

THE NIGERIA STATE AND THE BIAFRA QUESTION: THREATS TO OR OPPORTUNITIES FOR NATIONAL COHESION?

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The resurgence of the agitation for the creation of the Republic of Biafra in 2015 steps from a long history of agitations for the independence of the Southeastern states and some parts of South south zone of Nigeria from the Nigerian state. The agitation dates back to Nigeria civil war of 1967-1970. The re-annexation of the region to Nigeria after the civil war did not put an end to the agitation but led to the emergence of several pro-Biafra movements in the zone. The formation of the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) in September 1999, created the first “formalized” platform for articulation of the agitation.

MASSOB engaged in grassroots' sensitization of the Igbos at the community level to increase the appeal to secede from the Nigerian state. The sensitizations allegedly led to a systematic fundraising at the community level. This was done through the imposition of mandatory monthly dues on local communities in the South east states as well as other states with affinity to the Igbos including, Delta, Rivers, Lagos, Abuja and Kaduna states. At least Sixty Million Naira¹ (N60,

000,000) is reportedly raised from these contributions per month; there is also evidence of support from the diaspora. In 2009, Mr Nnamdi Kanu with the support of MASSOB ostensibly founded Radio Biafra and later Biafra Television, a satellite based television station in 2015. In July 2015, Biafra 24 Radio was launched to be the alternative platform to Radio Biafra. Other mediums including newspapers-Biafra Herald- Facebook pages and twitter handles were created to sustain the agitation. MASSOB claimed that it's agitation were largely non-violent; it

nevertheless led to series of clampdowns, arrests, detention and torture and alleged killings of the members of the movement. In 2005 Nigerian government pronouncing MASSOB an extremist group, arrested several of the members and jailed its acclaimed leader Ralph Uwazurike on treason charges. He was however released in 2007. The Biafra Zionist Movement (BZM) created in the early 2000s is an offshoot of MASSOB. It advocated for the legitimacy of Biafra and declared its new state of independence on 5 November 2012 and



Source: d.ibtime.co.uk

¹ <http://sunnewsonline.com/new/uwazurike-is-enriching-himself-with-biafra-struggle-madu-new-massob-leader/>

West Africa Early Warning & EARLY RESPONSE Network (WARN)

The West Africa Early Warning Network (WARN) is an integral part of the West Africa Preventive Peacebuilding Program co-ordinated by the West Africa Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP). Through its WARN Program, WANEP is setting the stage for a civil society-based early warning and response network in Africa with emphasis on human security.

WARN covers the entire Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) region.

Since 2002, WANEP entered into an agreement with ECOWAS through the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) in the framework of capacity building in Conflict Prevention. One of the goals of

this agreement is to interface WARN with the ECOWAS Early Warning Systems to optimize early warning conflict prevention in West Africa. In view of this development, WANEP has been operating a liaison office located at the ECOWAS Secretariat in Abuja, Nigeria since April 2003.

In recognition of the role and achievements of the West Africa Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP) in Conflict Prevention and Peacebuilding in Africa, particularly in West Africa, the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations at its substantive session of 2006 granted WANEP Special Consultative Status to the UN. WANEP is therefore mandated to designate official representatives to the United Nations in New York, Geneva and Vienna to further its advocacy and outreach strategies for peace and human security.

rebirth of the Republic in 2014. Other groups includes the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) which according to its purported leader Nnamdi Kanu was founded in London in 2012 by a group of people from the South-South and South-East regions of Nigeria. The Biafra Independent Movement formed by the leader of MASSOB Ralph Nwazurike on December 6, 2015 after his alleged suspension from the mainstream MASSOB is also part of the movement for the independence of Biafra.

The Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) and a faction of MASSOB led the latest pro-Biafra agitations. The arrest and detention of the Director of Radio Biafra and the professed founder of IPOB, Nnamdi Kanu on the 17th of October 2015 by the Nigerian government exacerbated the agitations. Igbo youths across the southeast zone and in Rivers, Delta state and Abuja-FCT took to the street to protest his arrest and demand his unconditional release. The sustained protests disrupted socio-economic activities in the Southeast zone and led to clashes between the protesters and security agents with the most violent incident been the clash between the protesters and the Joint Task Force in Onitsha on the 2nd of December 2015. The clash reportedly led to the death of two policemen and nine pro-Biafra protesters; destruction of vehicles, a Central Mosque and other properties in the city².

This policy brief examines the actors, factors and dynamics of the agitations, questioning if the current agitation is another flash in the pan and if current responses are adequate to address the agitations for secession of Biafra from Nigeria. The analysis of the emerging issues and scenarios as well as the response options aims at supporting the efforts of different stakeholders including the Federal government on managing the current pro-Biafra agitation.

2.0 THE CRUX AND PERCEPTIONS OF THE AGITATIONS FOR BIAFRA REPUBLIC.

The Renewed Quest for Republic of Biafra

The resurgence of agitations by pro-Biafra groups has once again placed the issue of the independence of Biafra in public discourse. The agitation led by a faction of MASSOB and its splinter groups; the Biafra Zionist Movement and the Indigenous People of Biafra have been described as the largest agitation by pro-Biafra supporters since the reannexation of south eastern Nigeria back to the country in 1970. The pro-Biafra groups share the goal of having an independent state, they however used different strategies and approaches in their agitations. Violent and non-violent means have been engaged in some instances leading to killings, disruption of economic activities and destruction of properties. The grassroots movements embarked by MASSOB for over five years have created a lot of awareness in communities in the South east zone and created the platform for mobilization of resources and man-power to sustain the agitation. The sustained awareness by MASSOB was cashed-in on by the splinter groups led by younger people with more zeal and resulted in several direct confrontations that led to the arrest of about 100 protesters in Port Harcourt³ many of whom were charged to court for treason.

The recent deaths from the clash between the protesters and the joint task force also received different levels of condemnation by the different groups. The Ralph Nwazurike led-faction of MASSOB

was in the forefront of the condemnation and described the clash as against the principle of non-violence needed to get the international support in recognition of Biafra as a sovereign state. Nigeria government in response to the clash broke its 2-months silence on the secessionist threats by pro-Biafra groups by declaring it a 'completely legitimate' struggle for self-determination⁴.

Perceived Marginalization of the Southeast zone: Perceived injustice, inequity and marginalization of the South East zone in the political leadership of Nigeria by successive governments are popularly cited by interest groups as the underlying causes of the quest for the secede of Biafra from the Nigeria state. These underlying factors were currently reinforced by the perceived under representation of the Igbos in the current President Buhari led government. The new government reportedly favoured other regions in its political appointments over the southern region. An analysis by Premium Times on 28th of August 2015 showed that 75% of the 29 appointments made by the president is from northern Nigeria while southern part had only 25%. A further breakdown of the analysis showed the Northwest had 41% while the Southeast zone had 0%⁵. The current protest over the arrest of Nnamdi Kanu speaks to the perceived deeper issue of marginalisation, the Igbos have always agitated about than



Source: news.bbc.co.uk

² <http://www.vanguardngr.com/2015/12/9—killed-as-pro-biafra-protests-turn-bloody>

³ <http://www.thisdaylive.com/articles/pro-biafra-protesters-defy-police-march-on-port-harcourt/225312/>

⁴ <http://www.thisdaylive.com/articles/fg-terms-pro-biafra-protest-completely-legitimate/227343/>

⁵ <http://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/headlines/189117-outrage-grows-across-nigeria-as-buharis-lopsided-appointments-continue.html>

just the unconditional release of Kanu Nnamdi. Prominent Igbo elites, including the **Ohaneze Ndigbo** blamed the resurgence of the agitation on socio-economic-political factors, manifesting in the marginalization of the people of the South-East region⁶. The **Ohaneze Ndigbo** is the most respected trade-political group in the south east that enjoys enormous respect and goodwill from the Igbos. Ohaneze Ndigbo condemned the clash between the pro-Biafra protesters and the JTF while also calling for the release of Nnamdi Kanu as a way forward. Some conditions have been put forward for addressing the underlying causes⁷ of the agitations for the creation of Biafra. These include the dredging of the River Niger to enable the Southeast have access to the ocean, the construction of the 2nd Niger Bridge flagged off by President Jonathan in 2014- more as fulfilment of campaign promise as well as court for the vote of the south east in 2015 elections⁸ similar to the promises made by President Obasanjo in his regime-, construction of federal roads in the zone, employment opportunity for the youths as well as political positions in the current government. The Igbos opine that they may have lost political relevance in Nigeria and in the current government in terms of appointments and leadership in the legislative arm of government due to its mass voting for PDP and not the current APC government. A statement accredited to the President in July 2015⁹ that he would treat the different constituency in Nigeria based on how the vote in the 2015 presidential election reinforces this observation.

Igbo Elites and Pro- Biafra Agitation:

The ongoing pro-Biafra protest brings to the fore the fact that the Igbos do not hold homogenous view about its

independence from the Nigerian state despite the ethnic affiliation and sentiments shared by them. The call for secession of Biafra brought out different reactions from the Igbo elite/political class, the diaspora and common woman and man in the south east. Disadvantaged Igbo youths that are mainly unemployed and under employed embraced the agitation and protest as life line to more economic opportunities in the 'paradisiac' Biafra Republic. However, the political elites, business owners and economically advantaged Igbos seems diplomatic in supporting the agitation perhaps for personal interest. The survival of the economy of the landlocked proposed Biafra Republic is also another concern for the Igbo businessmen/women known for extensive importing and exporting business. The elderly Igbos having experienced the civil war and the consequences are also cautious about supporting the agitation. The **Ohaneze Ndigbo** reportedly disassociated itself from the protest and agitation for Biafra¹⁰. Igbos in Lagos, Kano, Gombe states also disassociated themselves from the secessionist move of the agitators. The reaction of Igbo traders under the auspices of the South East Markets Amalgamated Traders Association contained in a press release dissociated Igbo traders and further complained about how the protesters enforce the incessant closure of shops and markets in solidarity with the agitators¹¹. The interest of Igbos in the diaspora in the agitation for the secession of Biafra Republic from Nigeria is another strong force supporting and promoting the agitation.

3.0 ACCELERATING AND DECELERATING FACTORS

Violent clampdowns by Nigeria government and disrespect for court orders: The beginning of the formalized agitation for the sovereignty of Biafra as articulated by the MASSOB coincided with Nigeria's return to democracy in 1999. The president Obasanjo's regime was perceived to have recorded series of arrests, detentions, torture and jailing of both the leadership and members of MASSOB as well as other Igbos sympathetic to the call for Biafra. Subsequent regimes have seen government clamping down on MASSOB and its members as well as the members of its splinter groups including Biafra Zionist Movement that declared its independence from Nigeria in 2012.

The arrest and detention of the Director of Radio Biafra and Leader of IPOB Nnamdi Kanu by the Department of Secret Service (DSS) on October 17th, 2015 is however the most sensational arrest of a pro-Biafra agitator since 2005 when Uwazurike was arrested and jailed. The Department of State Service (DSS) subsequently charged Kanu and one Benjamin Madubugwu and David Nwawuisi before a Federal High Court in Abuja on six counts of treason and other ancillary offences. Kanu was reportedly arraigned before the Abuja Municipal Magistrate Court, Wuse Zone 2 on 19th October 2015 and granted bail on conditions including getting a civil servant of Grade Level 16 that has a landed property within Abuja metropolis and in the sum of N10million as his bail surety¹². The arraignment and bail is however questioned by some legal luminaries, according to them, magistrate courts do not have jurisdiction over felonious offenses such as treason, sedition, rape, terrorism etc. The conditions of bail were reportedly

⁶ <http://www.vanguardngr.com/2015/11/the-igbo-our-position-on-biafra>

⁷ <http://oblongmedia.net/2015/12/02/root-causes-of-the-biafra-struggle/>

⁸ <http://www.dailytrust.com.ng/news/editorial/second-niger-bridge-contract/109052.html>

⁹ The president's speech at the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) on July 22nd 2015

¹⁰ <http://www.vanguardngr.com/2015/11/ohaneze-disowns-biafra-agitators-says-biafra-died-in-1970/>

¹¹ <http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/nigeria-traders-disassociate-biafran-leader-nnamdi-kanu-lawless-separatist-groups-1530464>

¹² <http://nigeriamasterweb.com/Masterweb/breakingnews-211015-true-position-nnamdi-kanu%E2%80%99s-conditional-bail-continued-detention-another>

not met which created the opportunity for the DSS to obtain an order from the Abuja High Court to detain Kanu for a further 90 days. Again on 17th of December 2015, Justice Adeniyi Ademola¹³ of the Federal High Court (FHC) in Abuja ordered the unconditional release of Kanu from the custody of the DSS setting aside an order earlier granted the DSS to detain Kanu for 90 days. According to the Justice, the continued detention of Kanu after three months without trial, violated section 158 of the Administration of Criminal Justice (ACJ) Act 2015 and section 35 of the 1999 constitution must not be allowed in the interest of the rule of law. Despite the ruling, the DSS continued to detain Kanu and brought a fresh six-count charge of 'treason and managing the affairs of an unlawful society and plotting to split Nigeria, by creating a Biafra Republic with South east, South south states, and parts of Kogi and Benue states as component units' against him and the two charged with him before the Federal High Court, Abuja. The last recorded arraignment of Kanu on 23rd of December 2015 and resulted in the Federal High Court judge, Justice Ahmed Mohammed exempting himself from hearing the case. This followed Kanu's plea that he preferred being held in the detention, than subjecting himself to a trial, which outcome would not be respected, as the federal government had repeatedly disobeyed previous court rulings¹⁴. The case has been remitted to the Chief Judge of the High Court for re-assignment to another Judge. The statement of President Buhari during his maiden media chat of 30th December 2015 also suggests the continued disrespect for the court

orders is tolerated by the President¹⁵.

Dialogue and other non-violent interventions

The Southeast Governors Forum, Traditional Rulers in the Southeast, the *Ohaneze Ndigbo* and other prominent sons of Igboland have repeatedly called for dialogue in resolving the issues.

However the rift¹⁶ in the *Ohaneze Ndigbo* and the Governors's Forum has inhibited the conveying capacity of the bodies and lowered its influence in negotiating with the pro-Biafra agitators or articulating better of the underlying issues in contention. A platform formed by the Governors and elders of the South East Geo-Political Zone in a meeting held in Enugu on 22nd November, set up an Economic Committee to dialogue with members of the MASSOB/IPOB and the federal government with a view to finding a lasting solution to the agitations as well as interfacing with the federal government on remedial measures¹⁷. Reactions to the decisions for negotiations and dialogue varies with several groups including pro-Biafra agitators like Nwazurike distance themselves from any form of negotiations intended to strengthen the unity and stability of the Nigeria, pledging to actualize the Republic of Biafra¹⁸. The pro-Biafra agitators also rejected all negotiations that would not have its leader Kanu in attendance¹⁹. The detained Kanu also allegedly wrote a letter of apology to President Buhari for referring to him as a terrorist, evil and a pedophile in his radio broadcasts. The letter of apology publicized by the media was reportedly written and signed by Kanu on October 23rd 2015 in

the DSS custody²⁰. Despite IPOB and MASSOB's rebuff of initial calls for negotiation and dialogue, they have however agreed to halt protests to give room to the federal government to dialogue²¹.

4.0 SCENARIOS

Best Case Scenario

Federal Government engages the leadership of the various "Separatist groups" and the umbrella Igbo stakeholders – the *Ohaneze* in negotiation to articulate their grievances and agree on implementable agenda towards addressing them; the groups lay down their arms and drop their agitations, allowing for a peaceful atmosphere that will spur development. The fate in the "oneness of Nigeria" is rekindled among the south easterners and other marginalized groups. Nigeria accepts wholeheartedly the change mantra of current administration and allow the country move on the path to greatness where every citizen has a sense of belonging. (Unlikely)

¹³ <http://www.thisdaylive.com/articles/biafra-court-grants-nnamdi-kanu-unconditional-bail/228233/>

¹⁴ <http://www.vanguardngr.com/2015/12/breaking-judge-exempts-self-from-hearing-treason-charges-against-nnamdi-kanu>

¹⁵ <http://www.vanguardngr.com/2016/01/kanu-dasuki-nba-sans-differ-with-buhari-sagay/>

¹⁶ <http://www.vanguardngr.com/2015/11/rifts-in-ohanaeze-governors-forum-stall-discussions-on-biafra-agitations/>

¹⁷ <http://allafrica.com/stories/201511231168.html>

¹⁸ www.vanguardngr.com/2015/12/biafra-no-nnamdi-kanu-no-dialogue-with-massob-ipob

¹⁹ <http://www.thisdaylive.com/articles/pro-biafra-protests-any-dialogue-without-kanu-baseless-massob/227621/>

²⁰ <http://saharareporters.com/2015/12/30/saharareporters-obtains-text-nnamdi-kanu%E2%80%99s-statement-containing-apology-president-buhari>

²¹ <http://www.vanguardngr.com/2015/12/biafra-massobipob-to-halt-demonstrations/>

Realistic case scenario

The Federal Government engages the South Eastern Governors, all political appointees from the Igbo extraction and the umbrella Igbo socio-cultural group – Ohaneze, in a discussion concerning the perceived marginalization; agreeing on the government plans for the region and expected milestones under the current administration. The government further issues a note of warning to the States on further agitation. Nnamdi Kanu is released on conditions that will be difficult for him and his group to carry on with the protest. A court order banning further protests and all the channels for airing the agitations is issued. The agitation lacks leadership and coherence and fades out gradually. The agitation is made unpopular due to lack of external support and continued mobilization of funds and key stakeholders interest; any attempt to further raise voices and agitation is subdued and treated as terrorism and felony. *(Likely)*.

Worst-Case Scenario

Nigeria government commence accelerated trial of Nnamdi Kanu and other accused persons who are still in DSS custody. Kanu is convicted of treason and treasonable felony and sentenced. The judgement triggers large scale protest in Nigeria especially in the South East and by Igbos in the diaphora. Socio-economic activities are negatively impacted by the spiraling violence; attacks by the protesters are recorded outside the South East zone, a state of emergency is declared by the Federal government in the south east region. *(Less likely)*

The Federal Government obtains a court order restraining all forms of secessionist agitation; declares MASSOB, IPOB and BZM illegal and with

terrorist tendencies; continued protests by the groups is met with stiff resistance and military onslaught, leading to several casualties. Human Right groups call for restrain and probe, which the Government ignores; continued military onslaught is sustained and attracts the voices of the Igbos in diaspora who calls for intervention of International Criminal Court (ICC) *(Less likely)*

polity

● The Federal government should make available and public its development plan – detailing how it intends to ensure inclusivity and fairness of all the regions of Nigeria to the general public

● A comprehensive system for ensuring ventilation of anger and seeking of redress other the court system should be explored by government. The Institute for Peace and Conflict Resolution may be empowered to perform such role that allows for period stakeholder consultations.

South East State Governments:

● The State governments should engage the different secessionist groups in a frank dialogue; assuring them of the avenues to address their grievances with the Nigerian state.

● There is need to develop mechanisms for regular engagement between the youths and the state governors in the east. This will create the opportunity to address the on-going propaganda, radicalisation with effective counter-messaging targeted at dousing the tension/anxiety over the secession of the zone from Nigeria.

● The issue of youth unemployment and proliferation of small arms in Nigeria should be addressed as a means of preventing youths' participation in violence.

5.0 OPTIONS FOR RESPONSE/RECOMMENDATION**Federal Government**

● Government can empower the National Peace Committee that facilitated the peace processes during the 2015 election to engage the leadership of the Igbos and the state government in a dialogue process towards the resolution of the issues

● The Federal government should review the recommendations of the last national conference especially areas relating to “true federalism” and see to its implementations

● The Federal government should pursue a political rather than legal resolution of the issues Nnamdi Kanu is accused of. The Government could consider making him an ally in addressing the Igbo agitation and avoid further destabilisation of the

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