IS SEPARATISM A VIABLE SOLUTION FOR THE PRESENT AFRICAN CIVIL WARS?

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Abstract. *Separatism as a political movement is as old as humanity. In Africa, where state borders are the result of colonial powers' interests and strategies, a huge number of separatist movements have engulfed the continent in a long series of civil wars. This essay examines whether separatism in its most extreme form of secession has led to the establishment of more stable, peaceful, and prosperous countries on the continent, comparing the emergent new nations' political and economic achievements with those of the original countries they left.*

Keywords*: separatism, secession, civil war, Africa, Namibia, South Africa, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Sudan, South Sudan, Somaliland.*

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Separatism is one of the most widely spread political movements across the globe. Generally, it means the advocacy of separation of one group from another, based on political ideology, ethnic, religious, or racial differences between them. There are three elements of this definition that need further analysis, namely advocacy, separation, and the nature of differences.

Advocacy can be either peaceful or done using an entire range of violent measures, from political kidnapping and localized terrorism (as employed by European separatist movements like ETA or IRA) to full scale insurgency and civil war (as in most of the African cases). There is a strong correlation between the type of advocacy used by separatists to promote their cause and the nature of the government they are trying to separate from: peaceful or low intensity violence is usually used against

democratic governments (real, substantive, and working democracies, not the type one can find in Eastern Europe or Africa, where democracy is just a façade) whereas high-intensity violence is used against authoritarian governments. This is the reason why, by and large, European separatist movements, though almost as numerous as the African ones (see maps), employ far more peaceful and non-violent strategies to promote their cause than their African brethren.

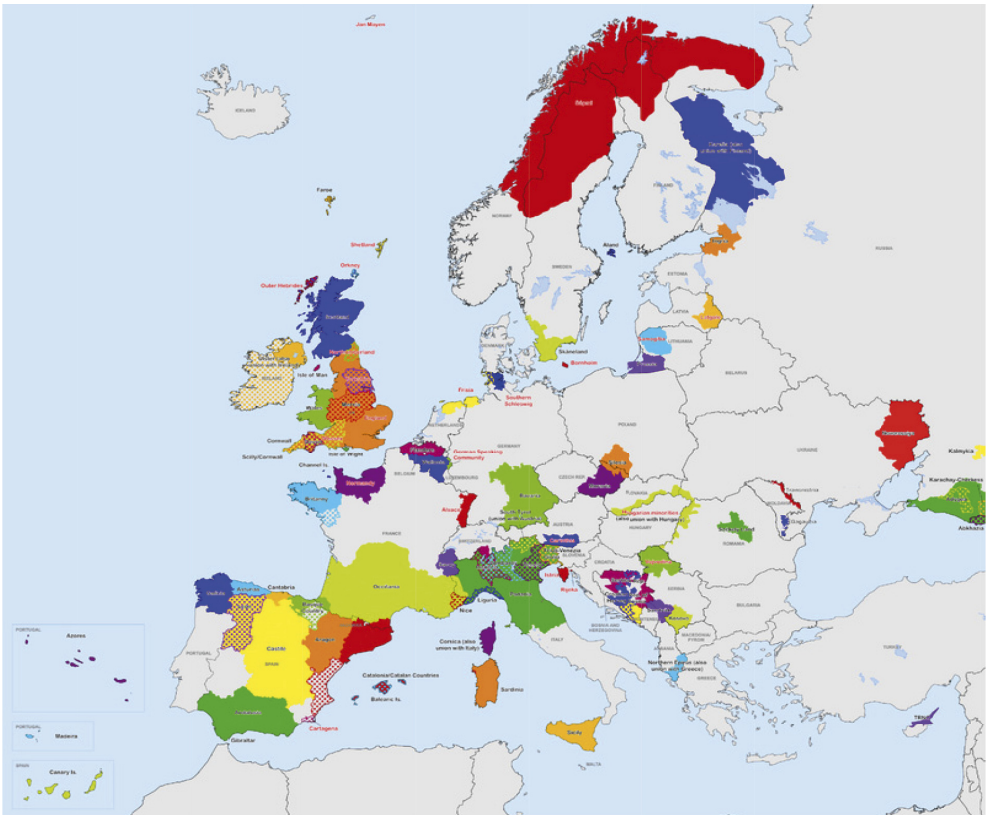

Figure 1. Map of separatist movements in Europe (Source: National and subnational borders: File: NUTS 3 regions EU-27.svg Data: List of active separatist movements in Europe)

Separation is, in itself, a term in need of more clarification. Some movements claim they just want more autonomy within the original political entity, with no contemplation of leaving it entirely. Others want more powers devolved from the central government, in order to turn the state into a confederation, a very loose alliance of territories, each governed separately with only a handful of prerogatives left to the central government. Finally, a lot of separatists want full secession, breaking up with the former state and establishing a state of their own. From Scotland to Congo, the world is full of this kind of separatist movements, employing the whole arsenal of methods and strategies to

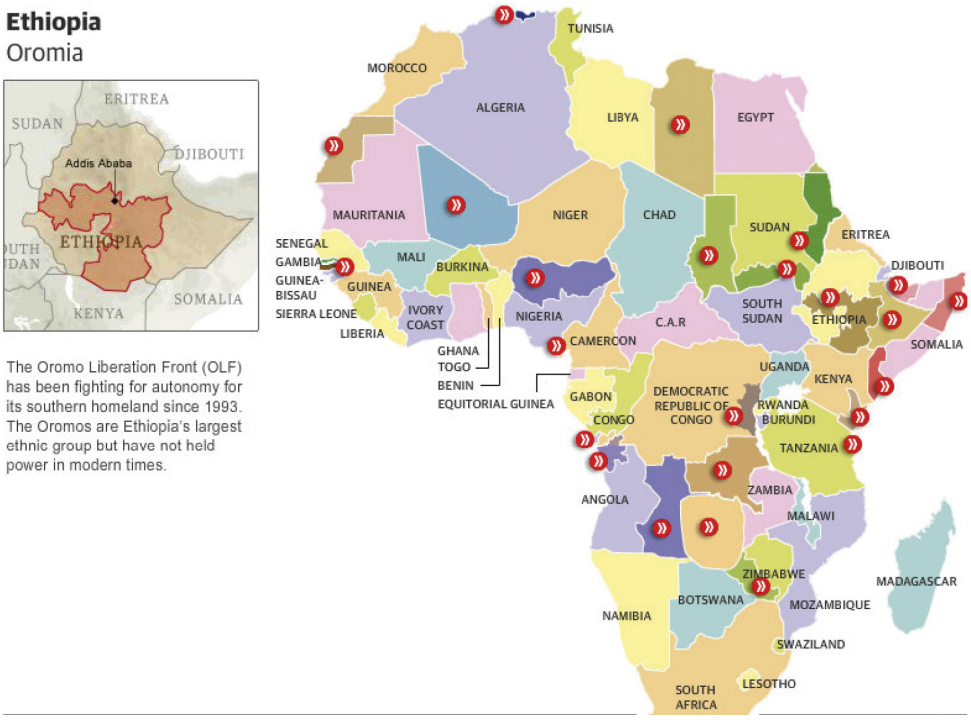

Figure 2. Map of separatist movements in Africa and their would-be states (interactive map retrieved from http://gisetc.com/the-separatist-map-of-africa-interactive)

fulfil their dreams. Our article here deals only with secessionist movements, leaving the autonomist movements outside, as they strive only to get more of a saying within the same political entity. What concerns us in this paper is to find out an answer to the following question: does total separation (i.e. secession) work? Meaning, does building new states encompassing grieving groups represent a viable and sustainable solution to the African ethnic and religious problems that tend to generate so many intractable violent conflicts?

Third, the nature of differences also plays a relevant role in classifying the plethora of separatist movements. The preservation of group identity is one of the major sources of conflict around the world, and has been such for the entire history of mankind. Identity is what makes us what we are and different from the others surrounding us. It is the psychological core of the human being and, consequently, of human groups, so it is no surprise it has such a central place in the drama of human conflicts. All over the world, ethnicity (and language, subsequently) and religion are the defining elements of the individual and group identity. But there are situations when separatism is pursued not because of ethnic or religious differences but for political/ideological reasons – here, the secession of the American colonies in the past and the continuous separation

of Taiwan and, to a certain extent, Hong-Kong are just a few examples for this case. Therefore, separatist movements are classified by political scientists, journalists, and pundits as ethnic or religious or political movements, and the fact that groups assume these identities is generally considered enough to explain why a certain civil war has begun. Most conflicts in Africa fall into this category.

The problem with measuring if secession is the right answer to African civil wars is the fact that few of the secessionist movements succeed. The international establishment and the international culture are biased against secessionism (leaving outside the phenomenon of decolonization, which is deemed natural from both political and moral points of view). Very few would-be states, from Somaliland to Iraqi Kurdistan, have enjoyed any political support worldwide, even if they are the only viable parts of mostly failed states. It is largely accepted that giving way to one secessionist movement and recognizing its success in the form of a new state will only embolden the rest of them, which makes almost all the countries of the world extremely cautious in supporting secessionism for fear of self-inflicted wounds. With all the support from America and EU, Kosovo is still not widely recognized as a sovereign state, not even by all EU member states who reckon that accepting Kosovo's forceful separation from Serbia will only give more wind to the sails of their own separatist movements.

After the advent of decolonization and the creation of the present political borders in Africa, there were a significant number of secessionist movements that used violent means to get their independence. The arbitrariness of the border drawing process in Africa has been common-place in expert literature even from those times. Lines drawn on maps with thick pencils in London and Paris left entire communities on the wrong side of the border – it was only natural for them to try to redress the injustice, even if this meant going to war. From Katanga in Congo to Biafra in Nigeria, some of these secessionist movements came very close to success. But, as we have already said, the world is biased against secession, and huge pressure was exerted to maintain the integrity of the newly created African states, no matter the realities in the field or the right of self-determination advocated by the Europeans and Americans for themselves but denied to others.

The only significant exceptions to-day are Namibia, which gained independence from South Africa in 1990, Eritrea, which seceded Ethiopia in 1993, and South Sudan, the newest member of the African club, born in 2011 after five decades of civil war. There are a number of territories that have successfully seceded from the original polity, but enjoy limited or no international recognition, like the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR), proclaimed by the Polisario Front in 1976, a partially recognized state claiming sovereignty over the entire territory of Western Sahara and Somaliland, established in 1991 but not recognized, even though the original polity, Somalia, has long ceased to function as a state. There is also the convoluted recent history of Senegal, Gambia,

and Mali. In January 1959, Senegal and the French Sudan formed the Mali Federation, which became fully independent the following year. The Federation had a short life, as Senegal and Mali broke apart into separate nations. In 1982, Senegal and the Gambia joined together to make Senegambia. It was dismantled in 1989.

Analyzing the evolution of these successful secessionist states after the advent of their independence can be a good tool in getting an answer to our initial question. Basically, if the new state has done better (or, at least, the same) as the original policy it left and peace endured between the former combatants, we can say, roughly, that secession worked. If, contrarily, it has done worse and/or the peace was broken by significant violence, the secession can be deemed as having solved nothing and, consequently, not being the answer to the problem of African civil wars. Of course, generalization is dangerous, as the number of cases taken for analysis is small (made small by the very limited success of the secessionist movements itself) and as conditions differ from one case to another. Nobody can say for sure that British Cameroon, now part of the Republic of Cameroon as Southern Cameroon, would be a viable and successful state if it secedes, as nobody can bet on the future. As Niels Bohr put it, prediction is very difficult, especially about the future. But a number of features common to all cases studied here can lead to a sufficiently solid conclusion about the uses of secession as a solution to civil wars in Africa.

Let's take these cases in chronological order. The first successful secession (if we leave outside the Senegal-Mali-Gambia case, too intricate to be relevant to our study) on the continent was that of Namibia, a country that left South Africa to become independent in 1990, after a guerilla war that went on from 1966 to 1990. It was a war waged against the apartheid regime of South Africa by the South-West Africa People's Organization (SWAPO) and other smaller organizations. It was closely intertwined with the Angolan Civil War and the South African Border War, all of which involving foreign intervening powers. As a force fighting apartheid, SWAPO certainly held the moral high ground, but its leftist inclinations and the support it received from the Communist bloc (especially from Cuba) left it in the cold from a Western point of view.

After all these wars ended at the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s, Namibia became fully independent, with a sparsely populated area of 825,615 km^2 (the 2011 census puts its population at a little over 2 million inhabitants, making it one of the least populated countries in the world). It succeeded to set up a parliamentary democracy and a stable government, not without having to fight and squash a secessionist movement of its own in 1999, in the North-East province of Zambezi. The substance of its democracy is marred by the fact that SWAPO has won all the elections after the independence, though there are several political parties registered. The transition from the long regime of president Sam Nujoma to his successor Hifikepunye Pohamba in 2005 went without trouble, but both belong to the SWAPO political party.

In economic terms, Namibia has done far better. Bloomberg, a global business and financial news provider, named Namibia in 2013 as the top emerging market economy in Africa and the 13th best in the world. There were only four African countries on the Top 20 Emerging Markets list in the March 2013 issue of Bloomberg Markets magazine, and Namibia was rated ahead of Morocco (19th), South Africa (15th) and Zambia (14th). Worldwide, Namibia also fared better than Hungary, Brazil, and Mexico, according to the same magazine. Its economy is still deeply linked to that of South Africa and it is based mainly on manufacturing, mining, agriculture (most surprisingly, given the fact that the country's water resources are considered negligible) and tourism. With an estimated $8,577 annual GDP per capita at purchased-power parity (PPP), Namibia has passed into the category of middle income countries, a performance that clearly surpasses that of most African countries. It is also in sharp contrast with Zimbabwe, a country with a similar history of secession from the South African realm as British colony, which went all the way from a solid economy at independence to one of the most destitute in the world, with a GDP per capita at only $837.

Even compared to South Africa, its original political entity, Namibia has not been doing far worse in either economic (South Africa's GDP per capita at PPP is $11,914) or political terms, and the country has been mostly stable and at peace. A contribution to this stability may be the (relative) ethnic homogeneity of the population, which is 82% Shona. All in all, Namibia seems to be an example of successful secession, providing a positive answer to our question, namely whether separatism can be a viable solution to African civil wars.

The next successful secession was that of Eritrea, in 1993. Eritrea's history is long and complex. It emerged as an Italian colony from territories formerly belonging to the Ottoman and Ethiopian empires in 1890. In 1952, it joined Ethiopia to from the Federation of Ethiopia and Eritrea, but it was dismantled ten years after and Eritrea was absorbed by Ethiopia. The Eritreans resisted and an ensuing civil war that was to endure for 29 years, until May 1991 when the Mengistu regime ended and the United States were able to mediate the peace that granted Eritrea its independence.

Eritrea has emerged as a multi-ethnic country with at least nine recognized ethnic groups, of which the Tigrinya form the majority – 55% of a population of roughly six million. In political terms, Eritrea has remained an authoritarian state, where the present president has been in power since the advent of independence. There is only one legal political party and elections were constantly called and cancelled. Other political parties are banned, even though the Constitution of 1947 calls for a multi-party democracy. In 2004 the U.S. State Department has put Eritrea on the list of Countries of Particular Concern (CPC) for religious persecutions. Opposition and critics of the president are persecuted, freedom of the press is inexistent and all privately owned media were shut down in September 2011.

Economically, Eritrea ranks among the bottom-of-the list countries of the world, with an annual GDP per capita at $707 (PPP). It is placed by IMF in the 183rd position out of a total of 187. However, there has been significant growth recently, given the start of operations at the gold and silver mines, but otherwise Eritrea lacks any kind of relevant economic activity outside mining and selling of natural resources. Infrastructure was badly damaged during the war with Ethiopia that followed the independence (1998-2000). The war itself badly served Eritrea, as it spent millions of dollars in a fight for disputed territories that, at the end, were left almost entirely to Ethiopia, while Eritrea was isolated as aggressor.

Compared to Ethiopia, the country it seceded from, Eritrea has fared worse. Even if Ethiopia is still listed as an authoritarian regime and placed 118th out of 167 countries in democratic terms, the country has held elections (Eritrea had none) and the Zenawi government (set up in 2005 in the first free multi-party election) has pursued policies of ethnic federalism, devolving powers to regional authorities. There is limited access to press and information, and journalists that are critical of government are harassed and arrested; the independent press struggles, but still exists, whereas in Eritrea it's been shut down. A poor country even by African standards, at $1,366 per capita (PPP), Ethiopia's GDP is still almost double than Eritrea's. Before the crisis, Ethiopia has been the fastest growing non-oil country in Africa. The world crisis hit the Ethiopian economy hard and it is still mired by structural problems, with a sub-productive agriculture that accounts for 41% of its GDP and for 80% of its exports. Secession of Eritrea left the country with no direct access to the sea. Nonetheless, it is estimated that Ethiopia can grow rapidly due to its large reserves of mineral resources, including oil and gold, but instability in the area has to subside for investors to gain trust. In conclusion, given the deep poverty and authoritarian tendencies of both countries, it is difficult to ascertain with any measure of clarity if Eritrea's secession has been a successful one. At least, the numbers prove it isn't.

The last case, South Sudan, is an utter disaster in any direction we look. South Sudan emerged as an independent country in 2011, by a referendum following the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement that put an end to one of the longest periods of civil wars in Africa (there were two civil wars in Sudan, the first from 1955 to 1972 and the second from 1983 to 2005, meaning that the country of Sudan has been marred in violent internal strife for almost all its independent life). A country of a size bigger than France, but with a population of only eight million, it counted on its oil reserves for revenues. Oil reserves and the way the Khartoum government appropriated them without any sharing with the South Sudanese constituted the core of a range of grievances that motivated the latter to fight for five decades to get their freedom (and their right share of the oil revenues). Unfortunately, gaining the independence, instead of uniting the elites in an effort to bring back the country from the depths of poverty were it was thrown by the

wars, only revealed the deep fractures among them. The mistrust between President Salva Kiir, a Dinka, and his vice-president, Riek Machar, a Nuer, slowly evolved into mutual suspicion enforced by their tribal identities and loyalties. The result was the abrupt escalation of violence in December 2013 that quickly evolved into a full scale civil war, fracturing the young nation along ethnic lines, mainly Dinka versus Nuer. To this day, the war has caused more than 10,000 killed and one million internally displaced persons (IDPs in UN terminology), it totally disrupted the fragile economy South Sudan has had, with oil production at zero (before the advent of the civil war, oil revenues counted for 98% of the government budget).

While there were clear reasons for Omar al-Bashir leaving Sudan, with its mountain of human rights abuses and its transparent bias towards the Northerners in terms of redistribution of revenues, the short history of South Sudan is anything but a success story. A poor country, poorer than any in Africa if oil is not taken into account, it has basically no infrastructure, mortality is among the highest in the world and its economy (besides oil) is based only on exporting raw resources (timber mainly) and sub-productive agriculture. After the referendum in 2011, there were hopes that the government could make a deal with Khartoum regarding the transport of oil through the (North) Sundanese pipeline (a plan has been drawn up to build a pipeline through Kenya to Mombasa, but it got nowhere due to lack of investors) and get the economy up and running. Lingering border disputes with the North in the areas of the Upper Blue Nile, Abyei and Jonglei kept brewing violence, but were thought manageable with the help of the international community, especially the US, the main sponsor of South Sudan's independence.

The violent rupture between Kiir and Machar and their main constituencies, the Dinkas and, respectively, the Nuers, put an end to all hopes that the newest country of the world would emerge from the misery left by five decades of civil war. It seems that fifty years were not enough to quench the thirst for more blood in South Sudan.

Data about the SADR and Somaliland is quite scarce and thus leave us little room for analysis. At least, for Somaliland, the case for secession is quite obvious. The end of the Siad Barre regime in 1991 plunged Somalia in one of the most reckless, violent, and enduring civil wars the world has seen in recent times. A fight of all against all, it resisted any attempt of the international community to find a viable solution. One by one, foreign interventions led by the UN, US, or AU failed to stop the fighting. Somaliland, the former British part of Somalia (the government of Somaliland regarded itself as the successor to the British Somaliland protectorate), has succeeded in maintaining a semblance of effective administration and avoided being involved into the fighting in the South (tough the massacre perpetrated in Somaliland by the Siad Barre in 1988 was one of the causes of the civil war). The clans of the land managed to find equilibrium between tradition and modernity in setting up the political system, which has worked

effectively and peacefully ever since it has been established (1993). As the rest of the country cannot be deemed, even by the most naïve supporter, as a functional state, Somaliland is a clear success, albeit not a recognized one.

So, what can be the answer to our question? Is secession a viable, sustainable solution for the African civil wars? Will a free Tuareg Northern Mali, a Muslim Northern Nigeria or Central African Republic, or a Southern Cameroon be success stories like Namibia, or utter failures as South Sudan? The answer, mostly, is like beauty: it is located in the eye of the beholder. For the people and politicians promoting secession, there are plenty of arguments for leaving the original country, drawn from history, demography, economy, and foreign examples. The same goes for its opponents. Our brief analysis of the successful secessions (i.e. those that managed to get international recognition) shows that there is no clear-cut answer. Much depends on the local conditions, which are particular to each case and make generalization difficult and risky.

Nonetheless, there are two conclusions that come from our analysis. First, the emergent country tends to be the image of the country it left, meaning that, if the original country was a badly governed one, the emergent tends to also be badly governed and vice-versa, a well governed original country can give birth to a well governed emergent one. As the people of the new country used to be part of the greater society of the original country, it is only natural that, in building their own country, they will carry with them the whole baggage of cultural, economic, and political institutions and customs of the society and country they left, making their own country not much different than the original one. So much for not falling into the kind of mistakes the original country did and which constituted the core motivation for secession.

A second conclusion, strongly related to the first one, is that secession does not solve the underlying problems that generated it. Motivations for secession generally fall into three categories: political, economic, and cultural. People feel they have no saying in the way they are governed, or they do not receive a fair share of the income generated by the economy or they have little or no access to resources, or their identity is threatened by the majority through assimilation and other means. As these motivations usually follow ethnic and/or religious lines of fraction within the society, they become self-enforcing – the more the marginalized act to get their fair share or to protect their identity, the more the majority acts in ways that marginalize them even more, making in the end secession as the only conceivable solution.

Unfortunately, once they become independent, these countries do not become more inclusive, more tolerant and fairer in redistribution of benefits or access to resources. They tend to repeat the same mistakes as the countries they left – they restrict access to resources and state positions and functions to the majority, they deny equal rights and equal access to smaller groups, they try to destroy these groups' identity as dangerous

for the coherence of the new country. They become the oppressors. Secession has solved the problems of one group at the expense of others which, in turn, will try to emulate the former and secede in their turn, in an endless spiral of misery and death, with no clear gain whatsoever. It seems that the only real winners are the people of the original country, as they got rid of the troublesome minority at the price of some territory and resources, but with the prospect of a country more homogenous and stable, if not more democratic, or even richer. The lesson form our cases is that the original country has always remained more prosperous (in relative terms and at those standards) then the splinter.

Although there will always be powerful arguments in favor of secession (especially in some cases, as Somaliland) and the thirst for freedom difficult to quench, the examples we have analyzed hardly make a clear case for breaking away. And the problem is that the international community does not have a consistent vision and policy toward secession either. Some places that deserve their independence and recognition (Somaliland, Iraqi Kurdistan, Palestine) don't get them, while others seemingly not fit for them (South Sudan) have their way with the support of powerful sponsors. The list of examples of inconsistent policy towards secessionist movements is endless.

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