

## Hate speech and inter-ethnic violence in Nigeria

**Bill Snaddon describes Nigerian writers' appeals to curb hate speech and ethnic stereotyping in a fragile nation.**

Nigeria faced many problems between 2015 and 2017. A power vacuum was created by the poor health of President Muhammadu Buhari, carnage was wrought in Nigeria's north by the Islamist terror group Boko Haram, and more than 14 million people needed humanitarian aid after a dreadful [famine](#). Amidst Nigeria's many problems, the story of Nigeria's ethnic conflict has however been largely untold and yet it may cause Nigeria to split into multiple nations.

The tensions of Nigeria's civil war have not gone away. Many [Igbo people](#) have called for the independence of Biafra, in Nigeria's south-east, which was last independent during Nigeria's civil war, from 1967-1970. Biafra was dissolved into the Federal Republic of Nigeria after the conflict, which culminated in millions of deaths and there have been concerns that hate speech may cause a return to violence. Radio Biafra was accused of hate speech and of ["inciting its listeners to violence while canvassing for a secession from Nigeria."](#)

In response, 28 Nigerian writers called for calm. The writers argued that "Freedom of speech, though sacrosanct, is not absolute. Our freedom is a shared one, limited by the freedom of others. Citizens must draw the line between free speech and arbitrary spite." The writers expressed their ["grave concern \[about\] the dominance of ethnic incendiary speech in our country"](#) and argued that the public space, both online and offline, has been hijacked by a vocal minority of individuals who promote ethnocentric ideas inimicable to the peace and well-being of a majority of citizens."

Two public statements in 2017 added to the tensions and made violence more likely. The first statement, known as the Kaduna Declaration, was [issued by a coalition of youth groups from Nigeria's north](#), who called for the Igbo people to leave northern Nigeria so that the north of Nigeria could form its own nation. The statement argued that "It since ceased to be comfortable or safe to continue sharing the same country with the ungrateful, uncultured Igbos who have exhibited

reckless disrespect for the other federating units and stained the integrity of the entire nation with their insatiable criminal obsessions”

Given Nigeria's history of inter-ethnic violence, the Kaduna statement is extremely significant. Writer Nwachukwu Egbunike called for restraint and for people to “bear in mind Nigeria's long history of ethno-religious conflicts” and argued that “people use this type of deep seated animosity in their speech precisely because of the culture of impunity which reigns in Nigeria. These conflicts break out, people are slaughtered and no one is punished”.

To comprehend today's current fracturing, one must understand the historic, religious, ethnic, and geographic context. When the British left Nigeria, the country they left behind was one whose borders slice through ethnic and religious groups. These tensions continued to be important in the Kaduna Declaration, which called for a northern ‘Muslim Nigeria’ to sit atop a southern ‘Christian Nigeria’. Whereas only 45% of the population are Christian in Nigeria's southwest, the South-East, where the Igbo people live, is predominantly Christian. In contrast, 80% of people are Muslim in Nigeria's north, where Buhari is from.

The second important statement, by [The Middle Belt Youth Council, condemned](#) the Kaduna statement and said, “their sponsors must be arrested and charged for treason”. The Middle Belt of Nigeria encompasses a wide mix of ethnicities and religions. The Middle Belt Youth Council offered “accommodation in our land. Southern Nigeria people should also know that ‘Middle Belters’ are a people with distinct culture, language, education, economy, and general lifestyle from the Hausa and Fulani.”

Egbunike told me that the writers were concerned with hate speech “from all corners of Nigeria”, regardless of religion, geography or ethnicity. Another signatory to the writers' statement, Ipadeola, told me that “If Nigeria is to split, it must be done without violence, especially because “in the event that balkanisation happens, the least number of succession blocs is three. There is a possibility of up to six countries emerging”.

Why has this received so little coverage in the international media? Ipadeola told me that he believed this was “due to both media fatigue and the fact that sections within Nigeria have been crying wolf a long time. There is a difference this time mainly because it is obvious the north will do anything to stay in power and the East will stop at nothing in getting what it believes is justice.”

Hate speech has contributed to increased tensions in Nigeria during a time of bloodshed and violence not seen since Nigeria's civil war. It is therefore the duty of the Nigerian government, as the 28 writers write, “to do everything in its power to protect her citizens and avert another spate of useless killings, and to listen to all aggrieved segments in a constructive and productive manner.”

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