

Renewed Biafra Secessionist Agitation in South East, Nigeria: The Implications on Economic Developments and National Integration

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Introduction

The Nigerian state, given its heterogeneity, has the potential to drive national cohesion and by extension sustainable development within its polity. Notably, the ethnic and religious makeup of the Nigerian state which amounts to about three hundred and fifty ethnic groups and about five hundred languages make the country a unique one among the comity of nations in the world. While the religious and ethnic diversity in a state has the potential to advance the intercourse of values and belief system; the failure to manage its dynamics has the potential to enmesh such state in varying levels of chaos as presently being witnessed in Nigeria (Terngu & Terngu, 2017).

Over the years, the ethnic and religious diversity of the Nigerian rather than advanced national integration continues to set the country on the pathway of division. While some of these challenges are borne out of the limited or scarce resources as is the case of the crisis between herders and farmers in most communities in Nigeria especially the south-east, south-west and the north-central that have over the years witnessed varying violent clashes between farmers and herders; other factors that threatens the cohesion of the country manifest in the marginalization of one ethnic group over the other politically or economically. For instance, the rise of militancy in the Niger Delta region of the country as advanced (Ayogu, 2020), which arguably came up in protest against environmental degradation, lack of basic social amenities, and control over crude oil replete in the region is one obvious case of agitations that arose as a result of economic marginalization plaguing the Nigerian state.

Over the years, the three major ethnic groups in Nigeria-Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba, two of the group – the Yoruba and the Igbos' have on several fronts under the aegis of different pan-cultural cum sociopolitical groups such as the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB), Biafran Zionist Movement (BZM), O'odua Peoples' Congress (OPC) and in recent time, Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) protested the marginalization of the regions economically and politically. In recent times, it is noteworthy, especially in the light of recent happenings in the country that these groups now see secession as the solution to the crisis of marginalization affecting the regions; a course that has witnessed proscription and declaration as a terrorist group, the activities of IPOB (Sahara Reporters, 2018). According to Osaretin (2019), the politics of imbalance and a large extent, the leadership crisis in Nigeria at various levels of governance and administration has failed to address nagging in the socio-political, and economic inequality in the nation's polity. The politics of imbalance in the nation's social, economic, political and co-operate governance in the management, sharing, and allocation of the nation's commonwealth, constitute a large rampant state of insecurity, rancor, fear, suspicion, and feelings of agitation, exclusion, and isolation within and among the various ethnic nationalities in Nigerian state (Osaretin, 2019).

As it concerns Biafra, Olomjobi (2015) notes that the agitations from the group stemmed from leadership failure on the part of the government, amounting to years of social neglect, the economic and political isolation of the people in Nigeria and particularly people from the South East of the Nation in general. Again, the monumental underdevelopment, lingering unemployment for the youth skewed political structure and composition and snarled speed economic growth of the Nigerian state resulting in increased poverty, hunger, insecurity are other factors driving the clamor for secession for the South-Eastern part of the country through the establishment of the sovereign state of Biafra.

Although previous administrations have attempted to address the challenge of minority groups in the country such as the granting of amnesty to Niger-delta militants by President Umaru Musa Y'Adua; the 2014 National Conference during the administration of President Goodluck Ebele Jonathan whose reports advanced political

restructuring as a medium through which federalism will thrive in the country, these mechanisms have failed to address the agitations of most aggrieved groups in the country partly due to the lack of implementation of the resolutions advanced by the previous government and/or lack of continuity in that regards especially as it concerns militancy in the Niger-Delta (Ayogu, 2020).

Renewed agitations for the independence of Biafra under the platform of IPOB led by Nnamdi Kanu, a British Nigerian political activist have witnessed violent clashes between the secessionist group and security agencies in different parts of the South-Eastern parts of the country (Daily Post, 2021). It is noteworthy that while different security personnel has been killed due to clashes between security agencies and members of IPOB, retaliatory attacks have been carried out by IPOB in different states in the South-East such as Enugu, Ebonyi, Imo, Anambra, and Abia targeted at police stations and security personnel. The establishment of the Eastern Security Network (ESN) on the 12th of December, 2020 by Nnamdi Kanu has further aimed at protecting the people of Eastern Nigeria against violent herdsmen in the country and from attacks by security personnel have escalated the security situation in the region by the way of the invasion of the camps of ESN located in different parts of the region by security personnel (Daily Post, 2021).

It is against this background that the study examines the possible causes and impact of renewed Biafra secessionist agitation in the South-East, Nigeria, and its implication on national integration.

Empirical and Theoretical Discourse Conflict

Conflict and its attendant ramifications have been described as a core aspect of human endeavor, especially as the instance of the position that people are imbued with different mindsets and ideologies. To this end, reaching a consensus over issues may be nearly impossible especially as one may want to have his or her perspectives resonate far above others. It is against the foregoing that Agbi (2013), describes conflict as a part of human existence that often arises as a result of people holding varying perspectives over issues and/or arising from disagreement over resources. Adegbonmire (2015), identifies types of conflicts to include religious, human, ethnic, political, and civil conflicts. Central to the typologies afore-stated lies the fact that conflict breeds inefficiency, underdevelopment, political instability, and anarchy. Furthermore, the above variance of conflict is most visible or witnessed in Nigeria. While ethnic conflict is traceable to the Ife-Modakeke, Aguleri-Umuleri, Benin-Igala crisis; political conflict can be traceable to insurrection or revolution such as the Niger-delta militancy, Boko Haram insurgency. Religious and ethnic politics is chief among the crisis that tears the civil rubric of the nation apart and is responsible for the widening gap of disunity in the country (Adegbonmire, 2015).

Haldun and Opeyemi (2016), argues that religious and ethnic nationalism in Nigeria is often triggered by the control over state power, unequal allocation of resources, citizenship issues as well as economic decline; to this end, intermittent violent clashes between Christians and Muslims have led to the death of many as well as displaced many others from their homes. Ethnic nationalism, it may be argued is the core objective driving the embers of violence between IPOB and the Nigerian government. This is a result of the continued marginalization of the region in terms of representativeness as well as resulting from bad governance which characterizes the Nigerian state. Oyewo (2019), opined that the feeling of exclusion and perceived injustice are the major challenges advancing the agitation of secession in the South-Eastern part of the country. The failure of the Nigerian government to address these challenges continues to advance conflicts between the Biafran agitators, on the one hand, and the Nigerian government, on the other hand.

National Integration

National integration remains has over time been subjected to varying definitions. Hence, different scholars have developed varying definitions and meanings to express the core connotation of national integration. Despite the variance in the meaning given to the concept by scholars, it is a generally accepted position that national integration seeks to bring a disparate group of people together with the view to advancing nationhood. In the view of Bahir (2014), national integration presupposes the forging together of a pact between people or a group who do not necessarily share similar beliefs or ideologies. Coleman and Rosberg (1964), asserted that national integration is a steady and continuous act of jettisoning tension brought up regional and cultural diversities aimed at advancing a unified State or country. With recourse to the Nigerian state, different factors spanning from the ethnic and religious crisis to bad governance manifest in lack of job opportunities, non-existing or decaying infrastructural facilities are some of the factors driving disintegration and violent conflicts in the country. These violent clashes according to Rina (2009), are traceable to the paucity of resources, religious and ethnic differences, marginalization, citizenship among others. Rina (2009), further opines that before attaining independence, especially with the formation of political parties, the Nigerian state towed a disjointed and disintegrative posture which till date affects the country's cohesion thereby fanning the embers of ethnic nationalism to flames at the instance of the call for the declaration of the sovereign state of Biafra under the aegis of the various pro-Biafran movements whose activities are renowned and are in recent times being renewed at the instance of the nature of leadership being

dispensed in the country.

From the foregoing, it may be argued, in the light of recent events that the Nigerian state is slowly but steadily divided across ethnic and religious lines, thereby making national integration a nearly impossible feat to achieve in today's Nigeria.

Theoretical Framework

The study adopts state fragility theory as the theoretical basis for examining the renewed agitations by pro-Biafran groups in the South-Eastern part of Nigeria. State fragility theory notes that a state that is categorized as weak or fragile is one where the instrumentality of the government and its agencies to protect its sovereignty is failing or has been lost to internal and/or external factors such as conflict among other socioeconomic and political challenges occasioned by bad governance (Tyagi, 2012). Hence, a fragile state will refer to the state that is incapable or has lost the political will to protect and provide for the needs of its citizens. These needs are categorized into three key components which include- security gap, capacity gap, and legitimacy gap. While the security gap speaks to the failure of the state to protect its sovereignty from internal and external attacks and is prone to conflicts while gradually degenerating into an anarchical state, 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 recognize the authority of the state, especially one that practices democracy (Albertson & Moran, 2017).

From the foregoing, it will be correct to state that a fragile state is on the verge of losing or has lost its capacity to govern thereby exposing the people to varying crises that impedes human capacity development while the state, in itself, will be characterized by gross underdevelopment thereby dependent on other states for its survival. In corollary, it may be argued that the failure of the Nigerian government to dispense quality leadership, especially at the instance of the state of insecurity in the country concerning the prevalence of banditry, insurgency, and terrorism orchestrated by Boko Haram and violent clashes between farmers and herders are the chief factors advancing the clamor for secession in the South-Eastern part of the country.

Renewed Biafra Secessionist Agitation and National Integration in Nigeria

Although the heterogeneity of the Nigerian state may be used as a tool to advance national integration, the nature of governance being dispensed in the country at the instance of the perceived support for heightening security challenges in the country at the instance of the activities of herdsmen, banditry among other challenges of insecurity in the country pose a grave challenge to national integration and by extension advances agitations by pro-Biafra secessionist groups. Notably, there have been persistent herders' attacks targeted against farmers in communities in the South-East. In 2016, for instance, herders of northern extraction attacked Nimbo, a border town in Enugu state thereby invading seven villages leading to the deaths of about 200 persons by about 500 suspected Fulani herdsmen (Global Terrorism Index, 2016). There have since been different coordinated attacks carried out in different south-eastern states by suspected Fulani herdsmen in different states in the region like Ebonyi, Abia, Imo, and Anambra states.

The implication of the foregoing reflects in the establishment of the Eastern Security Network (ESN) on the 12th of December, 2020 by Nnamdi Kanu. This is at the instance of the failure of the Nigerian government and security personnel to guarantee the safety of lives and property in the region. Further, the prevalence of banditry and kidnapping may be argued also raise concerns over the sincerity of the Nigerian government to protect the rights and liberty of Nigerians. It is noteworthy that on the 7th of May, 2021, ten people including police officers and some students were abducted by unknown gunmen in the southeastern region. These challenges continue to advance violent clashes between personnel of the ESN and security operatives in the region leading to the breaking into prisons; burning of police stations in different parts of the regions especially Imo, Anambra, and Abia states; as well as the death of security personnel (Guardian Newspaper, 2021).

Economic Impact of the Secessionist Agitation in South-Eastern Nigeria

It is important to evaluate the economic and commercial implications 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 has suspended their operation within the region thereby making all banking transaction and other financial business relating to the bank as well as payment and withdrawal of funds impossible.

Also, industrial activities have been placed on hold in places like the Nnewi part of Anambra state where there are numerous factories and industries within that local government area and the state generally. The suspension of industrial activity within that area will lead to loss of funds, as some of the businesses thrive on loans or daily cash remittances based on daily sales, the suspension will also lead to poor living standards as the factory staff who depends on wages or salary to take care of their needs and that of their loved ones will not have

access to such means of livelihood and as such might result to crime to fend for their families and cater for their needs.

Furthermore, the nightlife and hospitality sector in a state like Imo has been placed on hold considering the recent happenings and though the nightlife and hospitality sector might come back alive the current tempo at which it's running might not be regained until it takes a longer time to regain such pace thereby making the existing patronage of the sector in the region to decline while guest will switch to other regions to enjoy such services. This is majorly applicable to states like Imo state where hotels, clubs, lounges, and bars are the major source of occupation aside from the state government being the major employer of labor in the state.

It is also worthy to state that the traditional beliefs, norms, and culture of the Igbo ethnic group will witness low patronage as a result of the militarization of the region by the military because of the secessionist agitation. This will occur in diverse forms as youths and younger ones who ordinarily do visit the region during the new yam festival period will not be able to do so as a result of insecurity while those who would have planned doing traditional marital rites will plan to do it in another region of the country thereby excluding some personalities who would have graced such occasions, evading some crucial traditional obligations as a result of their new location and the items at disposal for such occasion.

In addition, the current situation of the South-Eastern region of Nigeria will not be suitable for any investor to feel free in the region and invest considering the level of insecurity and wanton killings as well as destructions of lives and property that have characterized the region.

Conclusively, the resultant effect of the activities in the region as a result of the Biafran secessionist agitators has made the federal government deploy military men to suppress the agitation thereby making the military and the police engage in extrajudicial killings of able-bodied men, the resultant effect is that a reasonable number of the able-bodied men who were supposed to be the energetic backbone of the region and take up jobs and other responsibilities have been tactically eliminated and thereby making the region to lose future manpower in carrying out the crucial task.

DECLINE IN INTERNAL GENERATED REVENUE IN SOUTH EAST.

It is however important to note that the South-Eastern states were trying to catch up with other regions of the souths in terms of internally generated revenue before the surge in insecurity took over the region for instance Anambra recorded a foreign investment inflow of \$10.02 million, making it the 6th highest capital importation destination in Nigeria as of the end of 2020. In a year that the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the global economy with severe health challenges, the figure is significant bearing in mind the state's efforts to attract foreign investment. The state also has the second-lowest domestic debt in the South East (N59.9 billion) after Ebonyi (N44.2 billion) as of 2020. Others are Imo (N150.2 billion), Abia (N89.2 billion) and Enugu (N68 billion).

A further glimpse into the statistics bureau's data revealed that Anambra grew its internally generated revenue (IGR) by 61.3 percent within five years covering 2016 to 2020. According to NBS, the state's IGR of N17.3 billion in 2016 rose to N23.6 billion in 2017, but dropped to N19.3 billion in 2018, apparently due to the recession of 2016/2017. The IGR recorded an over N7 billion jump to hit N26.3 billion in 2019 before peaking at N28 billion in 2020. Anambra also ranks among the 10 top revenue-generating states and the FCT in 2020.

The feat was achieved through its unique Grassroots Tax Awareness Campaign (GTAC) initiative of 2018. It was in response to the dwindling FAAC proceeds which compelled states to pursue alternative revenue channels or expand existing ones. The initiative is driven by the Taxpayer Education and Enlightenment Team (TEET) under the Anambra Internal Revenue Service (AIRS) aimed to address the low tax compliance level in the state. These were some of the techniques put in place by some of the states in the South-East before insecurity made these states experience a decline in the internally generated revenue of the region.

FOREIGN DIRECT INVESTMENT DECLINE IN SOUTH-EASTERN NIGERIA

However, it is worthy to say that foreign direct investment declined extremely and there is no hope that the Federal Government could remedy the investment gap by intentionally, investing in economic infrastructure in the Southeast.

For developing countries, FDI is a stimulant of economic growth (Ada, et. al., 2020). As such, FDI should increase economic output and labor employment in the zone and in the country at large. Socially, it will foster community peace because the default internal emigration of economically active people from the Southeast zone is creating colonies in other zones that in the long-term will create disharmony by raising fear of dominance and exclusion. People from the zone can also be more intentional in their investment behavior by limiting their investment outside the zone. This is important, not only for the safety of the investment portfolio but also to attract economic infrastructure and foreign investments," he suggested.

Aligning with Uba however, an Investor, Henry Chibuzo, observed that lack of political will, security threats, lack of coordination among governors of the zone, and poor infrastructure had continued to discourage investment in the southeast region. He stated that ease of doing business in the zone had remained cumbersome, stressing that,

even when an investor decided to live with it, low patronage from governments could cause an exit.

“I have also noticed that many states in the Southeast have Investment Promotion agencies but these agencies are not properly funded. There is no cohesion among them in terms of driving the southeast investment program; everybody is pursuing investment at an individual level. There ought to be strategic collaboration. The governors ought to come together. There is no strategic effort that can trickle down to investment attraction in the zone.”

He added that security threats had threatened investment in agriculture, especially since the rise in farmer/herder issues in the zone, stressing that certain investors that came into the zone and invested in agriculture in the Uzouwani area of Enugu State had their crops destroyed.

“Moving through the southeast, there are several checkpoints, and the policemen on the road care less about who is coming. They are only there to exploit the people. Any investor, who probably was in the southwest, south-south, and on coming into the southeast to discover this level of security checkpoints, will certainly not want to have any business to do here.”

An Estate Management Expert, Obichukwu Umeh, stated that governments of the zone had not given enough encouragement to Igbo Investors to deepen investment in the zone

Using what happens in the sector as a case study, he stated that only a few of his colleagues could invest in housing in the Southeast, as, according to him, “you are subjected to all manner of levies by community and government officials, even when you have paid exorbitantly to procure land. You pay to fence your land; you pay neighborhood security; you pay more than 20 percent of what you bought the land to get approval for your drawing, among others. It is not easy. That is why the cost of acquiring accommodation is too high in the zone compared to other zones of the country. That aside, provision of road, electricity, and water among other facilities that could make the place habitable is also on the investor. These are the challenges.”

Citing a housing project, he did in Asaba Delta State, he stated that when he indicated interest to do low-cost housing on the land he provided, “the state government freely did the access road and extended electricity to the area. For the boreholes we sunk in the process of construction, the government also helped us to ensure that the water was reticulated, which helped to reduce the cost to the occupants. So, we need to look inwards and encourage investment in this zone.”

The Southeast governors however stated that they had supported investors in the zone and had continued to provide platforms for interaction and make their businesses thrive in the area.

Director of Communications, Southeast Governors Forum, Mr. Mike Udah, told The Guardian that the governors “are in frequent contact with Southeast Chamber of Commerce and other stakeholders to boost investment in the region.”

He added: “Every year, they organized the Southeast Economic Summit. The taxation regime in the Southeast is as friendly as ever. Recently, following the outbreak of COVID-19, the governors of the Southeast, went a step further to stop outright some levies and in some cases, reduce them to ensure that investors and ordinary citizens do not suffer.”

As an interventionist plan, the Ohanaeze Ndigbo had recently set up the Alaigbo Stabilization Fund, in partnership with governors of the zone, to cure the infrastructural deficit of the Southeast and boost investments.

President General of Ohanaeze Ndigbo, Chief Nnia Nwodo had said while inaugurating the 54-member Steering Committee for the Fund, that it was envisioned as a key instrument to articulate strategies, mobilize resources, and coordinate policies to assuage the deep yearnings of Ndigbo for prosperous development and happy home.

Nwodo explained during the inauguration that the Igbo nation had resolved to urgently address the total neglect of the area by the Federal Government since after the civil war to build an industrialized homeland having modern world-class physical and social infrastructure, competitive, attractive for investments and generating employment for the teeming youthful population.

Recommendation

In summary, it is a known fact that fifty-one years after the civil war, the country faces separatist challenges across different ethnic groups from time to time. The government's forceful response to separatist agitation over the years has been counter-productive, inflaming passions and boosting sentiments and sympathy. A typical example of such a morale booster can be seen after the death of Mohammed Yusuf an Islamic cleric based in Maiduguri the leader of the Boko Haram sect, government should go back to the drawing board and engage in sincere dialogue as a tool for addressing separatist agitation rather than use coercion.

Also, the economic and political grievance is seen as a major factor in IPOB agitation over the years, out of the three major ethnic groups in Nigeria no Igbo has been elected to lead the country since Nnamdi Azikwe's ceremonial presidency in the early 1960s, Alex Ekwueme vice President in 1979-1983 while under the military rule Major General Johnson Aguiyi-Ironsi was killed after seven months. It is also worthy to say that of all the six geo-political zones only the South-East five states while others have six or seven. From the aforementioned, it is visible that economic inequality and political unbalance lie as the root cause of this development while other

factors like ethnicity and religious bigotry are sub-factors that the elites irrespective of their religion or ethnicity uses to share the collective wealth of the masses.

The government should create an all-inclusive economic and political template should be drawn where political offices will be rotated to accommodate all ethnic groups periodically, while the call for restructuring to thrive Nigeria must create a system where meritocracy and not mediocrity will be the determining factor in the appointment and occupying political positions and appointments. What we need is a country that will accommodate everybody regardless of ethnic or religious background, political, religious, and ethnic tolerance is the key to economic and political success, while the Biafran agitators should be granted amnesty just like the Niger Delta militants and the Boko Haram terrorist group. A commission for the Eastern region development commission should be created to develop the South-East and handle critical development in the region.

Finally, the government should engage the Biafran agitators in dialogue rather than a military approach, the country should be restructured so that each region will have a degree of autonomy to some things at their disposal like state police, judicial autonomy, legislative autonomy, and resource control as practiced by other federal systems globally.

Conclusion

While the agitations for the declaration of the sovereign state of Biafra have long been in existence in Nigeria's political space following the Nigerian civil war, the challenge of marginalization and perceived injustice are also factors advancing the clamor for secession by pro-Biafra groups in the region. The study however concludes that the renewed agitations in the south-east region are borne out of the failure of the Buhari-led administration to protect the lives and property of people (regarding the eastern region) at the instance of the banditry, kidnap for ransom, and violent clashes between suspected Fulani herdsmen and farmers in the region. The implication will continue to be manifest by the way of national disintegration and the promotion of ethnic nationalism in the country. The government should as a matter of urgency strive to implement the aforementioned recommendations so as not to let the nation move into a state of further disintegration and aggravation of the emergence of non-state actors and ethnic warlords each region will have to rely upon rather than the state and federal government.

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