

Re-Invented Abroad: Agitation for Self-Determination by the Indigenous People of Biafra (Ipub) Movement in South-Eastern Nigeria

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Abstract

Fifty years since the declaration of separatist Biafra, the narrative still reverberates across Nigeria. This is common in the south-eastern region where pro-Biafra movements with claims to the principle of self-determination, continue to reinvent the idea of the hitherto aborted Biafra. Relying essentially on primary data, this paper examines the current neo-Biafran agitation within the organizational framework of the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) movement. Findings reveal that IPOB is a scion of the Movement for the Actualization of Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) and an initiative of Nigerians in the Diaspora; that the group amplifies her struggle using the media; that non-violence remains the official principle of the group; and that group cohesion is very strong within the movement. Furthermore, the perception of marginalization, exclusionary politics, cumulative injustice, a weak economy, politics of the memory as well as state repression are factors that strengthen the neo-Biafran agitation. The paper suggests that strategies of inclusion, re-orientation of the Nigerian citizens, de-militarization of the Nigerian public space, dialogue and redefining of the Nigerian political structure are means through which the neo-Biafran agitation could be effectively managed.

Keywords: IPOB, Biafra, Ethno-Nationalism, Self-determination, South-Eastern Nigeria

Introduction

Nigeria's return to civilian rule in 1999 opened the space for the expression of popular aspirations most of which are, however, couched in ethno-religious sentiments (Ifeka, 2000; Ajayi and Duruji, 2008). This is exemplified in the activities of groups like the Oodua People's Congress (OPC) in the south-west, the pro-Biafran groups of the south-east, the Niger-Delta militants of the southsouth, the fundamentalist Islamic groups in the north, among others (Omeje, 2005; Duruji, 2012b; Okeke, 2016a). While most of these agitations are largely driven by calls for greater autonomy and the protection of group interests within the state (Adebanwi, 2005); some others like pro-Biafra groups, agitate for a separate state (Onuoha, 2013).

Biafra was the name of the secessionist state declared by the Colonel Chukwuemeka Odumegwu-Ojukwu led government of the defunct Eastern Region of Nigeria on May 30, 1967. The declaration is said to be a product of the inter-ethnic strife that dominated the politics of the decolonization era in Nigeria (Duruji, 2012a). Such situation was engineered by a complexity of factors ranging from the remote causes like age long mutual suspicions, engendered by the divide and rule tactics of the colonial government; succeeding crises of the pre and post-independence era such as the Kano Riot of 1953, the Census Crisis of 1962, the Tiv riots of 1964; the Federal Election Crisis of 1964; the regional election crisis in Western Nigeria in 1965 etc. to the immediate reasons such as the coups of 1966 and the succeeding pogroms of same year. In response, the General Yakubu Gowon led federal government declared what it termed a police action that snowballed into one of the bitterest wars experienced in Africa, which lasted till January 15, 1970, with the surrender of the Biafrans.

However, recently, the separatist idea is being re-invented and promoted by different pro-Biafran movements¹ (locally and in the Diaspora) especially in the south-east² geopolitical zone. With the focus largely on an earlier group, the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB), literature has attempted explanations for the agitations by these neo-Biafran movements however; recent agitations, especially in the south-eastern region, are largely carried out by a new group known as the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB)³ alleged to be more confrontational than other pro-Biafra groups (Adibe, 2015). Since its formation in 2012, the IPOB as led by the founding Director of Radio Biafra Nnamdi Kanu reinvented and had projected the Biafra secessionist ideology. To the best of the authors' knowledge, little or no academic enquiry focusing on the ideology, objectives and strategies of IPOB has been conducted. Such inquiry is very important because, 'the solution of the current Biafran dilemma cannot occur without the Nnamdi Kanu led IPOB' especially when it is assumed that majority of her members belong to a generation that did not witness the existence of Biafra (Offodile, 2016, p. 207). Moreover, it will be apt to ascertain if the hitherto articulated explanations for earlier groups like MASSOB apply to the IPOB.

With the use of both primary and secondary data, and while referring to existing explanations for neo-Biafranism before, during and after the Nigerian

1 These include: the Biafra Foundation (BF), Biafra Actualization Forum (BAF), Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB), the Biafra Youth Congress (BYC), Biafran Liberation Council (BLC), Biafra Zionist Movement (BZM), Biafra Liberation in Exile (BILIE), etc.

2 South-east is one of the six geo-political zones in Nigeria. Its population is predominantly Igbo and it comprises of Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo states.

3 This group should not be confused with IPOB worldwide, a group led by the supreme council of elders of IPOB who claim that their agitation for self-determination is solely through legal and diplomatic means (for more information, see Offodile, 2016, pg 200).

Civil War; this paper traces the emergence of the IPOB and examines the neo-Biafran agitation within the organizational framework of the movement. Since the neo-Biafran agitation has largely been supported by the Igbo ethnic group of southeastern Nigeria particularly in Onitsha and Aba of Anambra and Abia states respectively (Duruji, 2012a; Atata, 2016); primary data were largely drawn from these two major Biafran enclaves. Secondary materials that were consulted threw more light on the activities of the IPOB movement as well as other relevant information related to the group.

Succeeding this section is a discourse of the key concepts related to the study as well as relevant theoretical perspectives. The third section traces the emergence of the IPOB, examining its ideology and objectives. The next section interrogates the strategies adopted by the IPOB in her agitation and the state response to such strategies while the last section concludes.

Ethnic-Nationalism

Nationalism is an ideology built around the belief in common shared identity and characteristics such as language, values, allegiances and historical memories by groups of individuals and who adopt different activities to project such ideology (Duruji, 2008). However, there exists some ambiguity in its use because, while states can emphasize nationalism as the justification for her territoriality and legitimacy, sub-nations within a state could also use it to justify their agitations for self-determination (Calhoun, 1993; Riggs, 2002). Consequently, nationalism is of two forms: civic nationalism and ethnic nationalism. The civic nation is defined in terms of loyalty of citizens to a state as prescribed by the law, while the ethnic nation is defined in terms of its 'symbolic and socio-emotional linkage to ancestry, culture, language or religion rather than pragmatic or utilitarian justification' (Breton, 1988, p. 86).

Ethno-nationalism is a word that captures the complex concepts of ethnicity and nationalism neither of which can be used in place of the other, yet very difficult to mention each without the other (Calhoun, 1993). It can be explained as an attempt by members of an ethnic nation to preserve their integrity and protect their group interests within a state (Breton, 1988; Kiss, 1996). Allegiance to the state, therefore, is a factor of the extent to which it can satisfy the aspirations of the ethno-nationalists. Consequently, it is predominantly a political phenomenon and not merely based on primary feelings of coming from a particular group (Kiss, 1996). Other explanations for ethnic-nationalism include issues of modernization and globalization (Riggs, 2002; Gebrewold, 2009).

Furthermore, Nagel (1993) argues that ideology and competition are the two dominant explanations for ethnic nationalism. He noted that ethnic movements

draw legitimacy from international principles such as self-determination while the competitive nature of man extended to the international arena provides the material support for the existence of ethno-nationalist movements. However, Kiss (1996) added that there are variants of ethno-nationalism often defined in terms of the aims of the group and the strategies they adopt to achieve those objectives. Thus, while some 'seek to acquire a politically larger polity, some try to attain formal territorial or legal autonomy within a polity, some struggle to acquire their independent state, and others strive to conquer their neighbours and form an empire' (Kiss, 1996, p. 291).

In terms of its management, it is noted that democratic regimes are more likely to successfully manage ethno-nationalism and grievances from ethnic groups than despotic regimes because even though the latter has the tendency to suppress such agitations, it would only be for a while as the collapse of such regimes (which is inevitable) re-invents the ethno-nationalist struggle (Riggs, 2002). However, in constitutional democracies, the management of ethno-nationalism, especially those who seek total independence from the state, is more difficult.

Self-Determination

Self-determination is a principle that emphasizes the right of a people to determine their destiny concerning their political, economic, cultural and social development (UNPO 2006; Mrabure, 2015). However, the concept is laden with debates especially with reference to the peoples and conditions under which it is applicable (Whelan, 1992). For example, there is no consensus on who constitutes the 'selves', a 'people' or a 'nation' as contained in the definition of the concept (Nixon, 1970). Furthermore, while there is an argument that self-determination is a right that must be freely expressed by people under colonial rule which will lead to their independence; it is also argued that such expression cannot be applied internally by groups within an already independent state (Pantazopolous, 1995).

Eventually, the concept of self-determination became akin to a double-edged sword as it is important in the building of modern states but at the same time constitute the sturdiest basis for threatening the unity or sovereignty of the state (Nagel, 1993). However, Serapio (1987) notes that the expression of selfdetermination does not often lead to the disintegration of a state since it has different levels. Thus while some agitations could be about relative autonomy within the state, some might be targeted at outright secession.

With reference to its legal framework, the principle of self-determination is a right recognized by different international and regional legal instruments (Nawaz, 1965; UNPO, 2006). The provisions of the UN Charter and the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights emphasize the right of people to determine

their economic, social and political rights. However, the pre-conditions for the expression of self-determination by the UN include a history of independence or self-rule within an identifiable territory, distinctive culture and the will and capacity for self-governance. Also, such expressions must be backed by a popular will which can be ascertained through a referendum (Mrabure, 2015). In most cases, pro-Biafra agitators hinge their argument on provisions such as the above. However, realist politics within the international system shows that states seldom support the balkanization of other states (Trifuvunoska, 1997; Abdullah, 2006). Moreover, the United Nations had at different times promoted the idea of state sovereignty and territoriality. Such stance is influenced by the highly disintegrating capacity of the concept of self-determination principle.

Similarly, the fear of separatist calls made African leaders who before 1963 were debating the abolition of all colonial boundaries and redrawing the frontiers based on indigenous differences; to turn around and promote ‘the principle of *uti possidetis*⁴, with Article 111(3) of the Addis Ababa Charter declaring for ‘the sovereignty and territorial integrity of each state’ thereby transcending from ethnic to political concepts of nationality (Panter-Bricks, 1968; Whelan, 1992, p. 35; Freeman, 1999). Furthermore, Mrabure (2015) adds that the emphasis of the African charter is more in support of decolonization and not in support of secessionist attempts by groups within independent African states.

Nigeria is a state party to the African Charter as it not only ratified the said law but per the section 12 of her constitution has domesticated the charter through the National Assembly making it a valid law in Nigeria. Most IPOB members argue that since this is the case, their right to self-determination must be recognized by the Nigerian government. However, the provisions of the Nigerian constitution (which is supreme to any international treaty and soft laws) does not identify with the principles of self-determination. Quoting the introductory part of the Nigerian constitution which began thus “We the people of the Federal Republic of Nigeria Having firmly and solemnly resolve, to live in unity and harmony as one INDIVISIBLE and INDISSOLUBLE sovereign nation under God...” Mrabure (2015) exposes the futility of arguing otherwise.

Finally, in terms of ways through which states can manage self-determination claims, Knight (1985) noted that states could adopt different methods ranging from repressive to permissive methods like violent repression, assimilation, fair levels of political involvement and degrees of autonomy, among others. Though conservatives consider it a slippery slope, forms of collective autonomy like devolution, federalism, decentralization, among others, are the commonly suggested panacea to secessionist agitations in the literature (see Knight, 1985;

4 The principle of *uti possidetis* means that the holder of the right to independence is territorially defined and includes all inhabitants of the whole colony which is separated from the governing metropolitan State by a barrier of salt water.

Freeman, 1999; Wright, 1999). As shown by the Ethiopian/Eritrean case, repressive means end up radicalizing movements who initially were demanding for only relative autonomy (Keller, 1991).

Theoretical Framework

Primordialist, Instrumentalist and Relative Deprivation schools of thought offer possible approaches to interrogating the contradiction between ethnicity and nationalism on the one hand and self-determination on the other. They offer

some scaffolding upon which to build a framework constructing an alternative approach to understanding the agitation of the neo-Biafran movements. However, this article seeks to follow Irvin Janis' Groupthink theory as a basis for a critical exploration of the internal dynamics and how social conformity and cohesion is ensured within the IPOB movement. While embracing the tenets of Groupthink theory which argues that amiability and spirit of oneness within a group often leads to the replacement of independent critical thinking, by groupthink; the article aligns with the thought that it is practically impossible to provide a holistic recipe for understanding the situation. It embarks on a process that seeks to develop a pragmatic but heterodox approach to the problem of the IPOB agitation.

Thus, the paper does not seek to apply every Janisian idea to the problem but responds to Janis position which defies orthodox concepts for understanding ethno-nationalism in the light of paradigmatic failures; and proposes a reframing that seeks to open alternative strategies for analyzing IPOB agitation in southeastern Nigeria. This framing provides a normative position that can be used by actors to validate and evaluate the actions of others. Flowing from this, actors need to be held accountable for their policies and actions as well as their modus operandi for securing the vulnerable against repression. By facilitating actor accountability, this framing seeks to limit the risk of co-option by self-interested actors and creation of conditions for freedom is sought.

Helping to place an onus on actors with the agency to secure the vulnerable from malign structures is a major shift from making utopian claims of freedom to making pragmatic improvements on institutional arrangements that perpetuate the structural violence of repression and marginalization. This pragmatic goal is one of the key reasons for framing IPOB's plight in terms of structural violence. Because structural violence is the result of institutional incoherence, it provides a direct price on the task of developing and evaluating strategies, policies, actions and behaviours. It forces the questions like the following to be asked: What are the existing institutional arrangements? What changes are likely to result? And what impact will they have on or for the repressed? It is conceivable that even a single actor rethinking his commitment to IPOB question in this light and

adjusting his behaviour in its own field-modifying the institutional arrangements within its power; has the ability to make a measurable difference.

The work undertaken here lays down the challenge to develop a proactive heterodox approach to the IPOB question. It provides a useful framework for rethinking national cohesion to privilege the disempowered and marginalized without ignoring the centrality of the Nigerian state. Research framework grounded in this framing can be used to evaluate existing situations, test claims made by actors and help shape outcomes. For example, to evaluate an existing situation, questions can be posed that seek to uncover the nature of the structural

violence in Nigeria against IPOB, the existing institutional arrangements that give rise to such situations, for cross-examining claims made by actors to challenge existing discourses, and to evaluate strategies, policies and behaviours. These questions seek to uncover how such institutional arrangements are legitimized and perpetuated.

Also, as for actors benefitting from such institutional arrangements or proposing new policies or strategies, they might be asked how does the proposal improve, perpetuate or worsen the structural violence and repression of IPOB. Finally, for shaping outcomes, pertinent questions may interrogate alternative institutional arrangements that can limit or reduce the structural violence against IPOB? In such ways, a new agenda for further research and practice might be pursued that opens up the possibility of overcoming structural pathologies and creating the conditions for national cohesion in Nigeria.

Re-Invented Abroad: Emergence, Ideology and Objectives of IPOB

Though it is a phenomenon with roots to the era of colonization, ethnic-nationalism has remained a dominant part of conversations within the Nigerian public space. The re-advent of democracy in 1999 did not ameliorate the issue either. This is due to poor commitments to democratization project and sectional politics by the new leadership (Okonta, 2012; Lenshie, 2014). Other general explanations for the resurgent ethno-nationalism include contested state legitimacy, citizen alienation, the unresolved national question etc. (Onuoha, 2012). This was the context within which the first neo-Biafran movement, MASSOB and thereafter IPOB; were formed.

In 1999, Chief Ralph Uwazuruike, a member of the People's Democratic Party (PDP) decided to form MASSOB in response to the perception of Igbo marginalization and under-representation in federal positions during President Obasanjo's government (Duruji, 2012a; Okonta, 2012; Offodile, 2016). Over

time, MASSOB became very popular in the south-east, especially among the younger generation and artisans. The group started hoisting of Biafran flags and distribution of Biafran souvenirs; organizing rallies, procession, debates, sensitization workshops, engaging national and international bodies for Biafra's actualization, the establishment of a communication outfit (Voice of Biafra), mobilization of mass protests and sit-at-home programmes especially in Igbo land. At some point members of the groups went as far as engaging in regulatory functions of the state like pegging house rents for tenants in commercial cities like Onitsha, enforcement of sanitation laws, taking over security duties of the state, attempting to prevent extortion by police and members National Union of Road Transport Workers etc. (Duruji, 2012b). The President Obasanjo administration responded violently to MASSOB emergence and activities; and on repeated occasions incarcerated the leader of MASSOB, Ralph Uwazuruike.

The IPOB movement emerged as a result of the disagreements between Chief Ralph Uwazuruike and his lieutenants in the Diaspora. Nnamdi Kanu, one of Uwazuruike's lieutenants, decided to reignite the agitation using his own platform. Consequently, the emergence of the IPOB was largely decided by those in the Diaspora as most of her pioneer leaders were based abroad. For example, Nnamdi Kanu was based in London, Uchenna Asiegbu was based in Spain, Clifford Iroanya in Houston Texas, USA, Mmaranma Ugochukwu (Dallas, Texas), Leonard Aniemene (Trinidad and Tobago), Chika Edoziem (Switzerland), Onyinyechi Nlebedim (Malaysia), Austin Ofomah (Australia) etc. (Adesumoju, 2015). This confirms the views of Ukiwo (2009) that often secessionist aspirations are strengthened by members of the group in the Diasporas. In fact, in the case of the IPOB, it can be argued that funds from Igbos in the Diaspora were used to establish the movement and its chief tool of engagement, Radio Biafra. It was until the group had garnered enough local support that funds started coming from within.

In terms of the ideology that drives IPOB membership and support, passion for freedom was the most repeated explanation. Respondents⁵ were of the opinion that the current structure of Nigeria does not allow them to express themselves freely and to maximize their potential fully. As argued by Oloyede (2009), they see Biafra as not only their birth right but as the only means of regaining their freedom. This paper notes that the feeling of being in "bondage" in Nigeria is an idea that emerged from the post-war realities. Of course, any vanquished in a duel is most likely to assume such disposition especially when the victor either through overt or covert means suggests thus. The militarization of the Igbo public

⁵ Particularly IPOB members who were interviewed by the authors.

space further strengthens this mind-set and makes the agitators feel that the only way that they can be free to express themselves the way they want is through self-rule.

Furthermore, and as suggested by Janis (1982), group solidarity expressions like provision of welfare packages for members and other outward manifestations of group cohesion strengthens the resolve of IPOB members to keep on agitating for Biafra because they believe that the Biafran state will operate the way their current group does and will guarantee the “freedom” of all. However, one of the ambiguities observable in demand for “freedom” by the neo-Biafran agitators is the lack of consideration of the possibility of internal group differences⁶ which could make a segment of the Igbo populace a neo-hegemony in the anticipated state. In the event of a new Biafran state which of the sub-nations in Biafra land will assume leadership?

To prove that they are different from MASSOB and other pro-Biafran movements, IPOB attempts a historical justification for her agitation arguing that the Indigenous people of Biafra have existed in the past even before colonialism and that they share similar values. The above confirms the views of Tamir (1997) that perception of common values strengthens self-determination agitation. Thus just like MASSOB, IPOB claims that Biafrans are not just Igbos rather they comprise of different ethnic nations who irrespective of their varying languages, have common values, four market days and unique traditional clothing (two-piece wrapper) for every Biafran woman. However, the veracity of such claims is subject to doubt and can be addressed by further studies since history did not show the existence of these ethnic nations as a homogenous group. The claims of a homogenous Biafra were an issue during the Ojukwu-led secessionist attempt as some parts of the non-Igbo speaking areas did not agree with such construction. This brings to question, the real reason for Biafran agitations and supports the argument of Collier and Hoeffler (2002) that secessionist aspirations often have economic undertone (as the bulk of Nigeria’s oil wealth sits within these non-Igbo speaking areas). Moreover, the recent sit-at-home order that was obeyed completely, but only in the south-east region suggests that the idea of Biafra is popular mainly among the Igbo.

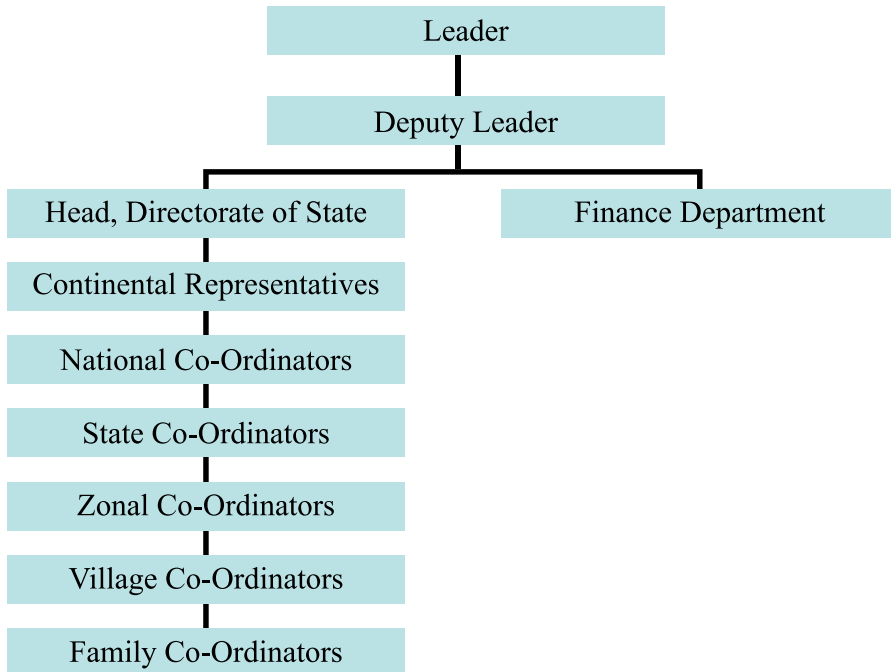
As the relevance of oil to Nigerian economy becomes apparent, the struggle for access to its source also became more intense at first, among the three regions. In dispute then, was what should be an appropriate revenue sharing formula between the regions and the federal government and among other regions. Nigeria’s oil

⁶ Popular sub-groups among the Igbo include: Nri-Igbo (found in present Anambra state), Waawa (found in present Enugu state), Ezza (found in present Ebonyi state), Ngwa and Aro (found in present Abia state), Ibeku and Ekpeye (found in present Imo state) etc. Each of these sub-groups have their own peculiarities and are powerful within their own spaces. In the event of realization of Biafra, some persons suggest that the differences among these groups might become more evident leading to further contestations for power.

fields are found in Rivers and Delta States and the area known as the Niger Delta today. As a resource that is both geographically concentrated and far more valuable than any other natural resource, Nigeria's Petroleum resources present a classic problem for distributive justice. Awareness of its potential value has been argued to be an important motivation behind the Eastern region's declaration of independence as Biafra in 1966/67. This explains why the rest of the country was so obstinately determined to keep the region within Nigeria. Consequently, it would be difficult to ignore the role of oil in the neo-Biafran agitation. However, had Biafra maintained its independence, the question of oil field ownership would not have gone away, for the people who traditionally inhabited that area were minorities in the Igbo dominated Biafra. To achieve their fair share of the revenue, minority groups throw their political weight behind any one of the major groups. The minorities try to ally with a major group to gain attention in the bid to meet their demand, although not necessarily with one collective voice.

Nevertheless, IPOB argues that their main objective is to restore the Biafra that was as far as the pre-colonial times. To achieve the above goal, the movement has an organized command and control structure which in some cases adopts the structure of the Nigerian state probably for administrative convenience. For example, the IPOB movement recognizes the position of state coordinators within her hierarchy. This contrasts with their position that their struggle is based on nationalities and not the geographical compartmentalization of the Nigerian state. It is worthy to note that in line with the Groupthink theory, members of the IPOB has very high respect for their leadership and seldom questions it. Thus the leadership has the capacity to control what they do and has ensured that the chain of command is closely knit as one finds the various coordinators operating at different hierarchical levels taking instructions from their direct superiors.

Figure 1



Source: Field Study – Interview with IPOB members (24/04/2017)

Furthermore, at each level of the IPOB, there are five principal officers, a Cooordinator, a Deputy Co-coordinator, a Secretary, a Financial Secretary and a Public Relations Officer.

However, one needs to note that of all the explanations for the emergence and popularity of IPOB in the south-east, the marginalization narrative remains dominant. The perception of marginalization linkable to the theory of relative deprivation is real in the south-east. Proponents of this argument make constant

reference to the state of infrastructure in the south-east. The current administration strengthened such perception through her verbal and physical expressions. While the authors observed that south-east infrastructure like roads are in a terrible condition, it supports the views of Ibrahim (2015) that the issue of marginalization is more of a class issue in Nigeria and affects all Nigerians. Basic amenities are lacking in all parts of Nigeria, and this is as a result of the conspiracy among the elites regardless of their ethnic background. Cases of superficial measures carried out by these elites in addressing challenges of the society; abound in all parts of Nigeria.

This is the reason for the introduction of the concept of self-marginalization in describing the relationship between the Igbo populace and their elites. As noted

by Duruji (2010), the pro-Biafran agitators rarely blame the state and local governments for not living up to their responsibilities rather; the emphasis is on the federal government. Also, Igbo representatives at the federal level who could not attract concrete developmental projects to the south-east are seldom questioned. For example, it is a fact that during President Goodluck Jonathan's tenure, Igbos occupied the offices of Deputy Senate President, Deputy Speaker of the House of Representatives, Secretary to the State Government, Minister of Finance/Coordinating Minister of the Nigerian Economy, Ministers of Interior, Health, Aviation, Labour and productivity, Power, Foreign Affairs (state), Petroleum (by marital affiliation), Chief of Army Staff, Director Generals of Bureau for Public Procurement, National Pension Commission, etc. thus were part of his government yet; none of these "friends of the President" could attract concrete federal projects to the south-east (Ameh, 2015).

However, the current administration of President Buhari is not weaned from such acts of prebendalism rather it has been described as worse by analysts. The President kept to his word about giving preferential treatments to areas that gave him 97% support (reference to Northern Nigeria) and not areas that gave him 5% support (reference to the south-east and south-south regions) (SBM Intel, 2017). For example, 100 days into his administration after which he had made 36 appointments, the distribution saw the northerners constituting almost 70% of the appointees while less than 3% of the appointments went to the south-east (ProShare, 2015). The similar relegation of the federal character principle played out in the recent recruitment into the Nigerian State Security Service where about 331 and 143 officers were recruited from the north and the south respectively with the south-east constituting less than 10% of the entire lot (Abidoye and Akinwunmi, 2017).

Agitation Strategies of IPOB

In its quest for separatist self-determination, the IPOB movement claims that their strategy of engagement and pursuing her ambition is non-violent. This is captured in the words of one of the respondents an active member of the IPOB:

We make sure we are non-violent even when attacked. If we are shot and we retaliate, they will call us rebels and use that opportunity to wipe us away. Our strength lies in the fact that we don't retaliate we just remain resolute. This is what makes us relevant. Our leaders always tell us... "Don't go with any arms... just go with your flag. Don't destroy anybody's property". We operate a command and control system thus we obey our leaders to the latter.

Another respondent (a member of the civil society) agrees that most IPOB programmes are non-violent. He notes:

Most of their protests have been largely non-violent. No cars were destroyed, nobody was kidnapped, shops were not looted etc. Note that we define the nature of a protest as peaceful or violent based on the early conduct of such activities. This is because the intent of the protest is always made manifest at such early stages.

This paper agrees that IPOB activities on its own seldom lead to physical violence. In fact, findings from observation of the group's meetings and announcements on a radio show that the leadership emphasize that no member should harass any other citizen or violently engage any law enforcement agent during their processions or other activities. However, the verbal expressions of some members of the group can be interpreted as violent. In line with the postulation of Irvin Janis' Groupthink theory, members of the IPOB believe in the invulnerability of their group and are highly critical of out-groups especially those who do not share similar sentiments with them. In fact, it was the vituperations of Nnamdi Kanu with reference to the rest of Nigeria and other perceived enemies of Biafra on Radio that brought IPOB to the limelight in south-eastern Nigeria. Nevertheless, one must note that members of the group do not engage in any form of physical abuse of other groups nor do they engage state agents violently.

The major tool of IPOB's engagement is the media, both electronic (radio) and social media. While the radio is key in promoting group-cohesion as member's tune in at designated times as directed by their leaders, the social media has also been identified as one of their most potent tools of engaging the public. Thus for all their events, members are encouraged to record videos and pictures and subsequently post them on social media platforms. Such means is also used to attract membership. The leadership of the IPOB recognize this fact and even makes effort to provide free Wi-Fi feed for all members on days during which they plan to hold rallies or protests. They often do this in anticipation of mobile network shut down by the Nigerian government on such days (Opejobi, 2017). Though the IPOB are physically non-violent, the capacity of the media which has become their major tool of engagement to incite violence through hate speech remains undisputed. Amamkpa and Mbakwe (2015) likened the hate propaganda of Radio Biafra to those of the Rwandan Radio Television Libre de Millie Collines (RTML) which was highly implicit and controversial in the genocides of 1994.

State Response to the IPOB Agitation

From the responses by both members of the IPOB, civil society and law enforcement agents, it is obvious that force has been the chief strategy of engaging pro-Biafran agitators in south-eastern Nigeria. An IPOB member shared his experience thus:

We travelled from Aba to Nkpor to participate in their 30 May 2016 rally. We decided to spend the night at an empty school building before the D-day. Suddenly and in the middle of the night, military men came into the place and started shooting sporadically but when we all charged at them, they ran away. But the next day we all regrouped and started our rally. It was around mid-day that the entire place became highly tensed because law enforcement agents were shooting at us obviously with the intention of killing us and not merely to disperse the crowd. For example, one of our brother was shot and fell inside a gutter, the army officer followed him to the gutter and shot him twice directly and at very close range. Thereafter, they packed some of the corpses inside their SUVs and drove off.

A member of the civil society confirmed the position of the IPOB members:

The Nigerian law enforcement agents reacted violently to the activities of these pro-Biafra groups. They were shot at with live ammunitions while some were physically attacked. For example, an independent research conducted by our organization reveals that more than 270 pro-Biafran agitators has been killed between August 2015 and January, 2017 while about 350 members have been terminally wounded. However, even in the face of provocation, IPOB members remained non-violent. I believe they adopted such methods to ensure that no one tags them a violent group. If they have reacted otherwise, you would have heard that at least some military men were killed in the process.

However, another member of the civil society added that in some cases, IPOB members resist the law enforcement agents. He notes:

They don't engage the military men physically but they keep marching. However, it is important to mention that there was a case where hoodlums took over the IPOB protests and eventually dis-armed two police officers and later on the military came back and descended heavily on them. This was how the five boys eventually got killed.

Law enforcement agents, however, argue that in most cases they used the means available to them since they lack modern means of handling such protests. One

of the respondents (a police officer) notes:

Some of the issues were beyond us so we applied the means available to us. We don't have modern means of managing riots such as water canisters and pepper sprays. When these boys keep advancing we have to use what we have to stop them. Moreover, the police lack the capacity to technically assess situations before reacting to them and the force is poorly staffed (less than 300,000 officers to manage over 180,000,000 people). The truth is that there is need for government to strengthen institutions like the police and the judiciary if it really wants to effectively handle issues like this.

As has been the case with Nigerian governments, the state has often been reactive in managing the emergence and activities of the IPOB. In most cases, such reactions are violent lacking coordinated strategy. The state often fails to neither control issues at the initial stage nor take proactive steps to prevent its occurrence in the first place. For example, Radio Biafra had transmitted for three years before the Nigerian government made efforts to jam its frequency and by the time the state wanted to engage the movement, it adopted extreme violence which escalated the whole issue (Amamkpa and Mbakwe, 2015). The argument by Freeman (1999) that repressive means escalate ethno-nationalist agitations explains the above.

Furthermore, the arrest of Nnamdi Kanu was adjudged a mistake of the President Buhari administration because it gave clout to an individual and his organization that was largely unknown outside the Igbo circle and who at best could only express anti-government rhetoric. Eventually, Kanu assumed a hero status amongst his followers and was perceived as a prisoner of conscience. Consequently, protests and rallies were conducted by members of the IPOB some of whom during the interviews declared Kanu the “liberator of the Igbo,” “the Igbo messiah,” and “the conqueror of the zoo republic” (reference to the Federal Republic of Nigeria).

During some of these pro-Biafran and the “release Nnamdi Kanu” protests and rallies, the response of the state has been tagged undesirable tarnishing the image of the Nigerian state and increasing the international profile of the group (Amnesty International, 2016; Intersociety, 2017). Locally, such response increased the perception of injustice and marginalization thereby leading to citizen alienation from the state and as argued by Badmus (2009) strengthened internal group solidarity among the Igbos. Such poor response from the state is a factor of institutional weakness in Nigeria. Policemen are poorly trained and lack crowd management capacity. The military notorious for impunity is involved in managing such situations, and in most cases, they worsen the issue. Moreover, the people do not trust the judiciary due to similar characterization of weakness. This is in line with the views of Osaghae (2007) that weak institutions encourage ethnic-nationalism.

However, in the case of IPOB and the neo-Biafran struggle, the willingness of the larger populace to be involved in the struggle is still under question as ‘the political elites, business owners and economically advantaged Igbos assume a diplomatic disposition towards the struggle’ (WANEP, 2016; p.3). Probably, studies such as the 2017 SBM Intel perception study⁷ in the south-east and south-south might be able to ascertain the level of commitment of the people from the said area to the Biafran agitation. A referendum or plebiscite, in this case, could also be instrumental.

7 The survey had a total of 489 valid responses.

Finally, although the authors observed that there was near total compliance to the sit-at-home order from the IPOB on the 30th of May within the whole of South-East region; further introspection and observation revealed that most persons chose to stay at home not only to show support for the movement but to avoid becoming victims of potential clashes between IPOB members and law enforcement agents as it were in the past. This view is strengthened by the fact that on the said date, patrol vehicles, helicopters and Armoured Personnel Carriers were deployed around the South-east. Moreover, the study observed that there is excessive militarization of the south-east; military checkpoints abound in the cities (especially Aba). A similar situation was reported during the last yuletide as the military launched an exercise known as Operation Python Dance I in the south-east claiming it was meant to curb criminal activities during the festive period. Recent reports show that the Nigerian military has launched a second version of the exercise in the south-east. Such show of force has negative effects on the populace and strengthens popular support for pro-Biafran movements.

Conclusion

In an attempt to understand the current ethno-nationalist agitations for selfdetermination in south-eastern Nigeria within the context of the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) Movement, this paper has identified some key issues.

First, the neo-Biafran agitation in south-eastern Nigeria is caused by different factors such as the perception of marginalization, cumulative injustice, centralist nature of the Nigerian political system, weak economy and unemployment, memory politics etc. However, while the dominant narrative by the people of the region is marginalization, history and memory have played a major role in sustaining the neo-Biafran agitations.

Second, the IPOB movement is an initiative of some Nigerians in the Diaspora with a separatist objective and has emerged due to an internal crisis within the foremost neo-Biafran group, the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB). The structure of the IPOB is pyramidal, and there are strong signs of group cohesion and attributes of groupthink visible in the group. Such attributes have been strengthened through the media outfits of the movement which is very popular in the south-east. However, the new movement is not free from internal crisis especially at the apex level of its structure.

The dominant ideology that drives the activities and objectives of the IPOB is the demand for freedom. This is influenced by the belief among her members that their freedom and the upholding of their rights as citizens cannot be guaranteed under the current framework of the Nigerian state. There is a strong sense of alienation by members of the group in relation to the state. Most members of

the group support the group due to the feeling of acceptance exhibited by its leadership both in words and action.

To show support for the movement, members who are spread across different communities in the south-east and beyond, participate in meetings, rallies, protests and obey any directive like sit-at-home orders from the leadership. Also, they have financial commitments to the group which is one of the major sources of funding for the group in addition to the contributions made by those in the Diaspora. Other means through which members of the group show support for the movement include online and offline “evangelization” which means convincing people through arguments and persuasion on why there is a need for the creation of a Biafran state.

The IPOB’s official principle for achieving her objectives is non-violence. However, some members of the group are highly critical of out-groups and nonsupporters of the movement. Also, the IPOB believes in the efficacy of the media (radio and social media) thus, they invest a lot of resources in ensuring that these platforms are always active. To a large extent, they have succeeded in using the media to sustain the conversation about Biafra and to win support. However, regardless of the fact that IPOB members are yet to engage in violent activities for the achievement of their objectives, the state has reacted violently to the group. There have been a lot of casualties in the IPOB struggle a consequence of the violent response by the state. The danger in this pattern of response by the state is that it strengthens the negative memory of the agitators about Nigeria and attracts more sympathy to the group both by local and international actors.

To effectively manage the increasing ethno-nationalist agitations in southeastern Nigeria and beyond, this paper suggests that the state should adopt strategies of inclusion such as execution of perennial development projects in the region such as: The Second Niger Bridge and the major roads (Onitsha-Enugu expressway, Enugu-Port Harcourt expressway, etc.) with respect to the southeastern region. Furthermore, consociational strategies that imply power rotation and sharing among the geopolitical zones in Nigeria as suggested by the 2014 National Conference report, the 2005 National Political Reform Conference and the 1994/995 Constitutional should be adopted. Efforts should be made by the government to retell the story of Biafra in a way that heals memories and could engender national development. The mistakes of the past should be acknowledged but at the same time be used as a justification for a new national project that will avoid such mistakes. The current practice of pretending that Biafra did not happen or attempts to shield it from the upcoming generation will worsen the situation because partisan narratives which stoke the ember of disintegration will keep dominating the public space.

Also, since IPOB is highly influenced from the Diaspora, attempts must be made to engage Nigerians in the Diaspora through their socio-cultural associations to convince them that there is a need for peace in Nigeria and that efforts are being made to address the issues that promote citizen alienation from the state. Furthermore, dialogue and non-violent response should be adopted in engaging local IPOB members whether physically or online. The state needs to understand that the language of force only strengthens ethno-nationalist movements, radicalize some of her members and attract more public sympathy to such groups. Consequently, there is need to strengthen institutions like the Police by enhancing their capacity in crowd control without leading to fatalities. The military should be less visible during such situations and have minimal contact with the civilians. Instead of matching the agitators with force, an intellectual based engagement should be engineered by the state aimed at deconstructing some of the claims and justifications for the neo-Biafran agitation, as outlined by the IPOB.

Finally, this paper supports the argument that there is a need for the federating units of Nigeria (especially the states) to start functioning as real sub-units of a federation. The federating units (states and local governments) need to take responsibilities and perform real functions like internal security, fiscal and resource management, infrastructural development etc. that connect them to the masses. This would reduce the pressure at the centre and make the people hold their governments accountable.

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