," leading to disproportionate sentences, including death sentences.

The government denies the conflict's identity-political component, reframing it as a "North-West/South-West crisis."

Violent Actions by Armed Separatist Groups:

Separatist groups, numbering around 30, have also committed "credible reports of crimes."

1. Targeting Civilians and Military: Killing military personnel and civilians, particularly those suspected of colluding with the government, breaking boycotts, or criticizing separatist actions.
2. Extreme Violence: Documented acts include beheadings and other "spectacular violence" disseminated on social media.
3. Kidnappings: Kidnapping for ransom, including traditional rulers, students, and teachers.

4. Enforced Boycotts: Enforcing school boycotts and "ghost towns" (lockdowns) that disrupt public life, leading to thousands of children missing education.
5. IEDs: Increased use of improvised explosive devices (IEDs) since January 2021.
6. Cross-border operations: Some factions, like the ADF, announced taking the war into Francophone regions and allied with Biafran separatists for joint military operations and arms exchange.

Role of the Diaspora and Social Media:

The Anglophone diaspora plays a crucial role by providing "ideological, organizational, and financial support for the Anglophone cause."

1. Mobilization: Diaspora leaders use social media platforms (Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, YouTube) and satellite TV to report on the crisis, mobilize support, and guide militant interventions, often employing impolite and aggressive language.
2. Funding: Fundraising campaigns like "Adopt a Freedom Fighter" and "Feed the Nchang Shoe Boys" provide financial support to armed groups, though some militias have resorted to coercing funds through kidnapping.
3. Incitement to Violence: Social media is used to "fuel violence," with activists explicitly supporting armed resistance, urging people to "arm themselves to the teeth," and criticizing government figures with insults and threats.

Government Political Measures and International Response:

Major National Dialogue (2019): Initiated by President Biya, it was largely seen as symbolic and failed to achieve significant political change or reduce violence. Key separatist leaders rejected it or were imprisoned.

International Criticism: The UN, EU, and some individual countries (e.g., US) have expressed concerns about human rights violations and called for dialogue. The US has imposed visa restrictions and granted Temporary Protected Status to Cameroonians due to ongoing violence.

International Complicity: Some international actors, including European governments, are implicated due to economic interests and development aid that strengthened the Cameroonian army (e.g., Rapid Intervention Brigade, BIR), whose training and equipment, originally for counter-terrorism, are now used against civilians and separatists.

"France is noted for its continued close involvement in Cameroon's economic and military life."

Other Notable Secessionist Movements and Human Rights Issues

A. Cabinda (Angola):

Background: Historically a separate Portuguese protectorate, Cabinda was forcibly absorbed by Angola after Portugal's handover of sovereignty in 1974.

Resource Conflict: Cabinda is rich in petroleum, accounting for over half of Angola's output. The local population complains of seeing few benefits, making economic grievances central to their independence rationale, while Angola's refusal to concede is driven by these revenues.

Movement Fragmentation: The Front for the Liberation of the Enclave of Cabinda (FLEC), formed in 1963, has fragmented into multiple factions, hindering its success.

Shift to Non-violent Protest: While armed activity has decreased significantly since 2010, non-violent protests and calls for dialogue have surged.

Human Rights Violations: The Angolan government maintains a "heavy suppression" policy, including "severe human rights abuses." (Amundsen, 2022, p. 12). This includes violent

dispersal of peaceful protests, arbitrary arrests, and inhumane detention conditions, despite some recent acquittals.

B. Biafra (Nigeria):

Historical Grievances: The region, primarily inhabited by the Igbo people in southeastern Nigeria, declared independence in 1967, leading to a civil war (1967-1970) that killed 1-3 million people. Despite a "No Victor, No Vanquished" policy, feelings of marginalization, inequality, and persecution persist, including receiving the least federal resources.

Resurgence of Movements: Demands for self-determination resurfaced with the Movement for the Actualisation of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB, 1999) and the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB, 2012), led by Nnamdi Kanu.

Criminalization and Repression: The Nigerian authorities have criminalized pro-Biafra movements. IPOB was declared a terrorist organization in 2017, leading to increased repression under the guise of counter-terrorism laws.

Human Rights Violations: The Nigerian Security Forces (NSF) have engaged in "violent repression," including extrajudicial killings of at least 150 peaceful protesters (2015-2016), arbitrary mass arrests (over 500), excessive use of force, torture, and other ill-treatment (March-June 2021: at least 115 killed). The UN Special Rapporteurs and the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR) have denounced these violations, warning against the misuse of counter-terrorism rhetoric for acts that do not legitimately fall into that category.

Militant Wing: The creation of the Eastern Security Network (ESN) by IPOB in 2020, ostensibly to protect the Igbo community from armed herdsmen, has further escalated tensions and violence.

C. Tigray (Ethiopia):

Conflict Genesis: While Abiy Ahmed's reforms initially brought positive change, they weakened the state and gave new impetus to ethnically-based nationalist movements. The Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) perceived a loss of power. The conflict escalated after the TPLF held regional elections in September 2020, which federal authorities deemed unconstitutional, leading to a military offensive in November 2020.

Humanitarian Crisis: The conflict has resulted in thousands killed, 2 million forcibly displaced, and 120,000 seeking refuge in Sudan. By June 2021, 900,000 people were facing famine-like conditions, and 5.2 million needed humanitarian assistance.

Widespread Atrocities: All parties are responsible for serious human rights violations, potentially amounting to war crimes and crimes against humanity. These include mass executions of civilians (Mai-Kadra by TPLF, Axum by Eritrean troops, Mahibere Dego by Ethiopian army), widespread rape and sexual violence used as a "weapon of war" by pro-Ethiopian government forces, and acts of ethnic cleansing against Tigrayans.

D. Western Sahara:

Unresolved Decolonization: Spain's withdrawal in 1975 led to Morocco's occupation, despite UN resolutions supporting the Sahrawi people's right to self-determination through a referendum. The 1991 ceasefire agreement with the Polisario Front, intended to facilitate a referendum, has been largely unfulfilled.

Increased Repression: Since Morocco broke the ceasefire in Guerguerat on November 13, 2020, repression against Sahrawis has "increased greatly," with military and police deployment, house searches, and mass arrests of demonstrators, including minors.

Political Prisoners and Torture: Sahrawi political prisoners, such as the Gdeim Izik group, serve disproportionate sentences based on trials lacking due process. There are reports of worsened conditions, physical assault, "psychological torture," and deliberate medical negligence in detention.

Harassment of Activists: Moroccan authorities use COVID-19 restrictions to limit activist movement and conduct raids and looting of homes. Prominent activists like Aminetu Haidar have faced travel bans and house arrest.

Sexual Violence: Cases of sexual violence, including rape, against Sahrawi women activists by Moroccan authorities, are reported, with total impunity.

Suppression of Journalism: Sahrawi journalists face persecution and threats for reporting, including physical violence, confiscation of equipment, and charges for "practicing journalism without authorization."

Plunder of Natural Resources: Western Sahara is rich in resources (phosphate, fishing, oil, gas) that Morocco exploits, with international trade supporting the occupation. This resource exploitation is seen as a key reason for the continuation of the conflict.

Conclusions

African states often maintain over-centralized systems, hindering democracy, local development, and diversity management. States typically respond to secessionist demands by "denigrating or ignoring them... and afterwards if the dispute gains more tract, by repressing and engaging in military action." This homogeneous response contrasts with the diversity of secessionist groups' methods (violent/non-violent) and goals (autonomy, power-sharing, federalism, referendums).

State authorities prioritize repression and violence against both armed groups and civil society, including using sexual violence as a weapon of war.

Official discourses demonize secessionist demands, often invoking "national unity as a totem that cannot be discussed," and frequently using "accusations of terrorism, not always sufficiently substantiated."

Communication blackouts and physical closure of regions are common in conflict situations.

This report was produced by the AI Salon consortium. Lead contributors: Mwende Mukwanyaga, Okari M., and Hesbon Ombati, with pattern identification support from Notebook LM. Edited by Lilian Mutinda. Cover image by Sora.

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