



WARSZAWA 2004 Vol. 11

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THE SIGNIFICANCE OF GEOGRAPHIC LOCATION
FOR THE SUCCESS OF TERRITORIAL SECESSION.
AFRICAN EXAMPLE

Abstract: Political and economic factors always play the main role in the secession of territory. Various aspects of geographic location may however facilitate or hinder secession, as well as the effective functioning of the newly emerged state. For Africa, geographic location in secession may be of greater importance than in the case of other continents. This is caused for the most part by the fact that African states are some of the poorest in the world and are often unable to effectively counteract secession through military means. The lack of well-formed democratic state institutions in turn impedes the peaceful resolution of problems constituting the basis of secessionist tendencies. These are precisely the conditions under which geographic location plays a more critical role.

Keywords: separatism, secession of territory, geographic location.

There is little doubt that geographic location is one of the variables that impact the success of territorial secession, although it is certainly never the deciding factor, since political and economic factors play the main roles in this matter. Geographic location may however not only facilitate or hinder the breaking away of the seceding region from the parent state of which it is part, but it may also have a significant impact upon the effective functioning of the new state, in case the secession is successful.

Secession attempts may constitute one of the real challenges facing the development and stability of African nations in the 21st century. Many of these nations are currently at the stage of building democratic government systems. European and Asian examples testify and give support to the thesis that the development of democracy may be accompanied by secessions and by processes of nation dismemberance related to secessions. At times, the building of a democratic order within a state involves the granting of far-reaching autonomy to the given region (in which case, the state unit acquires the characteristics of a heterogeneous state), or the hitherto formally homogeneous (unitary) state's adopting the federal system. Within a federal state, its individual parts are usually characterized by their own culture or religion or a historical past different from that of the other parts of the federal state. Autonomy, the decentralization of power or the introduction of the federal system should, under the conditions for the democratic development of

a nation, meet the interests of the inhabitants of the given region, or at least the interests of its elite, especially in the realm of the fair allocation of budgetary revenue and government jobs. Yet, it does not always happen this way. Differences which serve as justification for the emergence of a federation, or the granting of autonomy, may just as well constitute the precondition for secession.

The secession of a territory is defined as the separation of a part of a state from the rest of its territory, and hence the political withdrawal of the given region from the system of the usually larger state unit. Generally, the given region's attempts at secession are undertaken by a separatist movement active within its borders. Although separatism is most commonly understood as a region's drive to detach itself from a certain entity, it does not always signify the attempt of a given region to separate from a state. Cultural or ethnic separatism could be conceived as the drive of a certain religious or ethnic group to guarantee itself far-reaching autonomy within the state. Secession meanwhile is the most radical form of separatism. Secessionism (the drive towards secession) has as its aim either the achievement of sovereignty of the given region, and in this way the creation of a new state unit, or – less often – to the region's unification with another, usually neighboring state.

There may be various preconditions for secession. Usually, a local ethnic and/or cultural (mainly religious) distinction serves as the main basis for the local people's drive towards self-determination, especially if the given ethnic or religious minority within the state occupies an undivided territory.

From among the remaining major preconditions for the world's separatist and secessionist movements, the following should be mentioned:

— long-term authoritarian rule within the state, especially whilst the local culture is weakened or suppressed and the population inhabiting the given region is persecuted by the central government forces;

— the drive towards self-determination created subsequent to a long-lasting centralization of power within the state and lack of autonomy for the region, which is distinct from the rest of the state;

— powerful political groups originating from the largest or the most influential ethnic group or region dominate the state while political groups originating from other ethnic groups or regions are being denied opportunities (or are not being granted adequate opportunities) to participate in the central government;

— the nationalistic aspirations of local politicians, militaries and/or intellectuals, and their drive to hold the highest offices in their own, separate state;

— the overall weakness of the state and its institutions;

— the existence of a precedent situation in the geographic vicinity, in which the population of a certain region chose to become a part of another political entity during the decolonization period;

— a change in the nation's government system and/or the introduction of a democratic government system;

— independence being attained as the result of secession or the disseverance of the nation by other (neighboring) territorial entities (the so-called “domino effect”);

— the attitude of the region’s population (elites) towards the problem significantly concerning them being misrepresented by the central government;

— the secession being supported, or downright organized, by outside forces having political and/or economic interests in doing so;

— conflicts over soil, originating from the influx of people, often of ethnically dissimilar origin, into the region from overpopulated regions or infertile land situated in other parts of the state;

— the exploitation (in particular economic) of the region by the rest of the state and/or the belief of the region’s inhabitants that the costs of the region’s membership in the larger state unit outweigh the advantages;

— the desire to become a part of another state, dictated by economic and/or historical considerations;

— the unique past of the given region, different from that of the rest of the state, including a lack of tradition of the two creating one (common) state unit.

Usually, many of the above mentioned preconditions lie simultaneously at the basis of a secession attempt.

The success of a secession attempt may be governed by very many variables of a political, economic or geographic nature. The most significant variables are:

— the attitude of the central government towards the secessionist tendencies in the given region;

— military force, as demonstrated by the separatist movement, as well as by the central government;

— the strategic importance of the seceding region;

— the attitude of third-party nations (e.g. giving refuge to secessionists; supplying arms or, less often, providing direct military support to the secessionists or to the central government; introduction of sanctions by international organizations; mediatory activities);

— the recognition of the new state by the international community (especially by the United Nations);

— the economic significance of the seceding region for the economy of the parent state (especially if the seceding region is in the possession of significant natural resources, major ports, rivers or fertile land);

— the geographic environment of the seceding region (especially the land and water features) which have vital significance, especially for conducting military activities;

— the land area of the seceding region and its relation to the land area of the parent state (territorial integrity is difficult to maintain for states with large land areas);

— the geographic location of the seceding region.

Secessionist tendencies are not only characteristic of Africa. Secession attempts take place on other continents as well. In the case of Africa however, the issue appears to be especially sensitive, due to the artificiality of national borders, which were arbitrarily set by the colonial powers, mainly during the 19th century. These borders often constitute imaginary lines, dividing one people up into groups of citizens of various state units. At the same time, many peoples of various ethnic origins, dissimilar cultures and religions often reside within one nation.

Hence it is not surprising that African governments opt for the inviolability of the territorial integrity of the continent's nations. This policy was instituted by the Organization of African Unity (currently the African Union), which upholds the rule of inviolability of the borders existing at the time of decolonization, due to fear of destabilization of the political situation on the continent. Each instance of assent to secession of a part of a national territory, or to another significant change of national borders, might result in the so-called "domino effect" and in consequence transform Africa into one great theater of war. While the aim of a significant portion of the military conflicts in Africa, from the decolonization period onward, has been to bring about the breaking off of a part of a national territory, not every secession attempt has been linked to the dissimilar ethnic origin of the population of the region striving for self-determination. In Africa, secession is however always paired with war.

The most famous and already historical attempts at secession in Africa are the cases of Katanga (1960–1963) and Biafra (1967–1970). In contemporary Africa, several serious (military) secession attempts varying in their degree of advancement, have taken or are currently taking place. One example of a successful and internationally recognized secession is the separation of Eritrea from Ethiopia which took place in 1993. In 1991, independence was proclaimed by Somaliland which until this day, in spite of having many attributes of a sovereign nation, has not gained the acceptance of any subjects of international relations that are of any importance in the world. Ever since Angola gained its independence in 1975, Cabinda has been attempting to secede from it (having fought earlier, since 1965, for independence from Portugal). Since 1983, secessionists have been trying to take power by force in the Senegalese region of Casamance. In 1999, a bloody attempt to sever the Caprivi Strip from Namibia took place. During the years 1997–2002, on the island of Ndzuwani (Anjouan), formally constituting a part of the Comoros, the local secessionists that were in power effectively resisted the central government's control. Instances of separatism could be pointed out at other locations on the continent as well, including Ethiopia and Sudan in particular, and yet it is difficult to unequivocally classify them as manifestations of secessionism.

Let's now turn our attention to the correlations between attributes of geographic location and the above mentioned instances of secessionism in contemporary Africa.

WHETHER THE NEIGHBORS OF THE REGION OF SECESSION
FROM THE PARENT STATE ARE OTHER STATES, AND THEIR NUMBER

Whether the seceding region shares land borders with third-party states constitutes an important factor which aids secession, since the secession movement is usually able to take advantage of the help of forces which have their base in a neighboring state. If serious tensions of a political nature exist between the neighboring and parent states, the likelihood of the secession movement receiving such help greatly increases. The neighboring state may help arm the secessionists, or make its territory available for the establishment of bases from which the secessionist forces may operate and where they may count on a safe haven. Occasionally, the neighboring state may even provide the secessionists with direct military support from across the boundaries. This happens when there are significant political reasons, especially in the case of war between neighboring states.

Even if the secessionist movement is not receiving direct support from the centers (or individuals) that have their headquarters in the neighboring state, this state may play the role of a transit country, for example involved in the transfer of weapons or the passage of secessionists.

The importance of third-party states increases significantly when there is a large number of them bordering the seceding region. This is especially significant when the parent state of the seceding region has good relations with its neighbors (this situation is rare in Africa, however), or when a warming of mutual relations takes place which may conclude with the neighboring state asking the secessionists to leave and securing the border. In such cases, secessionist forces usually relocate to another neighboring state.

In cases where the parent state borders certain neighboring countries only at the region of secession, the detachment of the region would automatically mean the loss of this connection. If the potential loss of the land connection is seen as significant, especially for economic or political reasons, the parent state may object with greater vehemence to the secession of the region. In the case of a successful secession of Cabinda, Angola would lose its border with Congo; the independence of Somaliland would mean the loss of the border with Djibouti for Somalia, while the potential secession of the Caprivi Strip would deprive Namibia of its border with Zambia.

The seceding region's sharing of borders with many states may be a disadvantage in the case of a successful secession, since the seceding region inherits from the parent state the problems concerning border conflicts, with which it has to struggle from the very beginning of its independence, especially if the more powerful neighboring states, taking advantage of their neighbor's weakness, occupy disputed border territories.

If the seceding region were to be completely surrounded by other regions of the parent state, (a situation which does not at this moment exist on the map of African secessionism), the chances for the success of the secession would decrease drastically.

A specific example of the significance of another territory's proximity is the case of the secession of Ndzuwani, an island located near Mayotte, the French *Collectivité Départementale*. Over a certain period, this maritime link made it possible for secessionists to take in supplies from abroad, thus bypassing the parent country.

INSULAR LOCATION

It would appear that in principal the insular location of a seceding region should facilitate its severance from the rest of the state, either if the state lies partly on the continent, or if it has a completely insular character. Secessionists who have control over an island can in fact more easily counter the attacks of the invading central government forces, since water constitutes a considerable defensive barrier against invasion, but if an invasion does take place, then the island's extensive coastline can constitute an advantage for the central government.

A more significant problem for the secessionists seems to be the fact that the insular character of the seceding region may to a considerable extent facilitate a complete sea and air blockade of the region. Such a blockade may be imposed by an international organization, such as the African Union (as was the case with the island of Ndzuwani). The parent state of the seceding region may also turn to its foreign allies with a request for direct military intervention or the backing of the blockade over the island – the seceding region. Also, in the case of an insular region's unsuccessful secession, escape is made more difficult for the secessionists.

SEA ACCESS OR LACK THEREOF, AS WELL AS THE LENGTH OF THE COASTLINE, ESPECIALLY IN RELATION TO THE LENGTH OF THE ENTIRE COASTLINE OF THE PARENT STATE

The seceding region's sea access may just as well facilitate the secession itself, as the functioning of the newly emerged state. Access to the sea may create better conditions for delivering arms to the secessionists, and if need be – make it possible for them to escape from the region or ship out goods which are the source of their livelihood (the secessionists in Casamance are involved in the trade of narcotics). These activities are made all the easier with a longer coastline. Not only is a longer coastline more difficult for central government forces to monitor, but it also means a larger area of territorial waters which the forces have to struggle to control effectively.

In the case of the emergence of the new successor state, its sea access gives it the possibility to conduct broader economic trade.

If the coastline is of strategic importance, this may facilitate, as well as hinder secession. Strategic significance may be conducive to the seceding

region gaining diplomatic recognition from a state which is interested in making use of the ports on the region's shores (as is the case with Somaliland's independence being backed by Ethiopia). On the other hand however, the parent state, in its unwillingness to lose the valued coastline, may resist the secession of its region all the more vehemently.

The relation of the length of the seceding region's coastline to the length of the coastline of the entire state also matters in the case of secession. In the extreme case, the seceding region may be in the possession of the entire coastline of the given state. The dissociation of such a region from the parent state would cause the latter to become landlocked, which in turn makes the parent state more determined in their efforts to resist the secession of the coastal region (such is the example of Ethiopia, which for decades has been preventing Eritrea from seceding).

A seceding region in Africa completely deprived of sea access is the Caprivi Strip. This region does however give Namibia access to the Zambezi River, which greatly strengthens Namibia's water potential and may have strategic significance for this state, which is essentially a desert.

PERIPHERAL LOCATION ("AT THE EDGE OF THE STATE")

The seceding region's location at the periphery of the parent state results in a higher likelihood that secessionists will carry out armed operations aimed at the central government forces.

A peripheral location may ease the functioning of the new state, in case the former parent state was to close the shared border, or obstructs the flow of goods and people. This is also the norm when the authorities in the newly emerged state want to restrict contacts with the former parent state to a minimum.

If war operations are taking place within the former parent state, then the peripheral location of the region which has separated may make it difficult for the fighting to seep over into its territory and likewise may increase the safety of the population inhabiting it (e.g. Somaliland).

Peripheral location is a feature of the following seceding regions in Africa: Somaliland, Casamance, and the Caprivi Strip.

THE SPECIFIC SHAPE OF THE TERRITORY

The specific shape of a seceding region may also have bearing upon the secession's success. The Caprivi Strip is an elongated segment of land, somewhat artificially extending Namibia's territory into the African continent. (To a large extent, Namibia's borders are natural and run along rivers or the shores of the sea.) The Caprivi Strip shares long borders with three states

(Botswana, Angola and Zambia) and yet, with Namibia itself it is joined by a narrow section of land (at the region of Okavango). This augments the region's peripheral location, already favorable for the success of secession, as well as the fact that the region borders many states. The fact that the seceding region borders the parent state by only a narrow section of land facilitates the activities and movements of secessionists while impeding the mobility of government forces.

Yet, the specific shape of the region, elongated and narrow in the case of the Caprivi Strip, would constitute a geographic disadvantage, in case of the secession's success. Such a territorial outline impedes the state's development somewhat, particularly the movement of people and the transport of goods.

THE PROXIMITY OF ANOTHER STATE (OR STATES),
IN LARGE PART SEPARATING THE SECEDING REGION
FROM THE PARENT STATE

The example of Casamance shows how the proximity of another state or states, in large part separating the seceding region from the parent state, can be critical for secession. The region of Casamance is separated from northern Senegal by the territory of the Gambia. To the south it shares a long border with Guinea Bissau, while to the west its shores are washed by the Atlantic Ocean. Only to the east does it border Senegal, the land link with which it is much weaker than with the Gambia or Guinea Bissau. The geographic location of Casamance – during the current stage of moderate armed activity – gives it practically the same advantages that the Caprivi Strip has due to its location. Yet, maritime location to a greater extent facilitates the potential emergence and functioning of the new state.

THE PROXIMITY OF ANOTHER STATE (OR STATES),
COMPLETELY SEPARATING THE SECEDING REGION FROM THE REST
OF THE TERRITORY OF THE PARENT STATE

One seceding region in Africa completely separated from the rest of the territory of the parent state is the enclave of Cabinda. It has access to the sea and borders two states – the Republic of Congo and the Democratic Republic of Congo. If geographic location was the most significant factor in the success of secession, then Cabinda in particular (on account of it lacking a land connection with the rest of the territory of Angola) would without doubt have the greatest chance of attaining independence. Also – in spite of its small surface area – it would have the greatest chance of functioning effectively as a sovereign state, especially taking into account the fact that the territory possesses considerable petroleum resources and has a relatively small population.

THE EXISTENCE OF A NATURAL BOUNDARY
(E.G. MOUNTAIN RANGE OR RIVER), SEPARATING THE SECEDING REGION
FROM THE REMAINING PART OF THE PARENT STATE

The existence of a natural boundary separating the seceding region from the remaining part of the parent state can play an especially significant role in the case of a secession which concludes with a new state being constituted. This is because one of the fundamental problems faced by states created as the result of the separation from a larger political unit is the delimitation and demarcation of borders, first and foremost in the sector where the successor state borders the former parent state. The existence of a river or mountain range boundary certainly lessens this problem. Though it is difficult to find examples of this principle among the seceding regions of Africa, it is easy to point out the border conflicts occurring in places where a clear natural boundary between the seceding region and the parent state is lacking. This is especially illustrated by the *casus* of Eritrea and Ethiopia. During the years 1998–2000, the two fought a bloody war at their shared border (which resulted in approximately 100,000 fatalities). One of the causes of the conflict was the dispute concerning the boundary line, chiefly between Eritrea and the Ethiopian region of Tigray. Another example is the border conflict between Somaliland and the authorities in Puntland (northern Somalia), regarding the boundary line of the border regions of Sanaag and Sool.

Finally, it is worth emphasizing that while a certain geographic location may provide an advantage for the seceding region in its fight to secure sovereignty, it may simultaneously constitute an obstacle for the development of the new state. The reverse is also true.

Let's also reiterate that geographic location never constitutes the only factor determining the success of territorial secession or the effective functioning of a newly emerged state, although it may sometimes play a significant role. For Africa, the importance of geographic location in secession may be greater than in the case of other continents. This is caused for the most part by the fact that African states are some of the poorest in the world and are often unable to effectively counteract secession militarily. In turn, the lack of well-formed democratic state institutions, such as those in Europe or Northern America, impedes the peaceful resolution of problems constituting the basis of secessionist tendencies. These are precisely the conditions under which geographic location plays a critical role.

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English translation: Joanna M. Kwiatowska