# Biafra Agitation: Analysis and Implications for Nigeria's Security

Imaobong BASSEY[1]

## Abstract

The resurgence of Biafra agitation in South-Eastern Nigeria has its negative effects on regional and national security. As a result of these protests and the resulting conflicts between Biafra activists and the security forces, economic activities have also been hampered in the affected areas. This research analyses the implications of the various Biafra agitations on Nigeria's security. The research adopts the qualitative research methodology. It relies on data generated through interviews and other secondary sources, and content analysis. The research recommends that Igbo people should be aware of their tenacious sense of community and put it into action in all areas of their existence rather than the agitation for a separate and independent country. Strengthening weak institutions, political inclusion, and economic restructuring are identified here as some of the measures that could contribute to addressing the conflict.

Keywords: Agitation, Biafra, National Peace, Resurgence, Security.

## Introduction

Biafra as a topic is a difficult and emotional one. The commemoration of Nigeria's civil war experience is still a contentious issue. After the military took control of political leadership in 1966, the former Eastern Region – predominantly made up of Igbo people and one of the three major ethnic groupings of Nigeria – proclaimed herself the 'Republic of Biafra.' This led to Nigeria's civil war. More so, this experience has continued to influence Nigerian politics. In the recent years, the country has witnessed neo-Biafran movements, a coalition of some Igbo-speaking Nigerians who claim to be Biafrans rather than Nigerians (Brown and Oghabgonbgon 2016). Repeated calls for the independence of the states of the

---

[1] **Imaobong Bassey** is of the Department of Politics and International Relations, Lead City University, Ibadan, Nigeria. **Author's e-mail:** imabassey97@gmail.com

South-East and some in the South-South zone of Nigeria led to the resurrection of Biafra agitation in 2015. The agitation began during the 1967–1970 civil war in Nigeria. After the civil war, the area was re-annexed to Nigeria, but this did not halt the agitation. Instead, it sparked the creation of many pro-Biafra movements in the zone. The first 'formalized' vehicle for articulating the agitation was established in September 1999 with the founding of the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) (Meshach and Fanen 2020).

Economic activities in the areas where these protests take place are frequently disrupted by the Biafra activists' regular demonstrations and fights with the security forces. Apart from the disruption of economic activities, Biafra protests in Nigeria generally and in the South-East specifically may deter Foreign Direct Investment (FDI). Biafra agitation may be attributed to leadership failure, which resulted in years of social neglect, economic isolation, and political exclusion of Nigerians, especially those from the South-East. The issue is made worse by the failure of successive governments to address the high unemployment rate, corruption, and improper use of public monies that conflict with the interests of the country. Thus, this study analyses the implications of Biafra agitations on Nigeria's security.

This study focuses on the populace within the South-Eastern part of Nigeria where majority of Biafra agitators reside and also where the several agitations about Biafra emanate from. The study area covered major states that are Biafra affiliated, such as Anambra, Abia and Imo state. The data used in the study were collected through primary sources whereby participants were interviewed to ascertain their views regarding the subject under study. As a result, this study targeted 10 older respondents selected for responses to the various questions posed. These key-informants were selected based on their experience. Data were also gathered from secondary sources, including books, encyclopedias, novels, newspapers, magazines, journals, government publications, and other unpublished materials.

## Empirical Review

A study by Eric (2021) was carried out to examine Biafra agitation, focusing on the factors that led to the current resurgence of the agitation. The study's use of the library technique provided the researcher with the opportunity to assess the body of literature on the topic of Biafra since 1966. According to the study, the contemporary Biafra agitation is built on systemic problems such as marginalization, economic inequality, social alienation, ethnic suspicion, and subordination. The study recommended that the Biafra debacle may be resolved by the deployment of peacekeepers and peace builders, as well as through the use

of various peacemaking measures, such as negotiation, mediation, settlement, and diplomatic channels. The study also suggested three layers of conflict resolution involving Biafra separatist movements, conflict resolution between the Nigerian government and the Biafra agitators, and multi-track diplomacy to engage all ethnic groups, particularly the Hausa-Fulani Muslims and the Igbo Christians. Unfortunately, this study did not address the requirement of the Biafran agitators, which depends on effective government or true brotherhood free from any form of marginalization. The study, as such, is different from the present research in the sense that the recent study was a library study, while my current study on the implication of Biafran agitation on Nigeria's security is focused on primary data that is based on interviews and reports from people who have first-hand knowledge about the Biafra agitation.

Another study that was conducted to determine the cause of Biafra's persistent agitation in Nigeria despite government efforts to put an end to the agitations at various points in time was done by (Mohammed & Shuaibu, 2019). The study was based on the use of social media networks by the agitators to convey their messages to the wider world. The study employed Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) with a sociolinguistic foundation to examine how sociolinguistic concepts like virtual community, identity, linguistic variety, and social interaction are projected to represent self-determination and the pursuit of political independence. Based on the findings, increased internet-enabled devices that are pervasive in modern culture are encouraging the Igbo people to gradually mobilise themselves for the Biafra agenda through social media. According to this study, the country's unity is under risk due to the continuous push for self-government by the Igbo people.

Furthermore, a study was done to examine the reasons for popular movements, specifically MASSOB's and IPOB's demand for self-determination in opposition to the Nigerian state's position on the matter (Osaghae, 2017). The study utilised the deprivation, growing expectation, and frustration-aggression theories. The literature on Biafra recent agitation in Nigeria was also examined using the library research methodology. The study discovered that the incapacity of the Nigerian state to place the people's sense of belonging at the center is what has caused these recurrent calls for self-determination. The researcher denounced the use of military force and the legal system as the means of resolving conflicts in Nigeria that have ethnic and religious overtones. According to him, these strategies will more likely result in further escalation of the conflict. This is because military intervention and the subsequent retributive justice may not have the resources to identify the covert grievances. These are what fuel the conflict (Osaghae, 2017). Due to this, the researcher suggested a paradigm shift from coercive policy to

mediation and discussion and from retributive policy to restorative justice. Once more, this study focused on the factors that led to the use of the media to spread the Biafra agenda rather than how it affected people.

According to the results of a study by Yetunde et al. (2022), Nigeria is a vulnerable state. This fragility exposes the central government's weakness or incapacity to exert effective control over a large portion of its territory, as well as the under-provision of public services, widespread corruption, criminal activities, refugees, forcible population displacement, and sharp economic decline. This study's methodology differs from the present one, which is focused on examining the impact of Biafra agitation on Nigeria. Biafra crisis could be seen as a generational action that questions the failure of old power to stand for the Igbo people of today in the face of the political marginalisation they have been subjected to since the return to democracy in 1999. According to this perspective, the crisis is more about the Igbo people's ability to speak up at the national level for acknowledgment and inclusion, which they believe have eluded them for a long time. This is a major explanation for IPOB's ongoing struggle (Yetunde et al, 2022).

A different study by Ada, Seyi and Mojibola (2020) looked at the history of the Igbo people in Nigeria, their position and self-determination movement, as well as the federal government's responses to their agitation over time. The researchers came to the conclusion that the Igbo position is one of the nation's most unifying concerns that the government has failed to address. They accepted that the right to self-determination is inalienable but insisted that any group seeking self-government must adhere to the law and not use it as a vehicle for attention, self-promotion, or political sabotage.

While existing explanations for the recurring agitation for Biafra are not necessarily wrong, they are limited in three important ways. Firstly, by placing overwhelming emphasis on the period since 1999, they present an incomplete picture of Biafra separatism, which neglects the links between the current agitation for Biafra and the previous experiences dating to colonial times (Dywane, 2018). Secondly, the ethnic competition argument, in particular, is overly elite-driven, neglecting the perspectives and autonomous actions of the masses. In addition, it poses Biafra separatism in highly static terms, failing to account for variation in the intensity of the agitation over time and the factors that could lead to spikes and fall in the intensity of the agitation. Moreover, the idea of ethnic mobilisation and manipulation does not account for several occasions the Biafra agitation was stoutly opposed by the Igbo elite, particularly under President Jonathan (Dywane, 2018).

## Theoretical Framework - Instrumentalism

For the purpose of this study, the instrumentalism theory has been adopted as the theoretical framework on which the study is based. The theory of instrumentalism emphasises on flexibility of ethnic sentiments that depend on circumstance and the choice of the individual. The theory of political instrumentalism attributes the outbreak of inter-group conflict to ethnic entrepreneurs who capitalise on the availability of ethnic networks to mobilise masses along ethnic lines. This especially occurs when political elites are in danger of being 'ethnically outbid' by extremists or when domestic or international challenges threaten their political survival and interests (Chime-Nganya and Ezegwu, 2017).

One area of inadequacy in instrumentalism is its inability to explain situations where leadership arises to follow the will of the masses. This shortcoming notwithstanding, the theory of instrumentalism addresses the core of the subject matter of this study, which is ethno-nationalism and the renewed demand for Biafra (Iwara, Amaechi, and Netshandama, 2019). Furthermore, the dividing lines between people's opinion on the basis of ethnicity, becomes blurred when there is no opportunity for advancing parochial elite interests clouded as a group cause (Kanu, 2015).

Applying this theory to the study, it is noted that the security gap speaks to the failure of the state to protect its sovereignty from internal and external attacks. The capacity gap gives credence to the inability of the state and its agencies to meet the socio-economic needs of the people by the way of providing essential services like job opportunities, good roads, potable water, power supply among others. The legitimacy gap takes into cognizance the people's failure to recognise the authority of the state, especially one that practices democracy (Maiangwa, 2016).

## The Effects of Biafra Agitations on Nigeria's South-Eastern Region

It is important to evaluate the general effects of the secessionist agitation in the South-Eastern part of Nigeria, which has resulted in the federal government deployment of military action within the region. It was reported via the official website of the First Bank that eighty-one branches of the bank have suspended operations within the region thereby making banking transactions impossible (Usman, 2017). Also, industrial activities have been placed on hold in places like Nnewi Local Government Area of Anambra state where there are numerous factories and industries. The suspension of industrial activities within that area has led to loss of funds, as some of the businesses thrive on loans or daily cash remittances based on daily sales. The suspension has also impacted negatively on

living standards as factory staff who depend on wages or salary to take care of their needs and those of their loved ones have been denied access to such benefits (Kingsley & Jan, 2016).

Furthermore, the nightlife and hospitality sector in a state like Imo has been placed on hold considering the recent happenings. In a state like Imo, hotels, clubs, lounges, and bars could be described as the major sources of occupation aside from the state government being the major employer of labor in the state. Although, the nightlife and hospitality sector might come back to life, its usual high tempo of activities might take time to return. It is also important to state that the traditional beliefs, norms, and culture of the Igbo ethnic group will witness low patronage as a result of the militarisation of the region because of the secessionist agitation (Usman, 2017). Youths, who ordinarily visit the region during the new yam festival period, may not be able to do so as a result of insecurity. Those who would have planned doing traditional marital rites may consider other locations for such ceremonies. The implication is that some personalities who would have graced such occasions may be excluded. Again, some crucial traditional obligations may be evaded (Celestina, 2019).

In addition, the current situation in the South-Eastern region of Nigeria will not be suitable for investors to feel free and invest in the region considering the level of insecurity and wanton killings as well as destructions of lives and property. Finally, it is thought that the results of this investigation will help to pin-point reoccurring events and provide suggestions that deter conflicts that may slowly lead to war, thereby enhancing peace building and development, sustaining socio-political and economic structures in Nigeria and safeguarding her national security.

## Data Analysis and Discussion of Research Findings

The study's findings and outcomes are examined in the context of related researches and theoretical frameworks. The respondents demonstrated a good understanding of Biafra agitation and the role that marginalisation has played in the development of the Biafra agenda. Their responses show that the Biafra agenda has successfully cultivated the desire for agitation, if not to create a separate state, then at least to guarantee a better position in contrast to what is attained in the nation at the present time. The responses show that the majority of persons surveyed believe the Igbo people in Nigeria are being sidelined as a result of their secessionist agitation.

According to the discussion on this subject, Biafra agitation has been a key instrument for expressing unhappiness in the region. One of the participants

observed unequivocally that the agitation is critical because it educates the Igbo man about his status and place in this nation. This viewpoint was backed with the idea that the Biafra movement is about to spark another civil war in the nation. 'The manner in which the agitation is packaged and the messages conveyed is really peace threatening,' he says. The respondent called the attention of the young ones to the need to interrogate the elders about the past war experiences before agreeing to fight in another. Another participant was of the view that the Nigerian government should just let the Igbo people depart. His argument was essentially that the Igbo people have been denied certain legitimate positions of authority in the country.

Although some of the respondents justified the Biafra movement on the ground of ethnic marginalisation against the Igbo people, they however advised the agitators not to adopt violence as a method of accomplishing the Biafra ideal. Many believe that Biafra might be attained, but not in the manner that the agitators are currently pressing for it. This calls attention to the connection between cultivated and acceptable behavior. When there is a disagreement between what is conveyed and the responders' well-thought-out action, social exchange occurs, and a planned action subject to negotiated exchange takes priority. This conclusion is consistent with prior studies that challenge the capacity of the media to shape agendas. According to this study's actual experience, the Biafra agitation started the secession messaging with all sorts of harsh vocabulary, but the people appear to believe differently, with a strong focus on the cost-benefit analysis of acting on the signals (Sunday, 2016).

This study's data also reveal that Nigeria has not demonstrated the ability to resolve disputes between various factions in the country. This could make many groups build hurtful memories or a sense of injustice, which they express informally as 'marginalisation.' The idea that only groups with the power to hold the state to ransom will have their concerns addressed has grown as a result of the failure to definitively resolve group grievances. With the uncertainty in what might be the outcome, many elderly who saw the past war are not eager to support Biafra. The truth is that the majority of people agreed that they liked Biafra as a state but were frightened that advocating for it would lead to war, which they did not desire.

The longing for Biafra is at the core of the thinking of many Igbo men, but are not convinced that war or any kind of violence would be the pathway to it. There is the faith that someday God would release the Igbo people from their marginalisation. According to this participant, there is no need for violence in attaining the Biafra ambition. This anxiety was caused by the people's lack of willpower and drive to seize what they desired, even though it was obvious to all of

them that they were not well located in the nation. This is consistent with previous findings in other researches. For instance, by May 1967, it was clear that most easterners favoured independence over any other sort of connection with the rest of Nigerians, but that this would be difficult to accomplish (Folarin, Olanrewaju and Ajayi, 2018).

It has been observed from this study that many Igbo people are well exposed to, and informed about, Biafra agitation. Some participants in the study reported that that they always listen to Radio Biafra. The popular thinking is that Radio Biafra is a station for the Igbo people and set up for the liberation of the people of the region. The people also believe that the messages conveyed through the platform constitute the truth, even though Nigerians hate the truth. The finding here aligns with the articulation of the instrumentalism theory that contends that after exposing people to a certain media outlet for a while, they are likely to start accepting and believing its ideas as true. Additionally, the volume and frequency of radio exposure on Biafra is proof of how commonplace radio is as a medium for disseminating information (Peter & Fabian, 2021). It is clear that the station has been highly committed to pushing the idea of Biafra. This commitment resonates with the thinking that self-determination is a choice you make, not something the government grants you.

## Implications of the Biafra Agitation on Nigeria's Security

An effect of the ongoing Biafra agitation that it often compromises regional and national security. The radical separatists' growing ability to organise potential demonstrators could lead to armed conflict and exacerbate the already high levels of instability in the area. The most significant security issues in the South-East during the first three decades following the Nigerian Civil War were armed robberies and carjacking. However, since the late 1990s, these problems have been worsened by a spike in kidnapping and other forms of armed banditry, as well as the more persistent low-grade struggle between vigilante and criminal networks. In the early 2000s, vigilante violence became widespread in the region, with the most prominent militant vigilante group 'Bakassi Boys' active in the major commercial centers (Ibeanu & Chijioke, 2017).

The rising separatist movement in the South East has a real chance of making the security situation in the area worse by giving potential criminals a place to join the protests and simply transition from being Biafra protestors to armed robbers. The fact that certain pro-Biafra protestors have been recognised as former members of the Bakassi Boys and other armed groups who are transported by bus from one protest venue to the next raises the possibility that this is the case. These

demonstrators may pose severe challenges to regional security if they lack a reliable source of income (Okwuosa, Nwaoga and Uroko, 2021).

At the national level, ongoing Biafra agitation could exacerbate already difficult security issues. Nigeria is one of the nations in the world that is most badly impacted by violence and insecurity, according to a number of international indices. Inter-communal, political, and sectarian violence is the most distressing type of insecurity in Nigeria, despite the fact that security issues appear in many different forms. As was previously said, the Igbo population, mostly in Northern Nigeria, is frequently the target of these repeated attacks, which has fostered a strong sense of dissatisfaction among the Igbo people that the Biafra separatists can benefit from (Chime-Nganya, Ezeji and Ezegwu, 2017). As long as the Igbo people are a target of inter-communal violence, separatists in Biafra may take advantage of these incidents to rally support, escalate their conflicts, and try to carry out retaliatory assaults. The intervention of the Biafra separatists is relatively likely given that the Nigerian security services have failed to stop inter-communal violence, pushing state governments to consider other security measures.

The ability of the security authorities to manage the movement in a peaceful and professional manner may deteriorate if the pro-Biafra movements' activities increase and spread. There is strong proof that the Nigerian government use excessive force to repress the separatist organisations, including killings, imprisonment, and harassment. In May 2008, MASSOB alleged that the authorities have killed 2,020 of its members since 1999 (Iheanacho, 2016). Amnesty International recently released a report detailing how the Nigerian security forces killed at least 40 unarmed civilians and injured more than 50 others in an operation between May 29 and May 30, 2016, allegedly to stop an IPOB march before ceremonies honoring Biafra in Onitsha, Anambra State (Iwara, Amaechi and Netshandama, 2019). Onitsha killings raise serious concerns about Nigeria's ability to uphold its international human rights obligations such as the protection of the right to freedom of expression and the right to peaceful assembly and association; also, the requirement that law enforcement officials use non-violent methods whenever possible. Nigeria's human rights reputation has been seriously stained by the way its security agencies handle the pro-Biafra agitation and other instances of violations (Kanu, 2015).

## Conclusion and Recommendations

There is no gainsaying that one of the strongest reasons advanced for the resurgence of Biafra by both MASSOB and IPOB is that of marginalisation, that even after the war and over forty years later, the Igbo and indeed the easterners

have not been fully reintegrated into the Nigerian society. The Igbo people argue that some ethnic groups have created a deliberate stumbling stone not to allow any of them assume the highest office in the land and have been treated like "third class" citizens in their own country. They argue that they have been marginalised in terms of state and local government creation, federal character, appointments into juicy offices in the land, among others. They argue that the APC-led federal government has clearly shown its lack of acceptability of the Igbo people, and as such, they seek to secede from the entity called Nigeria.

This study has shown that Igbo people remain excluded in Nigerian politics and that the government's promises to them that it would restore the 3Rs; Reconciliation, Reconstruction, and Reintegration following the conflict, have not been fully fulfilled. In Nigerian politics, the Igbo people are confronted with numerous difficulties, which has led to the resurgence of the Biafra agitation.

A central argument in this paper is that peaceful engagement by people clamoring for secession will allow other people to buy into the idea of why it is important for them to separate and what they stand to gain when they do so. They must engage in debates with the parent states as seen with Scottish separatists and garner support from those who averagely will not support their course, while not ruling out the importance of media both social and conventional. It is important that its operation must be done within the ambit of the law and should not be used as an instrument to cause injury and wage a war of words with any individual or group.

Agitators must learn to coordinate and comport themselves in a way that show strong commitment and organisation and avoid engaging violently with the state's instrument of coercion. The Nigerian federal government must as a matter of importance avoid using the instrument of state coercion to inflict injury when people are engaged in lawful civil disobedience to drive home a point. These are some of the indices of development that Nigeria must implement to avoid breaching its obligations towards human rights, addressing the demands of the Biafra agitators and save its national security from re-occurring scenarios.

## References

Ada, C.A., Gungor H., Seyi, S.A. and Mojibola, B.S. (2020). Is the Causal Relationship between Foreign Direct Investment, Trade and Economic Growth Complement or Substitute? The Case of African Countries. *Journal of Public Affairs,* 20(2), 35-51.

Brown, A.A., and Oghabgonbgon A.E. (2016). The Nigerian State and the Biafra Question: Threats to or Opportunities for National Cohesion. *Warm Policy Brief: West African Network for Peace Building*, 38-51.

Celestina E.C., Daniel E.G., Ugochukwu D., Abasilim and David I. (2019). IPOB Agitations for Self-Determination and the Response of the Federal Government of Nigeria: Implications for Political Stability. *Academic Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies,* 8(3), 179-189.

Chime-Nganya E., and Ezegwu D.T. (2017). Secessionist Threat and Media Framing in Nigeria: Analysis IPOB/Nigeria Army Clashes/Effects on the Public. *Renaissance University Journal of Management and Social Sciences*, 3(1), 1-22.

Dwayne H. (2018). Patterns of Ethnic Separatism. *Comparative Studies in Society and History,* 23(2), 34-47.

Eric, C.I. (2021). Agitations of the Indigenous People of Biafra and the Right to Self Determination. *Municipal Journal of International Studies,* 4(2), 27-37.

Folarin, S.F. Olanrewaju, I.P. and Ajayi, Y. (2018). Cultural Plurality, National Integration and the Security Dilemma in Nigeria. *Covenant University Journal of Politics and International Affairs (CUJPIA),* 2(1), 81-92.

Ibeanu O., Nwachukwu O. and Chijioke K. (2017). Biafra Separatism Causes, Consequences and Remedies. *Institute for Innovations in Development,* 4(3), 54-73.

Iheanacho A.O.J. (2016). Characteristic Traits of the Igbo People: An Investigation into Critical Elements in Igbo Society. Nsukka: University of Nigeria Press Limited.

Iwara I.E., Amaechi K.E., and Netshandama V. (2019). The Igba-boi Apprenticeship Approach: Arsenal behind Growing Success of Igbo Entrepreneurs in Nigeria. *Ubuntu: Journal of Conflict and Social Transformation*, 1(8), 227-250.

Kanu I.A. (2015). Igwebuike as an Igbo-African Philosophy of Education. 4th International Conference on Law, Education and Humanities (ICLEH), November 25-26, 2015.

Kingsley, E., and Jan, P. (2016). Biafra Resurgence: State Failure, Insecurity and Separatist Agitations in Nigeria. *Global Journal of Human Social Science, Sociology, Economics & Political Science*, 12(10), 56-71.

Maiangwa, B. (2016). Revisiting the Nigeria-Biafra War: The Intangibles of Post-War Reconciliation. *International Journal on World Peace*, XXXIII (4), 39-67.

Meshach, R., & Fanen, A. (2020). Politics of Divisiveness and the Resurgence of Biafra Agitation in Nigeria, *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 24(3), 157-189.

Mohammed, I., and Shuaibu, I. (2019). Renewed Biafran Agitation for Self-Government: An Overview. *Lapai International Journal of Administration (LIJAD),* 2(2), 171-187.

Okwuosa, L., Nwaoga C.T., & Uroko, F. (2021). The Post-War Era in Nigeria and the Resilience of Igbo Communal System, Jamba. *Journal of Disaster Risk Studies*, 13(1), 86-91.

Olusegun Adigun. (2018). Repression of the Neo-Biafra Movement – Measures, Responses and Consequences. *Journal of Social Science Studies,* 5(2), 75-81.

Osaghae E.E. (2017). *Restructuring Nigeria within the Context of (True) Federalism.* Convocation Lecture, Modibbo Adama University of Technology, Yola.

Peter C.I., and Fabian I.A. (2021). Cultivating Biafra Agenda in Nigeria: Evaluation of the Influence of Radio Biafra's Rhetoric of Ethnic Marginalization on Rural Dwellers in the South East. *Journal of Media and Communication Studies,* 13(1), 23-37.

Sunday G.E. (2016). Promoting Accountability and Responsiveness in Government in Nigeria. In: O.S. Abah (Ed), *Geographies of Citizenship in Nigeria.* Zaria: Tamaza Publishing Company Limited, 34-63.

Usman, F. (2017). The Victors and the Vanquished of the Nigerian Civil War, 1967 – 1970. Zaria: ABU Press.

Yetunde, S., Sadiq, B., Elisa E., and Oluwasegun, P. (2022). Renewed Biafra Secessionist Agitation in South East, Nigeria: The Implications on

Economic Developments and National Integration. *Developing Country Studies,* 12(3), 1-5.