

The Biafra Question in the Modern day; a Right or Insurgency?

¹Dawodu Hakeem G., ²Akinde Mukail A. & ³Omojaro Anthony O.

¹Department of General Studies, The Federal Polytechnic Ilaro, Ogun State

²Department of Taxation, The Federal Polytechnic Ilaro, Ogun State

³Department of Business Administration and Management, The Federal Polytechnic Ilaro, Ogun State

Abstract: *This study critically looks at the current question of Biafra in Nigeria and looks at whether it is a valid struggle of self-determination or a kind of insurgency. Based on historic resentments by the 1967-1970 Nigerian Civil War, modern separatist struggles, especially the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) mould their case on political marginalisation, socio-economic marginalisation, and perceived wrongs of the federal system. The Nigerian state, in its turn, labels these movements as the threats to the national unity, and IPOB is a terrorist group, which is combated with militarised responses. A qualitative research design was adopted, which involve collection of secondary sources of data from peer-reviewed literature, government documents, and other reliable media reports. The collected data was analysed through thematic content analysis. The results suggest that marginalisation based on identities and relative deprivation are major mobilisation factors, whereas militarized interventions by states tend to increase grievances and destroy civil liberties. The study concludes that the wavering between the assertions of self-determination and the sense of insurgency is the indication of the sophistication of the question of Biafra. It suggests organized political discussion, institutional changes to enrich federal inclusivity, and the enhanced security of civil liberties as the key measures on reducing disagreement and promoting stability in the long term. The study, by emphasizing the political rights and security issues, adds to a critical picture of the sub-state movements, conflict management, and political governance issues in present-day Nigeria.*

Keywords: Biafra, Insurgency, Marginalisation, Securitisation, Self-Determination.

I. Introduction

The Biafra issue, which was a byproduct of the Nigerian Civil War of 1967-1970 and the unsuccessful secession of the Eastern Region, is a thorn in the side of Nigerian politics. Over 50 years since the war, separatist movements have taken different dimensions, the most recent being the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), which has arisen in 2012 to seek to secede the southeastern region (Ofodeme & Biereenu-Nnabugwu, 2024). Such a revival brings deeply critical questions of citizenship, government, nationality, and validity of demands both as a right to self-determination and as a threat to the territorial integrity of Nigeria.

The modern Biafra movement is fuelled by a complicated composite of historical agonies, felt socio-economic marginalisation, and political marginalisation. The Igbo ethnic group which is mostly found in the southeast states is reported to have grievances regarding underrepresentation in the federal institutions, inequitable distribution of resources and historical injustice dating back to the post-civil war period according to a recent study (Mezie-Okoye, 2025). These institutional injustices have given a good foundation to the stories that secession is not a political desire only but a way of correcting historical injustices. Nevertheless, the reaction of the Nigerian state has been more securitised: IPOB was declared a terrorist group in 2017, and the actions of state security agencies were maintained on the pretext of suppressing an insurgency instead of considering the political manifestations (Njoku, 2025).

This presentation of the Biafra agitation as an insurgency clouds significant analytical difference. As stated in the literature, IPOB, in its original rhetoric, concentrates on the non-violent resistance and the acts of exercising internationally recognised rights to self-determination and the demand of a referendum on independence (Oguejiofor & Eze, 2024). It is on this background that there is a great lack of cohesion between the self-represented identity of the movement and how it has been characterised as a security threat by the Nigerian state. Researchers opine that the securitization of political dissent in the South-East does not only pose a threat to fueling grievances, but also to weaken democratic governance and prospective conflict resolution in Nigeria (Njoku, 2025).

Although the literature on the topic is gradually increasing, the available research tends to be divided into two broad categories: the ones who predict the actions of IPOB in the framework of the discourse of international law and rights frameworks, and those that position the movement but largely as an insurgency destabilizing the situation. What has not been conclusively explored is a critical questioning of the construction,

contention, and realisation of such narratives in practice, especially when it comes to the citizen views, the state policy, and the stability of the region.

The main issue that is resolved in this study is the vague classification of the contemporary Biafra agitation that swings between the demands of the right to self-determination and the definition of insurgency. This ambiguity has some material implications on the policy of the people, security reaction and the socio-political incorporation of the affected communities. The security-first policy of the Nigerian state faces the possibility of disenfranchising valid political claims and decreasing the chance of finding political solutions through negotiations.

Objectives of the Study

- i. To critically examine the rival accounts that define the modern Biafra agitation as a right to self-determination or as an insurgency to the integrity of the nation.
- ii. To evaluate how the securitised response of the Nigerian state impacts on politics, civil liberties and chance of inclusive conflict resolution.

II. Literature Review

2.1 Conceptual Review

The modern Biafra query summarizes conflicting political and legal formations, most prominently, self-determination and insurgency/secession, which have different normative and factual connotations. In essence, the concept of self-determination signifies the entitlement of peoples to decide on their political identity and their economic, social and cultural growth within or without existent political systems. However, modern international law, although it acknowledges that self-determination is a right, is determined that it does not automatically mean an unconditional right to secession (particularly, in post-colonial states) but can also encompass other variants of internal self-determination: autonomy or federal redrawing (Onwubiko, 2023). This difference is critical to the realization of why modern appeals of referendum or autonomy in Southeast Nigeria are characterized as claims of rights and not insurrection.

In the Nigerian context, secession is not constitutionally legalized and the government always terms separatist agitations as a threat to the territorial integrity. This has compounded the conceptual vagueness: what the proponents define as political rights, critics define as insurgency. According to the scholars, such movements as the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) tend to employ the rights discourse to validate their demands, but the absence of the internationally recognised command makes the normative foundation of secession more complicated (Adesanya, 2023). Also, the insurgency is operationalised in a way that preempts the reaction by the state violence and security, even to the extent that the political goals of the movement are eclipsed (Njoku, 2025).

The conceptual discourse depends on the significance of marginalisation and identity politics. Researchers believe that the resurgence of Biafran agitation is not only influenced by the nostalgic feeling of lost sovereignty but instead by the constant socio-economic deprivation and the feeling of non-participation in elite politics (Mezie-Okoye, 2025). This theoretical framework broadens the discussion of the abstract argument about land possession to the experience of communities who consider themselves to be systematically disadvantaged based on the federal system.

2.2 Theoretical Review

In an attempt to explain the Biafra question today, a number of theoretical frameworks have been used. There are two leading schools of thought; **Relative Deprivation Theory** and **Securitisation Theory**.

Relative Deprivation Theory is based on the idea that perceived differences between anticipated and actual socio-political results enhance group discontent and political mobilisation. When applied to the IPOB case, this theory indicates that the feeling of political marginalization, economic marginalization, and cultural neglect among the Igbo peoples contributes to the self-determination or secession aspirations (Adesanya, 2023). Such works contend that it is relative deprivation and not intrinsic separatist sentiments that form the basis of mobilisation particularly in circumstances in which institutionalized grievance redress mechanisms seem to fail. In contrast, the theory of Securitisation which is based on the International Relations is concerned with the way the state actors create threats and rationalize exceptional actions aimed at preserving the national sovereignty. Scholars in this school of thought believe that the Nigerian state agents have put the agitation of IPOB in a context where it is more about an existential security issue thus justifying martialised reactions and declaring the group a terrorist organisation (Njoku, 2025). This method focuses on insurgency as a political formation and securitisation as a way to fix cycles of repression and resistance. Critics claim that the securitisation framing has a tendency of pushing to the periphery other conflict resolution channels like dialogue, negotiations on autonomy, or constitutional amendments.

A complementary theoretical prism is based on Federalism and Political Inclusion theories, as they focus on structural changes to allocate the power, funds, and politics more fairly. Research that follows this line of reasoning emphasizes the fact that the inability to acknowledge the interests of differing ethnic groups in the federal structure of Nigeria adds to the legitimacy crisis and stimulates the separatist moods (Ibukuntomiwa et al., 2025). Hypothetically, relative deprivation might be alleviated by increasing the level of decentralisation and inclusive government, and the secessionist agitation suppressed.

2.3 Empirical Review

The contemporary question of the Biafra is persistently studied on the basis of empirical research which shows subtle trends in the interplay of the political mobilisation, the reaction of the state, and the stability in the region. The recent developments suggest that the tactics of IPOB cover a range of activities, including peaceful demonstrations and open statements, as well as disruptive civil campaigns, that do not fit into simplistic characterisation as insurgency with violent goals (Njoku, 2025).

The other strand of empirical research concerns the socio-economic marginalisation and its relationship with mobilisation. Polls and content validations indicate that feelings of political alienation, under-representation in federal nomination, and economic injustice perceptions are the predictive factors of secessionist claims (Mezie-Okoye, 2025). These results dispute state rhetoric which diminishes the movement to illegitimate violence, rather showing complex socio-political motivations which cannot be dealt with by the use of security measures.

The international dimensions are also pointed out in the empirical work. The discussions of the United Nations involvement indicate the lack of connection between the international norms about self-determination and realpolitik practices by pointing out that the interests of powerful states do not allow active participation in campaigns such as the referendum by IPOB under the supervision of the United Nations (Oguejiofor & Eze, 2024). This factual observation highlights the shortcomings of international law in dealing with sub-state self-determination movement without extensive geopolitical backing.

All these empirical studies make the binary explanations of the Biafra agitation challenging, but rather these studies highlight the existence of multiple drivers and outcomes that are both political, economic and legal in nature.

III. Methodology

In the study, a qualitative method is utilised. This is because the study takes the complexity of politics and social debates, such as the Biafra conflict at the moment, which is characterized by the way people think and interpret the situation. This study relies on secondary sources such as peer-reviewed journals, government reports, human rights reports, and news articles. This will allow the study view the various narratives surrounding the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) and the response of the Nigerian State to them without exposing the study to the ethical dangers often present in conflict studies.

For the analysis, this study employs thematic content analysis. In this way, the study can identify the important emerging trends in the discourse that pertain to the themes of self-determination, securitization, marginalization, as well as the response of the state.

Qualitative document analysis is particularly apt for the analysis of political agitation because it identifies the subtleties in the discourse, facilitates intertextual analysis among a variety of sources, and establishes the depth of context that is impossible using quantitative analysis. This is stated in the study of Njoku (2025).

Ethical concerns relate mainly to data source reliability, how sources should not be used to produce biased interpretations, and protecting anonymity over people mentioned in the secondary sources.

IV. Results and Discussion

The discussion of the modern Biafra question shows that there is a certain interconnection between the demands of self-determination, state security issues, as well as socio-political marginalisation. The results are structured into thematic groups to achieve the purpose of the study: (1) the rivalry of narratives describing the movement as a lawful right or insurgency, and (2) the consequences of the securitised response of Nigeria on political stability and civil liberties.

4.1 Contradictory Narratives: Rights versus Insurgency.

Modern-day Biafran agitation is perceived in a different way by the Nigerian state and the proponents. The demands of the movements like the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) are framed as the ones based on the legitimate grievances. They are political marginalisation, lack of representation in federal appointments and economic marginalisation in the new post-civil war federal system (Mezie-Okoye, 2025; Adesanya, 2023; Aribisala, 2015). The rhetoric of IPOB focuses on the idea of non-violent advocacy, democracy, and the appeals

to the international standards of self-determination, such as the demand to conduct referenda by which the political future of the region can be established (Oguejiofor & Eze, 2024; Chioke, 2022).

On the other hand, the Nigerian state describes the movement more of an insurgent challenge to the territorial integrity. IPOB is declared a terrorist group and military measures have been introduced to quash perceived unrest (Njoku, 2025). In late 2025, the Federal Government of Nigeria sentenced Nnamdi Kanu who is the leader of the IPOB to life imprisonment. This securitisation discourse frequently blends the idea of peaceful political mobilisation and armed insurgency, decreasing the room of political discourse and strengthening the idea of bias of the state towards populations of the southeast.

More importantly, this duality depicts the conflict between normative assertions within the international law and practical issues of sovereignty of a state. Although international laws acknowledge the internal self-determination, namely, the autonomy, fair political representation, and civil rights, the lack of legal sanction of secession in Nigeria makes the legitimacy of the movement more difficult. There is empirical evidence that the above securitisation can result in unintended aggravation and reinforcement of grievances and support of the movement, forming a feedback loop of resistance and repression (Njoku, 2025; Mezie-Okoye, 2025; Itodo, 2017).

4.2 Socio-Political and Economic Drivers

Biafra agitation cannot be interpreted outside the context of structural conditions to which it is based. The research indicates that relative deprivation is at the center stage: Igbo people feel there are systemic inequalities in resources distribution, infrastructural growth, and federal appointments (Adesanya, 2023; Itodo, 2017). These social-economic inequalities are usually further complicated by the historical remembrance of the civil war, a continuity of generational resentment.

Empirical research points at these structural inequities showing a high degree of support of self-determination rhetoric (Nwabufo, 2019; Itodo, 2017). Despite the fact that even peaceful protests of IPOB are perceived by the state as a threat, surveys and content analyses indicate that political relevance of identity-based exclusion is a key issue (Okpata & Ejem, 2020). As a result, the agitation is both a reaction to experienced marginalisation and a critique of the Nigerian system of governance (Mezie-Okoye, 2025).

4.3 Implications and State Response

There are massive consequences of militarised strategy of the Nigerian state on political stability and civil liberties. Arrests, military operation and proscription of IPOB have been reported to increase tensions and not to contain them. It has been indicated that forceful implementation has also led to issues in human rights such as arbitrary arrests and access to justice by the affected persons (Njoku, 2025).

Governance wise, securitisation enhances institutional bias-related perceptions to the detriment of trusting the federal system by citizens. Critical scholarship states that these responses have the tendency to organize cycles of opposition, undermining opportunities of conflict resolution and dialogue (Oguejiofor & Eze, 2024). Conversely, the history of other states that embrace inclusive political reforms and a system of dialogue has proven to curb the effects of separatism, thus the manner the Nigerian state takes could be counterproductive.

4.4 Theoretical Implications

The results can be attributed to Relative Deprivation Theory, which notes that shared views of inequality and exclusion are effective forces behind political mobilisation (Ibukuntomiwa et al., 2025). They also show how applicable the Securitisation Theory is because the state presentation of IPOB as an existential threat justifies extraordinary actions, which in most cases are at the cost of civil liberties and democratic procedures (Njoku, 2025).

Also, the findings highlight the ineffectiveness of federalism and political inclusion in conflict reduction. The Nigerian constitution envisages federal organization; however, the unequal application of power distribution devices has contributed to the perception of marginalization, and this was an indication of the lack of connection between the formal and real lives of the people (Adesanya, 2023).

4.5 Critical Reflection.

The modern Biafra agitation still enjoys the interests of the national and international community; however, the critical evaluation of the structural and institutional reality makes the description of the movement as the valid claim to self-determination questionable. Although previous claims were motivated by historical grievances related to the 1967/1970 civil war and post-war marginalisation, many contemporary governance structures such as the Federal Character Commission and the federal quota system made sure that no region is systematically disadvantaged in federal appointments, political representation, or distribution of resources (Okpata & Ejem, 2020). The empirical data show that Igbo, which was previously historically referred to as marginalised, now has an equal number of representatives of the national institutions, which invalidates the argument that agitation

of the contemporary world is legally based on the right to self-determination (Ibukuntomiwa et al., 2025; Njoku, 2025).

From a theoretical sense, the Securitisation Theory is useful in the explanation of the way the Nigerian state frames the movement as an insurgency, but Relative Deprivation Theory seems to be less relevant in the modern context. The empirical measures prove that the Igbos have proportional representation and political and economic opportunities, which means that structural deprivation is no longer a major contributor. Rather, agitation seems to be fueled by socio-political identity, loss of historical independence and opposition to discourses of equity as opposed to material exclusion.

V. Conclusion and Recommendations

The contemporary Biafra issue is not so much an issue of unaccepted rights, but it is a manifestation of political activism, in a scenario where institutional structures are able to offer fair inclusion. Structural mechanisms are in place to curb systematic marginalisation and this is evidenced by the Federal Character Commission and quota system which has ensured that the Igbo are fairly represented in the federal appointments, and the structures of governance. As a result, even though IPOB advances its agitation by using the language of self-determination, there are modern signs that this movement is more of a politically and socially mobilised campaign than a legally mandated statement of rights.

It is based on this context that the first recommendation will be to focus on political involvement and narrative management by the government of Nigeria. The organised consultations with the southeastern leaders and civic associations may help to elucidate the expanse of the formal inclusion instruments, clear the illusions of the systematic marginalization, and diminish the possibility of a conflict due to the perception-based grievances. This should be coupled with openness in federal appointments, quota measures as well as open communication to instill the fact of institutional fairness.

Second, it is needed to enhance the civic education and trust-building mechanisms. Acknowledgment of agitation in the present institutional realities can be contextualised by conducting public awareness campaigns on the role and successes of the Federal Character Commission and other equity policies. The issue of historical memory and resulting reduction of political agitation based on historical memory, rather than present day deprivation can be overcome by educating citizens about proportional representation, governance inclusion, and access to national resources.

Lastly, the government must exercise a balanced security control based on legal policing and not too much militarisation which will result in increased tensions. The violence extremism and not the peaceful mobilisation of political parties should be subject to security interventions with civil liberties being upheld. Combining community participation and security activities can strengthen the sense of justice, guard citizen rights, and reduce the process of the political activism evolution into the violent opposition.

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