

Repression and Self-Determination: Analysing Nigerian Government's Response to Indigenous People of Biafra's Agitation for Self-Determination.

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Abstract: *This study examines the Nigerian government's response to the Indigenous People of Biafra's (IPOB) agitation for self-determination through an independence referendum. It argues that the government's approach has been characterized by systematic repression and military-oriented strategies, contrary to international human rights standards and the right to self-determination as recognized by the United Nations. The study employs a qualitative methodology, utilizing content analysis of secondary sources of data. The theoretical framework is grounded in the Realist Theory of international relations, which provides a lens for understanding the Nigerian government's actions as driven by the pursuit of power, security, and national interests. The research findings reveal a pattern of excessive force, arbitrary arrests, extrajudicial killings, and restrictions on freedom of expression and assembly in the government's dealings with IPOB. The article concludes by recommending that IPOB reviews their strategy and align efforts with other pro-Igbo groups advocating for restructuring and true fiscal federalism within Nigeria. This strategy could achieve meaningful autonomy and address key grievances. A restructured federal system with greater state or regional autonomy would allow for local control over resources and security forces (especially the police). By pivoting towards constitutional reform, IPOB may find common cause with a broader coalition of other pro-Igbo groups seeking similar decentralization of power. This approach potentially reduces the likelihood of violent conflict while still advancing Igbo interests.*

Keywords: Self-determination, State Repression, IPOB.

Introduction

The United Nations Charter, in its first article, establishes the development of amicable relations amongst nations as a primary objective, grounded in the principles of equal rights and self-determination of peoples. Over the past three decades, the rights of indigenous peoples and the concept of self-determination have become integral components of international law and policy. This progression has been driven by a collaborative effort involving indigenous peoples, civil society organisations, international mechanisms, and state actors at various levels of governance. The United Nations human rights framework, encompassing its mechanisms, legal instruments, and policies, has been pivotal in these advancements. Entities such as the United Nations Working Group on Indigenous Populations have been at the forefront of this movement, with their efforts now being continued by the Human Rights Council and its associated mechanisms, in cooperation with other significant bodies like the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues. A notable achievement in this domain was the adoption of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples by the General Assembly in 2007. By 2010, this declaration had garnered support from the overwhelming majority of United Nations Member States, with no nations in opposition. This milestone was the culmination of decades of dialogue between states and indigenous peoples, who collaborated in a spirit of partnership to endorse the Indigenous Declaration.

The Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) is a movement that advocates for the independence of the defunct eastern region of Nigeria from Nigeria through a United Nations-supervised referendum (Vanguard, 2023). The group emerged as a response to the perceived marginalisation and killings of the Igbo people in Nigeria and the failure of previous pro-Biafra movements, such as the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB), to achieve their goals (Oduah, 2017). The group's agitation for independence is rooted in historical, political, and ethnic factors that have shaped Nigeria's development since its inception.

The quest for the independence of Biafra can be traced back to the political, economic, and ethnic tensions that emerged in Nigeria following its independence from Britain in 1960 (Okoye & Onwukwe, 2021). The most significant event that marked the beginning of the Biafra independence movement was the declaration of the Republic of Biafra by Colonel Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu, the military governor of the Eastern Region, on May 30, 1967, following the massacre of the people of the defunct eastern region of Nigeria in the northern region of Nigeria. This declaration led to the Nigerian Civil War (1967–1971), also known as the Biafran War, fought between the Nigerian government and the secessionist state of Biafra (Jacob, Nwobi & Igboji, 2020).

In January 1966, a group of young military officers, mainly of Igbo origin, staged a coup d'état, overthrowing the government and killing several high-ranking politicians, including Prime Minister Abubakar Tafawa Balewa and the Premier of the Northern Region,

Amadu Bello (Ediba, 2018). The ethnic background of the figureheads of the coup resulted in the coup being termed an Igbo coup, without recourse to the fact that other team members that actively participated in the coup were not ethnically Igbo (Ediba, 2018). This coup was followed by a counter-coup in July 1966, led by northern military officers, which resulted in the death of the Head of State, General Aguiyi-Ironsi, an Igbo, and the installation of General Yakubu Gowon as the new leader (Siollun, 2003).

The counter-coup led to months of massacres against the Igbo living in the north. Tens of thousands were killed, while about a million fled to what was then known as the Eastern Region (British Broadcasting Corporation, 2020). In response to the violence and perceived marginalisation, the military governor of the Eastern Region, Colonel Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu, declared the region's independence as the Republic of Biafra on May 30, 1967. The declaration of Biafra's independence led to a brutal civil war between the Nigerian government and the Biafran forces. The war lasted for almost three years, resulting in the death of an estimated 1-3 million people, mainly due to starvation and disease (Leapman, 1998; Uwechue, 1991; Forsyth, 1977; de St. Jorre, 1972; Garrison, 1970; International Committee on the Investigation of Crimes of Genocide, 1969).

Despite having signed numerous human rights treaties, Nigeria's state-centric approach has sought to avoid enforcement efforts regarding indigenous peoples' rights (Igbani, 2017). This is exemplified in the 1999 Constitution of Nigeria, which declares Nigeria as "one indivisible and indissoluble sovereign state" (Igbani, 2017). Furthermore, Nigeria abstained from voting on the 2007 United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) (U.N. General Assembly, 2008).

The Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) emerged in 2012 as an independence movement seeking self-determination and secession of the old eastern region from Nigeria (Ugorji, 2017). IPOB's agitation is rooted in grievances linked to perceived marginalisation of Igbos after the Nigerian civil war, unaddressed claims for reparations, and feelings of political exclusion (Ugorji, 2017). IPOB has employed nonviolent strategies, including mass protests, marches, rallies, and sit-at-home civil disobedience, to pursue its goals (Ojukwu & Oni, 2017; Ekechukwu, Uzoh & Udeji, 2023).

Nnamdi Kanu, the leader of the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), has been arrested and incarcerated multiple times by the Nigerian Government (Amnesty International, 2016a; British Broadcasting Corporation, 2015). These arrests have raised concerns about human rights violations and the government's commitment to upholding the rule of law and due process (Donnelly, 2013). Kanu was first arrested in 2015 and detained without trial for over a year, despite several court orders for his release on bail (Amnesty International, 2016a).

After being released on bail in 2017, Kanu continued to advocate for the Biafran cause (Oduah, 2017). However, in September 2017, the Nigerian Government declared IPOB a terrorist organisation and the Nigerian Military attacked Kanu's house, killing five people (Adebayo, 2017; Daily Post, 2017). Kanu escaped this attack and went into hiding, later resurfacing in Israel in 2018 (British Broadcasting Corporation, 2018). On June 29, 2021, the Nigerian Government announced that Kanu had been arrested again and extradited to Nigeria for trial (Akinwotu, 2021). The circumstances surrounding his arrest and extradition remain unclear, with allegations of an "Extraordinary Rendition", which is a violation of international law (Human Rights Watch, 2021; Adeoye, 2021).

In October 2022, the Court of Appeal in Abuja acquitted Kanu (Osaji, 2022). However, the Nigerian government continued to hold him in detention, even with an ultimatum from The Working Group on arbitrary detention under the United Nations Commission on Human Rights (UNCHR), for his immediate release. On December 15, 2023, the Supreme Court of Nigeria ruled that Kanu should stay imprisoned pending the resolution of his hearing, overturning the Court of Appeal's 2022 decision ordering his release (Africanews, 2023).

Methodology

This study is qualitative in nature. Documentary method of data collection is employed to collect data from secondary sources such as journal articles, books and memoirs from Non-Governmental Organisations. Collected data analysed by content analysis. This involved the succinct review of literatures on the subject matter which aided in the clear analysis of the arguments and informed conclusion.

Theoretical Framework

The theory of Realism in international relations provides a useful lens through which to analyse the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) movement and its relationship with the Nigerian government. The primary tenet of Realism is that the nation-state, often referred to as the 'state', is the principal entity in the field of international relations (Antunes & Camisã, 2018). While other entities, such as individuals and groups, also exist, their authority is constrained. Furthermore, the state can be viewed as a single, unified actor. For realists, the paramount objective is the survival of the state. This explains why states' actions are judged based on the ethics of responsibility rather than moral principles (Antunes & Camisã, 2018). During periods of armed conflict, the state is compelled to express and execute its policies in a unified manner, driven by its national interests. It can be argued that decision-makers exhibit rational behaviour, as their decision-making processes are driven by rationality, ultimately resulting in the pursuit of the national

interest. In this context, engaging in behaviours that might compromise the strength or security of one's state would not be considered a sensible course of action. Realism posits that leaders, regardless of their political ideology, acknowledge this premise as they endeavour to govern their nation's affairs to ensure survival within a competitive environment.

States exist within a framework of anarchy, where there is a lack of centralised international authority. The often-used comparison of lacking a reliable point of contact during an international emergency serves to emphasise this assertion. In most jurisdictions, there are law enforcement agencies, armed forces, judicial systems, and other such institutions. During times of crisis, there is a prevailing anticipation that these institutions will take appropriate action in response. Globally, however, there is a lack of consensus about the anticipation of action from any entity or individual, since an established hierarchical structure is absent. Consequently, governments are ultimately compelled to depend solely on their own resources (Antunes & Camis o, 2018).

From a realist perspective, the IPOB's quest for independence and secession from Nigeria can be viewed as a direct challenge to the Nigerian state's sovereignty and territorial integrity. The Nigerian government, as a realist actor, perceives the IPOB's demands as a threat to its national security and the stability of the Nigerian state. This perception drives the government's response, which has included the use of repressive measures, such as the declaration of IPOB as a terrorist organisation and the arrest and detention of its leader, Nnamdi Kanu.

The Nigerian government's actions, guided by realist principles, is an attempt to maintain its power and control over the territory and resources of the former Eastern Region, which IPOB seeks to secede. From this standpoint, the Nigerian government's refusal to recognise the IPOB's right to self-determination, as enshrined in international law, is a deliberate strategy to preserve the unitary and indivisible nature of the Nigerian state, as enshrined in its constitution.

Furthermore, the Realist emphasis on the centrality of the nation-state and its pursuit of power can also be seen in Nigeria's abstention from voting on the 2007 United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP). This action suggests that the Nigerian government is unwilling to cede any of its sovereignty or accept international obligations that could potentially undermine its control over its territory and the Igbo people within it.

Therefore, the Realist Theory of international relations provides a compelling framework for understanding the dynamics of the IPOB movement and the Nigerian government's response. The Nigerian government's actions, driven by the realist pursuit of power, security, and national interests, have resulted in the suppression of the IPOB's demands for self-determination and the continued marginalisation of the Igbo people within the Nigerian state.

Nigerian Government's Response to IPOB's Agitation for Self-Determination through an Independence Referendum

The resurgence of Biafran sovereignty aspirations in the southeastern region has been met with a harsh response from Nigerian security forces, characterised by excessive use of force. Ibeanu et al. (2016) posits that the Nigerian government had adopted the use of security agencies such as police as the best way of tackling the agitating IPOB members with the use of stringent coercion and repression. This is collaborated by Alalade & Ayomola (2019) who opine that the Nigerian federal government has repeatedly employed military interventions to suppress Biafran independence movements, consequently exacerbating the precarious state of peace within the nation. In September 2017, the Nigerian government designated IPOB as a terrorist organization despite no evidence it had used violence (Felter, Renwick, and Cheatam, 2021). This designation was used to intensify the crackdown in the southeast. Security forces raided IPOB leaders' homes, arrested or killed suspected members, and used live ammunition on gatherings (Amnesty International, 2018). This approach has heightened tensions and further destabilised the already fragile socio-political landscape (Alade & Ayomola, 2019).

The Nigerian government's inclination towards employing military force to suppress IPOB independence movement was made evident through President Buhari's public statements. In a televised interview with Arise TV on 10 June 2021, the President characterised IPOB as insignificant and geographically isolated, stating, 'That IPOB is just a dot in a circle, even if they want to exist, they will have no access to anywhere'. He further asserted, 'We will organise the police and the military to pursue them' (Tolu-kolawole, 2021). These remarks could be interpreted as a veiled threat against the Igbo people, potentially indicative of genocidal intentions. Uche Mefor, who heads the information and communication department of the De-Facto Customary Government of Biafra, condemned the President's words as a manifestation of 'genocidal intent and ethnic cleansing' targeting the Igbo Biafra (Uzoaru, 2021).

In 2017, the administration of President Buhari became increasingly concerned about the expanding influence and mobilisation capabilities of IPOB, particularly through their use of 'community evangelism' and other non-violent resistance tactics. The strategy of 'community evangelism' was notably employed in the lead-up to the November 2017 gubernatorial election in Anambra State, involving grassroots efforts to persuade citizens to abstain from participating in the electoral process (Mbah et al., 2020; Nwangwu,

2018). In response to the growing resonance and impact of IPOB's messaging and civil disobedience campaigns, the Nigerian government deployed military forces to the South-East region under the auspices of Operation Python Dance II.

This military operation, also referred to as *Egwu Eke II* in the Igbo language, was conducted from 15 September to 14 October 2017 in the South-Eastern states. While ostensibly aimed at addressing issues such as 'kidnapping', 'armed robbery', 'killing of priests', and 'violent agitation', the operation ultimately functioned as an instrument of suppression against unarmed neo-Biafra activists, with IPOB members being particularly targeted (Ilozue, 2018). Okafor (2017) documented instances of physical abuse and degrading treatment inflicted upon defenceless neo-Biafra youths by military personnel, including forced acts of violence against one another and coerced submersion in muddy waters. The operation's scope extended beyond these actions, encompassing an incursion into the Afaraukwu residence of Maazi Kanu utilising approximately 10 armoured vehicles and seven Hilux vans. Additionally, Nigerian soldiers involved in Operation Python Dance II raided the Abia State Council of the Nigeria Union of Journalists in Umuahia, resulting in the destruction of valuable electronic equipment and the assault of union officials (Ayo-Aderele & Ikoku, 2017).

Operation Python Dance II was followed by regulatory measures against IPOB, including its proscription and designation as a terrorist entity. Initially, the South-East governors enacted a ban on IPOB, which was promptly followed by the Nigerian Army's designation of the group as a terrorist organisation. The military justified this categorisation by citing an incident on 10 September 2017, wherein IPOB members allegedly employed various improvised weapons, including stones, Molotov cocktails, machetes and broken bottles, in an assault on a military patrol (Daily Trust, 2017). Subsequently, on 20 September 2017, the Federal Government formalised the proscription of IPOB through a ruling by Abdul Kafarati, the Chief Judge of the Federal High Court in Abuja (The Sun, 2017).

Evidence gathered by Amnesty International suggests that the Federal government and its security forces have employed disproportionate force against the Eastern Security Network (ESN) in Imo, Anambra, and Abia, resulting in fatalities and unrest (Vanguard, 2021, August 6). According to a report done by Amnesty International (2016b):

“In the southeast, the security forces have responded with violence to peaceful gatherings, protests and prayer sessions of IPOB members and supporters. In all incidents documented in this report, the military was deployed and, in most cases, they used lethal force to stop gatherings and protests. It is evident that the constant deployment of soldiers for what should be routine policing functions is contributing to the increased level of unlawful killings by state officials in Nigeria.”

The key findings of the above stated report are summarised as follows:

1. Scale of Violence:

- Between August 2015 and August, 2016, security forces killed at least 150 IPOB members and supporters during largely non-violent gatherings.
- On May 30, 2016 (Biafra Remembrance Day), an estimated 60 people were killed and 70 injured during a rally in Onitsha and Asaba.

2. Excessive Use of Force:

- The military has been deployed to police IPOB gatherings instead of regular police forces, leading to disproportionate use of force.
- Security forces have used live ammunition to disperse peaceful gatherings with little or no warning.

3. Arbitrary Arrests and Detention:

- Hundreds of IPOB members have been arbitrarily arrested and detained.
- Eight IPOB coordinators have been arrested by the Department of State Security (DSS).
- Some arrested individuals face treason charges, which carry the death penalty.

4. Human Rights Violations:

- There is evidence of extrajudicial executions, with bodies of killed and injured protesters taken to military barracks.

- Reports indicate torture and ill-treatment of detained IPOB members, including denial of medical treatment.
5. Lack of Accountability:
- Despite video evidence of killings and human rights violations, there have been no independent investigations or prosecutions of military personnel involved.
6. Climate of Fear:
- The government's response has created an atmosphere of intimidation, with relatives of those killed often too frightened to speak out.

The findings of this report suggest a pattern of systematic state repression against the IPOB movement. The use of military force against civilian protesters, extrajudicial killings, arbitrary arrests, and the lack of accountability for human rights violations indicate a serious disregard for human rights and civil liberties in the government's response to pro-Biafra activism.

In addition to the aforementioned casualties, approximately 400 civilians in the southeast were subjected to arrest, charges, or detention without trial. More recently, Amnesty International documented at least 115 individuals killed by Nigerian security forces in the southeast from March to June 2021. Notably, the majority of these victims were reportedly innocent civilians uninvolved in attacks against Nigerian security agencies (Amnesty International 2021).

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics Showing Government Responses to the Agitations for Self-Determination by IPOB in Nigeria

S/N	Items	SA	A	D	SD	Total	Mean	SD	Rank
1	Killing of IPOB members	254 (67.6%)	85 (22.6%)	28 (7.4%)	9 (2.4%)	376 (100%)	3.553	.7356	1
2	Support referendum	106 (28.2%)	77 (20.5%)	43 (11.4%)	150 (39.9%)	376 (100%)	2.369	1.2645	4
3	Arrest and imprisonment of IPOB members	240 (63.8%)	110 (29.3%)	11 (2.9%)	15 (4.0%)	376 (100%)	3.529	.7405	2
4	Respect for human rights of IPOB members	70 (18.6%)	110 (29.3%)	24 (6.4%)	172 (45.7%)	376 (100%)	2.207	1.2064	5
5	Nigerian Government call for negotiation with IPOB members	34 (9.0%)	31 (8.2%)	79 (21%)	232 (61.7%)	376 (100%)	1.646	.9687	6
6	Harassment of IPOB members by Nigerian security forces	235 (62.5%)	114 (30.3%)	11 (2.9%)	16 (4.3%)	376 (100%)	3.510	.7518	3
Average Mean Score							2.802		

Source: Chukwudi et al. (2019)

Table 1 above reveals Nigerian government's responses to the agitations for self-determination and independence referendum by IPOB in Nigeria. Survey participants indicated that the Nigerian government's primary responses to IPOB's self-determination movement involves lethal force against IPOB members (mean value: 3.553), incarceration (mean value: 3.529), and intimidation by state security apparatus (mean value: 3.510). Remarkably, the majority of respondents refuted claims that the government had responded with support for a referendum (mean value: 2.369), respect for IPOB members' human rights (mean value: 2.207), or overtures for negotiations (mean value: 1.646). These findings suggest that the Nigerian government has adopted a predominantly hostile stance towards IPOB activists.

Table 2: A Compilation of Detained IPOB Members 2015-2023

DATE	PLACE OF DETENTION	NO. OF IPOB MEMBER S	REASON FOR ARREST AND DETENTION	DURATION OF DETENTION	SOURCE OF INFORMATION
October 17, 2015	Lagos State	IPOB leader Nnamdi Kanu	Offenses relating to “preparation to secede from Nigeria”	More than 1 year	https://www.vanguardngr.com/2015/10/breaking-radio-biafra-director-nnamdi-kanu-reportedly-arrested/
2015	Abuja	4 top members of IPOB	Offenses relating to “preparation to secede from Nigeria”	3years	https://www.vanguardngr.com/2018/07/4-detained-ipob-members-return-home/amp/
September 9, 2017	Abia State	59 members of IPOB	Alleged murder and arson.		https://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/headlines/243470-police-confirm-officer-killed-59-ipob-members-arrested-prosecuted-murder-arson.html?tztc=1
May 31, 2018	Umuahia, Abia State	21 members of IPOB	Charged for terrorism		https://punchng.com/police-arrest-and-trial-of-praying-ipob-members/?amp
August 17, 2018	Owerri, Imo State	114 women alleged to be IPOB members	Protesting for the whereabouts of IPOB leader	1 week	https://guardian.ng/news/imo-court-releases-114-detained-ipob-women/
May 22, 2019	Nsukka, Enugu State	140 suspected IPOB members	Allegedly organising unlawful procession, display of proscribed items on the streets, and allegedly chanting inciting songs against the nation.		https://theeagleonline.com.ng/ipob-police-arrest-140-members-of-pro-biafra-group-in-nsukka/
October 19, 2019	Ebonyi State	70 suspected IPOB members	Unlawful Assembly		https://dailypost.ng/2019/10/29/police-allegedly-shoot-17-ipob-members-70-others-arrested/

August 12, 2020	Abuja	67 suspected IPOB members	Unlawful assembly	5months	https://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/top-news/441598-67-ipob-members-regain-freedom-after-five-months-in-detention.html
January 7, 2021	Orlu Imo state	7 suspected IPOB members	Illegal possession of arms and killing of security personnel		https://www.vanguardngr.com/2021/02/breaking-troops-arrest-20-ipob-members-recover-arms-hand-them-to-police/amp/
February 17, 2021	Ihiala Anambra	14 suspected IPOB members			
March to June, 2021	South East	50 persons arrested during raid in south east		7 months	https://saharareporters.com/2021/09/23/breaking-court-orders-immediate-release-alleged-ipob-members-illegally-detained-7-months
May 31, 2021	Ebonyi	6 suspected IPOB members	Enforcing sit at home order		https://guardian.ng/news/police-arrest-6-suspected-ipob-members-recover-arms-in-ebonyi/
June 17, 2021	Owerri Imo state	A girlfriend to suspected IPOB member	Accused of being an informant	7months	https://www.thecable.ng/21-year-old-woman-detained-for-being-friend-with-ipob-member-igp-orders-probe/amp
June 26, 2021	Kenya	Nnamdi Kanu	Accused of treasonable felony	Held till date	https://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/top-news/475923-timeline-nnamdi-kanu-long-battle-with-nigeria-government-continue.html
July 4, 2021	Lagos State	A man	Suspected IPOB member		https://humanglemedia.com/detaining-suspected-ipob-member-for-months-without-access-to-family-members/
July 18, 2023	Delta State	5 Men	Suspected IPOB members		https://punchng.com/security-operatives-kill-two-ipob-members-arrest-five/

Compiled by the researcher (2024)

Table 2 above provides an account of the detention of IPOB members from 2015 to 2023, showcasing the Nigerian government's repressive efforts towards the activities of IPOB through arbitrary arrests and long detentions. The wide range of locations, the

significant number of detainees (362), and the varying reasons for detention highlight the extensive scope of governmental actions against the IPOB movement. This analysis underscores the ongoing tension and conflict between IPOB and Nigerian authorities.

Table 3: A compilation of verified incidents of extrajudicial killings of IPOB members by Nigerian armed forces

DATE OF EVENT	NUMBER OF CASUALTIES	LOCATION OF EVENT	SOURCE OF INFORMATION
August, 2015 – August, 2016	150	South-East Nigeria	https://www.amnestyusa.org/reports/bullets-were-raining-everywhere-deadly-repression-of-pro-biafra-activists/
February 9, 2016	13	Aba, Abia State	https://www.amnestyusa.org/reports/bullets-were-raining-everywhere-deadly-repression-of-pro-biafra-activists/
May 30, 2016	60	Onitsha, Anambra State	https://www.amnestyusa.org/reports/bullets-were-raining-everywhere-deadly-repression-of-pro-biafra-activists/
March – June, 2021	115	South-East Nigeria	https://dailypost.ng/2021/08/05/ipob-amnesty-international-reveals-number-of-people-killed-by-security-forces-in-south-east/

Compiled by the researcher (2024)

Table 3 above provides an overview of the extrajudicial killings of IPOB members by Nigerian armed forces from 2015 to 2021 culled from credible sources. The high number of casualties and the consistency of incidents over the years underscore the repressive action of the Nigerian government against IPOB through the armed forces.

The apprehension and subsequent extradition of Mazi Nnamdi Kanu, the head of IPOB, from Kenya on 29 June 2021 has intensified security apprehensions in the South-East region. In response to the detention of their leader, IPOB has instituted a weekly sit-at-home order on Mondays as a form of protest. The concern generated by this directive is significant. The situation has transformed from a state of simple anxiety to a profound fear, greatly obstructing movement between cities and notably hindering trade, business activities, and social connections. Marketplaces and venues for exchanging goods and services have faced closures or attacks due to the enforcement of the sit-at-home mandate. An impactful example is the fire that engulfed the Eke Ututu Market in the Orsu-Ihitte Ukwu Community, located in the Orsu Local Government Area, on Saturday, 7 September 2022. The event, driven by local turmoil and armed involvement, caused significant economic harm and led to the tragic loss of lives.

The assertion by Krasner (2004) that self-determination is often followed by violent conflict highlights a fundamental challenge in the pursuit of freedom and autonomy. When a group feels that its rights and aspirations are being suppressed or ignored, the potential for conflict increases. In the context of South-Eastern Nigeria, the perception that the government is actively working to destabilize the region through violence and repressive actions has created a volatile environment. This perception of governmental repression aligns with the historical pattern of authorities attempting to maintain control over regions seeking autonomy. Such actions, whether real or perceived, can serve as catalysts for increased resistance and, in some cases, the emergence of armed groups. The unknown gunmen enforcing IPOB sit-at-home orders in South-Eastern Nigeria can be seen as a direct response to this perceived oppression.

As it was captured in Cohen (2003), Patrick Henry's impassioned speech, "why stand we here idle? What is it that gentlemen wish? What would they have? Is life so dear, or peace so sweet, as to be purchased at the price of chains and slavery? Forbid it, Almighty God! I know not what course others may take; but as for me, give me liberty or give me death!", resonates strongly with this situation. His words encapsulate the fervour and conviction that drive self-determination movements, emphasizing the lengths to which people will go to secure their freedom. In the context of South-Eastern Nigeria, this sentiment is echoed in the actions of those who support IPOB and resist what they perceive as governmental oppression. The emergence of unknown gunmen enforcing sit-at-home orders can be seen as a manifestation of this "liberty or death" mentality. These individuals, driven by a belief in the righteousness of their cause, are willing to engage in violent acts to assert their vision of freedom and autonomy for the region.

From the foregoing, it is clear that the Nigerian government's response to the Indigenous People of Biafra's (IPOB) agitation for self-determination through an independence referendum is characterised by systematic state repression of IPOB, involving the use of military force, incessant arbitrary arrests, detentions, imprisonments, extrajudicial killings, restriction on freedom of expression and assembly, an internationally unrecognised proscription of IPOB as a terrorist group, and a lack of willingness to engage in dialogue or peaceful resolution of the conflict, all of which are contrary to the right to self-determination as recognised and allowed by the United Nations. The government has shown little inclination towards negotiation or supporting a referendum for IPOB's cause, suggesting a preference for forceful suppression over political dialogue. This approach not only fails to address the underlying grievances that fuel the IPOB movement but also risks perpetuating a cycle of violence and resentment.

Conclusion

The nature of the Nigerian government's response to IPOB's unrelenting agitation for self-determination via an independence referendum is not dialogue oriented, but highly repressive and based on a military oriented stratagem. This indeed is contrary to the United Nations charter (1945) and the United Nations International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966), which provide for the right to self-determination, to which Nigeria is signatory. This pattern of behaviour from the Nigerian government not only contravenes international human rights standards but also exacerbates tensions and undermines the prospects for peaceful resolution. Given the context of the enormous loss of life and property incurred during the Nigeria-Biafra war between 1967-1970, as well as the continued state repression of pro-Biafra groups like IPOB by the Nigerian government, which has led to insecurity, violence and death, it is imperative that IPOB reviews their strategy and align efforts with other pro-Igbo groups advocating for restructuring and true fiscal federalism within Nigeria. This strategy could achieve meaningful autonomy and address key grievances. A restructured federal system with greater state or regional autonomy would allow for local control over resources and security forces (especially the police). By pivoting towards constitutional reform, IPOB may find common cause with a broader coalition of other pro-Igbo groups seeking similar decentralization of power. This approach potentially reduces the likelihood of violent conflict while still advancing Igbo interests.

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