



Article

## Quest for Autonomy: Examining Self-Determination and the Resurgence of Separatist Movements in Nigeria

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### Abstract

Separatist agitations have been a reoccurring issue in Nigeria to push various agendas. These agitations are fuelled by unresolved national questions such as perceived marginalisation and recently, insecurity. The study assesses the resurgence of separatist movements in Nigeria, focusing on the agitations of the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) and Ilana Omo O'odua (IOO) and the application of the principle of self-determination. Relative Deprivation theory was employed as a framework for analysis. It also used a qualitative-descriptive approach. The study discovered that seceding groups often employ the principle of self-determination as an instrument to justify their agitations. The argument provided that the principles of sovereignty, territorial integrity, and non-interference of state are undermined by remedial secession and the principle of responsibility to protect (R2P) because of the growing shift from state-centred to human-centred security. The paper suggests that rather than using force that has only succeeded in escalating the situation, the Federal Government of Nigeria (FGN) should be prepared to employ dialogue and referendum to address these agitations.

### Keywords

Self-Determination, Secession, Insecurity, Separatism and Social Movements

### Introduction

The principle of self-determination of people has been a major instrument of agitation within states by the would-be seceding groups, regions, and component units. This principle as unequivocally put in Article 1 of the United Nations Charter stated thus.

...to develop friendly relations among nations based on respect for the principle of equal rights and self-determination of peoples, and to take other appropriate measures to strengthen universal peace. (Charter of the UN 1945)

The principle as stated above in the provision of the Charter has been interpreted differently by scholars of international politics. For one, it is a principle of the relationship between independent states and decolonization (Cats-Baril, 2018). For others, it is the right to statehood by ethnic nationalities (Raic, 2002).

Nigeria's political space right before independence has been replete with a series of agitations for self-determination. An example is the Western region which threatened breakaway when Lagos was carved out of the Western region (Awofeso, 2017). Similarly, Chief Anthony Enahoro also moved a motion for

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self-government for Nigeria in 1956 (Shedrack, 2021). Other earlier agitation movements are the Movement for the Actualisation of Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB), Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP), Movement for the Emancipation of Niger Delta (MEND), and Oodua People's Congress (OPC). The numeracy of this agitation in pre-independent Nigeria led to the promulgation of a series of constitutions by the British colonialists as a response to address the grievances that attended the agitations (Abbas & Sani, 2018). By the same token, several commissions have been set up, and national dialogues and conferences such as 1995, 2004, and 2014 National Conferences to discuss the demands of agitators.

Suffice to say that what took place in the annals of self-determination in Nigeria before the present democratic dispensation was an intermittent call by one group or the other at different times. Recently, the hues and cries for self-determination among various ethno-religious groups in Nigeria are not only common, but it has also become a household concept. From Niger-Delta agitation in the South-South, renewed Biafra secessionism led by the IPOB in the Southeast, the Yoruba Nation movement led by IOO in the Southwest, to the Minority Middle Belt cry in the Northcentral.

Some of the cited reasons for these separatist movements have their root in the history of marginalisation, skewed allocation of resources, the question of resource control, and unequal recruitment and promotion in the federal civil service, military, and other top agencies, and for South Eastern Nigeria, unequal state creation (Lugard et al., 2015; Nyekwere & Duson, 2020; Osaretin, 2019). Other recent reasons include perceived ethnic cleansing, insecurity, leadership deficit, and ideological fallout that triggered the aspirations of groups of people with an ethnoreligious affinity for self-government. The manifestations of State failure are noticeable in the Nigerian State as characterized by the insurgence of various armed groups, insistent internal conflict, violence, and increasing "destructive corruption" (Robert & Campbell, 2021).

International law maintains a level of legal neutrality on the contemporary rise in secessionist movements across the globe making secession a matter of capability of the agitators than a matter of law in the international system (Lawal, 2021). The preamble of the Nigeria 1999 constitution as amended declares Nigeria as an indivisible and indissoluble sovereign nation. However, article 20 of the 1981 AU charter guarantees the right of oppressed people to seek freedom from the bonds of dominations, hence, permitting them to resort to any means recognized by international law to achieve their independence.

Against this backdrop, this paper examined the resurgence of separatist movements in Nigeria. In specific terms, the study seeks to interrogate the factors that inform the resurgence of these movements and to examine their legality within the context of international law.

## **Review of Related Literature**

### **i. Conceptual Review**

#### **• Self Determination**

The concept of self-determination crept into the African lexicon after the end of the Second World War in 1945 following the decolonisation agenda of African states from the tide of colonialism. The principle as enshrined in Article 1 of the UN Charter (1945) and Article 20 of the African Charter on Human and Peoples right (1981) points to the principle of self-determination as the right of people to freely determine their political, social, and economic status and has been a major instrument for separatist agitators in Nigeria.

There are, however, controversies and variations as to the exact meaning of self-determination among scholars of international politics. Self-determination refers to the relationship among independent states in the international system without external interference (Cats-Baril, 2018). However, it was accepted

that the exercise of the right to self-determination is now a crucial right for minority groups. In a more similar view, self-determination is the right to statehood by ethnic nationalities (Raic, 2002; Siboe, 2020).

Arising from this view is the ambiguous meaning of 'nation'. Thus, suffice to point out here that the usage of the word "nation" and "peoples" in Article 1 of the UN Charter recognizes the group of people united by common identity, ethnicity, and history who has either been organized under a government or aspires to be organized under self-government. In this sense, self-determination is the right of people to freely determine what they wish to become (Bereketeab, 2012; Igwe et al., 2020). The notion of the free will of people was explained from three different perspectives; one is the people's freedom to political independence, that is, the people's desire for an independent state within the international system; two, the desire by a group of people to be a part of another state different from the existing union they belong to or three, the desire for self-government within a state (Bereketeab, 2012). Following the above explanations, self-determination can be divided into two.

- a. Internal self-determination and,
- b. External self-determination.

Internal self-determination as defined by the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD) is the freedom of people in the pursuit of their social, economic, and cultural development free of external control and the right to conduct public affairs at any level within an existing state. External self-determination is referred to as the right of people to determine their political status within the international community. An example of this is the freedom of people from colonialism and the right to be free from subjugation, domination, and exploitation (Cats-Baril, 2018).

The meaning and application of self-determination evolve differently with the aspirations of its agitators. In the case of colonized Africa, self-determination was employed by African colonized states as a strategy and right for attaining independence and to separatist agitators in Nigeria like IPOB, and IOO, it's a principle that guarantees a right to the emergence of an independent state from the extant state. The principle of self-determination has been a major tool for the campaign for decolonisation by African states that were seeking independence (Ojukwu & Okoli, 2021). Post-colonialism saw the reliance on the principle by ethnic groups for agitations for statehood from the existing state.

- **Secession**

The concept of secession is intrinsically linked with self-determination. Secession is a means, while self-determination is the end. The end goal of every secessionist movement is self-determination. Succinctly put, secession is a withdrawal of a unit, region, ethnic or united group of people from an existing independent state to form a separate new state or to join another state. Secession is the separation of a part of an independent state to establish a new state (Nolte, 2006). Furthermore, secession involves a complex process of negotiations and the severe struggle for the creation of new states different from the existing independent states (Kohen, 2006). The secession struggle may or may not be successful in establishing a new independent state. An example of successful secession in Africa is South Sudan from Sudan after Sudan was plunged into two consecutive civil wars and Eritrea from Ethiopia. An example of unsuccessful secession attempts is the declaration of Biafra that resulted in the Nigeria Civil War of 1967-1970. Hence, the Biafra secessionist attempt of 1967 was a secessionist failure.

- ii. **Self-Determination as a Product of Unresolved National Questions**

A number of these scholars traced the root cause for separatist agitations in Nigeria to the unending history of marginalisation, skewed allocation of resources, the question of resource control, unequal recruitment and promotion in the federal civil service, military, and other top agencies, and for South Eastern Nigeria, unequal state creation (Lugard et al., 2015; Ndukwe C et al., 2019; Nyekwere & Duson, 2020). Injustices endemic in the administrative, socio-political, and economic structures in Nigeria's federal system are some other causes of separatist agitations in the history of Nigeria (Ndukwe C et al.,

2019). It was observed that the resurgence of Biafra agitation was motivated by eroded confidence in Nigeria's unity, economic marginalisation, and skewed allocation of resources. The Yoruba, who are predominantly in the Southwest region and Kwara State, earlier calls for restructuring resulted from the same feeling of exclusion from the national political, social, and economic development (Osaretin, 2019). However, the Yoruba emerged from the agitation for restructuring of Nigeria to the agitations for an independent Yoruba Nation from Nigeria.

The factors underlying the propelling issues did not just emerge but an unresolved national question of resource control and allocation, corruption, and insecurity among others. However, the unchecked security problems informed these crises. Unfortunately, all these enduring problems still beg for solutions.

### iii. Self-Determination as an Instrument of Political Survival

A view different from the above was that separatist agitation has been prevalent in Nigeria's history as an instrument actively employed by elites with ethnic loyalty to achieve political aims and objectives for their ethnic group. The Northern region (Hausa/Fulani) threatened secession before Nigeria's independence in the 1950s when they observed that they were not well placed in terms of the acquisition of Western education which earned them the British-assisted hegemony of the central government of Nigeria at independence. Their dominance ignited the Yoruba in the Southwest and Ibos in the Southeast's threat to separate from the country in 1965 and 1966 respectively. This among others led to the thirty months Biafra civil war (1967-1970) and triggered the emergence of ethnic militancy from the Yoruba, the Oodua People's Congress (OPC) in 1998 (Harnischfege, 2019). The habitual agitations informed a power shift to the south with the emergence of a Yoruba-Christian president and in turn, motivated the resurgence of Biafra agitation by the Ibo's MASSOB to achieve similar feat in the central government politics like the Yoruba.

### iv. Self-Determination and Principle of Territorial Integrity

The principle to maintain the existing borders upon independence as stated in Article 2 of the OAU Charter (1963) and later in Article 4(b) of the Constitutive Act of the AU (2000) has been subjected to criticism following the South Sudan's independence in 2011. Examining the modern development of the right to self-determination and the principle of territorial integrity in African politics, South Sudan's independence presented a limitation to the barriers posed by the principle of territorial integrity and "*uti possidetis*" (Heather Byrne & Englebert, 2019). The creation of new states that may undermine the principle of territorial integrity of existing states may be perceived as an enduring solution to threats against national and global security (Heather Byrne & Englebert, 2019; McNamee, 2012).

South Sudan's independence stemmed from humanitarian rights to secession. This situation was presented as a shift from state-centred security to human-centred security. However, South Sudan's independence made the principle that colonial borders are to be maintained negotiable (Dersso, 2012). Biafra secessionists attempted to ride on the humanitarian right to uphold its secession attempt in 1967-1970 hoping the international community would intervene in what Ojukwu, the Biafra leader perceived as an act of genocide by the Nigeria government against the Biafra people (Harnischfege, 2019). Humanitarian organisations like the International Red Cross, the World Council of Churches, and the African countries (Tanzania, Zambia, Cote d'Ivoire, and Gabon) that recognized Biafra during the civil war relied on humanitarian grounds to assist the Biafra people.

However, Jure Vidmar's "domestic consensus" principle seems a potent way to achieve external self-determination. This principle points out that the existing state is required to accede to any group's agitation within the state for independence as in the case of South Sudan, unlike the case of Biafra and Katanga which was not accepted by Nigeria and Congo respectively.

### v. International Support and Self-Determination

Another interesting perspective is that the support of world powers is essential to the success or failure of separatist groups (Igwe et al., 2020). However, international support is not a direct translation to attaining success but the lack of it may presage an impediment to the success of separatist agitations and even independence (Schomerus et al., 2019). This is evident in the case of East Timor (Igwe et al., 2020). Support by international actors may be clandestine or manifest and States may present the doctrine of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) as underlying their support for separatist groups. Examples of manifest support are Tanzania, Zambia, Cote d'Ivoire, and Gabon. Tanzania argued that it has the humanitarian responsibility to assist the Biafra people against Nigeria's repression and pogrom suffered by the Biafra people (Heather Byrne & Englebert, 2019; Mwakikagile, 2010). For clandestine support, France and China, France and China did not offer Biafra diplomatic support but secretly and indirectly through Cote d'Ivoire and Tanzania respectively (Diamond, 2007; Mwakikagile, 2010). To this end, the capabilities of separatist agitators to lobby for international support go a long way in the pursuit of their aims and objectives. However, international actors offer such support for various reasons that border on their interests. France allegedly supported Biafra to protect her former colonies from the influence of Nigeria and to prevent the USSR from gaining an economic grip on Nigeria's oil (Griffin, 2015). The 1999 constitution that declares Nigeria as an indivisible union does not guarantee the right to exercise external self-determination for any group of the country (Igwe et al., 2020). However, the international and African regional laws guaranteed the right to self-determination for people under the reign of colonialism, gross human rights violations, and oppression.

#### vi. Gaps in the Literature

Scholars have conducted studies on self-determination and separatist agitations in Nigeria. However, none of these studies has adequately and holistically captured the resurgence of separatist agitation and the renewed agitation for self-determination in Nigeria by other ethnic groups among whom are the Yoruba people's agitation for Yoruba Nation independence (Oduduwa Republic), the alliance of indigenous people of the Lower Niger (Former East and Mid-west regions), Ilana Omo Odua (former Western Region) and the Middlebelt (a part of the former Northern region of Nigeria) under the umbrella of Nigeria Indigenous Nationalities Alliance for Self-determination (NINAS).

This paper explores the strategies employed by these groups within the context of the new age and international law, including the admission of the Yoruba Nation and Biafra as the 45<sup>th</sup> and 46<sup>th</sup> members of Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization (UNPO) which gives these agitations an international outlook. Also, it examines the state's responses to these agitations.

Most of the available literature primarily dwells on the Biafra agitations of 1967 to 1970 and 1999 to 2015. Filling this literature gap is vital, as it contributes holistically to the body of knowledge on this topic.

#### A. Relative Deprivation theory (RD)

The theory is credited to the writings of the American Sociologist Samuel A. Stouffer in 1949 and W.W. Runciman (1966). Its assumptions include the feeling that one's group is disadvantaged and dissatisfied in self-comparison to others. Two, these feelings may not necessarily arise as an objective hardship they suffered but from how they view themselves in comparison to others believed to be doing better than them in the society to which they belong. Three, this self-comparison against others generates a feeling of resentment and entitlement (Fahey, 2010; Pettigrew, 2015; Smith & Huo, 2014).

Relative deprivation is when an individual or group sees themselves as lacking necessary social amenities, rights, justice, and services required for a decent living in the society to which they belong which prompts a feeling of being socially marginalized (Ezemenaka & Prouza, 2016). It's the

discrepancy between the real state of living of an individual or group and how they feel they should be in the actual sense (Ted, 2016).

The theory best explains the resurgence of separatist agitations in Nigeria which stems from the feelings of marginalization, skewed allocation of resources, the question of resource control, and unequal recruitment and promotion in the federal civil service, military, and other top agencies, and for South Eastern Nigeria, unequal state creation (Lugard et al., 2015; Nyekwere & Duson, 2020) and the presumed domination of one ethnic group in the country over others. Other ethnic groups in Nigeria often hold the belief that the Fulani ethnic group in Northern Nigeria dominates the country at the expense of others. Other recent reasons border on the government's inability to provide adequate security for lives and properties mainly from banditry, kidnapping, and herder's crisis among others. The Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) agitation stems from the feelings of socio-economic and political exclusion of the Southeast region of the country which also is the yardstick for the earlier agitation by the Yoruba people of the Southwestern region of the country for restructuring and recent, for the Oduduwa Republic (Uchime, 2017). In addition, the agitators have often alleged that membership in Nigeria is a reason for poverty, unemployment, insecurity, and perpetual underdevelopment in the Southeast and Southwest regions respectively. To them, resources necessary for their development are being used for the development of other regions, especially Northern Nigeria. The leader of the Ilana Omo Oodua (IOO) Prof Banji Akintoye has often alleged that the Yoruba people and other people in southern Nigeria are treated as second-class citizens in the country and largely living in poverty, unemployment, and fear (Channels TV, 2020). The resurgence of the separatist movement in Nigeria borders on the unresolved question of age-long dissatisfaction and rejection of Nigeria's structural imbalance, revenue sharing formula, and political marginalization among others (Awofeso, 2017).

### **Legal and Theoretical Debate**

The right to secession was not explicitly stated in any of the available and accessed international legal documents. The international legal instruments maintain some level of neutrality on the right to secession. However, external self-determination provided a basis for the people's right to secession. Hence, secession is a means to external self-determination. The principle of self-determination is enshrined in various international legal documents viz. the Charter of the UN 1945, African Charter on Human and Peoples Rights 1981, International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights 1967, UN Declarations on the Rights of Indigenous People 2007 and International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights 1966 among others.

These instruments unequivocally state that the people have inalienable rights to self-determination. Specifically, article 20 of the African Banjul Charter 1981 guaranteed the right of the oppressed or colonized people from bonds of domination, stating that the exercise should conform to recognized methods and strategies by the international community. This charter recognized that the exercise of the right to self-determination goes beyond decolonisation to include those subjected to oppression within a political entity. However, the creation of independent and recognized states of South Sudan, Eritrea, and East Timor revealed the possibilities of exercising the right to self-determination beyond cases of decolonisation. The creation of South Sudan made tenable the negotiability of African colonial borders (Dersso, 2012). The Declaration on the Right to Development (1986) added that the right to development is the complete realisation of the people's rights to self-determination and full sovereignty over their resources.

Despite the "indivisibility clause" in Nigeria's 1999 constitution, the right to self-determination has enjoyed judicial pronouncements by the Nigeria High Court. In the case involving the FGN and Sunday Adeyemo (Igboho), the Oyo State High Court affirmed the fundamental right of the people to self-determination and declared the agitations for such by the Yoruba as legal (Yejide, 2021). Similar to the constitutional dispute raised through a "*force majeure*" by the Nigeria Indigenous Nationalities Alliance

for Self-determination (NINAS) in 2020, the 1999 constitution of Nigeria is a product of Abdulsalami military government impositions that lack representation and are dictatorial (Aladekomo, 2021).

However, scholars such as Antonio Cassese and Koskenniemi argue that the people have the right to remedial secession based on oppression and denial or failure of internal self-determination. The Supreme Court of Canada alluded to this in the case of Quebec secession that a state whose government ensure internal self-determination and fairness has the right to maintain its territorial integrity guaranteed by international law. The cases of oppression, gross human rights abuses and lack of legitimate representation of the interest's core to the survival of the people are the most important conditionality for the right to self-determination. For example, the several years of oppression and the 1998 conflict that resulted in the death of about twelve thousand people presented a justification for the 2008 declaration of independence by the Kosovo Republic to secede from Serbia (Ekeke & Lubisi, 2019). Similarly, South Sudan exercised the right to self-determination following several years of violence and conflicts. People not subject to the above conditions can exercise the right to self-determination through mutual consensus (Vidmar, 2012) which involves political dialogue between the parent state and the seceding group. The conditionality stated above favours the historical and contemporary experience of the Yoruba dominated southwest and Ibo dominated southeast regions of Nigeria. About thirty thousand Ibo people were massacred in cold blood in the northern region of Nigeria following the coup and countercoup d'état of 1966 that among other things led to the 1967-1970 civil war and, more than three million Ibo people were allegedly killed during the war.

Contemporarily, the inability of the FGN which exclusively controls the security apparatus of the country to check the insecurity that ravaged the Southern region of the country, most especially, the Southwest and Southeast and their negative responses to measures like the establishment of Western Nigeria Security Network (WNSN) employed by the governors of the southwest to abate the security challenges confronting the people aided the regions agitation for external self-determination. The unabated crimes of kidnapping, rape and other heinous activities of armed Fulani herdsmen and bandits across the Southern States have resulted in the loss of several lives and properties. Kidnapping which has risen to become a daily and scary phenomenon was a nearly non-existent crime in the South West Yoruba region before the emergence of conflicts between the Fulani herdsmen and farmers due to the resentment generated by cattle's grazing on, and destruction of farmlands worth millions of Naira across the region.

Fears, suspicion, marginalisation in terms of developments and state creation for the southeast region, the lopsidedness of recruitment into federal civil and military services, skewed distribution of resources and domination have over the years characterized Nigeria politics favouring the Hausa/Fulani dominated Northern region at the expense of the Yoruba and Ibo dominated southern region where the lion share of the resources are derived.

The shift from state-centred to human-centred security may undermine the principles of sovereignty, territorial integrity and non-interference of states based on the emergent norm of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P). The creation of new states may be perceived as an enduring solution to threats against national and global security. Individual states are obligated to protect their people from four broad crimes viz. ethnic cleansing, war crimes, genocide, and other crimes against humanity (McNamee, 2012). However, the manifest unwillingness of states to protect their people from, or are guilty of such crimes obligates third-party states to take timely actions (GlobalR2p, 2022)

## Methods, Strategies and Government Response

### Yoruba Nation: Method, And Strategies

The Yoruba's quest for self-determination has deep historical roots dating back to the 1950s when they first advocated for self-rule. The 1953 constitutional conference saw the Yoruba's demand for control over Lagos, leading to tensions. The Action Group pushed for the right to unilateral secession at the 1954 Resumed Constitutional Conference, but it faced strong opposition from the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons (NCNC) group led by Nnamdi Azikiwe who perceived the right to unilateral secession as illegal, suicidal and a call to anarchy (Alumona et al., 2019; Tamuno, 1970).

The hues and cries for a Yoruba country resurfaced after independence following the declaration of a state of emergency and the installation of an illegitimate government in the Western Region by the central government, sparking a secessionist riot in the region (Harnischfege, 2019) Furthermore, the clampdown and military suppression of the Yoruba people that followed the annulment of the June 12, 1993, presidential election also generated further resentment and this informed the formation of the Oodua People's Congress (OPC) to protect the interest of the Yoruba people (Duruji, 2012). The call for restructuring emerged as a response to Nigeria's challenges, with the Yoruba advocating for regional autonomy, resource control, and state police. The Yoruba's demands for restructuring gained support from the Southeast and Niger Delta regions.

The non-achievement of a restructured Nigeria and the state of insecurity in the Southwest region aggravated the once gradual and almost unattractive demands for disintegration among the Yorubas. Before now, several pro-Yoruba independence groups had existed like the Oodua People's Congress (OPC), Yoruba Liberation Command (YOLICOM), Yoruba Nation Global Directorate (YNGD) and Oodua Grand Alliance for Independence (OGAFI) among others who had earlier demanded a total dissolution of Nigeria but did not enjoy massive patronage from the Yoruba people.

The formation of the Yoruba World Congress (YWC) in 2019 which had its name changed to Ilana Omo Oodua (IOO) was a watershed in the annals of Yoruba's demand for an independent country. The Ilana Omo Oodua (IOO) launched the agitations for an independent Yoruba country with a desire through peaceful means in conformity to international law. Despite the opposition from the FGN, Prof Akintoye alluded to this that the Yoruba people would massively rely on their intellectual prowess to achieve independence rather than the employment of violence and war (Omoniyi, 2022). To further affirm the declaration for peaceful and law-abiding agitations, IOO released a manual in July 2021 following a violent attack by the government operatives on the residence of one of the group lieutenants, Sunday Adeyemo (Igboho) (Oyeleke, 2021). The manual serves as a guide for their activism and also highlights justifications for the agitation for a sovereign Yoruba nation to the international community with the pernicious experiences of the Yoruba people and the need for separation from Nigeria that include among others the high-level of poverty and hopelessness ravaging the Yoruba land, horrifying plans of "ethnic cleansing and genocide", unabated bloodshed and the "regime of crime against humanity" in Nigeria (Akintoye, 2021).

The strategies highlighted in the manual include what I can describe as the Seven P's (7P's) Strategies that IOO referred to as the demonstrations of the Yoruba civilisations like the processes employed by the Scots, Welsh, French Canadians, Czechs, Slovaks, East Timor, and others;

- 1) Peaceful organisation,
- 2) Peaceful demands,
- 3) Peaceful propaganda,
- 4) Peaceful protests,
- 5) Peaceful legal actions,



- 6) Peaceful political persuasion, and
- 7) Peaceful negotiation.

However, the activities of the group since its inception have included among others;

#### **a. Diplomacy, Domestic and International Organisations**

(Akinrefon, 2020) In the quest for attracting international appearance and support, the Yoruba Nation was admitted as the 45<sup>th</sup> member of the Unrepresented Nations and People's Organisation (UNPO) in April 2020 with four other Nations viz. Biafra, Catalonia, Guam (a United States Island territory), and the River Races of Zambesia (Akinrefon, 2020). UNPO is a global membership-based organisation established in 1991, headquartered in Hague Netherlands. The UNPO amplifies the agitation for the exercise of the right to self-determination by indigenous people under various forms of repression, violence, and with no or limited level of representation in the country they belong. However, former members like Armenia, East Timor, Estonia, Georgia, Palau, and Latvia have attained full independence (Akinrefon, 2020).

In furtherance of its diplomatic efforts, IOO joined an alliance with other regional groups to form NINAS. The group through the constitutional Force Majure proclamation of 2020 described themselves as a victim of ethnic cleansing orchestrated by armed Fulani militia and demanded the FGN to begin addressing the constitutional grievances highlighted in the 2020 proclamation.

#### **b. Rally**

Peaceful rallies were staged across the six southwestern states of Oyo, Ogun, Ekiti, Ondo, Osun, and Lagos including Kwara to sensitise, raise the consciousness of people, and mobilise Yoruba mass toward achieving a sovereign Yoruba nation. The massive support enjoyed was an expression of the people's resentment towards the Nigerian state, especially on the issue of deteriorating security and the growing level of poverty. The sloganeering of "*Yoruba Nation Now*" was employed to give succour to the campaign for a sovereign Yoruba Nation as a remedy for the high level of poverty, kidnapping, rapes, and other forms of unabated security challenges ravaging the region.

#### **c. Legal Actions**

The Yoruba group had on several occasions approached the Nigeria court on matters bordering on human rights abuses by the Nigeria security agencies. For instance, the group secured the release of the twelve Yoruba agitators arrested following the brutal midnight attack on Sunday Adeyemo's residence. Some of them were charged with terrorism-related activities (Oyero, 2021). Similarly, the Yoruba agitations enjoyed judicial pronouncements by the Nigeria High Court. In the case involving the FGN and Sunday Adeyemo (Igboho), the Oyo State High Court affirmed the fundamental right of the people to self-determination and declared the agitations for such by the Yoruba as legal. On the international level, Yoruba groups filed a petition with the International Criminal Court (ICC) to investigate the act of genocide and crime against humanity on the Yoruba People of the Southwest, Okun Land in Kogi, and Kwara states respectively (Akinrefon, 2021).

#### **d. Media and Propaganda**

The employment of propaganda and the use of social media have played crucial roles in marketing the Yoruba agitations to the Yoruba masses. However, the amplification of information has aided and presented the Yoruba nation's agitations as a sole remedy to the devastating experiences of the people within Nigeria.

The Yoruba nation's propaganda has been majorly focused on the security challenges confronting the Southwest region of the country. Repeated information and propaganda are often employed to appeal to mass sentiments, and drive both local and international public opinion in support of the agenda. The branding of the heinous crimes of the armed Fulani herdsmen in the toga of "*fulanisation*" has helped generate resentment and raised the consciousness on the history of Uthman Dan Fodio Fulani's jihad of 1804. Hence, the need for the Yoruba nation as a pre-emptive action to prevent a replay of history.

## **Biafra: Method and Strategies**

Several years before the Yoruba agitations gained traction in Nigeria politics, the MASSOB began the agitations for the restoration of the defunct state of Biafra by unveiling twenty-five stages plan hinged on the Mahatma Gandhi principles of non-violence to achieve the MASSOB agenda. In a nutshell, Ndujihe highlighted the 25 stage strategies to include among others (Ndujihe, 2015).

1. Peaceful protests and rallies,
2. Operating two forms of governments
  - a. Biafra government in diaspora and,
  - b. A shadow government in Nigeria
3. Hoisting of the Biafra flag,
4. Re-introduction of Biafra currency,
5. Introduction of Biafra international passports

Despite the adoption of the 25 stages of peaceful strategies, MASSOB was accused of orchestrating violence in the Southeast region of Nigeria which led to a massive crackdown on the group members and its activities across the region resulting in the loss of lives. Furthermore, the group threatened to make the country ungovernable to the FGJ should the arrested members and leader be tried for treason and alleged the government of making efforts to provoke them (Ujumadu, 2013). However, former president Goodluck Jonathan ordered the release of the MASSOB leader, Nwazurike and other Biafra agitators arrested in 2011 (Umeagbalas, 2012). In what seems to be a display of compromising the Biafra agenda, MASSOB announced its support for the 2015 presidential ambition of Goodluck Jonathan and urged the Ibo people to support “their brother”. Nwazurike further displayed his interest in Nigerian politics when he lamented the transformation of the All Progressive Grand Alliance (APGA) to a family affair by its leaders instead of a national party (Chidi Nkwoara, 2014).

Following the allegations of the MASSOB compromise, IPOB emerged in 2012 and began the campaign for the restoration of Biafra. Unlike MASSOB and IOO, IPOB did not announce strategies towards achieving its aims but at the initial stage, it’s observed that the leader of the IPOB, Nnamdi Kanu massively adopted reaching out to the people through the London-based Radio Biafra (Amnesty International, 2016).

However, the activities of the group since its inception have included among others;

### **a. Media and Propaganda**

A major strategy adopted by the Nnamdi Kanu led IPOB is the employment of media through Radio Biafra to mobilise support for the restoration of the defunct Biafra state. Radio Biafra was first used during the Nigeria Civil War as the official radio of the defunct Biafra Republic and operated from 1967 to 1970 to disseminate information to the Ibo people and its military. However, Nnamdi Kanu resuscitated Radio Biafra to reawaken the trauma and grievances of the civil war and mobilise mass support for the renewed Biafra’s agitation. The radio broadcast and his arrest in 2015 brought IPOB and Nnamdi Kanu to national and international discussion.

The pirate radio was used as an instrument of addressing national injustices against the Ibo in Nigeria and spreading rebellious messages among its supporters (Akande, 2017). Kanu’s broadcasts are highly provocative, filled with anti-Nigeria messages and hate speech. Nnamdi Kanu threatened to make the worst replay of the Somalia crisis in Nigeria should the government reject Biafra’s bid for independence. However, history presented such provocative statements as a catalyst for the outbreak of violence. For instance, such speeches aided the Rwandan genocide. Hate speeches against the Tutsi became the norm and popular before the outbreak of the violence. They were often regarded as a threat to the existence of the Hutus (Chitra Nagarajan, 2015).

IPOB employed dehumanizing statements like the “zoo called Nigeria” to raise the Ibo sentiments that they do not belong to Nigeria (Fashakin, 2017). Aside from the broadcast of provocative statements, IPOB’s propaganda majorly focused on the unaddressed problems of marginalisation, skewed allocation of resources, and uneven recruitment in the civil and military services among others (Lugard et al., 2015).

#### **b. Peaceful Rally and Protest**

Protest is another strategy employed to express willingness for the restoration of the defunct Biafra republic. Rallies across the five Southeastern states of Nigeria were organised to mobilise support for the Biafra agitations. More recently is the “sit-at-home” protest introduced as an instrument to inform the local and international communities of the level of acceptance of the Biafra agitations in the Southeast states.

'Sit-at-home " is a form of protest mandating that people remain indoors on an announced date to send a message of popular acceptance of a social movement to the public. “Sit-at-home” is simply an expression of resentment and grievances by the people about a particular issue. IPOB adopted sit-at-home protests as an alternative to street protests. Initially, it was used to celebrate the victims of the Biafra civil war. The protest oftentimes recorded huge success leaving Southeastern Nigeria deserted like a ghost town and IPOB described this as a demonstration of unity and Ibo people’s solidarity with IPOB’s agitation for Biafra (Opejobi, 2021). However, while accepting the right to protest, the sit-at-home strategy has been criticised for crippling the Southeast economy at the disadvantage of the people. The protest should be done given the paramount importance of the common good (This Day, 2021b).

#### **c. Diplomacy and membership in international organisations**

Biafra was admitted as the 46<sup>th</sup> member of the Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organisations (UNPO) to join Scotland, Catalonia, Yoruba, and Guam among others who are members of the organisation. The admission of ethnic nationalities from Nigeria is a demonstration of defective federal structure (Wahab, 2020).

#### **d. Semi violence.**

Pockets of violence have been attributed to the paramilitary arm of IPOB, the Eastern Security Network (ESN), especially on the enforcement of IPOB sit-at-home orders in the southeastern states (The Cable, 2021; This Day, 2021a). The crippling effect of the sit-at-home order inflicted untold economic hardships in the South East owing to the incessant closures of businesses, banks, and markets and the restriction of inter and intra-states movements (Godfrey Ofurum, 2021; Obianeri, 2023). Cases of violent enforcement of the order had been reported across the region. For instance, two commercial buses that violated the order in Mbaise local government of Imo State were set ablaze leaving four passengers dead, two of whom were burnt to ashes with the vehicles while the two others were shot. Also, the ESN operatives often patrol different markets in Obosi, Idemili North Local Council to ensure total compliance with the order (Alozie, 2021; Lawrence Njoku et al., 2021). Surprisingly, heavily armed men forced the students at Comprehensive Secondary School in Nkume, Imo state to discontinue the Monday examination exercises conducted by the West Africa Examination Council (WAEC) due to the sit-at-home order in force on a particular day. Sadly, the teachers and students fled the school premises for safety and about eight motorcycles belonging to the teachers were burnt by the assailants (Lawrence Njoku et al., 2021). However, condemnation has trailed the frequency of the order in the region which some residents described as a “lockdown in disguise” (Okoli et al., 2021).

### **Government Responses**

The government responses to the growing wave of separatist movements across the southern region of the country have majorly been the employment of brute force involving extrajudicial killings, incessant arrest of key actors and perceived members, terrorist colouration and media propaganda aimed to demarket the separatist movements in the country. Culminating events revealed that the government's attitudes towards the agitators have further hardened their commitments to secession. The government

began with the arrest and detention of MASSOB, IPOB members and their sympathisers across the southeast. The arrest and detention of Nnamdi Kanu, the IPOB leader in 2015 sparked massive social protest in the region, this created a personality cult for Nnamdi Kanu and brought the neo-Biafra agitations into both national and international discourse (BBC, 2015). Similarly, the government launched what Jean-Claude Juncker, the European Union president in 2017 described as an undemocratic disguise of a military exercise, Operation Python Dance 1, 2 and 3, that resulted in the loss of several lives in the region (Clifford Ndujihe, 2017). Government declared IPOB as a terrorist organisation in furtherance of its efforts to quell separatist movements in Nigeria.

Similar to the employment of repressive force in the Southeast, military operatives violently attacked the residence of one of the arrowheads of the agitations for the Yoruba Nation in the Southwest, Sunday Adeyemo (Igboho) in June 2021 leaving about two persons dead, thirteen others arrested and charged with terrorism (Adejumo & Ayitogo, 2021). Following his escape from his residence attack, he was arrested and detained in the neighbouring Benin Republic while planning to travel to Germany. However, the FGN has made frantic efforts to link the Yoruba group with the proscribed IPOB to ensure the proscription of the group as well as a terrorist organisation (Oyero, 2021).

## **Conclusion**

The resurgence of separatist movements in Nigeria is traceable to the age-long unresolved national questions in Nigeria's federalism. The last straw that broke the camel's back is the rising and unabated security challenges across the southern region of Nigeria and the fear of the Fulani expansionist tendencies. However, almost all the states in Nigeria are confronted with security challenges but the colouration and perception of the challenges in the southern states of Nigeria as an existential threat makes it peculiar among others.

The rising wave of insecurity in the Southeast and Southwest region has created an atmosphere of fear and apprehension and has discouraged people from farming to produce foods for the region and raw materials for needing industries in the region and across borders, deterred both domestic and foreign direct investment (FDI) and made the region's highways grossly insecure. Cases of incessant kidnappings on the highways, workplaces and people's homes, rapes, and killings of people on their farmlands dominated the national dailies.

Moreso, the perceived failure of the FGN to adequately address the security crisis attributed to the armed Fulani herdsmen in the entire South and Middlebelt region, rising unemployment among the youths across the country, and mutual suspicion between the ethnic groups created a cosy accommodation for uprising and agitations for the disintegration of the country.

The IPOB sit-at-home order has further inflicted untold suffering on its supporters and the entire people of the southeast due to frequent restrictions of movement and shuttering of banks, offices, markets, and other businesses. Violent enforcement has led to the loss of several lives and properties across the region. Also, the employment of peaceful strategies by the Yoruba agitators has made casualties in the southwest at a minimal level. However, the management of current separatist movements by the FGN has made them gain traction.

Conclusively, several international legal instruments that Nigeria is a party to explicitly stipulate that the people possess the inalienable right to self-determination. Scholars of international law and politics have argued that the people subjected to oppression, gross marginalisation, and inability to exercise internal self-determination have the right to pursue external self-determination to remediate their devastating experiences within the country. Remedial secession seems to have gained a foothold in the African Banjul Charter 1981 guaranteeing the right of the oppressed to self-determination under international norms and

the independence of South Sudan has created precedence for the possibilities of separatist success in Africa.

### **Recommendations**

The employment of brute force may not quell the separatist movements in Nigeria nor will incessant arrest and media propaganda propel the arrowheads of the agitations or its supporters to shelve their beliefs in the agitations. Military actions have only succeeded in the escalation of the crisis from peaceful rallies to basic guerrilla confrontation in the southeastern states and possible future armed confrontation in the Southwest. Addressing the root cause of the agitations that fuelled major resentments against the Nigeria state viz. the question of marginalisation, skewed allocations of resources, uneven recruitment in FGN civil and military services, and most importantly, the unabated abduction, rapes, bloodshed, and destruction of properties by the alleged armed Fulani herdsmen across the south will be a good start to ensuring internal self-determination.

The two separatist groups are not demanding a unilateral declaration of independence but agitating for a referendum to determine their continued co-existence in Nigeria. The FGN should pave the way for a referendum vote for the people concerned to decide their existence in Nigeria. However, we must understand that granting a referendum is not a direct translation to the dissolution of Nigeria. People may choose to vote to remain a part of Nigeria or otherwise. The media is replete with records of separatist regions failing to win independence referendum votes from their respective countries. For instance, the Scottish constituency (Scotland) lost the 2014 referendum conducted to determine their independence from the United Kingdom polling 45 per cent votes against a rejection of the independence vote of 55 per cent. Similarly, Quebec lost the 1995 referendum vote to determine its independence from Canada. Also, despite the separatist movements for independence, New Caledonia in the Pacific region of France lost the 2021 referendum vote. Nigeria's government needs to emulate civilised and democratic societies like the UK, Canada, and France in ensuring human security and preventing the escalation of the agitations that could result in an undesired humanitarian crisis in Nigeria and West Africa.

A referendum vote for external self-determination is more crucial in Nigeria now than forced cohesion. The failure to achieve peaceful co-existence in Nigeria sixty-one years after independence is a direct call for a new approach to addressing the inherent challenges. The constitution is not working in the interest of the people, several sections of the country are agitated, and mutual suspicion of possible aggression against each other and lack of trust have dominated Nigeria's co-existence. At this moment, Nigeria is like a time bomb due to explosion if necessary and civilised measures are not employed. We need to understand that Nigeria may not be able to afford a multi-lateral or any form of a humanitarian crisis in the current time – Boko Haram/ISWAP crisis in the North, Yoruba Nation in the Southwest, Biafra and Niger-Delta in the Southeast and South-south respectively.

A constitutional amendment must be taken into consideration as a follow-up to the above to grant minorities who feel unsatisfied and insecure in Nigeria the ability to exercise their right to external self-determination.

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