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## No Peace Ahead?: Biafra Chanters and the Nation on a Brink

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### Abstract:

*This paper addresses the developments that led to the resurgence of Biafra struggle against Nigeria in 2015. This resurgence manifested through a group known as Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB). The mission and goal of this group is akin to that declared and propagated by the progenitors of this struggle in 1967 which was hinged on the creation of Republic of Biafra Nigeria. Using reliable and pertinent sources, this paper examines the motivations for reemergence of Biafra's agitation against Nigeria. It argues that though achieving this goal by IPOB is unrealistic at the moment, the group deserves to be heard and granted access to referendum by Nigerian government as has been demonstrated in other democracies around the globe. The paper concludes that allowing every citizen access to 'fair hearing' and 'fair play' could help Nigeria in deepening its 'one nation' agenda.*

### 1. Background

The Nigerian Civil War was one of the major and significant wars fought on the African continent during the twentieth century. This war had its root in the unfortunate developments resulting from the divisive and inciting policies of the colonial masters in the country (Nzoigwe 2016: 18-19). One of the many consequences of such policies was the generation and spread of ethnic biases, animosity, hatred, and intolerance amongst the Nigerian people. This heartbreaking reality manifested itself in full, less than a decade after the reluctant departure of the 'seed-sower' (the British), and that was in the 1966 events which led to the mass murder and burial of Nigerians by fellow Nigerians! The inability of Nigerian leaders from different ethnic groups to resolve their differences and bond in one accord, was responsible, ultimately, for the declaration and birth of Republic of Biafra on May 30, 1967.

Biafra's independence declaration from Nigeria did not just begin overnight. It was a development that engendered debates and deliberations amongst the leadership of the Igbo ethnic group led by late Odumegwu Ojukwu who eventually and bravely championed Biafra's cause until November 1969, barely two months before Biafra's surrender in January 1970. Most of such deliberations revolved around the mass killings of the Igbos from the northern part of the country, and the path to remedying the perceived 'injustices' done to them by the rest of the ethnic groups, especially the Northerners. The motivation for Biafra secession is evident in Augustine Okwu's statement. According to Okwu, 'the region's separation from Nigeria was as a result of the two deadly military coups in 1966, and the massacres of the easterners, especially the Igbos, in the other parts of Nigeria' (Okwu 2016: 81). Those massacres led to a turning point in the relations between the Igbos and the rest of Nigeria. In short, it contributed to the deep suspicion existent between the major tribes in the country till today.

The account of one witness to the gruesome massacres of the Igbos in the north during 1966 has been documented. Speaking of the incident that happened in Zaria prior to Biafra's declaration of secession, a witness, who was a school pupil as of the time of the massacre, declares that 'a mob invaded the school...when they entered my classroom; they ordered all of us to lie down with our faces on the floor. Students who were not from the Northern Nigeria were dragged out of the room' (Uchendu 2007: 398). Evidently, the mob was not only interested in attacking the Igbos, but including children from other parts of Nigeria whose origins were not tied to the north. The witness further revealed thus, 'my friend, from Orji River, was among those slaughtered in full view of other students. I also witnessed the Sunday Massacres in which many Igbos were killed, houses burnt, and shops looted. Infact, it was like an offence to be an Igbo...' (Uchendu 2007: 81). This was part of the horrible experiences non-northerners, especially Igbos, were made to face across major towns and cities in the north during the 1966 massacres.

The Northerners did not spare their victims irrespective of their age, gender, and so on. The Igbo people were also targeted at other places across the north. For instance, 'the repeated outburst of violence between June and October 1966 peaked in massacres against Igbos living in 'Sabon Gari' the foreigner's quarters of northern Nigeria town' (Heerten and Moses 2014: 173). This incident alone has been analyzed to have 'claimed the lives of tens of thousands' (Heerten and Mosses 2014: 173) of Nigerians. It is difficult to figure the number of people of Igbo descent that were killed in the riot since, as revealed in the eyewitness account, the attacks were indiscriminately carried out. As a result, it could have led to killings of majority of people from other tribes too. To this end, the Igbos alone could not be said to have been the target, or have experienced the pogrom, even though the incident that spurred the riots across Northern Nigeria was led by an Igbo man, Major Chukwuma Nzeogwu, through a military coup which led to the disgraceful murder of the Sadauna of Sokoto, Amadu Bello, and Nigeria's first Prime Minister, Alhaji Tafawa Balewa on January 15, 1966. This development must have irked the Northerners as those murdered were perhaps the major political forerunners representing the interests of the northern Nigeria on the national front.

Additionally, some scholars have presented evidence which points to that fact that not only was the murder of Balewa and Ahmadu Bello responsible for the reactions displayed by Northerners against those who were not from northern Nigeria, the dancing and jubilations by some Igbos resident in northern Nigeria in celebration of the deaths of those leaders also contributed to the acts of manslaughter exhibited by the Northerners (Nzoigwe 2016: 29). Further, the actions of Aguiyi Ironsi (an Igbo man), who assumed power as military head of state after the murder of Tafawa Balewa also did not help matters as such contributed to the developments that led to the counter-coup in July 29, 1966. The actions of Aguiyi Ironsi after assumption of office were further viewed by the Northerners as Igbo conspiracies and plots to eliminate them from the political and leadership affairs of the country. For instance, the cabinet of Ironsi, who was an Igbo General, was filled with Igbo appointees (Heerten and Moses 2014: 173). Another major expectation by the Northerners which Ironsi failed to carry out was the arrest and eventual execution of those who masterminded the coup that led to the killings of their leaders. These two issues lumped in a box made the Northerners to react the way they did, as a way of demanding justice for their leaders, and perhaps, saving their own political futures in the country. The moves to avenge the death of the murdered northern political leaders therefore led to a counter-coup openly staged by majority of Northerners in July 28/29, 1966. In the process, Aguiyi Ironsi alongside other key army generals of Biafra origin were brutally murdered by the Northerners.

The Igbo people, with the trend of things in the country, therefore decided to secede, since all political solutions, including the meeting held in Aburi, Ghana, in January 1967 between Nigeria (represented by Gowon) and Eastern Nigeria (represented by Ojukwu), had failed. On May 30, 1967, Odumegwu Ojukwu, in his determined voice, declared the Independence of Republic of Biafra (Anyanwu 2016: 40). Ultimately, 'the declaration of the Republic of Biafra was premised on the promise that the Nigerian state could not guarantee the security of the Igbo and other easterners' (Duruji 2012: 538). The federal government, with its 'one united' Nigeria agenda, considered this declaration as an affront, audacious, and unconstitutional, hence, the need to react and silence Biafrans. Instantly, the government issued several warnings backed by military threats sounded in the ears of Biafrans and their leaders to renounce secession; it also made some physical moves aimed at breaking the wings of Biafrans including introduction of economic blockade (Stremlau 1977: 73-74) and declaration of creation of states out of the areas within the territories of the secessionists. These federal measures, however, did not seem to get to Biafrans who tended to be determined and ready to face whatever consequence for their actions. The confidence which Biafra's leaders displayed was further boosted by the wild support and encouragement they were getting from Biafran citizens through their readiness to be enlisted in the military to join the fighting soldiers. Biafrans of all ages who had either peacefully returned, or fled to Biafra from other parts of the country, were enlisted and fought as soldiers in defense of their land and its people. There were also series of exchanges, tirades, threats and counter-threats between Nigeria and Biafra with none willing to abdicate its position. With the realization by the federal government that Biafra was resolute, it declared war on the Biafrans by sending 'federal troops into Biafra on 6 July 1967' (Uchendu 2007: 397). This sets the stage for a war that would last for another 30 months, which, 'until the Rwandan Genocide, was the most reported war on Africa in contemporary media' (Falola and Ezekwem 2016: 6). But because, in any war, there would certainly be a victor and conquered, 'the young nation fought a brave 30-month civil war with Nigeria and lost on January 1970' (Okwu 2016: 81), despite the support of France through supplies of mercenaries and weapons (Griffith 2015). Although the federal military government made a diplomatic declaration at the end of the war that there was no 'victor no vanquished', it is important to note that Biafra was the unmentioned vanquished in that statement because 'by the war's end, images of starving women and children had become synonymous with Africa and African conflicts' (Falola and Ezekwem 2016: 6). This was prompted by 'scarcity of food, medicine, essentials such as salt and flour' (Okwu 2016: 95). The helpless situations in Biafra while the war rages, especially from 1968 onward, resulted into the untimely demise of many Biafran civilian population, and this became popularized as genocide. The genocidal claims by Biafra had generated debates by scholars, state-actors, and humanitarian organizations across the world. Scholars, of course, were divided over this very claim, with many arguing that it was a propaganda instigated by the secessionists to gain upper hands or favour from the international community at the expense of Nigeria (Doron 2014; Anthony 2014). None of the scholars, however, could contest the fact that there was massive death amongst Biafrans before and during the war. According to recent findings, 'something like a million died' (Chambers 2013: 754) in Biafra. This was huge loss on the part of Biafra, but it must be emphasized that incidence of casualties is a huge part of the dynamics of war. Overall, Biafra lost in this battle, though not without clinching some victories against the Nigerian military on the battle field (Heerten and Moses 2014: 175). The Republic finally fell and was declared non-existent by Ojukwu's Deputy Commander, Philip Effiong at Dodan Barrack, Lagos in January 1970. At this occasion, the demise of Biafra was celebrated, its coffins buried and worries of secession or self-determination in Nigeria were laid to rest. Nigeria, thenceforth, became re-united, at least for about four decades!

## **2. The Living Spirits of Biafra: IPOB and Its Emergence**

The Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) had been constituted around 2000s but made national news headlines as Biafra secessionist group in 2015. This was around forty-five years after the surrender of Biafra in 1970. The reconstitution, re-emergence, and resurface of Biafra's struggle for self-determination cannot be detached from the developments in the post-civil war Nigeria. The inability of the post-war leaders of Nigeria to fulfil their promises had great influence on Biafra's comeback. The post-war Nigeria is prominently characterized by rife corruption, anti-democratic governance style, political and socio-economic marginalization, ethnic intolerance, widespread poverty, mass unemployment, unjust murder of innocent citizens, and public disorder and insecurities, national treasury looting, money laundering, electoral manipulation, weak institutions, corrupt justice systems, ethnic-politicking, violence zones and dungeons, political thuggery, and senatorial-rascality as currently being demonstrated by some representatives in the country's upper house saddled with the duties of making laws that would benefit the entirety of the country's citizens (The Punch, Jul. 24, 2016). The

country gets suckled constantly by those at the helm of the affairs (BBC News, Oct. 20, 2016; World Finance, Jul. 21, 2016; BBC News Jul. 28, 2015). Nigeria's leaders are constantly in the act of betrayal of the trust and confidence reposed in them by their peoples and constituencies.

Further, the country (and its citizens) today is poorer than it was in 1970 when the war ended, hence, as of 2016, around 62% of its citizens were living in extreme poverty (Duruigbo 2005: 22; Economy Watch, June 30, 2016). It is now dependent, more than ever, on regular borrowing from IMF and World Bank (Daily Trust, Feb. 27, 2017; World Bank, April 25, 2014), as well as other private sectors, debts which it often finds difficult to repay due to the corrupt attitude of its leaders as well as high interest rates. Therefore, in a country where citizens are poor while the political leaders dominate the largesse without paying any tinge of attention to the conditions of their subjects, there will definitely be incessant protests, high crime rate and persistent armed robbery, and on the extreme, secession and self-determination demands. The post-civil war developments in Nigeria, rather than improving the situations of the citizens, have exacerbated them. IPOB, therefore, found its expression in some of these post-civil war developments as majority of easterners too were affected.

Although, the post-civil war governments did not fold their arms cluelessly as some steps were taken to turn the fortunes of Nigeria around from 1970s. For instance, in the months following the surrender of Biafra, the Nigerian government, under General Yakubu Gowon, made some efforts aimed at preventing any future events that could compromise the peace, stability and security of the country as witnessed during the war in 1960s. The measures were identified as 3RS, meaning Reconstruction, Rehabilitation, and Reconciliation. Those measures aimed at restoring, rescuing, and salvaging the lives of the war actors, victims, as well as generality of Nigerians. More so, the measures were considered as panacea in addressing the prevalent issues of hunger, poverty, poor infrastructure, unemployment, political and economic marginalization, and problems of ethnicity deepened by the war (Ojeleye 2010; Chambers 2013: 757). But unfortunately, the programs did not ameliorate the conditions of Nigerians due to some political hindrances.

Some national development strategies and programs were also adopted or floated by the post-conflict successive governments in an effort to prevent re-occurrence of issues that led to this conflict. They included the three National Development Plans, 1960s-1980s with each worth the capital expenditure running into billions of naira (IBRD 1966; Okediji 1971; Jose 1984); and the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) (Logie and Woodroffe 1993: 42-43). Even though these policies and programs contributed their own quotas to the economic prosperity of Nigeria, the issues of economic imbalance and inequality amongst various ethnic groups in the country remained pronounced and unresolved. There were, even till date, claims and counter-claims of political and socio-economic exclusion and marginalization across different ethnic groups, some of which had led to series of conflicts, though with minimal casualty impacts at different points in Nigeria's historical transition. To these, the Igbos, just like others, had lamented. Hence, in the perceptions of most ethnic groups in Nigeria, the post-civil war era had neither addressed successfully the issues that led to the civil war nor healed the wounds caused by the war's impact. The major constraints must have emerged from the fact that the leaders allowed their selfishness to override their sense of responsibilities towards their citizens. More so, many of them lacked (still lack) the political will needed to improve the well-being of Nigerians.

IPOB must have also found its motivation through the resurgence of ethnic rivalry, tussles and killings across the country by Fulani herdsmen known to have had their origins from the northern part of the country. The constant killings and national 'arrogance' by Fulani herdsmen became consistently displayed during the immediate post-2015 national election which saw the All Peoples Congress (APC) candidate, Muhammadu Buhari, into power. The herdsmen, within the last few years, have encroached on lands and territories beyond the north, unjustly killing many people without any action by president Muhammadu Buhari who is a Fulani man to caution them (herdsmen) or renounce their onslaughts on the people of Nigeria (Premium Times, Dec. 26, 2016). There had been mass killings and destructions of means of livelihood of the people across towns and villages in Benue State (Daily Post, Mar. 17, 2017). There had also been constant incursion and penetrations of northern Hausa Fulani/herdsmen into some south eastern and western states, leading into conflicts and confrontations which had left many dead on both ends. The recent was the crisis between Hausa Fulani and indigenes of Ile-Ife in Osun State, Nigeria, which led to the murder of southern and northern Nigerian citizens (Vanguard, March 16, 2017). And just in 2016, around 800 Christians living in Southern Kaduna in the northern region, majority of whom were from southern Nigeria, were allegedly killed by Fulani herdsmen (Daily Post, Feb. 11, 2017). In view of these, it was reasonable for IPOB leaders to have viewed these developments as a repeat of the 1966 pogroms against non-northerners, especially Biafrans in northern Nigeria. Hence, the need to protest and intensify efforts toward re-awakening the spirit of Biafra's secession for their collective safety and security (Daily Post, May 31, 2017).

The recollections and re-formulation of Biafra war narratives which had further triggered the pointing of fingers and apportioning of blames across ethnic groups in Nigeria for the fate suffered by Biafrans during the war also had roles to play in this IPOB's expression, emergence and determination to secede. The stories of Biafra have been told in different quarters, from distinct perspectives by scholars or fictional writers (Adichie 2006; Korieh 2012; Nwahunanya 1997; Emecheta 1982; Obasanjo 1981 etc.). The war, therefore, had been recounted in different editions, versions, and volumes, sometimes contradictory to the real war events, and at other times, tainted with ethnic biases. In short, a number of those works had been found to have generated 'problems of apportioning blames, giving voice to trauma, and evaluating the war's overall impact (Falola and Ezekwem 2016: 1) by scholars in defense of the philosophy of their ethnicity.

One such work which attracted several hundreds of reviews within the first months of its release in 2012 was the last book written by one of Nigeria's post-colonial thinkers, and former Biafra's strategist, late Chinua Achebe titled *There Was A Country: A Personal History of Biafra*. This was a memoir which details the issues that culminated into the war, roles played by its actors, fate of the Igbos which led to their recapitulation and surrender to the federal might, as well as how the consequences of the war had shaped the

conditions, status, and opportunities of the Igbo people in the post-civil war era (Achebe 2012). Most of Achebe's narratives, however, were found to be problematic, divisive, and capable of further inciting and generating ethnic uprisings, reactions, protests and violence in the country. For instance, in his article, Biodun Jeyifo (2013) analyzed Achebe's account of the conflict, and concluded that the work was influenced by Achebe's ethnic hatred and animosity for other tribes in Nigeria, especially the Yorubas. While referring to Achebe's work as majorly focusing on ethnic biases and divisions, with utter neglect of other crucial issues that led to the pogrom of 1966, and eventually the war in 1967, Jeyifo emphasizes that 'all of his speculations in his book, are relentlessly driven by ethnicity, and a very curious conception of ethnicity for that matter' (Jeyifo 2013: 685). This was found to be problematic by Jeyifo as Achebe's 'ethnic biases' had led him to re-invent his own story, hence, utter 'distortion' (Jeyifo 2013: 691) of the issues and events that gave rise to the conflict. Thus, this position maintained by Achebe had a high tendency of aggravating ethnic animosity amongst Biafrans against the rest (Jeyifo 2013) in a country already known or classified to be suffering from 'incurable' problems of ethnicity and tribalism (Taiwo 2013).

Further, reacting to this new book was Chambers who analyzed and interpreted Achebe's position or claims in his new book to be that 'Nigeria has failed by continuing to marginalize Nd'Igbo, by continuing to punish Nd'Igbo so four decades after and vanquishment. Nd'Igbo today are made to suffer like second-class citizens in everyday life' (Chambers 2013: 757-758). These statements or submissions credited to Achebe are strong enough to stir reactions and incite generations of Biafrans against Nigeria, and must have prompted the re-grouping, reconstitution and emergence of IPOB in 2015, as a way of liberating themselves from the 'unjust systems'. Lastly, it is also crucial at this point to mention that 'what we are experiencing right now in a generalized climate of terror and insecurity around life, freedom of movement and safety of possession in nearly all parts of the country- especially in the north- have their distant but effective roots in the pogrom of May and August 1966' (Jeyifo 2013: 689), hence, memories of injustices hardly die of easily especially in a multi-ethnic society like Nigeria. This is constantly a key point of reference by IPOB leader, Nnamdi Kanu, and his followers (Daily Post, May 31, 2017). It was, though arguably, in view of the above, that IPOB decided to launch its presence in 2015 through mobilization for support toward the creation of Republic of Biafra.

### 3. IPOB Launch: Federal Government's Responses and Biafrans Counter-Actions

IPOB and its leaders launched their presence on the Nigerian national terrains, prepared and armed with tools that could help facilitate the airing of their grievances against Nigeria, and eventually, win victory for the Igbo through actualization of an independent state of Biafra. One major form in which its presence was launched was through a media platform called *Radio Biafra*. Radio Biafra, from the second quarter of 2015, was used in transmitting information about conditions of Biafrans in Nigeria to fellow Igbo domiciled in Nigeria and abroad. Emphasis was mostly hinged on Igbo marginalization, enslavement, insecurity, and denial of human rights and means of survival by Nigeria, amongst others. The radio station had (still has) strong online presence, as it also transmits information to its audience through other social network platforms such as twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and many more.

Nigerian government under the leadership of President Muhammadu Buhari considered the broadcasts by this radio station as unhealthy for the nation as it had the capacity to divide the people of Nigeria rather than bound them together in unity, hence, the moves for its clamp down. In addition to this, the leader of IPOB, and known founder of *Radio Biafra*, Nnamdi Kanu, had been reported through various media outlets to have accosted the president using various adjectival qualifications. For instance, Nnamdi Kanu and IPOB, had been alleged to have called the 'Federal Republic of Nigeria as a zoo, and president Buhari as a terrorist, evil, and paedophile in some of its radio messages' (Thompson et al 2016: 8). These were deep, strong and very sensitive statements used in challenging the authority of the political leader of the country. The words were provocative and must have cut the president deep through into his skin. IPOB and its leaders did not stop at that as this tirade and criticism against Nigeria and its new leadership became regular, constant, and incessant. In another development, Nnamdi Kanu was reportedly gathering support in preparation for war against Nigeria should they (IPOB) be denied independence in this new move. According to a source, 'in a video message while addressing some Igbo at the World Igbo Congress in the US, Kanu was seen soliciting for weapons from the audience' (Thompson et al 2016: 8). The statement by Kanu was clear enough to send signals to the Nigerian government that there was an impending threat to Nigeria's national security. This would not have been tolerated by any security conscious country, especially Nigeria battling the threats of Boko Haram insurgency that has killed thousands of people within the last seven years (Akinbi 2015; Akinfala 2014; Brinkel and Ait-Hida 2012; Osita-Njoku and Chikere 2015). Further, Kanu was also viewed to have 'boasted that the Biafra passport and sovereign status has been recognized by some powerful countries' (Thompson et al 2016: 8). With these statements, IPOB was already gaining grounds and support from Biafrans who shared its vision within and outside Nigeria. While mobilization was ongoing in southeastern Nigeria where the Igbo people are concentrated, similar campaign for breakaway was taking place at other places across the country wherever people of Igbo descent were domiciled including Lagos and Abuja. Diplomatic congresses and meetings with allies must have also taken place a couple of times and at different locations within and outside Nigeria as revealed through the words of Kanu. President Muhammadu Buhari, being a former military commander and someone who understood the arts of war, did not allow this philosophy of 'new Biafra' to fly freely within the country under his watch before making a move to dig out the identity (or source) of *Radio Biafra* which was reportedly being secretly being operated in the country. This action resulted into the apprehension and arrest of the leaders of IPOB, prominent among whom was Nnamdi Kanu on October 16, 2015.

The arrest or apprehension of Kanu and other IPOB leaders by the federal government immediately generated reactions from their followers, majority of whom were Biafrans. The arrest itself was not the only source of their reactions, but also the way the government had been alleged to be interfering with or violating several judicial pronouncements in favour of Kanu and his colleagues. Mr Kanu's case was first tried at the Magistrate Court in the capital city on 16 December 2015, but the case was thrown out by the judge because the court considered itself as lacking the premise, right, and jurisdiction to decide on the case. This case was then

transferred to the Federal High Court, Abuja, which is the second highest court in the country. Ruling over the case was one Justice Adeniyi Ademola, who declared, on 17 December 2015, that the case could not proceed as there was no valid evidence or charge against the suspect. In his declaration, Ademola maintained that ‘Mr Kanu be charged to court or set free in the absence of a valid charge against him before a court of law’ (Okakwu 2015). This submission by Ademola was misconstrued by pro-Biafra, hence, the reactions and allegations that the government did not comply with court rulings. The statement of the judge did not imply outright release or point to the fact that Kanu was not guilty. It only indicated that there was no evidence presented as of that time by the federal government, and for that reason, he would have nothing to work with in determining the fate of the suspect. Therefore, to proceed with the case, the federal government was urged to either provide proof showing that the suspect truly had a case to face, and should the government know that there was no such evidence, it would be worthless to either continually detain Kanu or prompting him to appear in the court. This was not, in all its content, a judgement of release!

The federal government responded to this request by presenting its evidence leading to several charges including allegations of treasonable felony, illegal possession of two passports, terrorism, and so on (Okakwu 2015; Okakwu 2017) against IPOB leaders. The case had been treated in a number of courts, including court of Appeal, but the suspects were not allowed any opportunity to have bail conditions. They were therefore made to remain in the Kuje Prison, Abuja, Nigeria, since their apprehension in 2015. Nnamdi Kanu, was however, eventually granted bail with strict and tight conditions by the court on April 25, 2017 (Vanguard, April 25, 2017) while other IPOB leaders were made to remain in detention.

The detention of the leaders of IPOB did not bring the activities of the group to a halt. But rather, it emboldened its followers to continue their struggle against the state until the dream of an independent state of Biafra turns into a reality. To this end, *Radio Biafra* continues to air its contents and propagate the agenda of IPOB across and beyond Nigeria. As revealed by one IPOB member during an interview in March 2017, ‘we are proud to announce to you all today, that we are going live on air on Sunday, 19<sup>th</sup> March 2017, with a maiden broadcast, starting from 10:00 Biafra time’ (Opejobi, Daily Post, March 17, 2017). This launch was expected to take place in the territories of the United States. Just recently, some videos flying around indicated that IPOB had set up an embassy in Spain (TheCable, Feb. 10, 2017; The Sun, Feb.25, 2017). These, and yet to be disclosed developments about the progress of IPOB had given the group’s supporters hope for victory in their struggle.

The need to intensify efforts toward ensuring release of the leader of IPOB, and actualization of Biafra’s dream, generated pro-Biafra protests, mostly in southeastern Nigeria Eastern. There had been lock down of shops, schools, companies, and boycotts by government workers as means of registering their displeasure about their presence in Nigeria, as well as show of solidarity for their leaders locked in the prison for about two years. These incidents were not allowed to go by without counter reactions by Nigerian government. And in most cases, members of pro-Biafra group lost their lives during protests.

The international human right organization, Amnesty International, had alleged the Nigerian security forces of killing pro-Biafra despite the fact that their actions were not violent to have posed security threats to the country or its citizens. According to one of its reports, ‘since August 2015, security forces have killed atleast 150 members and supporters of the pro-Biafran organization IPOB (Indigenous People of Biafra)’, and they ‘injured hundreds during non-violent meetings, marches and other gatherings’ (Amnesty International 2016: 5). The organization further alleged that the government interrupted, thwarted, and killed several IPOB members during the celebration of 49<sup>th</sup> declaration of Biafra independence on May 30, 2016. As it stresses ‘on Remembrance Day itself, the security forces shot people in several locations, predominantly in Nkpor, the venue for the gathering, and in Asaba.... atleast 60 people were killed and 70 injured in these two days’ (Amnesty International 2016: 7). These evidences presented by Amnesty International are pointers to the fact that Nigerian government, just like what happened in 1960s, was determined to crush and silence pro-Biafra protesters by all means, and most times, this is done through the use and application of its military capabilities. Further atrocities or inhuman acts committed against pro-Biafra group can be seen in the submission, ‘the military took the bodies of those killed and injured in Onitsha and Asaba to the barracks in Onitsha. Video footage verified by Amnesty International shows soldiers loading dead and wounded people into their hilux’ (Amnesty International 2016: 7). IPOB has on its website the obituary poster of one of its members, Ndubueze Johnson Okoli, a 20-year-old man who was reported to have been killed by the Nigerian security forces during a pro-Trump protest held at Igweocha, Port Harcourt, Rivers State, on February 20, 2017 (IPOB 2017). These incidents had been decried and criticized as human right abuses by Amnesty International and other human rights organizations within and beyond Nigeria.

However, as there is no one side to a story, Nigerian military responded to the alleged killings of Biafrans who were engaged in the protests. In its response, Nigerian Army, through its spokesperson, maintained that Amnesty International was not objective in its report. The report was described as filled with fabricated lies by the organization. In the word of the Nigerian military, ‘without mincing words, these allegations contained in the said report are not only inconceivable, but also have no place in the Nigerian Army’. He further maintained thus, ‘the report is rather contrived lies orchestrated to blackmail and ridicule the Nigerian Armed forces which they had unsuccessfully tried to do in the past’ (Vanguard, Feb. 23, 2017).

Definitely, it was expected that none of the opposing sides would take responsibility for the allegations unless caught at a point where it could not twist the event. However, there might be some iota of truth in the allegation and evidence presented by Amnesty International in its report, though the number of victims reported might not be accurate. The reason for this conclusion is hinged on the fact that Nigerian military, as with most military in the world, would not accept that it had committed human right violations against the citizens which it was supposed to protect, even though the allegation was true. Because admitting to such allegation would result into public criticisms from other parts of the country and beyond. Hence, for the avoidance of developments that would portray the military as ‘murderer’, it was better to conceal and deny such allegations. Men of Nigerian army are known for their brutality against Nigerian citizens (Punch, March 15, 2017; Vanguard, March 16, 2017; Sahara Reporters, Feb. 25, 2017). There is, therefore, no doubt

that IPOB members had recently been through some persecutions in the hands of Nigerian military, either advertently or inadvertently, a trend akin to the fate suffered in the events that led to the birth of the first 'Republic of Biafra' on May 30, 1967.

#### 4. Resolving the Issue: Path to Peace?

As revealed in the previous section, the struggle for an independent state of Biafra got escalated because of the way the government of Nigeria had handled it in the past two years since its resurgence. To resolve this and for the purpose of achieving peace and security in the country, the government must be sensitive and pay attention to the needs and requests of the people. For the past one year, pro-Biafragroup had called on the government to consider granting referendum as a possible way of resolving this issue, but the current administration has not paid attention to this demand. The Nigerian president, Muhammadu Buhari, had, at different times, declared his intolerance for Biafra agitators. In 2016, Buhari, during one of his trips to United Nations in the United States mentioned that 'there was no room for any referendum for the Biafrans, and that the agitators should forget about Biafra' (Sahara Reporter, Sept. 24, 2016). Statements as these had further sparked protests and reactions against Nigeria, with Biafrans using abusive words on both Nigeria and the president. Reacting to the statement made by the president about his unwillingness to grant them access to referendum, Dozie Ikedifie, a pro-Biafra replied as follow:

→ 'If he (the president) won't allow referendum, what then will he allow? Does he remember that any group of indigenous people have the right to self-determination?...whether he allows it or not, when the time comes, referendum will take place, and the people will be allowed to express their opinion and wish' (Ikedifie, The SunNews, Sept. 26, 2016).

Furthermore, in their dailies known as *Biafra Times*, the pro-Biafra agitators published an article titled, 'No Referendum for Biafra, No Peace for You and Nigeria'. In this article, the pro-Biafra made statements which pointed to the fact that they were determined to pull out of Nigeria by all means, notwithstanding the actions of the president. As they wrote: 'who, can dispute that Biafra is here already? As Crimea left Ukraine for Russia, and they could not be stopped, so Biafra will eject from Nigeria in due course. No union is formed by force or under duress. Two cannot walk together except they agree' (Biafra Times, Sept. 27, 2016). This anger and frustration vetting did not cease at that point. The document further alleged the president of applying force to keep them within Nigeria which had been realized to be unsafe and insecure for the Biafrans nationwide, 'Mr President, you cannot force us to be a part of your bloodletting and blood-filled Nigeria. Your will cannot be enforced on us, we will not succumb to threats' (Biafra Times, Sept. 27, 2016). Should these tirades and exchanges be allowed to continue, there might be possibility of another bloodshed in the country. To achieve the much-needed peace in the country at this time, Nigeria should deem it fit to grant Biafrans the opportunity to have a referendum for the purpose of deciding their fate as some countries had done in the recent times. Canada, for instance, on two different occasions, granted Quebec opportunities to have referendum in 1980 and 1995 respectively with the people of Quebec voting to stay within the federation of Canada (Smith 2013; Machildon 2006; Roper Report 1999). In the same vein, the United Kingdom, in 2014, gave Scotland the chance to have referendum, yet the Scottish voted against Scotland's withdrawal from the UK (BBC, 2014). Additionally, Turkey, amidst the unrest it has experienced in the last few years including terror attacks, on 16 April 2017, held a constitutional referendum in which the citizens were given opportunities to express themselves and decide their choice (BBC, April 16, 2017), and to this, President of Nigeria even wrote to congratulate Turkey for such feat (Vanguard, April 18, 2017). Nigeria should also take a cue after these countries as referendum is one of the ways the country could prove that it is truly democratic. Referendum, as demonstrated in the cases above, does not imply granting of self-determination, or secession, but rather an act to restore or rebuild confidence in the government and the systems in general. But, first, referendum is a human right to which all Nigerians are entitled.

It is understandable that if Biafrans were given access to have referendum, there might be possibility that they would win their freedom in the process. This might be the fear of the Nigerian government and its advisors. It will be important to mention at this juncture that granting these people referendum access will not lead to bifurcation of the country. In other words, Biafra is not a possibility at this moment. There are two major ways of proving this stand.

Firstly, this current organization, IPOB, does not have the support base that would give it the opportunity to clinch victory in a referendum. The Igbo people, unlike what we experienced in 1966-1967 when virtually all the people of Igbo descent gave their relentless supports for the actualization of Biafra, are divided over the issues of secession at this time. There had been arguments and counter-arguments among Biafrans as to whether breaking up from Nigeria was the solution. While some Biafrans maintained that the best for them would be to secede from Nigeria, others had maintained that agitations for secession should not be the aim in view 'as this might engender another round of civil war' (Vanguard, Nov. 7, 2015). Prominent amongst those Biafrans who have displayed their disagreements with the secessionist IPOB is Charles Oputa. In series of headlines such as 'The Illusion Called Biafra', amongst others, Oputa expressed his opinion that breaking away from Nigeria was not the solution for the Igbo people or Biafrans, but that Biafrans should focus on building the Southeast to become like a paradise just like other ethnic groups in Nigeria, especially the South-westerners have done in their region (Sahara Reporter, April 20, 2017; Nigerian Watch, Jan. 31, 2017). Another Biafranleader, Chief Rommy Ezeonwuka further warned that secession was not the solution to problems facing Biafrans. He did not mince word by emphasizing that the pro-Biafra group should 'work towards placing the economy of the South-East in the right direction, nurture it, and then begin to canvass for a possible sovereign state of Biafra' (Vanguard, Nov. 7, 2015). To Chief Ezeonwuka, this is not the right time to agitate for Biafra as the southeast Nigeria is not ripe for such independence. Hence, the agitation by IPOB is misplaced.

There had also been some splits among IPOB members over the issue of secession. IPOB started with a large crowd of supporters, but as time progressed, some people organized themselves into a faction, and declared themselves as TRIPOD. While IPOB, the mother organization still believes in secession, TRIPOD is against secession. According to the group, 'we believe in being part of a united Nigeria, and a new way of thinking where the victim mentality will no longer be acceptable' (Vanguard, Aug. 24, 2016). The group

further denounced support for IPOB, and declared its total support for one Nigeria, 'TRIPOD now sees the Biafra question from a different perspective. Biafra will now become to us a powerful metaphor for change, development and greatness of the Igbos inside a united Nigeria' (Vanguard, Aug. 24, 2016). These positions are clear: TRIPOD is now pro-Nigeria, while IPOB is still pro-Biafra. This is an evidence that Biafrans are not united over the secession struggle. Hence, if the government grants IPOB agitators access to referendum, majority of TRIPOD members would vote against secession as we had seen in the cases of Quebec and Scotland. The overall outcome would be a loss of opportunity to secede by IPOB as there are some amount of percentages of votes which are required for secession or self-determination to be granted. In the light of these developments, it is not certain that IPOB would have the support huge enough to enable it clinch victory in a referendum.

Secondly, the long relations between the Igbo people and the rest of Nigeria would also make it difficult for IPOB to succeed at this proposed referendum. Many Biafrans have invested heavily towards the development and growth of different sectors within Nigeria. A number of them own companies, large and immovable properties such as houses in different parts of the country especially in the South West and the federal capital territory, Abuja. According to one Biafran, this move by IPOB 'could not serve the interests of the Igbo who own over 50 percent of commerce in Lagos, and 70 percent of real estate in Abuja' (Vanguard, Nov. 7, 2015). If IPOB becomes victorious, these Biafran citizens would lose their properties. This is because, the other ethnic groups, knowing fully well that the owners of these properties are Biafrans, and they would be moving out of Nigeria into their new land, definitely would not bid for acquisition of those properties owned by Biafrans. And in the case where the properties are bought, they would never be bought at good prices, hence, the loss for Biafrans. The Igbo people who have worked so hard to acquire properties in different parts of Nigeria know this reality, and as a result, they would definitely not vote a 'yes' in any secession referendum in favour of IPOB.

Furthermore, through this long relation between Nigeria and Biafrans, there had been inter-ethnic marriages between the Igbo and citizens of other ethnic groups. In short, some Igbo citizens were born and have lived all their lives in other parts of the country other than Igboland. To these group of Biafrans, Biafra secession would be considered as a ploy to pull them away from their 'roots' into an uncertain environment where, no doubt, they would have to start their lives afresh. For this reason, as well, such people, presumably large in number, will not decide to vote in favour of IPOB in a referendum.

Lastly, the current administration enjoys the support of some key governors and statesmen of Biafra origins. There are Igbo leaders in the cabinet, some serving as ministers, heads of government parastatals, director generals of national agencies. There are also a number of them within both the upper and lower houses in the country. These Biafra leaders possess the right connections, and influence that could facilitate the release of the leaders of IPOB, especially Nnamdi Kanu, but they turned deaf ears to the clamour by pro-Biafra chanters. But the fact that Biafra leaders (governors and politicians) themselves are not doing anything to release the masterminds of IPOB serves as assurance and proof that they are not in support of the vision of IPOB (This Day, June 6, 2016). These leaders, despite having Biafra origin or blood, identify with the ideal of Nigeria than that of IPOB. This is also because of their long relations with the people of Nigeria, and their belief in Nigeria.

In view of these two considerations, it is not certain that IPOB would defeat Nigeria in a referendum to pull out of the country. However, for Nigeria to prove that it is indeed democratic, it should give room for referendum as a path to peace.

## 5. Conclusion

The struggle for independence by Biafrans against the federal government of Nigeria is well-known both on the national and international platforms. The desires of the group remain alive. The pro-Biafra group, represented by IPOB, is determined to give whatever it takes to take its people out of Nigeria. However, it was also quick to realize that this journey to create the new 'Biafraland' would not be achieved on a platter of gold. Or rather, the Nigerian government would not grant them an easy pass to freedom and self-determination. As a result, the group had called on the Nigerian government headed by Mohammadu Buhari to give or grant it access to referendum for its people to decide whether they would love to remain within Nigeria or branch out. The government had renounced and decried this request on different occasions, with several gestures and utterances pointing to the fact that Biafra-land is a mirage. These had spurred IPOB members to several protests resulting into the group losing hundreds of its supporters through bullets released by the members of the Nigerian army. These developments must have further confirmed the fears of Biafrans that their security cannot be guaranteed within the territories or boundaries of Nigeria as any state that cannot guarantee the safety and security of its citizens would definitely lose its 'political sovereignty and moral legitimacy' (Jeyifo 2013: 688). For the country to experience peace and security, it has been suggested, being first of such, that the government give room for the desired referendum by the group. Referendum is, here, considered as human right especially in any democracy of which Nigeria is one. In so doing, the people would be able to decide their fate through voting. This, however, would certainly not pave the way for the group to breakaway from Nigeria considering the factors such as the lack of the level of support needed by IPOB to clinch the success as well as the long relations of many Biafrans with and within Nigeria through ownership of properties, marriages, family ties and political affiliations. Hence, the unity of Nigeria would always remain intact.

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