Repressing the Voice, Increasing the Noise: The Imperative for Negotiation as a Panacea to Security Crisis in the South East, Nigeria (PART I)

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Abstract

This article is divided into two parts: Part I and II. This part I discusses the provenance of insecurity in Nigeria, the theories explaining its emergence and the birth of militant groups in the region. Though there is no part of Nigeria that is immune to infectious insecurity, the case of South East is more worrisome. The security crisis in the region has been worsened by the intractable and complex secessionist agitation that started immediately after Nigeria’s independence. Common theories for explaining the situation have been long-term political marginalization of the region, state fragility to manage diversities and bad governance from the Igbo political elites. The conclusion of this part, therefore, is that insecurity in the South East Nigeria can be analyzed from these theories.

Keywords:
Insecurity; Negotiation; Ohaneze Ndigbo; Secession; Separatist; South East.
Southeastern Nigeria has become a theatre of insecurities as formidable secessionist groups violently confront Nigerian security forces unremorsefully while the latter respond violently by killing, forcefully arresting, incarcerating and/or holding in captivity both the actors and onlookers. The virulence of clashes between these two groups (the secessionist group and Nigerian security forces) have unleashed untold socio-economic and humanitarian consequences on both home population and immigrants (Ojewale and Onuoha 2022; Njoku 2023). The region, comprising five states of Ebonyi, Anambra, Enugu, Abia and Imo, and predominantly inhabited by Igbo-speaking people, was before now, regarded as a peaceful region. This peace sustained the commerce which the people have been known for and referred to since pre-colonial period.

Today, it is difficult to differentiate genuine separatist agitators from criminal elements in the region as Unknown Gunmen (UG), Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), Eastern Security Network (ESN) and government-formed Ebubeagu have all emerged separately with complex interests. Some scholars have also exposed the infiltration of state-sponsored criminal groups into the ranks and files of these groups, further complicating the insecurity situation (Nweje 2021).

As a result, both the security forces and the agitating groups have displaced their anger to innocuous but ordinary and prominent individuals and institutions while attacking, kidnapping, extorting and/or killing them.

This Part I of the article seeks to explain the nature and dynamics of insecurity in the South East, Nigeria. Its importance is crucial, given that it has the capacity to provide a foundation for understanding Part II that examines government's responses to insecurity in the region and the way negotiation can save the region and the entire region from breakdown.

The Provenance of Insecurity in the South East Nigeria

The current form of insecurity in the South East has taken a nuanced direction. This is because what used to be were pockets of armed robbery attacks and ritual killings perpetrated by mostly those who had been deserted by politicians after getting to the corridors of power. However, in recent times, the dimension of insecurity in the region has morphed into violent separatist agitation. This new phenomenon therefore explains other forms of insecurity in the region.

Separatist agitation in the region is an age-long phenomenon. It was made popular following the declaration of state of Biafra by the former warlord, Late Chief Odumegwu Ojukwu as a result of his perception and conviction that the people of the region were being marginalized by the rest of the country (Ebonine and Akinbetun 2021). The declaration, seen by the government of Nigeria as an affront to the sovereign power of the state to unify the people, confronted the people of the region with maximum force after the Late Ojukwu had declared
the secession of the Igbo people from the rest of Nigeria. While this may be the ultimate verifiable genesis of Igbos struggle for self-assertion and re-invention in the Nigerian socio-political landscape, some scholars have captured the root of the war on the hegemonic power tussle between former Head of State of Nigeria, Yakubu Gowon and Late Odumegwu Ojukwu over who was senior in the military and therefore should issue orders for the other to obey (Nwangwu, 2018). On this score, scholars argued that the import of Civil War that lasted for almost three years between the two personalities was an advancement of the duo’s contest for superiority. While the above may not be entirely verifiable, it is also not far from rational reasoning particularly when considered against personal verbal attacks that ensued between the duo throughout the period of the war.

However, some other scholars have excused the above submission. They have instead argued that the crisis in the contemporary South East region is also a pre-civil war origination following the ethno-religious framework that determined the character of the relationship that existed between the Igbos in the South East and Hausa-Fulanis in the Northern Nigeria (Achebe 2012; Ebonine and Akinyetun 2021; Onuoha 2018). According to the contention of these scholars, Igbos were caught in the web of envy and jealousy from the Hausa-Fulani ethnic group as a result of the former’s acuity and tact in commerce and entrepreneurship. These distinguishing characteristics significantly determined the politico-economic relevance of the Igbos between 1960 when Nigeria got its independence and 1966 when the first coup was executed as Igbos dominated almost every sector in the Nigerian political space (Achebe 2012). As a result, attacks on the property and persons of Igbo extraction living in the North became resonant even as reprisal attacks on the Hausa-Fulanis living in the South East became pronounced.

This created hostile environment would form part of the larger reason the Aguiyi Ironsi’s first military coup struck in 1966 and eliminated high-profile personalities from the North and South West (Ebonine 2021). The suspicion this sectional elimination exercise created among the Northern and Western people fueled virulent attacks on the Igbos living in these regions as well as reprisals from the Igbos in the South East. Therefore, the declaration of State of Biafra and separatist agitation that now shapes the ecology of Igbo existence can be pictured from this complex historical ethno-religious and politico-economic dichotomy between the Igbos and the rest of the ethnic groups but particularly the Hausa-Fulanis and Yorubas in the North and South West respectively as well as the emergence of post-war separatist groups and crime lords in the region. As alluded to by Oloyede (2009, 2), the anatomy of the contemporary separatist agitation in the South East is because “…the focus is on Biafra, a nation almost brought into existence, yet exists in the psyche of a person and whose loss in the sense of not being brought to existence is one of a ‘shattered assumption.’"
Theorizing Insecurity in the South East

A number of scholarly works have advanced various reasons for which insecurity in the region is ravaging. However, it appears that marginalization discourse dominates. As argued above, the narrative of structural marginalization of the Igbos in Nigeria could be traced to pre-civil war period. The end of the civil war completely changed the perspective of the Nigerian state on the Igbos and seemed to have constructed the people as spoils of war or prodigal group that ought not to be reintegrated into the legitimate fold (Onuoha 2011). The proponents of marginalization school of thought would argue that the Igbos have been consistently denied strategic political positions in Nigeria since 2015 when the secessionist agitation and its attendant violent attacks began (Nwangwu 2023; Onuoha 2011, 2018; Ebonine 2021).

During Muhammadu Buhari's first tenure in 2015, the former president of Nigeria from the North, out of the 157 appointments made, 73 went to the North, South East got 22, South-South got 21 and South West got 41. The 21 slots for the South East was fringe positions that could hardly account for the presence of the people of the region in the government (Ebonine and Akinyetun 2021). This was sequel to the president’s public remark that he would only recognize those that voted for him, apparently favouring the North and South West that voted for him on the basis of religion, ethnicity and party affiliation. In the same vein, following the declaration of victory of President Tinubu of the same All Progressive Party (APC) as the former President Buhari on May 29, 2023, the former’s recent appointments have followed majorly ethnic lines neglecting the people of the South East region that now has only five ministers (Ailemen 2023).

This brazen act contradicts sections 14(3) and 147(3) of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal republic of Nigeria that stipulates strict adherence to the federal character principle in the appointment of federal ministers for unity, equity and justice. Moreover, the leader of the Ohaneze Ndigbo, the apex Igbo socio-cultural organization, Emmanuel Iwuanyanwu said:

The Ohanaeze Ndigbo believe in one united Nigeria and this can only be achieved in an atmosphere of fairness, justice and equity. We, therefore, demand justice, fairness and equity for every ethnic group in Nigeria including the Igbo (Ailemen 2023).

Similarly, a political analyst, Kunle Okunade said:

Most of the Presidents often tint toward favouring their ethnic extraction when making political appointments. If one could critically evaluate political appointments at the federal level since 1999, it is only Olusegun Obasanjo that could be seen as a nationalist president. Others have displayed nepotism, ethnic favouritism and jingoism in the way they made their appointments (Ailemen 2023).
Beyond political emasculation, the region has also been marginalized territorially. Nigeria is broadly divided into six equal geopolitical zones except for the South East. There are seven states in the North West geopolitical zone, six states in the North East and six states in the North Central making it 19 states in the entire North of Nigeria. The South West geopolitical zone has six states, South-South geopolitical zone has six states and South East has five states. The implication for this is that the revenue sharing formula in Nigeria reflects this geopolitical configuration and therefore determines who gets what, how and when. The amplification of the secessionist struggle in the South East and the violence therefrom accounts for this brazen and willful marginalization of the people in the region.

On the other hand, other group of scholars such as Ezemenaka and Prouza (2016) and Nwangwu (2018) have looked beyond state marginalization of the people to the activities of the political class in the region. For instance, Ibeanu, Orji, and Iwuamadi (2016) argued that the insecurity in the region is a fallout of long-term disconnect between the Igbo political elites and their people. Given the political interests of the Igbo elites to be part of national cake sharing, they tradeoff the development of their people for interest alignment with the national political elites who are largely regarded in the region as ‘enemies.’ Ibrahim (2015, 1) also corroborated this assertion and therefore argued that the spiraling discontents and insecurity in the region “represents a complete fracture between the Igbo elite and their masses…the fact of the matter is that the Igbo elite has a strong empirical basis to read Nigerian political history as one of failure and frustration for them (the lumpen)… With this failure of the elite, the Igbo lumpen have seized the initiative of following the path of disintegration.” To Adetula (2015), the cause of separatist movements in the region is because “many groups in the country have never felt represented by the central power. Local elites play on these emotions for their gain…this is how local elites try to create greater political space for themselves.”

Following Igbo elite sabotage, the region has been in a sorry state in terms of development. Recent reports showed that the internally generated revenue (IGR) in the five South East states have been increasing. For instance, the five states grew their IGR from N49.24 billion in 2020 to N56.55 billion in 2021 (Diala 2022). In 2022, the IGR rose from N56.55 to 114.4 billion (Olufemi 2023). Yet, the quality of road, healthcare, schools and other critical human development sectors have been alarming (Ozibo and Okorie 2022).

Other scholars such as Akinyetun, Ebonine and Ambrose (2023) have theorized insecurity in the region in the frame of state fragility. State fragility connotes the “fundamental failure of the state to perform functions necessary to meet citizens’ basic needs and expectations” (McLoughlin 2012, 9). It is also a state’s deficiency in controlling its territory, imposing order, maintaining functional institutions, achieving economic growth and articulating, aggregating and integrating various
group interests (Akinyetun, Ebonine and Ambrose 2023). Nigerian government is notorious for lacking the capacity to exercise effective control over its citizens. As a result, there has been a surge in varied but intractable insecurities in the last few years including Boko Haram insurgency, banditry, farmer-herder crisis, oil theft, piracy, kidnapping and ritual killings. According to Fragile States Index 2022, Nigeria was ranked 16th out of 179 countries (Fragile State Index 2022). The implication is that non-state actors such as Ebube Agu, Unknown Gunmen, Eastern Security Network, IPOB and criminal gangs and crime lords masquerading as secessionist groups in the region have taken an advantage of this fragility phenomenon to unleash mayhem on the people thereby destabilizing the region.

The Emergent Militant Groups in the South East Nigeria

The governance and control vacuum left by the Nigerian state have spurred the emergence of militant groups since the end of the war. These groups comprised the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB), MASSOB International, Biafra Zionist Movement (BZM), Biafran Youth Congress (BYC), Biafran Zionist Front (BZF), Biafran Independence Movement (BIM), Biafran Liberation Council (BLC), Coalition of Biafra Liberation Groups (COBLIG) and recently the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) (Ebonine 2021; Nwangwu 2018).

MASSOB was the premier radical group that emerged after the war. It was founded by Ralph Onwuzuruike on 13th September 1999. Until its demise, following the forceful arrest and incarceration of its leader by the federal government as well as deep internal crack, the group was able to form a formidable force against the perceived and continued marginalization of the Igbo by internationalizing the struggle. This attracted sympathy from mostly Igbo in diaspora. As its popularity grew, it was able to coordinate the activities of other smaller reactionary groups mostly in diaspora such as Biafra Actualization Forum (BAF), Biafra Foundation (BF), Igbob USA, Ekwe Nche and Biafra Nigeria World (BNW) (Omeje 2005). However, internal crisis within the group led to the emergence of other militant groups such as BZM, BZF, BLC, BYC, COBLIG and recently the IPOB with seemingly the same purpose.

While IPOB can be categorized in the same rank as others, it appears as the most popular and largest of all other secessionist groups to have emerged. Formed in 2012 by Nnamdi Kanu, a dual-citizen of Nigeria and Britain, the group has gradually become more vocal, militaristic and assertive which has at different times brought it on a collision course with the federal forces. According to Nwangwu (2023, 41), the IPOB is also founded on the avowed doctrine of non-violence. In relation to the conservative Igbo nationalists who favour dialogue and diplomacy in their pursuit of Igbo nationalism, however, the IPOB represents the militant wing of post-war Igbo nationalism which promotes the secessionist inclination that surged since the return of civil rule in 1999.
Like MASSOB, or even more, IPOB, aided by the domiciliation of its leader in the United Kingdom, has effectively utilized propaganda through its Radio Biafra to disseminate information to its followers. This strategy has earned the group popular support from within and without. For instance, it was alleged that popular Nigerian personalities across ethnic divide such as Ayo Fayose, Peter Obi, Pat Utomi, Ayo Adebanjo and Charles Soludo have at various times supported the objective of the group to the chagrin of the federal government (Okaisabor 2023). The group has also been alleged to have embarked on community evangelistic mission to inundate its followers and supporters in the South East about government’s atrocious actions and polices against the region. This strategy was also used to dissuade the people from participating in the Anambra State governorship elections of 2017 (Mbah et al. 2020).

The formidable hierarchical leadership structure of the group also aids its operations. As aptly captured by Anyanwu (2017) and Ekpo (2019), besides Nnamdi Kanu, the leader of the group, other positions include deputy leader headed by Uche Mefor, Africa Representative and Interim Nigeria Coordinator, Deputy Biafra Land Coordinator, and Regional Coordinators (as representatives of Biafra Land East, Biafra Land West, Biafra Land Central and Biafra Land North) (Okaisabor 2023). However, in more recent times, particularly since the arrest of Nnamdi Kanu, a clear-cut understanding of the operations of these positions has been elusive as different individuals and groups, including the family of the detained leader have continued to claim superiority over others leading to competing and confusing instructions (Ebonine 2021).

Nnamdi Kanu has maintained his criticism of the government since 2015 when President Goodluck Ebele Jonathan, regarded by a section of Nigeria as Igbo president due to his name ‘Ebele’ that has Igbo language meaning was defeated by President Muhammadu Buhari, who was of Hausa-Fulani extraction. Added by the Buhari-led administration’s seemingly stance on favouring his ethnic clans, the fiery Kanu remarked that Nigeria is a “zoo that only understands the language of violence and force.” (Okaisabor 2023, 248). He equally at various times maintained that elections should not be held across all Biafra lands even as he instructed Igbo representatives at the 2014 National Conference to exit the conference should any discussion and resolution on Biafra actualization be not made (Okonkwo 2014). He saw the government as deliberately shortchanging the people of the region while denying them their freedom at the same time.

The frequency of these scathing attacks earned him an arrest on 24 October 2015 upon his arrival in Nigeria. The federal government quickly charged him with various offences bordering on treasonable felony, belonging to unlawful society and intimidation (Ebonine and Akinyetun 2021). He applied for bail which the government refused to oblige to after the court granted it. This hard stance by the government prompted violent agitations from the IPOB members. They issued
press conferences and an ultimatum to the government to release their leader unconditionally or risk attacks on government-owned institutions and installations (Okakwu 2017). They complemented their solidarity support for their detained leader with demonstrations and protests which yielded positive results in 2017 when Kanu was released on bail upon his agreement to adhere to strict conditions attached to the bail.

His release triggered a sense of relief to the residents of the region. Soon afterwards, Kanu was seen engaging the public against the condition attached to his bail. The continued public attention he attracted forced the federal forces codenamed 'Operation Python Dance' to attack him in his residence in September 2017 reportedly killing and injuring some people while he was whisked away. Since then, nothing was heard of him until his re-arrest in Kenya on June 28, 2021 in what looked like a collusion between Nigerian government and Kenyan Government (Ebonine and Akinyetun 2021). Since then, he has been facing charges bordering on terrorism with federal government refusing to release him after the High Court and Court of Appeal have discharged and acquainted him of the charges (Oko 2022).

As a consequence, continued government’s refusal to release him has birthed a mixture of peaceful and violent demonstrations. The more recent is the forceful imposition and observance of weekly sit-at-home order throughout the five states of the region (Ujumadu et al. 2021). As a result, supposedly miscreants popularly known and referred to as ‘unknown gunmen’ have seized this opportunity to unleash mayhem on the population while claiming to enforce the sit-at-home order (Akinyetun, Ebonine and Ambrose 2023). On the other hand, in what looks like an infiltration of Fulani jihadist in the region, the IPOB’s-formed Eastern Security Network (ESN), a militant wing of the group now attacks both suspected Fulani herders and government personnel including security forces. As a response, the five governors in the region counter-formed Ebube Agu, another security network, as a strategy to weaken the ESN and its operations in the region (Okoli et al. 2021). While the extent to which these two competing security networks have managed internal security in the region cannot be ascertained, it is evident that their formation has set a centre stage for hegemonic rivalry which has further negatively impacted the peace and harmony in the region. Moreover, it has been alleged that politicians utilize these security networks to achieve their narrow political interests by attacking any perceived enemy or opposition (Okoli et al. 2021).

Conclusion

This Part I of the article shows that the insecurity in the South East Nigeria has taken on an alarming rate in recent time. While it can be argued that insecurity has become Nigeria’s moniker, its rate in the South East has unleashed both human and non-human casualties. The common theories for the insecurity in the region are
marginalization, exclusion, state fragility and bad governance which has a historical trace. The event of civil war between the region and the rest of Nigeria was a reaction, in the form of separatist agitation, to this perceived socio-political exclusion and injustice. As argued here, this historical separatist agitation has birthed both moderate and aggressive groups such as IPOB, Unknown Gunmen, ESN and Ebube Agu whose modus operandi is as confusing as their emergence.

References


