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The politics of renewed quest for a Biafra Republic in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

The quest for a Biafran Republic by the Igbo ethnic group has become a recurring demand in Nigeria since the late 1960s. The agitation has been premised on claims of marginalisation and exclusion of the Igbo people in the Nigerian body politic. In spite of the consistency of the agitation through various Administrations, there was a noticeable lull in such demands during the time of President Goodluck Jonathan, only to assume a frightening proportion since the advent of the Administration of President Muhammadu Buhari. This article locates the factors in the outcomes of the 2015 general elections: the question of inclusion and representation; the unfinished nature of the Nigerian civil war; economic challenges, miscalculation both on the part of the Igbo people and indiscretion in the initial appointments made by President Muhammadu Buhari. The article recommends political restructuring of Nigeria as one of the ways to address secessionist tendencies.

KEYWORDS

Biafra; President Jonathan; President Buhari; civil war; secession; Igbo exclusion; federalism

Introduction

The quest for self-determination by ethnic nationalities is sweeping across the globe. Developments since 1945 have compelled a change of attitude towards the principle and jurists now generally admit that the principle has acquired a legal character.¹ Even more pertinent is the fact that the United Nations Charter of 2007 recognised the right to self-determination by ethnic minorities. Some of the successful attempts at the exercise of right to self-determination include: the creation of East Timor from Indonesia; the people of East Pakistan, who broke away from the Federation of Pakistan to form Bangladesh in 1971; Eritreans who successfully pulled out of Ethiopia in 1993; the constituent units of once stable Federations such as Yugoslavia; and USSR which has broken up into smaller autonomous and sovereign smaller units. More recently, South Sudan has broken away from Sudan. Some of the reasons for separatist agitation by ethnic minorities range from geographical, social and economic marginalisation and unequal educational opportunities, as well as unequal access to political power. Thus, the political movements fighting for separation often do so in the name of nationalism. Secessionist movements aim at autonomy rather than integration with a neighbouring country.²

In 1967, the Igbo ethnic group of South-eastern Nigeria attempted to secede from the Nigerian state by declaring the Biafra Republic. Prior to that declaration, a series of efforts were made to appease them, but all were to no avail. This resulted in a three-year war that killed millions of people as well as inflicting massive destruction of property and the environment. The war was essentially one of the major consequences of the Igbo officer-led bloody military putsch that resulted in the decimation of political and military figures in the Northern and South-Western regions of the country. Failure to address issues surrounding the coup by General Ironsi (an Igbo man), who emerged as the first military leader after the war, led to a pogrom of the Igbo ethnic group residing in the North. Smith³ has also identified the discovery of commercial potential in Eastern Nigeria as a factor that made secession look economically viable. What started as a police action became a major war; which dragged for three years at the end of which the Yakubu Gowon military government adopted a “No victor, no vanquished” slogan that sought total reconciliation and integration. Fifty years later and the implementation of the reconciliation programme, Biafran agitation still continues at different paces.

During the long years of military rule, the agitation was muted, buried in the mind and expressed through intellectual engagements. Since the return of democracy, however, it has assumed a violent dimension. Since 2015, it has assumed dangerous proportions. Why is this so? This article attempts to answer this question by examining the interplay of politics and the quest for self-determination in the current political climate in Nigeria. The first part discusses briefly the Igbo people in the Nigerian state. The second examines Nigerian politics since 1960 and the historical development of the Igbo’s quest for self-determination. The third part analyses secessionist revolt and the failed Biafra project. The fourth part critically examines post-war policies and politics in Nigeria and is followed by a fifth part that examines the nexus between 2015 election outcomes and the renewed agitation for a Biafran state. The final segment concludes with suggestions.

The Igbo in Nigeria

Igbo people occupy the South-eastern part of Nigeria. Prior to the advent of colonial rule, what is now the Igbo ethnic group was a collection of various groups with different myths of common origin which, given the prevalent norm of the non-centralised political organisation, were largely autonomous.⁴ Furthermore, the Igbo have wide-ranging socio-political organisations that stemmed from what is usually referred to as a stateless, decentralised or diffused political system. That is to say, the Igbo are an acephalous group of people where each village community existed as a separate political unit.⁵

With the present 36 state structure in Nigeria, the Igbo wholly inhabit the Abia, Anambra, Enugu and Imo States. Their representation in Rivers and Delta States is in excess of 30%, while their presence is also marginally felt in Benue, Akwa Ibom and Cross River States.⁶ The whole of Nigeria, from the bustling mega polis in the North and South and straddling, obscure hamlets, bristle with Igbo presence, most of who function as school teachers, doctors, artisans, merchants, produce buyers and petty traders.⁷ The rapid modernisation of the Igbo gave them a great sense of pride. With great rapidity, they progressed after a debilitating civil war, filling the ranks of Nigeria’s educated, prosperous upper classes. Their elevated status, educationally and economically, contrasted

with their subordinate status, politically and socially.⁸ At the same time, the Igbo belonged to the higher echelon in the First Republic, with Dr Nnamdi Azikwe becoming the first indigenous Governor-General of Nigeria.

Politics in Nigeria after independence in 1960

Like most other African states, Nigeria was created through the expedient actions of a British Colonial Administration. In a profound sense, many of the post-independence socio-political and economic formations and malformations are a direct consequence of the state-building and economic integration processes under colonial rule.⁹ Similarly, Nigeria attained independence as a Federation of three regions (East, North and West). Within each region, there was one dominant ethnic group whose economic and political interests became regarded as the economic and political interests of the entire region. In the North, Hausa-Fulani elite interests became equated with Northern interests. The Middle Belt peoples and other minority nationalities in the North had little opportunity to promote, let alone achieve, their socio-economic and political interests. In the West, a similar thing happened: Yoruba interests predominated. The Edo, Esan, Etsako, Urhobo, Ijo, Itsekiri, Isoko, Ika, Asaba, Ukwuani and Aboh peoples of the Western Region only mattered if they supported the Action Group (AG), the political party formed from a Yoruba cultural organisation. In the East, the Igbo were the dominant group. The Ijo of today's Rivers and Bayelsa States, the Efik, Ibibio, Yakur and other peoples counted for little in the politics of Eastern Region.¹⁰ In this regard, the politics of the First Republic (1960–1966) involved a struggle between the elites of the three largest nationalities for the control of power at the centre. As Dudley succinctly puts it:

For the political elite, power was an end-in-itself and not a means to the realization of some greater “good” for the community, and whatever the instrumentalities employed in the pursuit of power, such instrumentalities were legitimate.¹¹

The scenario above created a politics of suspicion between the Southern and Northern political elites. In the South, dominated by the Igbo and the Yoruba, there developed a mutual resentment due to intense competition for political and economic power. Each was afraid of the other. The North was not left out by the grip of the fear of ethnic domination. Nigeria's three most influential founding fathers, Nnamdi Azikwe, Ahmadu Bello and Obafemi Awolowo, had one time or another expressed an innate fear of ethnic domination or expressed the intention of dominating others, obviously as a defence against being at the receiving end of ethnic domination.¹² The roots of Nigeria's post-independence crises are therefore deeply entrenched in the bitter rivalry among the major regional political elites in their struggle for supremacy.

Beyond the struggle for supremacy, political party formation during this period was also evident within regional and ethnic cleavages. Each of the regions was dominated by a major ethnic group; the major political parties that became the embodiment of its interests were: the Northern People's Congress (NPC) in the Hausa-Fulani North; the National Convention of Nigerian Citizens (NCNC) in the Ibo East; and the AG in the Yoruba West. No one party emerged with a clear majority in the 12 December 1999 Federal elections, thus creating a political stalemate.¹³ And, after a week of political bargaining, during which an NCNC/AG Federal Coalition Government was mooted, a NPC/NCNC

Federal Coalition emerged, with Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa (NPC Deputy Leader) reappointed prime minister, and Dr Nnamdi Azikwe (NCNC Leader) appointed president of the newly created Upper Chamber of the Federal Parliament, the Senate and, subsequently, the Governor-General of the Federation in succession to Sir James Robertson.¹⁴ Even the NPC/NCNC coalition led to bitter rivalry and mistrust between party officials and degenerated into a power struggle between President Nnamdi Azikwe and Prime Minister Tafawa Balewa over who would actually exercise executive power, including control of the armed forces. As observed by Eghosa Osaghae,

The crises provoked by this rivalry cumulatively led to the collapse of the Republic. At the heart of the problems were the tensions and mistrust in the NPC – NCNC coalition – generated by, among other things, the NPC's attempts to use its control of the federal government to extend political and economic domination by the Northern region, as well as attempts by the NCNC to wrestle power from the NPC by counteracting its political advantages and extending its own power-base.¹⁵

Indeed, the post-independence politics was characterised by suspicion, fear and domination. The period from 1960–1966 was buffeted by frantic and increasingly violent and fraudulent struggles by region-based elites, each endeavouring to maintain or attain political dominance. The imposition of emergency rule in the Western Region in 1962, the 1962–1963 census crisis, and the 1964 Federal elections imbroglio, were symptomatic of these regional crises. But the Republic's most spectacular and fatal crisis took place in the Western Region in 1965, following the brazen rigging of local elections by the Region's Northern-backed ruling government.¹⁶ The inability to manage the Western Region crisis provided the context for the military to topple the civilian government in a *coup d'état* on 15 January 1966. Akinsanya has argued that the coup was inevitable for three major reasons:¹⁷ the first was the general lack of respect by members of the political class for constitutionalism and the rule of the game; the second, was that the politicians were corrupt, communal and incompetent; and finally, the departing Colonial Referee, who held the last vestiges of power, was partisan (the NPC was favoured by the Colonial Powers to dominate the political scene). However, the intervention of the military contributed to the accentuation and militarisation, rather than moderation, of ethno-regional conflicts. The January 1966 *coup d'état* presumably was significantly ethnically motivated, because its plotters were predominantly Igbo, the military and the civilian casualties of the *putsch* were disproportionately non-Igbo, and the uprising ultimately led to the political accession of the Igbo General J.T. Aguiyi-Ironsi.¹⁸

Secessionist revolt and the failed Biafra project

The background to the secessionist revolt by the Igbo can be traced to the aftermath effect of the January 1966 coup. The coup seemingly vindicated Northern apprehensions that the Western-educated Southerners would add political power to their already formidable economic, industrial and educational power. Indeed, there was an immediate transfer of power from a Northern civilian leadership to a Southern military leadership; in effect, from a Northern Civilian Prime Minister (Abubakar Tafawa Balewa) to a Southern Army General, Johnson T.U. Aguiyi-Ironsi.¹⁹ The ethnic interpretation of the coup, according to Osaghae, was reinforced by several factors: first was the pattern of killings

of political leaders and military officers.²⁰ With the exception of Lt. Col. Arthur Chinyelu Unegbe, Quartermaster General of the Army, who was Igbo, all the senior military officers killed were Northerners and Westerners. Also, none of the political leaders killed was Igbo. Whereas the Northern and Western Regional Premiers (Sir Ahmadu Bello and Chief S.L. Akintola) were assassinated, the two Igbo Premiers of the Eastern and Mid-Western regions, Dr Michael Okpara and Chief Dennis Osadebey, were spared.

The second factor was the ethnic interpretation of the military take-over through the networks of the British Broadcasting Corporation, whose Hausa service enjoyed wide patronage in Northern Nigeria. The third, and perhaps most important of all, has to do with the actions of the Ironsi regime itself, which seemed to confirm the suspicion of an Eastern-Igbo agenda to dominate the country.²¹ A particularly invidious move was Ironsi's abrogation of Federalism through the Unification Decree of May 1966. The decree was broadly interpreted as an attempt to replace Northern domination under the lopsided Federalism of the First Republic with Igbo hegemony over an even more obnoxious unitary system.

The Northern Region explicitly rejected the unitary system of government and demanded a return to Federalism. The inability of Ironsi to reverse Decree 34 resulted in a counter-coup that claimed the life of Ironsi in July 1966. The counter-coup had a number of implications for Nigeria. First, it restored Northern control of the Federation under the leadership of Lt. Col. Yakubu Gowon, who repealed Ironsi's unitary decree and restored the system of regional federalism. However, the refusal of the coup-plotters to let Brigadier Babafemi Ogundipe, the next highest ranking officer, to succeed Aguiyi-Ironsi, provided key evidence that the plotters were not willing to allow a non-Northerner to become the Head of State in the place of the assassinated Aguiyi-Ironsi.²²

At this point, however, much of the Igbo intelligentsia and political class, under the leadership of the Military Governor of the Eastern Region, Lt. Col. Odumegwu Ojukwu, had become committed to the pulverisation of the Gowon-led Federal Government, if that were possible, or the secession of the East from the Federation, if necessary. Mass support for the Eastern Region's secession came with the unconscionable massacre of thousands of Igbos and other Easterners in the North in September 1966. By the end of September, Ojukwu concluded that the safety of Easterners living outside the region could no longer be guaranteed, and asked them to return home. This order, combined with the revenge massacres of Northerners in Port-Harcourt, Enugu and other Eastern cities led to a counter-exodus of non-Easterners from the region. Secessionist sentiments and feelings grew strong among Igbo elites and pressure mounted on Ojukwu to act.²³

It is important to note that national and international efforts were made to resolve the conflict, including the legislation of a weak federal system following the Aburi Ghana talks of early 1967. However, Ojukwu not only remained insistent on virtual sovereignty for the East, but also began directly to defy the Federal Government. In a final decisive move to stave off the Eastern Region's imminent secession in May 1967, Gowon declared a state of emergency in the Federation and announced the reorganisation of the country into 12 states. Three days after Gowon's action, Ojukwu proclaimed Eastern Nigeria – together with her continental shelf and territorial waters – an independent sovereign state (namely), the Republic of Biafra.²⁴

The declaration of the state of Biafra on 30 May 1967 led the Federal Government to take drastic steps to preserve the territorial integrity of the nation. Thus, the war which

erupted on 6 July 1967 dragged on for an extended period of 30 months. The war, known variously as the Biafran War or the Nigerian Civil War, did not end until 15 January 1970.

Post-war policies and politics in Nigeria

The war ended with a promise from the Federal Government to reconcile the Nigerian state and Igbo people. Gowon pledged to guarantee the security of life and property of all Nigerians, including the secessionist leaders and their followers. He pledged a policy of Reconstruction, Rehabilitation and Reconciliation (3Rs) toward the victims of the civil war. The thrust of the 3Rs according to Gowon was also to create an atmosphere conducive for resettling those displaced and others who fled their homes; reunite families and friends; rebuild physical facilities which had suffered some damage during the civil war; and to place demobilised armed forces personnel in gainful employment in civilian life.²⁵ Although the implementation of the 3Rs policy appeared to have come to an abrupt end following the overthrow of the Yakubu Gowon Administration which initiated them, subsequent years also saw the introduction of a host of other policies and constitutional decisions aimed at strengthening peace and national unity, and guaranteeing political stability. These decisions included, for instance: the creation of new states and local government (or more appropriately, the splitting of existing administrative units); strengthening the central government vis-à-vis the Federating States;²⁶ the establishment of federal unity colleges in all the states of the Federation which drew its students from all parts of the country with a view to promoting positive inter-ethnic relations and perceptions; combat ethnicity and tribalism by initiating a National Youth Service Corps that involved a mandatory one-year community service programme for all university graduates aimed at exposing young Nigerians to other ethnic groups and cultures; helping to forge bridges of understanding, trust and mutual co-existence; and the adoption of a federal character law or a quota system to guarantee equal or fair access to state patronage to all segments of the population.²⁷

But the post-civil war period was characterised by elite fragmentation in the contest for power and the material advantages associated with power under conditions of post-colonialism. Although federalism was employed in integrating all ethnic groups in Nigeria, this does not reduce conflict and competition for resources among various ethnic nationalities. To be sure, Nigeria's federal system has been over-centralised to the extent that it reflects more of a unitary arrangement than a federal one.²⁸ If anything, the greatest travail of Nigerian federalism has been the problem of asymmetric power relationships between and among the desperate component units of the Federation. The Federation is rife with mutual accusations and counter-accusations of domination and marginalisation.²⁹

Quite obviously, the political development in Nigeria since the end of the civil war has polarised the country into a North–South fragmentation, with the South constantly accusing the North of political domination. In particular, the non-resolution of the national question and the vociferous contestations over where the locus of power should be continues to fuel a politics of anxiety. The combustible politics of oil, clearly based on inequities, greed for power, the exclusion of certain groups from the gains of oil, and the desire of the competing groups to advance their agendas in relation to the national question do pose direct challenge to the resilience of Nigeria's Federalism.³⁰ Clearly, the Igbo are virtually an isolated group subtly denied access to the presidential position (see Table 1).

From Table 1, the Igbo (apart from Aguiyi-Ironsi) from the South-East have not been able to attain the leadership of the country. Before Goodluck Jonathan became the president of the country in 2011, the oil-bearing regions contended that they and other delta nationalities endured systematic resource exploitation at the expense of environmental security. Easterners generally contend that they are more liable than other Nigerians to experience relative political marginalisation, meaning insufficient inclusion in decision-making bodies at the highest national levels.³¹

In Tables 2 and 3 there is an important finding. It took the Nigerian state four decades for an Igbo man, Lt General Azubuike Ihejirika to attain the position of Chief of Army Staff (Lt Gen Azubuike Ihejirika was the first Igbo person to become Chief of Army Staff after the Civil War) and Mr Ogbonna Okechukwu Onovo the position of Inspector General of the Nigerian Police after the Nigerian civil war. It is evident, therefore, that there is a lopsidedness in the recruitment of soldiers in the country. This structural imbalance in the recruitment means that Igbo people are at a disadvantage in the scheme of things at the military institution. The same lopsidedness in the military also takes place in the political sphere. Specifically, the lopsidedness in political appointments since the return of democracy paved way for the resurgence of secessionist agenda by the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) led by Chief Ralph Nwazuruike. MASSOB openly canvasses for the disintegration of the federation and periodically engages the Nigerian security agencies in battles. The emergence of MASSOB is based on the persistence of bitter memories of the civil war, lack of security of Igbo lives and properties, injustice, ethnic hatred and perceived marginalisation of the Igbo in the area of distribution of national power and economic resources.³²

It can be said that the formation of MASSOB “institutionalised” the platform for articulating Igbo quest for self-determination in Nigerian state. The Nigerian government responded to MASSOB agitation through clampdowns and detention. In 2005, the Nigerian government pronounced MASSOB an extremist group, arrested several of its members and jailed its acclaimed leader Ralph Uwazuruike on treason charges. He was, however, released in 2007. Since then, other pro-Biafran agitators including: the Biafra Zionist (BZM), formed in 2012, the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), founded in London in

Table 1. Political leaders in Nigeria (Presidency) 1960–2016.

	Name of leader	Regime	Ethnic group and geo-political zone	Period of rule
1	Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa	Civilian	Fulani/North East	1960–1966
2	Maj Gen Aguiyi-Ironsi	Military	Igbo/South-East	1966–1967
3	General Yakubu Gowon	Military	Angas/North Central	1967–1975
4	General Murtala Mohammed	Military	Hausa/North West	1975–1976
5	General Olusegun Obasanjo	Military	Yoruba/South West	1976–1979
6	Alhaji Shehu Shagari	Civilian	Fulani/North West	1979–1983
7	General Muhammadu Buhari	Military	Fulani/North West	1983–1985
8	General Ibrahim Babaginda	Military	Gwari/North Central	1985–1993
9	Chief Ernest Shonekan	Interim	Yoruba/South West	Aug–Nov 1993
10	General Sani Abacha	Military	Kanuri/North East	1993–1998
11	General Abdulsalam Abubakar	Military	Gwari/North Central	1998–1999
12	General Olusegun Obasanjo	Civilian	Yoruba/South West	1999–2007
13	Alhaji Umaru Yar’dua	Civilian	Fulani/North West	2007–2009
14	Dr Goodluck Ebele Jonathan	Civilian	Ijaw/South–South	2009–2015
15	General Muhammadu Buhari	Civilian	Fulani/North West	2015–current

Source: Compiled by the authors.

Table 2. Service chiefs in Nigeria's Fourth Republic (1999–2007).

Military position	Name	Ethnic group/geo-political zone
<i>The Obasanjo Administration</i>		
Chief of Defense Staff	General Martin Luther Agwai	Hausa/North Central
Chief of Army Staff	Lt General Victor Malu	Tiv/North Central
	Lieutenant General Alex Ogomudia	Isoko/South–South
	Maj. General Martin Luther Agwai	Hausa/North Central
	Lt. Gen Owoye Azazi	Ijaw/South–South
Chief of Naval Staff	Vice Admiral Ganiyu Adekeye	Yoruba/South West
	Rear Admiral Ibrahim Ogohi	Igala/North Central
Chief of Air Staff	Air Marshall Isaac Alfa	Igala/North Central
	Air Marshall John Wuyep	Berom/North Central
	Air Chief Marshall Paul Dike	Urhobo/South–South
National Security Adviser	General Aliyu Gusau (Rtd)	Fulani/North West
Military position	Name	Geo-political zone
<i>The Yar'adua Administration, 2007–2010</i>		
Chief of Defense Staff	Air Chief Marshall Paul Dike	Urhobo/South–South
	Lt General Owoye Azazi	Ijaw/South–South
Chief of Army Staff	Lt General Luka Yusuf	Bara Kagoma/North Central
	Major General A.B. Danbazau	Hausa/North West
Chief of Naval Staff	Rear Admiral Isaiah Iko Ibrahim	North Central
Chief of Air Staff	Air Chief Marshall Paul Dike	Urhobo/South–South
	Air Marshal Mohammed Umar	Hausa/North West
	Air Marshall Oluseyi Petirin	Yoruba/South West
National Security Adviser	General Owoye Azazi	South–South
<i>Jonathan Administration, 2010–2015</i>		
Chief of Defense Staff	Air Marshall Oluseyi Petirin	Yoruba/South West
	Admiral Ola Saad Ibrahim	Yoruba/North Central
	Air Marshal Alex Badeh	Fali/North East
Chief of Army Staff	Lt General Azubuike Ihejirika	Igbo/South-East
	Lt General Kenneth Minimah	Ijaw/South–South
Chief of Naval Staff	Admiral Ola Saad Ibrahim	Yoruba/North Central
	Vice Admiral Joseph Ezeoba	North Central
	Admiral Usman Jubrin	Igala/North Central
Chief of Air Staff	Air Marshall Alex Badeh	North East
	Air Vice Marshal Adesola Amosun	Yoruba/South West
National Security Adviser	General Owoye Azazi	Ijaw/South–South
	Col. Sambo Dasuki (Rtd)	Fulani/North West
<i>Muhammadu Buhari Administration, 2015–date</i>		
Chief of Defense Staff	General Abayomi Olonisakin	Yoruba/South West
Chief of Army Staff	Lt General Tukur Buratai	Kanuri/North East
Chief of Naval Staff	Rear Admiral Ikot-Ete Ekwe Ibas	South–South
Chief of Defense Staff	Air Marshall Sadique Abubakar	Fulani/North East
National Security Adviser	Major General Babagana Monguno	Kanuri/North East

Source: Compiled by the authors.

Table 3. Inspector general of the Nigerian Police (1999–2017).

S/No	Name	Period of office	Ethnic group/geo-political zone
1	Musiliu Smith	1999–2002	Yoruba/South West
2	Mustapha Adebayo Balogun	Mar 2002–Jan 2005	Yoruba/South West
3	Sunday Ehindero	2005–2007	Yoruba/South West
4	Mike Mbama Okiro	2007–2009	Ikwerre/South South
5	Ogbonna Okechukwu Onovo	2009–2010	Igbo/South-East
6	Hafiz Ringim	2010–2012	Fulani/North West
7	Mohammed Abubakar	2012–2014	Hausa/North West
8	Suleiman Abba	2014–2015	Haus/North West
9	Solomon Arase	2015–2016	Edo/South–South
10	Ibrahim Idris	2016–current	Nupe/North Central

Source: Compiled by the authors.

2012 and led by Nnamdi Kanu have continued to demand secession from the state of Nigeria.

However, after the election of Goodluck Jonathan as the president in 2011, there was a sharp reduction in the violent activities of the group. To be sure, the Igbo from the South-East voted massively for the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), which produced Jonathan as its presidential candidate. As a form of reward, the Igbo people featured prominently in the administration of Goodluck Jonathan as evident in Table 4.

It is important to emphasise that during the Jonathan Presidency, the South-East was not only well represented in the composition of both executive and legislative positions, compared with the South West, it was also given what is generally regarded as critical portfolios, such as Minister of Finance/Coordinating Minister for the Economy was given to the South-East, Health, Labor, Aviation, Petroleum and Chief of Army Staff. Thus, it can be argued that the Igbo were in the inner recess of power at the central level from 2011 to 2015. However, following the defeat of Jonathan in the 2015 elections and the assumption of office by Muhammadu Buhari, secession threats and violence have increased, resulting in the loss of lives and destruction of properties.

2015 General election outcomes and renewed Igbo secession agitations and violence

Ethnic/sectional politics has continued to dominate voting pattern in the history of Nigerian politics and the 2015 general elections was not an exemption. The Igbo voted massively for Goodluck Jonathan during the election, as evident in the results. Out of 2,663,254 total votes in the 2015 presidential election from the Igbo-dominated South-East; all progressive congress (Muhammadu Buhari) scored 198,348, whereas PDP (Goodluck Jonathan) scored 2,464,905.³³ A number of reasons are responsible for the massive votes Jonathan received from the Igbo people: the first is what is called the dislocation of political permutation of the Igbo people. Based on the principle of rotational presidency enshrined in the manifesto of the PDP, the Igbo had calculated that 2019 would be turn to produce the candidate for the Presidency after Jonathan would have completed his two terms in office.³⁴ The second is the affinity of the relationship between the South-South and South-East regions. The South-South geo-political zone was carved out of the bigger Eastern Region, showing that the people have enjoyed age-long interaction. Consequently, they regarded themselves as one. Evident of the interaction is also that Jonathan has Azikiwe (an Igbo name) as one of his names; Jonathan was therefore considered to be one of

Table 4. Composition of the Federal Government 2011–2015.

Office	Officer	Ethnic group/geo-political zone
Executive		
President	Goodluck Jonathan	Ijaw/South–South
Vice President	Namadi Sambo	Hausa/North West
Secretary to the Government of the Federation	Anyim Pius Anyim	Igbo/South-East
Legislature		
Senate President	David Mark	North Central (Benue)
Deputy Senate President	Ike Ekweremadu	Igbo/South-East
Speaker, House of Representatives	Aminu Tambuwal	Fulani/North West
Deputy Speaker, House of Representatives	Chukwuemeka Nkem Ihedioha	Igbo/South-East

Source: Compiled by the authors.

their own. The third reason is the high number of appointments given to Igbo people by the Jonathan Administration, something that had never happened since the end of the civil war. The fourth is a kind of suspicion of the personality of Muhammadu Buhari as a Northern apologist, who would attempt to impose his religion on others. This notion has been cemented by long years of attack on the personality of Buhari since 1983–1984, when he ruled as a military leader. Fifth, Muhammadu Buhari, as a military officer, participated in the civil war of 1967–1970. As a result, he was regarded as having the blood of Igbo people on his hands. This naturally made them find his candidature, repulsive. The last is a kind of general disdain for candidates from the Northern Region, whom they perceive as having oppressed and marginalised them.

The massive votes from the South-East were neutralised by the votes from Northern and South-western Nigeria, which eventually ensured the victory of Muhammad Buhari. However, since his swearing-in as president, there have been renewed secession agitations from the Igbo people in the South-East. Why is this so? John Ojo attempted to answer the question by saying,

The cacophony of secession move is as a result of a shift in Presidential power from the South to the North, ascribed in the 2015 electoral face-off between former President Goodluck Jonathan and General Muhammadu Buhari.³⁵

Indeed, the Igbo felt that they may have lost political relevance in Nigeria and in the current government. This was seen in terms of appointments and leadership in the legislative arm of government due to its mass voting for the PDP and not the current APC government. A statement accredited to the president in July 2015 that he would treat the different constituency in Nigeria based on how they vote in the 2015 presidential election, reinforces this observation.³⁶ In another instance, the president was accused of promoting the Northern agenda with the appointment of key political office holders of Northern extraction. Most of the appointments in the security sector went to the North (see Table 5).

Form the table, it was evident that the Igbo were not represented in the security sector and the complaint of the people is that at any security meeting, Igbo people would be

Table 5. Security appointments under President Buhari.

Positions	Regions
Chief of Army Staff	North East
National Security Adviser	North East
Chairman EFCC	North East
Minister of Defense	North East
Chief of Airforce	North East
Inspector General of Police	North Central
Commandant NSCDC	North Central
Director of Secret Service	North West
Comptroller of Immigration Service	North Central
Marshal of Road Safety Agency (FRSC)	South West
Director of Fire Service	North
Director of Emergency Agency (NEMA)	North
Comptroller of Customs	North East
Chief of Defense Staff	South West
Director of National Intelligence Agency	South West
Chief of Naval Staff	South-South

Source: *Saturday Punch*, July 2, 2016, 1.

absent. Added to their marginalisation in political appointments is the downturn in the economy that has resulted in growing level of poverty among the masses at large. This has contributed to the rise in the agitation for Biafra by disadvantaged Igbo youths who are mainly unemployed and underemployed, and who have started romanticising a Biafra Republic that will be an Eldorado.

However, as the Biafra agitation gains momentum, the promoters of the movement have not quite been given a clear delineation of the geographical boundaries of the proposed state of Biafra. At times, Biafra is portrayed as being within the territories of Anambra, Abia, Imo, Enugu and Ebonyi (the five traditional states populated by Igbo people). Others extend it to include all Igbo-speaking areas in the South-East and South-South zones, while some others extend it to include all the territories within the former Eastern Nigeria. However, many of the Eastern minorities who fall within the larger territory of the defunct Biafra do not seem to go along with the Igbo in the Biafra movement.³⁷ What this implies is that the Igbo people do not hold a unanimous view about its independence from the Nigerian state, despite their ethnic affiliation and claims of homogeneity.

Again, the call for the secession of Biafra has brought out different reactions from the Igbo elite/political class, the diaspora and common woman and man in the South-east. The political elites, business owners and economically advantaged Igbo seem diplomatic in supporting the agitation for personal interest.³⁸ Several Igbo political elites who share the sentiment canvassed by the leadership of MASSOB/IPOB in pursuing an egalitarian society prefer non-violent methods because of the fear of losing government political patronage.³⁹

Concluding remarks

The cry of marginalisation has deepened the crisis of governance in Nigeria. Ethnic nationalities that make up the country have been making attempts to secede since 1960, when Nigeria became an independent country. However, South-East Nigeria, in an attempt to secede from Nigeria, plunged the entire nation into a bloody 30 months civil war. The abortive secessionists' struggle between 1967 and 1970 formed a crucial account of Nigeria's political record. Despite all efforts to sign the peace treaty and bring back all the ethnic groups affected by the war into the political fold, the chronicles of the war are still lingering in the memories of the people of Biafran nation. Evidently, the resurgence of Biafra's agitation under the democratic regime of President Muhammadu Buhari substantiates the perpetual reminiscences of the Biafran heroes who fought to liberate their people under the rubric of self-determination. But the recent agitation for a sovereign state of Biafra is attributed to the perceived under representation of the Igbos in the current President Buhari-led government. However, it must be noted that it has become a trend in Nigeria for losers in general elections to play on primordial sentiments so as to make things difficult for the new Administration. Thus, the present agitation for the sovereign state of Biafra lies not only in the political calculation of those who control the Nigerian state, but also in the lingering socio-economic discontent among the people of Nigeria.

In order to douse the tensions and avoid another civil war in Nigeria, a truthful commitment to the principle and practice of federalism is very important. This will bring peace

and prosperity to Nigeria. The country and its leaders have failed for too long to accept that they can only live in a widening sea of troubles while they continue to operate a convoluted system that is unitary but claims to be federal, and thus breeds injustice, antagonism and discontent. Only a true federalism through a regional autonomous political configuration will be an alternative strategy to quench the yearning and aspiration of the secessionists in Nigeria. The states should be empowered to exploit natural resources found in their area and remit the approved rate to the central government. Beyond restructuring however, the present government under President Buhari should engage the different secessionist groups in a frank dialogue. It is clear that the force alone cannot quench the agitations in the country.

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Disclosure statement

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