

# **State Response to Violent Conflicts: An Assessment of the Nigerian State and the Indigenous People of Biafra (Ibop) Separationist Movement**

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## **Abstract**

Conflicts arising from separationist movements are gradually becoming a security threat and source of instability in Nigeria. This article examines the nature and impact of the activities of the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), and the response of the Nigerian state. It is of the view that the response of the Nigerian security apparatus to separatist movements is more likely to exacerbate the crisis, rather than help resolve it.

Keywords: Violent conflicts; Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB); Separationist Movement

## **Introduction**

Almost immediately after the decolonization experience, countries in Africa, Asia, and in parts of Europe started to experience a new wave of nationalism and separatism. Southeast Asia was faced with a variety of separationist movements, most occurring on the peripheries of its large multi-ethnic peninsular and Island states. Perhaps the worst-hit in Asia was Indonesia, with its wide expanse of islands and nearly incalculable diversity. Almost from its very outset, it faced a powerful and well-armed separationist movement in Aceh. Another separatist insurgency rose in Indonesia that resulted eventually in the granting of independence to East Timor in 2002.

In South Asia, there was the historic partition of India and Pakistan that later triggered a series of events that threatened the territorial integrity of both countries, mainly due to the accession of Jammu and Kashmir, a Muslim-majority territory, to India. In the Philippines, the post-independence government faced opposition from the Muslim populations of Southern Mindanao, which culturally had more in common with its neighbours to the South in Malaysia and Indonesia than to the predominantly Catholic mainstream Philippine culture. In Thailand, a superficially similar situation exists in the South which contains a large Malay-speaking Muslim population in a predominantly

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Buddhist society. Yet large-scale Muslim nationalist insurgency did not start there until the mid-1990s.

Curiously, nationalist separatist activity has also taken place in the regions of the world where it was least expected, the Industrialized West, often in the very home countries of the former colonial powers. For example, there was the upsurge of nationalist violence in Northern Ireland involving the movement by the Catholic Radicals and the Provisional Irish Republican Army (IRA) in 1970; the growth of Basque separatism in Spain, and the movement for the Quebec independence by the Quebec Sovereignty Movement, which became an active voice in Canadian politics in 1968. (Chai, 2008)

In Africa, the longest-running separatist conflict in North Africa, occurring continuously in Western Sahara since the 1960s and 1970s, is the one of the Polisario Front against Moroccan occupation of the former Spanish colony. Indeed, Africa has witnessed a series of separatist insurgencies; and they include the conflict between Nilotic groups of Southern Sudan and the Arab North, as well as Eritrean separation from Ethiopia.

Although many separatist movements are based on religion and racial/ethnic identity grounds, however, the process of decolonization also left behind conditions that gave rise to ethnic based separatist movements. This is as a result of boundaries that were drawn for administrative convenience but did not reflect geographical patterns of ethnic identities. And this has led to conflicts between ethnic groups, notably among which was the attempt by Katanga Province, under Moise Tshombe, to secede from Zaire (now DRC), but was defeated over the course of 1960 – 1963 with the aid of United Nations (UN) forces. Another ethnic-based separatist movement in Africa was the attempt by Igbo nationalists to secede from the Nigerian state to form the independent state of Biafra, leading to a bloody civil war of 1967-1970. (Chai, 2008)

Forty-seven years after the end of the Nigerian civil war and after Biafra had been reabsorbed into the Nigerian state, there is a resurgence of the scenario that led to the Nigerian civil war (Philips, 2007). Incidentally, this scenario of insurrection is playing out almost in every section of the country; the Boko Haram sect in the North East, the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) and more recently the Niger Delta Avengers (NDA) in South-south, the erstwhile restiveness of the Odua People's Congress (OPC) in the South-west, and that by the now less-active Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB).. It is interesting to note that since Nigeria's return to civilian democracy in 1999, many of the country's diverse peoples have been demanding for self-determination or greater autonomy. This clamour and agitation for greater autonomy by various ethnic and insurgent groups in Nigeria has in some cases unexpectedly assumed the form of armed rebellion against the

Nigerian state. This has, in no small measure, constituted a major threat not only to the Nigerian federation but also to Nigeria's constitutional democracy.

The election of a Muslim northerner from Katsina State, Muhammadu Buhari, as president of Nigeria early in 2015, seems to have heightened fears of renewed violence and militancy in the Niger Delta, and possible resurgence of agitation by other ethnic groups, which hitherto nursed feelings of distrust against a president of northern origin. There are indications that some militants in the Niger Delta region are rearming and still launching occasional attacks on oil and gas installations and are involved in the trade in stolen oil. There are also indications that neo-Biafran independence movements have re-emerged and intensified their protests partly due to Buhari's unpopularity in Nigeria's South East (Menas Associates, 2015). All of this may appear like mere perceptions; but indeed the perceptions may have given way to reality following the emergence of two insurgent separatist groups - the Niger Delta Avengers (NDA) and the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB).<sup>2</sup>

So far, the objectives of the two insurgent groups appear similar but their modus operandi and strategies for achieving their objectives are obviously different. Both groups have demanded for autonomous regions for their peoples; but while the Niger Delta Avengers have embarked on massive destruction of oil and gas installations mainly located in the Niger Delta region, the Indigenous People of Biafra have resorted to massive street protests, most of which have either outrightly incited violent responses from security agencies or have been tainted by violence. However, our focus here is on the activities of the IPOB, the involvement of the state and the strategy adopted by the state in responding to the demands by the IPOB separatist movement.

Before the emergence of the IPOB, there were other similar separatist movements which originated from South-East Nigeria. For example, there was the Biafra Zionist Front (BZF), which supports the reinstatement of the Biafra state in Southern Nigeria. The BZF, formerly known as The Biafra Zionist Movement (BZM), was reported to have stormed a radio station to announce the rebirth of the Biafran Republic. The Biafra Zionist Movement, led by Benjamin Onwuka, was created in the early 2000s. The BZM later declared a new state of independence on 5 November 2012, at an event during which at least 100 peaceful protesters were arrested. The Biafra Zionist Movement is believed to be a by-product or an offshoot of the Movement for the Actualization of Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB), which was led by Ralph Uwazuruike. Uwazuruike was later arrested in 2005 and detained on treason charges (Iaccino, 2014).

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This article was written before IPOB was banned by the Nigerian government in September 2017.

Although IPOB is undisputedly a separatist movement, there have also been insinuations concerning the obscure motive of the group. For example, the group has been linked to the idea of a Customary Government of Biafra, but this notion has been debunked by IPOB, reaffirming the general belief that the group is unequivocally a separatist movement. In a reaction to a publication branding the IPOB as part of the Customary Government of Biafra, the IPOB reinstated that it is strictly a ‘freedom fighter’ group led by Nnamdi Kanu who was given the mantle of leadership by the High Command of the Biafran Army on the 30<sup>th</sup> of May 2014 at Enugu (Africanpress.com, 2016).

The objectives of this study are: (1) To determine the fundamental issues and the driving forces responsible for IPOB secessionism; (2) To examine IPOB’s secessionist strategy vis-à-vis government militaristic approach in containing the Biafran secessionism with the view to ascertaining the effectiveness of the approach; and (3) To ascertain the legitimacy and legality of IPOB’s secessionism.

### **Theoretical Perspective**

This study is framed along the lines of Johan Galtung’s (1993) ‘Violence Triangle and Structural Violence’ theory. Analyzing this theory, Rajkumar Bobichand (2016), explains that violence is any physical, emotional, verbal, institutional, structural or spiritual behaviour, attitude, policy or condition that diminishes, dominates or destroys others and ourselves. Violence is one of the possible responses to specific conflict situations. Galtung made a clear distinction between Structural violence, Cultural violence, and Direct violence. In examining the three interrelated forms of violence (Structural, Cultural, and Direct), Structural violence is placed at the left end and Cultural violence is at the right end of the base of a triangle, while Direct violence is on the vortex.

Direct violence, physical and/or verbal, is visible as behaviour in the triangle. However, this action does not come out of nowhere; its roots are cultural and structural. Direct violence can take many forms. In its classic form, it involves the use of physical force like killing, torture, rape and sexual assault, and beatings. It also includes verbal violence like humiliation or put downs.

Cultural violence is made up of the prevailing attitudes and beliefs that we have been taught since childhood and that surround us in daily life about the power and necessity of violence. We can consider the example of telling of history which glorifies records and reports wars and military victories rather than peoples’ non-violent agitation movements.

Structural violence exists when some groups, classes, genders, nationalities, etc. are assumed to have, and in fact do have, more access to goods, resources and opportunities, than other groups, classes, genders, nationalities, etc., and this unequal advantage is built

into the very social, political, and economic systems that govern societies, states, and the world.

The implication of the Galtung's (1993) structural theory of violence is that, though structural violence seems latent but lethal, it is that often leads to direct violence. According to Galtung, the understanding of violence goes beyond direct violence in which one or more people inflict violence on other people. To the scholar, structural violence is another form of violence which is not carried out by individuals but is hidden, to a greater or lesser extent, in structures. An example of this might be the injustices of the worldwide system for the trade in goods, which creates more and more starving people every year.

Violence is built into the social system and expresses itself in the unequal distribution of power and, as a result, unequal opportunities (i.e. inequality in the distribution of income, education opportunities, etc.). As far as Galtung is concerned, structural violence is synonymous with "social injustice". Structural violence, thus, epitomizes deprivation and limited access to desired opportunities. The general formula behind structural violence is inequality in the distribution of power and resources (Galtung and Gewalt, 1993). It is on this basis that violence is defined [here] as that which increases the distance between the potential and the reality and that which impedes the decrease of the distance; the difference between what could have been and what is. When opportunities are denied, basic needs are deprived (denied?), and when access to political and socio-economic opportunities are limited, it translates into structural violence; and when this engenders the use of physical force, killings, maiming and the like, we have direct violence.

This is what is aptly represented in the IPOB versus the Nigerian state imbroglio. The Igbo people of Eastern Nigeria have, overtime, decried the political and socio-economic marginalization of their people. They have also expressed their grievances over limited access to key political positions, inequality in the distribution of social and economic resources, and what is perceived to be large scale vindictive deprivation and neglect of the South-East region within the Nigerian Federation (Menas Associates, 2015). This situation epitomizes structural violence (ostensibly precipitated by the Nigerian state), which has often led to civil unrest, and sometimes armed struggle between restive ethnic groups and the Nigerian state, thereby engendering direct violence as often showcased by the deployment of military option against separationist movements like IPOB.

### **The IPOB Secessionist Movement: The Driving Forces and the Issues Involved**

The various movements for the restoration of Biafra no doubt revolve around diverse issues; ranging from the political, socio-economic to the legal and constitutional issues. Since the separationist struggle for a Republic of Biafra first became evident in 1967, the demands and the engendering issues have by no means changed. Much of the grievances

have been linked directly to the problem of political and socio-economic marginalization of the Igbo people of South East Nigeria (Menas Associates, 2015).

From a political perspective, movements like IPOB, have expressed and projected the discontent of the people of the South East around appointments into key political positions in the country. Invariably, these appointments, which are believed to be skewed in favour of other sections of the country, have been considered to be grossly unfair to the Igbo people. These grievances were further aggravated in President Muhammadu Buhari's first appointments in 2015, shortly after he came to power, which were seen to have been in favour of the north. In his initial political appointments, Buhari did not pick anyone from the South East. This created a strong feeling of neglect in the area which had voted massively against Buhari's political party, the All Progressive Congress (APC) in the 2015 general elections. Although, subsequent ministerial appointments tended to redress the earlier imbalance, the mistrust persists. This has systematically increased the fears of pro-Biafra agitators because the Southeast is not getting its due from the country's federal system. Thus, it is believed that the pro-Biafra protest appears to have gained ground in part because of a perception that Buhari is biased against the South East (Menas Associates, 2015).

In terms of socio-economic ramifications, the South-East is believed to have suffered from deficient and decrepit infrastructure and widespread youth unemployment. The resulting economic frustration feeds into longstanding complaints that the federal government never fully rehabilitated the region after the civil war. Critics hold that administrative changes (such as the creation of new states and local government areas) decreed by northern-led military governments from 1983 to 1999 have diminished the region's share of federal appointments, revenue and development projects (Menas Associates, 2015).

This position has been re-echoed by the Secretary of the Lower Niger Congress, Tony Nnadi (2016). Nnadi, on the Africa Independent Television (AIT), breakfast programme, Kakaaki, aired on Monday August 29, 2016 alleged that there has been a deliberate effort by the ruling elite to stifle the economy and social life of the Southeast. According to him, the Federal Government has over the years shut down the Orji River power plant, neglected the coal deposits in Enugu which could have served as source of power supply to the Southeast region. Nnadi also condemned the failure of government to cite an alternative seaport in the Southeast and the over-concentration of economic activities on the Lagos seaport, and its neglect and abandonment, for over ten years now, of the Onitsha – Enugu Expressway.

Excerpts from the in-depth interview with Dr. Boniface Anyanwu reveal that the end of the Nigerian civil war in 1970 signalled the beginning of the marginalisation of the Ibo

people from the South East. The issues, as articulated and repeatedly canvassed by the various Biafran separationist movements, were re-echoed by IPOB as follows:

- That Biafra was an existing autonomous nation before the arrival of the British in Africa. The 1914 amalgamation that united the North and South and created the new country called Nigeria is illegal because it was decided without their consent (it was a forced amalgamation);
- That the 100 years terms of the amalgamation experiment expired in 2014 which automatically dissolved the Union;
- That there is consistent economic and political marginalization within Nigeria;
- That because of the marginalization, there is palpable lack of developmental projects in Biafra land;
- That there exist persistent security problems, frequently resulting in unaddressed killings of the Biafrans in the North of Nigeria;
- That the incidence of killings has gradually caused a fear of total extinction among the Ibo people (Government of Indigenous People of Biafra, 2014).

Thus, the IPOB have decided to consolidate their demands as follows:

- Declaration of their right to self-determination: Outright independence from Nigeria; or
- Self-determination within Nigeria like in a confederation as agreed at the Aburi meeting in 1967; or
- A dissolution of Nigeria along the ethnic lines instead of allowing the country to break up in bloodshed. This will reverse the amalgamation of 1914 so that everybody would return to their ancestral homeland as they were before the arrival of the British (Government of IPOB, 2014).

However, the claim of marginalization by the South-East can hardly be completely correct considering the number of Igbo indigenes who have occupied exalted political positions in the past. For example, Jaja Wachuku was the Speaker of the House of Representatives 1959 -1960; Edwin Ume-Ezeoke also became the Speaker of the House of Representatives between 1979 and 1983; five indigenes of South-East Igbo occupied the senate presidency, beginning from Evan Enwerem, 1999; Chuba Okadigbo, 1999 – 2000; Anyim Pius Anyim, 2000 – 2003; Adolphus Wabara, 2003 – 2005; and Ken Nnamani, 2005 – 2007. Under President Goodluck Jonathan, Anyim Pius Anyim also became the Secretary to the Government of the Federation.

In relation to the above, one of the in-depth interviewees, Prof. A. S. Apkotor, also argued that the phenomenon of marginalization is not exclusive to the South-East Igbo, rather it

is a common factor which other ethnic groups have experienced at one time or the other depending on who occupies the seat of power.

### **The IPOB Struggle and the Effectiveness of the Militaristic Approach**

What is clear about the Nnamdi Kanu-led IPOB separationist movement is the goal of achieving self-determination for the Igbo nation within the Nigerian Federation; what is not clear about the movement is the strategy it seeks to adopt in achieving its objectives. There is a generalized belief that Kanu's movement may be disposed to a non-violent strategy in its struggle. However, a critical observation of the strategies adopted by IPOB so far indicates that the strategies seem to have betrayed the presumed non-violence stance of the movement. This has become very evident in some of Kanu's declarations and proclamations. In some of his gatherings, Kanu has been found repudiating MASSOB's pledge of non-violence and ostensibly endorsing violence as an instrument for resuscitating Biafra. Addressing a Diaspora group, the World Igbo Congress (WIC), in Los Angeles, U.S., in September 2015, he said: "We need guns and we need bullets and those of you in America will give it to us ... If we don't get Biafra, everybody has to die". (Obasi 2015). Anyanwu, a key informant from the university of Delta state,<sup>3</sup> does not agree that IPOB is a violent movement; he, however, sees the purported attempt of IPOB to acquire arms as a measure of self-defence.

The violent disposition of Nnamdi Kanu and his IPOB was accentuated by the setting up of Radio Biafra, live-streamed from London, which broadcast highly provocative messages laced with misinformation, hate-speech and anti-Nigeria derision. This is not only capable of inciting violence, but also a recipe for violence. Following Buhari's victory in the March 2015 election, Kanu's Radio Biafra stepped up its messages of hate and incitement against the new president, his government, and northern Nigerians. (Republic Reporters, 2015). It is also believed that IPOB, in recent times, is interfacing with the newly formed and violence-oriented, self-styled separationist group, Niger Delta Avengers (NDA). (African Press, 2016). To this end, it is evident that, though IPOB propagates a non-violent form of mobilization, its modus operandi is blended and tainted with some elements of violence. And this, many believe, appears to have also informed the hard posturing of government against IPOB pro-Biafra agitations.

Government responses to IPOB's protest have been rather high-handed. A report by Amnesty International (AI) revealed that the state's response often takes the form of extrajudicial execution and torture by Nigeria security forces, especially the Nigerian Army. This approach has led to the death of at least 150 pro-Biafra protesters across Nigeria's South-east, between August 2015 and August 2016. The AI report corroborated

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3 Interview, 2017

a Premium Times investigation which revealed the vicious clamp down and wanton execution of members of IPOB by soldiers of the Nigerian Army, the police and operatives of the State Security Services (SSS) (Ibekwe, 2016).

The largest number of IPOB members killed was recorded during the Biafra Remembrance Day of May 30, 2016. An estimated 60 members were reportedly killed on that day when security forces swooped on over 1,000 members of the group who were gathered for a rally in Onitsha. On February 9, 2016 at the Aba National High School, the Nigerian Army surrounded a group of IPOB members during a peaceful gathering and opened fire on everyone in sight without any warning. Many of the protesters were then rounded up and taken away. Four days later, 13 corpses, including some of the men (where there women, children, etc.?), were found near the Aba Highway (Ibekwe, 2016).

There have also been reports revealing the disturbing use of widespread torture of those arrested by the military. On May 30, 2016, a trader in the commercial city of Onitsha was reportedly shot, dumped in a gutter, and bathed with acid by soldiers. Another man detained at the Onitsha Barracks said that “those in the guard room were flogged every morning, the soldiers tagged it Morning Tea” (Ibekwe, 2016). The climax of government hard posturing was the arrest and incarceration of the leader of IPOB, Nnamdi Kanu, in October 17, 2015 (Ogefere, 2015), before being released on bail in 2017.

Nevertheless, there have been critical voices against the hard posturing of the government concerning Kanu’s incarceration which portrays the government as acting in breach of the rule of law and contrary to the tenets of democracy. An academic at the Delta state university<sup>4</sup> agrees with the argument that such persons like Kanu should be freely allowed to pursue their rights to campaign for (Igbo) self-determination without persecution, the way it is done in developed climes. This is based on the fact that the arrest and arraignment of Kanu is perceived to be tantamount to persecution of Kanu and a contrived attempt to suppress IPOB’s struggle (Ogefere, 2015).

This militaristic approach by the Nigerian government has been obstructive to modern democratic practice. An academic at the Delta State University<sup>5</sup> bemoans the choice of military option in containing the Biafran secessionism, claiming that “it is a unique kind of response which witnessed the killing of unarmed protesters based on the historical antecedents of the protesters”. According to the academic, the response of the Nigerian state to the pro-Biafra insurgency has been selective and has not been standardized to the extent that government has not deployed the same measure of militarism to more lethal

4 Interview, Prof. A. S. Akpotor, 2017

5 Interview, Prof. Jike, 2017

insurgencies like the one perpetuated by Fulani Herdsmen in Northern Nigeria. Thus, the state's response to the pro-Biafra movement is believed to be a mismatch in the sense that, unlike the Niger Delta militants, the pro-Biafra agitators are neither armed nor militarized, and unlike Boko Haram, they are not terrorists (Ogefere, 2015).

Okadigbo (2016) categorizes the model of state response to the pro-Biafra movements into three theories which he describes as negative theories. One of the theories is the Vindictive Exclusion Theory, involving the punishment of Igbos for not voting for Buhari and which of course sparked off the renewed agitation. Another theory is what Okadigbo describes as the Underestimation and Under-Rating Theory, a theory where government dismiss the agitation for Biafra as a non-threat. For example, in a recent interview with the International Business Times, government spokesperson, Mike Omeri observed that the authority does not consider the separatist movement as a threat to the current leadership and defined pro-Biafrans as an 'insignificant number of frustrated people who are not a threat to the existence of Nigeria' (Iaccino, 2015). This theory has been linked to the Non-Negotiable Theory where President Buhari (like some past Nigerian leaders) has argued that the unity of Nigeria cannot be discussed. It is this theory that has apparently given impetus to the adoption of the military option.

The question to ask here is that, to what extent has government's militaristic approach been effective in containing the IPOB movement? As much as government militaristic approach has helped government to foreclose other options; it is also intended to weaken the enthusiasm of both the protagonists and sympathisers of the pro-Biafra movement. However, it has been argued that, despite the suppressive nature of government militarism, the pro-Biafra struggle will by no means abate. Another interviewee from the Delta state university<sup>6</sup> believes that government's response has been a tradition which is becoming more and more ineffective. This point is buttressed by Ejechi<sup>7</sup> who agrees that government militaristic approach is more likely to stoke the Biafran struggle.

For Ikeoji, the militaristic approach of the Nigerian state, instead of vitiating the Biafra struggle, has rather attracted the attention of the international community to the activities of IPOB. Anyanwu<sup>8</sup> agrees with this line of thought, admitting that the suppressive approach of the Nigerian state in containing IPOB activities has brought more international recognition to IPOB, alluding to the recent invitation of IPOB by the United Nations (UN). According to Ikeoji,<sup>9</sup> the international community is becoming more curious, interested in and sympathetic to the Biafra secessionism, due to the widely

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6 Interview, Prof. Ikeoji, 2017

7 Interview, Dr. Eukeria Ejechi, 2017

8 Interview, 2017

9 Interview, 017

acclaimed persecution and injustice the Igbo people have suffered since the Nigerian civil war. He queries the discriminatory treatment being meted out to South-east Igbo despite the 'No Victor, No Vanquished' pronouncement made after the civil war by General Gowon, Nigeria's former military head of state. Ikeoji therefore submits that the repudiation of the post-civil war resolve to reintegrate the Igbo people into the Nigerian state is no doubt attracting the attention of the international community to the Biafra struggle.

In the light of the above, the history of the Biafra struggle has revealed that the strategy adopted by the Nigerian state in containing the Biafran separationist movements has exacerbated the conflict. Over the years the use of military force to repress separationist agitators in Nigeria has proved to be counter-productive. For example, frequent deployment of the military to contain insurgencies in the Niger Delta (since the time of Isaac Boro) has only galvanized rather than reduce the potency of the Niger Delta agitators. Similarly, the defeat of the Biafran troops during the Nigerian civil war did little or nothing to prevent subsequent resurgence of pro-Biafran agitation, decades later.

### **The IPOB Secessionism: The Legal Perspective**

There have been arguments in respect of the legality, legitimacy and/or constitutionality of the IPOB secessionist movement. At least two of the academics at the Delta state university<sup>10</sup> are of the opinion that the intention to secede may not be the real objective behind the IPOB struggle, but rather to draw the attention of the international community to the plight of the Igbo of South-east Nigeria. Nevertheless, the major issues revolving round the pro-Biafra movements over the years have been the demand for self-determination. Whether or not the protagonists of these movements have disguised themselves on this issue is a matter of conjecture. But our main concern here is to determine if IPOB's demand for secession is a legitimate one.

Thus, the questions to ask here are: What is the position of the law on IPOB's demand for secession and self-determination? Is IPOB's demand for secession guaranteed in the Nigeria's constitution? Prof. Akpotor<sup>11</sup> argues that issues that border on secession are not provided for in the constitution of Nigeria and can only be leveraged through the process of constitutional amendment. Indeed, the law allows for the indigenous peoples of the land to maintain their indigenous identities; but does the law confer on the indigenous peoples of the land the right to self-determination? IPOB has argued that its struggle for a separate territory within the Nigerian state is a legitimate and lawful one, drawing inference from the Scots and the Catalans. According to IPOB, the Indigenous People of Biafra are seeking to exercise their right to self-determination to re-establish and

10 Interview, 2017

11 Interview, 2017

restore their ancient, ancestral nation of Biafra as a sovereign nation independent from Nigeria, the same way the Scots and the Catalans are seeking to exercise their right to self-determination and establish Scotland as a sovereign nation independent from Great Britain, and Catalonia as a sovereign nation from Spain respectively. (Government of IPOB, 2014).

But others have criminalized the activities of IPOB, citing Sections 37, 38, and 41 of the Criminal Code, Laws of the Federation of Nigeria, which define Treason and Treasonable Felonies as follows:

**Treason:** *Any person who levies war against the Nigerian Government or the Government of a Region (or state) with the intention to intimidate, overthrow or overawe the President or Governor, or conspires with any person either within or without Nigeria to levy war against Nigeria or against a Region, or instigate a foreigner to invade Nigeria or a Region with an armed force, is guilty of treason and is liable to the punishment of death upon conviction. (S. 37(1); S. 37(2) and S. 38)*

**Treasonable Felony:** *Any person who forms an intention to overthrow the President or Governor, or to levy war against Nigeria or against the State, or to instigate a foreigner to make an armed invasion against Nigeria or the States, and manifests such an intention by an overt act is guilty of a treasonable felony and is liable to life imprisonment on conviction. It is, however, controversial to say if the activities of IPOB contravene these provisions of the criminal code. (S.40 and S. 41)*

There have been frantic scholarly efforts to distinguish between secession and self-determination. Is secession the same thing with self-determination? Under what legal framework is the right to secede guaranteed? In an attempt to answer these questions, it has been argued that the right to secede is a matter of international law. On the other hand, the principle of self-determination of peoples suggests that every “people” have a right to their own nation-state. In a more explicit term, the principle of self-determination, as provided for in the United Nations (UN) Charter, Articles 1(2) and 55, was used to encourage colonized peoples to throw off alien domination. The normative force behind secessionist arguments derives from a different source, namely the right to territory that many ethnic groups claim to possess. Therefore, the separatist arguments make little sense unless interpreted in a territorial light. Thus, it has increasingly become difficult to determine whether the struggle of IPOB is meant to achieve secession or self-determination. The IPOB needs to clarify and better articulate its objectives by distinguishing secessionism from self-determination (Brilmayer, 1991).

## The IPOB Movement and the Emerging Trajectories of Conflicts

There is the tendency for the Nigerian state to sustain its military action against the Biafran separatist movement to suppress further pro-Biafra agitation and possibly prevent or forestall future similar agitation. Such a sustained military approach is expected to result in the disarticulation and capitulation of the leadership of the pro-Biafra movements. There is bound to be a reoccurrence since the Nigerian state continues to savour the victory that was recorded during the 30 months Nigerian civil war. There is the prognosis that if government suspends or decides to abandon its militaristic approach, similar insurgencies may likely emerge from other regions.

It is also expected that the Biafra secessionist agitation will fade away when more people of Igbo extraction are appointed into the Buhari government, or when the Buhari administration begins to implement more infrastructural projects in the South-east. This is precisely what happened in the restive Niger Delta when Jonathan became the Vice President (and later the President), and when the amnesty programme was introduced to rehabilitate ex-militants from the region (Adibe, 2014).

The institution of the present democracy can also result in the abatement of the Biafra secessionism. This is to the effect that elected representatives from the South-east, especially the Governors from the region, are unlikely going to lend support to the pro-Biafra struggle. Indeed, the reality of the fact that the South-east has representatives in the present government is a vitiating factor. In relation to that, Akpotor<sup>12</sup> is of the view that the failure of the South-east delegates to the 2014 National Conference to canvass the IPOB position is a disincentive to the secessionist struggle.

It is interesting to note that there is a noticeable trend, especially among African states, to the effect that ethnic-based secessionist movements are hardly successful. Although, many separationist movements are based on religion and racial motives, however, the process of decolonization also left behind conditions that gave rise to identity-based separationist movements. This is as a result of boundaries that were drawn for administrative convenience but did not reflect geographical patterns of ethnic identities. And this has led to conflict between ethnic groups, notable among which was the attempt by Katanga Province, under Moise Tshombe, to secede from Zaire but was defeated over the course of 1960 – 1963 with the aid of United Nations (UN) forces. Incidentally, the pro-Biafra struggle is also an ethnic based separationist movement which has so far been unsuccessful (Chai, 2008).

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12 Interview, 2017

On the whole, based on the antecedents of pro-Biafra struggles in Nigeria, the IPOB neo Biafra secessionist movement may not achieve its set objectives due to, what Ikeoji<sup>13</sup> refers to, lack of proper framework on the part of the agitators. According to him, IPOB should consider the reality of the landlocked nature of the South-eastern states and what impact this would have on the region in case the secession bid is achieved and the South-east eventually become autonomous. This means that the South-east would still depend heavily on other regions on the coastal line for their commerce.

Essentially, it is also expected that the neo-Biafra struggle, like in some African countries such as Sudan, Eritrea and Ethiopia, may eventually culminate in a referendum especially with the recent interest shown by the developed countries and the United Nations (UN).

### **Conclusion**

The hallmark of IPOB secessionist struggle is hinged on the dire need to address the problem of marginalisation and social injustice against the Igbo people of South-east Nigeria; a problem which incidentally has been a major outcome of the Nigerian civil war. The neo-Biafra struggles no doubt have been episodic and have over time been championed by different movements, including Ralph Uwazuruike's MASSOB, Benjamin Igwe Onwuka's BZF and presently Nnamdi Kanu's IPOB. Interestingly, the modus operandi of these movements has not been significantly different as they have always employed the civil disobedience approach to propagate their ideals and galvanize their supporters. Although this approach may not have achieved their expected objectives, it has undoubtedly elevated the struggle to a higher pedestal by attracting the attention of its supporters and the international community.

On the other hand, the government's militaristic approach in containing IPOB protests is considered too high-handed and therefore counter-productive. Invariably, the hard posturing of the Nigerian state has stoked, rather than vitiated, the pro-Biafra activities of IPOB.

Modern methods of handling separationist movements include the use of state coercion, but may also, depending on the context, involve the adoption of dialogue and negotiations that may culminate in the holding of a referendum. War is usually considered the last option when all avenues of dialogue and peaceful negotiation have failed. The recent 'BREXIT referendum', which witnessed the exit of England from the European Union (EU) and the referendum by the Scots to seek an exit from the United Kingdom though unsuccessful, are instructive. To this effect, former UN Security-General Kofi Annan has been reported as have advised the Nigerian government to dialogue with the people of the South-east. Short-term solutions in the form of repression and deployment of

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the military, as experience has shown, would lead to certain resurgence in the future (Tapuka, 2015). The issue of restructuring, as frequently canvassed by various segments of Nigeria, can be revisited as a long-term measure to address the fundamental issues of marginalization and social injustice against the Igbo people (Republic Reporters, 2015).

Furthermore, the prospect of achieving the objectives of IPOB is no doubt dependent on certain variables. These include the resolve of the leadership of IPOB to sustain the ideals of the pro-Biafra struggle; and this entails the ability of IPOB leadership to overcome challenges which are opposition by some Igbo elites, government opposition and the militaristic approach of the Nigerian state; its ability to build a more coherent movement to forestall and manage any possible leadership crisis; and the dire need for the leadership of IPOB to properly conceptualize and articulate the goals of the pro-Biafran movement. Issues relating to vitriolic outbursts of intolerance and duplicity have been linked to the leader of the IPOB, Nnamdi Kanu. And this has dramatically contributed to the emergence of The Reformed Indigenous People of Biafra (RE-IPOB) whose leader is yet to be announced. This, combined with the recent banning of the organization by the federal government, to a large extent, raises questions about the future of the pro-Biafra groups, including IPOB, and the prospects for the movement for Igbo self-determination.

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