

RENEWED BIAFRAN AGITATION FOR SELF-GOVERNMENT: AN OVERVIEW

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Abstract

The threat of secession by a section of Nigeria did not just start with the Biafran agitation for self-government, at a point, the Action Group (AG) sort to leave the entity called Nigeria because of “perceived” marginalization. Biafra held Nigeria to a thirty month long civil war in order to actualize its desire for self-government, the indivisibility and non-negotiability of the Nigerian entity and the right of people for self-determination met at a conflicting juncture. In line with the above, this paper attempts to examine the Renewed Biafran Agitation for Self-Government with a view to identifying their flaws. The paper also attempted a comparative analysis between the strategy employed by states that have achieved self-government and the Biafran strategy. Hence, the study leveraged on extant qualitative literature and made use of content analysis to arrive at a conclusion. Therefore, the paper reveals that the renewed Biafran agitation for self-government was as a result of perceived marginalization of those occupying the Biafran area of Nigeria, in the light of above, the paper recommend that tolerance..., sincerity of purpose, avoidance of the repeat of history and advocated for following due international and national procedure to secession and Nigerian federal government thinking inwards in terms of Nigeria’s current federal arrangement and return the country to practicing “true” federalism or better still return to the derivation policy as against the present system of revenue allocation formula.

Keywords: Nigeria, Biafra, International Law, Secession

INTRODUCTION

Madiebo, (1980) in Olude, (2011) observed that “on the seed of destruction the federation of Nigeria has never really been one homogeneous country due to the divergence of the people in terms of culture, ethnicity, religion, historical and political antecedent”. Although research has been conducted on the legality of secession as a means of self-determination, the identification of causes and problems which lead to calls for secession in the African political context has since South Sudan’s successful secession renewed interest in this topic. Aggrieved peoples in *inter alia* Eritrea, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Namibia, Angola, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Zambia and Somalia have since the post-colonial era expressed calls for secession. The Republic of Eritrea initiated the first successful secession in Africa after the decolonization of the continent when it gained independence from the Republic of Ethiopia on 24 May 1993 (Dersso, 2012 in Nicholson, 2013). In Nigeria, those occupying the South Eastern part of the country attempted to secede from the entity called Nigeria in 1967 and engaged the federal forces in a bloody civil war that lasted for over 30 months and saw the destruction of more than 2 million lives and property worth billions naira (Akindele, 1996).

The threat of secession by a section of Nigeria did not just start with the Biafran agitation for self-government, at a point, the Action Group (AG) sort to leave the entity called Nigeria because of “perceived” marginalization. Biafra held Nigeria to a thirty month long civil war in order to actualize its desire for self-government, the indivisibility and non-negotiability of the Nigerian entity and the right of people for self-determination met at a conflicting juncture (Njoku, 2010). It is important to note at this juncture that, the world continues to grow in all spheres, in fact, some nations of the world are making deliberate attempts at expanding their territories and becoming bigger as with the elaborate and ambitious plan by the European Union (EU), why are some trying to get smaller? Scotland held a referendum to leave the United Kingdoms but voted NO to remain with the UK while others like Eritrea and South Sudan that succeeded were thrown into chaos as quickly as they had the opportunity to govern themselves.

This paper attempts to discuss the renewed agitation for Biafra by the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra

(MASSOB) and the Indigenous People of Biafra(IPOB) and possess the question what are they not doing right? Is the method adopted by both groups sufficient enough to crown Biafran self-determination? Or are there other legal means that should have been employed by the agitators to crown their efforts? Are the reasons advanced for Biafran secession cogent enough to warrant secession in line with international laws?

The Origin of the Nigerian Union

The political crises that engulfed the country in the early and mid-1960s could be traced back to the amalgamation of 1914. The country was artificially created by the British colonial power without the consent of the people being herded together. Over 250 ethnic groups were arbitrarily fused together into an unwieldy and non-consensual union by the United Kingdom. Nigeria was so ethnically, religiously and linguistically complex that even some of its leading politicians initially doubted if it could constitute a real country”. In fact Sir AbubakarTafawaBalewa Nigeria’s first prime minister once stated that: “Nigeria existed as one country only on paper. It is still far from being united. Nigerian unity is only a British intention for the country”. In a similar statement Obafemi Awolowo was quoted to have said that: “Nigeria is not a nation, it is a mere geographic expression.... on top of all this, the country is made up of a large number of small, un-integrated tribal and clannish units who live in political isolation from one another.... but they are divided into a number of tribes and clans, each of which claims and strives to be independent of the other” (Audu, Uzoma, Baba Isaac, 2013).

Corroborating the above, Atofarati, (1992) observed that “The Federation of Nigeria, as it is known today, has never really been one homogeneous country, for its widely differing peoples and tribes. This obvious fact notwithstanding, the former colonial master decided to keep the country one in order to effectively control her vital resources for their economic interests. Thus, for administrative convenience the Northern and Southern Nigeria were amalgamated in 1914... This alone was an insufficient basis for true unity... There was division, hatred, unhealthy rivalry, and pronounced disparity in development. The growth of nationalism in the society and the subsequent emergence of political parties were based on ethnic/tribal rather than national interests, and therefore had no unifying

effect on the peoples... Soon afterwards the battle to consolidate the legacy of political and military dominance of a section of Nigeria over the rest of the Federation began with increased intensity. It is this struggle that eventually degenerated into coup, counter coup and a bloody civil war". It is true that Nigeria was created out of the "big three" ethnic nationalities in the region, the Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba, what Egwemi (2016) describes as the "unholy trinity" and for what many "apologist" scholars have termed "administrative convenience" of the colonizers. So officially, in 1914, the northern and southern protectorates of Nigeria were amalgamated to form what is today called Nigeria, it is the reason, there is always call for secession from major ethnic groups most especially the "big three" whenever they perceive "marginalization".

The Nigerian Civil War (1967-1970)

The history of Nigeria since 1914 is deeply rooted in major political issues which are violently contested along the lines of ethnic, religious and regional boundaries in the country. Webster, Boahen and Tidy (1979) in Tope, (2011) noted that Nigeria inherited a constitution from the British government which gave absolute majority to one region thereby promoting regional politics and political division in the country. Thus the events that led to the Nigerian Civil War (1967-1970) cannot be separated from ethnic and religious distrust between the three major groups: Yoruba, Igbo and Hausa/Fulani. Sudan for instance has been politically unstable for most of its post-independence period as it suffered Africa's longest civil war. The country was 'made in error' because its colonizers attempted to amalgamate alienated groups of nations with little if anything in common. The South did not identify with the Arab led Sudanese society (Daoud2012). Nigeria was also involved in a marriage of the northern and southern protectorates in 1914 not minding lingua, ethnic or religions differences. Meturare, (2009) observed that "Deep rooted ethnic grievances and rivalry among the major Nigerian ethnic groups had accompanied the politics of decolonization, culminating in the first attempt at Igbo ethno-nationalism expressed in the declaration of the Biafran Republic in 1967. This attempt at secession was crushed by the Nigerian state after a cruel three year war that resulted in the loss of over one million lives and displacement of many others in eastern Nigeria.

On January 15, 1966 a small group of army officers, mostly Southeastern Igbos, attempted to overthrow the government of the first Republic and succeeded in assassinating the Federal Prime Minister and the premiers of the Western and Northern regions. The Federal military government headed by Aguiyi Ironsi, a Southerner who high jacked the coup and assumed power was unable to calm down ethnic tensions or produce a constitution acceptable to all sections of the country and the promulgation of Decree No. 34, returning Nigeria to a Unitary state and eliminating its federal status and the indecision of the Aguiyi government to execute the coup plotters who were mostly from the eastern region of the country greatly increased tensions and led to another coup in July, 1966. The coup related massacre of thousands of Igbo in the north prompted hundreds of thousands of them to return to the Southeast where increasingly strong Igbo secessionist emerged (Tope, 2011).

The northern pogrom stimulated the commencement of the Nigerian civil war. Achebe (2012) recounts that, six months later, I watched horrified as Northern officers carried out a revenge coup in which they killed Igbo officers and men in large numbers. If this had ended there, the matter might have been seen as a very tragic interlude in nation building, a horrendous tit for tat. But the Northerners turned on Igbo civilians in the North and unleashed waves of brutal massacres that Colin Legum of the Observer (UK) was the first to describe as a pogrom. Thirty thousand civilian men, women and children were slaughtered, hundreds of thousands were wounded, maimed, and violated, their homes and property looted and burned... and no one asked any question (Achebe, 2012). If this short narrative by Achebe is anything to go by, it gives an insight into what might have prompted the military and political elites of the East to demand secession and declare Biafra an independent state. Was the retaliation necessary after the northern officers had orchestrated a counter coup and had killed major Igbo military leaders and had taken over government? Why the massacre of innocent civilian most especially women and children and the looting of property belonging to Easterners in the North? These incidences led to what is referred to as the Nigerian civil war otherwise called the Biafran war that enveloped Nigeria for over 30 months and terribly retarded economic and infrastructural development of the country while it lasted.

The Resurgence of Biafra:

After over forty years to the end of the Nigerian civil war, otherwise called the Biafran war that lasted for over 30 months and stole away the lives of over 2million people and property worth billions of naira on both sides, a renewed agitation for an independent state of Biafra has resurfaced with a vibrant vigour and intensity like never since the 1960s. This has been indicated by the activities of the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) which came into existence on September 13, 1999 to actualize the Republic of Biafra and the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) which embarked on the project of the restoration of the Biafra Republic before the beginning of 2015. According to those championing the movement, the renewed effort started last year, when it was clear that the Raph Uwazuruike-led Movement for the Actualization of Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB), which has been agitating for the actualization of the Biafra Republic for more than a decade has been compromised by the Nigerian government and politicians after his incarceration (nd).

According to Meturare, (2009) “Deep rooted ethnic grievances and rivalry among the major Nigerian ethnic groups had accompanied the politics of decolonization, culminating in the first attempt at Igbo ethno-nationalism expressed in the declaration of the Biafran Republic in 1967. This attempt at secession was crushed by the Nigerian state after a cruel three year war that resulted in the loss of over one million lives and displacement of many others in eastern Nigeria The end of the war was followed by deliberate social, political and economic policies aimed at reducing the capacity of the Igbo people to challenge the state or the dominance of the victorious groups.” (Meturare, 2009).

The above statement gives an insight into how the easterners perceive the on-goings in the country, and bounced back with renewed vigour since the ascendancy of the Muhammadu Bahari APC led government owing to his “one-sided” appointments and the continued and unlawful detention of the “new face of Biafra” the leader of the indigenous people of Biafra (IPOB) Nnamdi Kanu. The Indigenous people of Biafra (IPOB) adopted some strategies to push home their points like the establishment and airing of

Radio Biafra and some pockets of demonstrations mostly in the eastern part of the country, unlike the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign state of Biafra (MASSOB) that adopted peaceful approach towards actualizing its aims, IPOB approach is more radical in orientation and seeks to use the fire brand to achieve its aims.

International Law and Secession

The legal concept of self-determination is comprised of two distinct subsidiary parts. The default rule is “internal self-determination,” which is essentially the protection of minority rights within a state. As long as a state provides a minority group the ability to speak their language, practice their culture in a meaningful way, and effectively participate in the political community, then that group is said to have internal self-determination. Secession, or “external self-determination,” is generally disfavored.... Although issues of secession rarely receive formal adjudication, state practice, court opinions, and other authoritative writings, point the way to categorizing what are the “extreme cases” and “carefully defined circumstances” under which the privilege of secession exists. Any attempt to claim legal secession that is, where secession trumps territorial integrity must at least show that:

Secessionists are a “people” (in the ethnographic sense); the state from which they are seceding seriously violates their human rights; and there are no other effective remedies under either domestic law or international law (Borgen, 2008).

This paper will attempt to answer the following questions within the context of the Biafran agitation for self-determination.

a) **Are the Biafrans a “people?”**

According to the Canadian Supreme Court (1998) in Borgen (2008) the meaning of ‘people is “somewhat uncertain.” At various points in international legal history, the term “people” has been used to signify citizens of a nation-state, the inhabitants in a specific territory being decolonized by a foreign power, or an ethnic group....

Of course one will argue that the Igbo are a people in many regards, having inhabited the eastern part of Nigeria for many centuries way before the colonizers arrived, they have the same ancestral origin, speak the same

language to some extent, enjoy similar culture and customs and share similar traditions and belief system. To this end, those occupying the “Biafran area” of Nigeria are a people satisfying the first condition according to international law prescribed as a condition for seeking self-determination.

b) Are there/were there serious human rights violations?

Many Biafrans will argue that there were serious human rights abuses prior to the Nigerian civil war and during the war; they will point fingers to the number of thousands of hungry and malnourished children who were scattered everywhere while the war lasted. They argue that the deliberate attempt by the then Nigerian government to halt food supplies into the region arguing that she cannot feed someone who’s fighting her, they point fingers to the pogrom that happened in the north that got many easterners fleeing back to the east prior to the civil war among others as grave human rights abuses perpetrated by the Nigerian government and people or by a section of the country against another. It is worthy of note that to jettison these claims is to do great injustices to the Biafran side, instructively, the Biafran side should also remember that for 30 months, they engaged their former country in a bloody civil war that cost the lives of those they once referred to as brother, they decided to jettison the union of the country they once called home, they should remember that after they had surrendered to the federal forces, the Nigerian federal government declared a “no Victor, No vanquish slogan to help cushion the reconciliation process. In relation to the above question presently, there are no human rights abuses meted out on Biafra as an ethnic group to cause injury or inflict deliberate pain within the context of what human rights abuses mean.

c) Is secession the only solution?

In attempting to answer this question, many will argue that secession is not the only solution, the question to ask is, why are the Biafran adamant about self-determination and why has the movement for its actualization resumed with vigour and intensity? One of the strongest reasons advanced by many Biafran enthusiast for the resurgence of Biafra by both MASSOB and IPOB is that of marginalization, that even after the war and over forty years later, the Igbo and indeed the easterners have not been fully reintegrated back into the Nigerian society. They argue that some ethnic groups have created a deliberate stumbling block not to allow any Igbo man or woman aspire to the highest office in the land and have been treated like “third class” citizens in their own country, they argue that they have been marginalized in terms of state and local government creation, federal character, appointments into juicy offices in the land among others? They argue that the new APC led

government has clearly shown its lack of acceptability of the Igbo and as such seek to secede from the entity called Nigeria. Be that as it may, these reasons as genuine as they are, are not sufficient enough to call for the disintegration of a country, these reasons if articulated well could be resolved without necessarily resulting to the talk about secession. The basic framework provided by international law permits or allows the arguments for and against secession. This is the ultimate “tough case.” In the interest of systemic stability, international law has a bias against secession. However, if we take as a given that secession is not absolutely prohibited by international law, then the case of Biafra presents a set of facts that may not be too persuasive to pursue (Borgen, 2008).

Comparative Analysis

The first country on the African continent to successfully bargain and achieve its mission of self-determination was Eritrea when she successfully seceded from Ethiopia after many years of struggle in 1993. South Sudan have also achieved this feat when she was able to garner international support and recognition and held a referendum to the effect of self-determination with the people of Southern Sudan voting overwhelmingly in the affirmative. On the other hand, British and Scottish government held a referendum on September 18th 2014 with the question: “Should Scotland be an independent country? While the Catalan Government did the same on November 9th 2014 to ask the questions: “Do you want Catalonia to become a state?” and if your answer is yes, “Do you want it to become an independent state? (Castellà, 2014). Others include Quebec that has over many decades sort independence from the Canadian republic, Quebec’s first attempted through a referendum was in 1980 and secondly, in 1995 both attempts at self-determination were unsuccessful. The question to ask with these attempts alongside that of Scotland and Catalonia is what did the parent countries do right, what bargaining methods did they employ, what did they sell to the people to want to make them remain and maintain the union.

Linteau (2006) observed that confederation opened the way to a permanent settlement of a political problem that Canada had faced for decades. He went further to buttress the above by saying; confederation confirmed French Canadians as minority but gave them in addition to bilingualism in federal institution, provincial status for their heartland. They were in full control of their own cultural and social development (Linteau, 2006). It is not a debatable fact that Quebec is to Canada what Biafra is to Nigeria, having attempted secession that led to a bloody civil war that lasted for over 30 months and the continued agitation for independence as seeing with the

resurgence of Biafra many decades later. Scotland for instance remained with the UK for several reasons including the argument that the UK was better off together, fear, maintaining the status quo, keeping the prestige and pride of the UK, more power devolution from Westminster among others (Reuters, 2014). The important point to note here, like Quebec is the subject of more devolution of power to the Scottish parliament in the areas of taxes, spending and welfare of the Scottish people. It is instructive to note as a matter of importance for Biafra to take queue and learn from the experience of the French speaking Canadians, Catalonia and Scotland, who have successfully conducted civil campaigns for secession and held referendums to that effect to allow the mass of the people occupying the said regions answer a simple question of Yes or No.

Back home, South Sudan was also able to conduct themselves and held a referendum that produced the Republic of Southern Sudan, all these should serve as lessons to the Biafrans and the Nigerian federal government as regards the agitation for the sovereign state of Biafra. Both sides must learn to look for alternative and sustainable solutions to this age long problem, the Nigerian federal government must trend with caution while discussing the issue of the “indivisibility of Nigeria” putting in mind the “right of people to seek self-determination” within the context of the Nigerian and international laws.

Flaws of Biafrans

Engaged Campaigns

One very vital perimeter that must be employed by those agitating or any group seeking self-determination is objective, purposeful; and engaged campaigns to drive home their points. They must learn to engage the people they claim they are seeking secession for to allow the people buy into the idea of why it is important they need to go and what they stand to gain when they do. They must engage in debates with the parent states as seeing with Scottish separatist and garner support from those who averagely will not support their course, while not ruling out the importance of media both social and conventional, it is important that its operation must be done within the ambit of the law and shouldn't be used as an instrument to cause injury and wage war of words with any individual or group, it shouldn't be used to hype, mentally masturbate or brain wash its target audience, violence doesn't solve problems permanently the more reason for better alternatives to do so without necessarily engaging in any physical means. Radio Biafra should have been used to champion Pro-Biafran campaigns instead of using it to vent insults on Nigeria and Nigerians.

Peaceful Protest

Peaceful protest, Peaceful sensitization walks and peaceful demonstrations without resulting to any form of violence is another take home for the Pro Biafran movement. They must learn to coordinate and compute themselves in such a way as to show strong commitment and organization and avoid engaging on physical terms with the instrument of state coercion. The Nigerian federal government must also as a matter of importance avoid using the instrument of state coercion to inflict injury when people are engaged in lawful civil disobedience to drive a point. These are some of the indices of development that Africa countries must emulate from their counterparts across border.

Clear Case

Those agitating for the independence of Biafra must as a matter of importance articulate and present a clear case of marginalization in the areas of state creation, federal character, distribution of resource and resource control, appointments into juicy offices in the land and so forth. They must be able to present these scenarios in such a way as to convince anyone that indeed they have been neglected and have truly been treated like “third class” citizens in their own country by doing so, they will garner both local and international support.

International Support

For any group seeking self-determination and wanting to become an independent state as a matter of importance must seek the support of the international community, these they cannot do when their case isn't articulated and those seeking same are not well coordinated. Southern Sudanese were able to present a clear case of maltreatment from their parent country and they had an overwhelming support from the international community that led to its admittance and recognition by the United Nations and other nations of the world as a state. It is indeed worthy of note that those seeking the independence of Biafra from Nigeria must emulate those who had followed this path and have succeeded.

Referendum

All the above listed strategies will lead the Biafran agitators to the final point of a referendum, having meaningfully engaged their people and have been able to garner international support, the Biafrans must convince their people to vote Yes when it comes down to the ballot. Scotland, Catalonia and Quebec have over the years reached this peak but have failed to secure independence. This will truly show whether or not the struggle for self-determination is elitist or masses pulled. The Nigerian federal government must also be willing to explore alternative conflict resolution strategies, they must not meet brute with brute as that has over the years shown that it is not sustainable, the unity of Nigeria is important but so is the right of people to

seek self-determination within international and national laws when they perceive marginalization or hostility within their present country.

Conclusion

Whenever there is an agitation for self-determination, the elites almost always come out smiling to the banks, the elites are those who become profiteers in the reconciliation process, the elites are those who almost always come out unharmed, their families and property saved or recovered and of course, the elites are those who are reintegrated “fully” back into such societies.

It is important to note, that the Igbo’s and indeed those occupying the “Biafran areas” of this country have every right to demand and protest when they perceive they are being marginalized. But we must learn to accept this “unholy marriage” and strive to make the country better for all, seeking secession isn’t a sustainable solution because as new states are created, a new minority and majority groups are created, returning the status quo. The elites and those championing Biafra should be mindful of how they use their people to orchestrate personal ventures, it is true as many have agreed that the Biafran war would have ended prior to the time it did, if only the principal actors in the war were ready to compromise and shift grounds. That should not be allowed to repeat itself between the federal government of Nigeria and Nnamdi Kanu. The people on the other hand, should be wary and refused to be used as ready army or lumping proletariats to perpetrate crimes and become actors in conflicts.

One of the strongest reasons advanced for the resurgence of Biafra by both MASSOB and IPOB is that of marginalization, that even after the war and over forty years later, the Igbo and indeed the easterners have not been fully reintegrated back into the Nigerian society. They argue that some ethnic groups have created a deliberate stumbling stone not to allow any Igbo man or woman aspire for the highest office in the land and have been treated like “third class” citizens in their own country, they argue that they have been marginalized in terms of state and local government creation, federal character, appointments into juicy offices in the land among others? They argue that the new APC led government has clearly shown its lack of acceptability of the Igbo and as such seek to secede from the entity called Nigeria. The real question to ask in order not to be led astray is whether or not these claims are real, how many states comprises the South-Eastern

region in relation to its population, what is the budgetary allocation to these state in relation to that of other states in other geo-political zones. We should take queue from history, for over thirty months during the civil war on both sides, lives were lost and properties were destroyed, prosecuting a “war of egos” because some elements refused to compromise even at disadvantage. Such scenarios shouldn’t be allowed to repeat as the casualties are always the common people. MASSOB, IPOB and the Nigerian government must as a matter of importance put the interest of the people they claim to fight for forward and allow the “love” for the people dictate for them rather than personal and egoistic interest.

The continued and “unlawful” detention by the federal government of the leader of IPOB shouldn’t be allowed to bluster sympathy for the Biafran course, we must learn to tolerate one another, we must learn to explore sustainable alternatives to conflict resolution, the Biafrans must learn that seeking secession isn’t a sustainable solution to their problem. Quebec have resulted to the ballot on two occasions in 1980 and 1995, Scotland and Catalonia did same between September and November 2014, as observed in the paper, increased power devolution to these regions, in the case of Nigeria states is the most sustainable solution to the problem. The Nigerian federal government should begin to think inwards in terms of Nigeria’s “quasi” federal structure and return to practicing “true” federalism or better still return to the derivation policy as against the present system of revenue allocation. We must never allow the history of 1967 to repeat itself. Suffice to say, there MUST be no more war, the government must do the needful in order to avoid the repeat of history.

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