



## THE INDIGENOUS PEOPLE OF BIAFRA AGITATION AND THE FUTURE OF THE NIGERIAN STATE

**Social Sciences Research**

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### ABSTRACT

This paper examines the nature of the Nigerian state with regard to the centrifugal forces threatening to tear it apart. Nigeria is made up of over three hundred (300) ethnic groups. These ethnic groups were existing independence of one another prior to the colonial rule. These diverse and multiple ethnic groups were brought together under one country known as Nigeria. Few years after independence, forces of disunity and disintegration started rearing their heads to the extent that there was a civil war in the country between 1967 and 1970. After the civil war, events in the country have tended to prove that the Igbos of the South-Eastern part of the country seem to be marginalized in the socio-political and economic scheme of things in the country. This situation necessitated the agitation for the sovereign state of Biafra by the Indigenous People of Biafra. The agitation by IPOB actually brought to the fore the defects in the structure and composition of the Nigerian state to the extent that the 'Afenifere', a Yoruba socio-cultural group, Middle-belt and the South-South part of the country started demanding for the restructuring of the Nigerian state to the extent that all parts of the country would be made to have a sense of belonging in the Nigerian project. Development of Nigeria would continue to be a distant dream if issues of ethnic domination and marginalization are not resolved. This paper recommends the restructuring of the Nigerian state to give all sections sense of belonging as well as constitutional amendment to provide for rotational presidency along the six geopolitical zones, such should also apply to states and local governments as well as adherence to the principle of rule of law, accountability and transparency in governance.

**Keywords:** Biafra, Colonial Rule, Constitution, Restructuring, Rotational Presidency

## Introduction

Nigeria is a multi-ethnic and multi-religious country. Otite, cited in Aderemi (2013:3) opined that Nigeria is over 300 ethnic groups. The Richard's constitution of 1946 created three regions in the country, namely; North, East and Western regions. Each of these regions is made up of people of different ethnic groups. The North is predominantly Hausa-Fulani; the East are mainly Igbo while the West is made up of the Yoruba. These ethnic groups constitute what is known as the majority ethnic groups. The Nationalist who fought for the country's independence, were of these diverse ethnic groups. They were united in their struggle for independence but as soon as independence was achieved, the differences that existed amongst them started rearing their heads. This explains why Ake (1996:4) asserts that "the nationalist movement was essentially a coalition of disparate groups united by their common grievances against colonial oppression. It was typically a network of nationalities, ethnic groups, religious organizations, syncretistic movements, secondary organizations, and professional interest groups. But even though they cooperated against the colonial regime, their relationship was never free from tension and conflict".

The nature of politics and political activities in the first republic is a manifestation of the above position. Political parties that were formed were along ethnic lines. The Northern People's Congress (NPC) was an Hausa-Fulani party, led by Sir Ahmadu Bello, the National Convention of Nigerian Citizens (NCNC) was regarded as Igbo political party led by Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe while the Action Group (AG) led by Chief Obafemi Awolowo was also known to be a party for the Yoruba people. The ethnic politics of the first Republic as well corruption caused the crises which led to the January 15, 1966 Coup d'état. The coup was led by Major Chukwuma Kaduna Nzeogwu and it led to death of prominent Hausa-Fulani Political Leaders such as Ahmadu Bello, Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa as well as Chief S. L. Akintola who was the premier of the western region, Okotie H. Eboh who was the then Minister of Finance amongst others lost their lives. The nature of deaths as a result of the coup made it to be referred to as an Igbo coup. This led to the counter coup of July 29, 1966; this coup led to the death of Aguiyi Ironsi an Igbo Military officer who was the Military Head of State. Many Igbo officers were killed in that coup. This situation and the mass killings of the Igbos in Northern Nigeria caused the Nigeria/Biafra war that took place between 1967 and 1970 following the declaration of the Republic of Biafra by Lt. Col. Odumegwu Ojukwu.

Though the war ended in 1970 and the then Head of state, General Gowon declared no victor no vanquish, events in the country tend to suggest that the Igbo are being marginalized, for example; since then no Igbo man has been the head of state or president of Nigeria. It is against this background and other factors that led to the agitation of the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) for the actualization of the sovereign state of Biafra. James Coleman in Eliagwu (2005:6) argued that the present unity of Nigeria, as well as its disunity, is in part a reflection of the form and character of colonial government-the British superstructure and the changes it had undergone since 1900.

## **Brief History of Nigeria**

An understanding of the history of Nigeria would help to a large extent in understanding the subject matter. Nigeria is a product of British colonial rule. Prior to the colonial period there was no country called Nigeria. Different ethnic nationalities existing independent of one another were brought together under one country known as Nigeria without consultation or agreement. According to Awolowo (1947:24) "Britain came to Nigeria of her choosing, and with motives which are only too well-known. She sought to impose her rule on the various tribes that inhabited the country in order to retain her own selfish end".

The present structure and composition of the Nigerian state is traceable to colonialism. The Post-colonial leaders particularly of the Hausa-Fulani extraction are just relying and consolidating on it simply because it favours them to the detriment of others. According to Elaigwu (2005:6) "by 1990, what later came to be known as Nigeria was three Colonial territories under the umbrella of British colonialism, but administered separately, receiving orders direct from London. These were the colony of Lagos and what came to be known as the protectorates of Southern Nigeria and Northern Nigeria". Historical records show that in 1906, the colony of Lagos and the protectorate of Southern Nigeria were unified under a single administration. Furthermore, in 1914, the colony of Lagos and the Protectorates of Northern and Southern Nigeria were amalgamated as the colony and protectorate of Nigeria. According to Elaigwu (2005:6) "Nigeria was divided into the colony of Lagos, the Northern, Eastern, and Western groups of provinces in 1939, with each group of provinces having a Chief Commissioner who was responsible to the governor in Lagos.

Three regions were established in Nigeria in 1946 by virtue of the Arthur Richard's constitution. The regions were the North, East and West. This to a large extent formed the basis for the subsequent state creation in Nigeria. Each of those three regions had minority ethnic groups within them and because of the fear of domination they continued to agitate for state creation, and presently Nigeria has 36 states. State creation in Nigeria took the following order from the initial three regions to four in 1963, 12 in 1967, 19 in 1976, 21 in 1987, 30 in 1991 and 36 in 1996. Apart from the three regions of North, East and West as well as the mid – west created in 1963, the rest of the states of the federation were created by the military.

This explains why we have more states in the north than the south and this is because the north has produced more military heads of state than the south. This explains why Ade-Ajayi (1992:14) opined that "the military's state creation methods often have left too much room for individuals close to the seat of government to influence decisions on such delicate matters as the number, the boundaries and the capitals of new states". This view was corroborated by the delegates to the 1977 – 78 constituent assembly in Nigeria when they described the military-sponsored and military-managed state creation process as perverse, irregular, farcical, whimsical and provocative (McHenry 1986: 99 – 103)

According to Suberu (2001:128) "in essence the creation of states in Nigeria by military fiat has resulted not only in the unregulated proliferation of constituent units,

but also in strident allegations of bias and arbitrariness regarding the geo – political distribution or configuration of the new states. This situation is partly at the root of the agitations by different sections of the country particularly the south – east geo political zone.

### **Theoretical framework**

The paper adopts two theoretical frameworks and they include: the theory of justice and theory of relative deprivation. The choice of these two theoretical frameworks is predicated on their appropriateness to the subject matter under study. The major proponent of the theory of justice is John Rawls while that of relative deprivation is Ted Gurr. Rawls observes that the existing societies are rarely well- ordered and so the existing institutions are marked with grave injustices. Because these institutions are unjust, conflict rather than cooperation has come to characterize them. One of the features of conflict is that persons put forward conflicting claims to the division of social advantage, and that to reorder the society, generally acceptable principles of justice that would enhance a non-conflictual equity share of societal benefit and burdens must be developed (Rawls, 1972 cited in Dahl 1995, Wagbafor, 1996).

Ted Gurr defines relative deprivation as actors' perception of discrepancy between their value expectations and their environment's apparent value capabilities. Values expectations are the goods and conditions of life to which people believe they are justifiably entitled. Values capabilities are to be found largely in the social and physical environment. They are conditions that determine peoples perceived chances of getting or keeping the values they legitimately expect to attain. According to Ted Gurr, "the necessary precondition for violent civil conflict is relative deprivation".

The agitation by the Indigenous People of Biafra stems from the perceived injustice and deprivation foisted on the people of the south eastern part of the country. Since after the civil war, no south easterner has ever occupied the highest office of the land which is the presidency, in terms of states, and local governments which has formed the basis for revenue allocation, the south east geopolitical zone has the least number of states and local governments. It is against this background that the south eastern part of the country under the auspices of the Indigenous People of Biafra has decided to carry out agitations in the form of protest and demonstrations to get the federal government of Nigeria to address the perceived injustice or be allowed to break out of the Nigeria state to form the Republic of Biafra.

### **The Indigenous People of Biafra agitation: Remote and Immediate Causes**

The Indigenous People of Biafra came into existence due to the perceived injustice and marginalization of the south eastern part of the country. This group led by Mazi Nnamdi Kanu has been at the fore front of agitation in Nigeria in recent times. The reasons for the agitation are not farfetched and they include but not limited to the following: Since after the civil war no person from the south east has occupied the position of the president of the country and this situation does not go down well with the people of the south-eastern part of Nigeria. Many Nigerians including Chief E.K. Clark and former President

Olusegun Obasanjo have been advocating for Igbo presidency in 2023 for the sake of justice and equity.

The table 1 below shows the presidents and heads of government in Nigeria from 1960 till date. It shows that the period a south easterner occupied the presidency is the least. Since after the civil war, which ended in 1970 other geopolitical zones have not given the south eastern part of the country the needed support to produce the president of Nigeria. This condition has made the people of the south east to have a feeling of marginalization and injustice.

**Table 1: Empirical Indication of Power (Presidency) between 1960-2018**

| No. | Dates                        | Identities      | States  | Zones         |
|-----|------------------------------|-----------------|---------|---------------|
| 1   | 1 Oct. 1960 – 14 Jan. 1966   | T.F. Balewa     | Bauchi  | North East    |
| 2   | 15 Jan. 1966 – 29 July 1966  | J.T. Ironsi     | Abia    | South East    |
| 3   | 30 July 1966 – 28 July 1975  | Y.T Gowon       | Plateau | North Central |
| 4   | 29 July 1975 – 13 Feb. 1976  | M.R. Muhammed   | Kano    | North West    |
| 5   | 14 Feb. 1976 – 30 Sept. 1979 | O. Obasanjo     | Ogun    | South West    |
| 6   | 1 Oct. 1979 – 31 Dec. 1983   | U.A.S. Shagari  | Sokoto  | North West    |
| 7   | 31 Dec. 1983 – 26 Aug. 1985  | M. Buhari       | Katsina | North West    |
| 8   | 27 Aug. 1985 – 27 Aug. 1993  | I.B. Babangida  | Niger   | North Central |
| 9   | 26 Aug. 1993 – 17 Nov. 1993  | E.A. Shonekan   | Ogun    | South West    |
| 10  | 18 Nov. 1993 – 8 June 1998   | Sani Abacha     | Kano    | North West    |
| 11  | 9 June 1998 – 28 May 1999    | A. Abubakar     | Niger   | North Central |
| 12  | 29 May 1999 – 29 May 2007    | O. Obasanjo     | Ogun    | South West    |
| 13  | 29 May 2007 – 5 May 2010     | U.M. Yar'Adua   | Katsina | North West    |
| 14  | 6 May 2010 – 29 May 2015     | G.E.A. Jonathan | Bayelsa | South South   |
| 15  | 29 May 2015 – till date      | M. Buhari       | Katsina | North West    |

Source: *Sunday Tribune*, 7<sup>th</sup> August, 1994, Ibadan, pp7-9 and updated by the Author.

**Table 2: Number of Local Governments in each Geopolitical Zone in Nigeria under the 1999 Constitution (as amended)**

| No. | Geopolitical Zone | No of Local Governments |
|-----|-------------------|-------------------------|
| 1   | North-East        | 112                     |
| 2   | North-Central     | 114                     |
| 3   | North-West        | 187                     |
| 4   | South-East        | 95                      |
| 5   | South-South       | 123                     |
| 6   | South-West        | 137                     |

Source: *The 1999 Constitution of Federal Republic of Nigeria (as amended)*

The table 2 above shows the number of local government in each geopolitical zone of Nigeria. From the table, south east geopolitical zone has the lowest number of local government. Considering the fact that the number of local governments within a state and by extension geopolitical zone determines to very large extent revenue allocation in such a way that the more local government in a state and geopolitical zone, the more revenue. It shows the south east is short-changed in revenue allocation in this regard.

**Table 3: Number of States in each Geopolitical Zone of Nigeria**

| No. | Geo-political Zones | States  |
|-----|---------------------|---|
| 1.  | North-Central       | Niger, Kogi, Benue, Plateau, Nassarawa, Kwara and FCT     |
| 2.  | North-East          | Bauchi, Borno, Taraba, Adamawa, Gombe and Yobe.           |
| 3.  | North-West          | Zamfara, Sokoto, Kaduna, Kebbi, Katsina, Kano and Jigawa. |
| 4.  | South-East          | Enugu, Imo, Ebonyi, Abia and Anambra                      |
| 5.  | South-South         | Bayelsa, Akwalbom, Edo, Rivers, Cross River and Delta.    |
| 6.  | South-West          | Oyo, Ekiti, Osun, Ondo, Lagos and Ogun                    |

*Source: The 1999 Constitution of Federal Republic of Nigeria (as amended)*

Table 3 above shows the number of states in each of the six(6) geopolitical zones in Nigeria. The north central has six states with the federal capital, Abuja. North east has six states, North West has seven states, south south has six states, south west has six states and the south east has five states which is the lowest. Just as the number of local governments determines revenue allocation to each state, the number of states in a geopolitical zone also determines not only revenue allocation but also the number of appointive and elective positions in the geopolitical zones with its implication in the political economy of the states and geopolitical zones. The number of states and local governments in the south east geopolitical zone is the lowest in the country and this is part of the reasons for the IPOB agitation in order for the inequality to be addressed.

The nature of federalism practiced in Nigeria is another factor that occasioned the IPOB agitation. Federalism is a system of government where there is constitutional division of power between the centre and the constituent units in such a way that the constituent units have some level of political and economic autonomy to be able to harness and manage some resources within their domain for development purposes. This was the practice in Nigeria in the first republic.

According to Olowononi (1998, p.251) "the regional governments were almost fiscally self-independent from 1954 to 1966. This fact can be seen when we consider independent revenues as percentages of current revenue. The regional governments were fiscally very powerful vis-à-vis the federal government. In fact, the federal government played a second fiddle to the regional government". To Ayoade (2001:p.53) that era is the "golden age of the regions". True federalism was distorted by the military when they took over power in 1966, since then there has been too much concentration of power and resources at the centre to the detriment of the state. This view was corroborated by Ojo (2009:52) when he asserted that "military rule has no doubt affected the structure of

Nigerian federalism. In line with its command structure, Nigeria's federal system has been over-centralized to the extent that it reflects more of a unitary arrangement than a federal one. This situation to a very large extent has negatively affected the country's development.

The mismanagement of the resources of the country can be said to be one of the reasons for the agitation by IPOB. Nigeria is a country that is blessed with enormous resources but these resources have not translated to the wealth of the citizens. This condition no doubt is as a result of the mismanagement by those in positions of power and authority. This has resulted to high level of poverty in Nigeria. According to a report by the Washington based Brookings Institution of 2018, Nigeria has become the poverty capital of the world. The report said that as at May, 2018, Nigeria had about 87 million people in extreme poverty. This explains why the level of migration has increased tremendously. Poverty is also central to increase in crime and criminality in Nigeria. All these combined to worsen the development challenges in the country.

Bad governance is also responsible for the IPOB agitation. When a country is badly governed, it is very difficult to achieve any meaningful development. According to Egugbo (2016:45), "bad governance manifests in such a way that those in positions of authority instead of pursuing and achieving the good of all concentrate on the pursuit of personal interest. When the people are neglected in the process of governance, they find themselves in a situation where they decide to take their destinies in their hands and the end result would be the Hobbesian state of nature where life is solitary, nasty, brutish, poor and short". Non-adherence to the principle of rule of law and disobedience to court orders are manifestations of bad governance and can be an invitation to crisis and anarchy. There are instances where the executive arm of government in Nigeria particularly at the federal level blatantly disobeyed court orders. Electoral malpractice which is highly pervasive in Nigeria is partly responsible for bad governance. This is because there is a connection between election and governance. Virtually all elections conducted in Nigeria have been adjudged to be below international standard. This brings about a situation where people who do not actually have the mandate of the people find themselves in positions of power and authority, the end result of this is bad governance and with bad governance, development would be a distant dream.

### **Prospects for the Survival of the Nigerian State**

It is very clear that the Nigerian State is in a state of quagmire to the extent that its continued existence and survival can be said to be anything but certain. Below are the suggestions that can guarantee the survival of the state:

- Restructuring to ensure more powers are vested in the states. This would make the centre to be less attractive and therefore reduce the level of tension and conflict associated with the pursuit of power at the centre.
- There should be equal number of states in all the geo-political zones, since the north-west has 7 states, two additional state should be created for the south east to make it 7 and 1 each for the rest that have six states.

- There should be political awareness and education to all Nigerians so that they can take the issue of politics and leadership seriously. With this they can contribute one way or the other in ensuring good governance.
- There should be equity and justice in the distribution of resources like infrastructure and others as well as in the treatment of people by the Nigerian state to the extent that the rule of law prevails and applies in the governance of the country. In appointment, federal character principle should be strictly adhered to.
- The issue of job creation be taken very seriously, this can be done by the diversification of the economy, the government should have a summit with the private sector investors as well as industrialists of collapsed factories and industries to know areas of collaboration and support that would see to the reviving of the collapsed industries. The benefits Nigerians and Nigeria would derive when majority of the citizens are gainfully employed would be enormous.
- There should be genuine fight against corruption. The selective fight against corruption is counter – productive because those left untouched would continue to engage in more brazen act of corruption
- Machinery should be put in place by the Nigerian government to ensure that the era of electoral malpractice is gone for good. Free, fair and credible election has the capacity for enthroning good governance with its attendant advantages.
- To avoid rancor and acrimony always associated with election and political activities in Nigeria, there should be the constitutional provision for the rotation of the office of the president, governors as well as local government chairmen to ensure that every part of the country, states and local governments have the feeling of sense of belonging as far as leadership is concerned.

### **Conclusion**

No country can survive and make progress when injustice and marginalization are entrenched in the system. This is because the feeling of injustice and marginalization would make those affected to continue to agitate for the reverse of such unfavourable condition. This agitation sometimes can take violent dimension which would be antithetical to any meaningful progress and development. The way and manner some sections of the country particularly the south East is being treated in the Nigerian state is highly condemnable. It appears as if other majority ethnic groups have conspired to perpetually make them feel they are less important in the country's scheme of things. This no doubt has been the major reason for the agitation by the Indigenous People of Biafra. Some analysts view the activities of the Indigenous People of Biafra as a strategy to make the federal government address the perceived injustice and marginalization of the South-East; others see their activities as ultimately directed towards ensuring that the south-Eastern part of the country is pulled out of the Nigerian state to become the republic of Biafra. It is on this note; Nwakanma (2017:22) asserts that "the sole credit of the IPOB campaign is forcing a renewed discussion of the structural and other inequities of the Nigerian federation. Each day, new revelations indicate the complicity of the

current federal government in deepening the fissures through outright disregard for the laws of Nigeria on federal character and the sensibilities of other groups”.

It is expected that the managers of the Nigerian state should pay attention to address any genuine feeling of injustice and marginalization from any part of the country not just the South- East. When injustice and marginalization is removed in the management of the Nigeria state and economy it would provide an enabling environment for all and sundry to work assiduously for the development of the Nigerian state and its citizens.

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