
IPOB and the Economy of Igbos in the South East of Nigeria: 1999-2021

Dr. Kenneth Obem Etta

Department of History and International Studies University of Calabar, Nigeria

ABSTRACT

South East region of Nigeria is made up principally of the Igbos; since independence to the period of this study, people in the region believe and feel marginalized within the Nigerian federal structure leading to a series of agitations and separatist activities, even a civil war between the Nigerian Federal Government and the self declared republic of Biafra between 1967-1970. Though hostilities ended in 1970, the losses associated with the brutal war were huge, the economy of the region suffered greatly and only picked-up from the 1980's and early 1990's. Nevertheless, the problem of perceived marginalization, agitation and separation has not abated: this agitation has led to the emergence in 2012 of another separatist group in the South East called the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) which continued with its separatist agitation even on a higher scale. The result has been serious chaos, with more devastating havoc wrecked on the economy of the Igbos in the South East causing major problem to the economic development and peaceful life in the South East. This paper seeks to examine the nature of IPOB's activities especially to know how these activities have affected the economy of the South East within the study period. The paper made use of qualitative method of research relying mostly on secondary sources such as magazines, newspaper and internet materials. Relative deprivation theory was adopted for the purpose of this paper. Findings showed that the activities of this group have been destructive of the economy relating to investment, trade, commerce and education, just as they have also caused so much poverty, sufferings and deaths with a crumbling effect on the economy of the Igbos.

KEYWORDS: IPOB, South Eastern Nigeria, Economy.

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INTRODUCTION

IPOB is an acronym for the Indigenous People of Biafra which has been fighting for a separate state for Biafra from the Nigerian Federation. Recall that the birth of Nigeria in 1914 created a heterogeneous land with widespread diversities in terms of religion, language, tribe and race. This scenario, coupled with an aggregation of factors and policies of the Nigerian government after independence in 1960 helped to give birth to IPOB. The birth of IPOB could therefore be said to be a result of an aggregation of factors and policies of the Nigerian government. It is posited that IPOB developed due to the marginalised position of the South East principally inhabited by the Igbos who believe that they are not given their merited positions and place in the Nigerian Federation.

The group can be traced to the secessionist movement that started in the 1960's led by then Lt. Col. Odemegwu Ojukwu, the movement posited itself as representing the interest of the South East region of Nigeria who felt marginalised by the central government dominated by leaders from the Northern part of the region. As a result, they sought to break free from the shackles of the Nigerian government to form the Republic of Biafra. This led to the Civil War which lasted from 1967-1970 such that in 1999, the agitation for secession was taken over by the Movement for the Actualisation of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) led by Ralf Uwazuruike -The bubble underground continued and later busted with the formation of IPOB in 2012 by Nnamdi Kanu as a breakaway from MASSOB. The separatist movement though formed in 2012, its campaign for the actualisation of Biafra including other activities peaked between 2015 and 2021, the period President Mohammadu Buhari came to power and when Kanu was arrested in Kenya and extradited to Nigeria for trial. The refusal of the Federal Government to meet the demands of the movement especially the holding of a referendum led to a series of agitations and protests in the South East by the movement which degenerated, leading to attacks by the group and counterattacks by the government which further brought the economy of the South East to its knees.

According to the group, the South East is the region that makes up Biafra land with many Biafran's being Igbo speakers. From the ideologies of this group as earlier stated, it is clear that the group rose in solidarity to the will of the Republic of Biafra secessionist state in the South Eastern Nigeria that existed from 30th May, 1967 to 15th January, 1970. The region seceded due to economic, ethnic, cultural and religious tensions and cry against marginalisation traceable to the amalgamation of 1914 which even became "worse" after independence in 1960.

The emergence of IPOB in 2012 as a breakaway from MASSOB is not a surprise neither are their activities which have helped to crumble the economy of the Igbos in the South East as the group is bent on seceding from the Federal Republic of Nigeria as other groups before it. These activities rather than helping the group to achieve its aims have helped to wreck havoc on the economy and the general socio-political life of the Igbo man in the South East of Nigeria. As pointed earlier the people of the South East, particularly members of IPOB and its leader Nnamdi Kanu like Ojukwu and others before him have continually protested against the issues which characterised the pre-civil war in Nigeria. The problem of injustice of various kind for instance, social inequality, marginalization and political exclusion which were some of the main problems that led to the civil war in 1967 have not abated, instead these problems according to Nnamdi Kanu and his IPOB followers have since exacerbated leading to violence and separatist activities by IPOB with devastating consequences on the economy of the Igbos in the South East.

Against this background, this paper seeks to examine the causes and impact of IPOB's activities as well as their effect on the economy of the south east area of Nigeria, recommends measures to mitigate and possibly overcome these problems for the growth development and peaceful coexistence of the people region within the Nigerian federation.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Relative Deprivation Theory was adopted for the purpose of this paper. The theory was first developed by sociologist Samuel Stouffer, other scholars who have developed other threads are Gurr Walker who explains relative deprivation in psychological frustration aggression theory.

In this study, relative deprivation theory is based on the concept that persons may feel deprived of some desirable thing relative to their own past, other persons or group, or some other social category. The theory refers to inequality: the idea that people are deprived (materially or other ways) compared with others in society alongside issues of marginalisation etc leading to crime, agitation, even separatism in society or a given state as in the South-Eastern region of Nigeria. For the purpose of this work, the theory explains the economic, political and social deprivation that is relative rather than absolute based on perception of justice as much as on the need to fulfill basic human rights¹.

The theory also talks about poverty and social exclusion, the consequence of which manifest through behaviour and attitude, feelings of stress, political attitude and participation in collective action. The grievances as defined through the deprivation aspect of this theory are considered instrumental in analysing the complexities, the reason for IPOB's separatist movement and agitation in Nigeria.

In other words, the theory explains IPOB's agitation against deprivation and inequality against the Igbos in the South East by the Federal Government of Nigeria which leads to their separatist activities thereby affecting the economy and life generally of the people of the region.

Factors that Precipitated IPOB Activities

IPOB is a separatist agitation movement in the South-East of Nigeria that is currently the greatest threat to the economy of the Igbos in this region. The IPOB phenomenon like other separatist members in the global community such as the Catalan and Basque regions in Spain, the Kurds in Iran, Mizo in India, Southern Sudan, Southern Philippines, Northern Chad and Southern Cameroun or others within the Nigerian national boundaries like the ISWAP, Boko Haram, the Oduduwa Republic agitation, etc have assumed frightening dimension to the point that their activities have almost totally crumbled the socio-economic life and business of the Igbos in the South East of Nigeria.

Although there have been other Biafra separatist movements in the South East such as Movement for the Actualisation of the Sovereign of Biafra (MASSOB) and other groups who believed in non-violent approach to the Biafra separation, Nnamdi Kanu's led IPOB secessionist group favoured approaches that impinge on the economic growth and development of the South East and even the security of lives and property in the region. Some of these include threat to life, constitution of Biafra Secret Service the Eastern Security Network (BSN), etc within the Nigerian State, and circulates hate and inciteful speeches that often elicit violent protest and riots, including addressing Nigeria as a zoo. With these, IPOB is said to have altered as it were the environment that hitherto defined separatist agitation in Nigeria, especially within the South East, thus, forcing the Federal Government to proscribe the group in September, 2017.

The factors that helped to propel IPOB to succeed in these activities are legion. First, the group was able to do this successfully because as a separatist group, it exploited the position enunciated by Horowitz that, "Separatism includes ethnic demands for the creation of separate states within the existing state or for a broader measure of regional authority, either for independence or autonomy"². These demands were always further propelled by the feeling of ethnically based group marginalization which caused

grievances against the authorities and helped to reinforce a collective ethnic identity and sense of oneness which the group claimed was based on rejection leading to a sense of collective victimhood drawing community members together and thereafter laying the foundation on which collective political action took place. This generalized feeling of alienation and dissatisfaction amongst the Igbos led to a situation which deepened mistrust and incentivized the IPOB separatist group and its activities.

It should be noted that some, if not all the issues that characterised the pre-civil war years are still the same issues that precipitated the rise of IPOB and its activities; for instance injustice of various kind, social inequality, marginalization and political exclusion were the main issues that led to the civil war in 1967 and since then, these issues have only acerbated.

IPOB further capitalized on most other problems and challenges bedeviling the corporate existence of the country which include but not limited to bad governance and service delivery, poor state organisation and democratisation process, ethnic politics as well as religious fundamentalism and terrorism especially the activities of Fulani Herdsmen in Igbo Eastern Nigeria which made Kanu to even go a step further to form the Eastern Security Network as a security outfit of IPOB. The security network however further worsened and aggravated the economic development of the Igbos in Eastern Nigeria.

Activities of IPOB

The activities of IPOB in the Igbo region of South Eastern Nigeria are numerous, being the main group coordinating the free Kanu and to restore Biafra agitation, it uses violence as endorsed by Kanu himself as an instrument for resuscitating Biafra. To achieve this objective, the group operated a pirate radio called "Radio Biafra" which is an unlicensed station urging violent struggle to achieve independence for Biafra. The radio broadcasts, "highly provocative messages laced with misinformation, hate speech, anti-Nigeria derision and seditious messages"³. The group also involves itself in killings, especially of people who do not subscribe to their views or take their orders like that of "Sit at Home" etc. For instance, the DSS, the Nigerian Secret Police accused IPOB of killing 55 people whose bodies were found buried in a forest in Abia State, which included 5 Hausa-Fulani residents who the government accused the IPOB of abducting⁴.

The organisation also engages in protest across the eastern region of Nigeria and across some parts like in Port-Harcourt and Asaba in South-South Nigeria. These protests are also accompanied with demonstrations which have taken place in several cities in South Eastern Nigeria such as Aba, Onitsha, Nnewi, etc, where Igbo ethnic group is a majority.

In March 2016, in conjunction with MASSOB, IPOB issued a statement demanding that all "Fulani Herdsmen retreat to Northern Nigeria, as their safety could no longer be guaranteed because MASSOB and IPOB can no longer tolerate the systematic killing of our people and invasion of our land in the name of cattle grazing"⁵. Arising from the above, in December, 2020, the group launched its security outfit called Eastern Security Network (ESN) with the objective as claimed by Kanu to combat terrorism and protect South Easterners from criminal activities. This was as Kanu maintained that South East Governors failed to secure the lives and property of the Igbo in the region.

As part of the campaign against the Nigerian government, the group also leverages social media platforms to whip-up sentiments against government and its critics with the goal of gathering sympathy from the public. The group uses the social media to spread misinformation wide and fast with a large percentage of IPOB followers found in different platforms, consistently sharing and spreading their ideologies and most times fake news. For instance, the movement has over the years shared fake reports of World Leaders supporting the Biafra agenda, fabricated and altered texts accompanied with images of world leaders are shared on social media so as to create the impression that they identify with the movement. Such posts have claimed that the Ivory Coast President Alassane Ouattara, the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and even the Nigerian former President and Statesman, Olusegun Obasanjo in one case or the other support their struggle when indeed this is fake and found to be unverifiable⁶.

Additionally, popular Igbo personalities have been depicted as supporting the Biafra struggle by wearing the group's paraphernalia even when these images are largely edited and misleading. In 2018 for instance, altered images of Nyesom Wike, Ifeanyi Ugwuanyi and Willie Obiano, Governors of Rivers State, Enugu and Former Governor of Anambra state respectively appeared in the Daily post as supporters of IPOB even though these were largely edited and altered.

Of all the above activities, the "sit at home" order is a major activity of IPOB that affected the economy of the region the most. From 2016, commercial and academic activities in Onitsha and that of Banks, markets and schools were not only closed, the cities of Onitsha and Nnewi were "shut down" as a result of IPOB's order⁷. Lastly, though not exhaustive, the group has been able to get young men in the South East to attack government institutions like police stations, security check points, INEC offices, and even facilitated jailbreaks. The above and many others are some of the activities of this group that have impinged on the economy of the South East.

Impact on the Economy of Igbos in the South East Nigeria

Although there is no known research on the economic impact of IPOB on the economy of the Igbos in the south east, it can be posited that these activities are having a dampening effect on commerce, ethno-religious life, democratic processes, academic and social life of the people. For instance, shortly after the Eastern Security Network (ESN) was formed, and the "sit at home order was issued, some Northerners in the South East who dominate the cattle trade market in the area became very cautious and many relocated their business either back to the north or to other parts of the country⁸.

The activities of IPOB especially the 'sit at home' declared on the 9 of August, 2021 has inadvertently been dealing a fatal blow to investors and investees in the south east which continued to wreck havoc on the socio-economic activities within the Igbo South-East Nigeria. The major activity of the IPOB today is the "Sit at home" order, this affects the lives of the Igbo all round both academically and economically etc. It is also more of a threat to the people as many problems are being incurred by the Igbos. For example, a lot of killings and missing people including prominent men take place in the society, hardship and impoverishment, economic instability, loss of lives and property, etc. All these makes all those who fend for themselves through their daily hard work to be adversely affected by the decision and activities of IPOB. Traders and artisans within the region are lamenting the hardship these activities are inflicting on them. They lament that since the "sit at home" began, their families have been dying of hunger as they no longer meet their needs⁹. People and businessmen are fleeing the South-East and bidding the zone farewell, never to return again according to other reports. Most are also putting their property for sale within the zone. Aside from ruining the economy of the South-East by their activities and inciting statements, the "sit at home" order also threatens or has threatened the chances of Kanu's release as these activities do not allow or encourage a healthy discussion and negotiation for the release of their leader Nnamdi Kanu.

Apart from the economic havoc, these activities cause, there are also the financial catastrophe suffered by business men in the region. Governor Soludo of Anambra State for instance stated that in his state alone, businessmen loose 19.6 billion to sit at home every Monday¹⁰. Others put the figure at 25 billion as what is lost in Onitsha alone each day there is "sit at home". The disinformation campaign employed by IPOB has worsened the ethnoreligious divisions in the country and caused more insecurity in the South East thereby threatening Nigeria's unity and affecting the economy of the South East in particular

On the democratic front, the group warned that it would not allow elections in the South East especially the 2021 Governorship polls in Anambra State. It also threatened to boycott the 2019 general elections, even though it later relented its stance, the general fear of the group has caused a lot of voter apathy during recent elections in the South East especially with their attack on police stations, check points and INEC offices in the zone.

IPOB organized rallies which the police authorities initially broke-up with restraint while also arresting "scores" of people including the filing of charges against 137 pro-Biafrans as of 1st December, 2015¹¹. Clashes between IPOB and the police have also led to some shootings between the police and the group. International crisis group again reported that on the 2nd of December, 2015, the police shot at protesters due to clashes between the pro-separatist protesters and the police. It is on record that due to the activities of the group, the government has in several occasions responded with force against pro-Biafran activities who attended protest marches across South Eastern Nigeria or who attempted to do so¹². Amnesty further claimed that it had documented cases of arrest, enforced disappearances and often killing supporters and members of various pro-Biafran groups in the region, while scores of others have been arrested and detained for attempting to hold or participating in peaceful assemblies, many of them for so long a time.

The impact of the activities of this group is also reflected in more killings witnessed in South East, for instance, on the 30th May, 2016 in the city of Onitsha in Anambra State and the city of Asaba in Delta State, ten people were killed during protest to mark the anniversary of the start of the 1967 Biafra war when police officers opened fire on members of IPOB¹³. The spokesman of IPOB however claimed that, "at least 35 members of the group were killed in Onitsha". Even though the police claim that they shot at protesters after IPOB members fired at them, IPOB denied the claim.

Further killings were recorded as confirmed by Amnesty's International Investigation and report of the 10th of June, 2016 ¹⁴ of the shooting between 29th and 30th May 2016 which showed that at least 17 persons were killed while 50 persons were injured which was a consequence of excessive force applied by security forces. Amnesty International further posited that between August 2015 and May 2016, "at least five similar incidents happened in Onitsha alone where the police and Military shot unarmed IPOB members and supporters".

The above events were impactful in the ethno-religious, democratic processes, academic, social and economic life of the Igbos in the South East to the extent that it has affected the economy of the people of the region negatively.

CONCLUSION

The forceful amalgamation of the different peoples into what is today known as Nigeria in 1914 has led to series of agitation and separatist tendencies mostly arising from the feeling of marginalization by some groups especially the Igbo of South East Nigeria. Due to the above, most people from the region beginning with Lt. Col. Ojukwu have called for the independence and separation of the Igbo from Nigeria and for Ojukwu even leading a Civil War in 1960s. The calls have not abated even after the war, as the Igbos claim that those elements that caused the war are still present in today's Nigeria.

The above has led to a new and more determined wave of agitation as led by Nnamdi Kanu with his IPOB. However, the activities of this organisation especially the "sit at home" order including the wanton killings perpetrated by this group has tended to cripple the economy of the region. This paper analysed the problems including the activities as well as the impact of this on the economy of the south east. The paper concluded that the Federal Government and IPOB should enter into dialogue for the release Nnamdi

Kanu and or even use the might of the state to quell these activities and bring peace to the region if the organisation refuses to dialogue for the growth and development of the economy of the South East people of Igbo.

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