

## **Framing, Separatist Agitation and the Nigerian State: A Study of the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB)**

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### **Abstract**

*There has been a longstanding agitation in the South-East Nigeria for the break-up of Nigeria. This desire has been motivated by both individuals and groups. Groups such as the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) and the Biafran Zionist Movement (BZM) have been influential in promoting the idea for the Biafran State, yet these groups have been weakened over time by internal rift and the might of the Nigerian state. Moreover, some of the movements have become moribund while others have been struggling for legitimacy. IPOB is a neo-separatist movement with increasing legitimacy regardless of the efforts of the Nigerian government to suppress its activities considered threat to national security. This study employs the framing theory to examine the logic of the IPOB campaigns and its supporters. The theory highlights the tripod relationship between IPOB, its narratives, and supporters, and the reasons such narratives are emotionally appealing and compelling enough to trigger collective action and sympathy for a common course. This study employs broad sources of data including peer-reviewed journals, official documents and, media sources. It concludes that IPOB enjoys mass following because of its strategic logic of creating quality framing and the ability to align its propaganda with its audience. This paper recommends the need for good optics of governance to counter the narratives of IPOB and the need for negotiated political solutions with the leadership of IPOB and relevant stakeholders.*

**Keywords:** Framing, IPOB, Nigeria, Separatist Agitation

### **Introduction**

Separatist agitation is a recurring decimal in many countries including Nigeria. Such agitations have been experienced in Indonesia, India, Philippines, Thailand, Northern Ireland, Southern Sudan, Ethiopia, among other nations (Obagbinoko, 2018). Several years after the end of the bloody civil war (1967 -1970) which threatened to balkanise Nigeria, separatist agitations have risen in different parts of the country. The Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) in the South-South geopolitical zone and the erstwhile restiveness of the Odua People's Congress (OPC) in South-West Nigeria forms part of these agitations. The most pronounced agitation for secession comes from the South-East Nigeria where the majority of the citizens of the zone aspire for a Biafran state (Abada et al., 2020). The Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) and the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) have been considered as the most remarkable faces of the struggle.

The agitations for self-determination by various ethno-regional groups in Nigeria have in many instances led to armed conflict and confrontation with the agents of the Nigerian state. This has often time constituted a threat to the security of the Nigerian State and its democratization process. Overtime, the popularity and strength of these groups have been reduced drastically except for the IPOB. Since 2015, a neo-Biafran independence agitation championed by the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) has arisen with greater viciousness and determination to ensure that the South-East zone secedes from Nigeria (Abada et al., 2020). The group has resorted to massive street protests, violent destructions and, attacks on civilians who do not subscribe to their ideology or 'directives.' Security agents and institutions of the Nigerian state are also targeted by the group (Abada et al., 2020).

Regardless of the violent path of IPOB, the group is attracting great public support and sympathy. It draws much support through the media and in the streets across the South-eastern states (Chime-Nganya et al., 2017). This study aims, through the framing theory to examine the processes in which IPOB draws its support. It explains the relationship between IPOB, its narratives, and followers. This study highlights the reasons why IPOB unlike other separatist groups, is witnessing increasing popularity regardless of all attempts to outlaw it and its activities. Lessons can be drawn from this study on how dissident movements, rebel groups and other ant-state groups attract sympathy, followership, and loyalty towards a common course.

### **Research Method**

The study is an exploratory study which incorporated secondary sources of data which includes published sources such as peer-reviewed journals, official reports and documents and, media sources. Data was analysed through thematic analyses, especially to explain the logic of IPOB framing. A major limitation of the study is the inability to conduct an in-depth interview with key IPOB members because of the security risk involve in the research. However, data was obtained from the group's public comments in the media.

### **Debates on the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB)**

Previous studies observe that agitation for the realisation of Biafra revolves around diverse issues including political and socio-economic alienation as well as other grievances. Scholars have argued that since the agitation for the Republic of Biafra began in 1967, the demands and issues shaping the agitation have largely remained the same (Okoli, 2018; Obagbinoko, 2018). Much of the grievances igniting the agitation have been attributed directly to the political and socio-economic marginalisation of the Igbo people of South-East Nigeria (Menas Associates, 2015).

From a political perspective, separatist agitators from the South-East are concerned about the consideration of Igbo people for political appointments at the federal level into key political positions in Nigeria. There is a feeling that these appointments are skewed in favour of other sections of the country to the detriment of the Igbo people and this has led to grievances that further aggravated the agitation especially, with the emergence of the President Buhari-led administration in 2015 (Menas Associates, 2015). Despite President Buhari's consideration of the people of Igbo extraction for the statutory ministerial positions and other political appointments, the mistrust persists. Thus, it is believed that the separatist agitators gained ground in part because of the

perception that President Buhari is biased against the South-East. Supporting this claim, Chike *et al.* (2021), observed that the activities of IPOB are attributed to perceived injustice orchestrated by the Nigerian authorities on the South-East and South-South Zones of Nigeria, manifested in total lack of infrastructural development, poor investment, neglect in resources distribution, skewed railways, the militarisation of the zones and lot of others. Okoli (2018) corroborates the marginalisation narrative and observed that the South-East zone is poorly represented at the federal level and that political marginalisation gives rise to economic alienation because political position means access to economic resources in the Nigerian context. Okoli (2018) further observes that South-East candidates are the least selected in military enrolments and appointments to command positions. More so that when it comes to the appointment of Service Chiefs a number of senior ranking officers are retired to avoid the emergence of officers of Igbo descent.

On the socio-economic front, there is a feeling that the South-East is suffering from deficient and decrepit infrastructure and widespread youth unemployment that is resulting in economic frustration – lending credence to the claim that Nigeria’s central government has never fully reconstructed and rehabilitated the zone long after the civil war (Obagbinoko, 2018). Adetula (2015), sees the elite as the main drivers of the Biafran agitation. He views the upsurge in Biafra separatism to involve local elites negotiating for power. For him, Local elites from the region appeal to the sentiments of the local population and play on their emotions to attain personal goals – thereby, creating greater political space for themselves (elites). Similarly, Owen (2016), opined that the Biafra separatist agitation is a bid by political actors who have lost access to power to find their way back to the corridors of power. He believes that the recent surge in Biafra separatism since the emergence of the Buhari-led administration is sponsored due to the political change experienced at the federal level following the defeat of President Goodluck Jonathan of the People’s Democratic Party (PDP) whom the South-east offered with a majority vote. He further notes that the change of government has negatively affected the career of many politicians from the region who no longer have access to “juicy” appointments at the Centre, making them gullible to deploy instability as a form of political leverage and channel of striking deals with the federal government and a route to political inclusion.

Okonta (2012) averred that there is a link between the re-emergence of Biafra separatist agitation to the interaction between history, institutions, and political actors. He explained that even though Nigeria is a democratic state, the nation’s political institutions have remained largely authoritarian, restraining political actors and at the same time, allowing them the opportunity to mobilise people along ethnic, instead of civic lines. He further observed that political actors are compelled to go underground into armed dissent as a result of obstacles to their ethnic project as well as their inability to utilize civic strategies to build a winning electoral coalition. The effects of economic frustration also contribute to separatist agitation in Nigeria. The recent struggle for self-determination by young people from the South-East amounts to the expression of resentment over their material condition. This condition is attributed to the broader contradictions of the Nigerian political economy that is perceived as ethnic exclusion. Scholars in this school of thought believe that the agitation for Biafra is a political expression of the economic frustrations of young people. The agitators perceive the frustrations to be the result of the marginalisation of the South-East in national

economic life. The socio-economic reality of the region (contracting economic opportunities) has caused many young people in the region to be susceptible to separatist agitations. This is made worse by the perception that other parts of the country are unduly favoured by the central government (Chike *et al.* 2021).

### **A Theoretical Review of Framing Theory**

Framing and frames are primary means through which people make sense of a complicated world as argued by Gregory Bateson and Erving Goffman (Entman & Rojecki, 1993). Framing has been defined as the way events and issues are organised and made sense of, especially by media and its managers and stakeholders (Devreese, 2005). According to Abubakar and Faruk (2018), framing is related to psychology and sociology and is based on the assumption that the way and manner an issue is presented in news reports can influence how it is understood by the public. Framing's psychological origin is credited to the experimental work of Kahneman and Tversky. The theory also helps to explain how selected aspects of perceived reality are made more salient while communicating with the public in a manner that emphasises the definition of a particular problem, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or recommended solution (Entman, 1993). However, problem definition is the thrust of this theory.

Scholars such as Norris *et al.* (2003), noted that framing is concerned about interpretive structures that journalists deploy to set particular events within their broader context. The essence of framing is to select and prioritise some facts, images, or developments over others, thereby consciously and/or unconsciously promoting one particular interpretation of events (Price *et al.*, 1995). Framers do not seek to manipulate people or persuade them to adopt new beliefs, but rather to activate and amplify beliefs, values, and orientations which people already have (Thomas *et al.*, 1997).

Framing is a micro-level mechanism that connects structural circumstances (political, economic, social, and cultural context) with the protest behaviour of agitations. In the absence of opportunities and grievances, the formation of a protest movement would be impossible and unnecessary. Nevertheless, as the theory indicates, agitations and framing processes are not independent of structural circumstances but are influenced by them. Obvious opportunities, widely-known grievances, patronage networks, and established cultural understandings influence framers and framing processes.

This theory is relevant to this study because it explains how media reportage of separatist agitation contributes to shaping the perception of the people. Thus, the way the secessionist agitation is framed in Nigeria, the pictures that are presented, and the logical account of the event that has transpired have some worth influence on listeners and readers of newspapers. Neo-Biafran secessionists have extensively used framing as its strategic logic to communicate events, made claims, and successfully mobilised their audience to buy into their agenda, thereby, causing their mobilization efforts to resonate in the South-east region. The online radio Biafra and other media platforms have been deployed to prioritise some facts and appeal to the emotions of the people of the region and even those in the diaspora to trigger collective action and sympathy for a common independence agitation.

Media interpretation of realities in the South-East have been used to activate and amplify age long beliefs, values, and orientations that economic and political marginalisation of the Igbo people is not subtle but an active and deliberate strategy designed and adopted by successive Nigerian governments to checkmate the ascendancy as well as recovery of the region from the devastation of the Nigeria-Biafra civil war. More so, that the region was leading in economic activity in Nigeria and beyond (Nsoedo 2019). This narrative has been appealing to the people of the region, thereby causing a collective action in the form of agitation for an independent Biafra.

### **Separatist Movement in Nigeria and the Emergence of IPOB**

Nigeria is characterised by widespread ethno-religious and regional struggle and agitations for a fair share of socio-economic and political opportunities (Anjide, 2018). This situation widens the cleavages that culminate into calls for secession and the formation of a separatist movement. The agitation for self-actualisation started in May 1953 when the Northern Region of Nigeria indicated its desire to secede in rejection of the motion moved by the delegates from Southern Nigeria for Nigeria's independence in 1956 (Adangor, 2017). The call for secession was informed by the fear of domination by the Southern region as the Northern region was ill-prepared to compete politically and economically with the South.

With the independence of Nigeria from the British in 1960, Nigeria experienced another brand of agitation for self-governance which came from the Igbo ethnic group (Adangor, 2017). This agitation resonates from the long-drawn feeling of marginalisation by the Igbo people which has been a source of crisis and heated political tension in Nigeria (Okoli, 2018). The majority of the Igbos accused other regions, especially the predominantly Hausa-Fulani ethnic groups of the denial of sense of belonging and systematic alienation of the Igbos in leadership positions in Nigeria's central government (Okoli, 2018). The grievances would later motivate a coup de' tat orchestrated by a military junta from the Eastern region which killed the majority of politicians from the North on 15<sup>th</sup> January, 1966. The coup also instigated a retaliatory coup on 29<sup>th</sup> July, 1966 led by military officers of Northern Nigeria extraction. This situation heightened the tension between the two regions and gradually led to a civil war with Col Odumegwu Ojukwu, a senior Nigerian military officer declaring the breakaway of the Biafran Republic from the Nigerian federation. The declaration of Biafra Republic escalated into over 2 years (July 1967 – January 1970) of bloody civil war between the Federal Republic of Nigeria and the rebelling Biafran Republic (Adangor, 2017). Great number of unaccounted casualties was experienced resulting from the war, with the Igbos suffering more damages.

After the civil war, a reconstruction programme was designed and implemented by the Military administration of General Yakubu Gowon (Onuoha 2018). Regardless of the reconstruction programmes, regional suspicion and the desire for secession appeared unquenched. This situation renewed with the return of democracy in 1999 after almost four decades of military rule (Adangor, 2017). This is evident with the advent of Three major groups namely; OPC, a pan-Yoruba movement advocating for the secession of the South-western Nigeria and, MEND, a group in the South-South zone agitating for the control of its resources, independence from Nigeria and social justice.

The third is MASSOB, it emerged as a resurgence of the Biafran agitation in 1999 (Adangor, 2017). MASSOB triggered great Igbo nationalism especially amongst young Igbos. The movement was created by Ralph Uwazuruike, an Indian-trained lawyer. Uwazuruike situated the headquarters of the movement in Okwe, Imo State. He established several branches across South-eastern Nigeria where they helped in mobilising support for the course of the movement (Okonta, 2012). MASSOB abhors the symbols of the Nigerian state and had several clashes with Nigerian security agents. Overtime, MASSOB got weakened as a result of the superior military might of the Nigerian state, internal rift and heightened mass disenchantment of Uwazuruike's rapport with politicians. This situation bolstered some pro-Biafrans and the faction within MASSOB. A notable faction of the MASSOB was the Biafran Zionist Movement (BZM) which was led by Benjamin Igwe Onwuka. The notoriety of BZM intensified in 2012 and was suppressed by the Nigerian forces with several arrests and trials, consequently, some of the group members other pro-Biafrans merged to support Nnamdi Kanu in the formation of IPOB in 2012 (Okonta, 2012).

The majority of the IPOB followers are the younger generation of the Igbos who imagine the pains of the Biafran war and see the need of salvaging the Igbo nation from its 'trepidation and tribulation' orchestrated by the Nigerian state especially, the 'Hausa-Fulani oligarchy.' This has coincided with the burgeoning youth population in the South-eastern Nigeria. The youth form huge part of the population of the South-eastern region. This demographic factor has been harvested by IPOB for the achievement of its goals.

### **IPOB Strategies and Framing Process**

Communication is the major strategy employed by IPOB to win the hearts and minds of the public. Radio Biafra plays a key role in achieving this task. It serves as a virtual public square where the leaders of the movement enlighten and discuss with their followers. The online platform is a connecting platform for all audience in Nigeria and in the diaspora, who reside in different countries (Ekpo, 2018; Maiangwa, 2021). Social media platforms are used to reach out to all Biafra audience. Although, some social media accounts of the group such as Twitter has been closed, the group operates more on Facebook. It has different pages on Facebook. Figure 1 below is a picture of one of its numerous pages.

Figure 1 is a page of Biafra Radio bearing the picture of the IPOB founder Mazi Nnamdi Kanu. The page has 1.626 million reviews from its followers. The page is a convenient platform to interact with followers on various subjects relating to the movement. IPOB employs the use of inflammatory, derogatory, and inciting statements in the forms of hate speech and rhetorical comments to achieve their objective. Supporting this claim, Owen (2016) avers that IPOB has at various times resorted to inciting rhetoric through its radio. Maiangwa (2021) suggests that Radio Biafra through the internet has mobilised millions of Igbo indigenes in Nigeria and in the diaspora to support and advance separatist agitation. This may also explain why the Biafra agitation is appealing to young people who are active on social media.



Figure 1: Page of Biafra Radio on Facebook

Source: Radio Biafra (2021)

As Radio Biafra provides the needed platform for mobilisation of individuals and the interfacing between IPOB and its supporters, it is important to analyse the IPOB frame and the framing process. To understand the frame and framing process in the case of IPOB, we argue that frame, connecting frame and audience and, quality of framers is critical. Table 1 below illustrates the IPOB’s logic of framing.

Table 1: IPOB’s logic of framing.

<b>STEP ONE: FRAME</b>
<b>Narratives:</b> Alienation of the Igbos and subjection to ethnic cleansing
<b>STEP TWO: FRAME AND AUDIENCE</b>
<b>Compatibility:</b> 1. Narratives created by IPOB about political alienation, hatred and plan to stop the Igbos from progressing correspond to the political, social and economic orientations of the majority of the Igbos towards the Nigerian State. 2. The IPOB propoganda focuses on issues such as insecurity, political alienation, bitter experiences of civil war which their audiences interpret within the socio-economic and political space.
<b>Counter-framer</b> The excessive use of force against IPOB and its supporters is unjust and partial
<b>STEP THREE: QUALITY OF FRAMERS</b>
<b>Competence:</b> Mazi Nnamdi Kanu’s ability to mobilize Igbos within and outside Nigeria, ability to use radio Biafra and the non-partisanship of the IPOB credible and authoritative to the audience.
<b>Charismatic Quality:</b> Mazi Nnamdi Kanu’s charisma and personal appeal attract the attention and support of most pro-Biafran Igbos.
<b>Frame Consistency:</b> Internally, the majority of IPOB followers do not see the movement as self-contradictory. The movement are externally logical in the sense that their actions could be seen by non-Igbos as a reaction to the fragility of the Nigerian state.

The first step adopted by the IPOB is to create a narrative which will further appeal to the emotions of the Igbo population and resurrect ethnic sentiment. The leaders of

IPOB include horrific images and videos of the Nigeria-Biafra war of 1967 in their messages and propaganda. This usually arouses emotions and strong sentiments and tends to becloud and suppress rational national debate on the Biafran issue. The movement usually resonates great sympathy and following with comments such as:

“Our people are steadily being marginalized, victimized, kidnapped, gruesomely murdered, pauperised [impoverished] and enslaved across the Nigerian contraption. Incidents that prompted the Biafran armed resistance in defence of their [our] people and homeland [territories] dating back between 1945 and 1970 are very much prevalent after over forty years of hypocritical unity/federalism.” (Kanu, 2019: 15)

The statement above is made by the founder of the movement, Kanu where he asserted that the Igbos have been subjected to longstanding alienation, cruelty and killing. He argued that the issues that led to the civil war of which the Igbos were the major victims are yet to be resolved.

The second step in the IPOB's framing process is their ability to connect frame with audience. This has been possible through two factors namely: compatibility and counter-framer. The group deliberately connects its narratives or frames to the current economic, security and other challenges in order to prove to its supporters the compatibility of its frame and ongoing events in Nigeria. Okoli (2018) also observed that as part of their strategy to win public support, separatist agitators pledge to bring to an end to the sufferings of people of Southeast extraction. IPOB believes that until the independence of Biafra is achieved, South-easterners would not realise their socio-economic and political aspirations. This narrative sits well because many of the agitators and their supporters and sympathisers are young and unemployed South-easterners who have vested their hopes and aspirations in the manifestation of independence of Biafra (Amnesty International 2016).

IPOB is a strategic actor as it generates public sympathy against state response. One major strategy deployed by IPOB to win the support of the public is to incite the Nigerian authorities into reacting to their activities. The separatists have deployed this strategy efficiently and succeeded because of the character of the Nigerian state in deploying the instrumentalities of force to quench all forms of agitation. Since IPOB was birthed in 2012, Nnamdi Kanu has continued to make inciting statements through the Radio Biafra and other media platforms to irk the Nigerian authorities and elicit a reaction (Okoli, 2018). In one of his popular interviews Kanu stated that:

Anybody that can do anything to disrupt the present orthodoxy of governance by a group of very corrupt cabals is welcome. If they fail to give us Biafra, Somalia will look like a paradise compared to what will happen to that zoo. It is a promise, it is a pledge and it is also a threat to them" he portended. "If they do not give us Biafra, there will be nothing living in that very zoo they call Nigeria; nothing will survive there, I can assure you (Kanu, 2014)

From the above statement in March 2014 he issued a threat that Somalia will be paradise, compared to what will happen to Nigeria if Biafra is not achieved. These



inciting and provocative statements and many more resulted in the arrest of Nnamdi Kanu by Nigerian security agents in 2015 and 2021.

The third step employed by the group is the promotion of the quality of IPOB as a framer. This is facilitated by a combination of competence, charismatic quality and frame consistency. To prove its competence, IPOB poses as a selfless freedom fighter capable of freeing the Igbo nation from the chains of the Nigerian state. This is reflected in the comments of Emma Powerful, the group's spokesman. He emphasises that:

We the global family of the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), ably led by our prophet and liberator, Mazi Nnamdi Kanu, are delighted to note that this year's sit-at-home order in honour of our fallen heroes recorded 100% success throughout Biafra land (Powerful, 2021).

The spokesman eulogises Kanu as a prophet and liberator whose capacity to lead the separatists and other agitators draws wider support. Moreover, this places Kanu in the folds of all fallen Biafran heroes.

The group attempts to reflect its competence through technological savvy, young membership, militant rhetoric and acts of violence in south-east Nigeria (Maiangwa, 2021). It has been able to establish a militant wing called Biafra Security Service (BSS) which is meant to address insecurity in the South-East of which they perceived as deliberately created to target the Igbo people. Another strong factor that promotes the image of the IPOB and commands followership is the personality of its founder, Mazi Nnamdi Kanu. Kanu is known to be a fearless firebrand speaker with the gift of the gab. The arrest and detention of Nnamdi Kanu by the Nigerian authorities made him more popular and enabled IPOB to earn more support from fellow tribesmen who felt Kanu was fighting a just battle. Each time he is arrested and detained, separatist agitators leverage on the opportunity to hold protests and rallies across the South-East calling for his release. Agitators see the detention of Kanu by the authorities as a move to disrupt the fight for the liberation of Biafra. This has attracted more members to join the agitation and more sympathy for the Biafran agitation (Okoli, 2018).

We argue that the consistency of the group in its mode of operation and narrative regardless of the arrest of its founder, continually attracts support for the group. This is evident in the civil disobedience orchestrated by the group through protests and boycotts (sit-at-home orders) where citizens of the South-east are forcefully or willingly made to remain indoors every Monday of the week or any significant day. This is evident in one of the statements of their spokesperson, Emma Powerful which he declared:

The global family and movement of the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) under the command and leadership of our indefatigable liberator Mazi Nnamdi Okwuchukwu Kanu, wish to announce to the general public, especially Biafrans that Tuesday 13th of September has been declared a day of civil action in the form of sit-at-home in Biafra Land. The Tuesday 13th September, 2022 civil action is very important for two reasons: First, our leader's Appeal court hearing that was supposed to be on October 11th has been brought forward to 13th September, 2022. As usual we call on Biafrans

and lovers of freedom to demonstrate our solidarity with our leader who has been bearing our yoke in detention for over a year now. (Powerful, 2022)

Whenever sit-at-home orders or protest is declared, markets, shops, banks, and schools are closed and roads are mostly deserted in different parts of the region. The shutdown of the entire South-east is also a strategy to compel the Nigerian authorities to free Nnamdi Kanu and grant the region independence (Okoye, 2021). Additionally, agitation for Biafra has also enjoyed support from the Diaspora community as well as Nigerian politicians accused of funding separatist movements. The agitators appeal to people of Igbo extraction in different parts of the world to sponsor and support them to fight the marginalisation of their region and people (Okoli, 2018). Therefore, regardless of the measures of the Nigerian authorities, the Biafran agitation will be a herculean task to mitigate.

### **Response of the Nigerian State**

The Nigerian response to IPOB has been largely a military approach. Although, some degree of legal measures is also applied, from the legal perspective, the Nigerian authorities had proscribed IPOB. This was first pronounced by the governors of the five South-eastern states and followed with a court order obtained by the Attorney-General of the Federation in the Federal High Court of Abuja and signed by the President, proscribing IPOB and describing it as a terrorist group (Guardian Editorial Board, 2017). The decision by the Nigerian government to declare IPOB a terrorist organization is informed by the frequent clashes between IPOB agitators and security agencies. The other legal approach employed by the Nigerian authorities is the arrest of the leader of IPOB, Nnamdi Kanu, and some influential members of his group for trial. Their arrest has charged the atmosphere in the region and beyond, leading his supporters to stage protests in different states against his arrest.

In an attempt to quash violent agitation by IPOB, the Nigerian authorities launched several military operations in the South-East which include Operation Python Dance I & II. The military is deployed and uses "excessive force" to disperse gatherings and rallies by IPOB supporters. However, this seems to have emboldened rather than silenced the separatists and has added to the feeling of discrimination felt in the region and made Nnamdi Kanu a martyr (Mbah, 2017).

There are concerns over the use of force by the Nigerian authorities. For example, scholars and members of the public have questioned the use of heavy force through the Nigerian Army to threaten and arrest unarmed persons instead of deploying the regular police to deal with the menace that the IPOB has become (Guardian Editorial Board 2017). Amnesty International (2016) reports that the Nigerian authority's deployment of force against separatist agitators amounts to over-reaction that has further increased the agitation. Similarly, Maiangwa (2021) argues that the use of lethal force without compliance as a response to the Biafran agitation is counter-productive because it inflames passions and boosts separatists' sentiments, and has been blamed for the radicalization of IPOB. The response of the Nigerian authorities comes with a blowback effect as IPOB creates a picture of persecution to generate sympathy from its followers and the public.

### **Key Findings**

The finding of the study revealed that the ethno-religious and regional struggle and agitations for more socio-economic and political opportunities have emplaced great cleavages leading to mutual suspicion and call for agitation across regions. This tension has been escalated by the socio-economic and political challenges and the feelings of victimisation by various ethno-religious groups.

The IPOB have strategically established the compatibility of narratives on the hatred for Igbos in Nigeria with the feeling of their audiences about the experience of insecurity, political alienation, bitter memories of civil war. As a strategic actor IPOB generates public sympathy and support against the Nigerian authorities. The strategy works following the nature of the Nigerian state in using the instrumentalities of force in suppressing dissidents. The IPOB has been able to achieve this through inciting statements via Radio Biafra and other media platforms to vex the Nigerian authorities to respond violently.

In promotion of the quality of IPOB as a framer, the group presents itself as a selfless freedom fighter capable of liberating the Igbo nation from the tyranny of the Nigerian state. IPOB, through its messages have also created a cult-like following for Kanu who is largely seen as a prophet and liberator. Moreover, the success of IPOB successful frame its audiences are due to the use of technology technological and recruitment of young people who are attracted by rhetoric and the urgent desire effect social change, especially as IPOB provides the needed platform for change.

The study also found that the adoption of violence has also been justified by the group as a means of protecting the South-east against the surge of insecurity and the violence meted on the group by the Nigerian State. In addition to the use of violence the instrumentality of “sit-at-home orders or protest” are adopted as strategies to compel the Nigerian authorities to free Nnamdi Kanu and grant the region independence.

The study also found that the nature of response to the IPOB threat and agitations Nigeria have attracted plethora of sympathy and support for the IPOB and the Biafran agitation by locals, diaspora community, politicians and elites who desire to work collectively to address the marginalisation of the region.

### **Conclusion and Recommendation**

This study has employed the framing theory to examine the process in which IPOB enjoys mass following. IPOB is a strategic actor who creates quality frame and has the competence to align its narratives with its audience. This paper recommends the need for good optics of governance to weaken the narratives of IPOB and the need for political solutions with the leaders of the IPOB and relevant stakeholders this can be achieved through short, medium, and long terms.

On the short-term, there is a need to address the escalating tension generated by the IPOB's separatist campaigns, there is a need for reconciliation between state actors and the IPOB leaders and assurances to address issues around common good and national unity. The reconciliation needs to put into consideration the grievances of the agitators which will be addressed on the long-term period.

On the medium term, leadership, good governance and inclusivity are key to addressing the existing agitations in Nigeria, especially the one propagated by the neo-Biafra advocates. This is important in Nigeria because of the nature of its diversity

where each and every region or section strive for social, economic and political goods. Government needs to create a positive optics that it is all-encompassing and should work for a fairer society for all. This implies narrowing the gap between the rich and the poor, equal distribution of political and economic opportunities. 'Governance should not include winner takes all politics.' The allocation of value should be based on equity where the most vulnerable are first considered in the allocation of resources. Additionally, government should deliberately work towards the silencing of confrontational and divisive hardliners, who are constantly propagating the 'us against them' idea. Such thinking is been employed by demagogues, entrepreneurs of violence and hardliners in pursuance of selfish goals as well as ideas that are injurious to common good.

On the long-run, the Nigerian state needs to review the constitution and all legal and democratic structures that are inadequate in promoting equity, fairness and social justice for all Nigerians. This is important for all federating units to have a sense of belonging in the Nigerian state.

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