

THE IPOB QUESTION: SEPARATIST AGITATION AND STATE REPRESSION IN SOUTHEAST NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT: This paper interrogates the Nigerian state's heavy-handed approach towards the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), a predominantly nonviolent separatist movement in the South-East. Despite IPOB's pacifist tactics, which include rallies and diplomatic advocacy, the state has deployed disproportionate repression such as arbitrary arrests, military raids, and extrajudicial killings. Under the guise of counter-terrorism, security operations have ravaged communities, destroying properties and claiming civilian lives, including perceived IPOB sympathisers. Analysing secondary data through the lens of national security theory, this study reveals how the state's securitised response stems from three factors: The South-East's economic significance (particularly its oil reserves), historical anxieties rooted in the Biafra war legacy, and IPOB's effective mobilisation of collective grievances. Far from quelling dissent, the state's repression has amplified the separatist movement, exposing the folly of militarised solutions to political discontent. The paper argues that Nigeria's refusal to engage accommodationist strategies such as dialogue, constitutional reforms, or fiscal federalism has only entrenched mistrust and exacerbated grievances. As IPOB's support grows despite state crackdowns, the study underscores the urgency of a multifaceted approach in addressing structural inequities, revisiting the 2017 proscription, and prioritising justice for victims of security excesses.

Keywords: Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), Separatist Movement, Secession, State Repression, Self-Determination, Nigeria

INTRODUCTION

Nigeria, Africa's most populous nation, possesses a long and storied history of social movements that have arisen in response to injustice, marginalisation, inequality, and state policies (Obiukwu & Njoku, 2024). From anti-colonial campaigns to post-independence activism, these movements have consistently challenged state authority and shaped national discourse (Fashagba & Ajayi, 2020; Omar & Boucher, 2023; Thurston, 2016). As the so-called "giant of Africa," Nigeria's remarkable ethnic diversity (home to three major ethnic groups and over 300 others) constitutes both a source of cultural vibrancy and a seedbed for ethnic rivalries and political tensions (Njoku, 2025). The Hausa-Fulani, predominantly Muslims in the northern region, have historically exerted considerable influence over the Nigerian political landscape. The Yoruba, based in the southwest, comprise a mix of Muslims and Christians and are noted for their cultural heritage and dominance in commerce and academia (Falola, 2021). In the southeast, the predominantly Christian Igbo are widely recognised for their entrepreneurial drive and longstanding advocacy for regional autonomy (Bhui, 2012; Priest, 2020). Other notable groups, such as the Ijaw, Tiv, Kanuri, Idoma,

Nupe, and Efik, bring their histories, customs, and aspirations, further enriching the national mosaic (Falola, 2021).

This ethnolinguistic multiplicity, while a strength, has often served as the basis for separatist agitations (Njoku & Obiukwu, 2025). Secessionist tendencies have emerged across all six geopolitical zones, underlining the persistent fragility of Nigeria's nationhood (Adebulu, 2021; Njoku & Obiukwu, 2025). Among these, the most notable remains the 1967 declaration of the Republic of Biafra by the Igbo-dominated southeast. Triggered by allegations of ethnic violence, political marginalisation, and economic exploitation, the bid for secession was fiercely opposed by the federal government under General Yakubu Gowon, culminating in a devastating civil war that claimed over three million lives, mainly due to famine and disease (Forsyth, 2015; Akpan, 2014). Decades later, the Igbo region continues to witness strong secessionist sentiments, now articulated through the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), led by Mazi Nnamdi Kanu. IPOB alleges systemic discrimination and demands self-determination through non-violent mobilisation, media advocacy, and international lobbying (Njoku & Obiukwu, 2025). The state, in turn, views IPOB's activities, such as sit-at-home orders and alleged attacks on security personnel, as threats to national security and territorial integrity (Obiukwu & Njoku, 2024).

In the southwest, the agitation for an independent Oduduwa Republic has been championed by groups like the Yoruba Nation agitators, led by Sunday Adeyemo – popularly known as Sunday Igboho (Ojo, 2024). While support for the Oduduwa nation is less focused on historical memory than the Biafra movement and not as intense or widespread among the Yoruba as Biafra is among the Igbo, both share similar motivations such as ethnic identity, perceived marginalisation, and concerns over insecurity, particularly with regards to Fulani herders (Campbell & Quinn, 2021). The Niger Delta has also been a flashpoint for resource-based separatism. Groups such as the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) and the Niger Delta Avengers (NDA) have resorted to militancy to demand equitable resource distribution and remediation of environmental degradation. Their tactics, which include sabotaging oil infrastructure, kidnapping, and guerrilla warfare, highlight the economic dimension of Nigeria's fragmentation (Duffield, 2010; Elijah, 2022). Interestingly, even the North has not been immune to separatist sentiments. Certain groups have called for regional independence, citing the region's resource wealth and perceived self-sufficiency (Ibrahim, 2024). It is necessary to observe that while these movements from the North are often reactive responses to agitation from the South, they further reinforce Nigeria's deep-rooted regional divides.

The Nigerian state's response to these separatist movements has largely oscillated between outright repression and selective accommodation. IPOB and the Yoruba Nation movement have experienced intense military crackdowns, with IPOB being proscribed and labelled a terrorist organisation (Ojo, 2024; Olatunji, 2024). In contrast, the federal government has taken a more conciliatory stance with the Niger Delta militants and Fulani Herders. While the government engaged in dialogue and offered amnesty to the Niger Delta militants, it has deliberately implemented policies that favour the herders (Izeze, 2016; Sahara Reporters, 2021; Bello, 2025). This uneven approach reflects the state's strategic calculations, which are often influenced by the nature of the threat posed, the economic implications, and the broader political context. This paper

argues that the Nigerian state's preference for repression, rather than accommodation, in dealing with IPOB has not only deepened separatist sentiments but has also destabilised national cohesion.

In other words, despite decades of repression, separatist agitations in Nigeria have not subsided. Rather, they have grown more sophisticated by leveraging diaspora networks and social media to amplify their narratives (Madueke, 2024). The continued reliance on coercion, such as military deployments, arrests, surveillance, and legal suppression, has failed to address the fundamental grievances of marginalisation, political exclusion and identity-based discrimination. If anything, state repression has often reinforced the legitimacy of these movements in the eyes of their supporters, deepening distrust between citizens and the state. While the resurgence of Biafra separatism has received extensive academic discourse, existing scholarship has largely downplayed or totally ignored how sustained state repression has functioned as a catalyst for the contemporary Biafra separatist movement in Nigeria.

This raises fundamental questions: why does the Nigerian state continue to favour repression over accommodation? And what are the implications of this approach for political stability and national cohesion? This article addresses these questions by analysing the nature of the state's response to IPOB and other separatist actors, focusing on its preference for coercive control and its failure to engage meaningfully with aggrieved communities. The study adopts a qualitative research method, analysing secondary data from a wide array of sources, including academic texts, government reports, court rulings, media publications, social media feeds, and official statements from both IPOB and Nigerian authorities. Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2012) was employed to systematically code and categorise recurring patterns and narratives related to state repression, IPOB mobilisation and human rights violations. Data were carefully triangulated to ensure reliability and minimise bias. Themes such as "state violence," "self-determination rhetoric," "the socio-economic impacts of repression" and "militarisation of the Southeast" emerged consistently across sources. This method enriched the study's findings by offering grounded, context-specific insights into the dynamics of agitation and repression, while also providing a glimpse into the logic of the state and the lived experiences of those affected by its policies.

Theoretical and Conceptualisation framework

The phenomenon of separatism, defined as the quest to secede from an existing parent state in pursuit of independence, has remained a persistent feature of global and domestic political landscapes (Shikova, 2023). At its core, separatism involves a territorial claim and a political desire to break away, often driven by perceived injustices, exclusion, or governance failures (Kingsbury & Laoutides, 2015). While such movements may adopt civil or militant methods, ranging from peaceful protests and boycotts to riots, insurgencies, and terrorism (Dudouet, 2014; Duyvesteyn & Rich, 2012), the Nigerian experience, particularly in the South-East, reflects a hybrid of both. Since the end of the Biafran War, the pro-Biafra resistance has predominantly leaned towards civil agitation, though intermittent episodes of violence, labelled as terrorism in some cases, have emerged (Obiukwu & Njoku, 2024).

Globally, separatist struggles are not unique to Nigeria. The Basque and Catalan movements in Spain, Tamil separatism in Sri Lanka, the Tuareg insurgency in the Sahel, Kurdish aspirations

across multiple Middle Eastern states, and the Quebecois movement in Canada illustrate the universality of the separatist impulse (Minder, 2017; Wickremesekera, 2016; Keita, 1998; Kaya, 2020; Young, 1998). These movements compel states to navigate the tension between repression and accommodation, a dilemma influenced by the type of leadership, regime stability, and the broader socio-political context (Griffiths, 2016). Nigeria is no exception.

Repression, in this context, constitutes the state's coercive response to perceived threats, involving tactics such as arrests, proscription, surveillance, and militarisation (Davenport, 2015). Whether under authoritarian or democratic dispensations, states have historically responded repressively to secessionist and resistance movements. The Chinese suppression of the Tiananmen protests, Russia's militarised response to Chechen separatism, and the Spanish state's reaction to the Catalan referendum all reveal the limits of state tolerance when confronted with challenges to sovereignty and national unity (Brown, 2021; Dunlop, 1998; López-Basaguren & San-Epifanio, 2019). Similarly, democratic nations such as the United States have deployed repression against social movements—as seen in the civil rights era—under the pretext of preserving public order (Romano & Raiford, 2006). These global patterns underscore the paradox of repression: rather than neutralising dissent, repressive measures often radicalise opposition and deepen grievances, eroding state legitimacy and fuelling cycles of resistance. The Arab Spring exemplifies this dynamic, as state violence triggered widespread revolt and long-term instability (Brownlee, Masoud & Reynolds, 2015).

In Nigeria's case, the state's repressive engagement with ethnic-based movements has shaped the country's political trajectory. A mosaic of over 250 ethnic groups, Nigeria is frequently confronted with agitation for autonomy, resource control, or outright independence (Falola, 2021). Movements such as the Oodua People's Congress (OPC), the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP), and the Movement for the Actualisation of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) exemplify Nigeria's complex landscape of subnational activism. Among these, the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), under the leadership of Nnamdi Kanu, has reignited demands for an independent Biafran state, citing systematic exclusion and marginalisation of the Igbo people (Obiukwu & Njoku, 2024; Oyewole, 2019). In response, the Nigerian government has deployed heavy military presence in the South-East, designated IPOB a terrorist organisation, and adopted a securitised approach to the agitation (Adesomoju, 2018).

Recent studies have examined IPOB's evolution post-2017, highlighting a shift from peaceful agitation to increased militancy and transnational activism. Following its proscription as a terrorist organisation in 2017, IPOB has expanded its tactics, incorporating paramilitary elements through the Eastern Security Network (ESN) and engaging in sporadic violent confrontations with state forces (Obiukwu & Njoku, 2024). Scholars argue that the state's repressive clampdown which includes military raids and extra-legal killings, has radicalised segments of the movement (Nwangwu, 2022). On the other hand, IPOB has strategically leveraged digital platforms to amplify its secessionist message, mobilise diaspora support, and counter state narratives (Nwofe, 2021). Through social media, IPOB's leader, Nnamdi Kanu, has engaged a global audience, garnering both sympathy and visibility for the Biafran cause. This digital influence has enabled the group to frame its struggle as one of ethnic survival and self-determination, effectively internationalising its campaign. When coupled with domestic repression, such digital

mobilisation not only sustains but also intensifies the resilience and transnational reach of the separatist movement (Onyemechalu & Ejiofor, 2023).

This dynamic is best interrogated through the theoretical lens of state sovereignty theory (SST). Rooted in the Westphalian tradition, SST posits that states possess the ultimate authority to govern within a defined territory, free from external interference (Croxtton, 2010; Khan et al., 2021). Sovereignty is not only legal and territorial, it also demands the political capacity to maintain order, enforce laws, and secure borders (Philpott, 2001; Janzekovic & Silander, 2014). This conceptualisation assumes that the state is the sole legitimate wielder of force and the uncontested source of political authority within its domain.

However, in contemporary Nigeria, sovereignty is increasingly challenged by subnational actors. IPOB's separatist mobilisation, sit-at-home orders, parallel communication structures, and alleged attacks on security operatives pose a direct threat to Nigeria's constitutional order and monopoly of violence (Adesomoju, 2018; NAN, 2021). From the state's perspective, such defiance not only endangers regional peace but also threatens national cohesion, particularly in a context already burdened by Boko Haram insurgency, rural banditry, and ethno-religious conflicts (Njoku & Sidhu, 2017; 2021).

By contesting state authority and asserting an alternative political narrative, IPOB essentially undermines the very principles of Westphalian sovereignty. Its actions create a fragmented political space in which the Nigerian state's legitimacy is persistently tested. The state's repressive response, in turn, reflects a defensive assertion of sovereignty aimed at preserving territorial integrity. Nevertheless, this approach raises a critical question: can repression sustainably enforce state sovereignty in a plural and contested polity?

In sum, the interplay between separatist agitation and state repression in Nigeria is a microcosm of broader global patterns wherein state sovereignty is increasingly contested from within. Theoretical engagement with state sovereignty thus provides a framework for understanding the Nigerian state's response to IPOB not merely as a security imperative, but as an existential struggle to maintain its juridical and political authority in an era of heightened subnational assertion.

Situating IPOB within Nigeria's Post-War Separatist Landscape

The aftermath of the Nigeria-Biafra Civil War has continued to shape the trajectory of separatist agitation in south-eastern Nigeria, culminating in the resurgence of movements advocating for the right to self-determination (Ndujihe, 2015). In the early 2000s, the *Movement for the Actualisation of the Sovereign State of Biafra* (MASSOB), under the leadership of Ralph Uwazuruike, emerged as a pacifist platform promoting the peaceful emancipation of the Biafran people (Ndujihe, 2015). The unabated humiliation and exclusion of Ndigbo resulted in the feeling of no longer being wanted in Nigeria (Nkwopara, 2020). MASSOB's nonviolent strategy was initially rooted in civil disobedience and cultural revival, but tensions with Nigerian security forces and the arrest of Uwazuruike led to a decline in its influence and effectiveness (BBC, 2005). The internal fragmentation of MASSOB subsequently paved the way for the emergence of a more assertive

movement – *the Indigenous People of Biafra* (IPOB), founded in 2012 by Nnamdi Kanu, a British-Nigerian citizen (Oyewole, 2019).

IPOB's rise has been characterised by a blend of civil resistance, local and diaspora mobilisation, digital propaganda, and acts of defiance, including sit-at-home orders, which have frequently led to violent clashes with Nigerian security forces (Obiukwu & Njoku, 2024). In 2017, the Nigerian government formally designated IPOB a terrorist organisation – a proscription that has triggered widespread reports of human rights violations, including extra-judicial killings and systemic abuses by the military under the guise of counter-terrorism operations (Ojo, 2021; UNHR, 2019). While IPOB's initial tactics emphasised peaceful protests, online engagement, and international advocacy, the government's repression arguably contributed to the group's radicalisation. Central to IPOB's mobilisation strategy is its appeal to the economically and politically marginalised underclass comprising artisans, petty traders, commercial motorcyclists, and rural peasants. Through digital platforms, particularly *Radio Biafra*, IPOB has disseminated its ideology, critiqued the Nigerian state, and challenged the perceived betrayal by conservative Igbo elites (Madueke, 2024). The founding of the *Eastern Security Network* (ESN) in 2020 marked a decisive shift from nonviolence to armed self-defence (Nzeagwu, 2020). IPOB justified the creation of ESN as a response to the threat posed by armed Fulani herdsman and broader insecurity in the Southeast (Opejobi, 2020). This militarised turn has not only heightened IPOB's confrontations with the state but has also transformed it into a central security concern in Nigeria.

According to Nwangwu (2022), many within IPOB attribute the failures of governance in the Southeast to both the repressive machinery of the Nigerian state and the complicity of Igbo political elites. Kanu's leadership, amplified through his broadcasts on *Radio Biafra*, has positioned him as a symbolic figure of resistance (Odunsi, 2018). His detention, as well as IPOB's narrative of marginalisation, further galvanised support, especially following the 2015 presidential election and the internal crisis within MASSOB (). For a significant segment of the Igbo populace, IPOB's demand for the restoration of Biafra resonates as a legitimate expression of their right to self-determination and an urgent response to enduring experiences of exclusion, injustice, and political alienation (Bello, 2023).

Policing Dissent: State Tactics and Practices

Nwangwu (2022) argues that the repressive disposition of the Nigerian state towards Biafra agitators is at the base of the current mutation of the Indigenous People of Biafra's strategy from a non-violent option to an armed movement. The state's repressive approach involves harassment, proscription, arrests, extraordinary rendition, torture, and mass killing of pro-Biafra agitators (Obiukwu & Njoku, 2024).

Designation as a Terrorist Organisation:

The Nigerian government officially banned IPOB in 2017, effectively criminalising its activities and limiting its ability to operate legally (Adesomoju, 2018). Since then, there have been incessant military attacks, extra-legal killings, and police brutality on unarmed and nonviolent Biafra protesters in the Southeast (Amnesty International, 2021). The military engagement under the

pretence of counter-terrorism operations has resulted in the destruction and killings of innocent citizens who believe in the principle of self-determination (UNHR, 2019). Several reports have emerged detailing how joint security forces raided communities in Abia and Imo States, arresting youth en masse, razing homes, and executing suspected IPOB members without trial (Ugwu, 2024; Oko, 2024). In some cases, victims were abducted and later found dead in morgues, bearing signs of torture and bullet wounds (Onyeji, 2022). These acts have instilled fear across the region and created a climate of silent terror. Rather than neutralising dissent, such brute force continues to radicalise more supporters into the separatist cause.

Mazi Nnamdi Kanu's rendition and detention:

In June 2021, Kanu, leader of the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), was apprehended in Kenya and handed over to Nigerian authorities (Ikokuwu, 2022). His detention has raised concerns over human rights violations, including the legality of his transfer, as it was conducted without due process or transparent legal procedures (Ikokuwu, 2022). Kanu's arrest and continued detention have heightened tensions, particularly in the Southeast, where his supporters and some Igbo elders see the actions as infringing on his rights and part of efforts aimed at further marginalising and silencing the Igbos (Oko, 2021). For Sowore, the continuous detention of Kanu demonstrates that the Nigerian State has an Igbo problem (Sahara Reporters, 2024). The government's refusal to release him, despite repeated court orders granting bail, further reinforces perceptions of selective justice and ethnic bias (Okoli, Nnochiri, Nwaiwu & Oko, 2022; Ejekwonyilo, 2022). This has deepened distrust in state institutions and fuelled pro-Biafra sentiments within and beyond Nigeria's borders.

High-Handed Security Tactics:

There have been numerous reports of excessive use of force by security agencies during IPOB protests and gatherings, which have resulted in casualties (Ugwu, 2024). Most times, Nigerian troops are accused of killing unarmed residents in the South-East and labelling them IPOB members (Ugwu, 2022). Since the launch of a military operation known as "Operation Python Dance" in 2016, the region has witnessed an intensification of confrontation between IPOB and the Nigerian Security Forces, especially the police, the Department of State Services (DSS), and the military (Ilozue, 2018). For instance, on 2 December 2019, the police in Anambra State invaded the house of Mazi Nnamdi Kanu's lawyer, Ifeanyi Ejiofor, in Ifite Oraifite in Ekwusigo Local Government Area and killed three people while many were wounded (Eleke, 2019). Similarly, Amnesty International (2021) reported that security operatives killed at least 60 unarmed IPOB members during peaceful protests between August 2015 and August 2016, raising concerns of systemic brutality and impunity. In 2024, Nigerian security forces were accused of committing acts of rape and sexual assault against female residents of the Ehime community in Ehime Mbano Local Government Area, raising serious concerns about human rights violations and the abuse of power during security operations (Sahara Reporters, 2024).

Extra-legal killings by security forces:

The Nigerian state's repressive approach to separatist agitation, particularly in the South-East, has been marked not only by militarisation and proscription but also by disturbing patterns of extra-legal killings, enforced disappearances, and brutal suppression of dissent. Amnesty International (2021) accused Nigerian Security Forces of killing at least one hundred and fifteen (115) individuals during a repressive campaign in the first half of 2021 targeting Biafran agitators in the volatile South-East. The organisation's report, based on eyewitness accounts, video evidence, and hospital records, paints a damning picture of excessive and unlawful use of force in Imo, Abia, and Anambra states. Security forces have always been implicated in extrajudicial executions, arbitrary arrests, and the burning of properties belonging to suspected IPOB members and sympathisers. In one documented instance in May 2021, dozens of young men were allegedly rounded up in Owerri, Imo State, following a gun attack on a police station. They were summarily executed without trial, their bodies dumped in mortuaries without notifying families (Amnesty International, 2021). Such actions reflect a broader pattern of impunity by Nigerian security agencies, whose operations in the Southeast are often characterised by shoot-on-sight orders, indiscriminate raids, and disproportionate use of force.

Restrictions on Assembly and Communication:

The government also imposed measures that restrict the ability of IPOB and its members to communicate and organise, further limiting its political expression and mobilisation efforts (Brody, 2020). Security agencies have also broken up rallies and meetings of IPOB members, killing and arresting scores (Brody, 2020). As part of its hard-line stance, the Nigerian government attempted but failed to shut down Radio Biafra, operated by IPOB, in 2015 (Inyang, 2017; Premium Times, 2015). In October 2020, security forces stormed a peaceful IPOB gathering in Enugu, killing at least 21 members and arresting dozens (Amnesty International, 2021). Similarly, sit-at-home directives enforced by IPOB have been met with heavy militarisation and surveillance, often resulting in violent crackdowns (The Straits Times, 2025). Military responses to IPOB's sit-at-home have involved house-to-house raids, indiscriminate arrests and harassment under the guise of maintaining order (Omokhunu, 2022). Similarly, online platforms and pro-Biafra content have also been targeted for censorship, including the removal of IPOB-affiliated social media accounts (BBC, 2021). The Nigerian government repeatedly blamed social media for enabling IPOB mobilisation and lobbied for stronger regulation and censorship of pro-Biafra content (Shosanya, 2021). These actions reflect a broader strategy to silence dissent and restrict separatist narratives from gaining traction nationally and internationally.

State Justifications for Repressive Response

States typically engage in repression as a mechanism to enforce quiescence and suppress popular dissent (Porta & Diani, 2015). Both authoritarian regimes and democratic states employ varying degrees of coercion to quell opposition, particularly when it is perceived as a threat to political stability (Kendall-Taylor, Lindstaedt & Frantz, 2019). The rationale is clear: internal dissent, if left unchecked, possesses the potential to spread, escalate into revolutionary movements, and ultimately destabilise or even unseat ruling regimes (United States Congress, 2004). In this

context, separatist social movements like the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) are often interpreted as real and immediate threats to the status quo. In line with this, the Nigerian state has offered multiple justifications for its repressive stance toward IPOB. These include the need to preserve national unity, uphold state sovereignty, prevent ethnic conflict, safeguard economic stability, and maintain internal security (Obiukwu & Njoku, 2024).

IPOB's self-assertion, which manifests in its symbolic use of flags, public declarations of autonomy, and parallel governance rhetoric, is viewed by the state as an affront to Nigeria's constitutional authority and territorial integrity. Consequently, the government frames repression not as an act of suppression, but rather as a legitimate strategy to assert control and avert the establishment of alternative power centres within its territory. Drawing from the traumatic memory of the Nigeria–Biafra civil war, the state contends that permitting IPOB's activities and separatist discourse risks reviving national fissures and threatening cohesion. Actions such as protests, sit-at-home directives, and confrontations with security forces are construed as subversive acts capable of inciting broader unrest. Furthermore, the establishment of the Eastern Security Network (ESN) – IPOB's paramilitary wing- has intensified state anxieties (Sahara Reporters, 2021). The government accuses ESN of orchestrating violent attacks against security personnel and infrastructure, and this reinforces its rationale for adopting pre-emptive repression to forestall what it perceives as an impending large-scale conflict (Sahara Reporters, 2024). However, these repressive responses from the state often have unintended consequences.

Implications of State Repression Against the IPOB

The Nigerian government's militarised approach to handling IPOB has frequently triggered violent confrontations between members of the movement and state security operatives, contributing to the escalation of violence and deepening ethnic polarisation across the country (Oji, 2020). This cycle of violence has resulted in significant loss of life, destruction of property, and a pattern of retaliatory attacks that continues to destabilise the south-eastern region. In addition to these security implications, numerous reports have highlighted widespread human rights abuses such as extra-judicial killings, arbitrary detentions, and the disproportionate use of force, all of which have severely tarnished Nigeria's international image. Paradoxically, the state's repressive posture has not deterred IPOB's momentum; rather, it has fuelled the movement's narrative of marginalisation and persecution. This, in turn, has attracted increased support and solidarity, both within Nigeria and across the diaspora, for IPOB's demand for self-determination (Ojo, 2024). By framing their struggle around injustice and state oppression, IPOB has garnered local sympathy and international attention.

The unrest, largely intensified by aggressive crackdowns, has had adverse economic repercussions. Regular sit-at-home orders have crippled socio-economic life in many parts of the southeast, affecting livelihoods, commerce, and service delivery (Vanguard, 2021). The state's response has not gone unnoticed by the international community. Organisations such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, alongside several foreign governments, have expressed concern over the Nigerian state's handling of the IPOB issue and its implications for human rights and democratic governance (Amnesty International, 2021). While repression may initially subdue dissent by instilling fear, it also carries the risk of radicalising social movements, particularly when

it is seen as unjust or disproportionate. As Apodaca (2017) observes, excessive repression often backfires by galvanising resistance, attracting wider public sympathy, and drawing international scrutiny that legitimises the very movements the state seeks to dismantle.

Case for engaging the IPOB

Adopting an accommodationist approach towards IPOB represents a more sustainable strategy for Nigeria, as it directly addresses the root causes of separatist agitation while fostering long-term stability. Through meaningful dialogue, constitutional reforms, and platforms for inclusive participation, the government can cultivate a genuine sense of belonging among Ndi-Igbo (Ahiuma-Young, 2024). This approach offers multiple strategic benefits: Firstly, it promotes national cohesion by reducing perceived marginalisation in the South-East and also rebuilds fractured trust between the region and the federal government (Ahiuma-Young, 2024). Secondly, replacing repression with political solutions would de-escalate tensions, minimise violent clashes with security forces, and create conditions for lasting regional stability (Njoku, 2023). Moreover, constructive engagement would enhance Nigeria's international reputation as a democratic state committed to peaceful conflict resolution. Economically, resolving the crisis could revitalise commerce in the South-East and boost national productivity (Njoku, 2023). Most critically, addressing legitimate grievances would prevent further radicalisation and stem the emergence of extremist factions in other regions (Ahiuma-Young, 2024). By opting for accommodation over repression, Nigeria has the opportunity to transform a cycle of conflict into a framework for inclusive nation-building. But continued suppression only guarantees perpetual political instability.

Conclusion

The IPOB movement, rooted in Igbo collective victimhood, has faced relentless state repression rather than dialogue or accommodation. The central thesis of the paper that state repression exacerbates, rather than resolves, separatist demands, was supported by evidence of militarisation, extra-legal killings and political exclusion. Rather than undermining IPOB's legitimacy, such coercive strategies have deepened grievances, radicalised support, and intensified its momentum. While these crackdowns tend to temporarily suppress dissent and preserve Nigeria's fragile unity, they incur grave long-term costs. Far from resolving grievances, repression fuels radicalisation, entrenches divisions, and perpetuates cycles of violence. In other words, the Nigerian government's militarised response has not only worsened tensions but also foreclosed opportunities for meaningful conflict resolution. By prioritising suppression over engagement, the state has undermined social cohesion while failing to address the structural inequities driving separatist sentiments. Continued insecurity and growing Biafran nationalism demonstrate the futility of repression. Thus, a shift towards accommodation through constitutional reforms, or power-sharing, would yield far greater dividends than the state's current counterinsurgency approach. Because sustainable peace demands addressing root causes, not just symptoms.

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