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## Biafra: Why Igbo Want to Secede

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### Abstract:

*The Nigeria civil war (1967-1970) provoked by declaration of Biafra republic had indelible imprint on Nigeria state. The post war efforts for disarmament, demobilization and reintegration of the Igbo secessionist into the post-civil war Nigeria through the (3Rs) policy of rehabilitation, reconstruction and reconciliation (the 3Rs) to promote national unity and nationalism have failed to yield desire result. In recent times, specifically in post 2015 general election, there have been new waves of agitations for the Biafra republic by both Movement for Actualization of Sovereign State of Biafra and Indigenous People of Biafra on one hand and for Niger Delta republic by Niger Delta Avengers on the other, added to terrorism and militancy that are already threatening Nigeria fragile state. The calls for restructuring have been louder particularly from the southern part of Nigeria.*

**Keywords:** Civil war, Secession, Self-determination, Nationalism and Restructuring

### 1. Introduction

Nigeria has had an unusual susceptibility to civil war –most populous country in Africa, one of the most diverse countries of the world (both in ethnicity and religion) and with a substantial proportion of its export earnings from crude oil (Collier and Hoeffler, 2002:1-37, Fearon and Laitin, 2006: 1-26). According to (Fearon and Laitin, 2006) these are some of the indicators that determine if a country would go into a civil war in a particular period of time, specifically during the earliest period of independence years (1-4years). Hence, the Nigeria civil war (1967-1970) also refers to the Nigeria-Biafra war didn't in any way came as a surprise because the possibilities of a civil war onset had been with the Nigeria state since independence or amalgamation of 1914. The events that sparked the outbreak of the civil war could be located in a cobweb of factors ranging from the remote which includes but not limited to the military coup d'état of January 15, the counter coup of July 29, 1966, other remote factors are the regional election crisis in Western Nigeria in 1965; the Tiv riots of 1964; the Federal Elections of 1964; the killing of the Igbos living in Northern Nigeria from May to September 1966 (Cervenka, 1972; Oyeweso, 1992); the structural Imbalance of the Nigerian federation; and, most importantly, the asymmetrical distribution of power among the various ethnic and geopolitical groups (Ojo, 2009:146, Adeleke, 2008). Ever since the end of Nigeria civil war provoked by the declaration of Biafra republic by Major General Odumegwu Ojukwu, the Nigeria state has been making effort for disarmament, demobilization and reintegration of the Igbo secessionist into the post-civil war Nigeria through the (3Rs) policy of rehabilitation, reconstruction and reconciliation (the 3Rs) to promote national unity and nationalism (Ojeleye, 2010). However, it seems all the mechanism and policies of federal government for national unity like the National Youth Service Corp, unity schools, federal character, National sport festival, Catchment Area etc. have little or no effect on national integration. The increasing rates of post-civil war ethno-religious violence, kidnapping, high rate of thievery, economic sabotage through pipeline vandalism, militancy, and most recently terrorism are threatening the existence of Nigeria; the federal government over the years has maintained that the country unity is not negotiable. The Non-Negotiability of Nigeria unity was again stressed by former president, Goodluck Jonathan during his opening speech at the 2014 confab as a "no go area". The agitation for Biafra independence has once again surfaced and on the increase after the 2015 general elections. The United Nations in its common country analysis for 2016 revealed a deeply divided society on the basis of plurality of ethnic, religious and regional identities and gloomy economic woes (Opejobi, 2016). It is on this regard this paper attempts to examine the Nigeria-Biafra war and unravel Biafra attempted secession, its imprint on Nigeria state and the new waves of agitations.

### 2. Theoretical Framework: Secession

The term secession is many times used in the context of self-determination and dissolution (Mavric, 2012:17). Though these words are interconnected but they are by no means synonymous. Secession maybe defined as follows:

- Secession is the process by which a group seeks to separate itself from the state to which it belongs, and to create a new state on part of the territory of that state. It is not a consensual process and thus needs to be distinguished from the process by which a state confers independence on a particular territory by legislative or other means, a process which may be referred to as devolution or grant of independence. Secession is essentially a unilateral process (Crawford, 1997).

There is a need to emphasize four important points from the above definition. First, secession can only be carried out by a group of people and not individual. Since, there is no one man state, individual secession does not arise. Secondly, there must be territorial connectedness among the group trying to secede. Another feature from the above definition is the fact establishing the voice (Mavric, 2012:17) of exit of a particular group. Lastly, a forceful declaration of independence by a group of people without dialogue and consent or what (Mavric, 2012) refers to as unilateral process. The doctrine of self-determination appeared in the eighteenth century upon which a new order emerges.

- Intrinsically linked with the idea of democracy, self-determination was to correct the arbitrariness and injustices of dynasties rule. In theory, self-determination could be said to refer to the practice by which individuals freely express their political will by choosing their own government and, at this stage, reference to nationalism appears by no means necessary (Jacquin, 1999).

The meaning and application of principle of self-determination has evolved in international relations. The French revolution, American Revolution, the dissolution of the German, Austro- Hungarian and Ottoman empires, decolonization of former Spanish Latin-American empires, Asia and Africa, the two world wars and the emergence of international organizations like League of Nations and United Nations, and the provisions in international law as it relates to the right of minorities has since changed the applicability of self-determination. Thus self –determination has both internal and external dimensions. In other words, National self-determination is a theory of secession. The struggle for independence by nationalists’ in Africa and other colonized territories redefined the concept of self-determination to decolonization from European control and thus the right of self-determination was thus confined in its expression and secession appeared to be henceforth restricted (Jacquin, 1999). Another concept that is directly related to secession is dissolution: Dissolution may be triggered by secession or attempted secession of a part of the state (ibid). However, if the process involves a general withdrawal of all or most of the territories concerned, and no substantial central or federal component remains behind, it may be evident that the predecessor state as a whole ceased to exist (Crawford, 2005). When the process of secession is completed the newly created state forms a new legal and political unit, whereas the state where the part seceded from, i.e. the rump state retains its government, legal and political identity minus the withdrawn part (Mavric, 2012). We can deduce that the three concepts are not mutually exclusive, for instance, since must secessionists hinged their claimed for a new independent state, whether from colonial control or a part of a sovereign state on national self-determination, and secession of different parts (units) that make a central government may lead to the state to cease to exist (dissolution). Thus:

National self-determination  $\longleftrightarrow$  Secession  $\longleftrightarrow$  Dissolution

Secession is at the center of the other two concepts for the following reasons. First, while separatists always base their demands on national self-determination, the end which they want to achieve is an independent state (secession) i.e. national self-determination is a means to an end. The relationship between the two concepts is transitory. The relationship between secession and dissolution depends on whether the secession of units from an independent state leads to the total or complete collapse of the state. For example, the collapse of former USSR into 15 independent states, the dissolution of Czechoslovakia into two independent republics of Czech and Slovakia and the dissolution of Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY), into Slovenia, Croatia, Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, however, after Eritrea seceded from Ethiopia, the remaining territories still continue as Ethiopia. Same as South Sudan from Sudan, as such secession don’t lead to dissolution.

### 3. Theories of Secession

The theories of secession can be group into two broad categories. The first is primary right theories which view secession as a right of group of people to vote to secede. The two theories under this category are that of national self-determination theory and choice or plebiscitary theory. The second is derivative right theories which view secession as a measure to justified consequence of past mistreatment of the group by the state mass and permanent violation of basic human right unlawful incorporation into the state, violation of intra-state autonomy agreement, and violation of public realization of equality of democratic state (Mavric, 2012:23).

### 4. National Self-Determination Theory

The theory opined that different nations (in a multination state) have the right to secede. J.S Mill believes that in multi-national states; there can be no feeling of commonality and sympathy can only be achieved among same nationality (Mill, 1991). He argues that among people who spoke different languages, there can be no common public opinion and ergo no working of representative government and because of lack of common feeling even in armies of multi ethnic state cannot be strong , since the soldier would own obedience and alliance only to the flag but their heart would not be beating for a “foreign” country, because of all these Mill concludes that the boundaries of a state should be in line with the boundaries of a nation (Mill, 1991).

### 5. Choice or Plebiscitary Theory

A plebiscitary right of secession grants a right to a majority in any portion of the territory of a state to form its own independent state if it so chooses, even if the majority of the state as a whole opposes their bid for independence (Buchanan 1998:15). Beran argues that all individuals have the right to determine their own political relationships – a right which he claims to be both consistent with, and required by, liberal democratic theory (Beran, 1998:35). Specifically, Beran argument for secession is as follows:

First, he believes that the state cannot be the ultimate right holder in realm of liberal democratic theory, second, he considers the state to be the agent of the people, and third, the people can revoke the agency relationship they have with the state, the state must derives its right from the people, since the state is the agent of the people and lastly, substantial part of the state may terminate the agency relationship and withdraw them from the state within the territory (Beran, 1998:35). The plebiscitary theory simply believes in the

expression by a group to secede from a state through voting i.e. secession is a matter of majority rule (Mancini, 2008:553-584). The plebiscitary theory seems to be very permissive and the conditions for secession can easily be met by a majority approval in a referendum. Secession according to the theory is made lucrative and can as well lead to fragmentation of states in international system. Since the only requirement for secession is for majority to affirm the withdrawal of such group.

### **6. The Remedial Right Only Theory**

The prominent proponents of the theory are Anthony Birch and Allen Buchanan. Birch justify secession for the following reasons: first, in case of forceful annexation of a region, second, government failed to protect rights and security of people in some region both drastically and permanently, third, political and economic interests of a region were not safeguarded, in addition, either out of bias or ignorance, government ignored agreement made with sections about their essential interests that might easily find themselves to be outvoted by the majority (Birch 1984). For Buchanan, secession is the last option for groups whose basic human rights are permanently violated, territory that have been illegally annexed to the state, and groups whose intra-state autonomy agreement have been violated (Buchanan 2004). When the last resort for stopping the preserved injustice is secession, then it is morally permissible for them to secede (ibid). The major difference between the scholars' submissions on the theory is that the latter is restrictive about secession and considers it only as the last resort when all other available options have failed to address the injustices melted on a group in a particular region of a sovereign state.

### **7. Political Economy Theory**

The political economy theory suggests that if the presence of natural resources in a country is concentrated in a region or a nationality, this may have bred the quest for secession. According to Collier and Hoeffler (2012) secessionists group mobilize the people for independence on the argument for indigenous control of natural resources underneath their region. To them, the greed for the control of these resources always inform of agitation for a new state which in most cases lead to civil wars, i.e. natural resources bred greed, agitation and civil wars (Collier and Hoeffler, 2012).

### **8. Biafra Argument and Theories of Secession**

It can be claimed that independence from colonial rule set Nigeria on a rollercoaster ride of chaos and destruction in which regionalism, ethnicism, nepotism, thugery and political brinkmanship were the order of the day (Ojeleye, 2010). The series of crises that befell Nigeria shortly after independence dramatically led to the first military coup of 15 January 1966, a coup championed by Major Kaduna Nzeogwu, an Igbo, saw the demise of two senior Northern political leaders, four senior Northern soldiers and premier of western region and subsequently installed General Johnson Aguiyi Ironsi, an Igbo, as the head of Nigeria's first military government (Ojeleye, 2010, Achebe, 2012). Given the ethnic distribution of the casualties of the January coup and the fact that the leader of the coup and Ironsi were both Igbo, allegations were levied against the new regime as being an attempt at domination of the country by the Igbos (Ojeleye, 2010). Ironsi turned out to be a victim of fate and circumstance, he inherited the benefits of a coup he had not created, but failed to address the accusations laid against his regime, and to allay the fears that the coup that brought him into power was sectional (Ibid).

The counter coup of July 1966 led by Murtala Muhammed, the ascension of Yakubu Gowon to head of state, despite the fact that he was not the most senior military officer, alleged murdered of 185 Igbo officers, the massacre of the Easterners in the north- was seen as a northern revenge of the first coup that brought the northern control of federal government to a halt. Prior to the riots in northern Nigeria, the Igbo dominated the army (ranked officers), educational institutions and the federal civil services (Madiebo, 1980:14). The pogrom in northern Nigeria was alleged to be a state policy to exterminate the Igbo and their dominance in Nigeria affairs (Achebe, 2012:92). The crises in northern Nigeria saw over one million Igbos returned to the eastern region which resulted to a refugee problem. In January 1967 there was an attempt to discuss the area of conflict in what is now known as Aburi accord, on May 27, 1967 Gowon called for a state of emergency and divided the country into twelve states, responding citing a malevolent acts directed at the mainly Igbo Easterners –such as the pogrom that claimed over thirty thousand lives, the federal government failure to ensure the safety of easterners in the presence of organized, and the directed incrimination of the government in the murders of its own citizens ,thus, Odumegwu Ojukwu proclaimed the independence of the republic of Biafra signaled the Nigeria-Biafra war (Achebe, 2012:92). It is in the context of the foregoing that we now situate the Biafra on the theories of secession. First, the national self-determination believes that different nationalities in a state have the right to seek secession base on their nationalities, i.e. the boundaries of state should reflect that of their ethnic nations. Did Biafra reflect this? Even though the Igbo are the dominate ethnic group in old Eastern region of Nigeria that was proclaimed Biafra, there was more than ten (10) other ethnic groups in the old region, Ijaw, Ibibio, Ikwere, etc. like other secessionists, the Biafra republic was hinged on national self-determination, but the reality was that Biafra failed the national self-determination theory test. The declaration by Gowon of dividing the country into 12 states days before the commencement of the civil war was perceived as a move to raise the consciousness of the minorities in that region. Second, the declaration of the republic of Biafra was under a military regime in which an Igbo general was the first beneficiary, in fact the first military coup of January 1966 was known and refers to as “an Igbo Coup”. The first military coup which was seen as a revolt against the Nigeria elites, later turned out to be the greatest undoing of Nigeria against itself. The coup truncated the newly independent Nigeria democratic journey, a counter coup -and a military rule that lasted for over twenty-nine (29) years and a civil war that continue to have an imprint on the Nigeria state forty-six years after. The argument is that the liberal principle of democracy in which the choice and plebiscitary theory base its point was not in existence during the declaration of republic of Biafra. The Nigeria state cannot give what itself lack i.e. a consequence of the first truncation of the democratic rule of first republic. And besides, the Nigeria

civil war has been described as a personal vendetta of Ojukwe against Gowon. Supporting this claim, Raph Uwechue, who served as Biafra's envoy to Paris up until 1968, and then later as Nigeria's ambassador to Mali unleashed a scathing criticism of Ojukwu (Achebe, 2012: 125). As thus:

- In Biafra two wars were fought simultaneously. The first was for the survival of the Ibo[sic] as a race. The second was for the survival of Ojukwu's leader-ship. Ojukwu error, which proved fatal for millions of Ibos [sic], was that he put the latter first (Uwechue,2004).

The Nigeria constitutions (previous and current) do not provide for the use of referendum to solve and answer any national question. Third, remedial right only theory postulation of forceful annexation of a region to a country. Like the Igbo, every other nationality in Nigeria can rightly claim to be forcefully annexed into Nigeria. The Nigeria state, is an artificial country that was put together by non-Nigerians, no one sought the consent of the people that were literally gavelled into existence as Nigerians when the state was originally constituted (Taiwo, 2016). like most developing states, is the creation of colonial scramble and gun powder, state formation in Africa is the creation of external force. The above point illustrates the feelings among Nigerians that, the country itself is just a mere geographical expression (Awolowo, 1966:48) and that Nigerians combined but they don't mix. In this regard, there is a sense in which one can argue that the original emergence of Nigerians was the equivalent of kidnapping (Ibid). When it was evident that the federal military government didn't protect the lives of Igbo (particularly in the north) during the turbulent period leading to the civil war, but it may be wrong to suggest a Nigeria state conspiracy and a sponsored genocide against an ethnic group. The country is still bedevils with numerous security challenges. Lastly, the declaration of Biafra republic in 1967 was allegedly because of discovery of oil in Niger-Delta, mainly in minorities' community in the eastern region (most of these minorities are now in South-South geo political zone, excluding Edo and Delta). Gowon decision to create twelve states was seen as a tactical approach to save the oil rich Niger-Delta from Ojukwu influence and that their economy interest would be guaranteed in unified Nigeria.

### 9. The New wave of Agitations

It is important to stress that forty-six (46) years after the Nigerian civil war, the Igbo nation, especially a significant portion of its leadership, never reconciled with the idea of Nigeria (Taiwo, 2016). At intervals since then, with different degrees of severity, the demand for separation from Nigeria and the inauguration of an Igbo-dominated Republic of Biafra has become a permanent feature of the Nigeria political landscape (Taiwo, 2016). After the assassination of Aguiyi Ironsi in the counter coup of 1966, No Igbo has emerged Nigerian President, the closet ever since was when Alex Ekwuemen was vice president to Sheu Shagari during the second republic of 1979-1983. This they claim is a deliberate political marginalization of the people of South-East. The Igbo proclaim to be the victim of the Nigeria-Biafra war, a war they refer to as genocide perpetrated by the North (Hausa-Fulani) and supported by the south-west (Achebe, 2012:228). The fact that the presidency has eluded the Igbo for too long added to their disaffection towards Nigeria state. Another major demand is the creation of one additional state in the core Igbo south east zone to be at equal with the other four zones with six state. The core Hausa-Fulani North-West zone has seven states.

The Biafra agitation has been a reoccurrence and seems the war does not really provide any solution to Nigeria problems, if four decades after an avoidable war, Nigeria existence as a unified country still not certain. The Movement for the Actualization of Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) led by Ralph Uwazuruike was the spearhead of this agitation, a younger generation, impatient with what they see as the snail pace at which MASSOB has been moving towards the actualization of their sovereign republic, organised under the aegis of Indigenous People of Biafra was created to continue the agitation for an independent state for Igbo (Ibid). Nigeria returns to democratic rule in 1999 and MASSOB has carried protest over the years which later turned violent. The death of Umaru Musa Ya'adua in 2010 paved the way for Goodluck Ebele Jonathan from Bayelsa state (Niger-Delta) which was part of the eastern region during the first republic to become the president, the first from that region of the country. He enjoyed the support of the Igbo that earned him victory at 2011 poll. The Igbo consider Jonathan has their son even though he's of the Ijaw.

However, Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) have increase the severity of violent protest in South East and South-South immediately after President Goodluck Jonathan failed in his re-election bid in 2015, won by All Progressive Congress candidate, General Muhammedu Buhari, a former military head of state from the core Northern Nigeria, demanding the independence of Biafra from Nigeria. Expectedly, the government responded by arresting the leader of (IPOB), Nnamdi Kanu and some of its members for treasonable felony and terrorism. Demonstration in celebration of Biafra day and to demand for Kanu's release turned bloody in South East states where over 40 people, including a soldier were reportedly killed and over 50 were arrested (Jimitota, et.al, 2016).

While some believe the renewed agitation for Biafra is the manifestation of the long cemented marginalization of the region, others argue that the agitation is merely a political weapon of distraction by the opposition to the ruling All Progressive Congress (APC). The lopsided appointments by President Buhari has also fanned anger of the people of the south east. Commenting, Ohaneze Ndigbo, the pan Igbo social-cultural organisation, says the lopsided appointments have shown the Buhari presidency deep rooted hatred for the Igbo nation (Ujumadu, 2015). It is believed that the hate speeches targeted to President Buhari during the electioneering campaign and his rejection by the region was responsible for the lopsided appointment that is against the south-east. In addition, the anti-corruption fight of this present administration perceived to be one sided and regarded as a war against those that opposed the president. The handcuffing of Olisa Metuh, an Igbo and the spokesman of Peoples Democratic Party, the erstwhile governing party, to court for his corruption trial has been interpreted as a move to portray a particular ethnic group as corrupt. Moreover, the present economic policies of banning the importation of some items is been view as a plot against Igbo economic interest.

Unlike the 1967-1970 attempted secession, lack of high profile government officials publicly supporting the new agitation for Biafra, the reduction of territorial influence of Biafra to the five (5) core Igbo south Eastern states, the unwillingness of the former oil rich

minorities to join Biafra, representative democracy that guarantee membership into federal executive council, National Assembly etc. are some of the factors restricting and curtailing the present agitations.

## 10. Conclusion

The Independence of Nigeria in 1960 has been a journey to chaos and instability. The country continually pays for a civil war that has proved to be at a high cost for nation building, national unity, political and economic development. Much has not been achieved of post-civil war integration policies forty-six years after. It appears the events that sparked the avoidable war have always been with us; again, the unity of the country is at stake. The present government should ensure inclusive governance. However, there is no sincerity in the recent calls for restructuring the country. This is evidence by the proposal made by the 2014 confab for additional 18 states, while the existing 36 states have failed to propel national economic development. The National Assembly should endeavour to amend the constitution to provide for the use of referendum to answer national questions since the various national conferences have failed due largely to non implementable recommendations.

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