

RESURGENCE OF BIAFRAN SEPARATIST MOVEMENTS, GOVERNMENT REPRESSION, AND RISING INSTABILITY IN SOUTHEASTERN NIGERIA

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Abstract

The resurgence of Biafran separatist sentiments in Nigeria is largely a reaction to perceived ethnic dominance and the Nigerian government's compromised state-building capacity. The tendency to attribute the rise in ethnic nationalism and separatist agitations to the expansion of democracy since 1999 is flawed. While security challenges exist across Nigeria, the most pressing threats to lives and livelihoods in the Southeast are coordinated attacks on state facilities by unidentified groups and the Nigerian military's brutal response to neo-Biafra separatist uprisings. Although the revival of Biafra separatism has received substantial academic attention, existing studies have overlooked how persistent state repression has facilitated the growth of the neo-Biafra separatist movement in Nigeria. This study argues that the Nigerian government's repressive approach towards Biafra separatism has led the Indigenous People of Biafra to shift from non-violent to armed strategies. Relying primarily on secondary data analysis, the paper draws from the theory of state repression to conclude that the indiscriminate use of force, including harassment, proscription, arrests, rendition, torture, and mass killings of pro-Biafra activists, tends to exacerbate insecurity in the Southeast region.

Keywords: Biafra land, ESN, IPOB, Unknown Gunmen

Introduction

This study explores how state repression has influenced the shift in the separatist strategies of the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) from non-violent protests to armed struggle. Nigeria is grappling with various security challenges nationwide, but the primary sources of insecurity in the South-East - Igboland's core - include armed attacks by pastoralists on farming communities, coordinated assaults on state facilities by unidentified gunmen, and the severe military response to separatist movements. The resurgence of Biafra separatism in 1999, nearly 30 years after the Nigerian Civil War (1967-1970), is a direct reaction to perceived ethno-national dominance and the ineffective state-building efforts of Nigeria's ruling groups. While the expansion of civil space for expressing grievances, which was previously restricted during military rule, is often cited as a cause (Adebanwi, 2005; Nwangwu & Ononogbu, 2014), the rise of micro-ethnic nationalism and revival of primal political orientations in Nigeria actually highlight the chronic failure of political leadership

to foster national integration. These provincial tendencies reflect broader patterns of ethnic nationalism seen in various African states and beyond.

The resurgence of Biafran separatism has received substantial scholarly attention, primarily focused on the causal factors behind the origin of separatist agitations in Nigeria. Researchers have identified various drivers, including disunity in Nigeria (Chiluwa, 2018), perceived marginalization and collective victimhood among the Igbo (Ibeanu et al., 2016), the trauma and documentaries associated with the memories of the civil war (Ugwueze, 2019; 2021), the lopsided structure of Nigeria's federalism (Adibe, 2017), and the ineffective implementation of post-war peacebuilding initiatives (Johnson & Olaniyan, 2017; Nwangwu et al., 2020a). Particularly, the role of the ineffective implementation of the 3-Rs (Reconciliation, Rehabilitation and Reconstruction) post-war peacebuilding program in the revival of Biafra separatism is compelling. The mass mobilization, recruitment, and escalation of activities by 3 south-led, underclass-dominant neo-Biafra organizations are, to some extent, expressions of resentment over their economic exclusion and material deprivation (Nwangwu et al., 2020a). Although such deprivations generally reflect the broader contradictions of the Nigerian political economy, they are often perceived as ethnic bias and exclusion, reinforced by the perception that other parts of the country, especially the North, are unduly privileged by the federal government (Mbah et al., 2017, 2019; Otu et al., 2022). Consequently, Agwu et al. (2022) suggest that if post-conflict peacebuilding processes fail to address the basic economic needs of the poor and marginalized groups, it may be more challenging to achieve lasting peace, as they may be motivated to (re)mobilize and (re)engage in violent activities.

The existing scholarly discourses on the causal explanations of neo-Biafra separatism have largely overlooked how the persistence of state repression has continued to fuel the neo-Biafra separatist movement in Nigeria. While previous studies on Biafra separatism are relevant in their own right, this study argues that the repressive disposition of the Nigerian state towards Biafra separatism is a key factor that explains the current mutation of the Biafra separatist strategy from non-violence to armed struggle. State repression involves the use or deployment of institutional force by the government to suppress popular dissent and promote political goals within its territorial jurisdiction. This includes practices such as harassment, surveillance, bans, arrests, torture, and mass killings by government agents and/or affiliates (Davenport, 2007a; DeMeritt, 2016). This study specifically reflects on the ideological and tactical shift that led to the founding of the Eastern Security Network (ESN) as the armed wing of the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB). This development lends credence to the notion that social movements are ideologically dynamic forces whose modus operandi is not fixed, but rather adjusted in response to the authoritarian and repressive behavior of the state. By highlighting the role of state repression in the mutation of the Biafra separatist strategy, this study aims to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics underlying the resurgence of Biafran separatism in Nigeria, which has often been viewed through the lens of historical grievances, ethnic marginalization, and economic deprivation. This scholarly article is further structured into five distinct sections besides the introduction, each serving to provide a comprehensive analysis of the complex interplay between state repression and the evolution and radicalization of the neo-Biafra separatist movements in Nigeria.

History and Evolution of the Neo-Biafra Separatist Movement in Nigeria

The resurgence of the Biafra separatist movement in 1999 highlights the Nigerian state's failure to effectively implement post-war peacebuilding initiatives? This failure has contributed to a persistent sense of collective suffering and victimhood among the Igbo, which has, in turn, fostered the rise of neo-Biafra separatist movements in Nigeria. Before the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), the latest manifestation of the neo-Biafra movement, was established in 2012 by Nnamdi Kanu, the separatist struggle was initially led by Chief Ralph Uwazuruike. Uwazuruike founded the Movement for the Actualisation of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) on September 13, 1999, with the aim of advancing the interests of the Igbo in Nigeria. MASSOB garnered support from a global network of Igbo organizations, including the Biafra Foundation, Biafra Actualisation Forum, Igbo USA, Ekwe Nche, and Biafra Nigeria World (Omeje, 2005). However, state repression and internal leadership conflicts eventually undermined MASSOB, causing significant fractures within the organization (Ezea, 2017). This created space for the emergence of other neo-Biafra groups, such as the Biafra Zionist Movement, Biafran Zionist Front, Biafra Independent Movement, Biafra Youth Congress, Biafra Revolutionary Force, Biafran Liberation Council, and the now proscribed IPOB. IPOB has particularly resonated with the alienated underclass of mainly Igbo descent through its digital platforms, including the widely followed Radio Biafra.

The Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) is a secessionist movement that shares similarities with previous neo-Biafra groups, as it is also founded on principles of nonviolence. However, the IPOB represents a more militant wing of post-civil war Igbo nationalism, in contrast to the conservative Igbo nationalist groups that favor dialogue and diplomacy in their pursuit of Igbo self-determination. Unlike the conservative Igbo nationalists, the IPOB has actively promoted the secessionist sentiment that has gained momentum since the return to civilian rule in Nigeria in 1999. This separatist stance has brought the IPOB into direct conflict with the federal security forces, as well as the Igbo political elite who are perceived as complicit in the state's repressive actions against the movement in the South-East region. The IPOB has a decentralized organizational structure, led by Maazi Nnamdi Kanu. The highest decision-making body is the 15-member Directorate of State (DOS), which is based in Germany. Beneath the DOS, the IPOB has regional representatives for Asia, Europe, North America, and Africa. Within Nigeria, the movement has state-level coordinators in the South-East and South-South regions, as well as zonal and unit coordinators at the local government and community levels. This hierarchical and distributed command-and-control system suggests the IPOB's efforts to build a robust network to coordinate its secessionist activities, even as it maintains its non-violent doctrine, in contrast to the more conservative Igbo nationalist approaches.

The Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) transitioned from a non-violent separatist strategy to an armed struggle, as evidenced by the establishment of the Eastern Security Network (ESN) as its paramilitary wing. This dramatic shift in IPOB's approach occurred on December 12, 2020. According to sources cited, the dominant view within IPOB, ESN, and other radical separatist groups is that the governance crises affecting the Igbo region stem from the oppressive nature of the Nigerian state, as well as the complicit role played by conservative Igbo nationalist figures. As the paramilitary arm of IPOB, the ESN has been tasked with defending the Biafran homeland by countering the "murderous activities" of rampaging armed Fulani herdsmen against peasant farmers and local communities in the

region. Specifically, IPOB founded the ESN to protect the oil-rich South-East area from incursions by ethnic Fulani herders, whom IPOB accuses of grazing on farmlands and committing crimes against the local population. In essence, the creation of the ESN marked a significant escalation of IPOB's separatist strategy, transitioning from non-violence to an armed approach. This shift was driven by perceptions of oppression by the Nigerian state and threats posed by Fulani herdsmen in the region. The conflict over natural resources has escalated, with armed, nomadic pastoralists clashing with host communities across Nigeria's southern regions. This trend, which began in the Middle Belt, has intensified since the Buhari administration took power in May 2015 (Nwangwu et al., 2020b). The attacks by armed herdsmen have become increasingly frequent and severe, drawing comparisons to the atrocities committed by the Sudanese government-backed Janjaweed militia in the Darfur region.

Despite the mounting violence, the Nigerian government has failed to devise and implement effective strategies to address the risks posed by this transhumant pastoralism. In contrast, the administration, under Buhari, responded more proactively to other sectarian uprisings, such as those by the Islamic Movement of Nigeria, Yorut: Nation Movement, and Biafra separatists (Lenshie et al., 2022; Nwangwu, 2022). Observers attribute the government's inaction to President Buhari's persona background as a Fulani pastoralist and his position as the lifetime patron of the Miyetn Allah Cattle Breeders' Association of Nigeria. This perceived bias has led to allegation; that the administration is unwilling to confront the herdsmen's aggression against local communities (Igata, 2016). The resource-use conflicts between armed pastoralists and host communities have intensified across Nigeria, but the Buhari administration has been criticized for its inadequate and seemingly biased response to the escalating violence.

In response to the severe human security implications caused by the persistent attacks of armed, nomadic pastoralists against peasant farmers, as well as the Nigeria government's reluctance to address the situation, various sub-national and regional strategies have been developed to curb this scourge. For instance, states in the Middle Belt region, such as Taraba and Benue, as well as Ekiti State in the South-West, have pioneered the enactment of laws prohibiting open grazing. These laws are intended as a remedy to the threat posed by armed herdsmen attacks across Nigeria (Kabir, 2021). Similarly, the governors of the South-West region have launched the Western Nigeria Security Network, code-named Operation Amotekun, as a regional security initiative mandated to address the broader issue of insecurity in the area. These sub-national and regional efforts to curb the violence from armed transhumant pastoralists have emerged as a consequence of the Nigerian government's perceived inaction and failure to adequately resolve the conflict between the nomadic herders and local farming communities. The states and regions have sought to take matters into their own hands through legislative and security-focused interventions. The human security crisis caused by armed herdsmen attacks, coupled with the federal government's reluctance to address the problem, has prompted the development of various state-level and regional strategies, including anti-grazing laws and the establishment of the Amotekun security network, to confront this escalating threat to local communities. The Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) established the Eastern Security Network (ESN) in response to two primary factors: the existential security threats posed by armed, nomadic herders in Southern Nigeria, and the perceived inaction of political leaders in the South-East to create a regional security network akin to Operation Amotekun in the South-West.

According to the IPOB's Media and Publicity Secretary, Comrade Emma Powerful, the ESN is tasked with protecting the South-East and South-South regions (the former Eastern Region) from banditry and attacks by suspected Fulani herdsmen. The ESN claims to be self-reliant, with all its weapons being locally manufactured and not dependent on external sources.

However, the creation of the ESN was also a direct response to the persistent onslaught of state security forces against the IPOB and other neo-Biafra separatist organizations. The next section of the discussion will explore the theoretical implications of state repression in understanding the IPOB's secessionist uprising in Nigeria. In essence, the establishment of the ESN was a multifaceted move, driven by concerns over regional security threats, the lack of a coordinated response from political leaders, and the IPOB's broader separatist agenda. While the group claims self-reliance and locally-sourced weapons, the ESN's origins are also rooted in the IPOB's efforts to counter the Nigerian state's repressive measures against the secessionist movement.

Theoretical Perspective on State Repression and the Resilience of the Biafran Separatist Movement

The theoretical foundations of discourses on state repression can be traced back to the works of scholars like Dallin and Breslauer (1970), Lichbach (1987), Olson (1965), Tilly (1978), Walter (1972), and Ziegenhagen (1986). However, more recent advancements in this field have been dominated by the research of Christian Davenport and Molly Inman. State repression is the process by which a government or its agents use force to control and restrict the political participation of citizens within their territorial jurisdiction. This often involves the use of instruments of violence or coercion, such as the police, military, and paramilitary forces, to suppress dissent, limit freedom of speech and association, and dismantle collective organizations deemed anti-government. Through the application of intimidation and overt violence, state repression seeks to subjugate citizens and abolish their capacity for collective action. In essence, it represents a perversion of justice, where the rights of citizens and organizations, especially those perceived as oppositional, are not only constrained but also flagrantly violated through measures such as arbitrary arrests, torture, and extrajudicial killings.

According to Ake (1981), the state represents a specific mechanism of class domination, particularly in the postcolonial social formations of Africa, where the relevant institutional structures of repression are not adequately independent. The institutional mechanisms employed to deepen state repression can be exercised through coercion and/or ideology. The coercive apparatuses of state repression include the military, police, paramilitary formations, and prisons, while the ideological counterpart comprises the courts, legislature, and state media. The former uses violence to protect the ruling class and ensure their dominance over the masses, while the latter relies on non-violent means to achieve the same objective (Ake, 1981; Althusser, 1970; Margulies, 2018). Both democratic and autocratic regimes utilize repression to address internal threats to their sovereignty (Davenport, 2000). While advanced democracies typically have sufficient safeguards against state repression (Davenport, 2007b), the use of force to silence dissenting voices and popular protests has become commonplace in Africa (Coynash & Charron, 2019; Keels & Nichols, 2018). Consequently, most African states, including Nigeria, are among the countries with the most severe cases of human rights violations and the highest levels of citizen distrust in government institutions (Anazonwu et al., 2021). The colonial legacy continues to cast a

long shadow over the African state, particularly in the case of Nigeria. The conquest of African territories by colonial powers was achieved through the brutal suppression of local populations, as constabularies and paramilitary forces were employed to aggressively repress and oppress those who dared to defy the imposed authority of the colonial overlords.

Even more than six decades after the attainment of independence, the Nigerian state and its security apparatus have yet to fully shed the shackles of their colonial origins. They continue to operate in a manner akin to an occupying force, especially in the South-Eastern region, fostering a state of perpetual hostility between the state and groups such as the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB). The Nigerian state has become a tool in the hands of the dominant ruling classes, both at the center and within the South-East, to suppress the agitation, grievances, and uprising of the Igbo ethnic underclass. While the enforcement of the law may entail certain coercive and punitive procedures, the Nigerian state's penchant for the use of brute and unbridled force, particularly against unarmed civilian populations, is truly alarming. The colonial character of the postcolonial apparatuses of state repression persisted even after Nigeria's independence in 1960, as civil society activists, trade unionists, students, and political opponents became the targets of this oppressive machinery. This pattern of state repression has continued unabated, with the state unleashing violence against unarmed pro-Biafra agitators, purported violators of COVID-19 protocols, and the #EndSARS campaigners who bravely protested police brutality across various Nigerian cities in October 2020. The reliance on repression as the state's primary response to citizens' protests and mobilization against poor governance has solidified the perception of the Nigerian state as a weapon of rights violations and intimidation, rather than an institution dedicated to the protection of the citizenry and the facilitation of development.

The Escalating Tension between the Nigerian State and the IPOB Separatist Movement

The IPOB's recent shift towards armed separatist struggle is a direct response to the heavy-handed tactics employed by the Nigerian state against the activities of the neo-Biafra separatist movement. While the separatist agitators, including the IPOB, have generally adopted a confrontational approach rather than a conciliatory one, they have nonetheless been perceived as predominantly non-violent organizations. As argued by Onuoha (2014), the separatists seek to address the generational imbalance of power and ultimately, to facilitate the Igbo ethnic group's exit into an alternative political and administrative arrangement. Although the agitators are unified in their demand for secession as the only solution to the perceived Igbo victimization, they differ in their operational strategies. Prior to the establishment of the ESN by the IPOB in December 2020, the neo-Biafra separatist groups were associated with tactics such as the threat of armed struggle, boycotts of major national events like censuses, elections, and national identity card schemes, as well as calls for a referendum.

However, the Nigerian state's progressive deployment of brute force against the separatist movement has significantly radicalized the IPOB's approach, leading to the emergence of the armed ESN as a means of self-defense and resistance against the state's repressive tactics. The Nigerian state's orchestrated crackdown on Biafra agitators has led the movement to reconsider its non-violent strategy. As early as September 2017, when the military launched Operation Python Dance II, the IPOB leader Mazi Nnamdi Kanu stated that the organization was rethinking the viability of continuing the separatist struggle

through peaceful means (Vanguard, 2017; Njoku et al., 2017; Ujumadu, 2017). Kanu also emphasized the need to start defending themselves against the relentless attacks from the Nigerian state. The IPOB and other neo-Biafra separatist groups have indeed faced various forms of state repression, including the arrest and killing of Biafra Remembrance Day protesters, excessive military brutality and unprovoked shooting of unarmed protesters, illegal detention of separatists, attempts to jam Radio Biafra's transmission, the invasion of Kanu's home in Afaraukwu, the proscription of IPOB, and the extraordinary rendition of the IPOB leader from Kenya. These sustained attacks by the Nigerian state have significantly radicalized the Biafra separatist movement, leading the IPOB leadership to reconsider their commitment to non-violent resistance and explore more confrontational and potentially armed strategies to defend against the state's repressive tactics.

Most pro-Biafra rallies and peaceful demonstrations are often associated with various gradations of rights abuse by the Nigerian security operatives, as argued by Nwangwu et al. (2020a). However, these violations reached an unprecedented height during the 2016 Biafra Remembrance Day, which was the 49th anniversary of the declaration of Biafra. Credible media outlets and human rights campaigners widely reported that the security forces shot people during the Remembrance Day celebration in several locations, especially at Asaba, Nkpor and Onitsha (Amnesty International, 2016a, 2016b; Mayah, 2016). According to Amnesty International (2016b), opening fire on peaceful IPOB supporters and bystanders who clearly posed no threat to anyone was an outrageous use of unnecessary and excessive force, resulting in multiple deaths and injuries. Reports of harassment, torture, disappearances, abductions and extrajudicial killings of members of pro-Biafra movements by security agencies have also been documented by other rights organisations (Iroegbu, 2016; Sahara Reporters, 2015). Amnesty International (2018) further observed that the military was involved in arbitrary arrests, detentions and extrajudicial killings of IPOB members in the South- East between 2017 and 2018.

This history of state repression against Biafra supporters predated the government of President Muhammadu Buhari. In January 2013, for instance, fifty bodies believed to be Biafra supporters were found floating in the Ezu River in Anambra State (Mamah et al., 2013). However, none of the past and present killings has been thoroughly investigated by successive Nigerian governments. Following the October 2015 arrest and incarceration of IPOB leader Nnamdi Kanu on charges of sedition, ethnic incitement, terrorism and treason, his supporters staged a series of protests, marches and gatherings. These events were often timed to coincide with Kanu's court appearances. In 2017, the Nigerian government under President Buhari grew increasingly concerned about the growing influence and mobilization of the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) movement, particularly through their use of "community evangelism" and other forms of civil disobedience. These tactics were effectively employed in the lead-up to the November 2017 Anambra State gubernatorial election, where IPOB encouraged people to boycott the electoral process (Mbah et al., 2020; Nwangwu, 2018).

In response to the rising popularity and impact of IPOB's messaging and civil disobedience, the Nigerian military launched Operation Python Dance II (also known as Egwu Eke II in the Igbo language) in the South-East region. This military operation, which ran from September 15 to October 14, 2017, was ostensibly aimed at addressing issues like "kidnapping", "armed robbery", "killing of priests", and "violent agitation". However, the operation soon evolved into a repressive tool used against unarmed pro- Biafra activists,

particularly IPOB members (Ilozue, 2018). According to reports, the military operation subjected peaceful and defenseless neo-Biafra youths to physical abuse and other inhumane treatments, such as ordering them to slap each other and forcing them to drink and drown in muddy waters (Okafor, 2017). The military also invaded the Afaraukwu home of IPOB leader Nnamdi Kanu, deploying around 10 armored carrier vehicles and seven Hilux vans. Additionally, they raided the Abia State Council of the Nigeria Union of Journalists in Umuahia, destroying valuable equipment like laptops, iPads, and phones, as well as assaulting union officials (Ayo-Aderele & Ikokwu, 2017).

The heavy-handed crackdown on IPOB and the broader pro-Biafra movement was a clear attempt by the Buhari administration to suppress the growing dissent and activism in the South-East region. The aggressive tactics of Operation Python Dance II in the South-East were soon followed by the proscription of the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) and its classification as a terrorist organization. Initially, IPOB was banned by South-East governors, and shortly thereafter, the Nigerian Army labeled it a terrorist group. The military justified this designation by alleging that IPOB members used stones, Molotov cocktails, machetes, and broken bottles against a military patrol on September 10, 2017 (Daily Trust, 2017). The Federal Government officially proscribed IPOB on September 20, 2017, via an order from Abdul Kafarati, the Chief Judge of the Federal High Court, Abuja (The Sun, 2017). This justification for the terrorist designation seems particularly absurd when compared to President Buhari's government's lenient treatment of armed nomadic herders, bandits, and 'repentant' Boko Haram terrorists, whose violent actions have caused extensive loss of life and livelihoods in Northern Nigeria and other areas. Since 2015, attacks by Fulani herdsmen and bandits have grown increasingly frequent and sophisticated, with minimal effective intervention from authorities. Research also shows that Boko Haram's radicalization was exacerbated by state actions, including the extrajudicial killing of its leader, Mohammed Yusuf, in 2009 (Lenshie et al., 2022; Onuoha et al., 2020; Onuoha & Nwangwu, 2021). Despite the Nigerian state's harsh measures against Biafra separatism, IPOB's leadership continues to pursue a confrontational stance towards Igbo nationalism, largely due to their material conditions. As will be discussed further, state actions have not only failed to suppress IPOB's separatist activities but have also contributed to the increase in armed violence in the South-East.

Exploring Insecurity in the South-East: The Role of the Eastern Security Network and Unknown Gunmen

In the aftermath of the establishment of the Eastern Security Network (ESN) in December 2020, the Nigerian military swiftly responded by deploying a substantial force to confront the group. Just two weeks after the formation of the ESN, the Nigerian military invaded forests in the Southeast region, where the ESN members were believed to be based, utilizing combat helicopters, gun trucks, and soldiers (Sahara Reporters,

This military intervention led to a seven-day clash between the Nigerian forces and the ESN militia in the Orlu communities of Imo State. According to reports, the confrontation resulted in significant loss of life and the destruction of billions of naira worth of property (Njoku & Elekwa, 2021). The conflict did not end with this initial clash. In the subsequent four-month period, from January to April 2021, Imo State experienced a total of 32 security incidents, including 14 battles, 1 incident of remote violence/explosions, 13 cases of violence against civilians, and 4 incidents of riots, as reported by the European Asylum

Support Office. These incidents resulted in the deaths of 59 people (European Asylum Support Office, 2021).

The escalating tensions and ongoing conflict between the Nigerian military and the ESN have created a volatile security situation in the Southeast region, with significant humanitarian consequences. The loss of life and destruction of property highlight the urgent need for a resolution to this complex and deeply concerning dynamic. Following the initial confrontations between the Nigerian military and the Eastern Security Network (ESN) fighters in January 2021, the security situation in Imo State and other parts of Igboland remained volatile. On April 5, 2021, a group of yet-to-be-identified gunmen, commonly referred to as the "unknown gunmen" in public and journalistic discourse, launched a severe attack on government facilities in Owerri, the capital of Imo State (Akingbule & Parkinson, 2021; Ayitogo, 2021; Ezeamalu & Maclean, 2021). The unknown gunmen targeted the Imo State Police Command and the Nigerian Correctional Centre, freeing 1,844 inmates from the facility. They also set the premises of the Correctional Centre, including numerous vehicles, on fire. Additionally, the unknown gunmen killed several soldiers at Umuoji, along the Owerri-Onitsha Expressway (Nkwo-Akpolu, 2021). The emergence of the "unknown gunmen" and their attacks on government and security infrastructure have further exacerbated the security challenges in the Southeast region, particularly in Imo State. Table 1 presents a checklist of major attacks, primarily on the Nigeria Police, carried out by unidentified gunmen in the Southeast and South-South regions. The continued unrest and the evolving threat posed by the "unknown gunmen" have amplified the complexity of the security situation in the affected areas, underscoring the urgent need for comprehensive measures to address the underlying issues and restore stability in the region.

Table 1: Key Incidents of Attacks on Nigerian Police by Unknown Gunmen in the South-East and South-South Regions from February to June 2021

S/N	Date	Fatality/Casualty	Place/Event
1	January 8, 2021]	3 police officers killed	Onueke Police Station in Ezza South LGA
2	February 1, 2021	1 police officer killed	Omoba Police Station, Abia
3	February 23, 2021	2 police officers killed	Abaji Police Station, Aba
4	February 24, 2021	1 police officer killed	Ekwulobia, Anambra state
5	February 24, 2021	6 police officers killed	Idundu, Cross River
6	February 24, 2021	1 police officer killed	Osisioma Ngwa, Abia state
7	February 25, 2021	1 police officer was wounded	Aboh Mbaise, Imo state
8	February 26, 2021	A police station was razed down	Aboh Mbaise Divisional Police Station, Imo state
9	March 1, 2021	A police station was attacked	Iboko Police Station, Izei LGA, Ebonyi
10	March 9, 2021	A police station was burnt	Isinweke Police Station, Ihitte/Uboma LGA Imo state.
11	March 18, 2021	1 police officer killed and two police officers injured	Okacha Junction, Neni, Anambra state.

12	March 24, 2021	3 police officers killed & 1 person kidnapped	A town hall meeting in Isuofia, Aguata, Anambra state.
13	March 30, 2021	Commander of the Quick Intervention Unit and two police officers killed	Ikot Akpan, Essien Udem LGA, Akwa Ibom state.
14	April 5, 2021 -	Imo State Police Command Headquarters was razed down and 1844 inmates from the correctional services were freed.	Attack of correctional facility in Owerri, Imo state & Imo state Police Command.
15	April 19, 2021	Police state was razed down	Uzunkoli Police Station, Bende LGA, Abia State.
16.	April 21, 2021	Two Police officers were killed and a police station was burnt	Adani Police Station, Uzo-Uwani LGA, ENUGU State
17.	April 27, 2021	One Naval Officer was killed and two injured	Enamel Ware Junction, Onitisha Owerri high way
18.	May 1, 2021	One police officer was killed	Abamege police station, Ohaozara LGA Ebonyi State
19	May 25, 2021	Four police officers were killed and a police station ablaze	Iwollo Police Division, Ezeagu LGA, Enugu State.
20	27 Sept, 2021	Attack on APC Campaign	Uruagu, Nnewi, Anambra State
21	23 Sept, 2021	Two police officers were killed	Police checkpoint in Nachi, Oji River LGA, Enugu State
22	12 October, 2021	Attack on Governor Obiano's convey on APGA rally	Ihiala LGA, Anambra State
23	October 19, 2021	Three traditional rulers killed and many injured	Stakeholders meeting at Nnenas, Njaba LGA, Imo State
24	August 18, 2022	A police officer killed on a checkpoint	Enugu-Abakaliki Expressway, Ebonyi State.
25	August 16, 2022	A commercial motorcyclist was killed	Ogbaku Junction, Mbaitolu LGA, Imo State
26	August 28, 2022	Four guest in a hotel were Killed	Galaxy Hotel, Isu community, Onicha LGA of Ebonyi State
27	Sept 11, 2022	Senator Ifeanyi Uba convey was attacked where some were killed and iniured	Enugwu-ukwu, Njikoka LGA, Anambra State
28	Sept 27, 2022	Some soldiers and police officers killed	Obeagu-Amodu, Enugu South LGA of Enugu State
29	October 10, 2022	Two police officer killed	Akokwa/Arondizogu/Ikperera/Okigwe road, Imo State

The states of the South-East and adjoining South-South regions have become the epicenter of a troubling wave of attacks targeting security forces and institutions. As evidenced by the data in Table 1, these areas, particularly Anambra, Imo, Ebonyi, Enugu and Abia have witnessed widespread assaults on police stations and checkpoints since February 2021. Anambra State has been thrust into the eye of this storm, with a series of deadly strikes against the security apparatus. Tragically, these assaults have claimed the lives of police officers and naval personnel in the communities of Nkpologwu and Omogho. However, it is Imo State that has borne the brunt of this campaign of violence, Police stations have been savagely attacked and burned to the ground in areas such as Obowo, Aboh Mbaise, and Isiala Mbano, among others. The targets of these unknown armed groups extend beyond security forces, with markets, courts, and even offices of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) falling victim to their destructive acts. INEC, in particular, has found itself in the crosshairs, with its facilities and offices becoming the second-most affected after police stations. Between the 2019 general elections and May 2021, some INEC offices have been attacked, a grim testament to the complex web of factors at play - election-related violence, protests unrelated to the electoral process, and the shadowy presence of thugs and unknown gunmen.

The year 2020 saw 18 INEC facilities targeted by arsonists disrupting the nationwide EndSARS protests, a scattershot campaign. However, the subsequent attacks on INEC offices by unknown gunmen since December 2020 have been heavily concentrated in the South-East, the epicenter of the neo-Biafra separatist movement, with 9 such incidents recorded in 2021 alone. The landscape of Nigeria's electoral landscape has been marred by a disturbing trend of attacks on the offices and facilities of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC). This worrying pattern has unfolded across the country, with a particularly concerning concentration in the South-East and South-South regions. The timeline of these incidents paints a troubling picture of the challenges faced by the country's electoral authorities. The earliest documented attacks occurred in 2019, with incidents of arson reported in Imo, Abia and Enugu states. However, the situation escalated dramatically in 2020, as the #EndSARS protests swept through the nation. During this period, INEC offices in Lagos, Abia, Anambra, Ondo, and Cross River states fell victim to arsonists seeking to disrupt the demonstrations. The vandalism even extended to Imo State, where facilities were targeted in the aftermath of a Supreme Court judgment on the state's gubernatorial election.

As the year drew to a close, the attacks took on a more sinister tone, with the involvement of unknown gunmen. In December 2020, an INEC office in Aba South, Abia State, was assaulted by these shadowy perpetrators. The following year saw a surge in such incidents, with INEC facilities in Akwa-Ibom, Abia, Enugu, Ebonyi, and Anambra states falling prey to the assaults of these unidentified armed groups. The geographic scope of these attacks has been broad, encompassing both the South-East and South-South regions, with local government areas such as Essien Udim, Ohafia, Udeniu, Igboeze South, and Njaba bearing the brunt of the violence. The INEC state headquarters in Enugu, Ebonyi, and Anambra have also been targeted, underscoring the systematic nature of these assaults on the country's electoral infrastructure. As the timeline unfolds, the incidents reveal a complex tapestry of factors, from election-related unrest and protests to the activities of thugs, bandits, and the elusive "unknown gunmen". The concentrated attacks in the South-East, the epicenter of neo-Biafran separatist sentiment, further compound the challenges faced

by INEC in safeguarding the integrity of the electoral process. The gubernatorial election in Anambra State was marred by the fallout from the Biafra separatist movement, leading to significant challenges around voter turnout and widespread insecurity. In 2017, research by Mbah et al. revealed that Biafra agitation and an excessive military presence contributed to low voter participation in the state's governorship poll. A similar pattern emerged in the 2021 election, as the secessionist Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) called for a "no referendum, no election" campaign and threatened voters with their "vote and die" slogan. Though IPOB's planned week-long sit-at-home order was ultimately rescinded, the prevailing climate of fear and instability resulted in the postponement of the vote in Ihiala LGA.

The impact of the Biafra movement, however, extends far beyond Election Day dynamics. Since late 2020, the federal government's crackdown on the secessionist agitation has transformed Anambra, and the broader South-East region, into a "killing field". Several communities, including Ihiala, Ozubulu, and Nnewi, have been devastated by the resulting violence. High-profile victims included Dr. Chike Akunyili and Chief Gabriel Ufoma, who were gruesomely murdered by unidentified gunmen, as well as the arson attack on the home of Lagos-based politician, Joe Igbokwe, and the burning of state security facilities. Given the deteriorating security situation, the Attorney-General of the Federation even mooted the possibility of declaring a state of emergency in Anambra ahead of the 2021 gubernatorial poll, underscoring the gravity of the challenges facing the state.

The identity of the "unknown gunmen" responsible for the escalating violence in Nigeria's once-peaceful South-East region has become a point of contention, with two distinct schools of thought emerging. On one side, the Nigerian government and its security agencies have asserted that these attacks can be directly attributed to members of the proscribed Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) and its 'paramilitary wing, the Eastern Security Network (ESN). Penultimate former Inspector General of Police, Mohammed Adamu, went so far as to directly link the April 2021 assaults on police and correctional facilities in Imo State to IPOB/ESN elements. This position was echoed by the former IGP, Alkali Usman, who instructed police in the South-East to adopt an uncompromising stance, even going as far as to say they should "kill them all" without waiting for further orders when dealing with "Biafra secessionist groups".

However, IPOB adamantly denied any involvement in the 2021 Imo attacks, which lasted for several hours and maintained that its separatist agitation remains resolutely non-violent in nature. In contrast, the opposing school of thought argues that the surge in insecurity plaguing the South-East cannot be so simplistically pinned on IPOB/ESN alone, without thorough investigation. This view suggests that more complex, multifaceted factors may be at play, potentially including the involvement of criminal elements or even the possibility of false flag operations - a disturbing transformation that has turned the once-peaceful region into a virtual "killing field". Leaning on the conspiracy theory of a false flag operation, this view suggests the attacks may be the work of external forces, designed to undermine the Igbo ethnic group's political aspirations ahead of the 2023 elections. The escalating violence in Nigeria's South-East has led to a heavy-handed response from the government, further exacerbating the crisis in the region.

The Igbo elite, including prominent figures like Senator Enyinnaya Abaribe and late Chief Emmanuel Iwuanyanwu, have pointed to early warnings of a mass influx of Islamic

extremists into the more southerly parts of Nigeria as a potential factor behind the "dastardly activities of the unknown gunmen". This alternative perspective challenges the government's narrative and calls for a more nuanced, evidence-based approach to addressing the complex security challenges in the South-East. Ultimately, the divergent views on the identity and motives of the "unknown gunmen" have only served to deepen the divide and further exacerbate the prevailing socio-economic and security crises in the region, as the heavy-handed military response continues to disrupt daily life and economic activities. With specific reference to the April 5th Easter Monday attacks in Owerri, late Chief Emmanuel Iwuanyanwu, a prominent Igbo leader, asserted that such attacks on key federal government institutions were "strange to the Igbo" (Uzoma, 2021). He not only exonerated the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) and its Eastern Security Network (ESN) from the attacks, but also attributed them to "foreigners" whose intention was to "destroy the South-East" (Uzoma, 2021).

This viewpoint is widely shared in the South-East region, where the Igbo political elite believe the rapid succession of attacks on INEC facilities, security agencies, and prominent Nigerians are part of a coordinated effort to "discredit people from the South-East and scuttle their quest for a Nigerian president of Igbo origin in 2023" (Uzoma, 2021). In light of the Nigerian government's "hasty predisposition" to blame IPOB/ESN for the insecurity in the South-East Senator Enyinnaya Abaribe has called for a more nuanced and thorough investigation by the relevant security agencies (Nathaniel, 2021). He argues that "the time for a knee-jerk approach and fixated mindset in the investigation of criminal attacks" has passed, and that "it is not enough to be driven by a certain mindset, which has the tendency of foreclosing other probable leads and motives" (Nathaniel, 2021). Instead, Abaribe emphasizes that "this time calls for deeper introspection and painstaking investigation" to "nip these dangerous dimensions in the bud if the country must be rescued from falling off the cliff" (Nathaniel, 2021). The divergent perspectives between the government's position and the Igbo political elite's views highlight the complex and politically-charged nature of the security challenges in the South-East, which require a more balanced and evidence-based approach to effectively address the root causes and prevent further escalation of the crisis.

The foregoing suggests that there is no consensus on the actual identity of the "unknown gunmen" responsible for the destruction of public utilities and bloodshed in the South-East region (Oyero, 2021; Ufuoma, 2021). IPOB's repeated denial of culpability in these "dastardly acts" implies that the armed attacks in the zone might extend beyond the separatist organization and its militia, the Eastern Security Network (ESN) (Oyero, 2021; Ufuoma, 2021). This conclusion largely resonates with the position of Senator Hope Uzodinma, the Governor of Imo State, who asserts that "criminal groups, many of who are sponsored by political actors and institutions, are responsible for violent attacks in the South-East" (Oyero, 2021; Ufuoma, 2021). Irrespective of the actual identity of the "unknown gunmen", however, there is a general acknowledgement that the loss of human lives and livelihood opportunities, as well as the destruction of state institutions, has increased exponentially in the region since December 2020 (Oyero, 2021; Ufuoma, 2021). The divergent views on the perpetrators of the violence underscore the complexity of the security challenges in the South-East, which require a comprehensive and impartial investigation to uncover the true nature and motives behind the attacks. This, in turn, has significant implications for peacebuilding efforts in Nigeria, as the lack of a shared

understanding of the problem can hinder the development of effective and sustainable solutions.

Conclusion

This study delved into the profound security challenges afflicting the Igbo heartland, particularly the South-East region of Nigeria. At the heart of this crisis lies the complex interplay between the resurgence of Biafran separatist aspirations, the heavy-handed response of the state, and the emergence of the elusive "unknown gunmen" who have wreaked havoc across the region. Scholarly discourse on the revival of Biafran nationalism since the return to democratic rule in 1999 has been extensive. However, the existing literature has yet to fully account for how the persistence of state repression has continued to fuel the Biafran separatist movement. While the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) unequivocally favours a confrontational approach to Igbo nationalism, in contrast to the more conservative Igbo nationalist factions, its quest for sovereign statehood has evolved from a non-violent strategy to an armed separatist movement. This transformation has been a direct response to the coordinated efforts of the Nigerian state to repress the neo-Biafran agitators. The study's findings underscore the complex and multifaceted nature of the security crisis in the South-East. The lack of consensus on the true identity of the "unknown gunmen" responsible for the widespread destruction of public infrastructure and loss of life points to the need for a comprehensive, impartial investigation to uncover the true nature and motives behind the attacks. This, in turn, has significant implications for Nigeria's broader peacebuilding efforts, as the absence of a shared understanding of the problem can hinder the development of effective and sustainable solutions.

As the country grapples with the persistent insecurity in the South-East, this study serves as a sobering reminder that lasting peace can only be achieved through a nuanced approach that addresses the deep-seated grievances and historical tensions underlying the Biafran separatist sentiment, while also ensuring that the legitimate security concerns of the state are addressed in a manner that respects the rights and dignities of all Nigerians. The pervasive nature of insecurity across Nigeria casts doubt on the notion that the South-East region could remain insulated from the growing wave of civil unrest engulfing the country. Indeed, the security challenges confronting the Igbo heartland, particularly the menace of the "unknown gunmen", are a reflection of the broader sectarian violence and political instability gripping the nation. More than two decades after the return to civilian rule, the persistent Biafran separatist agitations in Nigeria serve as a sobering testament to the country's rhetorical and hypocritical approach to nation-building. It also underscores the failure of Nigeria's traditional kinetic methods in addressing dissent and political discontent.

The Nigerian state's reliance on a repressive approach - marked by the arrest, illegal detention, and unprovoked shooting of pro-Biafra protesters, the failed attempt to jam the transmission of Radio Biafra, the invasion of the Afaraukwu home of Nnamdi Kanu, the proscription of IPOB, and the extraordinary rendition of Kanu from Kenya - has proven ineffective in stemming the tide of Biafran separatist sentiments in the Igbo region. If anything, the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) has demonstrated a worrying capacity to prosecute an armed separatist struggle within the Nigerian federation. Clearly, a fundamental shift in approach is needed to address the underlying issues driving the resurgence of Biafran nationalism. A multi-pronged strategy that goes beyond the heavy-

handed tactics of the past is essential if Nigeria is to achieve lasting peace and stability, not just in the South-East, but across the entire country. The persistent insecurity in the region serves as a stark reminder that the nation's traditional reliance on coercion and repression is woefully inadequate in the face of deep-seated grievances and aspirations for self-determination.

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