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Approaches of MASSOB and IPOB and the Response of Federal Government in the Biafra Secession Movement in Nigeria

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Abstract

More than fifty years after the Nigerian Civil War which occurred as a result of the secession of Igbo people of Nigeria's South-East, the Igbo race under the aegis of Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) and Movement for the Actualization of Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) are calling for secession again, and they appear ready to take desperate measures to achieve this objective. The formation of these groups was in resistance to the perceived marginalization of the Igbo people, which the post-civil war rehabilitation program and military regime suppressed until the return of democracy in 1999. Democracy, with its guarantee of human rights and self-determination gave momentum to recent Biafra secession movements of MASSOB and IPOB. This study seeks to investigate the approaches of MASSOB and IPOB as well as examine the response of Federal Government of Nigeria to the activities of the agitating groups. This study adopts qualitative research method through which data were sourced from relevant literatures, interviews and focus group discussions. The study also adopts Gellner's Theory of Nationalism to explain the reasons why nationals of a nation-state engage in nationalist movements to seek self-determination and secession. The study finds that marginalization and low level of development in South-East are contributory factors to lingering secession agitations. The study therefore recommends a change of approach by Federal Government to encapsulate creation of South-East ministry and allocation of special intervention funds to address developmental challenges in the region.

Key words: Secession movement, self-determination, IPOB, MASSOB.

Introduction

Issues relating to feeling of dissatisfaction and resultant yearnings by various ethnic groups for better involvement and access to state resources are inevitable in a multi-ethnic state like Nigeria. These issues were responsible for political and ethno-religious crises that bedeviled Nigeria in the early years of independence. Because of the phenomenon of this era, the country experienced several years of military rule. Transition to democracy in 1999 gave rise to public and or open expressions of grievances that were hitherto suppressed by military governments. The reason for fresh expressions of self-determination is not far-fetched as feeling of dissatisfaction lingers. According to Obi-Ani (2009) the issues that gave rise to Biafra are still very prevalent in Nigeria today: injustice, insecurity and ethnicity. The development set the pace for secessionist agitations that were repelled by the Nigerian Government using the Armed Forces. Hence, the birth of Movement for Actualization of Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) and later Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) as well as other socio-cultural groups.

The Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) and Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) are two of the prominent ethnic militia groups. They draw membership from South-Eastern part of Nigeria and pro-Biafra Nigerians in diaspora. Duruji (2012) attributes the emergence of MASSOB,

IPOB and other socio-cultural groups to the nature and character of the Nigerian state and perceptions of marginalization in the distribution of power and resources, and the repressive tactics of the state to sub-national dissent. While some of the socio-cultural groups agitate for greater participation in government and protection of group interests, MASSOB and IPOB have an agenda for a separate state of Biafra. Increasing secessionist agitations and the way they are handled by the government raise questions that bother on peaceful coexistence in the country. Generally, from the side of the agitators, the approach has been characterized by massive protests and other aggressive activities to draw attention of the Federal Government of Nigeria and international community. These protests have resulted in casualties. However, approaches by MASSOB and IPOB seem to differ in spite of common demand expressed by both agitating camps. According to Alumona, Azom&Iloh (2017), Igbos' responses to alleged marginalization and victimization have historically taken different dimensions. The federal government of Nigeria, on the other hand, deployed military measure to quell the Biafran secessionists on several occasions, thereby aggravating the fragile nature of peace in the country.

The approaches of MASSOB and IPOB and Federal government's responses have not yielded positive results as feeling of dissatisfaction and secessionist activities linger. This development

thereby poses questions that hinge on national peace and unity without which the state's growth and development are jeopardized. Therefore, this study seeks to examine the MASSOB and IPOB approaches in the struggle for Biafran independence as well as assess Federal Government's response and the effects of the development on Nigeria's statehood.

Methodology

The study adopts the use of descriptive research design in order to make generalization of the findings. Qualitative method is utilized by the researcher in data gathering process in order to have in-depth understanding of the issue being investigated. The South-Eastern states where most activities of MASSOB and IPOB have been carried out constitute the population of the study and data sources for the study were collected from both primary and secondary sources.

Theoretical Framework: Gellner's Theory of Nationalism

For the purpose of this study, Gellnerian Theory of Nation and Nationalism is adopted to explain the reasons why nationals of a nation-state engage in nationalist movements to seek self-determination and secession out of their nation-state. Gellner (1983) claims that nationalism is a theory of political legitimacy, which requires that ethnic boundaries should not cut across political ones and separate the power-holders from the rest. Gellner saw a society in which the

people are of uncommon culture and possess uneven economic prospects as a forced association of people. His accurate idea of a nation is 'a group of human beings, possessing common distinctive elements of culture, a unified economic system, citizenship rights for all members, a sentiment of solidarity arising out of common experiences, and occupying a common territory. Nationalism, therefore, according to Gellner, is primarily a principle that holds that the political and national units should be harmonious.

Application of Gellner's Theory of Nationalism to Biafra Secession Movements

Gellner's Theory of Nationalism looks at behaviour of people of a nation in different dimensions. Nation in this sense being a component of a state. The socio-economic and political dimensions explain the reaction of people towards self-determination within a state:

The Socio-Economic Dimension

Gellner's theory of nationalism addresses the activities of citizens regarding perceived marginalization and deprivation. Kumar (2010) asserts that because of uneven development of capitalism and multi-ethnic nature of states, certain regions and places continue to remain in a backward state. As a result, groups living in these regions suffer from a sense of relative deprivation, which gets ethnicized. Ethnic sentiments get aroused and mobilization of

people take place along ethnic (nationalist) lines. Fundamentally, therefore, the economic forces lead to the emergence of ethnic/nationalist movements (Hechter, 1975). The socio-economic dimension of Gellner's theory applies to Nigeria as a host of minority ethnicities seem lost within the Nigerian system and they appear ready to embark on self-determination adventure in order to address age-long perceived marginalization that has deterred their socio-economic development process.

The Political Dimension

This approach hinges on relations between state and the communities within it. The state in this regard is the government, which is an organized institution for achieving the will of the state. The state has communities within it and has the responsibility to protect the interest of the communities. The Gellner's political variety of modernism argues that nations and nationalism emerge out of the changing dynamics of the relations between the state and the society. Groups and communities which do not wish to be part of any particular state due to precarious state-society relations try to secede from that (Kumar, 2011). Several authors attributed reasons for the persistence of Biafra separatist agitation to the nature of state-society relations in Nigeria. Ukiwo&Ibeanu (2012) attribute the re-emergence of Biafra secessionist movement to the state violence – defined as 'any act by the state or its agents that causes physical or mental

injury against the person or property of its law-abiding citizen or group of citizens'. In this process, Kumar posits further that new nations and nationalism emerge emphasizing the principle of autonomy and sovereignty. The feeling of dissatisfaction and deprivation in certain regions of a state lead to deteriorating state-society relations such as in Nigeria.

Underlying Factors Aiding Biafra Secession Movements in Nigeria

Power sharing and uneven development are some of the factors that give rise to regions seeking secession in Nigeria. As Suberu (1996) puts it, political developments since the beginning of the aborted programme of transition to the Third Republic in 1986 have highlighted the precarious and contentious state of the country's multiethnic federal system. In particular, there has been a growing wave of mobilization and opposition by ethnic minority groups against their perceived marginalization, exploitation and subjugation in the Nigerian federation. In spite of government efforts to foster national consciousness, unity and progress in Nigeria, feeling of dissatisfaction lingers. According to Obi-Ani (2009) the issues that gave rise to Biafra are still very prevalent in Nigeria today: injustice, insecurity and ethnicity.

State's wealth should be strategically and evenly distributed among all the regions within the state. Ethnic satisfaction and avenue for autonomy are sacrosanct to Gellner's theory of

nationalism which is adopted for this study. The nationals must develop a sense of belonging arising from being part of decision making and having access to nation's wealth. If these prove to be elusive in a state, nationals who share common value standard have the right to seek self-determination. The will of the state towards protection of the rights of the minority groups is tested as regions within it emerge seeking self-determination. Gellner (1983) posits that only the state has the power to inculcate the new standard on an uprooted labour force. He claims that in the homogenizing world of nation-states, only statehood can grant protection to small cultures facing constant threats of assimilation. Therefore, the failure of the state to homogenize or foster nation-building would lead to separatist agitations such as in Nigeria.

Perception of Marginalization of Minority Groups in Nigeria

The concept of marginalization in relation to Statehood is elusive. This is because it is used to describe the socio-economic fallout of imbalance in numerical strength, political participation and access to resource control within a state. According to Alakhunova, Diallo, del Campo & Tallarico (2015), marginalization is both a condition and a process that prevents individuals and groups from full participation in social, economic, and political life enjoyed by the wider society. Marginalization, as stated by Anugwom (2000), exists when an ethnic group or any other kind of group feels disenfranchised

with the political system. Alakhunova et al (2015) presented the areas in which a group may be marginalized to include lack of access to basic necessities, limited economic opportunities, illiteracy, and lack of social safety net protection.

Marginalization is most pronounced in a multi-ethnic state such as Nigeria. Rindap & Auwal (2014) posit that in a multi-cultural society like Nigeria, there are bound to be some people who will be on the advantaged side due to either their population, early contact with the colonialists or their educational attainment. Galadima (2010) asserts that the existence of disadvantaged groups in a state give rise to competition and struggle for equality and fairness in the distribution of resources, offices and positions available to the society to which they belong. This is the situation in Nigeria where the minority ethnic groups have struggled for equality, fairness and full participation in governance. Capotorti (1977) describes minority as a group numerically inferior to the rest of the population of a State, in a non-dominant position, whose members - being nationals of the State - possess ethnic, religious or linguistic characteristics differing from those of the rest of the population and show, if only implicitly, a sense of solidarity, directed towards preserving their culture, traditions, religion or language. Minorities, according to Rindap (2014) are considered to be culturally distinctive and relatively cohesive

groups which occupy a position of numerical inferiority and actual or potential sociopolitical subordination vis-a-vis other cultural sections in a political community. Being numerical inferior, as evident in the concept of minority puts the minority groups within a state at disadvantage in relation to access to power which is dependent on winning election by majority votes. As a result of this, sense of solidarity, as opined by Capotorti (1977) leads to agitations towards achieving self-rule.

United Nations 1992 Report on Minority Rights states that in many countries, minorities are often found to be among the most marginalized groups in society and severely affected by, for example, pandemic diseases, such as HIV/AIDS, and in general have limited access to health services. This forms the basis for agitation for secession from the larger community. Rindap (2014) asserts that Minority group constitutes the core of ethnic turbulence and violence world-wide. Conflict perspective with regards to ethnic groups can be approached from interethnic and intra-ethnic levels. Interethnic level of conflict perspective entails that minority groups are exploited by the dominant majority groups who control the economy and political power. The resultant effect of this is that conflict is imminent under conditions of inter-ethnic competition for scarce valuable resources (Rindap, 2014). Under this circumstances, the in-group and outgroup feelings of members of

ethnic groups in the conflicts are strengthened (Pal, 1977).

The South-East region of Nigeria, populated by the Igbo speaking people have engaged the Federal Government of Nigeria in fierce manner bothering on perceived ill-treatments against the Igbos. Continued agitations in this regard have led to secession movement which initially resulted into the Nigerian Civil War, and recently the move towards Biafran independence which is championed by the Movement for the Actualization of Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) and Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB). The factors that led to feeling of Igbo marginalization in the pre-civil war Nigeria included reorganization of the Nigerian state along federal lines (Orobator, 1987) which brought about a structure that seemingly remove the possibility of effective political representation for minority communities (Simpson, 2014) into which the Igbos fall. Examining the factors that heightened the feeling of marginalization among the Igbos since the end of the Nigerian Civil War, Nsoedo (2019) listed the Federal Government policies such as 20 pounds refund to any Biafran who had savings in the bank prior to the war or willing to convert the old currency, the Indigenization decree of 1972 in which the Igbos were disadvantaged, the Federal Character Principle, manipulated population census, deliberate underuse of seaports within the Igbo axis, lack of standard international airport, etc.

All these factors created feeling of dissatisfaction among the Igbo people. As Nsoedo (2019) puts it, the above listed factors formed overt and indirect actions to diminish the ability of the Igbo people to compete favourably on level playing ground with other major ethnic groups.

In establishing the factors that sustain current Biafran secessionist movement, Maiangwa (2016) states that since Nigerian democratic elections in 1999, there has been a renewed push for the creation of Biafra owing to the marginalization and transgenerational trauma of

the people belonging to the Igbo ethnic group as a result of the Nigeria-Biafra war of 1967-70. He further proposed four elements of reconciliation which include 'an acknowledgement of, and apology for, past wrongdoing, memorialization, and mediation'. The lack of comprehensive reconciliation programs have heightened the quest of the Igbo for secession. The Igbo people have occupied the status of minority among the major ethnic groups in Nigeria as they are numerically inferior compared to other groups. This is evident in both population and landmass as shown in the diagram below:

The population of the States of Nigeria according to 2006 census results and latest population projections

<u>Name</u>	<u>Abbr.</u>	<u>Status</u>	<u>Capital</u>	<u>Area</u> A (km ²)	<u>Population</u> Census (Cp) 1991-11-26	<u>Population</u> Census (Cf) 2006-03-21	<u>Population</u> Projection (P) 2016-03-21
Nigeria	NGA		Abuja	923,768	88,992,220	140,431,790	193,392,500
Abia	AB	FSt	Umuahia	6,320	2,338,487	2,845,380	3,727,300
Adamawa	AD	FSt	Yola	36,917	2,102,053	3,178,950	4,248,400
Akwa Ibom	AK	FSt	Uyo	7,081	2,409,613	3,902,051	5,482,200
Anambra	AN	FSt	Awka	4,844	2,796,475	4,177,828	5,527,800
Bauchi	BA	FSt	Bauchi	45,837	2,861,887	4,653,066	6,537,300
Bayelsa	BY	FSt	Yenagoa	10,773	1,121,693	1,704,515	2,278,000
Benue	BE	FSt	Makurdi	34,059	2,753,077	4,253,641	5,741,800
Borno	BO	FSt	Maiduguri	70,898	2,536,003	4,171,104	5,860,200
Cross River	CR	FSt	Calabar	20,156	1,911,297	2,892,988	3,866,300

Delta	DE	FSt	Asaba	17,698	2,590,491	4,112,445	5,663,400
Ebonyi	EB	FSt	Abakaliki	5,670	1,029,312	2,176,947	2,880,400
Edo	ED	FSt	Benin City	17,802	2,172,005	3,233,366	4,235,600
Ekiti	EK	FSt	Ado Ekiti	6,353	1,535,790	2,398,957	3,270,800
Enugu	EN	FSt	Enugu	7,161	2,125,068	3,267,837	4,411,100
Federal Capital Territory	FC	FDist	Abuja	7,315	371,674	1,406,239	3,564,100
Gombe	GO	FSt	Gombe	18,768	1,489,120	2,365,040	3,257,000
Imo	IM	FSt	Owerri	5,530	2,485,635	3,927,563	5,408,800
Jigawa	JI	FSt	Dutse	23,154	2,875,525	4,361,002	5,828,200
Kaduna	KD	FSt	Kaduna	46,053	3,935,618	6,113,503	8,252,400
Kano	KN	FSt	Kano	20,131	5,810,470	9,401,288	13,076,900
Katsina	KT	FSt	Katsina	24,192	3,753,133	5,801,584	7,831,300
Kebbi	KE	FSt	BirninKebbi	36,800	2,068,490	3,256,541	4,440,000
Kogi	KO	FSt	Lokoja	29,833	2,147,756	3,314,043	4,473,500
Kwara	KW	FSt	Ilorin	36,825	1,548,412	2,365,353	3,192,900
Lagos	LA	FSt	Ikeja	3,345	5,725,116	9,113,605	12,550,600
Nasarawa	NA	FSt	Lafia	27,117	1,207,876	1,869,377	2,523,400
Niger	NI	FSt	Minna	76,363	2,421,581	3,954,772	5,556,200
Ogun	OG	FSt	Abeokuta	16,762	2,333,726	3,751,140	5,217,700
Ondo	ON	FSt	Akure	14,606	2,249,548	3,460,877	4,671,700
Osun	OS	FSt	Oshogbo	9,251	2,158,143	3,416,959	4,705,600
Oyo	OY	FSt	Ibadan	28,454	3,452,720	5,580,894	7,840,900
Plateau	PL	FSt	Jos	30,913	2,104,536	3,206,531	4,200,400
Rivers	RI	FSt	Port Harcourt	11,077	3,187,844	5,198,716	7,303,900

<u>Sokoto</u>	SO	FSt	<u>Sokoto</u>	25,973	2,418,585	3,702,676	4,998,100
<u>Taraba</u>	TA	FSt	<u>Jalingo</u>	54,473	1,512,163	2,294,800	3,066,800
<u>Yobe</u>	YO	FSt	<u>Damaturu</u>	45,502	1,399,687	2,321,339	3,294,100
<u>Zamfara</u>	ZA	FSt	<u>Gusau</u>	39,762	2,051,591	3,278,873	4,515,400

Sources: National Population Commission of Nigeria & National Bureau of Statistics. Retrieved from <https://www.citypopulation.de/Nigeria-Cities.html>

South-East States are underlined and presented in blue colour in the table

The importance of population in a democratic system cannot be overemphasized. Falobi (2014) states that the characteristics of the population drive the decision-making that facilitates the development of socio-economic policies that will enhance the welfare of the population. Simply put population census is used as a basis for allocation of resources (Alumona et al, 2019). By implication, South-Eastern region that accommodates the Igbo people is numerically

and geographically inferior when compared to the rest of the regions (see the table below). This puts the region at disadvantage under the current federal arrangement and democratic regime due to majority advantage of the other major ethnic groups in winning general elections and access to power and resource control. Hence, the feeling of being marginalized is a common phenomenon in the region.

Table: Distribution of States and Local Government Areas in Nigeria

S/No	Zone	No. of States	No. of Local Governments
1	North -Central	6 (16.67%)	116 (15.19%)
2	North -East	6 (16.67%)	110 (14.36%)
3	North -West	7 (1.44%)	181 (23.69%)
4	South-West	6 (16.67%)	138 (18.01%)
5	South-South	6 (16.67%)	127 (16.58%)
6	South-East	5 (13.89%)	94 (12.27%)
	Total	36	774

Source: Ohaneze (2002)

The above table is presented to further affirm the status of the Southeast region as the minority among the other geo-political regions in Nigeria.

Differences between MASSOB and IPOB Approaches in the Biafra Secession Movement

It is inevitable to note that both agitating groups - MASSOB and IPOB have the same mission to secure the independent state of Biafra from the Nigerian state. At the inception of MASSOB in 1999, the group proclaimed a non-violent approach (Fasan, 2017). MASSOB seeks to protect the interests of Igbo people of the Southeast against marginalization and lack of representation in the central government of Nigeria. According to Obasi (2018), MASSOB sought to pressure the Federal Government to conduct a referendum in the Southeast to determine whether the people would be willing to remain part of Nigeria or secede and form the Biafra nation. IPOB, on the other hand came out with different approach, making use of radio broadcasts and social media at its inception in 2015 to propagate its mission. Emergence of IPOB in the self-determination quest marked a paradigm shift and a monumental departure from MASSOB demand and methodology, IPOB presented an irredentist ideology, its ideology is the restoration of the former territory known as Biafra before the arrival of the British imperial masters (Obasi, 2018).

Alumona, Iloh and Azom (2019) state that MASSOB under Ralph Uwazuruike did not have a mass appeal for a number of reasons. However, IPOB, led by Nnamdi Kanu which came into existence in 2015 (coinciding with Buhari assuming presidency) has mass appeal and huge membership, and as a result, revolutionized the call for a sovereign state of Biafra. Below are other striking differences between the approaches of MASSOB and IPOB:

- i. **IPOB's use of radio on the internet:** The radio station, which broadcasts on 102.1 FM and 15.6 AM at different wavelengths is useful in the mobilization, recruitment and instigation of IPOB members into participating in the various protests organized by the group (Nwafor & Omoevah, 2019).
- ii. **The use of Foot Soldiers by MASSOB:** MASSOB's foot soldiers were always having confrontations with the security agencies which led to their arrests, trials, convictions and acquittals (Alumona, Iloh and Azom, 2019).
- iii. **IPOB's strategy of appealing and recruitment youthful membership:** IPOB's strategy of appealing and recruiting youthful membership makes the organization different from MASSOB which parades older membership. Positing on the status of membership of MASSOB, Duruji (2010) pointed out that if youthful age is assumed to range

between 15 and 30 years, only 25% of MASSOB members are youths, which means that the overwhelming remaining 75% are adults, some of whom are in their late 40s and 50s.

- iv. **MASSOB's subtle and liberal approach:** This factor, according to pro-IPOB members is responsible for Nnamdi Kanu leaving MASSOB to form IPOB in the first place. According to them, Uwazuruike tends to be liberal in his approach as he was open to divergent opinions on the activities of MASSOB while Nnamdi Kanu is rather conservative in his approach.
- v. **The radical and aggressive nature of IPOB:** This is evident in massive IPOB protests resulting in casualties due to clashes with security agencies. For example, Udeze (2018) pointed out that March 2016 IPOB protest turned violent as protesters turned on the security officials who were sent to monitor their activities resulting in the deaths of two policemen and many IPOB members while several others were arrested in different parts of Nigeria. Ekpo & Agorye (2019), posit that MASSOB operates in a less radical manner compared to IPOB, and that it was the 'weakness' in the modus operandi of MASSOB in pursuing its objectives that paved way for the hysteria of the more radical IPOB.
- vi. **Use of Propaganda:** Another striking difference in the approaches of MASSOB

and IPOB is the use of propaganda by IPOB. Longman Dictionary (2009) defines propaganda as information which is false or which emphasizes just one part of a situation. Both groups under this study engage the public, especially their members in the call for Biafra independence but IPOB employs propaganda in order to incite its members and convince the public on certain information about Nigeria and Buhari administration which are false or have no basis. It is convenient to note that the leader of IPOB takes advantage of the group's youthful population to propagate his propaganda to them. On propaganda as a tool for IPOB's secession activities, Okpi (2020) posits that pro-IPOB online platforms are loaded with relentless disinformation which unfortunately are believed by members of the group. One of such propaganda is the Jubril Al- Sudan theory which states that Muhammadu Buhari is dead and is being impersonated by an impostor from Sudan.

- vii. **Attacks on Nigerian politicians of 'Igbo connection' abroad:** Another approach of IPOB that makes it different from MASSOB is the attack of Nigerian politicians of Igbo descent in foreign countries. IPOB claimed that it was responsible for the August, 2019 attack of Nigeria's former deputy Senate President, Senator Ike Ekweremadu in Germany

while attending the second annual cultural festival and convention organized by Igbos (Chukwudi, Gberevbie, Abasilim & Imhonopi, 2019). While claiming responsibility for the attack, IPOB publicity secretary claimed that the attack on Ike Ekweremadu by Nuremberg IPOB family in Germany was in keeping with the directive from the leader, Nnamdi Kanu (Chukwudi, Gberevbie, Abasilim & Imhonopi, 2019).

IPOB orchestrated another attack on an official in President Muhammadu Buhari's administration on 6th December, 2019 in Madrid, Spain. The victim of the attack was Rotimi Ameachi, Nigeria's Minister of Transportation while on national assignment. Spokesperson of IPOB Emma Powerful confirmed that the attack was IPOB's move and added that 'some politicians working against the interest of the Igbo must be brought down' (Asadu, 2019).

- viii. **Hate Speech:** Hate speech is another approach employed by IPOB as against MASSOB which is largely known to be more decent in the public engagement. Literatures consulted are of uniform opinions that hate speeches are capable of constituting security challenges. In the 2015 UNESCO report, hate speech is any expression that advocates incitement to harm (particularly, discrimination, hostility or violence) based upon the

target's being identified with a certain social or demographic group. The leader of IPOB has resorted to hate speech and name-calling as a strategy. In many of his addresses to his followers, Kanu has referred to the Nigerian state as a 'zoo' or a 'contraction' and that the other two major ethnic groups Hausa/Fulani and Yoruba are 'baboons'.

Other provocative and direct hate utterances of the leader of IPOB are adjectives such as 'bastards' and the bastardization of Hausa Fulani as 'Awusa' 'Fool+lani' (Alabi & Ayelaja, 2019). He has also been found assertive in his slogan – 'It is either Biafra or death' as well as his other popular threatening declaration: 'Eri Nigeria should prepare for war, we are coming to annihilate you, my secret service is already studying the zoo and strategizing'.

Assessments of Federal Government's Response to Biafra Secessionist Movement

Agitation for secession is not a new phenomenon in Nigeria. Different governments have had to grapple with different agitations and calls for secession since independence in 1960. The federal government of Nigeria has deployed military measure to quell the Biafran secessionists on several occasions, thereby aggravating the fragile nature of peace in the country. From Gowon's Police Action that metamorphosed into full-blown military

engagement in 1967, Obasanjo's violent response to MASSOB and incarceration Ralph Uwazuruike (Duruji, 2012) to Buhari's arrest of Nnamdi Kanu and proscription of IPOB, it is evident that Federal Government is clear in its approach to secessionism. Corroborating this assertion, Adibe (2017) posits that the typical response of Nigerian government over the years to separatist agitations is to brand the agitators "troublemakers," and send law enforcement agencies to use force to quell their agitations.

Existing literatures on the use of military against pro-Biafra protesters present that it is outrageous. Corroborating this stance, Opara (2019) states that the military campaigns in civil-related conflicts had caused more damages than solve the problems that warranted the operations and it violated human rights of many Nigerians.

At the height of the activities of IPOB before, during and after the incarceration of its leader, Nnamdi Kanu, the Federal Government expressed the resolve to forcefully suppress the agitations accumulating endless criticisms in the process. Eventually, the Federal Government under Muhammadu Buhari proscribed IPOB and its activities generating widespread criticisms as the proscription coincided with period of herdsmen-farmers crisis in which lives and property were lost in great measure and the government did not proscribe the much dreaded herdsmen. Furthermore, the condemnation and criticism of the military operations in

addressing internal crises in Nigeria are necessitated by high level of human rights abuses recorded during the operations. Several organization's reports including Transparency International, Human Rights Groups and US Government have accused all branches of Nigerian security forces of gross human rights violations. A change of approach by Federal Government is required since the militarization of the Biafra secession movement has not yielded desirable outcome.

Conclusion

As established in this study, failure of government to tackle imbalance in the distribution of privileged public positions, decadent state of infrastructure, forceful handling of agitations and refusal of federal government to engage the secessionists in dialogue are all responsible for continued calls for secession by MASSOB and IPOB. These agitating groups both clamour for Biafra to be granted independence as a separate republic by seceding from Nigeria. However, their approaches in the struggle differ. Areas of parallel difference in the approaches of the groups include use of radio Biafra by IPOB, training and use of foot soldiers by MASSOB, Hate Speech mechanism of IPOB, symposium organized for MASSOB members, use of propaganda by IPOB, membership composition, and IPOB's calculated attacks on high ranking government officials abroad.

Government's response to the Biafra agitations have been characterized by use of instrument of force. The Federal Government has approached the agitations with the show of military might in order to suppress the activities of the agitators. The submission of Adibe (2017) sums up government's response to the Biafran struggle for independence as he posits that the typical response of Nigerian government over the years to separatist agitations is to brand the agitators "troublemakers," and send law enforcement agencies to use force to quell their agitations. The use of force or military in engaging the agitators results to violence with casualties. This has failed to put a permanent end to the agitations, rather it has threatened the fragile peace in the country.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proffered as way forward in reducing the pace of secessionist agitations in the country in order to ensure cooperation and contribution of aggrieved regions in the development of the country, engender peaceful co-existence, improved confidence in the Federal Government and reduced feeling of dissatisfaction:

1. **Designing and adoption of policies that engender equity in distribution of public wealth and positions:** There is the need for government to design policies that would make the aggrieved Southeast region to develop improved sense of

belonging in the Nigerian system as a way of addressing the Biafra secessionist agitations. Policies such as Federal Character and Quota System designed to address question of inequality in the treatment of people and to protect the interest of all the regions should be adequately implemented by federal authorities in selecting and appointing people into privileged public positions in order to improve sense of belonging of all people of various sections of the country.

2. **Special Intervention Fund for South-East Development:** Federal Government has included capital allocation for North-East intervention which earned the region 45 billion naira in the 2019 budget. Such intervention program can also be replicated in the South-East to cushion the effect of (as Maiangwa (2016) puts it) the marginalization and transgenerational trauma of the people belonging to the Igbo ethnic group as a result of the Nigeria-Biafra war of 1967-70.
3. **Special training and re-training of Security Agencies on Protest/Riot Management:** On several occasions the security agencies have been involved in clashes with Biafran agitators during protests. Findings show that the security officials were provoked into reacting against the protesters and reacted with anger which resulted in casualties. The security agencies have accused the Biafra

protesters of throwing stones at them as an excuse for opening fire on the protesters. The federal security agencies should be well-trained and equipped to deal with stone-throwing protesters instead of using lethal weapons.

4. **Substituting Militarization with Dialogue:** It is recommended that the Federal Government change approach from military engagement/deployment to a more subtle and peaceful approach since the agitators are still citizens of Nigerians who should be accorded their constitutional right to freedom of expression as long as they are not destructive. Opejobi (2018), asserts that agitating for self-determination or secession is not a crime known to any Nigerian law. Therefore, the secessionists should be treated as citizens expressing grievances and government's response should not be militarized. Government should initiate dialogue with the secessionists with a view to reaching a compromise and lasting solutions to secession crisis.

Limitations to the study and Implications for Future Research

From the research findings, it may be suggested that there is need for further studies in some areas not fully captured in this study, thus researchers are required to carry out research on them in subsequently.

- i. This study covered three states out of the five South-eastern states in Nigeria. The three states were selected as sample for the purpose of this study because the activities of the Biafran agitators have been rampant in those states. Therefore, efforts should be made in subsequent researches to cover the activities and approaches of Biafra secession movements in other two states.
- ii. There is the need for comparative studies on the response of the Nigerian security agencies to other protests other than pro-Biafra protests to further ascertain the pattern of response of the security agencies in this regard. This would pave the way for necessary reforms on pattern of police response to sensitive protests.
- iii. There is need to interrogate the involvement or the influence of the political elites in the South-east regarding the Biafra secession movements. This is necessary considering allegations of sabotage against the political class in South-East region.
- iv. It is pertinent to conduct further researches to investigate whether secession would solve developmental challenges in South-East Nigeria which this study finds to be one of the factors contributing to Biafra secession movements.

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