

# What the arrest of Nnamdi Kanu portends for Nigeria

The story of the rearrest and subsequent repatriation of Maazi Nnamdi Kanu (MNK) to Nigeria has been on the front burner of both traditional and social media discussions in Nigeria since last week. On Tuesday 29 June 2021, Nigeria's Minister of Justice and Attorney-General Abubakar Malami [announced](#) that MNK (who is leading a separatist group in Nigeria) had been rearrested overseas and brought back to the country to face charges of treasonable felony. Unsurprisingly, this development has received mixed reactions from Nigerians and critics from other climes: while some see it as a sign that the Nigerian government is keen on quelling the separatist agitations rising in many parts of the country, others think it might have negative ripple effects. As events of the story continue to unfold, there are a number of begging questions: What might be the security implications of his rearrest for Southeast Nigeria, Nigeria as a whole and possibly West Africa? I will attempt to address these concerns—but first, who is MNK, why was he arrested, and why is he agitating?

## **Maazi Nnamdi Kanu's rise to prominence and why he's being arrested**

MNK is a Nigerian-British who lives in London from where he leads the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), a group seeking the separation of Southeast Nigeria (or Biafra) from the rest of Nigeria—the same reason that led to the Nigerian-Biafran War of 1967-70, which has been described as “[one of the bloodiest wars in modern human history](#).” He founded IPOB in 2014 and propagates its ideology through a UK-registered online radio known as Radio Biafra. MNK, IPOB and Radio Biafra remained relatively unknown and insignificant until October 2015, when the government popularised them by arresting MNK and subsequently arraigning him before a court with charges

bordering on treason.

The government kept him in detention for nearly 2 years despite several [court orders](#) granting him bail, which angered his followers, attracted sympathy even from non-followers and provoked wider agitations for the sovereign state of Biafra. A few months after his release in April 2017, his home was [raided](#) by the Nigerian military, leading to his disappearance (after many months of complete absence, he resurfaced in London, from where he's operated since 2018, meaning he's been unable to appear in court ever since). All these, particularly the government's blatant disobedience to court orders, emboldened MNK and his followers, who organised several mass protests across cities in Southeastern Nigeria, making a lot more Nigerians (including those from other groups) become sympathetic to his cause.

However, MNK and IPOB have received their fair share of criticism. While MNK is facing 11-count charges in a court, many people have also faulted his modus operandi. He's consistently made political, religious and traditional leaders, especially in the South, the target of his brutal criticism. He accuses them of being too weak and compromised. On many occasions, he's referred to prominent leaders in the South as "[Fulani slaves](#)." MNK has also been involved in defamation (one of the 11 count charges) and hate rhetoric not only against individuals but also against other ethnic groups.

Many point to MNK's hate rhetoric as the main reason he has struggled to enjoy the support of key political actors in the South. Many Igbo people, mostly the educated, have openly criticised his style, even if not his ideology. The activities of the Eastern Security Network (ESN), a security arm of IPOB established in December 2020, seem to be the last straw that broke the camel's back. There have been allegations that ESN members are involved in violence and the looting of public property. The Nigerian government, therefore, believes that, by all means, MNK had to be brought back to Nigeria to face

the barrage of allegations against him, hence the rearrest.

### **Why Nigeria's ethnic groups are agitating for secession**

Massive protests [took place](#) in Lagos last week by those clamouring for the independence of the Yoruba Nation, the second-largest ethnic group in Nigeria. The protest took place despite the [invasion](#) of the home of the leader of Yoruba Nation agitation, Sunday Igboho, by Nigerian security operatives on 1 July 2021 in a bid to stop the planned protest. This is following similar protests in different cities worldwide, including [London](#) on 12 June 2021–Nigeria's Democracy Day–asking for the separation of Yoruba from Nigeria. There are similar secessionist agitations from many other ethnic groups and regions in Nigeria. The question is: Why does it seem like everyone wants to leave Nigeria? The answer mainly lies in the fact that the present government runs highly nepotistic policies.

According to Nigeria's leading writer and Nobel Laureate, Professor Wole Soyinka, "[Nigeria \[is\] divided as never before under Buhari](#) [Nigeria's current President]." While addressing an audience at the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) on 22 July 2015, immediately after he was sworn in 2015 following his first historic electoral victory, President Buhari [said](#) that he would give more attention to constituencies that gave him a greater percentage of their votes. In other words, he was invariably saying that since he received more votes from the Hausa/Fulani-dominated North, he would run a pro-North government rather than be president for all Nigerians.

Buhari has lived up to this promise of sectionalism. For instance, Buhari's appointments have been skewed in favour of Northern Muslims, most of whom come from the President's Fulani ethnic group: the heads of all security outfits (police, army, air force, navy, etc.) are all Northern Muslims. A fact-check by Business Day Newspaper revealed that "[81 of Buhari's 100 appointments are Northerners](#)." Prominent

Nigerians from all sections of the country have condemned his nepotistic style of governance.

One, Lt Yinka Odumakin (former spokesperson of Afenifere, a pan-Yoruba sociocultural organisation) remarked that [“the various agitations to end the entity called Nigeria are directly linked to the issues of President Buhari’s appointments.”](#) Two, Former President Olusegun Obasanjo even advised President Buhari in an open letter not to seek reelection in 2019 because of his [“nepotistic deployment bordering on clannishness.”](#) Three, a former military governor, Col. Dangiwa Umar (himself a Northern Muslim), had also written an open letter to President Buhari, warning him that [“Nigeria has become dangerously polarised and risk sliding into crisis on account of your administration’s lopsided appointments.”](#)

Not only this, the president’s developmental projects are also skewed in favour of the North. For instance, most regions have benefitted from the ongoing Federal Government’s railway project. In fact, while the Federal Government has [built](#) railway to Niger Republic (another country), the entire Southeast Nigeria has been strategically cut off and has yet to benefit from the project.

Given these, many believe that the President has an [“Islamofulanicisation”](#) agenda, which alienates other ethnic groups and erodes their sense of Nigerianness. It has become commonplace to hear Nigerians make such statements as “I’m first Yoruba/Igbo/Ijaw before Nigeria.” As one of our columnists here once put it, Nigeria is currently [on tenterhooks](#)—it’s on the verge of implosion if drastic and urgent actions are not taken.

### **MNK’s arrest and security implications**

There is currently palpable fear in the country that MNK’s arrest might spark off further violent protests in the

Southeast, which is already volatile due to militarisation by the Federal Government. People fear that the circumstances that led to the radicalisation of Boko Haram in 2009 are about to be reenacted. Boko Haram, which started as a non-violent Islamist group in 2002, got radicalised after its founder Mohammed Yusuf was shot dead in 2009 by the police. Since then, Boko Haram has terrorised Northern Nigeria nonstop, even [forming a partnership](#) with ISIS. In 2015, the Global Terrorism Index [declared](#) that Boko Haram had overtaken ISIS to become the deadliest terrorist group in the world.

With regard to MNK's case, it is feared that he may be killed or jailed, which might radicalise his followers. The Nigerian government is already overwhelmed by the terrorist activities of Boko Haram, so it will undoubtedly be too much for it to bear if other terrorist groups emerge in other parts of the country. And given Nigeria's politico-economic and geographical position in West Africa (Nigeria shares borders with Benin, Cameroon, Chad and Niger—all of which are already impacted by the activities of Boko Haram), further security challenges in the country portend a great deal of danger in the region.

### **Way forward**

President Buhari has the burden of duty on his shoulder to convince Nigerians and the world that his government is not working in cahoots with Boko Haram to Islamise Nigeria, as many suspect. One way he can do this is to sit up and show the same level of seriousness, commitment and tactics his government deployed in arresting MNK and other secessionist leaders when dealing with Boko Haram – a group that has brought Nigeria to its knees for years on end. Moreover, Buhari should ensure inclusiveness in his appointments and developmental projects.

Given how deep-seated this secessionist consciousness has become, some wonder whether regional representation alone can

appease the agitating regions. But considering that these agitations were almost non-existent prior to Buhari's nepotistic administration, which has been the main complaint, it is strongly hoped that separatist agitations will peter out with time once people's sense of belonging to the entity called Nigeria is restored. Let all Nigerians be treated equally first—that's the issue!

Given how ethnopolitics has ravaged many African countries, African leaders can save their countries from conflicts by enthroning nationalistic rather than ethnic ideologies. For instance, Rwanda presents a classic example of how ethnic politics can destroy a nation in light of the tragic event of the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi. Considering Rwanda's comprehensive development in the aftermath of the tragedy, the country also serves as an example to other African leaders/countries that there is a lot to gain from defeating ethnic politics. After all, we are all children of the same Mother Africa!