

A Review of the Phenomenon of Separatist Movements in Nigeria

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Abstract

Though identity politics, minority agitations and struggle are not new to Nigeria, as witnessed by the minority agitations of the 50's and 60's leading to the Biafran war between July 6, 1967 - January 13, 1970. The rise of multiple ethnic and tribal agitations today, very often, violent, has reached an alarming point. In the last few years a lot of nationalist (separatist) movements have sprung up representing virtually all the geopolitical zones in Nigeria. They all have one central theme; each group wants to separate their ethnic people from the Nigerian state¹. The constitution of Nigeria 1979 would appear to be complicit in this trend. The same constitution that enshrines a "federal character" principle, also provides the principle of indigenety, which makes the right to benefits of federal character dependent upon where an individual's parents and grandparents were born. The aim of this paper therefore is to review the genesis of separatist movements in Nigeria with a view to proffer recommendations for resolving this debilitating problem. It adopts the doctrinal approach for research, which relies on laws, statutes, regulations, cases, written texts and articles. In that regard, the paper defines and clarifies the concept of separatists movement. It reviews and assesses the root cause of separatist movement in Nigeria. It ex-rays their motivating factor and their current status in the country. In conclusion, the paper is of the view that, solution to the problem of separatist agitations is never to criminalize such groups or clamp their leaders into detention. In several mature democracies separatist groups and purveyors of hate speech such as the KKK in the USA and the British National Party in the United Kingdom are not banned for fear that doing so will drive them underground and glamorize the ideas they espouse. The preference is to draw the ideas they espouse into the market place for political ideas and out-compete them. Finally, the paper recommends that referendum is a time-tested instrument for blunting separatist tendencies in the more mature democracies.

Keywords: Separatist, Nationalists, Indigene, Movement, and Agitation

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1. Introduction

Nigeria's federal system and politics are deeply flawed, contributing to rising violence that threatens to destabilise one of Africa's leading countries. Failing to encourage genuine power sharing, they have sparked dangerous rivalries between the centre and the 36 states over revenue from the country's oil and other natural resources; promoted no-holds-barred struggles between interests groups to capture the state and its attendant wealth; and facilitated the emergence of violent ethnic militias, while politicians play on and exacerbate inter-communal tensions to cover up their corruption².

In the last few years a lot of nationalist (separatist) movements have sprung up representing virtually all the geopolitical zones in Nigeria. The interesting thing about them is that they all have one central theme; each group wants to separate their ethnic people from the Nigerian state³. Though the constitution of Nigeria enshrines a "federal character" principle, a type of quota which seeks to balance the apportionment of political positions, jobs and other government benefits evenly among Nigeria's many peoples, the same constitution is distorted by a second principle - that of indigenety, which makes the right to such benefits dependent upon where an individual's parents and grandparents were born⁴. The result is widespread discrimination against non-indigenes in the 36 states and sharp inter-communal conflict⁵.

The deep sense of alienation felt by diverse groups throughout the country has fuelled the rise in ethnic identity politics, ethnic militias. The militias demand ethnic rather than national loyalty. Some, such as the Movement for Actualisation of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB), seek secession from Nigeria. Others, like the O'odua Peoples' Congress (OPC) and the Bakassi Boys, operate as security outfits, including for state governments, and are

² International Crisis Group, *Nigerian Faltering Federal Experiment*. Dakar/Brussels, 25 Oct 2006. [crisisgroup.org https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/](https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/) accessed on the 20th August 2022

³ The Nigeria Voice, *The Many Separatist Movements in Nigeria* 21 June 2011. [thenigerianvoice.com https://www.thenigerianvoice.com/news/544](https://www.thenigerianvoice.com/news/544) Accessed 20/08/22

⁴ See sections 14 (3) & (4) of the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999 CFN (as amended)

⁵ Ibid (n.1)

responsible for human rights abuses that have left hundreds dead⁶.

The desire for some nationalities that make up a diverse country to be independent is natural. For instance, despite being part of the United Kingdom for over 300 years Scottish separatism has remained a feature of the politics in the United Kingdom. In Canada, the agitation for the independence of Quebec has remained salient since premier of Quebec Honoré Mercier mooted the idea in the 1890s. In the United States, there are still groups that hoist the confederate flag of independence even though the American civil war ended as long ago as April 9 1865. In several other European countries – from Albania, Belgium, France, Germany, Italy and Bosnia and Herzegovina to the peaceful and prosperous countries of the Scandinavia, separatist groups abound⁷. In Africa, from Algeria, Angola, Cameroun, Egypt, Equatorial Guinea and Ethiopia to Uganda, South Africa and Zimbabwe secessionist groups flourish. In Ethiopia from where Eritrea gained its independence on May 24, 1991, there are separatist agitations in at least seven parts of the country⁸.

In most recent times, activities of groups agitating for the Republic of Biafra has continued to raise concerns, however, separatist agitations in Nigeria are not limited to the demands for Biafra by three competing groups – the Movement for the Actualization of the Republic of Biafra (MASSOB), the Indigenous Peoples of Biafra (IPOB) and the Biafra Zionist Movement. Other groups that have threatened secession in recent times include Arewa People’s Congress for Arewa Republic, Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta and Niger Delta People’s Volunteer Force for Niger Delta Republic, Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People for Ogoni country, Oodua Peoples’ Congress for Oduduwa Republic and Boko Haram for the Islamic Caliphate. Adibe, (2015)

⁶ Nextier SPD *Rule of Thumb Security* 12/06/2 ReliefWeb <https://reliefweb.int/report/nigeria/rule-thumb-security>

⁷ Canada - Quebec Separatist Movement. Britannica Encyclopedia Britannica <https://www.britannica.com/place/Canada/Quebec-separatism> accessed 25th 08/22

⁸ Adibe J, *Biafra and the new secessionist threat*. www.Jideofor Adibe @JideoforAdibe Accessed on the 14/06/17

What these different nationalist groups are doing is called variously by different names, Self-Determination, Nationalist Movement, Separatist Movement, Civil Rights Movement, Indigenous Peoples' Rights Movement, etc. It is this cacophony of discontent and agitations constituting separatist movements in Nigeria that this paper intends to review.

The aim of this paper is to review and or assess separatist movements in Nigeria with a view to proffer recommendations. Its scope therefore covers the Introduction, Aim, Background, Conceptual clarification, Review/Assessment of the phenomenon of separatist movements in Nigeria and concludes with Recommendations²

2. Conceptual Clarification

2.1 *Separatism:* The Cambridge online dictionary defines separatism as the belief held by people of a particular race, religion or other group within a country that they should be independent and have their own government or in the same way live apart from other people.

Wikipedia states that Separatism is the advocacy of a state of cultural, ethnic, tribal, religion, racial and governmental or gender separation from the large group. It is often referred to as political secession. The primary goal of separationist groups is nothing more than greater autonomy. Separatist groups, practice a form of identity politics, they feel insecure among the larger group. Their political activity is founded on their shared experience of injustice to members of certain social groups. Such groups believe attempts at integration with dominant groups compromise their identity and ability to pursue greater self-determination.

Therefore, separatist movement could be referred to as an organised group of individuals who feel threatened being in the large group and feel more sense of belonging, freedom and liberty when in a small group with very close identity.

3. Assessment of Separatist Movements in Nigeria

Tamuno has documented separatist Agitation in Nigeria since 1914. According to him, several separatist movement have emerged

in Nigeria across the geo-political zones, since the dawn of the Fourth Republic, these include, Movement for the Actualisation of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB), Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), Arewa People's Congress (APC), Movement for Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND), Niger Delta Volunteer Force (NDVF), Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP), Odua People's Congress (OPC) and the Boko Haram Insurgent Group⁹.

A critical examination of the above groups reflects ethnic and religious dimension to existing separatist movement in Nigeria. While those found in the South-South region are motivated by the deplorable conditions in the environment due to oil exploration and the perceived marginalisation of the areas producing wealth for the nation. The OPC emergence was as a result of the annulment of the June 12 1993 presidential election in which a member of the ethnic groups' candidate was believed to have won the election but denied access to the office.

The religious separatist movement of Boko haram threatens the existence of Nigeria majorly in the North East, but with the coming on board of the present administration, the war against insurgency has been yielding positive results.

In May 2013, then President Goodluck Jonathan listed the MASSOB movement (along with the radical Islamist Boko Haram and the militant Yoruba group, the O'odua People's Congress) as an "extremist groups" threatening Nigeria's security. In recent years, MASSOB has fractured and, on 30 November 2015, a major faction tried to expel Uwazuruike, alleging he had compromised the secessionist cause and pocketed some 100 million naira (about \$500,000) of the group's funds.

Kanu, the figure at the centre of the current unrest, fell out with Uwazuruike in 2009, and emerged as the leader of the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) in 2012. Shortly thereafter, he set up Radio Biafra, live-streamed from London, which broadcast highly provocative messages laced with misinformation, hate speech and anti-Nigeria derision. IPOB has more recently opened "embassies"

⁹ Tamuno, T.N. *Separatist Agitation in Nigeria since 1914*. Journal of Modern African Studies, Vol 8. No.4 PP 563-584

(small offices) in the Basque county in Victoria, Spain, and also in Luxemburg¹⁰.

Following Buhari's victory in the March 2015 election, Kanu's Radio Biafra stepped up its messages of hate and incitement against the new president, his government and northern Nigerians. Repudiating MASSOB's pledge of non-violence, Kanu has strongly endorsed violence as an instrument for resuscitating Biafra. Addressing a diaspora group, the World Igbo Congress (WIC), in Los Angeles, U.S., in September, he said: "We need guns and we need bullets and those of you in America will give it (sic) to us If we don't get Biafra, everybody have (sic) to die".

Nnamdi Kanu who is still in prison custody over treasonable charges continues to conduct himself as a separatist leader. The IPOB under his leadership continues to issue, (through his lieutenants), and enforce sit at home orders in Eastern Nigeria, a policy he instituted since 30th May, 2017, to mark the 50th anniversary of the declaration of Biafra Republic and was reported to have been observed by people in the South-east part of the country. All business activities and transport routes in the southeast region were shut down on that fateful day and continues to be shut down on days set aside by the IPOB for sit at homes. Is this indicative of the support of the people of the region for the group and its ideas? Not necessary as they thrive on fear and intimidation, sometimes outright murder of non-compliant citizens.

From a global historical experience, this paper finds that there is a need for dialogue to bring this and similar ethnic threats to a reasonable resolution. It would be recalled that the Civil war between Federal Republic of Nigeria and Biafra Republic is estimated to have claimed over three million lives. Nigeria cannot afford to witness such carnage any longer.

The Ibo of the southeast and minority groups in the Niger Delta share common feelings of marginalisation. IPOB has strong following among the Ibo in Rivers state, particularly in its chief city, Port Harcourt. MASSOB's leaders and some ex-militant Niger Delta leaders have exchanged solidarity visits and jointly called for the

¹⁰ Ibid (n.3)

right to self-determination¹¹.

However, the Ibo and delta groups are sharply divided over their practical interpretation of what to do with that right. Most groups in the delta are demanding regional autonomy and the right to control their petroleum resources within Nigeria. They are fiercely opposed to any suggestion of joining the Ibos in a breakaway Biafra. Armed Niger Delta groups could be a source of weapons, but will not join any insurrection in support of Biafra¹².

4. *Motivating Factors for Separatist Movements*

Hivorits¹³ as cited by Keller (2007) has classified and tabulated separatist movement groups into four (4) namely;

- i. Backward groups in backward regions
- ii. Advance groups in backward regions
- iii. Advance groups in advance regions
- iv. Backward groups in advance regions.

He identified backward groups in backward regions to be a veritable tool for secessionist movements who have advanced groups indigenous to the groups in some advanced regions. This would enable them access to finances to establish structures and finance the activities of those in the backward regions to actualise their self-determination most especially when such areas are enriched in mineral resources of economic values. Keller¹⁴

itemises the following as motivating factors for secessionist movements.

- i. Presence of abundant natural resources
- ii. Retention of cultural identity
- iii. Marginalisation by the central government
- iv. Availability of Structure for political opportunity
- v. Established structure and function of political and social institutions.
- vi. International recognition of separatism movement.

¹¹ International Crisis group, Nigeria's Biafran Separatist Upsurge 4/12/2015
crisisgroup.orghttps://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-afric

¹² Ibid

¹³ Keller, E.J. *Africa Secessionism*: (2007) The Journal of African Policy Studies Vol 13. No 1

¹⁴ Ibid

All the aforementioned could be said to be at the disposal of the separatist movements in Nigeria like the IPOB and Boko Haram, besides international recognition from Igbos in diaspora who may be given financial and technical support to the group. It would be recalled that even during the civil war, four countries on the African continent recognised the Biafra Republic, namely: Tanzania, Zambia, Gabon and Cote d'Ivoire while other nations of the globe were on the part of Federal Republic of Nigeria.

5. *The Nigerian Situation Today*

Adibee¹⁵ in his essay titled, "Biafra and the new secessionist threat" contends that the natural tendency for some groups in a diverse country to clamour for self-determination is, in the case of Nigeria, exacerbated by a number of factors:

first, in newly democratizing states, there is often a tendency for pent-up feelings that were not allowed expression during periods of dictatorships to be released under the freedom of speech guarantee of liberal democracy. And since virtually every part of the country has an institutionalized memory of hurt and feelings of injustice, which it wants addressed, such freedoms of expression would naturally often include secessionist threats. This is why it is often said that democracy in fragile states could in the short term aggravate the structures of conflict. But democracy in the long run also presents the best opportunity for peaceful resolution of such conflicts. Second, Nigeria's inability or unwillingness to deal with what is often called the 'national question', has led to the erroneous belief that only groups that can hold the state to ransom by an overwhelming claim to certain entitlements will have their grievances addressed. For instance, some believe that the Yoruba-led NADECO's challenge to both the

¹⁵ Ibid (n.8)

Babangida regime (following the annulment of the election won by MKO Abiola) and the Abacha regime that succeeded him, played a role in the 'decision' to concede the presidency at the onset of the Fourth Republic in 1999 to the Yoruba. Similarly, it is also thought that the protracted violent agitations of the militants in the Niger Delta played a role in the choice of Dr Goodluck Jonathan, from the Niger Delta, as the running mate to the late Yaradua in the 2007 presidential election. The 'juicy' amnesty programme put in place to quell the militancy in the region may also have had the unintended consequence of incentivizing insurgencies and violent agitations. In the same vein, the Boko Haram challenge in the northeast was at least initially seen by some politicians in the south as part of the laying of overwhelming claim to the North's 'entitlement' to the presidency in 2015.

He concluded and this author is in agreement with him that:

Secessionist or insurgency movements often tap into local grievances. While some use secessionist threats as a bargaining tool to call attention to a group's alienation from the Nigerian state, some use it for personal aggrandizement while a few really meant secession. Common to all secessionist movements however is the tendency to assume wrongly that cultural or ethnic homogeneity of the proposed new nation will guarantee its success. As the case of Somalia demonstrates, this is far from the truth. Again no one can foresee the sort of internal contradictions that will flare up in the proposed new country. For instance South Sudan which got its independence from Sudan only in 2011 is today at war with armed groups in nine of its ten states, with tens of thousands displaced.

The question earlier posed as to whether these movements or their leaders represent the group or ethnic interest is answered when Adibe states that:

It will be wrong to assume that leaders of separatist groups truly speak for the people they claim to represent. In Scotland for instance when the separatist Scottish National Party lost the referendum for Scottish independence on September 18 2014, Alex Salmond, a long-time canvasser for Scottish independence, realized he was not speaking for the generality of Scots and stepped down as both Scotland's First Minister and leader of the SNP. The inability of Nnamdi Kanu of Radio Biafra to meet his bail conditions for a long time is also instructive in this regard.

The agitators view Nigeria's present federal arrangement as a "forced and flawed marriage", a view shared by several other groups, as analysed by the International Crisis Group's 2006 report¹⁶. The fact that the protesters are predominantly unemployed and under-employed youths, reflects widespread economic frustration in the country. The agitation could grow worse, if this is not addressed. At the same time, the agitators' use of ultimatums, intimidation and threats of violence highlight Nigeria's shallow democratic culture. Many citizens and groups are yet to consent to constitutional avenues for righting perceived wrongs.

Mr. Jonathan in his capacity as Acting president's to addressed the leaders of the Igbo nation was seen as a pragmatic and right step in the right direction. With a sustained dialogue and address of areas of discontent in the country in terms of infrastructural development, access to government appointment, etc the present tension posed by the IPOB and other separatist movements may douse.

6. Recommendation

This paper submits that the solution to the problem of separatist agitations is never to criminalize such groups or clamp

¹⁶ Ibid (n.11)

their leaders into detention - if they go about their demands peacefully. In several mature democracies separatist groups and purveyors of hate speech such as the KKK in the USA and the British National Party in the United Kingdom are not banned for fear that doing so will drive them underground and glamorize the ideas they espouse. The preference is to draw the ideas they espouse into the market for political ideas and out-compete them.

This article recommends that the Federal Government should grant a significant level of resource control to local communities. It should hasten to assure all regions of the country of equitable attention and distribution of resources as soon as possible.

The federal Government should replace the anachronistic concept of indigenety with a residence test when applying the federal character principle. This of course can only be done by way of constitutional amendment, which may also consider a constitutional provision allowing for the conduct of referendum among nationalities that want to secede from the union once every 50 years

The Federal government should deemphasise threats of “crushing” the agitation, rather it should encourage governors, federal legislators and other ethnic/regional/religious leaders to more actively persuade protesters to channel their grievances and demands through constitutional avenues.

In all these, the only and lasting solution is, good governance at all levels.

In final conclusion, this author is in complete agreement with Adibe¹⁷ that referendums are a time-tested instrument for blunting separatist tendencies in the more mature democracies of the world. In Scotland for instance, the victory of the ‘Better Together’ campaigners are likely to blunt the demand for Scottish independence for a long time to come. Again the victory of the ‘No’ campaigners in the 1995 referendum for Quebec independence from Canada has weakened agitations for Quebec’s secession. Flowing from this, there may be a need for the country to consider a constitutional provision allowing for the conduct of referendums among nationalities that want to secede from the union say once every 30 years. We submit that declaring discussions about the unity

¹⁷ Ibid n.8)

of Nigeria as a ‘no go area’ in successive constitutional or national conferences is counter-productive as it only helps to romanticise the hush-hush agitations for independence.

7. Conclusion

It has been observed that the federal government has characterised many of these developments as no more than a law and order problem and has responded accordingly with force. It has dismissed the demands of Niger Delta militants, for example, as simple thuggery and assumed that federal security forces can always quell the violence there and in other flash points in the country, while decreeing sweeping bans on the ethnic militias and putting a number of their leaders like Kanu, on trial for treason.

Whilst we concede that the federal government has an obligation to deal with violence by the full force of the law, it also needs to look deeper into the circumstances that give rise to so much trouble and anarchy.

These agitations are bound to further stretch Nigeria’s security forces. With the Boko Haram insurgency still very much a challenge, new unrest in the south east could detract from the resources the military and police need to improve security and resettle internally displaced persons in the north east and other parts of the country.