

Separatist Agitation, Infrastructure Development and Business Operations in Nigeria's Southeast Zone: An Analysis in Crisis of Development

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[0181] Abstract

This paper examined the interface between separatist agitation in the Southeast and infrastructure development as well as business operations in the zone. Separatist agitation in the Southeast has remained at the front burner, leading to the creation of Eastern Security Network – ESN, increased presence of the military in the zone, as well as violence and tension which culminated in a forced Monday sit-at-home since 2021. Looking at these issues, the paper interrogates how the Southeast's separatist agitation has impacted infrastructure development and business operations in the Southeast zone. Using the qualitative research design, the paper relied on data generated from Key Informant Interview – KII and Focused Group Discussion – FGD, as well as data from various reliable secondary sources, to arrive at the conclusions of the paper. The Structural Functional Theory was used as the paper's framework of analysis. Findings show that the latest separatist agitation is remarkably detrimental on the Southeast's infrastructure development, as well as business operations. The Monday sit-at-home has caused significant losses across the zone. Also, the security concerns and tension arising from the separatist agitation were found to be significantly consequential on the infrastructure development and business operation in the Southeast. The paper recommended that the governors of the Southeast should jointly address the insecurity and tensions arising from the agitation. That the zone must, device a means of strategic communication to address these issues, among others.

Key words: Business operations, Infrastructure development, Insecurity, Southeast

Introduction

The Southeast has a peculiar challenge of infrastructure deficit, with no significant national infrastructure located in the zone and this is blamed on marginalization, (Achebe, 1983). This pattern has continued and can be observed in contemporary Nigeria as Southeast was not featured in the national rail project designed during President Muhammadu Buhari tenure of office, between 2015 and 2023. The Southeast to this day lack critical infrastructure such as a functional international airport comparable to the ones in other parts of the country and also has no functional seaport. This is in addition to lacking critical agricultural infrastructures like national irrigation for industrial agricultural projects. There is also absence of relevant national Ministry, Department or Agency of national government with consequential political or economic weight domiciled in the zone. This is sometimes blamed on lack of national integration after the Nigeria-Biafra war. Zubairu (2023), Akinyetun, et al (2023), Abdullahi (2022), Ozoigbo (2019), Ndubisi-Okolo & Anigbuogu (2019), Okpanachi (2023), all agree that insecurity in Nigeria is caused by poverty and unemployment, youth restiveness, corruption, ethnic tension, religious differences, porous borders, bad governance, use of hard drugs, lack of government presence, and resource control. These causes of insecurity identified by these authors are development inclined. Okpanachi (2023, p. 240) observed that "insecurity has unquestionably generated intolerable levels of fear, anxiety, hopelessness and powerlessness in Nigeria." It is doubtful that business and infrastructure can thrive in the Southeast under these circumstances.

The Indigenous People of Biafra - IPOB's message on Islamization agenda "ignited phobic spirit" and increased security concerns. Although, IPOB had carried on with its activities peacefully but was frequently suppressed by the "Fulani-led federal government of Nigeria", which forced the group, after the arrest and re-arrest of Nnamdi Kanu to declare a compulsory sit-at-home every Monday, (Obioji, 2024). The implication of this is that separatist agitation in the Southeast has significantly defined the security situation in the zone, especially between 2012 and 2023. With rising violence, tension and militarization of the Southeast zone as a result of the separatist agitation, infrastructure development and business operations in the Southeast are paying for it. It is in fact so significant that funerals are now secretly conducted or conducted in cities far away from the homestead of people especially those from parts of Ihiala LGA in Anambra State, and parts of Orlu in Imo State. Under this atmosphere of

fear and uncertainty, there are high chances that infrastructure development and business operations in the zone have become subjects to the prevailing realities bothering on the securitization of the Southeast zone.

Theoretical Framework

This paper adopted the structural-functional Theory as propounded by Gabriel Almond. The structural functionalism theory provided a universal political obligation performed by all political systems, under diverse nomenclatures. These universal functions are performed by various structures within a political system and this enables for both stability and governance in that political system. The structural-functional theory originally was propounded by Talcott Parsons in Sociology, before Gabriel Almond domiciled it in the study of politics.

Structural-functional theory relies on a fundamental assertion that all political systems, not minding its level of advancement, must perform some basic functions so as to remain alive and preserve stability. These functions, Almond argued, were the same everywhere, however, he admitted that the means through which they perform those functions, or the structures that perform them are notably distinct across diverse political systems or background. Importantly, the gap between function and structure strikes Almond as the beacon or lens through which all political systems can be analyzed.

For Almond, every political system perform the following key four functions; political socialization and recruitment, interest aggregation, interest articulation and political communication.

One of Almond's key insights was recognizing that political structures are multi-functional – meaning a single structure can perform multiple functions simultaneously. Conversely, a single function might be performed by multiple structures. This flexibility allows political systems to adapt to changing circumstances while maintaining stability (Political Science Institute, 2023).

In relation to this paper, the structural-functional theory suitably explains the degree of absence of infrastructure development and the hard time on business operations in the Southeast as a result of the separatist agitation in the zone. The implication is that many structures set up to perform certain key roles to ensure stability and governance in the Southeast have not performed their functions adequately leading to collapse of trust and faith in the political system, and now to disruptions and instability threatening the entire political system.

Methodology

The paper used the qualitative method of Key Informant Interview – KII, and Focused Group Discussion – FGD, to generate the primary data used. The sample size for the KII is a total of 17 respondents. The respondents were divided into four categories of security, community, government and market leadership across the Southeast. As key informants, two top security personnel in Anambra and Enugu States were selected from the security category. One person each is selected from the central leadership of the markets in each of the five Southeast states. For town unions and government categories, one respondent each was selected from each state of the zone. However, two security personnel had been selected for KII given the nature of security architecture and level of shared information across the networks of security agencies. For the FGD, the paper used the mini group of three persons for three categories of government officials, community leadership and market leadership across the five states of the Southeast. One participant is selected for each of the three categories and three in total for each of the five states of the Southeast. In total, the FGD involved about 15 participants across the 5 states of the Southeast. In all, the study featured 32 respondents across the five Southeast States.

Respondents were divided into four categories: first is the security category, which has the two major security organizations charged with internal security and armed with sufficient intelligence on local issues which are the Police, and the DSS. The next category is the leadership of communities like the Anambra State Association of Town Unions – ASATU, Now Anambra State Town Union Council – ASTUC or the Enugu State Association of Town Unions - ESATU, which are umbrella associations for the leadership of communities in Anambra and Enugu States. The third category is the leadership of Southeast markets like the Anambra State Amalgamated Traders Association – AMATA, which office in Onitsha also houses the Southeast Amalgamated Traders Association. The fourth and final category is the different levels of government in the Southeast, like states, and local governments. This category is therefore to be represented by officials of the government within the zone.

How Violent Protest Shaped Southeast Separatist Agitation

Violent protest at some point emerged and escalated the separatist agitation in the Southeast, leading to tensions and widespread insecurity that have defining impact on the agitation and Southeast's development. There is the case of brute violence unleashed by the state on its citizens which builds on existing feeling of marginalization. There are some indicators that the violent agitation in the Southeast; a combination of factors; was given impetus by the events that followed the endsars protest. The endsars protest which emerged in late 2020 against the Nigeria Police Special Anti-robbery Squad because of various violations against citizens, became violent across parts of Southern Nigeria after forceful attempt to disperse protesters on 20th October 2020 at Lekki tollgate, led to the death of some protesters according to reports by CNN and the Lagos Judicial Panel of Inquiry into the event. What followed after 20th October was violence of a magnitude that is both novel and strange. In Anambra State, Nnewi Area Command Police Station was attacked and burnt down with weapons looted. The Ogidi Police Station in Idemili North was attacked, police officers were killed, beheaded and burnt, and the station was also looted, burnt and destroyed. The Ukpok Police Station opposite Nnewi South local government area was attacked, destroyed and burnt down with weapons looted.



Nnewi Central Police Station destroyed and looted in 2021. Photo credit: Author

Less than two months after the end sars violence, the ESN was formed by IPOB as its military arm. A few months later, violent gun attacks by gunmen christened Unknown Gunmen or UGM in short form, led to the death of Dr. Chike Akunyili who was killed by gunmen around Ogidi in Idemili North LGA, Anambra State. Many months later, gunmen camped in Ukpok became a real terror around the Anambra South senatorial zone. Thereafter, the security situation became a free for all of sorts. Importantly, during the endsars protest, Nnamdi Kanu's regular order to thousands of his followers to "cut down" security officers and take their weapons from the beginning of the endsars violence and to use the weapons to stop Fulani herdsmen from overrunning the zone, correlates with the new drive of targeted violence against security operatives and weapon stockpile that followed, (Abdullahi, M. 2022).

The Owerri Correctional Centre was attacked and more than a thousand and eight hundred inmates were freed and weapons were stolen. Before then, "Unknown Gunmen" had attacked a police post at Nkpota Junction in Idemili North local government of Anambra state and killed some officers, set their vehicle ablaze and then stole their weapons. The same day, they attacked a Navy Post in Awkuzu, Oyi local government area of Anambra State and killed some officers and also stole their weapons. So many police posts and police stations were then attacked in quick rapidity across the Southeast, and weapons were stolen in each attack. Many public infrastructures were attacked including government warehouses, INEC offices, among others. However, attack on INEC office Anambra State just before the 2021 governorship election failed. In any case, random gun violence on security operatives and stealing of weapons had by mid 2021 become a major and regular experience for Southeast residents. Many respondents blamed the separatist agitation on marginalization, bad governance and hardship. However, they did not specifically outline state violence as a factor in the Southeast's separatist agitation, which has now shaped the zone's economic fortunes in business operations and infrastructure development.



INEC Headquarters Awka, attacked by Gunmen in 2021. Photo credit: Author

To date, it is still not clear how many weapons or assault rifles were lost in all the attacks on police stations during the end sars violence. The far-reaching implication of these attacks was that as Ani and Uwizeyimana (2022) observed, “End SARS protest weakened policing and the security architecture in South Eastern Nigeria thereby giving rise to the emergence and growth of unknown gunmen, robbery, sit-at-home killings.”

Implications of Violence Riddled agitation on Infrastructure Development and Business Operations in Southeast Nigeria

Sadiq-Bamgboya, et al, (2022) observed that the level of economic disruption on account of separatist agitation is remarkable on not just internally generated revenue for Southeast states, but also on foreign direct investments. In 2020, Anambra attracted \$10.2 million as Foreign Direct Investment, according to a report by the National Bureau of Statistics. But in the last quarter of 2023, Anambra attracted FDI of \$4 million. Meanwhile, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo states attracted zero FDI in Q3 of year 2023. Between 2016 and 2020, Anambra’s IGR grew by 61.3%, but in 2022, it recorded a significant decline. “The shortfall recorded in the State’s independent revenue this year (2022) was attributed to insecurity. crisis bordering on agitation for secession”, (Amata, 2022). Therefore, the agitation and the insecurity associated with it have direct bearing on infrastructure development and business operations as well as the general economy of the Southeast and impact it vigorously in multitude of ways.

Yet, disruption of economic activities through the regular Monday sit-at-home has been projected to amount to a staggering loss of ₦4. 618 trillion for the Southeast yearly, (Anudu, 2023). Although SBM Intelligence (2025) reported that “since August 2021, IPOB’s sit-at-home order in Nigeria’s Southeast has caused severe economic damage (\$4.75B loss) and displaced thousands, fuelled militant violence and government responses.” From our findings through the key informants and discussants, the five states of Southeast, namely Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo, are affected economically by the activities and consequences of separatist agitation in the Southeast. The respondents generally agreed that the separatist agitation has become problematic to development and to business operations in the Southeast. This was particularly echoed by the business community across the Southeast. For a business leader in Ogbete Main Market which is the biggest market in Enugu, “agitation is pointless. Investments have closed. Go to Emene, more than five industries have closed.” KII/Enugu/July4, 2025. In Ahia-ofuu, located in Abakaliki, discussants said that “sit-at-home affect business because it causes disruption, insecurity and uncertainty.” KII/Abakaliki/July 3, 2025. Although Ebonyi State has not been observing the Monday sit-at-home, as the state is fully functional and the markets are fully operational on Mondays. “There is no sit-at-home in Ebonyi”, said a key informant in Ahia-ofuu. However, she reiterated that the sit-at-home affects business transactions in Ebonyi State because; there is no free flow of movement within the Southeast on Mondays. So, while they are open for business in Ebonyi, the fact that there is no free movement across the zone affects their business. This position was repeated in more fine details by a business leader in Margaret Umahi International Market, Abakaliki. Speaking during the in-person Focused Group Discussion, he said that; Ebonyi state does not observe sit-at-home. Ebonyi

is free doing their business. The International Market opens fully without any disturbance. But the sit-at-home affects inter-state transportation within the Southeast. But we have buyers from Cross River and you can go to Cross River. However, travelling within the Southeast is a problem on Monday. FGD/Abakaliki/July 3, 2025



Margaret Umahi International Market, Abakaliki, Enonyi State. Photo Credit: Researcher

The business community in Ebonyi and Anambra State have specific complaints about “internal government interference” or issues relating to over taxation and multiple taxation which appears to be of serious concern to them. In Anambra State, the business and community categories insist that the state has lost many opportunities because of separatist agitation. According to a market leader;

There are so many opportunities we have lost because of separatist agitation. No good thing is coming down to the Southeast. Even the three tribes, no other tribe invests in Igbo land. But if you go to other places, Igbos and other tribes invest there. Now, this agitation is not helping. It is creating fear and uncertainty and no one will look at our direction because money does not like uncertainty. KII/Onitsha/June 30, 2025

Discussants in the FGD agree that separatist agitation “negatively affect infrastructure development and business operations.” To buttress, they argued that the sit-at-home has been excessively damaging. “Look at the sit-at-home. You can’t calculate the impact on skilled workers, transportation sector”. The respondent also emphasized that there has been nothing new in many places because of insecurity. “In many places where you have insecurity, there is no new infrastructure. Nothing is going on. The losses are humongous and no sensible investor will come to the Southeast to invest. Southeast is like a dead place,” one discussant concludes. For another, “In Umunze, (a community in Anambra South senatorial zone, Anambra State), by 3pm, you can’t see a vehicle move.” FGD/virtual/ June 23, 2025

However, during FGD, a discussant suggested that violence and separatist agitation should be distinguished. According to the discussant, “violent separatist agitation is only becoming an excuse for the government to continue its marginalization against the Southeast. It has provided the government an excuse not to perform,” the discussant insisted. He went on to inquire at what point the agitators became violent and what was the situation before that time? However, a counter argument ensued and another discussant pointed out that the separatist agitation created the enabling environment for violence and recklessness, as well as created an atmosphere of fear and uncertainty which has terribly destroyed investor’s confidence in the Southeast. This was generally agreed to, even by the first discussant who raised the objection.

Respondents revealed that the Southeast has lost significant economic value in the following sectors; farming, trade and commerce, industry, banking, etc. As a result of insecurity and the agitation, throughout the entire Ihiala LGA and Orumba South LGA in Anambra State, “it is practically impossible

for people to go to their farms.” An official of Anambra State Government who has a large farm in Ihiala and Nnewi South confessed that he lost the farms worth multi million Naira to the agitation. Another fish farmer in Ihiala confessed to have lost his fish farm worth tens of millions of Naira to the separatist agitation. A discussant also said he knew another fish farmer in Orsumoghu who closed down the business after he was kidnapped twice. “I know someone, a fish farmer in Orsumoghu, he was kidnapped twice. He had a mega fish farm. He shut down the farm.” Another discussant noted that Anambra State for instance used to be second only to Lagos in MTN telecom ratings which were good signals for business. But now, “MTN is gone in Ogbaru, Ihiala, Umunze, Okigwe, Orlu areas in Imo state and across other parts of Southeast. We are now not anywhere near the top users.” FGD/virtual/June 30, 2025. “Separatist agitation has terribly injured many sectors of the Southeast economy” said a key informant in the security category. This position was shared by the security category informant in another Southeast state, who described the situation as an “economic sabotage of a zone because of conspiracy of compliance.” According to the informant, “markets, banks don’t open. This requires everybody to push and demonstrate that spirit of patriotism. Everybody is affected. The situation affects both the economy and the psych of the people.” For a key informant in security category in Abia, an experienced senior officer in a Nigerian security agency; There is no development in an atmosphere of insecurity and fear. Let me even tell you, the delay in IVM takeoff was because some of these agitators at the time kidnapped Chinese expatriates who came for that. One of the expatriates was killed. Industrialization has suffered in the Southeast. The uncertainty is too much and the zone can’t move forward like that. KII/Aba/July 5, 2025



Ekeoha, Abia, on a Monday. Shops are closed due to Sit-at-home. Photo credit: Author

These opinions were shared by respondents and discussants in government category in Abia, Imo and key informants in community and market leadership categories. “Nine out of ten Southeasterners are businessmen. They have lost Monday”, said an Aba business leader. “To feel safe, many businesses could no longer be established in the Southeast. Some have closed. Security threats affect establishment of businesses and industries and there are collateral consequences.” A discussant pointed that there are disruptions in Abia, specifically in Ariaria Market, the biggest market in Abia State. “Agitators close shops and threaten people. So now, people comply with the sit-at-home and you can’t build business and infrastructure in an environment of fear and uncertainty.” Ibid

The Monday sit-at-home in Abia is fully enforced, just like in Anambra State. Major markets like Ariaria, and Ekeoha Shopping Centre in Abia, Onitsha Main Market, New Tire Market in Onitsha, are closed completely with absolutely no access into the market. However, in Anambra, Eke Awka, a considerable big market is open for business on Mondays, but not in full operation. But in Imo State, Eke Onuwa Market, Owerri, the biggest market in Imo State, opens for business on Mondays, but not in full operation. In Enugu, Ogbete Main Market opens for business on Mondays, but not fully operational because as a discussant in Ogbete put it, “people now rest on Mondays. But in villages, Monday sit-at-home is enforced. In Nsukka, everywhere is shutdown.”

In Ebonyi, both Ahia-ofuu, a considerable small market but the second largest in Ebonyi, and the Margaret Umahi International Market Abakaliki, are fully opened on Mondays. However, markets that

do open on Mondays suffer disruptions on Biafra Remembrance Day, every May 30th or other special Biafra Day designated by the separatist agitators, according to information from respondents.

Further Consequences of Separatist Agitation in the Southeast on the zone's development

In specific terms, compared with available secondary data, information from respondents in the key informant interview and focused group discussion reflect the same realities in relation to impact of separatist agitation on infrastructure development and business operations in the Southeast. Economic activities like banking and availability of funds which are crucial for massive business and commercial transactions for commercially charged up environment like the Southeast, is severely impaired. To appreciate the far-reaching implication of this, banks no longer operate at full capacity. This further makes access to cash and otherwise normal banking and financial transactions more difficult for a business environment like the Southeast. Similarly, a lot of businesses that depend on daily loans have been affected by difficulty in accessing funds. In the whole of the Southeast even till now, a senior bank operative who preferred not to be mentioned confirmed that certain amounts of money cannot be accessed in the Southeast in recent times, because banks are no longer operating at full capacity. A senior Central Banker at a recent event during a private conversation also said that the Southeast's financial system has been isolated from that of the entire federation because the zone's financial week starts on Tuesday, while others start on Monday and that this has some serious implications for the zone. As a business inclined zone, this situation impacts the business community, as legitimate business transactions are subjected to needless bottlenecks and difficulty, (Sadiq-Bamgboya, Ehinmilorin and Popoola, 2022). To access certain volume of money now, Asaba is the nearest point of call for Anambra business community, while Portharcourt or Ikot Ekpene are the closest points of call for Aba and Owerri business community.

The situation has further nearly killed night life economy in the Southeast, especially in Imo and Anambra States. Enugu, Abia and Ebonyi, are also not left out. For instance, the night life economy grew massively under former Anambra State Governor, Willie Obiano, but has now nearly grinded to a halt on account of tension and insecurity associated with separatist agitation. Typically, in Awka in the past few years since the heightened security concerns, people retire before 8 in the evening out of fear of unknown as a result of tension created by separatist agitation. Meanwhile, every ambitious city with development prospects has fully powered night economy which enhances chances of prosperity and development. In Imo State, popular hotel and club, All Seasons, can no longer operate at average capacity. The entire street in New Owerri which house the mainstream night life in the city of Owerri is now a ghost of itself at night, as people no longer come out late even on weekends. This situation has forced many people to relocate their night life business including Pascal Okechukwu, more popularly known as Cubana Chief Priest, who has relocated his night life businesses to Asaba and Lagos. In economic terms, these are lost jobs, lost IGR to the state, lost economic opportunities for MSMEs like sharwama makers, meat/suya sellers, food vendors, and others whose business model rely on the patronage of clubs and hotels which support the night life economy.

Conclusion and Recommendation

The impact of the separatist agitation in the Southeast on the zone's infrastructure development and business operations is vicarious and multidimensional. Data from KII and FGD strongly affirmed that separatist agitation in the Southeast which led to tension and various range of insecurity in the zone, has diminished infrastructure development in the zone, as well as business operations, forcing some businesses to shutdown, operate at less capacity or at a loss. Significantly, the Monday sit-at-home since 2021 has not only shaped business operations in major markets in Anambra and other parts of the Southeast, but even in Ebonyi where the sit-at-home is not observed, it is still consequential on the business community because of travel restrictions within the Southeast on Mondays. Also, findings from available secondary data strongly align with the responses from KII and FGD. In the end, the paper showed a clear and direct negative interaction between separatist agitation and infrastructure development. More so, the paper showed that separatist agitation is a key challenge to business operations in the Southeast.

Recommendation: (a) There is an urgent need for sustained strategic messaging targeted at addressing the age-long feeling of marginalization against the Southeast geopolitical zone. While this is going on, efforts must be made to address popular feeling of marginalization through a deliberate location of certain critical infrastructure and presence of the federal government in the Southeast, as well as through equitable appointment to Southeasterners. (b) Southeast Governors must rise up to this

occasion. Particularly, Anambra and Abia states should learn from Ebonyi, and replicate its success in handling the three-year-old Monday sit-at-home which has significantly impacted commercial activities in both states. There is also a need for sustained public enlightenment in the Southeast aimed at arming the populace with basic critical thinking knowhow. This will go a long way in addressing some of these challenges. (c) The Southeast must pay a particular attention to the importance of media projection, as a part of the strategic response in positioning the Southeast as an investment heaven in Nigeria. The separatist agitation in the Southeast has remarkably damaged the perception of the zone to the extent that it is conceived of by outsiders as a war zone. There must be a deliberate effort to clean up that perception as a means to establish the Southeast as a suitable investment destination in Nigeria.

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