

# The Biafran State & the Rise of IPOB: A Crack on Nigeria's National Integration

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**Abstract:** The Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) had recently joined other secessionist agitators in the South-east region of Nigeria to demand for Biafran independence. IPOB together with several other uprisings in Nigeria have greatly challenged the possibility of achieving national integration. These challenges are often attributed to the unsolicited amalgamation of the Northern and Southern protectorates in 1914, which produced a geographical expression known today as Nigeria. Unsolicited in the sense that the colonial authorities at that time failed to seek the consent of the diverse ethnic nationalities that later became part of the federation. Indeed, it was the amalgamation of these diverse ethnic nationalities that created the present need for national integration, to help fuse together the multiple ethnicities in the new born nation. Thus, in the post-colonial years, there were policies and programs initiated by various administrations to help foster unity and true federalism among the various groups. Unfortunately, the unfolding events from 1960 leading to the civil war in 1967, and the war itself dealt a big blow on the unity of the young nation. The Nigeria-Biafra civil war which started as a result of the secession attempt of the Igbo dominated Eastern Nigeria ended in 1970, with Gowon and subsequent leaders initiating several policies and programs to rekindle the fire of national integration. Fifty nine years after the war, the unity of the country is still under serious threat. It appears that neither the 3R program of Gowon, nor the Federal Character policy of Shagari among others, have been able to effectively address the problems of federalism, which has left multiple cracks on national integration efforts. The thrust of this paper therefore, is to examine the rise of IPOB with the aim to understand why the federal government policies failed to address the increasing tempo of secessionist movements in the country. Also, the paper will analytically demonstrate how government failures contribute to the rise of IPOB and its attendant threats to national unity.

**Keywords:** National Integration, Indigenous People of Biafra, Nigeria, Policies, Secessionists

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## 1. Introduction

The birth of Nigeria in 1914 created a heterogeneous land with widespread diversities in terms of religion, language, caste, tribe, race, and regions. Hence, from creation, the achievement of national integration became very essential for all-round development and prosperity of the nation. However, the bunching together of the North and South in the amalgamation of 1914 have so far demanded for a more critical review due to the inability of the various groups to fuse properly together. Many attempts have been made since amalgamation; to arrive at a certain agreement on how the nation and its populace will move forward together. One of the front-liners of these attempts is the national conference of 1945, followed by the regional conference of 1950. Many

other attempts have been made in recent times including the national conference of 2014 as well as the Yoruba summit communiqué of 2017. However, all these seems to have amounted to nothing, as most of the agreements reached or issues discussed in these conferences have not been taken seriously or effectively implemented.

With the dawn of independence in 1960, the country was faced with the challenge of nurturing a new born nation, but regrettably it was in no time faced with series of challenges, ranging from political crises to ethno-religious killings, military coup d'états, and finally the civil war which was as a result of minority secession. All these have negatively impacted the growth and development of the country in general, and the integration of the various ethnic nationalities in particular. The end of the war however, initiated a new

effort towards achieving national unity. The military and civilian governments that have risen from that time till now have made certain moves in pursuit of national unity, but the failure of these moves is clearly seen in the rise of some pro-secessionist groups like the Oduduwa People's Congress (OPC), Movement for the Emancipation of Niger Delta (MEND), as well as Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) and the Biafran Zionist Movement (BZM), both of which laid the foundation for the rise of the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB).

With the return of civilian rule, and the inception of the fourth republic, the Obasanjo led government of 1999-2007 viewed national integration as one of the nation's biggest challenge, and therefore set into action power rotation strategy otherwise known as the zoning system in a bid to create a political power distribution that will strengthen democracy and national integration. He strongly implemented policies like federal character principle, fiscal federalism, and concept of zoning, rotational presidency as well as power sharing system. In all, these principles apportioned major political positions to individuals within the six geopolitical zones of the country [1]. However, these policies were not improved, neither were they followed up, leading to the rebirth of voices clamouring for secession, the loudest being that of the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), and cutting up holes on the already torn fabric of national unity. Fifty nine (59) years after independence, Nigeria is still battling with challenging issues anchoring on the national question, and if not tackled immediately and expertly, the consequences may be disintegration or another civil war.

## 2. Conceptualizing National Integration

National integration also referred to as nation-building, national unity, national cohesion, national loyalty or national question goes beyond a particular definition, as many scholars and writers have variously defined this term from varying angles. According to Jega, national integration involves a situation in which citizens of a country increasingly see themselves as one people, bound by shared historical experiences and common values, and imbued by the spirit of patriotism and unity, which transcends traditional, primordial diverse tendencies [2].

National integration is the feeling of togetherness or oneness towards one's own country irrespective of their individual differences with regard to religion, region, race or culture. Nigeria, being a multi ethnic nation-state with people of different beliefs systems, dialect and culture, and as such requires a solid integration to move forward.

National integration is a socio-psychological and educational process through which a feeling of unity, solidarity and cohesion develops in the hearts of the people and sense of common citizenship and a feeling of loyalty to the nation are fostered among them. It is the process of creation of a common bond together with a strong feeling of brotherhood and high sense of patriotism that inspires the

nation in all aspects of thought and action and helps it sink and transcend all differences, individual, parochial, religious or linguistic whenever confronted with vital national problems [3].

The great ideologist and writer Myron Weiner sees national integration as "avoidance of divisive movements that would balkanize the nation and presence of attitudes throughout the society that give preference to national and public interest as distinct from parochial interest" [4]. His view posits national integration as a sentiment which reflects solidarity or patriotism among the people belonging to a nation. Its aim is to foster a common identity amongst the citizens of a country making them feel they are all one.

In the words of Shona Khurana, "national integration is the awareness of a common identity amongst the citizens of a country. It means that while people may belong to different castes, religions and regions as well speak different languages, however, it should be recognized that unity of purpose engenders progress and national cohesion" [5].

Also, Ogunjenite adds that national integration relates to the building of nation-states out of disparate socio-economic, religious, ethnic and geographical elements. According to him, this entails the translation of diffuse and unorganized sentiments of nationalism into the spirit of citizenship through the creation of state institutions that can translate into policy and programmes in line with the aspirations of the citizenry. Stated in another way, national integration means efforts to weld together a plural society to enhance development but without necessarily jeopardizing ethnic identity [6]. Thus, national integration is a serious and purposeful endeavour, the failure of which has grave consequences. It is no wonder, therefore, that Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu sees it also as 'active nation-building' which means "forging out a nation out of our diverse ethnic groups." He also contends that the failure to achieve this in respect of Nigeria is that: "Today, the result is that tribalism and ethnicity has become a potent source of friction, rather than diminish in the face of an emergent, virile and modern nation" [7].

## 3. The Rise of IPOB

IPOB, is an acronym for the Indigenous People of Biafra, it is a group leading the call for the secession of Biafra from Nigeria. Founded in 2012, the group is a reformation of the already weakened pro-secessionist groups of Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) and the Biafran Zionist Movement (BZM). The group which is under the leadership of Mazi Nnamdi Kanu and his deputy Uche Okafor-Mefor, aims at creating an independent state for the people of old Eastern Region through referendum.

Although IPOB was created in 2012, the leader, Nnamdi Kanu had gained popularity in 2009 from his broadcasts on Radio Biafra. This radio is stationed in London, and from there, he calls out for the freedom of Biafra people as well as criticising the practices of the Nigerian government. The

International Crisis Group described Radio Biafra as "an unlicensed station urging violent struggle to achieve independence for Biafra," and states that its broadcasts are "highly provocative messages laced with misinformation, hate speech and anti-Nigeria derision" [8].

According to the group, the South East is the region that makes up Biafraland. Its western border is the River Niger and it incorporates most of the Niger Delta. The eastern border is Cameroon. Many Biafrans are Igbo speakers, while other Biafrans speak Urhobo-Isoko, Ijaw-Epie-Ogbia, Ogoni, Efik, Annang, Eket-, Oron-Ibibio, Ogoja, Ejagham, Igala, Idoma, Ibani, and Igbanke among others.

From the moves and ideologies of this group, it is clear that the group rose in solidarity to the will of the Republic of Biafra, a secessionist state in South-eastern Nigeria that existed from 30<sup>th</sup> May 1967 to 15<sup>th</sup> January 1970. The region seceded due to economic, ethnic, cultural and religious tensions, as well as the failure of the then central government of Yakubu Gowon to effect the agreements of the Aburi Accord. Taking its name from the Bight of Biafra, the region was led to secede by the then military governor of Eastern Region, Col. Chukwuemeka Odimegwu Ojukwu on 30<sup>th</sup> May 1967.

#### 4. Understanding the Dynamics of Secession

James Crawford defined secession as the withdrawal of territory which is opposed by the functioning host state [9]. This view explains secession to be the creation of a state by the use of threat or force without the consent of the former sovereign, which was exactly the case of Nigeria and Biafra in 1967.

Christine Haverland also view secession as the separation of part of the territory of a state carried out by the resident population with the aim of creating a new independent state or acceding to another existing state as in the case of Creamier in Ukraine that joined Russia after their 2012 referendum [10]. This definition does not only see the creation of a new state as secession, but also the transfer of a territory from one state to another.

Secession therefore is the withdrawal and detachment of a group from a larger entity, especially a political entity. It is an act of separating from a nation or state and becoming independent, which sometimes generates violent confrontations.

Buchanan posits that most of the reason for secession is related to oppression by people of one ethnic or racial group against another, especially those previously conquered. He added that states did not have the right to secede; however there is no constitutional right to stop them [11].

Scholars on this field have categorized theories of secession into two, the 'choice theory' and the 'just course theory'. Where the choice theory states that there is a general right for people to want to secede, the just course theory on the other hand states that secession should only be considered only to rectify grave injustice. However, even with these theories of secession, there are many arguments against it.

According to Buchanan, it will create an inconsistent government, as well as undermine the efforts of past heroes. Furthermore, it will lead to calls from other groups to secede as self defence will be weakened, making it difficult to defend the rest of the state.

#### 5. Issues, Challenges and Operational Structures of IPOB

Although the various ethnic groups applauded and celebrated the birth of an independent Nigeria in 1960, the years after independence were characterized by mutual mistrust and suspicion, which resulted to the civil war. The end of the war saw the Eastern Region conceding defeat, this equally heightened the suspicion and mistrust among the various ethnic groups especially between the Igbo and the Hausa-Fulani. It is true that the central government, after the war, began to introduce policies and programmes to foster national integration, in order to amend the torn fabric and as well cement the cracks on the wall, but regrettably, the programs were ineffective as they lacked proper implementation mechanisms thereby leading to the internal crises that further widened the divide.

Some of the issues that characterized the pre civil war years are still the same issues that precipitated the rise of IPOB. For instance, injustices of various kind, social inequality, marginalization and political exclusions where the main problems that led to the civil war in 1967 and since then, these issues have only been acerbated. The IPOB group have continued to decry the marginalization of the South Easterners in the social and political structure of the country, as well as economic inequalities and the partial distribution of state wealth. This has led to their agitation for the independence and restoration of the defunct state of Biafra. The aftermath of the war was not different, the atrocities, war crimes and crimes against humanity committed against Biafra during the civil war remained unaccounted for. With 'Biafrans' seeing it as an attempt at genocide, since the killings were indiscriminate, as all Igbo were targeted. Reconciliation was far, as the Igbo were considered an existential threat to the state.

Briefing the European Union Parliament in Brussels, Belgium on 10<sup>th</sup> September, 2019, Nnamdi Kalu stated that there is a crisis in Nigeria, and that the Nigerian State has never been at peace with itself and recent events amplified this pending emergency. He called Biafrans the easy target of the lack of a credible Nigerian state since 1960. Nigeria claims to be ruled by law, but in effect, there is a de facto lawlessness in Nigeria. Recent proposed land reforms across Nigeria do just that. The Fulani herders from the North are increasingly encroaching on the settled farmers of the South/South and South/East. This includes Biafra. As Amnesty International has reported, there were more than 2,000 deaths in 2018 linked to this land crisis. Instead of seeking to address the violence, the Government has sought to condone it and legitimise the land grab by proposing the Rural Grazing Area (RUGA) scheme.

The leader of the group has since made his stand on secession, stating that the International law is clear in relation to self-determination. Where there is a credible claim for self-determination the only way to resolve the issue is by holding a referendum which complies with international standards. He further claimed that IPOB is calling for a referendum, and it is for this singular reason that the Nigerian authorities have sought to brand IPOB as a terrorist organisation.

The IPOB believes that resolving Biafra's legitimate claim for self-determination will resolve Nigeria's long time crisis. And not just Nigeria, but Africa's peaceful future will be revealed, as the effects of Nigeria's permanent state of conflict resonate across the continent.

## 6. A Critical Assessment of Government Response to IPOB Activities

With its many protests and radio threats, IPOB was proscribed by the federal government, and on 18<sup>th</sup> September, 2017, the Federal High Court in Abuja upheld the proscription and labelled IPOB as a terrorist organization, and since then they continue to be declared as terrorist organization under Nigeria's Terrorism Act.

Prior to the proscription of IPOB, the Nigerian State has utilized violent and excessive force in order to silence activities of the group. Between 2014 and 2016, members of the group were clamped down, many killed, and many more arrested. Amnesty International released a report detailing that countless IPOB protesters were killed in May 2016 during a governmental operation wanting to prevent IPOB members marching from Nkpor Motor-park to a rally.

Although the Nigerian army claims they were acting in self-defence, these killings were not investigated by the government. The report also claimed that in February 2016, the military used "excessive force" to disperse a peaceful gathering of IPOB supporters in a school compound in Aba, killing "at least" 9 people and injuring many. Similarly, Vanguard reports that three Nigerian human rights organizations (the International Society for Civil Liberties and the Rule of Law, Intersociety, and the South East Based Coalition of Human Rights Organizations) sent a letter to the Nigerian Minister of Defence alleging that, on 9 February 2016, the Nigerian military killed 22 and injured over 30 unarmed IPOB members who had gathered in a school in Aba for a "prayer/meeting".

In September 2016, in response to IPOB's call for the sit-at-home protest, the Commissioner of Police in Imo stated that police "would arrest and prosecute any IPOB member if their actions lead to breach of security and public peace". The Sun, a Nigerian weekly newspaper, also reported that, on 23 September 2016, the day that the sit-at-home protest occurred, there was a "heavy presence" of police at "every strategic point, particularly at the Asaba end of the River Niger Head Bridge which is the entry point from the eastern part of the country.

Human rights organizations have also claimed to be

keeping records of extrajudicial killings in Nigeria. They report that from August 2015 through February 2016, 170 unarmed civilians were killed and that 400 were arrested, charged or detained without a proper trial.

On 14<sup>th</sup> October 2015, Nnamdi Kanu was arrested in Lagos by the Department of State Security (DSS), and detained in Abuja. According to Amnesty International, Kanu was charged with "criminal conspiracy, managing and belonging to an unlawful society and intimidation" in October 2015, and charged with "treason" in December 2015. Vanguard reported that Kanu was charged with "six-counts of treason". He was detained without trial for over a year and was arraigned on November 8, 2016 for charges of criminal conspiracy, membership of an illegal organization and intimidation. He was granted bail on April 2017 because of health concerns which the judge said needed better medical attention that couldn't be provided by the prison. However, he was barred from granting interviews, meeting in groups larger than ten individuals, organizing and attending rallies or social functions. In September 2017, Kanu disappeared after a premeditated attack on his home village, Umuahia by the combined forces of the Air Force and Army. Through a Radio Biafra broadcast he explains that his disappearance was because President Muhammadu Buhari sent the military to execute him in his home. The military have since denied the occurrence of this raid, despite an obvious video footage of the gruesome attack.

Although the army announced that the Operation Python Dance (OPD) was aimed at fighting crime in the South East, indications were very clear that the operation was a plot to intimidate the pro-Biafran agitators demanding for referendum. The first campaign was in 2016, the second in 2017 and the third is ongoing. When the OPD 1 was launched in 2016, the Army stated that the operation was purely a command post and field training exercise as a way of exchanging troop preparedness across spectrum of contemporary security challenges peculiar in the regions. However, the operation created tension in the South East region with many innocent people allegedly killed and many more arrested and tortured. Between 2017 and 2019, a high number of peaceful protests have been violently attended to by the police and the army, with hundreds arrested and jailed, and many killed.

## 7. Implications for National Integration

The pronounced strategy of Nnamdi Kanu and the IPOB undoubtedly utilizes the application of civil disobedience in pressing home its demand for the freedom of Biafrans. In 2015, a video on YouTube showed Nnamdi Kanu soliciting for weapons from Biafrans in Diaspora, for the Biafran struggle, at the World Igbo Conference held in the United States on 14<sup>th</sup> September 2015. More so, radio broadcasts from the group radio has on daily basis incited hatred and ill feelings in the minds of the people, causing further rift on the failing foundation of Nigeria's unity.

The recent beating and physical abuse of Ike Ekweremadu,

a serving senator, and the immediate past Deputy Senate President, by loyalists of the IPOB in Nurnberg, Germany, betokens the onset of nemesis. Though this may sink well because he is from South East, however, in no time this singular act will be meted out to other politicians from other geopolitical zones. This shows how strong and passionate the IPOB members are, and it is no longer in doubt that their message is gradually sinking into the minds and hearts of the Southerners, and in most cases, having unarguable points regarding their demands. The result of the constant 'sit at home' calls by the group and the recent call for election boycott of the 2019 general elections goes a long way to affirm this. As the days go by, the crack on the wall of national integration is becoming worse, and if there is no rapid response, a collapse is inevitable. According to Chief Afe Babalola, "the only change that can change the country and pave way for nationhood is the change that changes the structure of project Nigeria. No amount of sermon from the pulpit can change the country. It is this change that will bring about the necessary interest and determination to succeed, and that change is the restructuring of the country [12].

Note that the call for restructuring has also been one of the points of the IPOB, and with the general state of the nation (not just because of IPOB), the entire nation needs to be restructured. The various agreements made in the conferences already held needs to be revisited, and effect without alteration. The continuous clamp down on the leaders of the group, as well as unaccounted killings of its members (mostly unarmed innocent citizens) have equally not been an encouraging move on the part of the government [13]. Just like a child who was beaten by the mother, a continuous cry wouldn't require more beating, rather a concise discussion as to the solution. The cases being championed by the IPOB are not all to be swept under the carpet, as many more groups may still rise in a similar course if not addressed. The government should therefore pause, and collectively look into the issue of our national unity, so as to salvage the future of Nigeria as a united country.

## 8. Conclusion

According to Edosa Enaruna, a united country and people are in a better position to ably confront its crises of development, nationhood and stability. This clearly sums it up that Nigeria has not achieved success in nation building because of the division and lack of unity among its people. National integration is not an act, but a thought that must go into the heads and minds of people. It is the consciousness which must awaken the people at large. The civil war, the rise of MASSOB, the BZM and IPOB has gone beyond what we can tag a show of arrogance or mere strong-will to secede. Moreover, it is not in doubt that some other groups have thought about following the same course as IPOB is doing. If this issue is not properly attended, we may soon face the challenge of having over 3 secessionist groups clamouring for independence, and then it will be difficult for the centre to hold.

Something is surely wrong and must be addressed to stop

the country from plunging into a dark path. Col. Abubakar Umar (rtd) was of this view when he warned the Federal Government not to re-arrest the leader of IPOB, Nnamdi Kanu. He stated that doing so will be dangerous and politically unwise, as Nnamdi Kanu is not a common criminal, but a bitter young man fighting for a better deal for his Igbo kinsmen. The words of Kunle Olajide clearly sound a warning that 'the ship of the Nigerian state is floundering. It is in fact heading towards a titanic rick and Nigerians from all parts of the country must rise up to halt the drift'. The proscription and intimidation of IPOB have not, and will not do the magic, as IPOB was clearly born from the mistakes in attending to national integration.

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