
Separatist Agitations in Nigeria: Historical Background, Problems and Remedies

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Abstract

Recent literature on Nigerian history and politics is replete with accounts of separatist agitations. Such separatist activisms are blamed on factors ranging from ethnicity, insecurity, poor economy, religious violence to political marginalization. This article is an attempt to re-examine the separatist agitations in Nigeria and proffer solutions that will bring peace and stability to the fledging polity. The findings of the study reveal that Nigerian government's insensitivity and inability to provide inclusive and effective leadership is responsible for the recurring separatist agitations in Nigeria. The study concludes by recommending among other things the devolution of power from the central government to the constituent states so as to reduce the excessive concentration of power and responsibilities on the central government. Again, the Nigerian leadership should also embark on a reorientation campaign that will create among the citizenry the culture of

patriotism and responsible leadership as well as transparency in governance.

Keywords: *Nigeria, Separatist agitations, ethnicity, colonial rule, failed leadership*

1. Introduction

There has been an increasing rate of enthusiasm in ethnic groups' advocacy for the right to secede from the Nigerian federation. This may not be surprising to keen observers of Nigeria's political development, given the religious and cultural diversity of its peoples, the disparities in demography, natural resource endowment, social and economic development as well as the distribution of political power in the national government. Whether or not ethnic groups have the right to secede remains a continuous debate among scholars. According to Horowitz (2003, 50) "the newly asserted right to secede is to be held by ethnic groups and is derived from a reinterpretation of the principle of self-determination by nations." The diversities that exist in Nigeria have created and continued to sustain mutual mistrust, acrimony and fear of ethnic domination between the majority and minority ethnic groups in Nigeria (Adangor, 2017).

The aim of this paper is to assess and critically examine the growing separatist agitations in Nigeria by analyzing the history and causes of separatist agitations in Nigeria. The paper will also look at the different theories of separatism and proffer solutions to this malignant tumor that has eaten deep into the political life of Nigeria. The paper is structured into sections: a brief colonial foundation of the disunity in Nigeria, conceptual and theoretical explanations to the recurring separatist agitations in Nigeria, a brief discussion on the separatist groups, consequences of the agitations and government's response to the agitation movements, as well as recommendations and conclusion. Although separatism typically

includes demands for autonomy and federalism while secessionism is limited to the demand for independent statehood, both concepts use the same theoretical frameworks. This paper interchangeably uses the two concepts since many separatist agitators also demand independence from the Nigerian State.

2. A Brief Historical Sketch of the colonial foundation of Disunity in Nigeria

The mistrust and rivalries among Nigeria's disparate ethnic groups did not start today and the British colonial officers in Nigeria were aware of the issues. Oliver Lyttelton (1962), who served as the Secretary of State for Colonies once lamented that, "the only cement which kept the rickety structure of Nigeria together was the British ... left to themselves (Nigerians) they would clearly fall apart in a few months". On his own part, Lord Milverton, former colonial governor in Nigeria asserted: "it is only the accident of British suzerainty which has made Nigeria one country" (Milverton, 1948).

Statements credited to some Nigerian nationalists corroborate the differences in the historical and social developments of the peoples that make up Nigeria and the fact that Nigeria's political leaders have not patriotically identified with the colonial project called Nigeria. For example, Awolowo (1947) stated that Nigeria is not a nation; "it is a mere geographical expression" to which life was given by the "diabolical" amalgamation of 1914. Awolowo, who was one of the founders of Nigerian nationalism, strongly believed that Nigeria is composed not only of ethnic groups but of several great nations, each with its history, language and culture. During a legislative debate in Lagos in 1947, Mallam Abubakar Tafawa Balewa (later prime minister) remarked, "Since the amalgamation of the Southern and Northern provinces in 1914, Nigeria has existed as one country only on paper. It is still far from being united... I should like to make it clear to you that if the British quitted Nigeria now at this stage the Northern people would

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continue their interrupted conquest” (Balewa,1947). There is no doubt that the amalgamation of the Northern and Southern Protectorates was done for administrative convenience and economic reasons rather than for any nationalist motive because, the North and the South remained under separate administrations after the amalgamation. And for over three decades, there was little or no attempt by the colonial authorities to achieve practical unification of the North and South, which historically had had different forms of cultural influence – the Arab and European. Leaders of the more conservative North seemed to have been more doubtful and mistrustful of the unity of Nigeria and were inclined to think in terms of partition. It was after the visit of Balewa to the United States in 1960 as a prime minister of independent Nigeria that he became convinced that Nigerians could build a united nation of people of diverse cultural, ethnic, religious and geographic backgrounds, (Palmer, 1968).

The premier of Northern Nigeria and Sardauna of Sokoto, Ahmadu Bello, made a striking statement on the failure of the colonial authorities and Nigerian leaders to build a united Nigeria. He noted:

“It is true that we politicians always delight in talking loosely about the unity of Nigeria. Sixty years ago, there was no country called Nigeria. What is now Nigeria consisted of a number of large and small communities all of which were different in their outlooks and beliefs. The advent of the British and of the Western education has not materially altered the situation and these many and varied communities have not knit themselves into a composite unit... In 1914, the North and South were amalgamated though the administration of the two sections was distinctly different. Since then no serious attempt has been made by the British or by the people themselves to come together and each section has looked upon the other with suspicion” Bello (1962, 134).

NnamdiAzikiwe, a foremost nationalist was almost caught in the web of ethnic sentiment. At a meeting of the Igbo State Union in 1949, he made a remark that generated reactions from other ethnic groups. He stated: “It would appear that the God of Africa has specially created the Ibo (Igbo) nation to lead the children of Africa from the bondage of the ages” (Schwarz, 1969). The ethnic content of Azikiwe’s speech inspired ObafemiAwolowo to found EgbeOmoOduduwa (the society of the sons of Oduduwa), a Yoruba socio-cultural organization whose political wing emerged as Action Group. The notion of ethnicity among the national leaders largely laid the foundation of ethnic politics in Nigeria.

The amalgamation of the Northern and Southern Protectorates, like an earthquake, altered the history and social development of the ethnic groups that virtually existed as city states and autonomous nations. It bore no relations with the historical and socio-cultural backgrounds of the peoples concerned. Hence, there are no “Nigerians” in the same sense as there are “English”, “Welsh” or “French”. The word “Nigerian” is merely a distinctive appellation to distinguish those who live within the colonial boundaries of Nigeria and those who do not. As Palmer (1968), the first American Ambassador to Nigeria rightly noted, the colonial boundaries were not designed in Africa by Africans for African reasons. They were in fact, delineated in Europe by Europeans for European reasons – commercial, strategic and prestige. In other words, the colonial authorities failed to take cognizance of the ethnic, religious, historical and economic considerations that would have produced a rational and stable political unit. Although the colonial boundaries were arbitrarily designed and imposed with their unfortunate effects, African leaders had to accept them in order to facilitate the attainment of political independence, (Panter-Brick, 1968, 255).

The prevalence of ethnicity and separatist agitations in Nigeria today is traceable to the colonial formation of Nigeria. Arthur Richards changed the political landscape of colonial Nigeria when,

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as the governor-general, he introduced a constitution that created a structurally weak federation that alienated the minorities and ignited the flames of ethnic politics and jingoism. Thus, all the provinces and peoples of Nigeria were divided into three regions that represented the three major ethnic groups – the Hausa-Fulani of the North, the Yoruba of the West and the Igbo of the East and ignored ethnic minorities such as Edos, Urhobos, Efiks, Ibibios, Ekois, Nupes, Tivs, Igalas, Ijaws and Kanuris. The Richards constitutions also preserved the Northern Region to the extent that it was in a position to dominate the other two regions. Arthur Richards' successor, John Macpherson, worked within the structure bequeathed to him. The regionalization of national wealth and the inter-ethnic struggle for political power which these two men introduced in their constitutions of 1946 and 1951 respectively injected and consolidated ethnicity in Nigerian politics (Olusanya, 1974). Imoagene (1975) also blamed Richards and Macpherson when he observed that:

The ethnic consciousness which this developed affected the recruitment system markedly. It changed the policy of 'Nigerianization' to one of 'indigenization'. It was no longer sufficient to be a Nigerian to get a job in this or that part of the country; one has also to satisfy such ascriptive requirements as membership in a particular ethnic group. Ethnicity became the principal criteria of recruitment.

There is no doubt that Nigeria is the artificial creation of the British. It is also true that the distinct groups that make up the federation at one time or another, were either making wars with each other or making alliances, on equal term (Adediran, 1985). Nevertheless, multi-ethnicity is not peculiar to Nigeria. Other postcolonial countries in Africa inherited multiethnic groups with historical, cultural and religious diversities. The issue with ethnicity and religious difference in Nigeria is that Nigeria's political leaders have been instrumentising ethnicity and religious differences for

selfish interests. As a consequence, the question of national consciousness and nation-building have remained poorly executed projects if not illusory. Instead of national integration, different ethnic groups emphasize ethnic chauvinism and separatism. Two recent cases seem to suggest that Nigeria is still as divided as it was 60 years ago. The May 30, 2017 “sit at home” order issued to all Igbos by the leadership of the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) to honour the Igbo who were murdered during the Nigeria/Biafra War, 1967-1970, witnessed a high level of success in many parts of South-Eastern Nigeria. This strongly suggests that while the Igbo may have been defeated during the Nigeria/Biafra War, the Biafra spirit is still alive (Mamah, 2017).

In response to the “sit at home order” issued by IPOB leadership, a group of northern youths under the aegis of the Coalition of Arewa Youths issued what they called “The Kaduna Declaration” in June 6, 2017. The declaration gave the Igbo resident in Northern Nigeria until October 1, 2017 to leave the 19 northern states. The Northern youths also stated that an inventory of assets owned by Igbos in the North would be taken at the expiration of the ultimatum. The so-called Kaduna Declaration further heightened the tensions and the social distance among Nigerians. Although there is no known research on the economic impact of these tensions and separatist agitations, it is speculated that they may be having a dampening effect on commerce (Adibe, 2017). There have also been unnecessary population movements from the North to the south and *vice versa* due to fears. Ibeanu, Orji and Iwuamadi (2016) argue that the separatist agitations have created “push separatism” and “pull separatism” both of which are responsible for low national integration of the Nigerian peoples. They describe “push separatism” as a feeling of not being wanted while “pull separatism” is associated with a feeling of being different. In other words, the actions of the Arewa Youths constitute a serious push factor against the Igbo of Southeastern Nigeria.

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In fact, no zone or region in Nigeria is free from separatist agitations but two are threatening the foundations of Nigeria: the Boko Haram activities in the northern Nigeria which aims to make northern Nigeria an Islamic State and the Biafranstate agitators in the South-eastern Nigeria whose aim is to secede from Nigeria. In Western Nigeria, the echoes of separatism according to Adibe (2017) come in difference forms – from a direct call for Oduduwa Republic to those championing a Sovereign National Conference to decide if the federating units of the country still want to continue to live together, and, if so, under what arrangements?

In the Niger Delta, apart from the demand for Niger Delta Republic, shades of separatism are embedded in the demand for “resource control” by regional activists. In essence, there is a fairly generalized feeling of alienation and dissatisfaction among the various constituents of the Nigerian federation, a situation that has also deepened mistrust and incentivized separatist agitations. However, because there has never been a referendum in any of the areas agitating for separation, it is difficult to know whether the leaders of the various separatist groups actually reflect the wishes of the people of those areas or whether the agitations are mere masks for pursuing other agenda (Adibe, 2017). But it is generally believed that bad governance, corruption, persistent economic hardship and rising inequality are some of the variables that fuel separatist agitations across the country.

3. Conceptual Explanations of Separatist Agitations in Nigeria

The term “separatism” may be used to connote different things ranging from a demand by a unit of the federation for greater regional autonomy or loosening of political control by the centre to outright secession of a federating unit by way of declaring its own political independence (Adangor, 2017). Separatism according to Gammer (2014) is the advocacy or practice of separation of a

(certain) group of people from a larger body on the basis of ethnicity, religion, or gender. It is nowadays limited mainly to ethnic/national groups aiming at independence. As such, the term “separatists” is practically synonymous with “secessionists”, but by far simpler to use, write and pronounced. Also, in some cases, “separatism” is interconnected with “irredentism”, which is defined as nationalist agitation in other countries, based on historical, ethnic, and geographical reasons, for incorporation of territories under foreign rule.

In his own contribution, Wright (1976) observes that separatism is the desire of some articulate portion of the population in a section (usually a province) of a sovereign state to loosen or break the political and legal bonds which tie the part to the whole. According to Wright, if only loosening is the aim, it is called autonomy; if secession of a province or of a member of a federation is in view, there may be further goals of either independence or union with some other, usually adjacent sovereign state. However, the term “separatism” according to Adangor (2017) is generally used in its narrow sense to denote agitation by distinct political unit within a polity for enhanced decentralization of authority by the central government so as to guarantee the sub-national unit’s greater autonomy in specified activities. In this sense, separatism and secession are not coterminous although both represent varying forms of political instability or disintegration, resulting in the breakup of the polity. Separatism includes autonomism and secessionism. What is and is not considered an autonomist or secessionist movement is sometimes contentious.

The history of separatist movements in Nigeria clearly shows that the objectives usually oscillate between the struggle for greater regional autonomy and outright threat of secession. Tamuno (1970) argued that the belief in the legitimacy of secession has deep roots in Nigerian political thought. These threats first emerged during the formative years of the federation and have not abated ever since.

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Sometimes, separatist threats have been employed by political leaders of various ethnic groups as a tool of political negotiation to extract favourable concessions from other ethnic groups. For instance, the series of negotiations that took place amongst representatives of various ethnic groups during the constitutional conferences organized by the British colonial office were almost aborted by separatist tendencies exhibited by most of the delegations. The Northern delegation had taken firm and irreversible position during the General Conference on the Review of the 1946 Constitution held at Ibadan in 1950 that unless the North was allotted 50 percent of the seats in the proposed House of Representatives (equal to the representation of Western and Eastern regions combined) in accordance with its preponderant population, it will seek “separation from the rest of Nigeria on the arrangements existing before 1914” (Ezera, 1964).

Ezera goes on to argue that the Southern delegation was initially opposed to this demand until the Legislative Council members from Eastern Region capitulated in order to save the country from disintegration. This decision taken by the Eastern members in the Legislative Council to withdraw their opposition to the demand of the north for parity of representation in the legislature with the two southern provinces saved the country from disintegration.

In 1954, when Action Group (AG), the leading party in the Western Region, demanded the recognition in the Nigerian constitution of the right of secession, Nnamdi Azikiwe led his party – the National Council of Nigeria and Cameroons (NCNC) – to stand in vehement opposition to the proposal. In a statement he released on the issue as leader of the NCNC, Azikiwe justified the rejection of the right of secession on four grounds: (1) secession from a federation is incompatible with federalism, (2) secession from a federation is an illegal act, (3) secession from a federation is an invitation to anarchy, and (4) secession from the Nigerian Federation between now and 1956 would be suicidal (Ibeanu, Orji

and Iwuamadi, 2016). Again, the Yoruba also threatened to opt out of the proposed federation of Nigeria if the decision of the British colonialists to constitute Lagos the Federal Capital Territory of Nigeria was not reversed. This threat was promptly countered by the Colonial Office which treated it as equivalent to a threat of the use of force.

To complete the circle of separatist agitations by Nigeria's three dominant ethnic groups, the Igbo, had, following the 1966 pogrom, agitated for the restructuring of the federation. However, sensing that their call for restructuring of the federation would fail, but determined to terminate the perceived Hausa/Fulani domination, the Igbo made a failed secessionist attempt by declaring the independence of the Republic of Biafra in May, 1967. The federal government's attempt to crush the secession, which it termed rebellion plunged the federation into the thirty-month war, which became the first war of secession fought in the country (Adangor, 2017). However, one of the ironies of Nigerian political history, Nixon (1972) observed, is that it was the Easterners who had given secession the least consideration in the past that eventually put the idea into practice, and have championed it till today.

Perhaps, the most ferocious post 1999 separatist campaign has been launched by two Igbo grass root-based groups, namely the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) and the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB). Both groups according to Adangor (2017) are led by separate leaders, who have constantly campaigned for the declaration of the sovereign "State of Biafra", thus, clearly making them secessionist groups. The central goal of both groups is that the 5 core Igbo States in South-Eastern Nigeria should secede from the Federal Republic of Nigeria and form an independent sovereign state of Biafra. By pursuing this mandate, the groups seek to resurrect the ghost of the Nigeria/Biafra Civil War. The groups have carried out several pro-Biafra rallies in major cities in South-Eastern Nigeria to sensitize

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the Igbo on the Biafra project in addition to running a pro-Biafra radio station. The major grievance of the pro-Biafra agitators is that the Igbos have not been fully re-integrated into the Nigerian State since the end of the Nigeria-Biafra War and that their homeland, South-Eastern Nigeria, has been subjected to perennial neglect and marginalization by the Nigerian State in terms of federal appointments, social infrastructure and economic development.

The North has also recently manifested separatist tendencies. A coalition of Northern Youth Groups, in apparent response to the activities of MASSOB and IPOB recently issued the “Kaduna Declaration” wherein they purportedly gave a “quit notice” to all Igbos currently resident in Northern Nigeria to quit on or before October 1, 2017. The ground of this unprovoked declaration on the Igbo was that northerners were seeking their independence and freedom from the Igbo whom they described as “barbaric, uncultured, criminals and breakers of law”. They further declared that the north was no longer disposed to co-exist with the Igbos and shall take definite steps to end the partnership by pulling out of the current federal arrangement. The Northern Elders Forum (NEF) through a statement issued by its spokesperson, Professor AngoAbdulahi, appeared to have supported the Northern Youths’ quit notice (Premium Times, 2017).

The secessionist threats became aggravated, according to Adangor (2017), when a coalition of youth organizations in southern Nigeria under the aegis of the Southern Nigerian Youths Coalition (SNYC) in apparent response to the isolationist posturing by the Arewa youths called upon the United Nations to conduct a referendum to determine the future of the country. To demonstrate their seriousness, the southern youths warned that “... if any section of the southern part of Nigeria is forcefully excised through the ongoing aggression being perpetuated by the Hausa/Fulani oligarchy, the rest of the country should rest assured that every other constituent part of the southern region will also go their way”.

Apparently jolted by the above fast unfolding dangerous drama, the then Acting President, YemiOsinbajo, held meeting with governors of the 36 States at the end of which the nation was re-assured of the commitment of the federal and state governments to the protection of the sovereignty and indivisibility of the federation. It is uncertain whether this assurance succeeded stemming the nation's drift towards disintegration as various groups in the country continue to clamour for either restructuring or disintegration of the federation.

4. Theoretical Explanations of the Recurring Separatist Agitations in Nigeria

It is not abnormal that some groups in multi-cultural and multi-ethnic states would nurse desires for independence. This is perhaps why Scottish separatism persists in the United Kingdom despite being part of the UK for over 300 years. The same is true in Canada where Quebec separatism has been part of Canadian life since the 1890s. In the United States, some people, especially from the Southern part of the country still fly the confederate flag even though the American civil war was won and lost 150 years ago (Adibe, 2017). Similarly, Nigeria's separatist movements attract a "mixed multitude", some are in it for personal gains; some use it as a bargaining chip while others may be in it for full regional autonomy or secession. There have been many theories put forward by scholars to explain separatism. Some of the relevant theories are considered here:

- i. *Theory of Ethnic Diversity*: This theory claims that ethnic diversity is one of the major reasons why separatist agitations are high amongst the different ethnic groups, who find it difficult to live together under one administration. Ethnic, linguistic and religious heterogeneity is frequently argued to promote separatist agitations and secessions. Government repression of certain cultural groups, even in relatively homogeneous national environments, is also

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believed to encourage them to seek their own political fortunes (Boyle and Englebert, 2006). Scholars of Nigerian politics and history have tended to focus on ethnicity and inter-ethnic competition for federal power to explain why separatist agitations are on the increase and why Biafran agitation can be recurring amongst the Igbo of Southeastern Nigeria. According to Adetula (2015) “many groups in the country have never felt represented by the central power. Local elites play on these emotions for their own personal gain This is how local elites try to create greater political space for themselves”. Similarly, Owen (2016) claims that the recent agitations for Biafra represent “a bid for re-inclusion by political actors excluded from power”. Owen believes that the recent resurgence in Biafra separatism is engineered by the political elite in response to the significant realignment of power at the federal level following the defeat of President Goodluck Jonathan of the People’s Democratic Party (PDP) whom the Southeast offered vast support.

- ii. *Regional Availability of Natural Resources Theory*: This theory states that the demand for separatism is raised when people feel that the union is not investing enough in order to explore the natural resources of the place. Hence, they demand for an independent status in order to look after their natural resources by themselves. Ross (2003) identifies several cases linking oil and other minerals to separatist conflicts and insurgency. Treisman (1997) makes a related argument which stresses the “bargaining power” of regions. If a region is dependent on the centre for its revenues, it has less bargaining power to demand autonomy. If it has its own resources, however, it is more likely to be aggressive about autonomy. A very good example is the ‘oil wars’ in the Niger Delta region, where ethno-nationalist militants and warlords hijack the longstanding grievances and redress-seeking agitations over environmental degradation and resource

injustices. Indeed, after the 2015 general elections that ushered in President MuhamaduBuhari (a northerner) to power, there have been renewed hostilities in the region. A leading group of the new hostilities is the Niger Delta Avenger (NDA), which had been attacking oil installations and even threatened to secede from Nigeria (Olasupo, Oladeji and Ijeoma, 2017).

- iii. *State-society Relations Theory*: When people of a particular region witness or experience a “step-mother behavior” from the centre, they conceive an opinion of separatism which further gives rise to such situations. Studies by Onuoha (2011) attribute the reemergence of Biafra and other separatist agitations to the opening up of Nigeria’s political space following the country’s transition to democracy in 1999. He posits that since 1999, Nigeria’s political space has been diversified following the entrance of new non-state actors, such as ethno-nationalist movements, into that space. According to him, the post-1999 political space is characterized by “confrontation between state-led nationalism and state-seeking nationalism (led by non-state actors). In the contest, the state-seeking nationalists appear to be losing out to the hegemonic state-led nationalist project, prompting a change of strategy by ethno-nationalist groups and the intensification of the demands for alternative spaces and parallel structures of power. The result of these developments is increase in separatist agitations.
- iv. *Diaspora Theory*: Ethnic diasporas may also contribute to separatist sentiments as they tend to keep grievances alive, offer irredentist support, magnify beliefs in ethnic purity, and provide funding to local organizations (Malkki, 1995). This theoretical explanation may be the reason why Igbos in diaspora popularized NnamdiKanu’s Radio Biafra which the Nigerian Broadcasting Service claimed to have rendered ineffective by blocking the station from broadcasting in the country. While Kanu, the Biafra IPOB leader was still in

detention, the IPOB supporters in diaspora organized rallies and marched across several cities in Europe and North America drawing support for the Biafran cause. Militant groups in the Niger Delta also receive funds from diaspora although most of their funds come from ransom payment from kidnapping and proceeds from illegal bunkering, which is widespread in the region. Again, the Boko Haram insurgency in the Northeastern Nigeria is believed to be aided by generous external support from other affiliates groups in the Arab Islamic countries.

- v. *Market Dominant Minorities Theory*: This theory claims that ethnic conflicts are caused in many societies by disproportionate economic or political influence wielded by “market dominant minorities”. According to Chua (2003), market dominant minorities are ethnic groups which tend to control a disproportionate share of the local economy whenever they are – often in such a manner that it triggers the envy and bitterness of the majority against them. According to Chua, tension and conflicts are inherent in the relationship between ‘the economic dominant minority’ and the poor majority in the context of liberal democracy. Chua argued that when free market democracy is pursued in the presence of a market-dominant minority, the almost invariable result is backlash because “overnight democracy will empower the poor, indigenous majority. What happens is that under those circumstances, democracy doesn’t do what we expect it to do – that is, reinforce markets. (Instead) democracy leads to the emergence of manipulative politicians and demagogues who find that the best way to get votes is by scape-goating the minorities”. Chua listed the Igbos as among the ‘market dominant minority’. In virtually every part of Nigeria, the Igbos would be the largest ethnic group – after the indigenes. Chua’s thesis of market dominant minorities creates a generalized feeling of a group not liked by the rest of the country. For many supporters of

the Biafran agitators, it is this sense of ‘not being wanted’ in Nigeria that justifies the quest for Biafra (Adibe, 2017).

Having given the theoretical explanations on why separatist agitations keep recurring in Nigeria, we now examine briefly the historical formation of some of the separatist agitation groups in Nigeria.

5. Brief History of Some of the Separatist Agitation Groups

Niger Delta Separatist Movements: The first known separatist agitation movement in Nigeria was the movement to liberate the Niger Delta people led by Major Isaac Jasper AdakaBoro. Boro belonged to the Ijaw ethnic group in the Niger Delta region. At the time of the rebellion, he was a student of the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. His complaint was against the exploitation of the oil and gas resources in the Niger Delta by both the federal and regional governments in total disregard of the citizens of the area. Boro formed the Niger Delta Volunteer Force (NDVF), an armed military group composed of 150 members. He firmly believed that the people of the Niger Delta deserved a more equitable share of the wealth which accrues from oil. To press the point, on 23rd February, 1966, the NDVF declared the Niger Delta a republic. The republic lasted only 12 days before the federal military forces crushed the insurgency and arrested Boro (Muzan, 2014). Today, there are numerous militant groups in the Niger Delta fighting the same cause that Major Boro started in the 1960s. Some of the active separatist movements in the Niger Delta include: Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND). The MEND is believed to have been formed in January, 2006. MEND according to Ukiwo (2007) has its root in the loose coalition including the Federated Niger Delta Ijaw Communities, the Niger Delta People Volunteer Force (NDPVF) and other armed groups from Delta, Bayelsa and Rivers. Its primary goal is to fight against the oppression of the

Niger Delta people, the devastation of its resources and the attendant environmental degradation.

Biafra Separatist Groups: The current agitation for Biafra has its roots in the Republic of Biafra – a secessionist state in the former Eastern Nigeria, which existed from 30th May 1967 to January 1970. The first attempt to organize a movement for Biafra re-secession was in 1999, when Ralph Uwazurike, an Indian trained lawyer, formed the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB). At the early stage of MASSOB, he claimed it was a peaceful group and advertised what it called a 25-stage plan to achieve its goals peacefully (Adibe, 2017). Although MASSOB based its struggle on a non-violence pledge, its members, alleging provocation, have clashed repeatedly with the police – these clashes have resulted to several deaths. Apart from MASSOB, there are still other groups with separatist tendencies. The most important amongst them is the Indigenous Peoples of Biafra (IPOB) led by a United Kingdom- based activist, NnamdiKanu, which he started in 2012. Kanu is a dual citizen of Nigeria and Britain who believes in the “freedom of Biafrans” and broadcasts through his London-based Radio Biafra. The group campaigns against inequitable distribution of national resources, ethnic marginalization, corruption of the national government and heavy military presence in the Igbo-speaking part of Nigeria. The group, which is believed to non-violent, has become a common target of political crackdown by the Nigerian government. The immediate trigger of the recent protests by Biafran separatist group was the 19th October, 2015 arrest of NnamdiKanu by the government and the charge for sedition, ethnic incitement and treasonable felony. On September 18, 2017, IPOB was declared an illegal and terrorist group by a federal high court in Abuja and was proscribed by the federal government. Efforts by the group to reverse the proscription have proved unsuccessful, and the police and the military have continued to use violence and force to silence pro-Biafran movements in Nigeria. The re-emergence of Biafran separatist agitators according to Ibeanu, Orji and Iwuamadi

(2016) calls for an inquiry to understand why the agitation has persisted, nearly 50 years after the end of the Nigerian civil war.

The Oodua People's Congress: The Western states of Nigeria are home to the Yoruba and the Oodua People's Congress (OPC), an agitationist Yoruba organization was formed in 1997. The founding head of the organization according to Muzan (2014) is Dr. Fredrick Fasheun, and its militant aspect is headed by Ganiyu Adams. The organization came about as a natural outcome of the massive Yoruba protests which followed the death of Chief MashoodAbiola, who was widely regarded as the winner of the annulled presidential elections of 12 June, 1993. Clashes between the OPC and law enforcement agencies, primarily the police, intensified the activities of the dissident group within the OPC, which ultimately broke away to form the Oodua Liberation Movement, sometimes also known by the name Revolutionary Council of Nigeria (RCN). This splinter group became far more militant in its operations. This group opposes Nigeria's federal system of government and wants the Yoruba to secede from Nigeria and form a sovereign Oodua Republic (Muzan, 2014).

The Boko Haram Insurgency: The northern part of the country refers itself as Arewa. Until recently, the north had not seen any sustained terrorist attacks which could be characterized as approaching insurgency. There were, however, violent conflicts in the north in the late 1970s and 1980s. These were violent, intra-religious campaigns between different sects of Islam that resulted in the death of several thousand people. The Maitatsine sect led by Sheik MuhammaduMaruwa fought mainstream Muslims who refused to accept its path in Islam. The latest upheaval in the North is Boko Haram (meaning, 'western education is sinful') which has brought about heightened tension, anxiety and a sense of insecurity hitherto unknown in Northern Nigeria (Muzan, 2014). One of the aims of Boko Haram is to make northern Nigeria an Islamic State. To achieve this aim, they must confront the government by attacking

public places such as the markets, churches, mosques, schools, military and police bases. The government has been doing its best to contain the insurgency and restore peace to Northern Nigeria but the conflict remains irreducible. The most devastating pattern is the attack and abduction of school children in the North. The cases of abduction of school children include, the abduction of 276 schoolgirls at Chibok in Borno State, which attracted international human rights attention in April 2014, the abduction of over 300 schoolboys at Kankara in Katsina in December 2020 and the recent kidnap of over 40 school children in Kagara, Niger State by islamistarmed bandits. Although the Nigerian government continues to reassure its citizens of its responsibility to protect lives and property, the continuous collapse of the security situation in the country, makes the separatist agitators more popular in their demand for a country where freedom and security will be guaranteed.

6. Government's Responses to Separatist Agitations

The typical response of Nigerian governments to separatist agitations over the years is to brand the agitators “trouble makers”, and send law enforcement agencies to use force to quell their agitations. This often results in casualties, stoking ethnic tensions in the process, which further fuels or hardens separatist agitations. Although in recent times the government appears to be showing more willingness to use dialogue to solve some of the country's separatist challenges. For instance, the Vice President, YemiOsinbajo remarked that citizens have right to discuss their continued existence in Nigeria (Adibe, 2017). The federal government had always adopted brutal use of force and extra-judicial killing against any separatist agitators in the country whether Niger Delta militancy or Biafran protesters. It should also be recalled that the leader of the Boko Haram sect was also extra-judicially killed by the police.

In June 2016, Amnesty International accused the Nigerian army of killing unarmed Biafra supporters in Onitsha ahead of their planned May 2016 commemoration of Biafra. According to Amnesty International (2016) “opening fire on peaceful IPOB supporters and by-standers who clearly posed no threat to anyone is an outrageous use of unnecessary and excessive force and resulted in multiple deaths and injuries”. There seems to be an established history of extra-judicial killings of separatist agitators in Nigeria especially the Biafra protestors. For instance, in January 2013, fifty bodies believed to be Biafra supporters were found afloat in the Ezu River in Anambra State. Still, none of the past and present killings have been thoroughly investigated by the Nigerian governments (Ibeanu, Orji and Iwuamadi, 2016).

If the federal government had responded to the separatist agitators in Nigeria the way it handled the Niger Delta militancy during the regime of the late President Umaru Yar'Adua, the surge in the activities of the groups would have declined if not totally eliminated. The general amnesty granted to the Niger Delta militants and a comprehensive plan for their rehabilitations and empowerment led to serious decline in oil pipeline vandalism and bunkering activities in the Niger Delta creeks. The sincerity of the federal government in pursuing the amnesty programme led to stability in the oil sector in Nigeria and more economic earnings to the federal government. The insincerity that followed the implementation of the Amnesty framework after the death of President Yar'Adua led to the regrouping of the ex-militants and the resumption of attacks on the oil installations.

7. Consequences of the Recurring Separatist Agitations in Nigeria

To be sure, the responses of the federal government and its approaches in handling the activities of the separatist agitation groups have serious consequences in the polity. Firstly, Nigeria's

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economy has been seriously affected by the activities of the separatist groups. For instance, IRIN News (2006) reports that the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) nearly succeeded with its threats to cripple the Nigerian oil industry. It is worthy to note that, the Nigerian economy is largely sustained by proceeds from the exportation of oil and gas, produced in the Niger Delta. The Nigerian nation was taken aback when the militants were able to move into the deep-sea-operation area to attack Nigeria's largest offshore oil platform, the Bonga Oil Platform, which lies 120 kilometers off the coast of the country. That operation according to Punch (2009) almost grounded oil business in Nigeria and made the country to cede her position as the foremost oil exporter in Africa to Angola. Again, This Day (2016) reports that the Minister of Works, Power and Housing, BabatundeFashola, lamented that electricity power generation dropped from 5074mw in February, 2016 to 2000mw due to militant attacks on Forcado Subsea pipeline power generator. This drastic drop in power supply has negatively affected power distribution throughout the states of the federation and has had negative impact on the industries due to increased operational overhead from powering of the industrial plants with diesel.

Secondly, in the Southeast, the tendency for pro-Biafra protests to disrupt economic activities is understandable considering that most of the protests occurred in the major commercial areas of the South East such as Aba, Onitsha, Awka, Umuahia, Enugu and Owerri. The protest also snowballed to South South towns such as Port Harcourt, Asaba, Ikom and Yenagoa. With the increasing hostilities between Biafra separatists and the Nigerian authorities, the investment climate in the southeast could be made more unfriendly, discouraging potential investors from directing their resources to the area. Ibeanu, Orji and Iwuamadi (2016) strongly believe that these protests have the potential to further complicate the security situation in the Southeast by providing a basis for potential criminals to become part of the protesters, and switch easily from being Biafra protesters to armed bandits.

Thirdly, this recurring agitation for Biafra has serious implications for political stability and democratic consolidation. With separatist agitations simmering in other parts of Nigeria, the persistence of the agitation for Biafra could become a rallying point for groups questioning the Nigerian project. Biafra separatism can produce a snowball effect – motivating group after group to demand for greater autonomy or separation. This might create a basis for democratic breakdown. There have been attempts in the past by pro-Biafra separatists to connect their struggle to the struggles of other groups dissatisfied by the Nigerian State as currently constituted. Such alliances have given rise to new groups challenging the Nigerian project and agitating for separation. A good example of such groups is the Lower Niger Congress (LNC) which describes itself as “a platform by which willing peoples of the ethnic nations of the old Eastern Region and the old Mid-Western Region, seek to federate themselves into a cohesive, values-driven, systems-based political bloc”. As separatist agitation intensifies, it is likely that separatist groups would proliferate. The combined activities of these groups could raise the risk of inter-ethnic disaffection, destabilize Nigeria’s fledgling democracy and further deepen the crisis of confidence among government and ethnic groups across the country (Ibeanu, Orji and Iwuamadi, 2016).

Fourthly, in the northeast, the activities of the Boko Haram insurgency have had serious consequences in the socio-economic life of Nigerians. Aside the human cost in the Boko Haram activities, the economic, social and psychological costs cannot be quantified. Commercial activities in the northeast have been crippled because of the unprecedented attacks by the sect. Banks, markets and shops do not open regularly due to the fear of the attacks from Boko Haram (Awojobi, 2014). Shiklam (2012) reports that the Maiduguri Monday Market which is the biggest market in the city is reported to have been seriously affected as hundreds of shop owners, especially southerners are said to have closed their businesses and left the troubled city. About half of the 10,000 shops and stores in

the market were said to have been abandoned by traders who fled the city. In November 2020, members of the islamist group known as Boko Haram killed over forty rice farmers and fishermen in Borno State (Umar, 2020). The farmers were rounded up and killed by the insurgents in retaliation for refusing to pay extortion to one militant. But a factional leader of the extremist group, Abubakar Shekau, who took responsibility for the killing stated that his group killed seventy-eight rice farmers because the ricefarmers arrested and handed one of its members to the Nigerian Army (Amin, 2020). Whatever is the reason, such mass killings have not only heightened the insecurity situation in the Northern part of the country but has aggravated the food crisis in the region.

Just as the economic implications of Boko Haram atrocities cannot be quantified, the social costs are enormous too. The churches, schools, markets, clinics and mosques are potential targets of Boko Haram. A number of schools have been attacked and school children abducted by the Boko Haram members since 2014. Such attacks have affected school enrolment in the Northeast and other areas affected by the terrorist activities. People no longer worship freely in churches due to the fear of being attacked by the marauding islamists sect and bandits. Same for the Muslim faithfuls who abandoned their worshiping centres because of Boko Haram attack (Awojobi, 2014).

8. Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

This study has examined and assessed the separatist agitations in Nigeria. Government's responses to separatist agitations in most cases have been repressive without addressing the fundamental issues that trigger the agitations. This has not only affected the international reputation of the country but has also threatened the foundation and corporate existence of the country. The fruitless attempts by ethnic groups to break away from the federation have neither addressed minority oppressions and marginalization nor

reduced incessant conflicts and ethno-religious violence. Instead, it has continued to build and solidify mistrust and mutual suspicion among the ethnic groups that make up the federation. The conditions responsible for the continued agitation for separation have remained constant. Amidst the growing agitation, the federal appears to be confused or rather insensitive to the grievances of the separatist agitators, leading to the federal government's use of brute force to repress unarmed agitators.

It is the position of this study that the spate of separatist agitations in Nigeria will continue unless the federal governments of Nigeria summons the political will to addressing the plethora of problems leading to agitations. The study therefore, recommends the devolution of power from the centre to the constituent states as a sustainable way of stemming the tide of separatism. Devolution of power according to Adangor (2017) will guarantee greater regional autonomy which underlies most of the separatist agitations and diffuse the hegemonic dominance of the central government and the acrimonious struggle amongst the ethnic groups for its control.

Apart from the issue of devolution of power, at the root of the various separatist agitations is the issue of power sharing among the various regional and ethnic factions of the elite as well as access to infrastructure and privileges at the federal level. Following from this, it will be helpful to institutionalize or codify the existing conventional system of power sharing and rotating the presidency between the north and the south as an interim measure – until the country's democracy matures and trust among Nigerians has improved. Strengthening the Federal Character Commission (FCC) – an agency created in 1996 to ensure fairness in the distribution of jobs and socioeconomic amenities among different parts of the country – will help to build trust among groups. Making it a mandatory requirement that certain federal appointments and distribution of infrastructure must have the imprimatur of the FCC will reduce the suspicion that the ethnic group in power will

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privilege its in-group and disadvantage others. This move will, in turn, help reduce inter-ethnic suspicion and attenuate the anarchic character of the country's politics (Adibe, 2017).

Again, even if Nigeria restructures the system via devolution of power, agitations will still persist if the leadership fails to embark on restructuring of the mindsets of Nigerians. Restructuring of the mindsets will revive the spirit of patriotism which will in turn enhance national integration and create in the citizenry the virtues of honesty of purpose, dedication to duty, and absence of corruption.

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