

# The Nigerian State and the Resurgence of Separatist Agitations: The Case of Biafra



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## **Abstract**

In recent times, separatist movements in the South East geopolitical zone have stepped-up struggles for the actualization of the sovereign state of Biafra through protests and other forms of social mobilization. The protests have triggered tension and heightened insecurity, with the security agencies applying excessive force to quell the protests. The extant literature is awash with narratives regarding the recent upsurge and persistent centrifugal demands by pro-Biafra separatists, four decades after the Nigerian civil war. Although these analyses are germane to the subject matter, they essentially suffer from disjointed empiricism, and as such unable to adequately illuminate the understanding of the renewed Biafra separatist agitations. With the aid of secondary data generated through documentary sources, this study systematically presents evidence to demonstrate that pro-Biafra separatist agitations derive from the deteriorating material conditions of the people. Accordingly, the study argues that certain actions, inactions and policies of the Nigerian government, which are perceived to be targeted against the Igbo, have created the feelings of collective victimization among the people which sustains and reinforces the separatist agitations. Moreso, the study highlight the interplay of forces that account for the inability of the Nigerian government to concretely address the challenges of nation-building, and their overall implications for peace-building and sustainable development in Nigeria.

**Keywords:** Separatist agitations, South East geopolitical zone, Biafra, nation-building, marginalization

## **Introduction**

The Nigerian state since its emergence has been struggling with the challenge of how to coalesce the numerous ethnic nationalities in the country into one united nation. The challenge of forging national consciousness and unity among the different ethnic nationalities has always been compounded by the inability of the successive governments to frontally address the problems associated with citizenship, religion, ethnicity, inequality, resource distribution, native-settler dichotomy and development. The negative fallout from the situation has not only promoted disunity and mistrust among Nigerians but has manifested in the resentful disposition towards the Nigerian state exhibited by the nationalities that feel disadvantaged and aggrieved remaining in Nigeria. To this end, separatist agitations, which have been a regular feature of Nigerian politics, remain a veritable tool for the expression of discontent with the Nigerian state and a platform for demanding adequate political accommodation. With the aid of hindsight, these separatist agitations that date back to the era of British colonial administration cannot be adequately explained outside the context of poor leadership and the absence of an ideology with mass appeal (Tamuno, 1970). The interplay of power and forces between different ethnic nationalities that resort to separatist agitations has constantly threatened the continued existence of the Nigerian state. Unfortunately, the dominant political elites have not found any practical solution to this challenge.

The advent, in 1999, of democracy which thrives in rule of law raised hopes that the enormous challenges besetting the Nigerian state, including separatist agitations, would be concretely addressed. The expectation was that democratic practice with its ideals of fairness, freedom, justice, equity and participation could provide a platform for accommodation that could address the issue. But events since then have shown that the challenge rather than being solved is exacerbating. By 1999, the Odua People's Congress was the main group making separatist demands because of the annulment of the June 12, 1993 election which was believed to have been won by late MKO Abiola, a Yoruba from the Southwest. Today a plethora of separatist groups and social movements, with diverse aims and targets, exists in the six geopolitical zones of the country. The division of the country into six geopolitical zones (although not constitutionally recognized but which has become a platform for political accommodation by the government) seems to have aggravated the proliferation of separatist groups since it has made ethnic mobilization a bit easier for the specific ethnic groups occupying the different geopolitical zones.

It is within the above context that we can locate separatist agitations among the Igbo ethnic group in Southeast, Nigeria. The existence of separatist movements such as the Movement for the Actualization of Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB), Biafra Zionist Movement (BZM) and the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) all point to the perceived feelings of marginalization and discrimination of the Igbos. These ill-feelings which are part of the issues that led to the Nigerian-Biafran Civil War between 1967 and 1970 have persisted till date. The post war character of Nigerian politics in which the Igbo ethnic group

appears to have been permanently denied the apex political position has not helped matters. Ironically, despite the cries of marginalization among the Igbos, the ideology and modus operandi of these separatist movements have always been in conflict with that of the mainstream Igbo political elite and leadership. Hence, often, they all appear to speak in discordant tunes.

Meanwhile, in recent times, IPOB has stepped-up struggles for the actualization of the sovereign state of Biafra through protests and other forms of social mobilization. The protests have triggered tension and heightened security, with the security agencies applying excessive force to quell the protests.

The extant literature is rich with narratives bordering on the issue of separatist movements and ethno-nationalism in Nigeria. Scholars like Tamuno (1970) points to poor leadership and lack of an ideology with mass appeal. Duruji (2012, 2014) differently points to the perception of inequality and injustice held by the Igbos and the inability of democratic institutions to contain with the explosion of ethno-national grievances. Recently, Ibeanu, Orji and Iwuamadi (2016) underscore the fact that the feeling of collective victimization which ties all separatist movements together cannot be discarded in any genuine effort to understand the resurgence of separatist agitation in the Southeast, Nigeria.

Although these analyses are rich and revealing, they essentially suffer from disjointed empiricism, and as such unable to adequately illuminate the understanding of the renewed Biafra separatist agitations. There is, thus, a need to address this knowledge gap in an effort to further enrich the extant literature. It is against this backdrop that this study seeks to problematize the implications of political leadership for the rising wave of Biafra separatist agitations in the Southeast geo-political zone of Nigeria, in addition to exploring the linkages between political governance and deteriorating material conditions of people. The remainder of the paper is structured along the following discursive themes: theoretical perspective; trends in separatist agitations; collective victimization and the resurgence of Biafra separatist agitations; Biafra separatist agitations and the challenges of nation-building; and conclusion.

The study is qualitative and analytical. Documentary method was used to generate secondary data from books, journal articles, official publications and conference papers. The data generated were analyzed using logical induction.

### **Theoretical Perspective**

The Marxist revolutionary theory of the right of nations to self-determination was adopted in this study. The theory emerged from the strands of thought on the national question by radical scholars such as Marx 1846 [1964], Engels (1853); Luxemburg (1908, 1970, 1971); Pannekoek (1912); Renner (1917); Bauer (1924); Rosdolsky (1964), Stalin (1953); Paust (1980); Suzuki (1976); Markovits (2005), among others.

The theory assumes that there is dialectical relationship between the resolution of the national question and the right of national self-determination: only the freedom to secede makes possible free and voluntary union, association, co-operation and, in the long term, fusion between nations. Similarly, national liberation struggle of oppressed nations is seen as a democratic movement. Despite, the economic, cultural or “psychological” dimension of the problem, the question of self-determination “belongs wholly and exclusively to the sphere of political democracy” i.e. to the realm of the right

of political secession and the establishment of an independent nation-state (Lenin, nd, p. 145).

The Marxist revolutionary theory of the right of nations to self-determination posits that “peoples may be dominated and governed only by their own consent. Self-determination is not a mere phrase. It is an imperative principle of action, which statesmen will henceforth ignore at their peril” (Temperley, 1920, p. 266). Thus, “all peoples have the right of self-determination. By virtue of the right they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development” (Article 1 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights of the General Assembly, Dec. 16, 1966).

The basic propositions of the Marxist revolutionary theory of the right of nations to self-determination are centered on some fundamental theses, which among others include:

1. Nation as a uniform and homogenous entity does not exist; each class in the nation has conflicting interests and “rights”;
2. State discrimination creates collective grievances and facilitates the formation of antagonistic groups and greater potential for collective action and even violence as individuals face similar circumstances and suffer from similar patterns of discrimination.

State-making in Africa is replete with contradictions. These contradictions are embedded in both vertical and horizontal relations among groups constituting the post-colonial state, and between them and the state itself. According to Ake (1996), vertical relations involve the imposition of domination over independent social formations by bringing them together into one polity dominated by a centralizing power. This involves the imposition of a chain of command, extraction of political allegiance, exaction of social surplus, making and enforcement of laws, transformation of the subordinated social formations into a coherent economy and polity, and elimination of the resistance of the subject formations to the hegemonic-centralizing power.

On the other hand, horizontal relations have to do with struggles for domination and subordination among constituent social forces (groups) in the emergent state. These relations find expression in renewal of primordial identities and solidarity, communal competition among subject communities for access to central power, especially competition among communities that were antagonistic prior to their common subjugation to the centralizing power, as well as demands for full or partial autonomy from the existing political system (Ake, 1996).

Rather than liberation and economic development, the Nigerian state immediately after independence and civil war, has become the instrument of suppression, oppression and in fact intimidation. Those who are limited by the persistent structural injustice have in many cases risen against it and that is why: the battle to control the state or have access to its resources has been particularly fierce and acute between contending political elites and the various social groups and communities in the country (Okonta, 2008).

The above theoretical insight clearly demonstrates that political and economic marginalization and the attendant political insecurity occur when the central government fails to protect the citizens, or provide them with the basic social amenity/infrastructure. The strength of the theory as an analytical tool lies in the fact that it provides both conceptual and analytical framework that illuminates the linkages between the perception of relative deprivation and horrendous oppression and marginalization by the Nigerian government, on the one hand and the resurgence of Biafra separatist agitations on the other.

### **Trends in Separatist Agitations**

The attempt for Biafra secession from Nigeria in 1967 was not the first of its kind in Nigeria. The secession attempt itself was the culmination of the various contradictions within the Nigerian state. Various constitutions had been negotiated and adopted prior to 1966, but none addressed the fundamental social differences, political tensions, economic competition and ethnic imbalances that the Nigerian state had struggled with since amalgamation. Before the secession attempt by the Eastern Region that led to the war, the Hausa/Fulani, dominant in the then Northern region, and the Yoruba, who dominated the then Western region, had all contemplated, and sometimes threatened secession. Thus, Tamuno (1970) had traced the agitations for secession in the country to 1914. He noted that from Ahmadu Bello's account, the north would have preferred a separate political future, instead of being yoked with the south in what the Sardauna termed "the mistake of 1914". Then, the north, displeased with the amalgamation, threatened to secede from the union. Further separatist agitations in several parts of Nigeria occurred in the 1950s. According to Tamuno (1970), new constitutional arrangements and party political rivalries during that period accounted for this. During a constitutional conference in Ibadan in 1950, the Emir of Zaria had threatened that unless the north was allotted 50 percent of the seats in the central legislature, it would ask for separation from the rest of Nigeria. The colonial authorities granted this request. Further political developments around 1953 led to a chain of events which again put northern leaders in a mood for secession.

Towards the end of 1953, it was the turn of the Yoruba, in the west, to threaten to secede. This resulted from the contention over the status of Lagos (Awofeso, 2017). While the colonial authority and the rest of Nigeria wanted Lagos to remain a neutral territory as the federal capital, Awolowo and his party wanted it to be administered as part of the western region. As the disagreement raged, Awolowo sent a strong-worded cable to the Secretary of State in which he claimed the freedom of the Western region "to decide whether or not they will remain in the proposed Nigerian Federation" (Tamuno, 1970, p. 570). In the resumed constitutional conference of 1954 in Lagos, Awolowo's Action Group vehemently argued for a constitutional provision for the right of any of the federating regions to secede from the federation. This was opposed by Nnamdi Azikiwe's National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons (NCNC). The conference ended with an agreement that no secession clause would be written into the amended constitution.

The first call for secession from the eastern part of Nigeria came from the then Premier of the region, Michael Okpara, who openly threatened to cause a secession of the Eastern region from Nigeria as a result of the circumstances surrounding the federal elections

of December 1964. The following year, after the Western regional elections where it was alleged that the NCNC was massively rigged out, calls for the secession of the Eastern region became more strident, especially from some of the party's members in the Federal House of Representatives. There were other pockets of secessionist agitations in the Middle Belt region principally by the Tiv ethnic group, and another in the present Niger Delta spearheaded by Isaac Boro and his two other compatriots. In fact, Boro and his Niger Delta Volunteer Force declared the Niger Delta Republic as Independent State on February 23, 1966 and gallantly engaged the federal forces in a battle that lasted for only twelve days (Awofeso, 2017). That was the first ever real attempt by any group to attempt secession from Nigeria. They were eventually arrested, tried and sentenced to death for treason. In 1967 however, then Head of State, Yakubu Gowon, exercised in their favor the prerogative of mercy, after repeated calls for clemency by the public.

The main secessionist bid that rocked the entire federation came in 1967 when the Eastern region, under the leadership of Lt. Col. Emeka Odumegwu Ojukwu, launched a massive attempt to break away from Nigeria. Before then, there was the counter coup of July 1966 which was spearheaded by northern military elements, to retaliate the earlier 'Igbo' coup of January 1966, in which a number of military and political leaders of northern extraction were killed. The first coup was led by five Majors who were mostly Igbo. In the coup, foremost northern political leaders: Prime Minister Tafawa Balewa and the region's Premier, Sir Ahmadu Bello were killed. Also killed were four senior northern military officers and Premier of Western region (Ojibara, 2016). Sparing the President, Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe and the Premier of Eastern region, Dr. Michael Okpara, accentuated the impression that the coup was targeted at the north. This impression was reinforced by the inability of General Aguiyi-Ironsi, an Igbo who took over the mantle of leadership after the coup failed, to bring the coup plotters to justice (Duruji, 2012). The counter coup and the pogrom that followed saw to the massive massacre of Igbos residing in the north.

These sad events encouraged Igbos to believe that they were unwanted persons in other parts of the country and those who survived the pogrom, returned home in droves, thereby widening the crack in national unity. Accounts of efforts made to resolve this crisis by the government at the center led by Yakubu Gowon, and the Eastern regional government led by Ojukwu, have been well documented in extant literature. Suffice it to say that all efforts at peace-building at the time did not yield the desired results as the Governor of Eastern region was left with no option than to declare the region as a sovereign state named the Republic of Biafra on May 29, 1967. Thus began the 30 month fratricidal war that only ended in January 1970. Achebe (2012), Ademoyega (1981), Madiebo (1980), Forsyth (1977), and other authors have all presented comprehensive post-mortem accounts of the events of the war. The civil war and the victory for the Nigerian forces seemed to have put paid to secession attempts. Since the war ended, the feeling of injustice, marginalization and persecution had persisted among the Igbos (Ezemenaka & Prouza, 2016; Awofeso, 2017).

However, because the fundamental issues for which the Igbos went to war in the first place were not addressed in the interregnum, agitations for Biafra have resurfaced, albeit with much vigor. Groups agitating for a revival of Biafra reappeared shortly after the return to democracy in 1999, alongside other ethno-nationalist movements across Nigeria. MASSOB was the strongest of this early generation of ethno-nationalist groups (Owen, 2016). The aim

of the organization was to use a non-violent strategy to actualize the separation of Biafra from Nigeria. Its foot-soldiers were frequently having confrontations with the Nigerian security agencies which led to their arrests, trials, convictions and acquittals. Its leader, Ralph Uwazuruike, was on several occasions arrested and released. MASSOB under Uwazuruike, however, did not have a mass appeal for a number of reasons. As a result, the coming into existence of the IPOB, with mass appeal and huge membership, revolutionized the agitation for a sovereign state of Biafra. The group was formed and led by Nnamdi Kanu. The commencement of the activities of the group coincided with the inauguration of Muhammadu Buhari as Nigeria's President. His administration has made no pretention about deliberate marginalization and victimization of the Igbos. We proceed now to examine how collective victimization of the Igbos engenders the Biafra separatist agitations.

### **Collective Victimization and the Resurgence of Biafra Separatist Agitations**

The amalgamation of the Northern protectorate with the Southern Protectorate in 1914 gave birth to an entity called Nigeria. By this singular act, over four hundred ethnic nationalities, that were not only socially, politically and culturally different, but also existed as separate entities, were brought together to co-exist under one geographical and political unit. The journey to nationhood, which started and proceeded on the "wings of militant nationalism", gradually degenerated into ethnic irredentism, with the emergence and preponderance of "regionalist and sectionalist orientations in the political struggle" (Ohaneze, 2002). Engulfed in simmering ethnic tensions, rivalry and mistrust, Nigeria attained independence as a tripod of three ethnic-based regions, viz North, Southeast and Southwest.

Scarcely had independence attained when the young state began to grapple with crises associated with contestations among the three major ethnic groups for political dominance. The crises culminated in coup d'état and usurpation of political powers in 1966, counter coup, or the so-called "July Rematch" and 30 months civil war. By the end of civil war in 1970, the control and use of state power had fallen into the hands of war victors who systematically centralized it. Since then, state power has been used to determine the character of accumulation and system of rewards in a way that suggests deliberate attempts to disempower the Igbos politically, economically, socially and militarily, in contravention of the official policy of *no victor, no vanquished* declared at the end of civil war.

Politically, it has become a common practice to manipulate census figures in Nigeria to increase the population of the North and the Yorubas of the West, and to reduce the population of Igbos. For example, the population of Igbo decreased from 17.16% in 1952/53 to 13.48% in 1991 (a decrease of 3.68%), while the population of the Yorubas in Western Nigeria increase from 16.00% in 1952/53 to 17.60% in 1991 (an increase of 3.88%) (Ohaneze, 2002).

The mass of data produced by a population census is critical for development and policy making (UNFPA, 2016). Planners need accurate census information for all kinds of development work, including: assessing demographic trends, analyzing socio-economic conditions, designing evidence-based poverty-reduction strategies, monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of policies, and tracking progress toward national development goals (Corcos, 2017; Odenyi, 2005). In addition to aiding policymaking, population census helps in identifying forms of social exclusions, disadvantaged groups as well as empowering local



communities by providing them with the necessary information to participate in local decision-making. In a nutshell, population census is used as a basis for allocation of resources.

Unfortunately, Nigeria has a history of problems with data collection. Results of the first post-independence census conducted in 1962 were withdrawn. The reliability of the 1963 census has been questioned. The results of the 1973 census were discredited and never saw the light of day, and no census was conducted in 1981. During the March 2006 census, thousands of enumerators walked off the job, because they had not been paid (Lalasz, 2007; NPC, 1991; Yin, 2007). Census figures have remained controversial in Nigeria due to apparent demographic manipulations of the Igbo from being one of the main ethnic groups in Nigeria to a minority status. Since census figures in Nigeria guide distribution of federal funds to each of the country's 36 states and 774 local government areas, as well as civil service hiring (Yin, 2007), deliberate reduction of the population of the Igbo in Nigerian federation is seen to adversely affect the volume of resources that accrue to the region.

Aside population census, states and local government are also basic units for sharing federal largesse in Nigeria. Unfortunately, the creation of the 12-state structure in 1967 was a civil war strategy used by the Federal Government to isolate, dismember and land-lock the Igbos to incite them against their neighbors with a view to frustrating their struggle for self-determination (Barrett, 2017). Apparently, table 1, which shows the distribution of states and local governments among the geo-political zones, clearly demonstrates that subsequent exercises in state and local government creations in Nigeria till date have continued to follow the same pattern.

**Table 1: States and Local Government Area Distribution 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%)
	<b>Total</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>774</b>

**Source:** Ohaneze (2002). *The violations of human and civil rights of Ndi Igbo in the federation of Nigeria (1966– 1999)*. A petition to the Human Rights Violations Investigating Committee. Enugu: Snaap Press, p. 47.

Of the six geo-political zones, Southeast has the lowest number of states and local government. Owing that state and local governments are used as basis for sharing federal resources, the rising Biafra separatism is, to a large extent, driven by a sense of victimization and gross injustice perpetrated through state and local government creations.

The process of political liquidation of the Igbo also manifests glaringly in the deliberate state policy to exclude them from political apex. Unlike other geopolitical zones, no Igbo man, except Major-General Aguiyi Ironsi, has occupied the political apex of Nigeria. Hausa/Fulani have occupied the political apex for more than nine years; Yoruba have occupied it for more than eleven years, while the Igbo have occupied it for just 6 months and

13 days. Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe was merely a ceremonial President. Table 2 clearly shows the regional character of the foregoing exclusion.

**Table 2: Nigeria's Head of State/Government (Ethnic Tenure) (Oct. 1 1960-tilldate)**

S/N	Name	Title	State	Ethnicity	Zone	Period	Ethnic Tenure
1	Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe	President (Ceremonial)	Anambra	Igbo	South East	1/10/1960-15/1/1966	5 Years, 5 months and 8 Days
2	Alh. Abubakar Tafawa Balewa	Prime Minister	Bauchi	Jarawa	North East	1/10/1960-15/1/1966	5 Years, 5 months and 8 Days
3	Maj.Gen, J.T.U. Aguiyi Ironsi	Head of State	Abia	Igbo	South East	16/1/1966-29/7/1966	6 months and 13 days
4	General Yakubu Gowon	Head of State	Plateau	Angas/Beron	North Central	29/7/1966-29/7/1975	9 Years
5	Gen. Murtala Mohammed	Head of State	Kano	Hausa	North West	29/7/1975-13/2/1976	6 months and 15 Days
6	General Olusegun Obasanjo	Head of State	Ogun	Yoruba	South West	13/2/1976-30/9/1979	3 Years, 7 Months and 17 days
7	Alh. Shehu Shagari	President	Sokoto	Fulani	North West	1/10/1979-31/12/1983	4 years, 2 Months and 30 days
8	Maj. General Muhammadu Buhari	Head of State	Kastina	Fulani	North West	31/12/1983-27/8/1985	1 Year, 7 Months and 26 Days
9	General Ibrahim Babangida	Head of State	Niger	Gwari	North Central	27/8/1985-26/8/1993	8 Years
10	Chief Ernest Shonekan	Head of State	Ogun	Yoruba	South West	26/8/1993-17/11/1993	2 Months and 23 Days
11	General Sani Abacha	Head of State	Kano	Kanuri	North West	17/11/1993-8/6/1998	4 Years, 6 Months and 22 Days
12	Gen, Abdusalami Abubakar	Head of State	Niger	Nupe	North Central	8/6/1998-29/05/1999	11 Months and 21 Days
13	Chief Olusegun Obasanjo	Executive President	Ogun	Yoruba	South West	29/05/1999-29/05/2007	8 Years
14	Musa Yaradua		Kastina	Fulani	North West	29/05/2007-05/05/2010	2 Years, 11 Months and 6 Days
15	Dr. Goodluck Jonathan	Acting Executive President	Bayelsa	Ijaw	South South	6/05/2010 - 29/05/2011	1 Year 23 Days
16	Dr. Goodluck Jonathan	Executive President	Bayelsa	Ijaw	South South	29/05/2011-29/05/2015	4 Years
17	Muhammadu Buhari	Executive President	Kastina	Fulani	North West	29/05/2015-Date	2 Years 3 Months 24 Days (As at Today 22/09/2017)

**Source:** Adapted from Ohaneze (2002). *The Violations of Human and Civil Rights of Ndi Igbo in the Federation of Nigeria (1966–1999)*. A petition to the Human Rights Violations Investigating Committee. Enugu: Snaap Press, p. 47.

The capitalist state is not a neutral force in mediating and moderating political conflicts. By organizing production and defining the cohesion of the formation, the state primarily determines the character of accumulation and relations of production. In Nigeria, state power has been captured and used to further the interests of an ethnic group or a combination of ethnic groups that dominate the corridors of power (Vande, 2012). Therefore, the struggle and contestations for acquisition and use of state power in Nigeria have been patterned largely along ethnic lines. Given that the political apex of Nigeria has eluded the Igbo of Southeast, it would appear that the policy and programmes of the Nigerian government are deliberately designed to exclude them. The cut-off marks for entrance to federal unity schools for the 36 states of the federation is a case in point. Table 3 clearly shows that the Southeastern states of Anambra, Imo and Enugu have the highest cut-off marks in Nigeria. The implication is that a primary school boy in Anambra, Imo and Enugu must score ten times above his counterpart in Kebbi, Sokoto, Taraba, Yobe and Zamfara to gain entrance into federal unity schools in Nigeria.

**Table 3: Cut-off Marks for Entrance into Federal Unity Schools for all 36 States and FCT**

S/N	State	Male	Female
<b>North</b>			
1	Adamawa	62	62
2	Bauchi	35	35
3	Benue	111	111
4	Borno	45	45
5	Gombe	58	58
6	Jigawa	44	44
7	Kaduna	91	91
8	Kano	67	67
9	Kastina	60	60
10	Kebbi	9	20
11	Kogi	119	119
12	Nasarawa	58	58
13	Niger	93	93
14	Plateau	97	97
15	Sokoto	9	13
16	Taraba	3	11
17	Yobe	2	27
18	Zamfara	4	2
19	FCT Abuja	90	90
<b>South East</b>			
20	Abia	130	130
21	<b>Anambra</b>	<b>139</b>	<b>139</b>
22	Ebonyi	112	112
23	<b>Enugu</b>	<b>134</b>	<b>134</b>
24	<b>Imo</b>	<b>138</b>	<b>138</b>
<b>South South</b>			
25	Akwa-Ibom	123	123
26	Bayelsa	72	72
27	Cross Rivers	97	97
28	Delta	131	131
29	Edo	127	127

30	Rivers	118	118
<b>South West</b>			
31	Ekiti	119	110
32	Kwara	123	123
33	Lagos	133	133
34	Ogun	131	131
35	Ondo	126	126
36	Osun	127	127
37	Oyo	127	127

Source: <http://dailypost.ng/2017/08/23/unity-schools-education-ministry-releases-20172018-admission-list>

Again, the present structure of the Nigeria Police Force is an eloquent testimony of deliberate state policy of excluding the Southeast region. Unlike other geo-political zones, Police Commands in the Southeast report to AIGs outside the region because there is no AIG based in the region to which the five Southeastern States will report. Anambra State Command reports to the AIG based in Benin (South South Zone), Enugu State Command reports to the AIG based in Makurdi (North-Central Zone), Abia, Ebonyi and Imo States Commands report to the AIG in Calabar (South South Zone) (Ohaneze, 2002).

Besides, there appear to have been social disempowerment of the Igbo through denial of employment in the federal sector, discrimination and attacks in various parts of the country at every slightest provocation, and neglect of minerals discovered in Igbo land, even when their exploration and exploitation would benefit the entire country. It is on record that Oil discovered in Nsukka area by SAFRAP (a Federal Oil Company):

...was sealed up with the expulsion of the company during the war, and to date the federal Government has not ordered resumption of activities. Natural Gas find in Ugwuoba, the largest deposit in Nigeria, has been sealed up as strategic reserve (Ohaneze, 2002, p. 42).

Moreso, the dredging of River Niger, construction of an inland port, and construction of the long proposed second bridge across River Niger to unleash the industrial potentials of the Onitsha-Nnewi-Aba axis appear to have remained indefinitely on the drawing board. So also the opening, expansion and modernization of Bonny Opobo, and Port Harcourt ports to prosper Ikwere, Obigbo, Ahoada, Bonny, down to Aba, Onitsha and Nnewi. Igbo businessmen are rather compelled to go to Lagos, with all the inconveniences, to clear their goods, when it can be done easily at home (Igwe, 2016). All these have fed into infrastructural decay and bad governance at different levels of government to heighten Biafra separatist agitation in the Southeast and instability of the Nigerian federal system.

The instability of the Nigerian federal system did not start with the rebirth of constitutional rule in Nigeria in 1999. It was rather created by the British and made worse by the military usurpation of political power. For over 30 years, the Nigerian military dominated the political stage, imposed a reign of tyranny, abuse of human rights and the worst form of corruption in the society (Nwala, 2013). It also subdued the reality of political and economic domination in Nigeria.

However, the restoration of civil rule at the twilight of the twentieth century and the widening of political space let loose the gamut of centrifugal forces long held in check by the military. This led to the emergence of various groups and organizations with different histories and goals. Their objectives range from “drawing attention to the perceived

marginalization of their ethnic group, or serving as pressure groups to influence the structure of power to redress perceptions of marginalization of their group” (Fadile, 2013, p. 19). It was at this point that the MASSOB emerged under the leadership an Indian-trained lawyer, Mr Ralph Uwazurike, with the main goal of achieving self-determination. Since then, several other Biafra separatist groups such as BZM and the IPOB have emerged in the Southeast with the same objective.

However, though renewed Biafra separatist agitations in the Southeast dates back to 1999, when constitutional rule was restored, their activities have been intensified in the last two years, despite periodic crack down on their members by security agencies. While a number of narratives have emerged to explain this, the politics of exclusion, evident in the initial appointments by President Buhari in which the Igbo were completely excluded, has remained the most appealing. Tables 4 and 5 below show clearly the regional character of President Buhari’s initial appointments.

**Table 4: Service Chiefs Appointed by President Buhari and their State of Origin**

S/N	Name	Position	State
1	Major-General Abayomi Gabriel Olonishakin	Chief of Defence Staff	Ekiti
2	Major-General T.Y. Buratai	Chief of Army Staff	Borno
3	Rear Admiral Ibok-Ete Ekwe Ibas	Chief of Naval Staff	Cross River
4	Air Vice Marshal Sadique Abubakar	Chief of Air Staff	Bauchi
5	Air Vice Marshal Monday Riku Morgan	Chief of Defence Intelligence	Benue
6	Major-General Babagana Monguno (rtd.)	National Security Adviser	Borno

Source: *Premium Times*, Tuesday, January 13, 2015.

**Table5: List Buhari’s First Appointments**

S/N	Name	Position	State/Geo-political Zone
1	Lt. Col Abubakar Lawal	Aide de Camp to president	Kano State, North-West
2	Femi Adesina	Special Adviser, Media and Publicity to the president	Osun State, South-West
3	Garba Shehu	Senior Special Assistant, Media and Publicity	Kano State, North-West
4	Lawal Abdullahi Kazaure	State Chief of Protocol/Special Assistant (Presidential Matters)	Jigawa State, North-West
5	Ahmed Idris	Accountant General of the Federation	Kano State, North-West
6	Lawal Daura	Director General, State Security Services, SSS	Katsina State, North-West
7	Amina Zakari	Acting Chairperson, Independent National Electoral Commission, INEC	Jigawa State, North-West
8	Habibu Abdulahi	Managing Director, Nigerian Ports Authority, NPA	Kano State, North-West
9	Paul Boroh	Special Adviser, Niger Delta Amnesty Office	Bayelsa State, South-South
10	Baba Haruna Jauro	Acting Director General, Nigerian Maritime Administration, Safety and Security Agency, NIMASA	Yobe State, North-East
11	Umaru Dambatta	Executive Vice Chairman/ Chief Executive Officer, Nigerian Communications Commission	Kano State, North-West

12	Babatunde Fowler	Executive Chairman, Federal Inland Revenue Service, FIRS	Lagos State, South-West
13	Aliyu Gusau	Director General, Budget Office of the Federation	Zamfara State, North-West
14	Emmanuel Kachikwu	Group Managing Director, Nigeria National Petroleum Corporation, NNPC	Delta State, South-South
15	Babachir David Lawal	Secretary to Government of the Federation	Adamawa, North East
16	Abba Kyari	Chief of Staff to the President	Borno, North-East
17	Hameed Ibrahim Ali	Comptroller-General, Nigerian Customs Service	Kaduna State, North-Central
18	Kure Martin Abeshi	Comptroller-General, Nigerian Immigration Service:	Nasarawa State, North-Central
19	Ita Enang	Senior Special Assistant on National Assembly Matters (Senate)	Akwa Ibom State, South-South
20	Suleiman Kawu	Senior Special Assistant on National Assembly Matters (House of Representatives)	Kano State, North-West
21	Modecai Baba Ladan	Director, Department Of Petroleum Resources, DPR	Kano, North West
22	Mohammed Kari	Commissioner for Insurance and Chief Executive of the National Insurance Commission	North-West

Source: *Premium Times*, Tuesday, January 13, 2015.

The point being made is that systematic reduction of the Igbo of Southeast to a minority group by the Federal Government and coordinated attempts to exclude them from active involvement in governance at the federal level have given fillip to persistent separatist agitations in the region.

In addition to the conspiracy of the Federal Government, corruption and political illiteracy of leaders in the Southeast also contribute immensely in the rising level of infrastructural deficit, disempowerment and social decay in the region, which are often exploited to mobilize people to engage in separatist agitations. For sixteen years of PDP rule, particularly the six year years of Goodluck's administration, Igbos occupied the office of Deputy Senate President; Deputy Speaker of the Federal House of Representatives; Secretary to the Government of the Federation (SGF); Minister of Finance/Coordinating Minister of the Nigerian Economy; Ministers of Health, Aviation, Labor; Chief of Army Staff, among others yet no meaningful improvement either in infrastructure or federal institutions was recorded in the Southeast. Those "who have access to Aso Rock and got fat contracts sustained the lies to hoodwink both the Aso Rock Gods and the Igbos." The trend in social decay and disempowerment in the Southeast appears not to have abated, despite the change slogan of the ruling party, since three of the Southeastern states of Abia, Ebonyi and Imo are among the ten states that owe worker despite the Paris Club loan refund.

Therefore, although the deteriorating material conditions of the people derive from the actions and inactions of the Nigerian government, which appear unfavorable to Igbo, and which have created the feelings of collective victimization among the people, the failure of governance at various levels has produced a disconnect between the masses and the government.

## **Biafra Separatist Agitations and the Challenges of Nation-Building**

Igbo responses to alleged marginalization and victimization have historically taken different dimensions. So also is their quest for a separate statehood. While an epoch was characterized by mere threats of secession, some others witnessed actual attempt at secession either through violent means, or recently, non-violent strategy. Ibeanu *et al* (2016, p. iii) have argued:

...the Igbo elite have historically responded to the perceived victimization of the group in two principal ways: by advocating for either more inclusion or for more separation. The inclusivist approach represents the attitude of the Igbo elite who see greater political, economic and social inclusion of the group as the most effective way of addressing the group's victimization. By contrast, radical-separatists hold that a sovereign, independent state of Biafra is the only solution to the victimization of the Igbo. While separatists agree on secession as is the only solution to Igbo victimization, they differ on how this is to be achieved. They propound three possible routes to sovereignty namely, armed secession, civil disobedience and more lately, referendum.

Thus, as noted in the preceding sections, when in 1964 the Premier of Eastern region, Michael Okpara warned that his region would secede because of the circumstances surrounding the general elections of that year, it was a mere threat that was not backed with action. However, it was not the case three years later, when the people of the region were faced with genocide in other parts of the country. The Biafra that existed between 1967 and 1970 was created through a violent approach, since that seemed the only option left, after all efforts to resolve the crisis yielded no results. Thus, for thirty months, it was a full blown war between the separatist Biafra and the federal government.

In 1999 when MASSOB brought back the idea of Biafra into the consciousness of the Igbos, the organization made it clear that it tended to achieve the restoration of the Biafran state not through going to war with Nigeria again, but through non-violent means. It therefore employed strategies such as organizing peaceful marches and protests, raising Biafran flags in public places, organizing sports competitions, and issuing its own currency and passports in order to contest the writ of the Nigerian state. Despite the numerous clampdowns on its members by the Nigerian security forces, the group continued to preach non-violence as a strategy for actualizing its independence from Nigeria.

IPOB took a slightly different approach. Like MASSOB, it continuously preached non-violence even in the face of extreme provocation from the Nigerian security forces. However, its members have occasionally tended to be violent, especially while enforcing instructions from their leader, Nnamdi Kanu. According to Awofeso (2017), while the MASSOB claimed to be peaceful and non-violent in its approach, the IPOB have the tendency of using violent approach. As regards the BZF, he stated that it was actually violent, especially when the group invaded the Enugu State Broadcasting Service (ESBS) and when it attempted to gain entrance into Enugu State House of Assembly for the purpose of hoisting their flag on 5th June, 2014.

Another important approach adopted by IPOB is the use of media propaganda. It understood the power of communication and therefore, established an underground radio station - Radio Biafra - from where it disseminated information to the supporters of their cause, while using the same platform to cast aspersions on the Nigerian government and its

leaders. This radio organization represents the most high-profile and radical of a number of diaspora-based movements in alliance with street-based groups (Owen, 2016). Thus, before long, Igbo youths across the globe got conscientized and keyed into the philosophy of Biafra. IPOB has also called for a referendum in the Igbo-speaking states to determine the choice of the people: whether to remain in Nigeria or to form a separate and independent State of Biafra. The Nigerian government would have none of this. At several fora, it has re-stated its resolve to keep the country united and indivisible. Apart from the arrest and continued detention of some of its leaders, it has also met the agitators with brutal force, using the security agencies to not only disrupt their rallies, but also to shoot them. In the process, many have been killed and many more got maimed. This is even as the agitators were always unarmed. This has attracted the attention of the international community as well, as some interested parties are beginning to question the human rights implications of government's response.

These agitations, no doubt, have socio-economic and political implications both on the south east region and on Nigeria generally. In the first place, during the numerous demonstrations and protests by the IPOB, economic activities around the towns where these protests are held are disrupted. In fact, in the recent sit-at-home protest ordered by IPOB leader, Nnamdi Kanu, on 30<sup>th</sup> May, 2017, economic and social activities in the entire south eastern states and some south-south states were completely grounded. This has enormous implications on the economic development of the region, considering the number of man-hours lost to the protest on that day alone.

Security-wise, Ibeanu *et.al* (2016) have argued that the recurring agitation for Biafra has specific regional and national security implications, including the chances that mobilization of potential protesters could escalate armed violence and worsen the existing levels of insecurity. It could also lead to organized attacks on the people of the south east residing in the north. In fact, the recent quit notice issued to the Igbos residing in the north by a coalition of Arewa youths to leave the north by October 1, 2017 is in response of the activities of IPOB. Though the quit notice was later suspended, it is an indication of how far reaching the consequences of the agitation could be. Related to the above is the loss of lives and property that has always accompanied every clash of the agitators with security forces. On a number of occasions, security agencies have responded to the Biafran challenge with brutal display of force, causing casualties in its wake. A lot of Biafran supporters have been killed during demonstrations. More have been injured, and properties of residents destroyed.

The resurgent Biafra separatist agitations have also caused severe strain on efforts at peace-building, national integration and political stability in Nigeria, thereby rolling back the little gains achieved since after the war. Already, agitations for Biafra are having snowball effects on other ethnic nationalities such as the Yoruba and the Niger Delta peoples as some elements amongst them are already agitating for Oduduwa and Niger Delta republics. In other words, it has awakened the consciousness of other radical elements in other parts of the country, especially groups that feel disadvantaged in the Nigerian project, to begin to question the rationale for their continued coexistence with the rest of Nigeria.

On a positive note, the agitations have sent a signal to the Nigerian authorities that unless an urgent tinkering is done to the Nigerian project, dismemberment might be a possible outcome. Aside the core Hausa/Fulani north (except for few dissenting voices like



those of Atiku Abubakar), every other part of the country is seriously calling for the restructuring of the country, even though there has not been a well-articulated proposal to that effect. This is a positive fallout of the Biafran agitations for self-determination, as many believe that it is the current structure, nature and character of Nigeria that simmered and festered the secessionist agitations in the first place, and that a restructured Nigeria will put the agitations to rest. In September 2017, several Yoruba organizations, political and religious leaders, as well as traditional rulers assembled in Ibadan to deliberate on the state of the union. The outcome of the summit was a call for urgent restructuring of the country or immediate dismemberment. Many other ethnic nationalities have made the same call, including the Ohaneze Ndigbo.

How best can the agitations for a sovereign state of Biafra be contained? The Nigerian state has taken the option of use of force. From all indications, the use of force is not yielding the desired results, as the more force is applied, the more resolute the agitators become. According to Adibe (2017), 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. This often results in casualties, stoking ethnic tensions in the process, which further hardens separatist agitations.

## **Conclusion**

Against the backdrop of the renewed Biafra separatist agitations in the Southeast geopolitical of Nigeria, which currently pose the most formidable threat to the corporate existence of Nigeria as a political entity, this study explored the linkages between political governance and deteriorating material conditions of people on the one hand, and the rising wave of separatist agitations on the other. The study found marginalization and systematic “minoritization” of the Igbo domiciled in the Southeast geopolitical zone to have been elevated to an official state policy. Nonetheless, the study argues that while certain actions, inactions and policies of the Nigerian government, which are perceived to be targeted against the Igbos, have created the feelings of collective victimhood among the people, and which are often exploited to mobilize the people for separatist agitations, the failure of governance at various levels has produced a disconnect between the masses and the government. The study notes, therefore, that the feeling of relative deprivation and discontent with the system is not necessarily a product of collective victimization but a fallout of the inability of the government to fulfill its own part of the social contract it entered with the masses. Since the use of force has not solved, but rather aggravated, the problem, other strategies need to be experimented. These alternatives include:

- a. **Genuine reconciliation:** it is obvious that the wounds of the civil war are yet to heal. The three Rs policy (reconciliation, reconstruction and reintegration) of the Gowon’s regime did not also achieve its purpose. Therefore, the federal government should urgently establish a truth and reconciliation commission, and try as much as possible not to politicize its membership and activities. Its members should be drawn from respected members of the traditional institution, clergy and the academia. Their terms of reference should include to identify areas of friction between the agitators and the rest of the country, and proffer solutions on how to strengthen the relationship.

- b. The renewed agitation for Biafra is seen to result from the continued perception of inequities and injustice in the distribution of power in the country. As part of the reconciliation, government should correct this imbalance and injustice by strictly applying the federal character principle in the distribution of political appointments and amenities/infrastructure. Efforts should be made to include all states in the scheme of things in order to reduce the feeling of marginalization, exclusion and victimization. In order to address the infrastructural deficits in the south east region, which is part of the alleged marginalization of the region, the National Assembly should expedite action on the proposed South East Development Commission bill. When passed and assented to by the president, it will go a long way in disabusing the minds of the people of the region.
- c. Tinkering with the constitution to accommodate referendum could help remedy the Biafra agitations.

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