Biafran Separatist Agitations in Nigeria: 
Causes, trajectories, scenario sand the way forward*

Jideofor Adibe**

Introduction

The current agitation for Biafra has its roots in the Republic of Biafra – a secessionist state in the former Eastern Nigeria, which existed from 30 May 1967 to January 1970. The former Eastern region was dominated by the Igbos, who led the secession.

The cause of the civil war would depend on where one stands in the divide: for those on the federal side, the civil war was caused by the attempt by the mainly Igbo-dominated Eastern Nigeria to secede, meaning for such people the civil war was fought to keep Nigeria one. In fact the mantra during the civil war on the federal side was “to keep Nigeria one is a task that must be done”. For those on the side of the short-lived Republic of Biafra, the civil war was precipitated by the pogrom in the North following the counter coup of July 1966. For such people, the civil war was a war of self-preservation1.

While it is normal that people on opposite sides of a conflict will have different narratives of the same event, what is clear is that many factors contributed to the civil war: the 1962/63 census controversy, the Western regional election crisis of 1965 and the federal election controversy of 19642. These crises created the condition for the unnecessarily bloody coup of 1966 coup, which was initially well received3. As it turned out however the coup created more problems than it solved. It turned out that most of the coup plotters were Igbos and most of those killed were non-Igbos while the Igbo political leaders somehow survived4. The anger triggered in the North by this led to the counter coup of July 1966 in which the Igbo Head of State Aguiyi Ironsi and several Igbo army officers were killed. It also led to a pogrom against the Igbo in the North, in which an estimated 30,000 Igbos and others of Eastern Nigerian origin were killed5. The pogrom in the North against the Igbo after the July 1966 revenge coup, and the refusal of Col. Emeka Ojukwu, who was military Governor of Eastern Nigeria to recognize Col Gowon, a Christian from the Middle Belt, as the new Head of State, generated a series of events that eventually led to Ojukwu’s declaration of the Republic of Biafra and the subsequent 30-month civil war.

1Adibe, Jideofor (2016), 'Nigeria: January 15, 1966 and After - We Remember Differently', Daily Trust, January 20, (back page).
2For a discussion of these, see for instance Diamond, Larry (1988), Class, Ethnicity and Democracy in Nigeria (Syracuse, Syracuse University Press).
In the two-and-a-half years of war, there were an estimated 100,000 overall military casualties, while between 500,000 and two million Biafran civilians died from starvation.\(^6\) When the Biafran forces surrendered, the federal government under General Gowon declared that there was ‘’No Victor, No Vanquished’’ and began the arduous process of trying to re-integrate the Igbos back into the Nigerian society.

**Neo Biafrans and the movement for re-seceding**

Like all people who fought and lost a war, Biafra evokes something in an average Igbo, making it possible for it to be tapped as a shared victimhood narrative for mobilization. The first attempt to organize a movement for Biafran re-secession was in 1999, when Ralph Uwazurike, an Indian trained lawyer, formed the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB). At the early stage of MASSOB, he claimed it was a peaceful group and advertised what it called a 25-stage plan to achieve its goal peacefully.\(^7\) Notwithstanding, the strategy adopted was seen as being aggressive, though peaceful, which led to his arrest on several occasions during the reign of President Olusegun Obasanjo. For example, in 2005, Uwazuruike was arrested and charged with treason but the case never reached the trial stage as the first two years were spent hearing his bail application. He was granted bail in 2007 to enable him attend to the burial of his mother who died while he was in detention.\(^8\) As MASSOB members battled the federal government and the police many of the State Governors in Igboland also saw them as irritants. In 2006 for instance Governor Obi of Anambra State ordered a shoot-at-sight order against the Biafran activists who were often fingered in disturbances in the commercial town of Onitsha.\(^9\)

In the early years of the presidency of Goodluck Jonathan (who was adopted by many Igbos as ‘one of their own’ - coming from the neighbouring Niger Delta region of Bayelsa State and who additionally adopted the Igbo name of ‘Azikiwe) Biafran agitations continued – though more muted than they were under both the administrations of Olusegu Obasanjo (1999-2007) and Umaru Shehu Yaradua (2007-2010). For instance, in 2011 Jonathan gave a presidential directive that all MASSOB members detained across the country – estimated to be over 1000 at that time - should be released immediately, including Uwazuruike.\(^10\)

As with most secessionist movements, MASSOB attracted a ‘mixed multitude’ --people of different tendencies and conflicting ambitions. Therefore, fractionalisation within the movement was only a matter of time. One of the early factions, the Indigenous Peoples of

---


\(^8\)Masterweb news (2008), ‘Court grants Biafra leader bail’ May 16, [http://www.africamasterweb.com/AdSense/MassobCourtGrantsBiafraLeaderBail.html](http://www.africamasterweb.com/AdSense/MassobCourtGrantsBiafraLeaderBail.html)


Biafra (IPOB) led by a United Kingdom-based Nnamdi Kanu, started in 2013\textsuperscript{11} “when it was clear that the Ralph Uwazuruike-led Movement for the Actualisation of Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) had been compromised by the Nigerian government and politicians after his incarceration.” It also claimed that IPOB had to revive the “defunct” Radio Biafra as a “platform to educate and sensitise Biafrans who have been biased and made dormant by the propaganda fed to them by the Yoruba dominated media in Nigeria.”\textsuperscript{12} This will seem to support Uwazuruike’s claim that he founded Radio Biafra\textsuperscript{13} – though the press usually mentions Nnamdi Kanu as its founder.

While Nnamdi Kanu’s pirate Radio Biafra had been operating under the Jonathan government, it was the Buhari government that inadvertently ‘popularized’ him and his innocuous Radio Biafra when the Nigerian Broadcasting Service started drawing the public’s attention to his controversial broadcasts but proved rather ineffective in blocking the station from broadcasting in the country – despite claiming several times it had done so.\textsuperscript{14}

The government was also to inadvertently further boost him when it detained him for nearly two years on several charges that included treason and operating the pirate Radio Biafra. He was refused bail despite several court rulings granting him bail. His prolonged incarceration turned him into a cult figure among his followers and stoked the ethnic solidarity of his Igbo kinsmen.\textsuperscript{15} While in detention he converted to Judaism and began to make even more controversial statements, with his supporters organizing marches and rallies across several cities in Nigeria, Europe and North America. By the time he was granted bail on April 28, 2017, he had become a cult figure among his supporters who would literally shut down cities he visited in Igboland as people trooped to get a glimpse of him.\textsuperscript{16}

In addition to MASSOB (which renamed itself Biafra Independent Movement or BIM) and IPOB, there are other Biafra separatist groups such as the Biafra Zionist Movement (BZM), which is led by Benjamin Onwuka. The group – which is also sometimes called Biafra Zionist Federation-\textsuperscript{14}, came to public notice on November 5 2012, when it declared a new state of independence at an event in which at least 100 peaceful protesters were arrested.\textsuperscript{17} On March 8 2014, BZM attacked Enugu State Government House in a bid to hoist the Biafran

\textsuperscript{11}Some source put the date of the formation of IPOB as either 2012 or 2014. See for instance Refworld (2016), ‘Nigeria: The Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), including objectives, structure, activities, relations with other Biafran independence groups, and treatment by authorities (2014-October 2016)’, http://www.refworld.org/docid/5844003b4.html


\textsuperscript{13}The Cable (2017), Uwazuruike: ‘I handed over Radio Biafra to Kanu but he allowed politicians to hijack it’, June 12, https://www.thecable.ng/uwazuruike-handed-radio-biafra-kanu-allowed-politicians-hijack


\textsuperscript{17}Lacinno, Ludovicca (2014), International Business Times, June 17, http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/nigerian-separatist-movement-who-are-biafra-zionists-1453085
flag there. It struck again on June 7, 2014 when its members attempted to seize the radio and television stations of the Enugu State Broadcasting Service to announce the secession of Biafra.\textsuperscript{18} He was charged with treason and detained. He was released after nearly three years in detention in February 2017. Perhaps sensing that Nnamdi Kanu has dominated the Biafra secessionist space while he was in detention, Onwuka audaciously announced the secession of Biafra effective from August 1 2017. He also announced the formation of an ‘interim cabinet’ for Biafra, with himself as the ‘interim President’. He equally appointed Ministers and top government officials for the said nation (including some from the North Central States of Nasarawa and NigerStates) – apparently without consulting those so appointed.\textsuperscript{19}  

\textbf{Causes of Biafran separatist agitations}  

\textit{Separatist desires are not abnormal in ethnically and culturally diverse countries}  

It is not abnormal that some groups in multi-cultural and multi-ethnic nation-states will nurse desires for independence. This is perhaps why Scottish separatism persists in the United Kingdom despite being part of the UK for over 300 years.\textsuperscript{20} The same is true in Canada where Quebec separatism has been part of Canadian life since the 1890s.\textsuperscript{21} In the United States, some people, especially from the Southern part of the country still fly the confederate flag even though the American civil war was won and lost 150 years ago

\textit{Narrativizing the civil war}  

The memory of the civil war is very strong among the Igbos – just as the memory of the Igbo-led January 15, 1966 coup which killed several leaders of the North – is also very strong in the North. It is possible that Igbos’ bitter memory of the war and their attempt to aggressively contest the narratives about the war creates residual anger among those who fought on the federal side or animates among many in the North the bitter memories of their lost leaders during the January 15, 1966 coup. The anger and suspicion around the agitations for Biafra maybe subtle but they help to feed into Igbos’ feeling of being unwanted, which in turn fuels separatist sentiments.

\textit{Market dominant minorities’ thesis}  


In her highly regarded book, *World on Fire: How Exporting Free Market Democracy Breeds Ethnic Hatred and Global Instability* (2003), Yale Law Professor Amy Chua explored the ethnic conflict caused in many societies by disproportionate economic or political influence wielded by “market dominant minorities”. According to her, “market dominant minorities” are ethnic groups which tend to control a disproportionate share of the local economy whenever they are – often in such a manner that it triggers the envy and bitterness of the majority against them. For Chua, tension and conflicts are inherent in the relationship between ‘the economic dominant minority’ and the poor majority in the context of liberal democracy. She argued that when free market democracy is pursued in the presence of a market-dominant minority, the almost invariable result is backlash because

...overnight democracy will empower the poor, indigenous majority. What happens is that under those circumstances, democracy doesn’t do what we expect it to do - that is, reinforce markets. ... [Instead,] democracy leads to the emergence of manipulative politicians and demagogues who find that the best way to get votes is by scapegoating the minorities.²²

Chua listed the Igbos among the ‘market dominant minority’. In virtually every part of Nigeria, the Igbos would be the largest ethnic group – after the indigenes. Chua’s thesis of market dominant minorities – coupled with the belief that humility and diplomacy do not seem to come naturally to many of the Igbo traders²³ create a generalized feeling of a group not liked by the rest of the country. For many supporters of Biafra agitators, it is this sense of ‘not being wanted’ in Nigeria that justifies the quest for Biafra.

*Inability to conclusively resolve group grievances*

Nigeria seems to struggle with the skill to conclusively resolve grievances by several groups in the country. One of the consequences of this is that many groups appear to have institutionalized memories of hurt or perceived sense of injustice, which they popularly express as “marginalization.” This inability to conclusively resolve group grievances has contributed to the rise of the notion that only groups with the capacity to hold the state to ransom will have their grievances addressed.

*The ethnic factor*

Ethnicity is often used as a veneer by the elites to mask their intra-elite and intra-class struggles over power and resources. Over time, however, in Nigeria ethnicity has acquired a more objective character, tending towards more or less an ideology and a prism through which most government measures are filtered. It is also a potent instrument of mobilization. For instance, the fact that Nnamdi Kanu was detained for a long period of time and denied bail despite court rulings for him to be so released, stoked ethnic solidarity even from people averse to his brand of harsh rhetoric. The more his ethnic brethren use the refusal to grant bail as another instance of injustice against the Igbo or more evidence of Buhari’s alleged hatred

of the Igbo, the more Buhari’s ‘kith and kin’ from the North feel compelled to defend one of their own. The dominant ethnic groups routinely use threats of secession as bargaining tools when things are not going their way. The pervasive hate speeches and ethnic profiling in the media may have given some ethnic groups the belief that they are better off being on their own.

Crisis in Nigeria’s nation-building processes

Nigeria’s nation-building processes seem to be mired in deep crisis, which feed into the crisis of underdevelopment in the country to create an existential crisis for many Nigerians. For many young people, a way of resolving the consequent sense of alienation is to retreat from the Nigeria project into idealized primordial identities - often with the Nigerian state as the enemy. For most of the Biafra agitators, Biafra represents that utopia which will shield them from all the challenges of underdevelopment and state failure experienced in Nigeria.

Additionally, there is a heavy burden of institutionalized sectional memories of hurt, injustice, distrust and even a disguised longing for vengeance. One of the consequences is that no individual or political authority enjoys universal legitimacy across the main fault lines. In this sense, neo Biafra movements and agitations are symptomatic of the crisis in Nigeria’s nation-building processes, with the Biafra agitators contesting the legitimacy of the Nigerian state - the manner in which the state is constituted and the mode of leadership recruitment into its structures.

Trajectories and Scenarios

Nigeria’s separatist movements attract a “mixed multitude:” some are in it for personal gain; some use it as a bargaining chip while others may be in it for full regional autonomy or secession. At the same time, there are many internal contradictions within each separatist area that it is not at all clear that if honest conversations and referendums are allowed that the forces of separatism will carry the day. For instance, IPOB unilaterally drew a map of Biafra lumping many ethnic groups – such as parts of Rivers, Delta States and Benue into it. Many of such groups have disclaimed being part of IPOB’s Biafra. Even among the Igbos, it is not certain that States like Ebonyi will want to be part of Biafra or that several Igbos would want to be part of Biafra – other than to use it as a bargaining chip. In addition, there are many contradictions within the Biafra separatist movements, which have led to fractionalisations.

Largely because of the above, there is a feeling that the various separatist agitations, if not unnecessarily inflamed, are likely to wither on their own as the country’s democracy matures, the economy improves, and Nigerians move on to other challenges.

On the other hand, if the Biafran separatist agitations succeed, it is likely to lead to several other separatist movements being energized, and also demanding for their own independence. In such a scenario, Nigeria is likely to break-up into smaller units. If such happens, the internal contradictions within the newly independent states will flare up as some newly created minorities will begin agitations for more autonomy or outright independence.

Another scenario worth speculating upon is the likely impact of the quit notice given to the Igbos by the Arewa Youths to leave Northern Nigeria by October 2017. Though the quite notice has now been “suspended”\(^{27}\), it may likely dampen the enthusiasm of many Nigerians, (especially the Igbos) to invest heavily outside their region. The quit notice and all hate speech that went with it could also lead to Igbos being subtly less welcome in other parts of the country, especially in the North as subdued distrust and bitterness against them deepen across the country, especially in the North.

**What is to be done?**

The typical response of Nigerian governments over the years to separatist agitations is to brand the agitators “troublemakers,” and send law enforcement agencies to use force to quell their agitations. This often results in casualties, stoking ethnic tensions in the process, which further fuels or hardens separatist agitations. For instance, Amnesty International accused the Nigerian security forces, led by the military, of embarking “on a chilling campaign of extrajudicial executions and violence resulting in the deaths of at least 150 peaceful pro-Biafra protesters.”\(^{28}\) The report by Amnesty International was exploited by IPOB supporters who saw it as a legitimation of its argument that its protests were peaceful and that the Buhari government used it as an excuse to kill the Igbos. Nigerian authorities denied the claim by Amnesty International, saying it was only aimed to tarnish the reputation of the country’s security forces.\(^ {29}\) Although in recent times the government appears to be showing more willingness to use dialogue to solve some of the country’s separatist challenges (such as the remark by Acting President Yemi Osinbajo that citizens have right to discuss their continued existence in Nigeria\(^ {30}\)), much more needs to be done. Below are recommendations to address these separatist challenges:

---


Power sharing

At the root of the various separatist agitations is the issue of power sharing among the various regional and ethnic factions of the elite as well as access to infrastructure and privileges at the federal level. Following from this, it will be helpful to institutionalize or codify the existing conventional system of power sharing and rotating the presidency between the north and the south as an interim measure - until the country’s democracy matures and trust among Nigerians has improved. Strengthening the Federal Character Commission (FCC) - an agency created in 1996 to ensure fairness in the distribution of jobs and socioeconomic amenities among different parts of the country - will help to build trust among groups. Making it a mandatory requirement that certain federal appointments and distribution of infrastructure must have the imprimatur of the FCC will reduce the suspicion that the ethnic group in power will privilege its in-group and disadvantage others. This move will, in turn, help to reduce inter-ethnic suspicion and attenuate the anarchic character of the country’s politics.

Exploring the ‘apology’ option

The Igbos have a very bitter memory of the civil war and the pogroms against their people in the North following the revenge coup of July 29, 1966 – just as the Northerners have bitter memories of the Igbo-led January 15 1966 coup that killed several of their leaders. For this it may be worth exploring whether an apology by the Igbos to the North for the January 15, 1966 coup (through the council of Igbo traditional rulers and the pan umbrella Igbo organization Ohaneze) could help mollify the North for the pains caused by the January 15 1966 coup. At the same it is worth exploring if an apology to the Igbos by the North for the pogrom that followed the revenge coup of July 1966 and by the rest of the country to the Igbos for some of the excesses of the Civil War such as using starvation as an instrument of war could mollify Igbo separatists.

Tolerance of uncomfortable views

One of the arguments for free speech is that through a robust competition of ideas in the political marketplace, the truth will be discovered. Unfortunately, some of the ideas that are brought into such markets are necessarily those that “shock and awe” and annoy and aggravate people. Banning them, though, will make them more dangerous by driving them underground and glamourizing the leaders of those who espouse such ideas. Indeed, when Nnamdi Kanu, who was hardly known in Nigeria, was detained in 2015, his popularity soared to eclipse those of other Biafran separatists, turning him into a cult hero among his followers and making it easier for his group to recruit and raise funds. Criminalizing separatist demands romanticizes the hush-hush agitations for independence.
Handling uncomfortable viewpoints in such a way that they do not put stress on the system is the acme of statecraft. It is probably for this reason that purveyors of offensive views such as the KKK in the United States and right-wing groups in Europe are not banned. The preference is to draw these groups’ ideas out and then out-compete them. While some argue that “proportionate force” should be used to deal with separatist groups, the carrot approach should always be the first line of engagement.

**Referendum**

Referendum is another time-tested instrument for blunting separatist tendencies in the mature democracies. It is also a way of testing whether the leaders of the separatist movements really reflect the wishes of those they claim they represent and want to “liberate.” Following from this, perhaps Nigeria should consider a constitutional provision allowing for a referendum among nationalities that want to secede from the union, say, once every 30 years. This will allow earnest conversations between supporters and opponents of each separatist movement. Though opponents of referendum in Africa argue that it may actually encourage secession, the counterargument by its supporters is that it could force states in Africa to be fair to all its component parts, which will convince them beyond doubt that the benefits of remaining part of the country clearly outweigh the benefits of becoming an independent state.

*Will conceding the presidency to the Igbos quell agitations for Biafra?*

Some have argued that agitations for Biafra are due primarily because the Igbos are frustrated that as a major ethnic group in the country, they have never produced a Nigerian president of Igbo extraction. For such people conceding the presidency of the country to the Igbos will be the antidote to agitations for Biafra. While the optics of having a president of Igbo extraction will have some ‘hurrah effect’ among the Igbos, it will be simplistic to assume that such on its own will be sufficient to quell the agitations for Biafra. For instance, while the Yoruba have produced Obasanjo who served both as a Military Head of State and a two-term civilian president and have also produced the current Acting President Yemi Osinbajo, these have been unable to quell the episodic demand for Oduduwa Republic or the Yoruba demand for ‘restructuring’. In the same vein while the Niger Delta produced President Jonathan - that has also not resolved the problem of militancy in the region or threats to declare a Niger Delta Republic. Therefore, a president of Igbo extraction, on its own, is not likely to be effective in quelling the agitation for Biafra.

*Prioritizing nation-building processes*

Ultimately, the greatest weapon against separatist agitation is for each constituent party to feel treated fairly and be convinced that the gains of being part of the Nigerian federation far

---


outweigh the benefits of existing as an independent country. This means the country must prioritize its nation-building processes, which currently seem to be engulfed in crisis. In addition to the tools mentioned above, the government should also consider creating a separate Ministry of National Integration to drive and coordinate efforts at the country’s nation-building processes.

Nigerian government should realize that while the Biafra separatist threat is receiving the most attention at the moment, many other groups hold similar goals. Consequently, the government should not wait for other separatist agitators in hibernation to get re-energized before acting.

**Jideofor Adibe is an associate professor of political science at Nasarawa State University, Keffi, Nigeria. He is the founding editor of the quarterly peer-reviewed academic journal African Renaissance, and co-editor of the bi-annual academic journal, Journal of African Foreign Affairs. He is also a weekly columnist with Daily Trust, one of Nigeria’s leading national newspapers.**