

Agitations for Separation and Non-Negotiability of Nigeria's Unity: Bottling the Bomb?



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By

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Abstract

The Nigerian state came into being through conquest and forceful imposition of foreign rule, which denied the indigenous peoples the opportunity to negotiate and choose what they wanted. Successive regimes have continued to hold the state together in a seeming forceful manner, creating the impression that the country must remain as crafted by the colonialists and that her unity is non-negotiable. However, the state has continued to experience swirling lava of agitations for self-determination. Relying on documentary evidence, observations, and descriptive analysis, this paper explores the nature of Nigeria's unity; pattern of coexistence among the different groups within the Nigerian state vis-a-vis the extent they exhibit the proclivity for, as well as the factors that militate against, national integration; the manner the government promotes national unity; and the factors that ignite the separatist tendencies. The finding of this paper is that the inability to foster sense of common identity and national consciousness among the different groups, the continuing promotion of inter-ethnic hatred and unhealthy rivalry, as well as the bad governance rooted in corruption and divisiveness are the main factors that fuel the agitation for separation. The basic recommendation is that the government should reverse her non-negotiable stance about Nigeria's unity and realise that any sincere move aimed at enthroning lasting peace and unity must begin with good governance and a general understanding and agreement reached by the constituent groups on how to proceed with the Nigerian project.

Keywords: Unity, Peace-building, Separatism, Self-determination, National integration

Introduction

One of the attributes of the structure of the Nigerian state that easily catches the attention of close watchers is her multi-ethnic composition. Nigeria came into being as a direct consequence of colonialism (Odum, 2016a). Prior to the incursion of the colonialists, different groups had existed separately within the vast area that eventually formed part of the Nigerian project. It is in this regard that Mimiko and Adeyemi (2005, p. 57), describe the country as "a union of diverse largely autonomous ethnic nationalities that had existed under distinct political arrangements like empires,

kingdoms, chiefdoms, city-states and caliphate”. Just like most other multi-ethnic African states that went through colonial experience, the colonialists did not seek the consent of the various groups before fusing them into one entity.

The problematic nature of this forceful marriage and its seeming unacceptability by the constituent groups began to manifest even before colonial rule came to an end, as exemplified by the character of the political parties formed within the period (Odum, 2016b) as well as the ideas encapsulated in the Northernisation policy (Balogun, 1983). It was, perhaps, based on the glaring incidents suggestive of mutual suspicion, hatred, and disunity that Awolowo (1947) declared the term, Nigeria, as representing a mere geographical expression. In spite of the festering suppurations, Nigeria retained her “united” status at independence. Yet, the Nigerian leaders that inherited power from the colonial masters not only failed to foster true unity among the constituent groups but also took actions that deepened the sense of disunity within the polity. Thus, signs that things were falling apart began to manifest quite early when the country started witnessing agitations for separation within the first decade of her independence.

Nigeria fought a civil war in the name of preserving her unity. Though the government initially went through the path of dialogue and peaceful settlement in handling the problem, she eventually made a swift turn around and decided to preserve the unity of the country forcefully – the same manner it was formed. Numerous problems bordering on unity kept cropping up as the country advanced in age, yet the government remained adamant in adopting the forceful approach towards maintaining the country’s unity and based on this mindset ruled out the option of (re)negotiation. Fifty years after the Nigerian government rejected the path of dialogue and embarked on the war of “unity”, there are strong indications that the unity of the country still exists only in rhetorical terms and has failed to sink into the minds of the different peoples. In the face of the glaring evidence that the country is yet to attain

true unity and recent agitations for separatism, the position of the government still remains unchanged as she insists that the unity of the country is settled and non-negotiable. However, it is not yet clear how, when, and the people involved in getting the matter “settled”. It equally remains a puzzle how some writers like Oche (2015, p. 2) drew the conclusion that “there appears to be a consensus among the majority of Nigerians in favour of the country remaining a political entity” (my emphasis). No matter what the government is saying, the stark reality is that Nigeria is facing serious challenges in relation to her unity, as exemplified by the threats and agitations for separation echoing from different sections of the country. The point remains that, by foreclosing negotiations over the issue of unity, the country would either explode in a most catastrophic manner or remain forcefully united with the peace of a graveyard.

Truly, considerable academic attention has been paid to the issues of Nigeria’s nationalism and unity. In view of the fresh challenges being witnessed currently in this direction, the need arises now to re-appraise the state of Nigeria’s unity with a view to not only come up with suggestions on how to encourage peace-building among the various groups but also urge the government to recognise and respect the right to self-determination in the event that peaceful coexistence appears unrealisable. This forms the primary objective of this paper.

Theoretical Perspective

In spite of the deficiencies identified with it, democracy has become a very popular form of government in most countries of the world due to the positive sentiments attached to it. Its overwhelming popularity actually began with the transformation orchestrated by the third wave of democratisation, as highlighted by Huntington (1991), which saw many countries of the world aspiring towards aligning with the democratic order – whether sincerely or pretentiously. Fukuyama (2011) shows that as at 1973, there were only 45 countries (out of the 151 existing then) deemed as being

under democratic influence but the number grew to about 120 by the late 1990s. Nnoli (2011) opines that democracy has become a highly cherished value to the extent that even societies that are clearly different in their politics, as well as those that are brutal, oppressive, and unjust but who wish to justify their actions claim it. Omelle (2005) holds the view that democracy remains the best form of governance ever devised by man.

Various scholars have offered definitions of democracy but the most elementary and most popular among them remain the one credited to Abraham Lincoln, which captures it as government of the people by the people for the people (Nnadozie, 2007; Nnoli, 2011; Omelle, 2005). As can be gleaned from existing literature, the common thread running through various definitions of the concept is the centrality of the people in a democratic dispensation. Hence, Nnoli (2011, p. 13) talks of “demystifying the people” while Jinadu (2007, p. 25) deems it fit that the question of “whose democracy?” should be raised in order to resolve whether a particular government has democratic content or not. The implication of this is that the actions of a democratic government must reflect the choices and preferences of the people.

According to Tom (2015), the advocates of Democratic Consent theories share the view that, to some extent, there is a direct linkage between democracy and legitimate authority. For the purposes of this paper, the relevant arguments we can extract from the theory traced to John Locke is that when a person consents to the creation of a political society, he necessarily consents to the use of majority rule in deciding how the political society is to be organised; it is whatever the people chooses that determines the line of action to be taken by the government; and that participation guarantees legitimacy. The main criticism directed at the theory borders on how the consent of the majority is treated as consent granted by all. This is in view of the fact that the *majority carries the vote* and even if the minority shared a different view and actually disagreed with the position of the majority over an

issue, they are still bound by the position of the majority and deemed to have equally consented. But we cannot lose sight of the fact that, as stated by Nwanegbo (2016), there is a reasonable relationship between democracy and good governance, which is characterised inter alia by participation, equity, the rule of law, transparency, and accountability. If we take this to be true, it stands to reason that good governance guarantees that the fears and interests of the minorities are accommodated even when they have to flow with the choices of the majority.

The criticisms notwithstanding, the Democratic Consent theory appears quite relevant in this study. In discussing the issue of Nigeria's unity, it will be necessary to establish whether, when, and how the consent of the people had been sought before arriving at the Nigerian project. With this, one can conveniently interrogate the suitability or otherwise of the pronoun, "We", as it exists in the Nigerian constitution and upon which the government must have rested her argument over the issue of unity. This theory will be helpful in determining whether the declaration that the unity of Nigeria is non-negotiable and already settled actually originated from the people or from those that do not have the right to do so. Also, this will help in making an appraisal of the democratic content of the Nigerian state, especially as it relates to good governance.

Conceptual clarifications

The basic concepts that form the topic include agitation, separation, unity, non-negotiability, and bottling the bomb. Hornby (2015) gives us a general view about their meanings. Unity refers to the state of being joined together to form one unit, or the state of being in agreement and working together. In this paper, we are not just looking at the act of unification or the fact that people are living within same territory. Before affirming that unity exists, there must be evidence of peaceful coexistence and unity of purpose. As such, we cannot say that there is unity in an environment characterised by

incidents of disunity. The opposite of being united is being divided and, as such, one cannot claim to be in unity when there are glaring cases of division.

Agitation stands for public protests geared towards influencing changes in a law or in social conditions. There are different forms of agitations going on within Nigeria and they include those that border on creation of more states, gender equality, release of Chibok Girls, increase in salary, resource control, separating from Nigeria and forming a sovereign state, etc. Here, we are dealing with the issue of those mounting public protests in order to be allowed to exit from Nigeria and form their own sovereign state.

In simple terms, negotiate means to try to reach an agreement by formal discussion. It precludes threat or use of force. The aim is to reach a common stand agreeable to all the parties. In essence, non-negotiability means ruling out the possibility of arriving at an agreement through such formal discussion. With regard to the claim that Nigeria's unity is settled and non-negotiable, it means that the status quo must be maintained and that discussion on the matter cannot be entertained.

Understanding the Background to the problem of Nigeria's Unity

As we have already noted, Nigeria was formed by the British colonialists without the consent of the different indigenous peoples. It is worth pointing out that the fusing of the different groups into one entity, per se, was not the main cause of the ethnic-related problems facing the country. The trouble about ethnicity in Nigeria was occasioned by the paradoxical action of the colonial masters who took deliberate steps, as encapsulated in their divide-and-rule policy, to keep the different groups separate from one another (Coleman, 1958). Among others, the policy of Sabon Gari (strangers' quarters) captured by Nnoli (2008), which was adopted to separate the indigenous northerners from the southern

migrants living in the northern cities, serves as a practical example. This divisive strategy succeeded in promoting the agenda for tribal integration and militated against national integration.

In the final analysis, the people swallowed the pill of discord administered by the colonial masters and its effect began to manifest even before the country gained her independence. From the account of Coleman (1958) and Balogun (1983), it can be seen that the internal self-government and national independence were delayed in a bid to manage the mutual fear emanating from a section of the country. Also, the Northernisation policy introduced during the period of institutional transfer shows that the Northerners were pursuing a northern-centred agenda in isolation of the rest of the country. Added to these, the three major political parties formed within the period, which include the AG, NPC, and NCNC, bore stamps of ethnic identities (Coleman, 1958; Kurfi, 1983; Sklar, 1963; Uba, 1989).

If this discussion is concluded at this stage, one might be tempted to believe that the sense of division and mutual distrust coursing through the country at that period existed only in the form of Northern Nigeria versus the Southern Nigeria or simply among the three major regions of the country – East, North, and West. But there exists evidence (Arowosegbe, 2005; Nnoli 2008; Nwokedi, 2001) to show that the problem ran deeper than that and equally affected other smaller ethnic groups struggling for self-identification within the polity. It was in this state of internal division and seeming disunity that the people were clamouring for independence and this must have been the reason Ogban-Iyam (1989) drew the conclusion that the people were virtually unanimous in their demand for an end to colonial rule but were not concerned with forging a common culture and identity among all the different nations that have been forced to live under one colonial government.

The Nigerian peoples emerged into the independence era in that seeming state of disunity. Against the backdrop that the only common cause they were pursuing with a sense of togetherness and unanimity was the termination of colonial rule, it stands to reason that they became deficient of binding

elements after independence was granted. Old prejudices anchored on parochial interests found their way into the new State. The existing elements of disunity were further aggravated at independence by the actions of the political elite. Preoccupied with the desire to gain political relevance and win votes, they resorted to the whipping up of ethnic sentiments and abandoned the pursuit of nationalistic goals. It is in this regard that Ihonvbere (2003) blames them over their failure to build those elements that pull a people together and inability to cultivate a national identity and culture. The first republic crumbled under their watch as a consequence.

The military that came to rescue the country from the excesses of the politicians was eventually drawn into the game of clannishness. In all, the successive military and civilian regimes kept doing things that magnify, rather than erase the lines of ethnic division within the country. Thus, the social gap existing among the different groups in Nigeria continued to widen with the passage of time.

Nigeria's Unity and the Agitations for Separatism

It is quite agreeable that the custodians of state power in Nigeria have not done enough to get the various groups into a melting pot so as to attain Nigerian nationalism and promote true unity. To the extent that the British colonialists did not seek the consent of the indigenous peoples before establishing the Nigerian state, and in the light of the fact that the political leaders who took over the mantle of leadership at independence did not create opportunities for the various groups to negotiate the terms and conditions of the union, one can say that the unity of Nigeria is one that *comes from above*. It is not surprising, therefore, that questions relating to the desirability of the unity of Nigeria and her continued existence as an indivisible unit have erupted from the different sections of the country at various times.

A review of the steps believed to have been taken by the government in ensuring the unity of the country will reveal that they are inadequate to forestall agitations for separatism. The waging of the civil war is one of such steps. However, it appears the war was fought primarily for the purpose of preserving the “sacred” heritage laid down by the British and not necessarily to promote unity. Perhaps, the Aburi Accord reached between the Nigerian team and the Biafran side would have promoted unity if the Nigerian government had not made a turn-around at the last minute. From what it appears, the war and its memories kept the country more divided than united. Again, the implementation of the three Rs (Reconciliation, Reconstruction, and Rehabilitation) would have gone a long way in healing the wounds inflicted by the war. Unfortunately, the federal government not only refused to take any meaningful action in this direction but also embarked on certain actions that appeared to be further punitive actions.

There are some policies initiated by the government with the aim of promoting unity such as the federal character principle, quota system, state of origin, etc. These, too, have succeeded in highlighting the lines of sectional division, obstructing opportunity for a level-playing field, and militating against national integration and unity (Mimiko and Adeyemi, 2005). For instance, the issue of state of origin is a constant reminder that Nigeria is not home to the citizens and that the real home is the state of origin.

At various times, the federal government has convoked national conferences with the intention of finding solutions to the problems facing the country. These would have served as golden opportunity for thrashing out the issue of unity. But the government had always declared the issues relating to the unity of the country as “no-go-area” during such conferences, thereby disallowing it to feature in the agenda. By taking this line of action, one is tempted to conclude that the government prefers living with the problems generated by (dis)unity of the country to facing the problem squarely with the aim of

getting it solved once and for all. Experience shows that the option of foreclosing discussions on the matter has not been any helpful in fostering unity.

There is an extent to which one can say that the most visible measure adopted by the Nigerian government in promoting unity remain the unity rhetoric and threats directed at any group that dares question the basis of Nigeria's unity. Has this helped in enthroning unity? Taking into consideration the events going on presently in the country, one cannot be in doubt that the different measures adopted by the government have not yielded meaningful results. Nigeria has never been so divided along ethnic lines as it is today. While the government continues to live with the pretence that the unity Nigeria is settled and non-negotiable, different groups are busy engaging in actions that make a mockery of the claims about the oneness and unity of the country. The country keeps witnessing a proliferation of ethnic militias that parade as the military wing of the different ethnic groups. There exists various sectional groups that show greater inclination towards advancing their parochial agenda in a more committed manner than they do for a pan-Nigeria agenda.

At this juncture, it is pertinent to ask whether there can be unity when there is no unity of purpose among the people. The point here is that unity is not something that exists merely at the rhetorical realms. There are practical signs that indicate the existence of unity. It manifests, inter alia, through the lifestyle, manner of engagement, pattern of relations, and level of peacefulness that exist between or among those involved in a union. Unity cannot be said to exist under a circumstance where those in the union see one another as potential threats that must be avoided or eliminated. It cannot be said to exist in an environment laden with mutual fear and suspicion originating from other members who are supposed to be partners in the unity project.

Truly, agitations for separatism occur when a group faces real threat within a political system, especially, in a multi-ethnic society that lacks unity. In Nigeria, for instance, it is a known fact that

people of the Igbo ethnic stock had suffered pogrom and constant ethnic-based violence in the hands of the northerners. The rest of the country had faced the region in a civil war that resulted in genocide. Most policies of the government still appear to be skewed against the region many years after the war had ended. For instance, it took the federal government several decades to grant the region an international airport. The unbearable conditions that pushed them into engaging the government still persist within the system. It is in the light of these that agitation for separatism appears to have gained wide support in the region.

Agitation for separatism can equally occur when a group develops the (imaginary) feeling that they are not accommodated and that their interests cannot or may never be represented within a political system. It has become a common habit for the Nigerian political class to manipulate the masses through the whipping up of ethnic sentiments in a bid to gain political relevance or score cheap political points. This trick that appears similar to the divide-and-rule strategy of the colonialists helps in creating problems where none really existed in order to gain political and economic advantage and they achieve this by demonising other ethnic groups and political opponents from there. The atmosphere created by this act is one rent with mutual suspicion and hatred and this creates room for feeling of insecurity and not being wanted especially when a person from different ethnic group is at the helm of affairs.

Based on certain misrepresentations and nature of the environment, bad governance can generate agitations for separatism. In a heterogeneous society (especially, one suffused with mutual suspicion whereupon the different groups have gotten accustomed to pointing accusing fingers and trading blames across borders), chances are high for the people to weigh bad governance with an ethnic measure. This is where Nigeria falls in. Laden with ethnic sentiments and mutual suspicion/hatred, people from the various groups that make up the country have been accustomed to situations whereby a

despicable action can be tolerated, or a minor issue magnified and blown out of proportion, depending on the side the person who took the action or generated the issue belongs. For example, the northerners have never complained against bad governance and marginalisation in Nigeria like they did during the regimes of Obasanjo and Jonathan (southerners). Same goes to the southerners under the regimes of northerners. Though cases of outright marginalisation actually exist in some cases, issues that border on general incompetence and poor leadership are often adjudged to be deliberate attempt by the leader to punish his “enemies” that belong to different ethnic groups. In the circumstance, separatism will therefore appear as a fanciful option to get away from the perceived “wickedness” of the enemy.

An undemocratic environment is yet another factor that can generate agitations for separatism. Undemocratic regimes are notorious for stifling the voice of opposition, averse to negotiations, impervious to the suffering of the people, and indisposed to offer all-inclusive governance. Under such circumstance, the people may begin to develop the impression that they will live and die with whatever problems and challenges they are facing within the system. When this kind of leadership (“rulership”) is taking place in a multi ethnic environment characterised by ethnic suspicion and hatred, the temptation will be high for certain sections of the country to mount agitations for separatism. This picture captures the Nigerian situation vis-a-vis the undemocratic nature the government has been handling the issue of unity in the country.

There is a sense in which one can say that the Nigerian state encourages her citizens to adopt violence as a bargaining chip (Odum, 2016c). An example can be drawn from the manner the government began to pay increased attention to the Niger Delta problem after the militants had wrecked enough havoc and demanded for the emancipation of the region from the country. Once a group sees this as the language the government understands, chances becomes high that it may choose to embark on agitation for separatism, not necessary for the purpose of exiting from the country but as a ploy to

get the government. All the existing separatist groups that are pushing for the restructuring of the country as a second option fall into this category.

The point here is that whether real or imaginary, agitations for separatism are indicators of disunity and whenever it occurs, a serious minded government ought to find immediate answers to the problems being raised by the agitators.

The non-negotiability of Nigeria's Unity: A Viable Option or a Time Bomb

The government has remained recalcitrant in shielding the question of Nigeria's unity from being subjected to democratic currents and scrutiny. Truly, the persistent government's declaration that the unity of the country is non-negotiable in this modern era begs for questions. In whose interest was the non-negotiable stand of the government taken? What are the fears of those that took this autocratic position? Do the present conditions in the country suggest that there is true unity and as such deserve no reappraisal? Is there really a point in a country's life when one can say that the issue of unity is sealed and no longer negotiable?

The scary situation on ground is that after fifty seven years of independence, Nigeria is still handling the issue of unity as a project that is still at its formative stage. Echoes of disunity prevail in the land. Against this backdrop, some of the constituent groups have reappraised the fifty seven year old project that has failed to work properly and decided to agitate for separatism. By insisting that the unity of the country is settled and non-negotiable, especially in view of the continuing incidents of disunity, the government is insinuating that the people must live with whatever problems that had persisted over the years in their unsolved manner. Or, are there signs that the existing problems, fears, and old prejudices would suddenly vanish without the issues being discussed and agreements reached on how to overcome them? The situation gets scarier when the conditions that led to the initial agitation

for separatism within the first decade of the country's independence are still in the system and are even getting worse many years after. It gets scarier in view of the general belief that the current president has maintained a clannish disposition in the way he treats those constituencies he claimed gave him only 5% of votes during his election, thereby exacerbating the *us* versus *them* distinction that Gurr (1993) talked about. It gets scarier because a government that is operating within democracy is appearing to be averse to all-inclusive governance and willing to handle civil matter in a military fashion. Indeed, it does not seem that these actions can help in building unity. It will rather expand the space for disunity.

The much touted unity of Nigeria does not exist yet and this explains why the strategies adopted by the government all these years have not worked. It is agreeable that the government has continued to live in pretence because the actions of the various groups do not align with the claim that the unity of the country is settled – unless it was settled that the country will remain in a state of disunity. As it appears, the government must have been living with the impression that throwing open the question of unity to democratic currents would result in the break-up of the country. But the question that keeps recurring is: In whose interest is the government holding the country together? What stops the different groups from breaking up if that appears to be the only way they can live in peace?

This is not to imply that bringing the issue of unity to the negotiating table will definitely lead to a break-up of the country. On the contrary, it is the failure to engage the people in a negotiation that is most likely to lead to an unplanned and, perhaps, violent break-up. Forceful unification is most unlikely to engender true unity. By continuing to maintain that the unity of the country is non-negotiable amidst the cries of the real or imaginary injustice, the government will only keep postponing the evil days. Foreclosing negotiations leaves the option of violence open. Thus, adopting this approach under an environment where ethnic distrust is at an all-time high is tantamount to bottling up animosities. At the superficial level, the government might believe (or pretend) that the approach is working but at the

subterranean level, the lava will keep boiling. Like a bottled bomb, the animosities will still explode with time. In sum, the non-negotiability approach is not a viable option in solving the nagging problem of Nigeria's unity.

Concluding Remarks/Recommendations

Our conclusion is that Nigeria's unity is problematic and what this suggests is that the approach the government has been adopting in handling the problem is not working. The different groups that were unified into one entity have refused to consummate the union, hence, the continuing problems and echoes of agitations for separatism. Since the existing approach has failed, there is need to do something different. The recommendations here are as follows:

1. The government must perforce expose the issue of unity to democratic currents so that Nigeria can work for Nigerians. Resisting negotiations will simply keep deepening the crisis of national unity.
2. In line with this, government must kick-start a sensitisation process and campaign to convince Nigerians about the desirability of a united Nigeria. The people should know what they stand to gain by remaining united and what they would lose if the country breaks up.
3. The sensitisation campaign should run *pari passu* with positive actions on the part of the government. In specific terms, the government should endeavour eschew those tendencies that militate against unity such as marginalisation, clannishness, and other forms of injustice. Unity cannot thrive in an atmosphere of injustice, hence, the need for equity, fair play, level playing ground, and all-inclusive governance.
4. The distributive character of the Nigerian state, to a large extent, has rendered the constituent units unproductive. This explains why they expend greater energy strategising on how to share the national cake. This trend should be discouraged to reduce the tension associated with this unproductive competition. There is need for an upward review of the derivation formula in order to

promote regenerative competition. At least, 50% of revenue should go to the derived source while the remaining should go to the Federation Account.

5. Nigeria is a federal state in principle but has been exhibiting *unitarist* tendencies and this explains why the “almighty” centre has the capacity to marginalise or choke any of the constituent units with the “federal might”. There is need to restructure the system in such a manner as to make the centre less attractive. Thus, more powers should be devolved to the lower tier of the federating unit.
6. Already, there is an existing report emanating from the latest national conference that was held in 2014. The federal government should adopt the recommendations contained in the report as this will serve as a step in the right direction and prove the democratic disposition of the government.
7. Bad governance is a critical factor that fuels agitation for separatism. Oftentimes, the issues misinterpreted as marginalisation are mere outcome of poor governance. Hence, the good governance option becomes inevitable. To achieve this, leaders must be willing, not only to resist but also fight corruption, discourage wastefulness and mismanagement, and display a sense of commitment towards achieving laudable developmental goals. This good governance option must apply at all levels of government.
8. Governments at the regional level should synergise to achieve regional integration and promote productive ventures. They should find areas of partnership for the advancement of the region so as to demonstrate the viability of the region.
9. Above all, there is need to activate the demand-side of government. Part of the reason official corruption is prevalent in the country is because the masses appear too lethargic to demand for accountability of their leaders. It is a truism that many a great number of the uninformed separatists are living with the impression that the problems of the country begins and ends at Abuja and that these problems will vanish once a sovereign state is created. Based on this, they do not challenge the political leaders at the lower tiers of the federation for good governance and qualitative

leadership. It is recommended that citizens should begin to demand for accountability of leaders at all the levels of government.

10. In the event that any group is still interested in forming a sovereign state of their own, the government must be willing to negotiate with them because self-determination is a right and should not be viewed as a criminal act. It is better to live in peace as good neighbours than live together in a permanent state of crisis.

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