



GOVERNANCE DEFICITS, MARGINALIZATION, AND SECESSIONIST MOBILIZATION: THE BIAFRA AGITATIONS (MASSOB/IPOB) IN NIGERIA'S FOURTH REPUBLIC

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Abstract

The social contract obligates states to provide security, equitable development, and political inclusion for citizens. When governments fail these constitutional duties, chaos and secessionist movements often ensue. Nigeria has experienced persistent political unrest from the colonial era to the Fourth Republic, with unresolved National questions manifesting in crises, including the Kano riot (1953), census crisis (1962), civil war (1967-1970), June 12th annulment (1993), and contemporary Biafran secessionist agitations. This paper examines how governance failures, specifically political exclusion, fiscal inequity, and coercive state response, influence Biafran secessionist movements (MASSOB and IPOB) in Nigeria's Fourth Republic (1999–present). Adopting a phenomenology design and qualitative method, data from in-depth interviews (n=7 traditional rulers, 3 family members of agitators) and twelve Focus Group Discussions (teachers, street urchins, IPOB/MASSOB members) across Abia, Anambra, and Imo States were thematically analyzed. Relative Deprivation Theory provides the analytical lens. Findings reveal that: (1) 100% of respondents identified unequal ministerial appointments, resource allocation inequities, and corruption as governance-driven triggers; (2) the 1966 counter-coup and civil war atrocities remain unresolved grievances; (3) coercive state response paradoxically escalates rather than diminishes secessionist mobilization; (4) the "oil greed" thesis for Biafra is rejected by 100% of respondents. The paper concludes that governance deficits, not ethnic atavism, drive secessionist agitations. Recommendations include a Truth and Reconciliation Commission, constitutional fiscal federalism reforms, political inclusion quotas for South-East Nigeria, and a negotiated dialogue framework through traditional institutions.

Keywords: Governance, national question, secession, Biafra, IPOB, MASSOB

INTRODUCTION

Political upheavals such as military coups, civil wars, and secessionism are some of the features associated with postcolonial African nations. These events arise from failure to solve issues related to the National Question. Recent studies on governance failures indicate that failure to provide fair representation, resource distribution, and protection of minorities would lead to secessionism (Dramalio, Drymouras, & Theodosi, 2025; Margaretha, 2026). The idea of governance failure has become fundamental to what was described earlier as the National Question, which refers to the difficulty of organizing the interaction among different ethnicities, languages, and cultures under one state system.

As Africa's most populous and prosperous country, Nigeria offers an appropriate case



illustration. According to Tamuno (1970), the first incidence of secessionism happened just after the 1914 amalgamation when Northern politicians accused British authorities of making a mistake by uniting the Northern and Southern Protectorates. After the Ibadan Constitutional Conference of 1950, the Emir of Zaria insisted that the North be represented at fifty percent in the central legislature of Nigeria, a request accepted by colonialists to avoid secession. In 1953, the Yorubas threatened to secede if Lagos City was not governed in the Western Region of Nigeria (Awofeso, 2017). Therefore, even prior to Nigeria's independence, the elements of secessionism were present.

However, the first turning point happened in 1966. Following the January 15, 1966, military coup, the assassination of several Northern politicians and the installation of a Christian leader of Igbo descent (General Aguiyi-Ironsi) caused another military coup in July 1966, which led to the killing of General Ironsi and several other leaders. The July coup created a ground for widespread violence against Igbos residing in the Northern Region. Achebe (2012) notes that 30,000-50,000 people were killed and over 1 million displaced as they fled to the Eastern Region. In this period, Lt. Colonel Emeka Odumegwu Ojukwu announced the Republic of Biafra, and the subsequent 30-month war cost Nigeria over one million lives, most of whom perished from starvation as a result of the blockade imposed by the Federal Government (Ezeani, 2016).

Following the fall of Biafra in January 1970, Nigeria's Head of State announced a policy of "no victor, no vanquished". However, according to Odoemene (2012), "the root causes of the war have not been addressed". While the government's approach to post-war reconstruction seemed reconciliatory, it further worsened the problems. Specifically, more appointments were made for Northerners, construction projects were carried out in the North, and the security sector continued to be dominated by Northerners (Ayokhai & Peter, 2016). As a result, secessionism became prevalent in the Fourth Republic of Nigeria. In 1999 and 2009, the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) and the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) organizations emerged, respectively. According to Frankfurt (2011, p. 57), "When I returned to Igbo land for brief visits between 2000-2007, the option of new Biafra was widely discussed."

While the historical context of secessionism in Nigeria is well known and the issue has gained momentum again in the Fourth Republic, current literature exhibits at least three significant deficiencies. First, most scholarly works tend to use the narrative history of the 1967-1970 civil war or theories about conspiracies among Nigerian elites while largely ignoring the contemporary motivations of ordinary citizens, especially the younger generation, to engage in secessionism without any lived memory of the conflict (Achebe, 2012; Ezeani, 2016; Akinyetun, 2018). Second, although the government uses coercion as a means of solving the problem (Operation Python Dance, proscription of IPOB as a terrorist organization, and arresting leaders



such as Nnamdi Kanu), secessionism does not seem to abate; nevertheless, there is still no study on how the government's coercion strategy backfires. While Madueke (2025) and Onyishi (2025) have started addressing this deficiency, more grassroots data needs to be collected. Third, while many policymakers argue that secessionism is fueled by "oil greed" or ambitions of individuals such as Nnamdi Kanu, no thorough research has been done to test this claim among ordinary Nigerians in the South-Eastern region.

Thus, the urgent need to understand what drives secessionist agitation in the Fourth Republic of Nigeria motivates this study. Specifically, it seeks answers to the following research questions: What governance deficits in terms of political exclusion, fiscal inequities, and coercive measures used by the government are behind secessionist movements in Nigeria's Fourth Republic, and why do the former not lead to secessionism resolution despite coercion? To do so, this paper focuses on the opinions of traditional rulers, family members of secessionist leaders, and ordinary people (young generation, educators, and movement members) in Abia, Anambra, and Imo States.

Nigeria, being Africa's most populous nation, has faced threats of secession ever since its amalgamation in 1914. The process of uniting the two regions had been opposed from the very beginning. Adegoke 2025 reports that the first secessionist movement was initiated by the North, as a response to the amalgamation, which its political elite, Ahmadu Bello, regarded as a "mistake of 1914". This statement reflects the fear of Northern elites of subordinating their unique religious and political system to that of the colonial authority. Thus, the idea of secession had emerged even before Nigeria's independence.

In 1950, during the Ibadan Constitutional Conference, the Emir of Zaria made a threat by proposing that the Northern Protectorate be granted a half-representation in the central legislature (Anyaele, 2003). Again, this demand, as recorded by Anyaele (2003), was a tactic used to keep veto power against any amendments in the constitution. In order to preserve the cohesion of the newly established Nigerian state, the colonial masters conceded to the demand. The problem was still unresolved, for by 1953, the Yorubas, under Chief Obafemi Awolowo's leadership, announced their secession threat in case Lagos – the capital territory of the federation – was not administered in the Western region (Awofeso, 2017). The 1964 federal election malpractice marked a turning point. That election, widely condemned as rigged, shifted secessionist agitation decisively toward the Igbo faction. As Ezeani (2016) argued, the cause of the Igbo's attempt to secede in 1964 was influenced by no other factor than the perceived malpractice of the Federal election of December 1964. The election fraud convinced many Eastern elites that the Nigerian federation was structurally incapable of delivering free and fair political competition. This disillusionment was followed by the first armed rebellion in post-independence Nigeria: Isaac



Boro's 12-day insurgency from February 23 to March 8, 1966 (Awofeso, 2017). Boro's declaration of the "Niger Delta Peoples Republic" was a precursor to the larger Biafran secession, demonstrating that militant separatism had become a viable political strategy.

The watershed moment, however, arrived with the coup and counter-coup of 1966. The January 15, 1966 coup, which scholars of politics have described as the springboard or catalyst for all contemporary agitations in Nigeria's polity, recorded more casualties from the Northern part of the country. This bred deep resentment among Northern political elites, which in turn influenced the July 1966 counter-coup (Ezeani, 2016). The counter-coup resulted in the assassination of General Aguiyi-Ironsi, Nigeria's first military Head of State, and triggered systematic pogroms against Igbos living in the North. As Achebe (2012) documented, an estimated 30,000 to 50,000 Igbos were killed, and over one million fled to the Eastern region. The pogroms were not spontaneous communal riots but organized violence with state complicity, and they fundamentally shattered Igbo trust in the Nigerian project.

In light of the pogroms that had occurred, coupled with the failure of the Aburi Accord signed in Ghana in January 1967, Lt. Col. Emeka Odumegwu Ojukwu declared the formation of the independent state of Biafra in May 1967. Consequently, the Nigerian Civil War between 1967 and 1970 lasted for thirty months and took over a million lives, most of which were a result of starvation caused by the federal government's imposition of a blockade on Biafra (Achebe, 2012). Finally, with Biafra surrendering in January 1970, the federal government declared its policy of 'no victor, no vanquished'. However, as Odoemene (2012, p. 8) observes, "the root causes of the war have not been addressed and this has tainted the memory of Biafra." In this case, the federal government's policy of post-war reconstruction could not be regarded as genuinely reconciliatory because most of the Igbo communities viewed such policies as oppressive. For example, the decision by the federal government to change the currency (popularly called '20 pound policy') was seen as a means of confiscating the savings of the Igbo community. Besides, the indigenization and federal character policy, although aimed at enhancing national unity, led to Igbos being sidelined in federal appointments for almost ten years (Ezeani, 2016).

The main grievances, thus, have not been addressed, hence remaining unsolved to this day, including marginalization, unaddressed pogroms of 1966, and post-war reconstruction policies (Ezeani, 2016). As Soyinka (2006, p. 101) puts it succinctly, "When a people has been subjected to a degree of inhuman violation for which there is no other word but genocide, they have the right to seek an identity apart from their aggressor." These grievances have continued through the years through familial narratives and cultural memory.



The issue has continued to be a major one for Nigeria in its fourth republic (1999- present). Despite the transition to civilian governance in 1999, the issue of marginalization and national question in Nigeria was not solved but only resurfaced within a different context – democracy. As Frankfurt (2011) states, democracy in 1999 did not solve the problem of marginalization or the national question in Nigeria. On the contrary, it enhanced the deprivation of the minority groups, thus resulting in ethnic and religious intolerance in Northern Nigeria. This time, the Igbos were amongst the victims of this democratic deficit.

The first organization formed during the fourth republic in relation to the national question was Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) in 1999. Established by Ralph Uwazurike in Imo State, this movement was based on the philosophy of self-determination developed by Uwazurike in India when he studied as a political scientist and a lawyer. It was claimed that MASSOB was a non-violent organization having 25 steps towards the creation of the sovereign state of Biafra (Frankfurt, 2011). However, the Nigerian government declared MASSOB as a violent organization, leading to the arrests of Uwazurike along with 280 other members of MASSOB (Biafra News, 2010; Shirbon, 2006).

Secondly, Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) emerged in 2009 under the chairmanship of Nnamdi Kanu from Isikama Afara, Abia State. Having studied political economics at London Guildhall University (currently London Metropolitan University), Kanu adopted calling for a referendum as a strategy to break away legally from Nigeria (Sahara Reporter, 2015). By adopting social media and radio Biafra as a means for gaining international and municipal attention, IPOB was able to develop an armed security force known as the Eastern Security Network. IPOB was later proscribed as a terrorist organization in 2017 by the Nigerian government (Daily Post, 27 May 2017). Hence, secessionist movements in the fourth republic of Nigeria have not been a mere historical anomaly, but a direct result of the Nigerian state's inability to address the governance deficit that led to the original Biafran secession.

1.1 Statement of the Research Problem

Existing literature on Biafran secession in the Fourth Republic of Nigeria has mainly relied on historical accounts of the 1967-1970 Civil War, elite conspiracy theory, and legal approach where secession is viewed as a legal problem (Achebe, 2012; Ezeani, 2016; Akinyetun, 2018). These studies have provided significant contributions, although they might turn out to be stale in two critical aspects. Firstly, these studies tend to view Igbos as a homogeneous victim community without taking into consideration how the young generation, without firsthand experience of civil war, constructs grievances using unemployment, digital activism, and everyday state predation. Secondly, they tend to look at the government's reaction as being static, i.e., arresting and proscribing individuals without taking into account how coercive governance enhances secessionist mobilization via social media and diaspora funding.



Furthermore, the Nigerian government's claim regarding Biafrans' desire for independence being either the ambition of Nnamdi Kanu or a mere reminiscence of Biafran history does not adequately explain why secessionist sentiments continue despite repeated arrests of Kanu, military action Operation Python Dance, and proscription of IPOB (Mbagwu, 2017; Adibe, 2017). Consequently, a problem statement for this research would need to inquire the following: What are the governance deficits (political inclusion, fiscal equity, security reform, and conflict resolution mechanisms) that continue driving secessionist agitation in the Fourth Republic of Nigeria, and what is it that makes traditional government reactions (coercion, proscription, and elite negotiation) fail to address such governance deficits? This study will take off from stale elite-centered approaches to Biafran secessionism and look at how current governance deficits are being narrated among the ordinary citizens in South-East Nigeria.

1.2 Research Questions

The study will seek to answer the following research questions:

1. What governance deficits (political exclusion, fiscal inequity, security bias, corruption) explain the persistence of Biafra secessionist agitations in Nigeria's Fourth Republic?
2. How do historical grievances from the 1966 counter-coup and 1967–1970 civil war shape contemporary MASSOB and IPOB mobilization?
3. What conflict resolution mechanisms, such as negotiation, amnesty, constitutional reforms, or truth and reconciliation processes, can address the root causes of secessionist demands?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Conceptual Clarifications

2.1.1 Secessionist Agitation; Secessionist agitation is described as the demand by a sub-national group to secede from an existing sovereign nation and create a new independent entity using part of the land previously occupied by the former entity (Mandala, 2009; Akinyetun, 2018). Unlike self-determination (which involves autonomy within an existing nation) and dissolution (where both parties voluntarily dissolve the union). The definition of secession adopted for this study is the process by which “A territory attempts to separate itself from the entity it belongs to and establish a new state.”

2.1.2 National Question

National Question: as noted by Oluwasuji, (2006), is a difficult venture to define, because the concept can mean different things to diverse people depending on the individuals' standpoint, or the view the individuals adopted in analyzing the concept. For instance, political ideology, school of thought, tribe, and religious identity, could influence the way individual persons interprets National question. According to Naanen in Oluwasuji, (2006), National question could mean different things to diverse people based on their interests or what is called group desire, want and the needful. Additionally Naanen, (2001) observed:



...to the Islamic community, the National question could mean the struggle for the enthronement of the sharia code in the polity. To the Christian, it could mean the maintenance of a secular State. To those who believe in ethnicity as the central mediating force in Nigeria, the National question may mean ethnic empowerment. To those who sees Nigeria in terms of a geo-political divide it could mean the control of political power by either the north or the south. To the oil producing State of the Niger Delta, the National question may be synonymous with the struggle for resource control and self-determination. To the middle belt elite, their quest for an identity for the region outside the control of the Islamic North could be integral to the National question (P. 216)

2.1.3 Governance

Governance can be defined as the mechanisms, institutions, and practices involved in how power is wielded in managing political, economic, and social affairs in a country (World Bank, 2007). The main aspects of governance pertinent to this research include: (a) political inclusion (representation of certain groups in policymaking); (b) fiscal federalism (resource allocation between national and sub-national governments); (c) security governance (disposition of security forces); (d) accountability (anti-corruption and rule of law).

2.1.4 MASSOB and IPOB

Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB): Founded in 1999 by Ralph Uwazuruike (a political scientist and lawyer educated in India). This group was organized on the basis of "Biafra Government in Exile" and "Biafra Shadow Government," promoting peaceful civil disobedience. In 2005, the Nigerian government labeled it as a terrorist organization, and Ralph Uwazuruike was arrested (Biafra News, 2010; Shirbon, 2006).

IPOB (Indigenous People of Biafra): Formed in 2009 by Nnamdi Kanu (a British-Nigerian graduate of Political Economics from London Metropolitan University). IPOB adopted a referendum strategy and later formed an armed wing (Eastern Security Network), leading to its proscription as a terrorist organization by the Nigerian government in 2017 (Daily Post, 27 May).

2.2 National Question and the Rise of Biafran Separatist Aspirations

One of the longest-standing questions facing Nigeria as a country is the national question. National questions encompass issues surrounding representation and participation, allocation of resources, ethnic representation, federalism, citizenship, among others. In the era of Nigeria's Fourth Republic, these issues have remained unsolved, leading to continued dissatisfaction among various ethnic nationalities, including the Igbo people of southeastern Nigeria. The resurgence of Biafran separatist groups such as Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) and Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) has been widely attributed to the failure of the Nigerian state to address these issues satisfactorily.

According to Abada et al.,(2020) the national question is one of the key ways through which IPOB can be analyzed. The authors posit that demands for self-determination and secession stem



from unresolved grievances related to political exclusion and lack of fair participation in the Nigerian federation. In effect, the persistence of secessionist agitation shows that political and constitutional reform measures undertaken in the Fourth Republic have not been adequate in addressing the concerns of many groups regarding representation and autonomy.

Ezemenaka and Prouza(2016) share a similar perspective on the topic under investigation. According to these scholars, the resurrection of Biafra is not only about contemporary politics but represents a continuation of unresolved issues associated with the Nigerian Civil War and its aftermaths. Notably, many adherents of the Biafran nationalistic ideology view the political dispensation following the war as being incapable of offering the Igbo people opportunities for reintegration and advancement within the Nigerian state context. Unresolved issues concerning belonging and citizenship play a critical role in fuelling secessionist ambitions.

Relationship Between Governance Deficits and Separatism

The theme of the relationship between governance deficits and the growth of separatist mobilization features prominently in the extant literature. Studies point out that governance deficits are some of the factors responsible for the resurgence of Biafran agitations.

In a similar vein, Osuchukwu et al. (2025) claim that the rise of IPOB cannot be separated from the broader crisis of the Nigerian state. According to the authors' arguments, poor governance has led to the weakening of citizens' confidence in state institutions. Moreover, the inability of the state to guarantee security, economic opportunities, and equitable development, among other aspects, has resulted in the flourishing of secessionist movements such as IPOB.

Iteke and Okonkwo(2025) take a similar line in their research work. The authors argue that the inability of the government to address socioeconomic problems in the region has contributed to the resurgence of Biafran separatist aspirations. According to their assertions, separatist mobilizations are often used by citizens as mechanisms for expressing their dissatisfaction with the inability of the Nigerian state to fulfill its civic responsibilities.

According to Aliyu (2022), another reason that fuels the rise of separatist aspirations is the issue of deficient leadership. In his study, Aliyu found out that political leaders have failed to promote governance approaches that are capable of accommodating the interests of Nigeria's diverse ethnic and regional groups. As a result, this approach intensifies feelings of alienation among marginalized groups. The researcher concludes that national unity in the country largely depends on how the political leaders solve problems of equity and justice.

Perceptions of Marginalization, Social Injustice, and Collective Grievance

The problem of marginalization and social injustice plays a major role in driving support for the Biafran movements, according to the extant literature. Various studies point out that without examining public perceptions of Biafrans' relationship with the state, it would be difficult to comprehend the popularity of IPOB.



Nnam (2024) examines public perceptions of Biafran social movements in southeastern Nigeria. The author discovered that the region's population perceives the country's political and socio-economic structures as politically marginalized and economically deprived relative to other regions in the country. In this way, the sense of collective grievance drives Biafrans to support separatist organizations like IPOB.

The findings of Nnam(2024) align with those of Abada et al.(2020). The authors argue that the inability of the Nigerian state to address the national questions relating to equity, justice, and representation has reinforced the feeling of marginalization among Igbo people, thus strengthening separatist sentiments. From this perspective, agitation for Biafra is considered a mechanism of dealing with historical and contemporary injustices against the Igbo people.

According to Anugwom(2018), perceptions of marginalization can also be influenced by ethnicity and historical memories. In his study, the researcher found out that ethnic-based mobilization continues to thrive as a result of historical memories associated with past experiences during and after the civil war. Memories of civil war have become important tools in reinforcing separatist aspirations because they symbolize experiences of historical injustice.

Historical Development of Biafran Movements

Over time, Biafran movements have evolved in terms of objectives, leadership, and strategies of communication. In this regard, Ayoyo(2020) examines the evolution of the Biafran secessionist movement in Nigeria from 1967 to 2022. According to Ayoyo's findings, although the original Biafran objective was crushed militarily, the grievances associated with this objective continued to exist for years after.

The author claims that after Biafran independence failed, MASSOB was formed to achieve the same goal but in a less violent manner. However, due to increasing frustration in the southeastern part of the country over the course of years, a new organization known as IPOB rose to prominence. This organization has proved to be more successful and capable of attracting global attention than its predecessor.

The above discussion suggests that issues surrounding the national question continue to remain relevant in shaping Nigeria's contemporary politics despite the evolution of separatist organizations.

Role of Symbolic Politics in Mobilizing Support

In addition to issues discussed above, another theme that emerges from the extant literature is that of symbolic politics. The idea here is that ethnonationalist movements exploit collective memory, myths, symbols, and narratives to construct group identity and legitimize political demands.



Firstly, Ejiofor (2025) posits that symbolism plays an integral role in the quest for self-determination in Nigeria. Using the power of historical memories and symbols of oppression, IPOB has succeeded in intensifying ethnonationalist consciousness among its members. Symbolic representation of Biafra, according to this research, serves as an instrument for boosting collective consciousness among the people as well as a means for resisting state domination.

In addition, Anugwom (2018) highlights the importance of memory in present-day Nigerian politics. The experience of warfare, coupled with marginalization during peacetime serves to foster the development of a shared identity that promotes separatist mobilization. Thus, the aforementioned symbolic elements go a long way toward explaining why Biafran nationalism resonates with many individuals decades after the civil war was officially ended.

National Integration, Radicalization, and Deradicalization

The question arises whether national integration processes are successfully implemented to counter the growing threat of separatism in Nigeria. Uchime and Ewa (2025) examine this topic in their research and argue that persistent ethnic cleavages hamper efforts at achieving national integration. As a result, mechanisms intended to promote national cohesion prove insufficient in addressing grievances at a deeper structural level.

Additionally, Daniya (2021) discusses the phenomenon of radicalization and deradicalization in Nigeria. According to the researcher, the failure to address grievances coupled with a lack of adequate government response fosters a conducive environment for radicalization. In turn, efficient management of conflict requires the adoption of measures aimed at addressing the root cause of the problem and creating opportunities for political involvement.

Another consequence of separatist agitation is analyzed by Igwedibia et al. (2024). Focusing on IPOB's sit-at-home directives in southeastern Nigeria, the researchers point out that these actions led to economic and social disruption that affected peacebuilding and development efforts in the region. Although these tactics serve to strengthen solidarity among supporters, they may pose certain problems for the surrounding communities.

CAUSAL FACTORS OF INCESSANT SECESSIONIST AGITATION IN NIGERIA'S FOURTH REPUBLIC

This section of the paper discusses what contributes to the continuous secessionist agitations in Nigeria's fourth Republic. Scholars emphasize that persistent secessionist agitation in Nigeria reflects governance failures and chronic socio-economic grievances. Studies consistently cite enduring marginalization, economic inequality, and historical injustice as core drivers of the Biafra movement. For example, Osuchukwu et al. (2025) identify "perceived marginalization, economic grievances, state-sponsored violence, and a sense of historical injustice" as the primary



catalysts of IPOB support. Empirical surveys echo this: Nnam (2024) shows that social injustice in state institutions explains nearly all pro-Biafra mobilization. Leadership failures and structural dysfunction are also blamed: Aliyu (2022) argues that “leadership failure and structural dysfunction” triggered the rise of modern separatist groups. In sum, scholars agree that entrenched inequities and periodic state breakdown – especially affecting the Igbo – have embedded a grievance narrative. Continued neglect of fairness and inclusion in governance sustains the Biafra agitation. Though these causes are not quite different from the causes of the Nigerian Civil War, the researchers examine the positions of current indigenous literature on the subject matter in the fourth Republic. Odoemene (2012) observed that:

...the trust remains that the root causes of the war have not been addressed and this has tainted the memory of Biafra. For instance, one of the beliefs upon which Biafra was founded was that the Nigeria task is a façade ensnared by fraud. The general motif put forward by the Igbos is that little or nothing has changed in Nigeria following Biafra’s defeat (P.8).

The position of Odoemene (2012) on the rationale of the Igbo community in Nigeria is traceable to unresolved National question. Resentment has been pointed out by current literature on secessionist agitation in Nigeria’s Fourth Republic. In support of the National question as a major cause of secessionist agitations in Nigeria, Dickson (2013) states that Nigerians ethnic conundrum and unresolved National question, which include abuse of power, ethnicity, and resource control, are major challenges of Nigeria. In agreement with the above-mentioned points, Ayokhai and Peter (2016, 24), uphold that “the latent problems underlying inter-group conflicts in Nigeria can be unbundled to include: the National question, a clash in groups’ identities and aspirations; and inter-group rivalry and competition”. Ayokhai and Peter (2016) further defended their position on the national question as a major cause of conflict in Nigeria, by citing examples of the national question in Nigeria, as the national census question and electoral malpractice. The researcher is of the opinion that the above-mentioned unresolved national questions have created problems between the north and south in Nigeria polity.

2.3 Theoretical Underpinning

Relative Deprivation (RD) is a theory that was advanced back in 1949 by Samuel Stouffer as 'post-facto' explanation to the surprising results that came out of the American Soldier series (Pettigrew & Smith, 2015). The researchers observed that (RD) started as a concept but over time, developed into a theory applicable to many social sciences variables, especially relevant to social justice issues (Smith, Pettigrew, Pippin & Bialosiewicz, 2002). Relative Deprivation (RD) as defined by Pettigrew et al. (2015, p.2), is a situation where “there is a judgment that one or one’s group is disadvantaged compared to a relevant referent, and that this judgment invokes feelings of anger, resentment and entitlement”. Apart from the above definitions of relative deprivation, the researchers also argued that relative deprivation consists of three basic psychological factors that any person or group of individuals who are experiencing (RD) must



undergo. These factors include; (i) Cognitive Comparisons (ii) Cognitive Appraisal where one or his/her group considers himself to be disadvantaged; (iii) The above-mentioned disadvantage must be perceived to be unfair and as such, triggers angry resentments. In further support of the above definitions of relative deprivation, Smith et al. (2012), asserted that without the fulfillment of these three basic indicators of (RD), no individual or group can be said to be marginalized. Moreover, it is important to note that scholars like: Ted Robert Gurr (1970); Adekanye (2007), Richardson, (2011); Mbawgu (2017) and Martin (2013) among others are in agreement with Pettigrew et al. (2015:2) concerning the above-mentioned utility of relative deprivation theory.

Secondly, in line with the above assertion, Smith et al., (2012) agree with the postulation that there are three basic psychological aspects that define relative deprivation theory. Hence, the present study is an attempt at mirroring Nigeria's secessionist agitation as outlined in the three basic indicators above. The first indicator of aggression arising out of relative deprivation theory is that it arises when victims discover their deprivation/marginalization through cognitive observation. Putting the above assertion in perspective with the causes of the coup of 15th-16th January 1966, one agrees that the coup was a consequence of marginalization and deprivation in the Nigerian polity according to Ezeani (2016). The aggression as motivated by cognitive observations arising from the acts of corruption and marginalization led to the coup. The perpetrators of the coup were motivated by a sense of Nationalism to free Nigerians from the exploitative practices of some elites, but their failure to follow through with their plan eventually turned the coup into the greatest National crisis in Nigerian Federation leading to the pogrom of the Igbos and Nigeria civil war of 1967-1970. When the causes of the coup, counter-coup and subsequent Nigeria civil war are analyzed, one discovers that feeling of deprivation and marginalization played a prominent role. The reaction of the Hausa/Fulani to this coup led to the pogrom of the igbo in northern Nigeria, counter-coup and the eventual civil war. Meanwhile, the call for secession in 1967 arose due to deprivation, counter coup and pogrom. According to the argument by the probiafrans such as; Odoemene (2012); Dickson (2013); Ayokhai & Peter (2016); Jideofor & Adibe (2016) and Ezeani (2016) among others, the pogrom of the igbos in the northern Nigeria, counter coup and extrajudicial killings of igbo in the civil war are just some of the causes for the resumption of secessionist agitations in Nigeria's fourth republic. According to the arguments presented by Mbagwu (2017, p.95), one of the limitations of relative deprivation theory is that aggression still occurs despite the presence of the three basic psychological conditions of RD. This cannot apply to this study since all cases of secessionist agitation in Nigeria arose as a result of relative deprivation and marginalization in the country. However, one observes that one of the weaknesses of relative deprivation theory in the context of this study is that relative deprivation theory failed in its attempt to diagnose the causes of Biafra secessionist



agitations. Rather than diagnosing, the theory failed in finding solutions to the problem of secessionist agitation in Biafra. Therefore, in order to address the above shortcomings of relative deprivation theory, the study will provide a possible panacea to the problem in the concluding remarks of this paper.

3. METHODOLOGY

The methodology employed a phenomenological approach to investigate the lived experiences of marginalization and secessionist mobilization. The population was the residents of Abia, Anambra, and Imo States. Purposive sampling was used to select three LGAs (Umuahia North, Nnewi North, and Okigwe) that have produced the majority of Biafra movement leaders and the highest number of agitation participants.

Data was gathered using twelve Focus Group Discussions stratified into teachers, unemployed young people, IPOB members, and MASSOB members (a total of ninety-six participants) and seven interviews with traditional rulers and three interviews with family members of Kanu, Ojukwu, and Uwazuruike. Literature search included archival newspaper coverage of 1999-2019, government white paper, and court judgment.

Transcription was done verbatim, and thematically data analysis was performed using NVivo 12. The themes were derived through deduction from research questions and induction from narratives of participants. Inter-coder reliability was confirmed (Cohen's Kappa = 0.84).

Approval to conduct research was obtained from Babcock University. Informed consent was sought from all participants, and confidentiality was ensured. Due to the sensitivity of the topic, audio recording was avoided in IPOB and MASSOB FGDs. Notes taken during interviews and FGDs were cross-checked with participants.

4. HISTORICAL GRIEVANCES AND CONTEMPORARY SECESSIONISM (RQ2)

4.1 1966 Pogroms and Civil War as Unhealed Wounds

Unanimously reported by ten interviewees and FGD participants was that the historical 1966 pogrom and civil war remain fresh memories and a source of contemporary agitation for Biafra. One family member of Ojukwu explained that:

"The story of how our people were slaughtered in the North, not in battle but in their home. Babies, women, and old people in their houses, the world saw it, but still, they blocked us from food supplies and starved us to death. They blockaded Biafra. After the surrender, the world says 'No victor, no vanquished,' but they stole our oil, our land, and our dignity. This was what happened." (IDI-FAM-OJ-01)



It confirms that "the root causes of the war have not been addressed, and therefore it has tainted the memory of Biafra," (Odoemene, 2012, p. 8). Additionally, it validates the RDT framework, where the cognitive comparison between prosperous Igbo before the civil war (1960s—the Igbo were considered one of the wealthiest communities in Nigeria) and the post-war marginalization (discrimination and deliberate non-employment in civil services until the 1980s) generates secessionist anger.

4.2. Intergenerational Transmission of Grievances

Interestingly, younger participants (aged between 18 and 25 in "street urchin" FGDs) expressed similar grievances to their older counterparts, even though they were not born at the time of the civil war. A graduate aged 22 years in Nnewi North reported that:

"My grandfather lost his brother in the war. My father could not get federal employment as 'Igbo' is marked on the application forms. In my days, I also struggled getting a job because they needed an 'indigene certificate'. In addition, there are no jobs offered by my state government, but the federal government gives contracts to its own. Then how can I consider myself Nigerian?" (FGD-SU-NN-04).

The above shows the social reproduction of grievance transmission in families and discrimination (Hamber & Wilson, 2002).

4.3 State Responses to Secessionist agitation: coercion as escalation, not solution

4.3.1 Violence Increases Biafran Secessionists' Support (92% agreement)

One IPOB member in the Okigwe FGD described the effects of the military force in the form of Operation Python Dance:

"Prior to 2017, many Nigerians feared mentioning Biafra. But after the military invaded, killing peaceful protesters, and arresting Kanu, the government has succeeded in creating Biafrans. Many of us now support Biafra because we believe that the government has failed us." (FGD-IPOB-OK-03)

As such, the study found that the government's coercive response towards peaceful protest only escalates secessionist agitation and encourages radicalization (Martin, 2013; Mbagwu, 2017). The government proscription of IPOB as a terrorist organization did not help solve the issue but drove the organization underground and attracted recruitment.

4.3.2 Negotiations Absence as Governance Failure.

This stands in contrast to the Niger Delta approach, where the federal government negotiated with militants, offering amnesty and stipends. The refusal to extend a similar dialogue framework to the South-East was cited as evidence of ethnic bias.

4.4 Rejection of the "Poor Education" Thesis

Contrary to popular claims, 90% of the participants rejected poor education as a factor behind the



agitations for secession. On the contrary, Biafran secessionists have attained very high educational attainments: the founder of Movement for the Actualisation of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) Ralph Uwazurike, has earned both a degree in Political Science and another in Law (trained in India), while Nnamdi Kanu of Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) holds a degree in Political Economics from London Metropolitan University (Sahara Reporters, 2015).

4.5 Discussion of the Findings

Governance Deficits as Triggers of Secessionist Agitation

Political exclusion and unequal ministerial appointments emerged as major triggers of secessionist agitations as reported unanimously by all ten interviewees and FGD participants. In particular, a traditional ruler in Nnewi North highlighted that,

"Since 1999, has any Igbo person been President or Vice President? Yes, we have served in various ministries but never Defense, Interior, and Petroleum. When we complain, the government calls us agitators."* (IDI-TR-03)

This corroborated the findings of Boyle and Englebert (2006) that political exclusions are stronger predictors of secession than economic variables in multiethnic states. It contradicts the claims of the Nigerian Federal Ministry of Information that, "Nigeria employs people for competence not ethnicity" (Federal Ministry of Information, 2018)

Fiscal Inequality and Uneven Development (100% agreement)

All participants reported that unequal fiscal allocations and uneven development contribute to the growth of Biafran secessionist agitations. For instance, an IPOB member in the Okigwe FGD emphasized that:

"We pay taxes. Our markets generate billions for the government through import duties, but do you see the condition of our roads? The Enugu-Port Harcourt expressway has resulted in many deaths even more than the civil war. Look at the road condition in the North, everything there is brand new." (FGD-IPOB-OK-02)

It rejected the claim of anti-Biafra researchers about the role of oil greed as a catalyst for secessionist mobilizations (Ezeani, 2016). As one MASSOB FGD participant remarked, "If oil was the reason, then why did we not secede in 1960 when oil was not discovered in commercial quantities?" (FGD-MASSOB-UM-01)

Historical record shows that the discovery of commercial oil occurred in the 1960s, while the 1964 secessionist agitation was prior to the existence of significant oil deposits.

Corruption as Institutionalized Governance Failure (92% agreement)

In eleven out of twelve FGDs, corrupt practices were mentioned as institutionalized failures leading to secessionist agitation. Specifically, a teacher in the Umuahia North FGD remarked that:



"When politicians steal billions without any punishment, and the perpetrators of these heinous acts come from the north or west, yet Igbo politicians who steal end up in jail, it is clear that the government discriminates against Igbo." (FGD-TCH-UM-03)

This perceived injustice (i.e., impunity of northern politicians and punishment of Igbo politicians) was identified as one of the drivers of secessionist agitation. For instance, the case of former governor of Abia State, Orji Uzor Kalu was compared to some northern governors who did not face similar prosecution for corruption allegations.

5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In conclusion, a direct connection exists between the ongoing National Question and the frequent secessionist agitations in the Fourth Republic of Nigeria. Indeed, the connection hinges on governance failures, namely the inability to ensure political inclusion, fiscal equality, and proper management of the security sectors. Consequently, to put an end to such agitations, the Nigerian government must introduce governance reforms centered on the themes of equality, development, and cessation of exclusion.

Specifically, the study concludes that the following governance failures lie at the heart of secessionist agitations: the marginalization of the Igbos (a failure in political governance), corruption and bad governance (a failure in institutional governance), the unresolved trauma caused by 1966 counter-coups and civil war (a failure in transitional justice governance), coercive military responses to peaceful agitations (security governance failure), and persistently high unemployment rate in the Eastern region (economic governance failure). As a result of such inequality and lack of development, the Igbos feel that Nigeria's political landscape is constructed to benefit other groups at the expense of the Igbos, irrespective of their enormous contribution to the federal coffers. Unless governance problems are addressed and fixed via comprehensive reform, the National Question will persist, thus leading to persistent secessionist agitations.

Therefore, the following strategies can be proposed as efficient ways to prevent Biafra's endless secessionist agitations:

5.1. Address Political Exclusion

Given the results indicating that 100% of the respondents identify unequal appointments to the posts of ministers and exclusion from the presidency as key triggers, the government should introduce a binding zoning formula that grants the South-East the presidency in 2027 and 25% of federal ministerial posts.

5.2. Correct Inequality in Resource Allocation

To solve the problem of inequality in resource allocation, which was found to contribute to



secessionist agitation, the derivation percentage must be increased from 13% to 50% for onshore resources. Additionally, South-East Development Commission must be properly funded with N100 million to compensate for underdevelopment.

5.3. Create a Truth and Reconciliation Commission

As revealed by the results, the grievances caused by past violations, such as those committed during 1966 pogroms and 1967–1970 civil war have been unresolved and intergenerationally transmitted. Thus, a Truth, Justice and Reconciliation Commission should be introduced to address past atrocities with compensation and a formal government apology.

5.4. Cease the Use of Force

As indicated above, the use of military force escalates secessionist agitations. Hence, the government should immediately abandon coercion in favor of dialogue and initiate unconditional negotiations with Igbo leaders, traditional rulers, and the representatives of IPOB and MASSOB, while considering establishing an amnesty program for the South-East similar to that implemented in the Niger Delta.

5.5 Implement Economic Development Plan for South-East

To tackle the problem of high unemployment rates, which fuel secessionist agitation, the government needs to develop the Enugu-Onitsha-Aba Industrial Corridor, build additional roads around the Second Niger Bridge, and introduce skill acquisition centers in all five South-East states.

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