

AGITATION FOR THE RESTORATION OF THE REPUBLIC OF BIAFRA FIVE
DECADES AFTER THE NIGERIAN-BIAFRAN CIVIL WAR: CAUSES,
CONSEQUENCES AND SOLUTIONS

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Abstract

The recent demand for the restoration of the Republic of Biafra started in 1999. The origin of Biafra agitation for self-determination could be traced to 1967 when Odumegwu Ojukwu declared the Republic of Biafra (IPOB). The Igbo who claim to be Biafrans, and not Nigerians, regrouped into neo-Biafra movements with the Indigenous People of Biafra as the most prominent and active among the movements. The self-determination struggle of the Indigenous People of Biafra kicked off in 2012 with Mazi Nnamdi Kanu as the founder and leader. The objective of this study is to examine the factors responsible for the agitation for the independence of the Republic of Biafra, over five decades after the civil war, the implications of the agitation, as well as, the solution to IPOB self-determination agitation. The study adopted secondary method of data collection from sources such as text books, newspapers and internet sources. The data collected was content analyzed. It was established in this study that the suppression, injustice and deliberate marginalisation against the Igbo are the factors responsible for the demand for the restoration of Republic of Biafra. The following solutions were proffered in the form of recommendation: fairness and equality in the distribution of state resources and appointments; creation of opportunity for Igbo presidency; dialogue and negotiation with the agitators; and the agitators' use of peaceful strategies in the self-determination agitation.

Key Words: Civil war, marginalisation, secession, self-determination, separatist agitation

1.0.Introduction

Separatist agitation in Nigeria pre-dates the October 1, 1960, independence of the Nigerian state. The three major ethnic nationalities in Nigeria – Igbo, Hausa-Fulani and Yoruba - had at one point or another threatened secession from the Nigeria. Nnamdi Azikiwe, while

addressing the Igbo people in 1949 averred that the Igbo had the role thus thrust on them by history to preserve all that is best and most notable in African culture. Consequently, he asserted that “the key note in this address is self-determination for the Igbo”. At the London Constitutional Conference of July 30 and August 22, 1953, Awolowo threatened that the Western Region would secede from Nigeria if Lagos was carved out of Western Region and made the Federal Territory. Eventually, the excision of Western Region happened as it was backed up by the leaders of both the Northern and Eastern Regions. Also in 1956, Sir Ahmadu Bello who tagged the amalgamation of the Northern and Southern protectorates as the mistake of 1914, threatened the secession of the Northern Region over his perceived hurried demand for independence by the South – Eastern and Western Regions (Aladekomo, 2021).

The recent separatist agitation in Nigeria started in 1999 with the establishment of a pro-Biafra organisation named Movement for the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB). Other pro-Biafra organisations that emerged after MASSOB are Biafra Zionist Movement (BZM) and Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) (Adibe, 2017). The two principal pro-Biafra organisations are MASSOB and IPOB. The agitation of IPOB is the most active of the Igbo separatist agitation, and it started when the group was formed in 2012. The resurgent clamour for the restoration of Biafra independence came four decades after the Nigerian-Biafran civil war, 1967 – 1970 (Okeke, 2016).

This study seeks to examine the causes of the demands for the restoration Republic of Biafra five decades after the secession of the Igbo (Eastern Region of Nigeria) from the rest of the Nigerian state to form a new state called Republic of Biafra. The study will also discuss the consequences of the agitation, as well as, proffer solutions to the recent agitation for the Republic of Biafra.

The study adopted qualitative research method. The data collection was through secondary sources which include extant literatures, official publications, newspapers and internet sources. The data collected were content analyzed.

1. 1. Theoretical Framework: Relative Deprivation Theory

The theoretical framework for this study Relative Deprivation Theory (RDT) is a sociological theory used by social theorists and political scientists. The development of the theory was credited to Ted Gurr, an influential scholar of mass violence and revolutionary psychology. In his book *Why Men Rebel*, Gurr (1970) explains relative deprivation as the main source of frustration that triggers mass violence which could led to revolution. Sodaro (2001, P. 265)

stated that “relative deprivation occurs when people perceive a gap between what they feel rightfully entitled to and what they feel they are actually capable of getting and keeping under existing circumstances”.

When people feel they are deprived of the resources or benefits such as political rights and involvement, government presence or institutions, economic resources, et cetera, which their counterparts within the same society receive, frustration takes place. Thus, Kegley (2007, P. 423) defines relative deprivation as “people’s perception that they are unfairly deprived of the wealth and status they deserve in comparison with advantaged others”. He further explained that the reaction to frustration and relative deprivation is among the causes of civil war or internal violence.

One major weakness of relative deprivation theory is that the deprivation is based on feeling, and there is no instrument to measure the level of deprivation. However, when people are relatively deprived, it could be noticed.

The perceived discrepancy between the expectations of the Igbo people from the federal government during the pogroms against them in the North created a gap between the Igbo and the state. This resulted to the declaration of the Republic of Biafra by Odumegwu Ojukwu. The Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) is aggrieved because they feel that there are discrepancies in what they deserve as a nation and what they receive from the government when compared with other ethnic nationalities in the country. The feeling of resentment over neglect, injustice and non-involvement resulted to agitations for the restoration of the Republic of Biafra. The more the gap between the Igbo people and the state widens the more the separatist group becomes aggressive in its agitation for the independence of the Biafra nation.

1. 2. The Historical Overview of Pro-Biafra Agitation in Nigeria

The area known as Biafra existed with the name even before the colonial period. The Bight of Biafra lost its sovereignty to colonial powers. Circa 15th – 19th centuries, the early maps of Africa drawn by European cartographers derived from the accounts written by European explorers and travelers reveal that the original word used by those explorers and travelers for Biafra was “Biafar/Biafara/Biafares” (Amanambu, 2017). Prior to the advent of colonial administration, Biafra had an autonomous government until they became subjugated under imperial 1890 – 1905. The Igbo (Biafra) did not consent to the union called Nigeria. However, colonialism being a tool of coercion robbed them of their autonomy by force (Olumodimu, 2024). The geographical area of Biafra Region includes the states inhabited by

mostly Igbo people – Abia, Akwa Ibom, Anambra, Bayelsa, Cross River, Ebonyi, Enugu, Imo and Rivers states.

The origin of the agitation for the restoration of the Republic of Biafra could be traced to the defunct Republic of Biafra. The secession of the Eastern Region from the Nigerian state was mainly as a result of the pogroms against the Igbo ethnic group in the Northern Nigeria and the irreconcilable difference of the military rulers – Lieutenant Colonel Odumegwu Ojukwu (the then Military Governor of the Eastern Region) and General Yakubu Gowon (the Military Head of the Nigerian state) –on how to administer the affairs of the country. The pogrom in which about thirty thousand Easterners were murdered in cold blood started in May 1966 and lasted for over four months. The situation of those months terrified the easterners as millions of them fled home to escape the horrible atrocities inflicted on them and their families living in different parts of Nigeria because the federal government of Nigeria did nothing to stop the pogroms (Achebe 2012, P. 95).

The July 1966 counter coup and the massacre of the Igbo in the North was in retaliation of the January 15, 1966, coup d'état which was tagged "Igbo coup". However, there were strong evidences that show it was not an Igbo coup. One, the coup plotters were not only Igbo. Adewale Ademoyega was a Yoruba man and was one of the three military officers – Nzeogwu, Ifeajuna and Ademoyega –who planned and executed the first coup d'état of January 15, 1966 (Ademoyega 1981, P. 36). He explained that he came into the army with the aim of finding solution to Nigeria's political problems, likewise other coup plotters. Being moved by Nzeogwu's humanity, straight-forwardness, patriotism and open handedness, he became close to him. Two, the coup plotters wanted to make Chief Obafemi Awolowo the leader of the country. Three, Igbo military officers like Emeka Ojukwu, Arthur Unegbe and others thwarted the January 15, 1966 coup. And four, the coup was carried out to restore the political instability in the Western Region (Ezeani, 2013). The assertions of both Ademoyega and Ezeani invalidate the statement that the coup was an Igbo coup.

Among the vices which resulted to the Igbo secession and pro-Biafra agitation was the suppression, injustice and marginalisation that was structured by the British colonial administration. Biafra agitation is an action birthed to confront the government's failure to address the prolonged political marginalization dispensed against since the return of civilian rule in 1999 (Bassey, 2023). The recent agitation for the restoration of the Republic of Biafra commenced at the establishment of the Movement for the Actualisation of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB), founded in 1999 by Ralph Uwazuruike. The group was

weakened by repression and leadership disputes leading to the emergence of Biafra Zionist Movement (BZM) founded by Benjamin Igwe Onwuka. MASSOB leadership was accused of collaborating with Nigerian government rather than advancing Biafra course. Thus, the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) founded in 2012 by Mazi Nnamdi Kanu emerged (Mezie-Okoye, 2022). The IPOB is, so far the most prominent and active Biafra separatist group that clamours for the restoration of the independent state of Biafra through the administration of referendum.

1.3. Account of Biafra Self-Determination Agitation

The 1966 pogrom in the northern parts of Nigeria that was staged to exterminate the Igbo made the declaration of the Republic of Biafra inevitable. The Nigerian government fought and defeated Biafra to keep Nigeria one but even though Biafra was defeated and integrated back to Nigeria, over the years different Igbo separatist organisations have agitated for the restoration of the Republic of Biafra. Why the persistent demand for the independence of Biafra over five decades after the civil war?

Some scholars believe that the Igbo people were not properly reintegrated into Nigerian state after the Biafran-Nigerian civil war. This was because of the non-implementation of the three Rs - Reconstruction, Rehabilitation and Reconciliation – government policy which was meant to cushion the consequences of the civil war on the Igbo people and the immediate post-war policies of the federal military government geared towards economic strangulation of the Igbo. The post-war policies include: (1) The seizure of landed properties owned by the Igbo in the old Rivers state, a policy known as Abandon Property policy. (2) The 20 pounds (£20) flat rate for all cash deposit by the Igbo into Nigerian bank. (3) Indigenization of all foreign industries in Nigeria at a time Igbo could not afford such property. (4) The non-absorption of the Igbo military officers back into Nigeria army. (5) The non-absorption of Igbo civil servants back into national service (Obianyo, 2007).

The Igbo rehabilitated themselves and bounced back so well after the civil war because of the hardworking nature of Igbo people without the contribution of the federal government. The situation planted the seed of pain and feeling of neglect or marginalisation in the hearts of the Igbo. Thus, a significant portion of the Igbo do not welcome the idea of one Nigeria (Ojibara, 2016).

The major reason for the continued agitation for the self-determination of Biafra, as championed by the indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) is the deliberate marginalisation of the Igbo people from the political and economic affairs of the country. The Indigenous people

of Biafra, popularly known with the acronym – IPOB - was founded by Mazi Nnamdi Kanu in 2012. Its ideology is Igbo nationalism or separatism. The main objective of IPOB is the restoration of the independent state of Biafra through the administration of referendum. The group believes that Igbo has suffered great injustice and marginalisation, which none of the past Nigerian government ever made and deliberate attempt to resolve. Consequently, the group believes that the only way out of the oppression of the Igbo is the independence of the Igbo in Nigerian state through the administration of referendum to ascertain the choice of the Igbo citizens and proper implementation of the choice majority of the Igbo.

The government's use of the state apparatuses of force to quell IPOB separatist agitation was rampant during the Buhari administration and exacerbated the self-determination struggle. IPOB has been in existence since 2012, while Goodluck Jonathan was still on seat as Nigerian president. Those times, there was no news of military crackdown on IPOB members, neither was there any member of the group nor leader arrested and detained, even though IPOB had rallies, marches, gatherings and radio broadcast via Radio Biafra channel. In as much as Goodluck Jonathan did not address the grievances of the group, he ignored the activities of the group so the security agencies had no clashes with the group members.

The new wave IPOB agitation kicked off with the arrest and detention of the group leader – Mazi Nnamdi Kanu (Amamkpa and Mbakwe, 2015). IPOB declared a sit-at-home order from August 9, 2022 in South-East states until its group leader is release from detention (This Day live July 30, 2022). The sit-at-home order has negatively impacted the South-East states and the entire federation, not only economically but also in the aspect of security.

Even though self-determination is a principle in international law and United Nations Charter, yet the Nigerian government has refused to discuss or organise referendum in that regard.

1.4. Marginalisation of the South-East People: the Major Reason why IPOB wants Secession
Marginalisation is one of the vices which characterise the Nigerian state. According to Onimisi, Samsu, Ismail and Nor (2018), “one of the major problems confronting Nigeria as a country is the high level of inequality and marginalisation across Nigeria. Therefore the federal government of Nigeria established the Federal Character Principle as a policy measure to check the problem of inequality and marginalisation that has led to the lopsidedness in the country”. Adangor (2017) explained that “the problem with Nigeria is not necessarily ethno-cultural heterogeneity or divisive colonial experience but one of an unjust

and discriminatory federal system that has been manipulated to favour one ethnic group at the expense of the others”.

Marginalisation has been defined by various scholars. Ezeani (2013, P. 204) stated that “marginalisation occurs when a group within a country becomes (group-inflicted) or made (other-inflicted) subsidiary, that is, relegated to the margin or infringe of the society in which they are supposed to be equal stakeholders”. In Oshewolo (2011) some authors defined marginalisation. Ojukwu defined it as “a state of relative deprivation, a deliberate disempowerment of people by group or groups that during a relevant time frame, wields political power and control the allocation of material and resources at the centre”. For Akinbade, marginalisation is “a denial of access to political power or social amenities to a group or region while dispensing favour to the advantages of others”. Obianyo (2007) defines it as “neglect, non-involvement or inequity in the distribution of the socio-economic and political resources of the state or indices of development”. From the above definitions, it is clear that marginalisation means an unfair treatment, deprivation to a person or group of persons, and it occurs when a country’s government fails to equitably distribute the resources of the state to the component parts which makes the deprived group to lose interest in the affairs of the state.

The ethnic group that suffers marginalisation most in Nigeria has been the Igbo nationality. Amanambu (2017) explained that the Igbo ethnic nationality were deliberately punished for not voting Muhammadu Buhari massively in 2015 presidential election, despite the fact that some voted him. The former president Buhari while responding to the question on how he would help the southeast region during his trip to United States made it clear that he would not treat constituencies that gave him greater number of votes the way he would treat others who did not (Geopolitical Intelligence Reports 2017).

The resentment and marginalisation against the Igbo predates Nigerian independence. Achebe (2012, P. 74) asserted that:

The origin of the national resentment of the Igbo is as old as Nigeria and quite complicated. But it can be summarized thus: The Igbo culture, being receptive to change, individualistic, and highly competitive, gave the Igbo man an unquestioned advantage over his compatriots in securing credentials for advancement in Nigerian colonial society. Unlike the Hausa/Fulani he was unhindered by a wary religion, and unlike the Yoruba he was unhampered by traditional hierarchies. This kind of creature, fearing no god or man, was

custom-made to grasp the opportunities, such as they were, of the white man’s dispensation.

Obianyo (2007) affirmed that the attacks and the marginalisation of the Igbo predates the independence of Nigeria. She explained that it started with the exclusion of Nnamdi Azikiwe from the legislature by the Western House of Assembly in 1951. Then, the massacre of the Igbo in the northern part of the country (1966-67 pogrom), which led to the secessionist policy of the eastern region. And, the post war policies of the federal military government geared towards economic strangulation of the Igbo nation.

The main reason for the emergence of the Igbo separatist movements is the injustice and marginalisation of the Federal Government of Nigeria against this Igbo, which made the group to lose faith in the continued existence of Nigerian state (Chukwudi, Gberevbie, Abasilim and Imhonopi, 2019). The first and second batches of federal government appointments of Buhari administration in 2015 revealed his obvious hatred and marginalisation against the Igbo nation. Not even one out of 26 appointments was given to a core Igbo person. The South-East geo-political zone was not included in the appointments at all, which is contrary to federal character principle.

S/N	POLITICAL POSITION	APPOINTEE	STATE	GEO-POLITICAL ZONE
1.	Aide de Camp	Lt. Col. Abubakar Lawal	Kano	Northwest
2.	Special Adviser on Media and Publicity	Femi Adeshina	Ogun	Southwest
3.	Senior Special Assistant on Protocol/Special Assistant on Presidential Matters	Lawal Abdullahi Kazaure	Jigawa	Northwest
4.	Accountant General of the Federation	Ahmed Idris	Kano	Northwest
5.	National Security Adviser	Badagana Monguno	Borno	Northeast
6.	Chief of Defence Staff	Abayomi Olonishakin	Ekiti	Southwest
7.	Chief of Army Staff	Tukur Buratai	Borno	Northeast
8.	Chief of Defence Intelligence	Monday Riku Morgan	Benue	Northcentral
9.	Director-General, State Security Services	Lawal Daura	Kastina	Northwest
10.	Acting Chairperson, Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC)	Amina Zakari (replaced with Prof. Yakubu Mamood)	Bauchi	Northeast
11.	Managing Director, Nigerian Ports Authority	Habibu Abdullahi	Kano	Northwest
12.	Special Adviser, Niger Delta Amnesty Office	Paul Boro	Bayelsa	Southsouth

13.	Acting Director-General, Nigeria Maritime Administration, Safety and Security Agency	Baba Haruna Jauro	Yobe	Northwest
14.	Executive Vice Chairman/Chief Executive Officer, Nigerian Communications Commission (NCC)	Umaru Dambatta	Kano	Northwest
15.	Executive Chairman, Federal Inland Revenue Service	Babatunde Fowler	Lagos	Southwest
16.	Director-General, Budget Office of the Federation	Aliyu Gusau	Zamfara	Northwest
17.	Group Managing Director, Nigeria National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC)	Emmanuel Ibe Kachikwu	Delta	Southsouth
18.	Secretary to Government of the Federation	Babachir David Lawal	Adamawa	Northeast
19.	Chief of Staff to the President	Abba Kyari	Borno	Northeast
20.	Comptroller-General, Nigerian Customs Service	Hameed Ibrahim Ali	Bauchi	Northeast
21.	Comptroller-General, Nigerian Immigration Service	Kure Martin Abeshi	Nasarawa	Northcentral
22.	Senior Special Assistant on National Assembly Matters (Senate)	Ita Enag	Akwa-Ibom	Southsouth
23.	Senior Special Assistant on National Assembly Matters (House Assembly)	Suleiman Kawu	Kano	Northwest
24.	Director, Department of Petroleum Resources	Mordecai Baba Ladan	Niger	Northcentral
25.	Managing Director, Asset Management Company of Nigeria (AMCON)	Ahmed Lawan Kuru	Kano	Northwest
26.	Commissioner of Insurance and Chief Executive of the National Insurance Commission	Mohammed Kai	Kano	Northwest

List of Buhari Administration Appointments. Source: Abdurrahman in Amanambu, 2017.

1.5. The Political Implications of Persistent Agitation for the Republic of Biafra

In a press statement issued by IPOB's spokesperson, Emma Powerful, it was categorically stated that:

IPOB stands for peace. We stand for dialogue, and we stand for discussions.

The cardinal rule under which IPOB was formed is to lead the way to a peaceful separation of Biafra from Nigeria. Biafra and Nigeria are two

different nations. The events from 1948-2023 have shown that it is practically impossible for Biafra and Nigeria to co-exist as one nation. IPOB has been calling on the Nigeria state for discussions on peaceful referendum date, but Nigeria state always returns the peaceful call with violent suppression. We have always maintained that self-determination is our inalienable right according to the UN laws (Punch October 8, 2023).

Many Nigerians have suggested restructuring as a solution to IPOB's self-determination agitation. Biereenu-Nnabugwu (2021) identified three types of restructuring being clamoured by vast number of Nigerians. To wit: status quo restructuring, modular restructuring and centrifugal restructuring. He explained that "the main thrust of status quo restructuring is greater centralist institutionalisation and centripetal networking based largely on the prevailing 2009 Constitutional arrangements". In other words, advocates of status quo restructuring are against any restructuring that could lead to substantial devolution of powers to federating units and they are not supporters of any arrangements that make component units to exercise meaningful power such as state policing, fiscal federalism, resource control, et cetera. Modular restructuring represents the aspirations of those who call for decentralisation and devolution of power in order to achieve true federalism. And, "centrifugal restructuring hinges on extreme decentralisation and on the proposition that Nigeria actually needs to breakup or separate in peace, and those who wish to separate should be encouraged to do so". Separatist agitators are strong advocates of centrifugal restructuring because it will provide for the administration of referendum that could lead to the emergence of new states out of Nigeria.

Ebiem is a supporter of the third type of restructuring – centrifugal restructuring – identified by Biereenu-Nnabugwu (2021). He strongly advocates multi-state (MS) solution to the problems – corruption, bad leadership and lack of patriotism - inherent in the Nigerian society. The rationale for statehood is to promote the wellbeing of the citizens, as well as, security of lives and property which the Nigerian state has failed to provide (Ebiem 2014, P. 83). For him:

From all indications, none of the parties to the Nigerian union are satisfied, and so each is ready to opt out at any given opportunity. Hence the argument by some that Biafra and all other would-be independent states have always been there from the formation of the one Nigeria union. These shadow-states will continue to exist until they finally revert to how they originally were and

substantially recover their sovereignty. It remains obvious that no matter how long it takes, the need to balkanize Nigeria will never disappear. MS solution, has the only answer to the Nigerian question, will always be there until a bold and honest set of people finally choose to get Nigeria right (2014, P. 187).

There is the tendency for political disintegration – the division of a failed state to create newly independent countries – in the global system due to the new waves of self-determination agitation in different parts of the world. The surge of ethnic separatist movements could increase the number of independent countries from over 200 to as many as 500 because of the interest of indigenous peoples to secure a homeland. Meanwhile, self-determination struggle and revolution are not new in the international system (Kegley 2007, P. 571). Examples of new states that emerged out of self-determination struggle include Eritrea in 1991, South Sudan in 2011, et cetera.

1.6. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study investigated into the causes of the agitation or demand for the restoration of the Republic of Biafra five decades after the civil war and the defeat of the Republic of Biafra, the consequences and solution to the IPOB self-determination agitation.

In conclusion, this study found out that the deliberate injustice and marginalisation of the federal government of Nigeria against the Igbo which led to the secession of the Eastern Region from Nigeria over fifty years ago persists in the country. None of the past Nigeria and present government administrations has made any effort to address the issue of injustice and marginalisation against the Igbo. As a result, Igbo separatist groups with IPOB the most prominent and active sprung up to agitate for the independence of Biafra. The IPOB group believes that the Igbo has suffered great injustice and marginalisation and the only way out of the oppression against the Igbo nation is the independence of Biafra from Nigerian state through the administration of referendum and implementation of the choice of the majority of the Igbo.

The following are the recommendations of this study based on the findings:

The federal government should ensure fairness and equality in the distribution of social amenities, resources and appointments. Also, the Nigerian political system should be restructured to make room for Igbo presidency. Furthermore, the government should invite the Igbo separatist groups for dialogue and negotiation. And, the pro-Biafra agitators should endeavour to employ only peaceful means in their self-determination struggle.

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