



## ABSTRACT

Post-independence Nigeria has recorded different threats to the stability of the country, with implications for nation-building. What is expected to be peaceful nation-building is now confrontational because of the hostility perception. For several years, the Movement for the Actualisation of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) became a threat to Nigeria's unity until the arrest of some of its members and leaders, which contributed to the group's days of decline. The resurgence of Biafran agitation in 2015 marked a watershed in Nigeria's nation

# THE BIAFRAN QUESTION, MILITARISM AND SECURITY OPERATIONS AGAINST INDIGENOUS PEOPLE OF BIAFRA (IPOB) IN SOUTH-EASTERN NIGERIA

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## Introduction

Post-independence Nigeria has recorded different threats to the stability of the country, with implications for nation-building. What is expected to be peaceful nation-building is now confrontational as a result of the hostility perception associated with intergroup relations. There have been arguments and questions on whether Nigeria would be able to sustain her nationhood with some ethnic groups already feeling excluded from the mainstream politics in the country. Such arguments have not only generated hostility perception but have also continued to create mutual suspicion. Since the 1960s, the Biafran question has remained a driver of secessionist agitations in the southeastern part of Nigeria, with many of the youths from the region engaging in social movement activities for many decades. Various factors have contributed to the escalation of the agitations. These include allegations of socioeconomic deprivation, neglect of the people and political exclusion of the Southeast up to this Fourth Republic. Nigeria is one of the countries that have experienced increasing self-determination struggle in recent times. Despite the non-violent strategies adopted by some groups, they have been subjected to victimisation and repression by the forces of order. This motivated some self-determination groups to adopt the United Nations' core principle of non-violence in their bid to take advantage of collective action to achieve the objectives of their movements in their so-called de facto states. For several years, the Movement for the Actualisation of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) became a threat to Nigeria's unity until the arrest of some of its members and leaders, which contributed to the group's days of decline.



*-building efforts, as the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), a more radical Biafran group, began to agitate for a referendum to pave the way for the independence of Igboland. With primary and secondary sources, including observation, transect walk, and follow-up of IPOB Radio, this paper examines the evolution and actors of de facto statehood as well as the security operations that escalated the IPOB-Federal Government imbroglio to the extent that the Southeast became an enclave of negative peace, where the standoff between security forces and the IPOB separatist agitators made life brutish. The paper suggests more humane ways of containing the resurgence of Biafra rather than encouraging militarism, which has proven not to be an effective antidote to the separatist movement. Since the escalation of the conflict arising from de facto statehood, the state has continued to respond by initiating different military operations aimed at containing the activities of IPOB and the group's Eastern Security Network (ESN). The paper recommends government's people-oriented conflict transformation, true reconciliation with the secessionist agitators, youth-centred human development and integrative peace education in Igboland to reduce tension in the region and address the alleged politics of exclusion.*

**Keywords:** Biafran question, De facto statehood, IPOB, Militarism, Nation-building.

The resurgence of Biafran agitation in 2015 marked a watershed in Nigeria's nation-building efforts, as the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), a more radical Biafran group, began to agitate for a referendum to pave the way for the independence of Igboland. The year 2020 made it exactly 50 years since the formal surrender of the Biafran government to the Federal Military Government of Nigeria. This automatically ended the civil war that was fought to preserve the Nigerian soul. Currently, most scholars consider only six entities as de facto states: Somaliland, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Nagorno-Karabakh, Transnistria and Northern Cyprus, with the recognition of Biafra as a de facto state that existed until the end of the war in 1970. Biafra was one of the de facto states in the international political system which struggled to gain the recognition of other sovereign states and sought to use diplomatic channels to earn the much desired recognition that only came from very few states in Africa.

In Nigeria's Fourth Republic, two major groups have led and dominated the agitations for Southeast sovereignty, namely Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) and Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB). But IPOB seems to be more vocal and has taken over the centre stage of the struggle against what they describe as oppression. It is remarkable that IPOB became more visible since the coming of the current All Progressives Congress (APC)-led government in 2015.

### **Methodology**

The study area was Igboland. Primary and secondary sources, including observation, interviews, transect walk, and follow-up of IPOB Radio, were used to gather data. The author also asked residents about their safety and how the army clashed with civilians. The author equally sourced data from the FM and online radio stations operated by IPOB to get first-hand information and also



monitored security programmes on Africa Independent Television (AIT), Channels TV, Magic FM Aba and other radio stations, and print media sources.

The paper addressed the following questions: (1) How did security operations escalate the IPOB-FG imbroglio? (2) Why did IPOB encourage traditional security regime through the principles of people-centred avoidance and monitoring? (3) How does IPOB's agitation for referendum shape socio-political relations in Igbo communities?

### **De Facto Statehood and the Biafran Question: Conceptual and Theoretical Explanations**

Across the world, about 25 de facto states were identified and they survive until today, while more than ten have disappeared since 1945 (for example, Katanga, *Biafra*, Krajina, Chechnya, Anjouan, Tamil Eelam, Rwenzururu Kingdom, Găgăuzia, Bougainville, Eastern Slavonia, and Aceh). Only three successfully became recognised states and UN members (Eritrea, East Timor, and South Sudan) (Mylonas, 2019). De facto states seek self-determination from their "parent state," and are different from stateless nationalist movements because they have achieved de facto statehood. Such entities violate the principle of territorial integrity in multiple ways and want to modify the borders of the contemporary state system. De facto states directly affect their parent states whose sovereignty they challenge. Similarly, in the view of the Berlin-based scholar, Thomas Risse, these areas of "limited statehood unsettle the international system of states can become the source of interstate war" (Mylonas, 2019:1). A common feature of both de facto states and nationalist movements is that they are usually involved in self-determination projects, with the intention of having a territory of their own, independent of the parent state. Depending on the type of response by the parent state, forcing the leaders of many breakaway states to suspend their campaigns could cause war when peaceful solution fails to reintegrate the territory.

The paper combines non-killing theory with the theory of territory and hostility perception theory to address the socio-economic and political challenges created by de facto statehood. The theories are germane to explaining how the government should approach separatist issues, the response of the IPOB members, and how the use of militarism to contain the threats to Nigeria's unity creates negative peace.

Since the independence of Nigeria, "hostility perception" has remained one of the features of the country. This became more prevalent with the breakaway region, Eastern Region, forming a new state that became a de facto state. Hostility perception theory, according to Catildi (2011:29), describes how the perception of other individuals or groups is hostile toward a particular group or one's own group, identity, or culture, with such perception exacerbating conflict and conflict behaviour. Most of the struggles usually associated with hostility perception are aimed at establishing control over the other group in a polity that has numerous ethnic or political groups. This problem of the "other" has been described as problem of how to manage individual or social relations, which is also a form of power relations leading to anxiety on domination and being dominated syndrome. In other words, certain actions by each group are aimed at preventing or countering the efforts of others to dominate them whether politically, economically or socially so as not to be on the losing side.

The theory of territory, usually described as political theory of territory, sees groups as crucial stakeholders in territorial right-holding, and explores the control over borders and resources



within a geographical location (Moore, 2015). This manifests in the relationship between different stakeholders whose status may be unequal, with one attempting to dominate the available contestable space within a territory. It is argued that, in the event of insecurity occasioned by the competition, the moral right of occupancy, which gives the basic right to live in a place, people's moral entitlement to reside in the area would witness unusual threat (Moore, 2001).

With the adoption of militarism by the state, competition to control a territory between security providers and non-state actors will expose the civilians residing within the affected area to the direct impact of such high-risk competition. This occurs as a result of retaking and controlling of the territory. Non-state actors take advantage of the failure of state security providers to control parts of a territory by usurping state's territorial right to the detriment of the inhabitants; and any group that is able to impose order would gain territorial right with the possibility of a "might is right" argument, which is contrary to international law (Moore, 2015; Taylor, 2016).

The territorial right control struggle is aimed at curbing the problem of ungoverned spaces to enhance state control in an era of security threats, like rebellion, secession, counter-insurgency, counter-terrorism, stabilisation and increasing necessity for peace building (Taylor, 2016; Clunan and Trinkunas, 2010).

The non-killing theory is associated with life-saving features which offer insight into the actions of people concerning their conscious efforts that are made to comprehend the practices, policies, institutions, cultures, politics, and behaviours that promote killing of humans in society and to assess what is needed to transition from a killing state to a non-killing one. This can be achieved through research, advocacy, mapping or investigation of developments in society. If given adequate consideration, this theory would guide policy and the cultural, political, and socioeconomic behaviours of individuals and institutions towards creating a non-killing society (Allen, 2010). The non-killing theory also emphasises the strategic significance of identifying the sources and hotspots of violence and fatal crimes.

The advantage of the non-killing attitude is that it promotes human rights protection, especially when security agencies and the civilians or non-state actors are involved in misunderstanding. The theory is crucial in this paper because the Biafran question is a security issue that now has a context of political violence, having the capacity to divide the territory of Nigeria, as seen in 1967, if not handled peacefully. The relationship between the Biafran question, non-killing theory and hostility perception explains why the Federal Government usually adopts militarism to contain the threat of de facto statehood which could gain global attention if not checked.

#### **The Biafran Question: The Journey So Far**

The Biafran question is traceable to the early years of Nigeria's independence when, within the first decade, the politics of oil, marginalisation, and the coups of January and July 1966 created instability, which later climaxed in the war that led to the death of many of the Igbo (Thomas and Falola, 2020). Biafra was not the first to threaten Nigeria's nationhood. At different points in Nigeria's history, other ethnic groups threatened to secede from the territory called Nigeria. Some of the remarkable groups are the northern people and the Ijaw people of Niger Delta. According to Taiwo and Ariwo (2020), from the early 1950s, the Northern Region threatened twice to secede from the country for their desire to be granted, during the Ibadan conference and after the self-



government issue of 1956 The Western Region was not left out in the trend of quest for self-governance, when they attempted to influence the decision of colonial administrators to excise Lagos from Western Nigeria.

However, the difference between most of the threats and Biafra's quest for independence was that only Biafra practically carried out the threat of declaring a sovereign state with functional government, after the six days' revolution by Isaac Boro in present-day Bayelsa State, which was crushed by then Head of State, Yakubu Gowon. Some people often argue that it is the issue of context when there is a mention of how other ethnic groups have threatened the unity of Nigeria in the past. This points to one direction: that the agitation/threat of secession by the Igbo is more critical and could lead to the disintegration of the entire country (This was also observed during Gowon's speech in 1967, declaring war against Biafra).

During the early years of the Nigeria-Biafra war, some issues, like the ownership of oil and the territorial right of then Eastern Region, complicated the situation (Venter, 2015). All these made the resolution of the dispute difficult; even third-party intervention failed. Apart from the denial of a sense of belonging in the federation, the Igbo had concerns over the failure of the Federal Military Government to guarantee the safety of the easterners in other parts of the country where many became victims of massacre, especially the pogrom. The immediate and remote causes of the activities of the pogromists are traceable to the political developments that dominated the First Republic and how many of the Igbo were not affected by the political turmoil during the first coup in 1966. Venter (2015:22) captures this vividly:

*At the time of independence, only about 15 percent of the officer corps came from the north and the west. Most of those who replaced former white officers were of Ibo extraction. To avoid friction between the three regions, it was then determined that the army should be recruited by quota: 50 percent from the north and a quarter each from the Ibo east and the Yoruba west; but by 1965 the Ibos had filled nearly half of the places offered by the British to Nigeria at Sandhurst. So once again, the easterners were showing that they were pushier than all the rest – and in so doing, becoming all the more hated. The fact that they seemed to be taking over the whole Federal Army was regarded by some Nigerians as positively dangerous. In the event, the officers responsible for the first military insurrection disclaimed any tribal motive.*

The journey to Biafran statehood began on 27 May 1967 with the declaration of sovereignty by the then Governor of the Eastern Region, Ojukwu, who was supported by the Consultative Assembly in Enugu (Thomas and Falola, 2020). The failure of third-party intervention was displayed after the Aburi agreement which recommended a confederate state in Nigeria but was later rejected by the then Head of State, Yakubu Gowon.

It has been argued that Biafra had war as the only "alternative to defend themselves" from external aggression by Nigerian troops considering the unresolved issues over self-determination and Nigeria's insistence on one Nigeria (Aneke, 2007:635). This is in spite the several efforts within and outside Nigeria to prevent the escalation of the Biafran tension. A notable internal effort was



that of the National Reconciliation Commission (NRC), which led a delegation headed by Chief Awolowo to Enugu for the proposal of peace talks to be accepted by all parties, including Ojukwu (Achebe, 2012). After the declaration of war, the unpreparedness of the newly formed state leader was exposed, as he (Ojukwu) confronted an organised state like Nigeria with unequipped army, using just 128 riffles domiciled in the Eastern Region (Ezeani, 2013:13). Biafra could only boast of two thousand troops when the war began (Achebe, 2012). The foregoing may not be unconnected with the desperation of the leaders to urgently set the army on the right track. Consequently, General Philip Effiong, Biafra's second in command and Chief of General Staff, had to recruit an additional twenty thousand men and created a separate Biafran militia of civilian volunteers, giving them on-the-spot training to make them relevant as the survival of Biafran demanded; the only heavy military equipment was the Nigerian battalion stationed in Enugu which was inherited by Biafra (Achebe, 2012:153).

The ingenuity of the Biafran state equipped the security planners with the innovative establishment of Biafran Research and Production Unit, which started producing locally-made weapons. The Biafran side had no other option than to equip itself in order to withstand the Nigerian side, which was more advanced in the area of defence budget, diplomatic support, numerical strength and ammunition than Biafra that struggled to survive. According to Venter (2015), Biafra had a mortar team, giving soldiers the capacity to use the metal-improvised claymore devices which proved extremely effective in ambushes and were dubbed "Ojukwu Buckets". These buckets killed invading enemy forces in hundreds and had the potency to demoralise troops and limit their advancement into Biafra's strategic places. These casualties caused by the buckets reduced internal security threats for Biafra. To Biafra's strategic advantage, Ojukwu Buckets – "with a range of about 300-400 yards and detonated electrically –were successfully deployed against federal road convoys and armoured cars in the jungle on regular basis despite their lack of sophistication" as well as the instrumentality of Ogbunigwe targeting the aircraft of the Federal Air Force at Uli landing strip during daylight hours (Venter, 2015:78).

Biafra recorded internal crises both in the areas of security governance and food provision, with citizens and soldiers having mutual suspicion. With leadership problem, there was challenge of poor communication, inadequate weapon supply, poor training, poor aerial support, and indiscipline within the rank and file of the armed forces, as field commanders could not trust one another (Onwuejeogwu, 1984). Victory would not have been experienced by such threatened belligerent party in a civil war. As a result, all military operations to push into Biafran territory yielded the desired result. With Nigeria's "Operation Tiger Claw" launched in 1968, the federal forces were able to capture more strategic places, such as Bonny Island, Ugep, Obubra, Odukpani, Creek Town, Adaibo, Akpap, Iwuru, Ikot-Okpora, Okurika, Adim, Itigidi and Afikpo, most of which were towns surrounding the capital of Biafra, with Biafra suffering casualties and some soldiers becoming prisoners of war (Alabi-Isama, 2013). This was disastrous, with the readiness of the federal troops to sustain the destruction of lives and property with bombs and heavy artillery shells to create a state of emergency in Biafra and force them to surrender (Nwolise, 1984).

The denial of recognition for Biafran de facto state by the major world powers worsened the predicaments of the new state that only managed to withstand the external aggression for thirty months. The situation also exposed the weakness of the UN principle of self-determination, which



did not help in galvanising support for the survival of Biafra as far as diplomatic support and military aids were concerned.

According to Oriji (2019:15):

*Language used to define the Nigeria-Biafra war (genocide) such as “inter-ethnic war” or “war of rebel groups” is colonial language used to remove the race-based parameters of the war. Britain was the key imperial power that supplied Nigeria with guns against Biafra during the war to maintain Nigeria’s neocolonial condition, especially as it pertained to controlling oil extraction, with discursive support from the U.S. under the banner of “one Nigeria”.*

The intervention of some world powers only favoured their interests and not directly aimed at helping the belligerents find solutions to the conflict. The unresolved Biafran question has turned into a political violence which seems to have ethnic dimension, considering the interpretations and perception of actors within and outside the southeast region. The Biafran question also generates ethnic concerns within and outside Igboland. This is based on the fact that there are various minority groups in the area geographically called Biafra from 1967-1970 before the end of the war. Currently, the core Igbo-speaking states are five southeastern states and Delta North Senatorial zone (Delta State) and some parts of Rivers State.

With the resurgence of the Biafran agitation to revitalise de facto statehood for UN recognition, IPOB’s leader has been utilising all media platforms to list all the ethnic groups and communities that must be included in the proposed new state of Biafra. Some of these groups/communities are already in South-South and North-Central states.

In response to Nnamdi Kanu’s announcement on his 23 August 2020 radio broadcast, whether the UK government could inform the general public why the Colonial Nigeria flag had the Star of David, Malteo Solvini said, “Ohamadike 1 Biafra we are waiting to hear the gospel of truth sir, because it is only on radio Biafra we learn our history as the irredeemable entity called zoological republic of Nigga area has removed history in the school class that is why some people are confused about the star of David” (Mazi Nnamdi Kanu Words Page, 2020).

### **Militarism in Igboland: Interrogating the Security Operations against IPOB**

Since the escalation of the FG-IPOB imbroglio, the government has consistently initiated different operations aimed at combing all parts of the Southeast with the intention of flushing out separatist agitators from the streets and towns in the region. Notable operations are Operation Python Dance 1, 2 and 3, which were believed to have contributed to the arrest of some criminal gangs who had nothing to do with the Biafran struggle.

These operations coincided with the attempted invasion of IPOB leader’s home, who managed to escape through mysterious circumstances; the military and the police could not account for his whereabouts.

Open confrontation against the group by the military began in September 2017, after the army accused some protesting members of the group of allegedly pelting troops deployed with stones on 10th September in Umuahia, Abia State while they were on patrol. This was seen as an act of



terrorism by the army, which quickly named the apparently non-violent group a terrorist organisation. The controversies this development generated became a source of division in the polity, as many blamed and criticised the army for the action.

Prior to Operation Python Dance II, there was the first operation called Operation Python Dance I, aimed at eradicating crimes in the Southeast. This made the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) to launch a counter operation code-named Operation David Dance, which was motivated by the famous fight between young biblical David (Israel) and the commander of the Philistine army, Goliath, whom David slew (Amadi and Amadi, 2017). But on Tuesday, 12th September 2017, there was pandemonium in most parts of Aba. People scampered for safety from mob violence involving IPOB members, soldiers and the police. Many people abandoned their businesses for the day to find their ways home. People called their relatives on phone to rush home. Workers in various institutions and banks, traders and students also rushed home as soldiers took over the city. In fact, banks closed down for the day to avoid being targets of aggrieved youths. Also, churches organising prayers quickly conducted the service of the day to ensure the safety of members. Human security in the city was fluid for weeks as a result of the dusk-to-dawn curfew declared by the state governor to forestall the breakdown of law and order.

According to different media sources, the invasion of Nnamdi Kanu's compound by Nigerian soldiers on 14 September 2017 led to the use of tear gas on everyone there, the abduction of his parents and the killing of dozens of Biafra Security Service officials. Even the leader of Family Writers, Mazi Somto Okonkwo, was also declared missing after the attack.

One mind-boggling issue is the speed with which the Nigerian Army declared IPOB a terrorist organisation and the proscription by the governors of southeast states on 15 September 2017 without recourse to the rule of law. This action anchored in the crime control model of national security is a threat to democracy, particularly the rule of law.

The government has always pointed accusing fingers at some disgruntled politicians whose aim is to make the country ungovernable. This made some analysts to caution that it is all about politics and that the country has gone beyond disgruntled politicians' narrative (AIT, 2017). The clashes between the military and the IPOB members have created a state of fear and instability in Abia State and most parts of Igboland. When the author moved round most parts of Abia State, it was observed that the military, through Operation Python Dance (involving Nigeria's security agencies) set up checkpoints that subjected many residents to suffering, as leaving or entering major towns became more problematic as a result of traffic jam. A look at the Osioma Roundabout at the entrance of Aba in Abia State (the hotbed of IPOB-military showdown) showed that the army established a base inside Ngwa High School, and named it 144 Battalion, subsector B Headquarters. In front of the base, the army stationed an armoured personnel carrier with heavily armed soldiers in search of any IPOB member or protester. It was like a warfront.

In different locations, there were billboards, with the inscription "slow down, military checkpoint", at both sides of Enugu-Port Harcourt Expressway, which has recorded numerous violent deaths, as claimed by the IPOB whose members were allegedly killed by trigger-happy troops. The stop-and-search operations were conducted by soldiers. After clashes with the IPOB members, the army came up with a strategy to outlaw the activities of IPOB by naming the group a terrorist organisation despite its non-violent strategy in pursuing self-determination. According to the



Special Adviser to the President on Prosecution, Chief Okoi Obono-Obla, IPOB's activities qualified it as a terrorist group as defined by the provisions of the Terrorism (Prevention) Act 2013.

In response to the proscription, the group argued on its radio station that:

*IPOB means an organism set up to achieve Biafra through non-violent means. Biafra is a spirit and tagging IPOB a terror group catapulted the group to the United Nations. Whatever step the federal government takes whether forward or backward will always be to our advantage. Ohaneze Ndigbo is forcing itself on northerners. Members of the association are not protecting the interest of Igbos who look up to them. The Hausa/Fulani have encircled our land and we need a change of strategy. They want to destroy us. They did not kill Boko Haram, they successfully relocated them. We should ask UN whether terrorists walk without arms, go to businesses and live a normal life (IPOB Radio, 2017).*

The above assertion was aimed at demonstrating to the world that the group is peaceful and avoids the use of violence in achieving its self-determination goal. Some IPOB members, including their lawyer, have written protest letters to the United Nations.

In the Fourth Republic, soldiers also took advantage of their deployment in stability operations in the Niger Delta and the Northeast for the purpose of countering militancy and insurgency to engage in abuses. In 2009, the Boko Haram leader was allegedly killed in police custody. This has escalated the insurgent violence, with human and material costs to the country and the international community. The soldiers have vehemently denied such abuses, on several occasions, dismissing accusations of human rights abuses while assuring the public on their resolve to investigate any allegation. The denial is occasioned by their trigger-happy nature, sometimes owing to hostility perception. It would have been easy to curb such abuses if allegations are well investigated, perpetrators punished and the rules of engagement adhered to.

The situation in Abia State was caused by IPOB's actions, which the army described as internal aggression, although the group adopted non-violent means to agitate for referendum. The issue of dispute is that, while IPOB sees its actions as self-determination, which is recognised by the United Nations as a right, the Federal Government believes that it is a rebellious objective. This portrays a situation of conflict between international law and municipal law.

Many called the action military invasion which lacked constitutional backing. Former President Goodluck Jonathan was explicit about the action of the military, noting that:

*Nigeria is no longer under military rule. In a democracy, you separate the military from the police. The military is not meant to fight criminality within a nation because they are trained to fight a nation's external enemies. It is the police that are trained to fight crime internally. When the military starts doing the job of the police and starts fighting or doing what they call a 'show of force', the effect will not be to reduce crime. The effect will be to intimidate people (Akinkuotu, 2017, no page number).*



From the perspective of the rule of law, the former President Goodluck Jonathan cautioned the presidency over the military operation in the Southeast and the planned extension of the show of force in the Southsouth and Southwest, in the name of Operation Crocodile Smile. His argument is based on the fact that the country had passed the era of military regimes which used the state's instrument of coercion to suppress civil unrest.

Similarly, Nigeria's Senate President, Bukola Saraki warned against disregarding due process:

*I wish to state that the announcement of the proscription of the group known as the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) by the governors of the Southeast states and the categorisation by the Nigerian military are unconstitutional and does not follow due process. Our laws make clear provisions for taking such actions and without the due process being flowed, such declaration cannot have effect. I am sure the president will do the needful by initiating the right process. This will go a long way in demonstrating to the world at large that we are a country that operates by laid down process under every circumstance. So, those who have been hammering on this point should maintain their cool (Itua and Kilete, 2017:11).*

The intention of the Senate is to separate facts from fiction through investigation of the crisis. The foregoing positions of some leaders made a young Nigerian to argue in an interview with the author that: "The world mocks Nigeria for claiming she practices democracy, yet what we have is military democracy" (John, Banker, interview, 24/09/2017). As seen from the foregoing statements of two prominent leaders, the military simply dramatised their real nature in most parts of the Southeast through Operation Python Dance, particularly in Aba and Umuahia, where they clashed with the members of IPOB who were not armed like the army. The soldiers argued that the youths pelted them with stones and had to pay for such attack by receiving the bullets. In Aba, for instance, fear gripped many and people ran home from work and churches on hearing that soldiers were already deployed and that IPOB members were endangered species if found with any material that looked like Biafran colour.

A journalist based in Owerri, Saviola Ikechukwu Godwyn, averred that, "Buhari's regime tagged killer Fulani Herdsmen (who have been declared terrorists worldwide, as they occupy the 4th position) a 'criminal gang', and declared 'unarmed' and 'relatively' peaceful IPOB a 'terrorist group'. Who is fooling who?" This is just one of the many concerns expressed by many Nigerians as the Fulani Herdsmen have not attracted much military intervention compared with the role of the military in handling IPOB non-violent agitations.

Oshima argued about why the president failed to negotiate with IPOB before disregarding the rule of law to invade Kanu's house in a bid to apprehend him. The Defence Headquarters that declared IPOB a terrorist organisation group was questioned based on the attributes of a terrorist group, which IPOB lacks. In a related development, Col. Isa Sambo questioned why IPOB should be used to threaten national security (Channels TV interview, 2017). Dr. Amaechi Nwokolo stated that the declaration of IPOB as a terrorist organisation is not supposed to come from the military. He wondered why the country must always involve the military in handling civilian matters and



advocated the use of a peaceful strategy to avoid giving individuals unnecessary publicity to the detriment of government.

The fact that some Nigerians compared IPOB agitation, which attracted military deployment, with the inability of the same government to deploy troops in routing the herdsmen who are merchants of violence, is a source of concern. This is because herdsmen have been implicated in killing and raping innocent people and violation of other human rights (Olayoku, 2014; Amadi and Amdi, 2017). Many prominent Nigerians, including politicians and kings, have been kidnapped and killed by suspected Fulani herdsmen, with only few of them apprehended.

The action by the government in terms of military deployment has generated controversies within and outside Nigeria. A retired officer, Major-General Ola Ishola-Williams (retd.) noted thus:

*I believe strongly that Operation Python Dance is a needless one. It is an overkill; the Federal Government should have used the police to quell any form of disturbance or perceived threat to peace by Nnamdi Kanu and IPOB. Drafting the military to deal with Kanu and IPOB was needless; it shows that the military is not too preoccupied with how to tame the deadly Boko Haram insurgency. The Federal Government should order troops withdrawal immediately from Aba and other parts of the South East. The police should be allowed to contain IPOB's crisis (Saturday Sun, September 30, 2017).*

It is noteworthy that the Chief of Army Staff, Turkur Buratai, maintained during the Third Quarter Nigerian Army Conference in Abuja, that the army was not pressured to withdraw troops from the Southeast, as speculated by different groups across the country. This points to the fact that the deployment of military did not follow the constitutional process.

As a result of the casualties recorded on the part of IPOB members, various members have been warned by their leaders to suspend every activity for now. A report signed by the Deputy Leader of IPOB who is based in London, Uche Mefor, and posted on their social media handle states thus:

*Attention, attention, attention: To all Biafran principal officers, this warning and information is for you, especially in the area of communication and for every genuine follower of Nnamdi Kanu. Beginning from tonight 22nd September, 2017, all IPOB principal officers should adhere to these instructions for those of you making use of iPhones, smartphones and android phones. Always ensure that your phone location is off when making calls or receiving call; ensure that your phone is on airplane mode before retiring to bed at night. Henceforth, stop any social media chat especially for those of you on WhatsApp; don't walk alone and always learn to observe people and things around you. We are in difficult situation and must have to be vigilant all times. We are not terrorists and can't accept that name (Uche Mefor, 2017).*

Given that IPOB has a radio station transmitting from London, operated by the group's deputy leader, and relayed in different locations around the Southeast on 102.1 FM, it is crucial for the



Federal Government to start winning the hearts and minds of the Igbo. This can be through a town hall-based approach in reaching out to the people. It can also be through prioritisation of human capital development in all states within the region instead of the politics of militarism, which is a violent approach to managing intra-state dispute.

The IPOB should realise that, as a new state, in terms of age and development, Nigeria is not a place where self-determination in the context of secession would be tolerated. Hence, there is a need for change of strategy, in agreement with the President and Commander-in-Chief, governors from the Southeast and some senators, who suggested the need to explore other options and more constitutional means, like channelling their grievances to the National Assembly. This will save lives and prevent further militarisation of Igboland.

Fani-Kayode (2020) says, “I can also tell you that when the police, with some elements of the military, attacked and killed IPOB youths and literally burnt down half of Orifite in Anambra State, the hometown of my friend and IPOB lawyer, Mr. Ifeanyi Ejiofor, Abba Kyari, in collaboration with Umahi and Ugwuanyi, was instrumental in putting a stop to it.” This was in recognition of Abba Kyari’s effort in preventing the harassment of IPOB’s lawyer.

The incident of August 23, 2017 in Emene Enugu state was another scene of confrontation between IPOB and security forces. The media reported how DSS (Department of State Services) invaded a meeting venue where the members of IPOB were peacefully interacting and started firing into the air. By the end of the operation, over 21 IPOB members were dead, while DSS claimed that two of its officers were missing. Both sides accused each other of masterminding the clashes. The DSS said officers were on patrol when they were attacked by members of IPOB. According to the spokesperson of DSS, Peter Afunanya, IPOB launched unprovoked violent attack on the patrol team with the loss of two operatives (Eze, 2020). However, the fact that many IPOB meetings are usually done publicly since the clampdown on the group escalated in 2017 makes it disputable that the officers were on patrol without invading the location to arrest the members. Also, Enugu has been more peaceful than many parts of Igboland as far as the relationship between security forces and IPOB is concerned. Observation in the Southeast revealed that many IPOB members are usually not armed and would not have easily launched violent attack on patrolling security operatives during a meeting. The leader of IPOB had used his radio to caution members on the need for non-violence and vigilance in their agitations for the Biafran statehood. After the confrontation between DSS and IPOB, the army directed soldiers to avoid wearing uniforms while moving alone outside the barracks to prevent being attacked. They were also cautioned to be vigilant to avoid losing their arms to any group of protesters. After the DSS-IPOB clash, several police checkpoints were deserted within and around Enugu owing to the atmosphere of uncertainty in the area (Interviews, 26 August, 2020). Talking about the depth of injustice in Nigeria, Nnamdi Kanu stated online that “No matter what they wear, we will surely find them.”

Operation Python Dance (OPD) has been accused of human rights abuses and being an agent of negative peace which only operates in the area to protect the interest of government by resisting and targeting any individuals or groups whose actions are viewed as anti-government. With the presence of OPD, people are not expected to freely talk or express themselves and are cautioned against speaking against the Nigerian state.



Since Operation Python Dance began, the Southeast has witnessed unusual deployment of troops, increase in the rate of stop and search by troops, strategic withdrawal and avoidance of IPOB. Operating within the mandated rules of engagement would have encouraged security forces to avoid human rights abuses while protecting government's interest. Although the group has continued to preach against violence, the security forces insist that the group has been proscribed by the government and accused members of using dangerous weapons to harass people.

**Pictures of IPOB and Soldiers**







Source: Mazi Nnamdi Kanu and IPOB Community Radio Page.

### **IPOB's Sit-at-Home Orders**

Within the past few years, the activities of IPOB has paralysed economic activities in major towns and cities in Eastern Nigeria following the series of sit-at-home orders by the leadership of IPOB to restrict the inhabitants of the region and beyond to their homes (Taiwo and Ariyo, 2020). The sit-at-home orders revealed the capacity of IPOB leadership to mobilise support and influence public opinion before and during various socioeconomic and political events in the Nigerian state. The sit-at-home order is observed annually to commemorate the declaration of Biafra as an independent state on May 30; it is also declared on January 15 to mark the end of the war and remember/honour the fallen heroes who fought for the de facto state (IPOB Radio, 2020).

With sit-at-home orders as weapon against the FGN, IPOB declares lockdowns that eventually cripple not only economic activities but also institutions of learning and government offices. To show the impact of IPOB orders, the group sometimes discourages Biafrans from voting during general elections, with emphasis on the futility of such actions; they mock those who flout such orders and launch psychological attacks on them, likening them to individuals who support their oppressors. Although some of those adhering to such directives may not necessarily believe in the Biafran cause, the fear of victimisation makes them to stay at home. This is also occasioned by the seeming lack of security guarantees; some disgruntled elements who may not even have much to do with IPOB could hijack the situation to either extort people or attack financial institutions. As observed during the sit-at-home periods since 2015, streets are deserted, banks are closed, and many businesses avoid opening to customers in Aba, Enugu, Owerri, Onitsha and other towns within Southeast and Southsouth where there are Igbo people and believers of the Biafran struggle. The 2021 sit-at-home order was successful. This attracted many comments. According to Nnamdi Kanu:

*We are the ones protecting your lives all these years. If not for IPOB, your land would have been conquered by now. When you wake up in the*



*morning, say a prayer for IPOB. Am a prophet, if you listen to me you will have life through the prophecies of Nnamdi Kanu. If you don't sit at home, we will make you sit at home by force. Am warning those of you in Abakaliki, Enugu and Umuahia. Leave the roads open and stay in your houses. There should be complete lockdown. Clear from the roads.*

The IPOB leader was responding to the allegation that some people in the Southeast were not complying with the sit-at-home directive.

The following also reveals the philosophy of IPOB's agitation:

*Land of the Rising Sun*

Land of the rising sun, we love and cherish,  
Beloved homeland of our brave heroes;  
We must defend our lives or we shall perish,  
We shall protect our hearths from all our foes;  
But if the price is death for all we hold dear,  
Then let us die without a shred of fear.

Hail to Biafra, consecrated nation,  
Oh fatherland, this is our solemn pledge:  
Defending thee shall be a dedication.  
Spilling our blood we'll count a privilege;  
The waving standard which emboldens the free  
Shall always be our flag of liberty.

We shall emerge triumphant from this ordeal,  
And through the crucible unscathed we'll pass;  
When we are poised the wounds of battle to heal,  
We shall remember those who died in mass;  
Then shall our trumpets peal the glorious song  
Of victory we scored o'er might and wrong.

Oh God, protect us from the hidden pitfall,  
Guard all our movements lest we go astray;  
Give us the strength to heed the humanist call:  
'To give and not to count the cost', each day;  
Bless those who rule to serve with resoluteness,  
To make this clime a land of righteousness  
(Mazi Nnamdi Kanu, 26/08/2020).

The foregoing is all about self-determination and territorial issue with the IPOB recognising the force of people's power to cooperate in achieving set goals and resolution to always remember



the dead members of the de facto state. This has remained the source of confrontation between IPOB and the Federal Government of Nigeria. Both actors are highly optimistic on the successful outcome of their campaigns, with the government using mainly militarism to target agitators and IPOB advocating non-violence and continuous engagement with the international community.

### **The Situation in Igboland and Optimism of IPOB Leadership**

The Biafran question has given birth to three categories of people, especially those from South East and Southsouth. These are those interested in Biafran State (please we need and must avoid the struggle to live); those not hopeful and see it as impossible to achieve (prepared for the risk and ready to support); and those expectant but not ready for the risk associated with secession viewing it as (not ready to support).

The majority of the IPOB members were actively involved in peaceful protests aimed at creating public awareness on the agitations of the group to influence government's policies in the Southeast. Since the arrest and detention of the group's leader Mazi Nnamdi Kanu, who was granted bail by an Abuja court, it was thought that militarism would contain the group's activities and possibly mark the end of secessionist agitations. Immediately after Kanu's release, he embarked on massive rallies in different towns in the Southeast, with thousands of supporters cheering and encouraging the movement for the actualisation of Biafra's independence.

IPOB leaders are optimistic of the future of the state and the revival of the Biafran de facto state that would be recognised without bloodshed unlike the previous state declared by Ojukwu which led to loss of millions of lives on both the Nigerian side and the Biafran side. Unlike Biafrans most of whom died of starvation, exchange of fire, the Nigerian side lost mainly troops in the warfront, during ambush or advancement.

Currently, the optimism displayed by the leaders of IPOB at all levels indicates that the realisation of their ambition is what they expect some day even when it is certainly not clear when the dream would materialise. State crackdown on IPOB members has gone beyond stop-and-search operations within major towns in Igboland to include combing of isolated areas and villages where members either reside or plan to organise meetings. On several occasions, security forces adopted the commando style to invade meeting venues, thereby undermining their freedom of association. Through such crackdown, thousands of members have been arrested and either remanded in prison custody or prosecuted. The most recent incident was that of the first week of August 2020, when security forces invaded a venue of an ongoing meeting in the Ohaji Egbema area of Imo State and arrested IPOB members, accusing them of organising a meeting to plan visiting a native doctor to prepare bullet-resistant charms for them to overcome repression by the security agencies (Interviews, 2020). Consequently, they now prefer to organise meeting away from the reach of security forces.

Some members were praying for the release of Kanu at National High School Aba and were shot dead by soldiers. There was human security threat occasioned by the arrest of people with Biafran flag and logo because the situation did not end at the arrests; some were targeted and attacked, especially during the period when the group was controversially proscribed by the governors of the southeast states and the declaration of the group as a terrorist organisation by the Federal Government of Nigeria. Cars and tricycle drivers were banned from tuning to the IPOB Radio. In all



these, IPOB has continued to emphasise on the strategic significance of non-violence to their agitations. They have been more emboldened to continue advocating their so-called freedom.

The traditional security regime is for the safety of members and for safer Igbo communities without violence. This is advocacy for non-violence and to ensure that people who do not have anything to do with IPOB do not take advantage of the struggle to indulge in criminality. The agitation of IPOB for referendum shapes socio-political relations in Igbo communities in a way that it has been creating hope on the probability of realising the Biafran state. Many people advocate that the option of armed conflict is ruled out and that the group has embraced non-violence with the expectation and determination of engaging the international community to recognise their right to self-determination. The group now focuses on the option of referendum to give the people opportunity to determine their destiny, as seen in South Sudan where the people overwhelmingly voted in support of their state created from Sudan.

The group has been adapting to the situation of militarism by reducing protests and street processions that were major activities of the group before 2017. From observation in the southeast towns, members have reduced displaying several emblems and flags that are used to showcase the group to the world. What is common nowadays is the use of social media platforms that do not expose them to the attack by security forces to express their IPOB identity. This has reduced the risk of being arrested or shot by security forces on patrol. With the militarism, there is a conflict of dual loyalty, to the government of Nigeria and the IPOB leadership.

With the members of IPOB becoming more active within the grassroots, they have established effective communication links with the international leadership of the group using their social media platforms and the radio. This development is based on the need by the group to establish community relations with the leaders, with the expectation of having platforms to discuss their concerns, as seen in Emene in Enugu, where security operatives got the information and invaded the area.

The resilience of IPOB leadership and members is enough to attract militarism. From the Biafran song, it is evident that IPOB promotes the motivation of the movement for the establishment of Biafran state, with emphasis on the promise of freedom. This is seen in the statements, “thou shall not be tired, you shall be victorious. Patience is better...” (IPOB USA, 2020). According to Nnamdi Kanu, “we are everywhere. Our people are everywhere. We have what it takes to form a government and raise an army” (16/08/2020). The leader of IPOB also asserted that, “We are the last line of defense between enslavement and freedom. We are the saviour of the people. That is why they are killing our people. They don’t want to hear about IPOB” (23/08/2020). All these statements have been creating concerns amongst the stakeholders in the Southeast, especially the leaders of Ohaneze Ndigbo, a sociocultural organisation.

The internal sabotage that has remained the bane of Igbo unity since Nigeria’s independence has been extended to the self-determination in the Southeast to the extent that the activities of spoilers continue to undermine the goals of IPOB. Such sabotage usually makes it easy for outsiders to infiltrate the group and get information used in attacking members to undermine the group. For instance, this is responsible for the mass arrest of IPOB members during peaceful meetings in schools, churches, and members’ compounds where they sometimes gather to discuss the progress and future of the movement. In Aba, Enugu, Anambra, and other places, invasion of



IPOB meetings by security forces has characterised the military tactics of the Nigerian government. Consequently, the leadership of IPOB directed many branches to suspend meetings and remain vigilant to avoid being attacked by security forces. Because those apprehended by security forces had emblems on them, some members decided to start removing all IPOB materials around them, including deleting of IPOB radio application.

The problem has been complicated by the emergence of ESN (Eastern Security Network) formed by IPOB as a response to the activities of herdsmen in Igboland, and the counter security outfit known as Ebube Agu, which was formed by southeast governors in May 2021.

The intersection between IPOB agitation, the Biafran question and militarism cannot be overemphasised. However, militarism seems to have overshadowed government's responses to the threat to Nigeria's unity.

As the Biafran war ended, the failure of the Federal Government's 3Rs – rehabilitation, reconstruction and reconciliation –to effectively affect the Igbo in the area of true federalism is responsible for the inability of the government to resolve the lingering feelings of marginalisation.

### **Conclusion**

This paper has examined the Biafran question and issues surrounding de facto statehood which have dominated political discourses in the country since 2015. The situation creates uncertainties in Igboland, making the region the third most militarised, after Northeast and Niger Delta regions. The Biafran question does not mean the Igbo did not contribute to national integration or did not contribute their quota to the independence and unity of Nigeria, especially in the post-colonial era. The fact that the Igbo were not the first or second to attempt secession raises doubts on the accusation that they want to destroy the hard-earned unity.

The Biafran war was a manifestation of the failure of the actors, especially the belligerents to accommodate peacebuilding. The Biafran war would have been prevented if all the actors embraced the peaceful platforms initiated to deescalate tension. Every secessionist agitation would generate hostility perception mainly because of the incompatible goal usually associated with the campaign. De facto statehood is still an issue in contemporary Nigeria because many of the factors that led to the declaration of Biafra, like the politics of exclusion and perceived marginalisation, are still felt by the people in Igboland, where the affairs of the region is yet to receive much of the attention of the central government. The politicisation of the court case against the IPOB leader and the use of the army to invade his home in Umuahia all strengthened the movement and contributed to the emergence of ESN.

Since the civil war years, state repression against Biafran agitators has not changed and IPOB has consistently accused the Federal Government of brutalising and masterminding the incarceration of the individuals perceived to be behind the group's activities, tagging them miscreants and enemies of the state. The proscription of IPOB means that more people would be arrested or killed by security forces if they protest again.

Apart from government's reluctance to grant the request of IPOB, there are obvious challenges that could hinder the geographical coverage of the group as desired in terms of reaching out to groups outside Igboland. One of these is the current state system in Nigeria, which has some



minority groups in some Southsouth states. Another is that some of these groups are yet to welcome the Biafran idea.

The paper suggests more humane ways of containing the resurgence of Biafra rather than encouraging militarism which has proven not to be an effective antidote to the separatist movement. Since the escalation of the conflict arising from de facto statehood, the state has continued to respond by initiating different military operations aimed at containing the activities of IPOB. The Federal Government should consider rethinking militarism as an antidote to the threat of de facto statehood because the inability of the civil war and death of Chukwuemeka Ojukwu to discourage youths from agitating for Biafra indicates that military might cannot stop the movement. The paper recommends government's people-oriented conflict transformation, true reconciliation with the secessionist agitators, youth-centred human development and integrative peace education in Igboland to reduce tension in the region and address the alleged politics of exclusion affecting the people to enhance nation-building in the country. IPOB's rethinking of the hardened position on the restoration of Biafra, which was a de facto state, and FG's engagement of the actors in conflict transformation by looking into allegations of deprivation and politics of exclusion would restore stability and positive peace.

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