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Civic space in the South-East is reported as increasingly shrinking, also due to actions linked to separatist groups, such as use of propaganda, labelling, cyberbullying, forced restrictions (such as sit-at-home orders), various forms of intimidation, violence and the suppression of basic civil rights.637 Open criticism of the separatist movement within the South-East has become rare, and the general climate is one of intimidation and silence. According to the Nigerian senior security advisor, 'self-censorship is pervasive, with many Igbos feeling held hostage by separatist narratives and by actors operating in the region.' Igbo individuals who are critical to separatist groups are often accused of being collaborators with the Nigerian state, planted to infiltrate and undermine the movement from within. Many, particularly public figures, such as traditional leaders, clerics, journalists, and civil society representatives, feel they are under constant surveillance, face potential repercussions for expressing dissenting views, and fear being targeted or labelled as enemies of the cause. There have been documented instances in which traditional rulers and religious leaders who publicly advocated for moderation and non-violence received threatening messages; but also, some cases of violence, including the killing of traditional rulers and others perceived as unsupportive of the agitation.638 In October 2024, when Bianca Ojukwu, widow of the late Biafran leader Chukwuemeka Odumegwu-Ojukwu, accepted President Tinubu's appointment as junior minister for foreign affairs,639 a US-based Biafra supporter accused her of betraying the Igbos by 'joining the enemy'; another 'independent Biafra media activist', warned Ojukwu that 'no one has ever served Nigeria and retired without shame and disgrace.'640

The same source informed that Simon Ekpa is reported to have issued a public warning in August 2024 indicating that the struggle had entered a new phase, whereby the movement was no longer focused solely on resisting the Nigerian state but was now also targeting internal collaborators. These included politicians, religious figures, and traditional authorities who were perceived to be obstructing or weakening the separatist effort.641

A report by intelligence consultancy SBM Intel revealed that a sit-at-home order enforced by IPOB in the Sout-East has resulted in the deaths of over 700 people in Nigeria's Sout-East over the past four years. Such a sit-at-home order - consisting in imposing a shutdown of business and services every Monday - was originally intended as a symbolic act of solidarity to demand the release of IPOB leader Nnamdi Kanu. The weekly Monday shutdowns have since transformed into a prolonged crisis, characterised by widespread fear, violence against those who disregard the order, and severe economic disruption. Between 2021 and the beginning of May 2025, over 700 people were killed in 'IPOB-related violence', including in retaliatory attacks by IPOB on civilians who defied sit-at-home orders. The group's enforcement methods include setting fire to vehicles, looting, and targeted killings of individuals who defy the order.642 As noted by the senior security advisor, the sit-at-home lockdowns have had a significant economic impact, further deepening regional disparities. As a result, there has been a clear shift in public sentiment. While many Igbos remain frustrated with their political marginalisation, there is growing disillusionment with the tactics of IPOB, ESN, and other separatist groups, seen by many as harming the region, without achieving any political objective. Despite this, public criticism is rare due to threats, intimidation and the fear of being misunderstood as siding with the Nigerian state. Igbos who question the legitimacy, methods, or direction of the agitation are frequently labelled as traitors or betrayers of the cause.643

IPOB actively discourages Igbo youth from joining Nigerian security forces,644 issuing statements that imply harsh consequences for those who do. According to the Nigerian senior security advisor, the group spread narratives claiming Igbo youths are used as sacrificial lambs in a fight that doesn't concern them, fighting against religious extremists that they don't understand (i.e. Boko Haram), defending a country that often discriminates against them, while 'they should save their energy for the Biafran army that will come.'645 Beyond the psychological pressure, Igbo individuals serving in the Nigerian military have been specifically targeted and killed by armed groups in the South-East.646 The same source mentioned the example of a retired Major General,647 an Igbo from the South-East who was abducted in September 2023 and eventually killed, even after his family had paid a 50 000 USD ransom; the three killers, arrested by police in May 2024, reportedly confessed that they were IPOB members. Another incident involved an army couple from Imo State,648 who was stopped at an illegal checkpoint, murdered and dismembered; then a video of the killing was circulated online with a warning: 'this is what happens to those associated with the Nigerian army.' There have been other killings of Igbos serving in the Nigerian army, police and other security agencies. Although it is often difficult to establish precisely who is behind the killings - whether IPOB, the pro-Biafra government-in-exile, or criminal groups exploiting the name of IPOB - the impact is the same: it discourages young Igbo people from joining the Nigerian military or police, knowing they or their families in the South-East could be targeted.649

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