

**TERRITORIAL INTEGRITY AND SELF-DETERMINATION  
UNDER THE UNITED NATIONS CHARTER: THE RENEWED  
BIAFRA SECESSIONIST CLAIM IN NIGERIA**

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**ABSTRACT:** The tension between territorial integrity and the right to self-determination remains one of the most contested issues in international law, particularly in post-colonial states confronting renewed separatist movements. Yet, while international legal scholarship largely emphasizes the primacy of territorial integrity under the United Nations Charter, less attention has been paid to how domestic political grievances sustain secessionist mobilization even when legal claims lack international validity. This study examines this dilemma through the resurgence of the Biafra secessionist claim in Nigeria. Drawing on Relative Deprivation Theory, the study explains how perceived political, economic, and representational marginalization can generate collective grievances that sustain separatist agitation. Using qualitative documentary analysis, the research interrogates whether the Indigenous People of Biafra's (IPOB) demands align with international norms of self-determination, the socio-political drivers of the renewed secessionist agenda, and the implications for national stability. The findings indicate that, although international law strongly protects Nigeria's territorial integrity and does not legitimize unilateral secession, persistent perceptions of marginalization among sections of the Igbo population contribute to a continuing internal self-determination deficit. The study, therefore, argues that legal prohibition alone cannot extinguish secessionist claims when governance grievances remain unresolved, highlighting the need for inclusive governance, constitutional dialogue, and rights-based federal reforms.

**Keywords:** Territorial Integrity, Self-Determination, Biafra, IPOB, Relative Deprivation, United Nations Charter, Nigeria, Secessionist Mobilization.

### **Introduction**

Secessionist movements continue to challenge state sovereignty and national cohesion, particularly in postcolonial contexts where historical grievances intersect with contemporary political marginalization. In Nigeria, the resurgence of the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) highlights the enduring tension between the principle of self-determination under international law and the imperatives of territorial integrity enshrined in the United Nations Charter. While self-determination was formalized in the 1960 UN Declaration on Decolonization, contemporary claims increasingly emerge within established sovereign states rather than former colonies, raising complex questions about legitimacy, legality, and state responses (Burke, 2010; Crawford, 2007).

The agitation for a sovereign Biafra state reflects decades of unresolved historical, socio-political, and economic grievances among the Igbo population. Rooted partly in the perceived inequities surrounding the 1914 amalgamation of Nigeria's Northern and Southern Protectorates, these grievances intensified through post-independence constitutional crises, military coups, and the Nigerian Civil War of 1967–1970 (Nwanike, 2022; Tamuno, 1970). Neo-Biafra separatism, which re-emerged after Nigeria's return to democratic rule in 1999, has been sustained by perceptions of political exclusion, economic marginalization, and the incomplete implementation of post-war reconciliation and reconstruction initiatives (Ibeanu et al., 2016; Nwangwu, 2021).

In recent years, IPOB's strategies, including civil disobedience campaigns, sit-at-home orders, and threats of armed resistance, have intensified insecurity in Nigeria's South-East, disrupted regional economic activities, and attracted both national and international attention (Nwangwu et al., 2020; Okutu, 2021a). The Nigerian government has responded through a combination of coercive and conciliatory measures, including military operations such as Operation Python Dance and non-kinetic initiatives like Operation Atilogwu Udo and Operation Udoka, which emphasize community engagement, infrastructure support, and civil-military cooperation (The Nation, 2019). These responses reflect the broader challenge of balancing state security imperatives with the legal and moral claims associated with self-determination movements.

The implications of IPOB's agitation extend beyond immediate security concerns. The movement has heightened inter-ethnic tensions, disrupted commerce and investment, and raised questions about Nigeria's stability and international reputation. More broadly, the Biafra question illustrates the continuing tension between the legal doctrine of territorial integrity and the political appeal of self-determination claims in multi-ethnic states (Achonwa, 2024; Adibe, 2017).

This study argues that persistent perceptions of political and economic marginalization among segments of the Igbo population have produced a deficit in internal self-determination within Nigeria's federal structure. While international law, particularly the United Nations Charter, strongly protects Nigeria's territorial integrity and does not legitimize unilateral secession, these unresolved grievances sustain the political resonance of the Biafra secessionist claim despite its weak legal standing. Accordingly, the study examines whether IPOB's quest aligns with international norms of self-determination, explores the socio-political drivers sustaining the renewed secessionist agenda, and assesses the broader implications for national security and governance in Nigeria.

### **Historical Roots of Biafra Agitation,**

The perception of political and economic marginalization has long been cited as a central driver of separatist agitation among the Igbo of southeastern Nigeria. Historically, during the colonial era, no ethnic group wielded dominant power over others; rather, the colonial administration implemented policies that marginalized all groups uniformly, creating a level playing field for nationalist mobilization (Taiwo et al., 1974). Nationalist movements, therefore, sought to protect the rights and privileges of ethnic groups within colonial Nigeria through constitutional and loyal channels, rather than anti-government agitation. However, the post-independence era saw the

eruption of ethnic particularism, which had been suppressed under colonial rule, culminating in the Nigerian Civil War of 1967–1970 (Achebe, 1983; Tamuno, 1970).

Several scholars identify the structural economic policies of the post-war Nigerian state as critical to the persistence of Igbo marginalization. Achebe (1983) highlighted the 1968 currency change, which resulted in Igbo losses exceeding £50 million, effectively pauperizing the Igbo middle class while benefiting the federal treasury. The federal government's post-war state creation exercises further fragmented eastern solidarity, as noted by Okadigbo (2000), diluting the political coherence of the Igbo and allied ethnic groups. The selective siting of federal projects, industrial installations, and agricultural investments outside Igboland further entrenched perceptions of economic exclusion (Achebe, 1983; Nwakanma, 2000). Scholars agree that the cumulative effect of these policies rendered southeastern Nigeria economically marginalized and politically disempowered across successive regimes, from Gowon (1966–1975) to Buhari (2015–2023), with brief exceptions under the Jonathan administration (2010–2015) (Eme & Okeke, 2017; Bolaji, 2015).

The federal character principle, enshrined in Section 14(3) of the 1999 Nigerian Constitution, is intended to promote equitable representation across Nigeria's six geopolitical zones and ensure national unity. Yet, studies indicate consistent violations of this principle in federal appointments, with disproportionate favoring of northern elites under Buhari's administration, which exacerbated perceptions of exclusion among the Igbo (Anigam, 2015; Achonwa, 2024). Similarly, the exclusion of the Southeast from the allocation of major financial interventions, such as the \$22.7 billion loan in 2020, reinforced the notion of systematic economic marginalization (Achonwa, 2020).

This sense of victimization has deep historical roots. Prior to independence, Nnamdi Azikiwe decried colonial practices that disadvantaged the Igbo, highlighting political disenfranchisement, poor infrastructure, and social discrimination as evidence of systemic bias (Azikiwe, 1961; Ibeanu et al., 2016). The civil war further amplified collective trauma, with millions of Igbo civilians dying from starvation and war-related deprivation, while post-war reconstruction programs failed to prioritize Igboland adequately (Achonwa, 2024; Tamimo & Ukpabi, 1989; Harniet-Sievens, 2006). Policies such as the 1972 Nigerian Enterprises Promotion Decree (Indigenization Decree) and the handling of abandoned properties further exacerbated economic disenfranchisement (Obi-Ani, 2009; Ibeanu et al., 2026).

The cumulative effects of political, economic, and social marginalization have directly shaped the emergence and intensification of secessionist movements, including MASSOB (1999) and IPOB (2012). Research indicates that these movements draw strong support from the youth and economically frustrated populations, who perceive secession as a pathway to economic empowerment and socio-political recognition (Odikpo, 2015; Mbachu, 2021; Ibeanu et al., cited in Achonwa, 2024). Economic grievances are compounded by security concerns: the invasion of Igboland by militant Fulani herdsmen and Boko Haram operatives, attacks on Igbo populations in northern Nigeria, and recurrent ethno-religious violence have intensified feelings of vulnerability and victimhood (Achonwa, 2024; Adibe, 2017; Ekwowusi, 2020; Ugwulebo, 2003).

State responses to secessionist agitation have often been characterized by repression and militarization rather than negotiation, contributing to further radicalization. The Nigerian

government's designation of IPOB as a terrorist organization, mass arrests, and operations such as "Operation Python Dance" (2016) intensified confrontations and strengthened IPOB's narrative of victimization (Adebayo, 2022; Onyemaobi, Ngwu & Chris-Sanctus, 2023; Audu, 2021). The establishment of regional security outfits like Ebubeagu has produced mixed results: while intended to curb separatist agitation, insufficient funding and operational excesses have sometimes aggravated community tensions and incited local protests (Achonwa, 2024; Raji, 2022; Nwabughio & Alozie, 2022).

Social media platforms have emerged as critical arenas for mobilization, propaganda, and counter-narratives, allowing IPOB to sustain momentum and engage supporters domestically and internationally (Akamana, cited in Achonwa, 2024; Anele & Eke, 2023). Studies reveal that Facebook pages such as "IPOB Community Radio Biafra," "Freedom Biafra," and "The Biafra Restoration Voice" serve as central hubs for information dissemination, mobilization, and shaping perceptions of collective grievances (Ogbu & Bayo, 2019; Onayinka et al., 2019).

The literature demonstrates that the resurgence of Igbo secessionist agitation is a multifaceted phenomenon rooted in historical marginalization, post-war economic and political exclusion, security vulnerabilities, and the perceived failure of the state to address grievances through inclusive governance. The literature further indicates that the repressive strategies employed by the Nigerian government, coupled with the strategic use of social media by IPOB, have sustained the movement and heightened its potency. The interplay of historical injustice, economic deprivation, political exclusion, and security concerns provides a comprehensive understanding of why secessionist agitation remains salient in southeastern Nigeria.

### **International law on self-determination.**

The principle of self-determination of peoples occupies a central place in international law and human rights discourse. The Scottish Human Rights Commission (2024) underscores that peoples possess the inherent right to determine their own political status and freely pursue economic, social, and cultural development. Rooted in the aftermath of the two world wars and reaffirmed in the Trans-Atlantic Charter of 1941, self-determination remains a cornerstone of modern international law. While universally recognized, its application is complex and often contested, particularly in post-colonial states where ethnic and regional identities intersect with national sovereignty. Fundamentally, self-determination entails that ethnic nationalities enjoy freedom, equity, and justice within a federating state, including the latitude to develop independently and, where legally permissible, to secede through a referendum or democratic process (Scottish Human Rights Commission, 2024).

Silas (2022) and the Centre for Civil and Political Rights (2021) affirm that the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1966 and enforced from 1976, explicitly enshrines the right of self-determination in its Article 1. They observe that the ICCPR, alongside the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, forms the International Bill of Human Rights. Article 1 articulates that all peoples have the right to freely determine their political status and pursue their economic, social, and cultural development. It also emphasizes the right to

manage natural resources for mutual international benefit without deprivation. Significantly, state parties are obligated to promote and respect this right in conformity with the United Nations Charter, reflecting the normative and binding nature of self-determination in both domestic and international contexts. Currently, 173 states are parties to the ICCPR, demonstrating its global reach (Silas, 2022; Centre for Civil and Political Rights, 2021).

The case of Nnamdi Kanu, leader of the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), illustrates the tensions between the right to self-determination and state sovereignty. Arnell and Iloka (2021, 2025) analyze Kanu's extraordinary rendition from Kenya to Nigeria, emphasizing that it circumvented the political offence exception under the London Scheme for Extradition within the Commonwealth. Article 12 of the Scheme precludes extradition for political offences, distinguishing between 'pure' political offences (e.g., treason, sedition) and 'relative' political offences connected to uprisings. Kanu's rendition prevented Kenyan courts from evaluating whether his actions in support of Biafran independence, largely non-violent, constituted political offences. The studies further reveal violations of both Kenyan and Nigerian law, including the Extradition (Commonwealth Countries) Act 1968 and the Nigerian Constitution's provisions for liberty and habeas corpus. These procedural breaches underscore the irregularity and probable unlawfulness of his transfer, highlighting the intersection of domestic law, international obligations, and human rights protections (Arnell & Iloka, 2021, 2025).

The African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (2023) expands on these implications, noting that Kanu has initiated proceedings against Nigeria and Kenya before the Commission. Articles 6 and 7 of the African Charter protect against arbitrary arrest and guarantee a right to a fair trial, providing a forum for addressing violations arising from his extraordinary rendition. Beyond the immediate legal considerations, the case has broader political and socio-legal consequences. First, Kanu's treatment risks invigorating secessionist sentiment in South-East Nigeria by elevating him to a symbolic status among IPOB supporters. Second, Nigeria's international reputation is at stake, recalling historical precedents such as the 1984 attempted abduction of Umaru Dikko in London, which disrupted diplomatic relations for years. Kanu's simultaneous civil actions in Nigeria and Kenya, seeking damages and legal recognition of the illegality of his arrest, exemplify the enduring complexity of balancing the right to self-determination with the imperatives of state sovereignty (African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights, 2023).

The literature demonstrates that while international law robustly enshrines the principle of self-determination, its enforcement often collides with state interests. The IPOB quest for secession, as exemplified by the Kanu case, reveals the legal and diplomatic frictions inherent in pursuing self-determination within a federal state. These cases highlight the necessity for states to respect procedural and substantive human rights obligations while navigating politically sensitive claims of independence.

### **Political and Economic Marginalization**

A substantial body of scholarship explains the persistence of Biafran agitation through the lens of perceived political and economic marginalization of the Igbo within Nigeria's federal structure. Scholars generally agree that while the Nigerian civil war formally ended in 1970, many of the

structural grievances that underpinned the conflict were never fully resolved. Instead, post-war political arrangements and patterns of resource distribution have continued to generate perceptions of exclusion among segments of the South-East population (Adibe, 2017; Ibeanu et al., 2016).

One strand of the literature emphasizes political marginalization, arguing that the Igbo have remained underrepresented in key federal power structures since the end of military rule. Studies highlight the limited access of South-East political elites to strategic national offices and the broader perception that Nigeria's power-sharing arrangements disproportionately favor other geopolitical zones (Nwangwu, 2021; Achebe, 2012). This perception of political exclusion has contributed to a sense of collective grievance that separatist movements have strategically mobilized.

A related body of research focuses on economic marginalization, pointing to disparities in federal infrastructure investment, industrial development, and access to national economic opportunities. Analysts argue that despite the entrepreneurial dynamism of the region, federal development initiatives and large-scale infrastructure projects have historically been concentrated elsewhere, reinforcing the narrative of systemic neglect (Ibeanu et al., 2016; Adibe, 2017). These conditions are frequently cited by secessionist groups as evidence of structural injustice within the Nigerian federation.

Importantly, scholars caution that the power of these grievances lies less in their objective measurement than in their perceived legitimacy among local populations. Perceptions of marginalization whether empirically verifiable or politically constructed have become powerful mobilizing narratives for movements such as the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), sustaining separatist agitation even decades after the civil war (Nwangwu et al., 2020).

While this literature provides important insights into the socio-political drivers of neo-Biafra separatism, it often focuses primarily on domestic political dynamics. Less attention has been paid to how these grievances interact with the international legal framework governing self-determination and territorial integrity. This study therefore builds on existing scholarship by examining how internal perceptions of marginalization intersect with the legal constraints imposed by the United Nations Charter in shaping contemporary Biafran claims.

The Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) struggle for self-determination has had profound implications for Nigeria's national security, particularly in the Southeast. Chukwudi, Gberevbie, Abasilim, and Imhonopi (2019) examined the strategies employed by IPOB and the Nigerian government's responses, highlighting the effects on political stability. Using a descriptive cross-sectional survey design and a sample of 385 IPOB members across key locations in Imo, Anambra, Rivers, Cross River, Edo, Lagos, and Abuja, the study revealed that the federal government's primary approach to police and military action often involved excessive force. Such measures exacerbated regional insecurity and undermined democratic consolidation. The authors recommended policy reforms at both the federal and state levels, the establishment of a Peace and Reconciliation Commission, and increased inclusivity in governance as mechanisms to reduce agitation and foster political stability.

Further evidence of the security implications of IPOB's agitation is provided by Achonwa (2024), who cited an Amnesty International report (2021) documenting systematic human rights violations by Nigerian security forces. Between January and August 2021, security personnel engaged in mass arrests, unlawful killings, torture, secret detentions, and other forms of excessive force in Anambra, Abia, and Imo States. The Eastern Security Network (ESN), IPOB's armed wing, was both the target and instigator of violence, resulting in 52 reported unlawful killings, 62 cases of arbitrary arrest and ill-treatment, and hundreds of injuries and deaths in previous years (2015–2017). Security forces were also reported to disrupt hospital treatment of the wounded, leading to additional deaths and lifelong injuries. Such responses have deepened mistrust between citizens and the state, highlighting the complex interplay between human rights, counterinsurgency, and national security.

Recognizing the need for a multidimensional approach to restoring peace, Nwangwu (2025) analyzed military-led operations from *Operation Python Dance* through *Exercise Atilogwu Udo* to *Operation Udoka*, situating them within contemporary counterinsurgency and peacebuilding frameworks. The study, which drew on ACLED and Nextier Conflict Database datasets, reports from Amnesty International and the European Asylum Support Office, as well as military communiqués and scholarly sources, identified a strategic shift from purely kinetic operations to integrated strategies emphasizing community engagement, intelligence gathering, strategic communications, humanitarian assistance, and community policing. This evolution reflects modern counterinsurgency doctrine and demonstrates that sustainable peacebuilding in the Southeast requires simultaneous attention to security, governance, and social cohesion.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical lens adopted for this study is the Relative Deprivation Theory, initially propounded by Dollard et al. (1939) as a framework for understanding the link between socio-political and economic inequalities and the emergence of conflict, rebellion, and insurrection. Relative deprivation, as a concept, holds that frustration and discontent emerge when expectations exceed achievements, regardless of the absolute level of resources or rights available. Scholars such as Davies (1962), Gurr (1970), and Leeds (1978) have underscored that grievances, marginalization, and perceived injustices are central to mobilizing individuals and groups into protest, agitation, and sometimes violent confrontation. The theory posits that social movements and insurgencies are often responses to both real and perceived inequalities, spanning economic, political, and socio-cultural domains (Liddell and Teasley, 2023; Janse, 2023; Liddett et al., 2023).

In the context of Nigeria, Relative Deprivation Theory provides a robust explanation for the resurgence of neo-Biafran secessionist movements, particularly IPOB, by linking historical, political, and economic marginalization to contemporary insecurity in the Southeast. Following the Nigeria-Biafra war (1967–1970), the Igbo people of the Southeast experienced systemic political exclusion and limited access to strategic power positions within Nigeria. Over time, these historical grievances evolved into a broader consciousness of marginalization, fueled by uneven economic development, underinvestment in infrastructure, and perceived exclusion from national decision-making processes. These conditions collectively fostered a sense of frustration and relative deprivation among the Igbo populace (Nwangwu et al., 2020; Onuoha, 2011).

Specifically, IPOB's quest for secession can be interpreted through the relative deprivation lens as a response to four unresolved issues. Firstly, political exclusion from key positions of power within the Nigerian federation has cultivated a sense of inequality and diminished representation. Secondly, economic marginalization, reflected in underdeveloped infrastructure and limited access to state resources, has reinforced feelings of deprivation relative to other regions. Thirdly, the perceived failure of post-war peacebuilding programs, compounded by recurring state repression, has intensified grievances. Finally, the persistence of ethnic dominance by Hausa-Fulani and Yoruba elites in the political sphere has amplified the perception of injustice and the demand for alternative political arrangements (Ibeanu et al., 2016; Nwangwu, 2021; Adebani, 2005).

The rise of neo-Biafran groups including IPOB, MASSOB, and Biafran Zionist Movements demonstrates the operationalization of relative deprivation into collective action. While united in the goal of correcting historical injustices and attaining self-determination, these groups adopt diverse strategies ranging from civil disobedience, advocacy for referenda, and sit-at-home orders, to armed resistance via IPOB's militant wing, the Eastern Security Network (ESN) (Nwangwu et al., 2020; Nwangwu, 2023). The government's counterinsurgency measures, notably Operation Python Dance (2016–2018) and subsequent military operations, have often intensified rather than alleviated the underlying grievances, resulting in protracted insecurity, human rights violations, and the emergence of unknown gunmen insurgency (Njoku & Elekwa, 2021; Sahara Reporters, 2020).

Relative deprivation theory also elucidates the broader socio-economic implications of IPOB's agitation. Measures such as weekly sit-at-home orders since August 2021 following the arrest of Nnamdi Kanu have disrupted commerce, transportation, banking, and small- and medium-sized enterprises across the Southeast. The resultant economic losses, estimated at ₦10 billion per week, alongside increased unemployment, declining household incomes, and strained social services, highlight the tangible effects of perceived deprivation translating into collective action (Okutu, 2021a). Moreover, the disruption extends to national security, regional stability, and cross-border relations, particularly with Cameroon, emphasizing the theory's relevance in understanding how socio-political grievances can escalate into multidimensional security challenges.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study adopted an explanatory research design to investigate the factors underlying the resurgence of the Indigenous People of Biafra's (IPOB) secessionist agitation and its implications for Nigeria's national security. The design is suitable for examining cause-and-effect relationships in contexts where complex socio-political dynamics require interpretive analysis. The geographical focus of the study is South-East Nigeria, comprising Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu, and Imo states. The region is predominantly inhabited by the Igbo ethnic group and includes major commercial centres such as Aba, Enugu, and Onitsha, alongside significant agricultural and industrial activities and natural resource deposits, including oil, gas, and solid minerals (Achonwa, 2024).

The study relied exclusively on secondary data, drawing from a wide range of documentary sources. These included academic literature (books and peer-reviewed journal articles), legal and policy documents, government reports, media publications, and credible online materials addressing the

Biafra question, Nigerian federalism, and international law on self-determination. Documents were selected purposively based on their relevance to the research questions, scholarly credibility, and recency, with particular attention given to sources that examined the historical evolution of Biafra agitation, IPOB's activities, and Nigeria's legal and political responses.

Data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis, which involved systematically reviewing the selected documents to identify recurring themes, patterns, and relationships relevant to the study objectives. The analysis proceeded through three stages: document familiarization, thematic coding, and interpretation of patterns linking political marginalization, legal norms on self-determination, and the dynamics of secessionist mobilization. This analytical approach enabled the study to synthesize diverse sources while identifying convergent and divergent perspectives within the literature.

To ensure validity, the study relied on triangulation of multiple documentary sources to cross-check information and interpretations. Reliability was enhanced by prioritizing credible and verifiable materials and by applying consistent criteria in the selection and analysis of documents (Good & Hart, 1952, cited in Obasi, 1999). This methodological framework provides a systematic basis for examining IPOB's agitation, the Nigerian state's responses, and their broader implications for national security and governance.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **IPOB's Secessionist Claim and International Law on Self-Determination**

The findings of this study reveal that while the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) grounds its agitation in the internationally recognized principle of self-determination, the legal permissibility of unilateral secession under international law remains highly circumscribed. The right to self-determination is firmly embedded in modern international legal doctrine. It is articulated in Article 1(2) of the United Nations Charter (United Nations, 1945) and reaffirmed in common Article 1 of both the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, which provide that "all peoples have the right of self-determination" and may freely determine their political status and pursue their economic, social, and cultural development (United Nations, 1966a; 1966b). This principle is further reinforced in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations, 1948), and regionally within Africa under Article 20 of the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (OAU, 1981).

However, contemporary international law distinguishes between internal and external self-determination. Internal self-determination refers to the right of peoples to meaningful political participation, representation, and equitable access to governance within an existing state. External self-determination, often equated with secession, is traditionally recognized in situations of decolonization, foreign occupation, or alien domination (Cassese, 1995; Crawford, 2006). Outside these contexts, international law generally prioritizes the principle of territorial integrity of sovereign states (United Nations, 1970). The 1970 Declaration on Principles of International Law concerning Friendly Relations explicitly protects territorial integrity where a state possesses a government representing the whole people without distinction (United Nations, 1970).

The IPOB movement frames its demands within a discourse of systemic political marginalization, economic exclusion, and historical injustice in South-East Nigeria. From a doctrinal standpoint, such claims fall primarily within the realm of internal self-determination. The legal threshold for a right to unilateral “remedial secession” remains unsettled in international law and is considered exceptional rather than general (Crawford, 2006). The International Court of Justice’s advisory opinion on Kosovo clarified that international law does not explicitly prohibit declarations of independence, but it did not establish a general right to secession (ICJ, 2010). Thus, while IPOB’s invocation of self-determination is normatively grounded in international instruments, the legal pathway to recognized statehood remains uncertain and heavily contingent on political recognition and contextual legitimacy.

The findings further indicate that state responses to separatist movements carry significant international legal implications. The petition before the African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights concerning the extraordinary rendition of IPOB leader Nnamdi Kanu raises questions under Articles 6 and 7 of the African Charter, which guarantee protection from arbitrary arrest and the right to fair trial (OAU, 1981). Allegations of procedural violations may strengthen narratives of political repression, thereby reinforcing grievances that fuel separatist mobilization. As Gurr (1970) suggests within the relative deprivation framework, perceived injustice—particularly when linked to state coercion—can intensify collective dissent rather than suppress it.

Importantly, Nigeria is a state party to the ICCPR and the African Charter, and these instruments impose obligations to ensure political participation, non-discrimination, and fair judicial process. The 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria similarly commits the state to fostering national integration and preventing domination of one group over another (Section 15). Where significant segments of the population perceive exclusion from meaningful participation, the legitimacy of internal self-determination may be called into question, even if external secession remains legally constrained.

The results show a critical paradox. IPOB’s claims resonate with the normative language of international human rights law, yet international law simultaneously safeguards Nigeria’s territorial integrity. The sustainability of the Nigerian state, therefore, depends less on militarized suppression of secessionist agitation and more on strengthening internal mechanisms of inclusion, constitutionalism, and equitable development. In this regard, the study advances a nuanced conclusion: while international law does not provide an automatic legal entitlement to secession for IPOB, persistent deficits in internal self-determination risk deepening instability and international scrutiny.

### **Structural Drivers of Secessionist Agitation in South-East Nigeria**

The findings of this study indicate that the persistence of secessionist demands championed by the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) is rooted in longstanding perceptions of structural political and economic marginalization within the Nigerian federation. These perceptions are not merely rhetorical but are reinforced by distributive patterns in political power, federal appointments, infrastructural allocation, and security architecture. As Nwakanma (2000) observes, the post-civil war reconstruction era was characterized by the siting of major federal industries, irrigation

schemes, and large-scale agricultural projects outside the Igbo heartland, contributing to what has been described as economic stagnation and limited federal presence in the South-East. Such patterns, whether intentional or systemic, have sustained a narrative of exclusion that resonates strongly within the region's political consciousness.

Empirical indicators reviewed in this study further reinforce these claims. In terms of local government distribution, the South-East possesses 95 out of Nigeria's 774 constitutionally recognized local government areas, the lowest among the six geopolitical zones (Itumo, Nwobashi & Offor, 2018). Given that revenue allocation and federal representation are partly influenced by local government structures, this numerical disparity is often interpreted as institutional disadvantage. Similarly, federal infrastructural spread particularly road networks and capital project allocations reveals uneven development patterns. Budgetary analysis of the 2016 fiscal year shows that the South-East received the lowest allocation for developmental projects (₦28.22 billion, representing 9.8% of zonal distribution), compared to higher allocations in the North-West (25.7%) and North-Central (18.8%) zones (Yesufu, 2016). While such allocations may reflect population size, landmass, or strategic considerations, their political interpretation within the South-East has reinforced perceptions of deliberate neglect.

Political leadership distribution also features prominently in the marginalization discourse. A historical survey of Nigeria's heads of state and presidents indicates that since independence in 1960, the South-East has occupied the executive office for comparatively shorter cumulative periods relative to the North-West and South-West zones (Akinpelu, 2025). Although leadership rotation has never been constitutionally mandated along strict geopolitical lines, the symbolic significance of executive representation in Nigeria's ethno-federal structure cannot be understated. The absence of equitable rotation is frequently cited as evidence of structural imbalance within the federation.

Representation within the military hierarchy presents a similar pattern. Data on the geopolitical spread of Chiefs of Army Staff between 1963 and 2024 indicate that only two office holders originated from the South-East out of twenty-nine appointments (Premium Times Nigeria, 2024; Agbulu, 2024). In contrast, the North-West and North-Central zones have recorded significantly higher representation. Given the historical sensitivity of military power in Nigeria's political development, limited representation within the upper echelon of the armed forces contributes to broader anxieties regarding national inclusion and security trust deficits. These trends appear to contradict the spirit of the federal character principle enshrined in Section 14(3) of the 1999 Constitution, which mandates equitable representation to promote national unity and prevent domination by any particular group.

The cumulative effect of these structural imbalances aligns with the Relative Deprivation Theory underpinning this study. When a group perceives a consistent gap between expected entitlements, political participation, economic opportunity, infrastructural development and observable outcomes, frustration and collective mobilization are likely (Gurr, 1970). IPOB's emergence can therefore be interpreted as an institutional expression of these aggregated grievances rather than an isolated radical movement. Initially operating through media platforms such as Radio Biafra, the

movement gained increased visibility and assertiveness after 2015, reflecting both changing political dynamics and intensifying regional dissatisfaction.

Importantly, this study does not conclude that disparities automatically justify secession under domestic or international law. Rather, the evidence suggests that unresolved structural inequalities, whether real or perceived, continue to fuel demands for restructuring, autonomy, or outright independence. The absence of comprehensive transitional justice mechanisms following the Nigeria–Biafra war (1967–1970) has further allowed historical grievances to persist across generations. Consequently, IPOB’s agitation represents not merely a contemporary political movement but a manifestation of deeper systemic tensions within Nigeria’s federal arrangement.

The unending issues affecting the Igbo of South-East Nigeria, including political underrepresentation, limited federal infrastructure, uneven budgetary allocations, and marginal presence within national security leadership, constitute significant explanatory variables in understanding the persistence of secessionist sentiment. Addressing these structural deficits through inclusive governance, equitable resource distribution, and credible federal reforms may prove more sustainable than securitized containment in mitigating the resurgence of separatist mobilization.

### **Escalating Insecurity and the Criminalization of Secessionist Agitation**

The findings further reveal that the persistence of IPOB-related agitation has significantly contributed to the deterioration of security conditions in South-East Nigeria. Beyond peaceful protests and civil disobedience, the region has witnessed increasing incidents of violence, kidnappings, assassinations, and enforcement of illegal sit-at-home orders attributed to armed actors and suspected enforcers. For instance, a report by *Punchng.com* (12 January 2022) documented the abduction of passengers travelling from Uyo to Lagos after gunmen intercepted their commercial vehicle in Isiala Mbanjo Local Government Area of Imo State. Notably, the victims’ belongings were reportedly left behind, suggesting that the operation was targeted rather than opportunistic. In a separate incident, the traditional ruler of Nguru community in Aboh Mbaise Local Government Area of Imo State, Eze James Nnamdi, was shot dead by hoodlums allegedly linked to sit-at-home enforcement activities.

These incidents illustrate the mutation of secessionist agitation into fragmented armed violence, often attributed to so-called “unknown gunmen.” While IPOB officially distances itself from certain violent acts, the securitized environment has blurred the lines between political agitation, criminal opportunism, and militia-style enforcement. The proliferation of violence has undermined economic activities, eroded traditional authority structures, and deepened public fear within the region. From a conflict dynamics perspective, such developments align with patterns where prolonged political grievances, coupled with heavy-handed state responses, create fertile ground for non-state armed actors to emerge (Gurr, 1970).

The enforcement of weekly sit-at-home orders, initially framed as a civil disobedience strategy, has evolved into coercive compliance in several instances, leading to attacks on civilians, businesses, and public officials who defy directives. This has further complicated the legitimacy of the self-determination claim, as the normative framing of rights-based agitation increasingly intersects with

human security concerns. The internationalization of the conflict, particularly through diaspora mobilization and human rights litigation, has also drawn global scrutiny to Nigeria's internal security management and rule-of-law compliance.

## DISCUSSION

The results of this study are best understood within the explanatory logic of Relative Deprivation Theory as advanced by Dollard et al. (1939) and further developed by Gurr (1970). The theory posits that collective violence and political agitation are not necessarily products of absolute deprivation but rather of perceived discrepancies between expected entitlements and actual socio-political realities. In this regard, the IPOB secessionist movement reflects a widening expectation–achievement gap among segments of the Igbo population in South-East Nigeria. The expectations rooted in constitutional guarantees of federal character, political inclusion, and equitable development are contrasted with perceived patterns of underrepresentation in executive leadership, national security architecture, federal project allocation, and infrastructural development.

The data presented in the study concerning local government distribution, federal budgetary allocations, executive leadership rotation, and military appointments reinforce the perception of systemic imbalance within Nigeria's federal arrangement. Even where disparities may be legally or administratively justified by demographic or strategic considerations, the subjective interpretation within the South-East is one of persistent marginalization. Relative Deprivation Theory emphasizes precisely this psychological dimension: it is the perception of injustice, rather than objective measurement alone, that generates frustration capable of mobilizing collective action. IPOB's rhetoric of exclusion and historical injustice, therefore, resonates because it articulates widely shared grievances anchored in post-civil war integration deficits and contemporary governance concerns.

Furthermore, the findings regarding escalating insecurity, kidnappings, targeted assassinations, and coercive enforcement of sit-at-home orders illustrate the progressive radicalization dynamic anticipated by the theory. As Gurr (1970) argues, when grievances remain unaddressed and are compounded by coercive or securitized state responses, frustration may intensify and manifest in more confrontational or violent forms. The arrest and extraordinary rendition controversies surrounding IPOB leadership, alongside heavy military deployments in the region, may have reinforced narratives of repression, thereby strengthening mobilization rather than diffusing tensions. In this sense, the security crisis in the South-East can be interpreted as both a symptom and a consequence of unresolved structural grievances.

Importantly, the theory does not suggest that deprivation automatically justifies secession or legitimizes violence. Rather, it provides a causal framework for understanding why segments of a population may gravitate toward separatist movements when they perceive systematic exclusion from political power and economic opportunity. The study's findings therefore demonstrate that IPOB's agitation is less an isolated extremist project and more a manifestation of accumulated grievances embedded in Nigeria's federal political economy.

### **Major Findings of the Study**

The study establishes three principal findings.

First, the quest for self-determination as articulated by IPOB is normatively grounded in established international legal instruments recognizing the right of peoples to self-determination, including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights. However, while these instruments affirm internal self-determination, they do not automatically confer an unconditional right to unilateral secession under international law.

Second, the persistence of secessionist demands in South-East Nigeria is strongly linked to structural grievances, including perceived political underrepresentation, limited federal infrastructural presence, inequitable distribution of national projects, and low representation in key security institutions. These structural imbalances reinforce collective perceptions of marginalization and relative deprivation, thereby sustaining mobilization for autonomy or secession.

Third, the study finds that IPOB's agitation has become a significant contributor to insecurity in the region, with spillover implications for Nigeria's national stability. Violent enforcement of sit-at-home orders, kidnappings, assassinations, and clashes with security forces have intensified instability, disrupted economic life, and attracted international human rights attention. The securitization of the movement, rather than resolving underlying grievances, appears to have deepened distrust between the state and segments of the South-East population.

These findings suggest that while IPOB's secessionist claim is situated within a recognizable international rights discourse, its domestic manifestation has evolved into a complex security challenge. Addressing the crisis, therefore, requires a dual strategy: strengthening inclusive governance and internal self-determination mechanisms while simultaneously restoring law, order, and civilian protection within the framework of constitutionalism and international human rights obligations.

### **Conclusion**

This study examined the juridical and political tension between territorial integrity and self-determination within the normative framework of the United Nations Charter, applying this debate to the resurgence of the Biafran secessionist claim in Nigeria. Specifically, it investigated whether the Indigenous People of Biafra's (IPOB) agitation can be sustained under contemporary international law, why the movement persists despite legal constraints, and the implications for Nigeria's national security.

The findings indicate that, within the prevailing international legal order, territorial integrity remains the dominant norm. Interpretations of Article 1(2) and Article 2(4) of the United Nations Charter, together with the Friendly Relations Declaration (UNGA Resolution 2625), affirm that external self-determination in the form of unilateral secession is permissible only under exceptional circumstances such as colonial domination, foreign occupation, or the systematic denial of

meaningful internal self-determination. On this basis, IPOB's claim does not meet the legal threshold for remedial secession, and Nigeria's territorial integrity therefore remains protected under international law.

However, the persistence of the Biafra movement demonstrates that legal invalidity alone does not eliminate the political appeal of secessionist claims. Perceptions of political and economic marginalization among segments of the Igbo population have sustained the narrative of internal self-determination deficits within Nigeria's federal system. Consequently, the continued resonance of Biafran agitation reflects broader challenges of domestic governance and political inclusion rather than a breakdown of the international legal order.

In light of these findings, several policy implications emerge. First, Nigeria can strengthen its alignment with the principles of the United Nations Charter by deepening internal self-determination through inclusive governance, equitable federal resource distribution, and transparent political representation across national institutions. Such measures reduce the conditions under which secessionist narratives gain legitimacy.

Second, given the enduring legacy of the Nigerian Civil War, a structured constitutional dialogue on federal restructuring may serve as a preventive mechanism against recurring separatist mobilization. Framing such dialogue as a process of strengthening the federal compact rather than conceding to secessionist demands may help address long-standing grievances while preserving national unity.

Third, the protection of territorial integrity under Article 2(4) of the Charter must be balanced with Nigeria's obligations under international human rights law. Security responses to separatist agitation should therefore remain proportionate, legally accountable, and consistent with rule-of-law principles. A rights-compliant security framework reduces the risk that state responses themselves reinforce narratives of systemic exclusion.

Ultimately, the stability of territorial integrity in multi-ethnic states such as Nigeria depends not only on legal doctrine but also on the credibility of domestic governance arrangements that ensure meaningful political inclusion and equitable participation within the state.

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