

No Victor, No Vanquish in the Nigerian Civil War: Analysis of the Recurrent Biafra Separatist Agitation in Southeastern Nigeria

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Abstract

The recurrence of Biafra nation separatist agitation in Nigeria since the civil war between the federal government and southeastern secessionist groups continue to raise concerns about the security and survival of the Nigerian federal state. Hence, while studies have been conducted in this direction, the findings of extant studies have not been harmonized in the literature. This paper examined the factors sustaining separatist agitation in southeastern Nigeria. This study sourced information from secondary materials. Twenty articles published between 2018 and 2023 were purposively and randomly selected from peer-reviewed and open-access journals through the Google search engine using the phrase Biafra separatist agitation in Nigeria. The Greed and grievance, and elite theories were synthesized to analyze the agitation. The study argued that the factors sustaining Biafra separatist agitation in Nigeria can be classified as internal and external. While the internal factors are particular to the country and include military response, corruption, fear of dominance, marginalization, and failed nationalism, external factors include the proliferation of ammunition and the interest of the power blocs. In the class of factors, the elite remains necessary because it is an essential feature of human organization. Hence, the paper concluded that the elite remains the driving force behind Biafra separatist agitation in southeastern Nigeria because the unity of the elite or otherwise determines the situation in a nation. The paper suggests adequate public orientation to the masses. In addition, government institutions should be strengthened to provide services for citizens rather than based on identity.

Keywords: Civil war, elite interest, military response, secessionist agitation, south-east, Nigeria

Introduction

The recurrence of the agitation of the Biafra nation since the civil war between the federal government and southeastern secessionist groups has raised concerns about the security and survival of the Nigerian federal state (Olowu, 1991; Thom-Otuya, 2013; Olu-Adeyemi, 2017; Adeforiti, 2018; Amadi, Allen, & Mai-Bornu, 2023; Nwangwu, 2023). The civil war remains symbolic because it was the first time that the Biafra separatist agitators and the Nigerian government engaged in military exercises to settle their differences (Tamuno, 1970). Biafra lost the war, which was evident in the renouncement of the existence of the declared Biafra nation (Okonta & Meagher, 2009; Okwuosa, Nwaoga, & Uroko, 2021). Avoiding the repetition of civil war/separatist agitation prompted the adoption

of different measures, including state creation, to catalyze the country's peacebuilding process. The essence of these measures has been to weaken ethnic/separatist agitation and enhance citizens' integration into the country.

Integration measures by the Nigerian government targeted at curbing Biafra agitation have recorded partial success and this has been attributed to the compromised state building capacity of the ruling group in Nigeria (Yagboyaju & Akinola, 2019; Amadi et al., 2023; Nwangwu, 2023). Certain specific considerations have continued to drive the cause of governance and political leadership instead of the public interest in the country (Yagboyaju & Akinola, 2019). This reality weakens governance in the country since personal interest allows manipulation of ethnic identity for personal gain on the path

of elites/representatives in the government. In another dimension, the adoption of crude oil as the major foreign exchange earner for the country in the aftermath of the civil war redefined the contest for political power at the federal level, such that the control of power at the federal level is synonymous with the control of oil revenue (Ota et al., 2022). Hence, while the principle of derivation adopted by the federal government is not favorable to resource host communities, the imbalance in resource allocation has prompted the quest to restructure the country (Ota et al., 2022).

Similarly, Nwangwu (2023) explained how the military response to separatist agitation in the southeastern region is breeding the neo-Biafra association in that part of the country. It was argued that the use of force by the government on the agitation movement in the region manifesting as mass killing of pro-Biafra, torture, harassment, and proscription continues to propel insecurity in the region (Bassey, 2023; Nwangwu, 2023). The impact of military response on regional and national security in the country has been identified (Bassey, 2023). Thus, the above analysis presents the problem with measures adopted in the aftermath of the Nigerian/Biafran civil war. These measures have not adequately addressed fundamental issues, including the welfare of residents in the resource area, political power rotation, and crude-oil-prone ecological damage vis-à-vis resource control between the host community and the government, which are key to the peaceful coexistence of the country (Alapiki, 2005; Okonta & Meagher, 2009). State creation as a measure of peace/nation-building has suffered the same fate as other peacebuilding measures. Alapiki (2005), for instance, described state creation as a failed nation-building approach. It was noted that the approach exacerbated ethnicity through demand for the creation of more states, especially along ethnic/tribal lines. In addition, the number of states required to be created to resolve continuous requests remains unresolved. This further established the report of the Henry Willink Commission of 1957, which stated that

state creation was not necessary for the administration of Nigeria (Akinyele, 1996; Alapiki, 2005).

In another dimension, issues with measures aimed at addressing the Biafrans' plight in the aftermath of the civil war were presented by Gurses and Rost (2013) as the effect of the continuous political and economic marginalization against opposing ethnic groups in civil war. Nsoedo (2019) claimed that, since the end of the civil war, the federal government has never fulfilled its promises to the south-easterner. It was claimed that a series of measures introduced by the (military and civilian) government, including the reconstruction of destroyed territories, had never been implemented (Nsoedo, 2019). Aro and Ani (2017) explained that the Igbo nationalist movement gained momentum following the genocide committed against persons of Igbo ethnic origin during the coup d'état of the 29th of July (1966), the civil war, and sustained marginalization after the civil war killings of Igbo in the country. In addition, the South-easterners still lament their marginalization in the governance of the country 50 years after the civil war (Okwuosa et al., 2021; Okaisabor, 2023). This reality may have informed the submission of Amadi et al. (2023) that social justice and equality should form the basis of democratic practices in the country.

The perceived absence of social justice and equality may also have encouraged the creation of ethnic militias in the southeastern part of the country. After all, Collier and Hoeffler (2004) explained rebellion as an opportunity for the formation of rebel organizations. This is further established in the submission of Anyebe (2017) that the formation of ethnic militia is one of the possible approaches that may be adopted by grieving ethnic groups as a medium to express their perceived injustice against the state. The manifestation of the above-explained features may have continued to propel the separatist movement in the southeastern part of the country.

Evidently, studies have continued to evaluate post-civil war measures, including resource

allocation and state creation, adopted by the Nigerian government to prevent the recurrence of civil war (Alapiki, 2005; Aro & Ani, 2017; Okpanachi, 2017; Nsoedo, 2019; Okwuosa et al., 2021, Ota et al., 2022; Amadi et al., 2023; Nwangwu, 2023). However, the findings have not been systematically linked to provide analyses of recurring separatist agitations in southeastern Nigeria. This study addresses the gaps identified in both the literature and methodology. The question guiding the study is: what are the factors sustaining separatist agitation in southeastern Nigeria? This study examined the factors that sustain separatist agitation in southeastern Nigeria. This study assumes that the government sustains separatist agitation in the country.

Literature Review

This section synthesizes reviewed literature on the conceptualization of agitation and the civil war. A total of 20 peer-reviewed journal articles were purposively and randomly selected from various open-access journals (using the keyword “Biafra separatist agitation in Nigeria” on the Google search engine). The phrase “Biafra separatist agitation in Nigeria” was purposively used given the agitation for restructuring and separatist movement in southeastern Nigeria. The selected articles were those published in open-access journals between 2018 and 2023. The reason for selecting peer-reviewed journals on the above subject matter during this period aligns with the five-year validity for peer-reviewed literature and the review process in peer-reviewed journals before publication. Specifically, the study aimed to analyze the factors sustaining separatist agitation in southeastern Nigeria and utilized the findings of selected studies from 2018 to 2023.

The Concept of Agitation and Civil War

The absence of a generally adopted or accepted definition of agitation has been established in the literature (Fischer, Agar, Hosie, & Teodorczuk, 2020). The definition of the term has remained problematic. However, Langhout (2016) argued that it is a situation that can be

obtained with piqued imaginations and curiosities and where self-interest becomes obvious. Agitation was presented as a process that tends to facilitate changes (Langhout, 2016). Additionally, borrowing from the field of psychology, the term has been used by health professionals to imply patients’ disruptive and problematic behavior (Fischer et al., 2020). Agitation is believed to result from discomfort and pain (IPA, cited by Fischer et al. 2020). Discomfort with respect to separatist agitation may include the dream and desire of the leader to govern a state. Hence, the definition of Fischer et al. (2020) was adopted for this paper.

On the other hand, the concept of civil war has been viewed from diverse perspectives. Collier and Hoeffler (2004) have explained the term as a conflict within the frontier of a nation that is characterized by a minimum of one thousand combat-related deaths, with both the government and the rebels suffering at least 5% each. This implies that when a civil war breaks out, death is usually recorded by the belligerent sides, and the scope of such war is usually within a country. Thus, issues prompting civil war usually border the nation, where the role of the elite is often underlined. Gersovitz and Kriger (2013) explained the concept as large-scale violence that occurs within a country, usually between a significant population over the use of physical force in the state. This further revealed the underlined role of the elite, whose goals, actions, and inactions often determine peace as well as conflict in the state.

The outbreak of (civil) wars has generally been attributed to factors such as the nature of human beings, fear, frustration, and the existence of weapons (Perrin, 1996; Levy, 1998). While armed confrontation, either internal or between countries, does not occur without causes, factors responsible for it have been identified to include political ideological defense, the proliferation of arms, and burgeoning nationalism (Perrin, 1996). From another perspective, civil Civil War was conceived by Clausewitz as the act of compelling our opponent to fulfill our will (Howard & Paret, 1989). This means that war becomes the last and

sole strategy to accomplish our objectives when all other options for peaceful settlement of the ensuing conflict fail. This paper adopted the definition of civil war by Gersovitz and Kriger (2013).

Theoretical Framework of Analysis

The theoretical framework for this study combines the greed and grievance theory with the elite theory. Greed and grievance theory, articulated by Collier and Hoeffler (2004), suggests that significant grievances are better understood as catalysts for rebellion across political systems. These grievances can stem from inequality among citizens, disenfranchisement, and societal divisions along ethnic and religious lines. The occurrence of injustice can lead to the formation of militias or rebel organizations, which may help explain the emergence of separatist movements in the southeastern region of Nigeria.

In addition, the classical elite theory developed by Pareto, Michels, and Mosca is reviewed. Pareto's conception of elites is that they have distinct attributes such as character and intelligence (Barkley, 1955; Zanotti-Karp, 1970). Mosca identified an elite as the leader of a political organization based on the belief that there are two categories of people in any society at any point in time: the ruler and the ruled (Barkley, 1955; Zanotti-Karp, 1970). Hence, in grading human beings in any political system, the elite is usually at the top of the echelon (Barkley, 1955; Zanotti-Karp, 1970). In the submission of Michels, there are elites in society but not in circulation, as they do not replace one another. Although there is contention between the (old and new) elites, this usually ends with their reunion. Hence, the elite recruitment process is continuous because the old elite attracts, absorbs, and assimilates new ones (Barkley, 1955; Zanotti-Karp, 1970). This submission is contrary to Pareto's belief that old elites are replaced by new ones in accordance with history.

Hence, the synthesis of the theories and as applied to the study is that while the greed and grievance theory identified the possible origin of rebellion with the disenfranchisement, inequality

among citizens, and categorization along ethnic/religious identity, elites are a necessary attribute of human organization with distinguishing features including intelligence, access to information, and control of political power at the group level. Of course, elites are also informed of the development within and outside their unit. These realities may influence them to act in self or group interest for specific purposes.

Study Area

The study area is southeastern Nigeria, and while different ethnic groups exist, Igbo is dominant. Equally, there are diverse perspectives among the dominant ethnic groups in southeastern Nigeria on the relationship with the Nigerian state following the civil war. Two major positions driven by two different classes were identified based on views held in the Biafra relationship with Nigeria (Okwuosa et al., 2021). One group quests for true federalism, and the other advocates secession from the Nigerian federation (Okwuosa et al., 2021). While the two major groups often claimed to pursue their aims in a non-violent way, adopted measures such as sit-at-home and protests have resulted in violent clashes with members of security forces, including the Nigerian Army and the Police (Okwuosa et al., 2021). The outcome of clashes includes loss of life and economic activities and the displacement of people (Okwuosa et al., 2021). The resulting death, destruction of property, and displacement from such confrontation are used by separatist agitators to mobilize members for their Biafra nation campaign.

Overview of the Nigerian/Biafra Civil War

The Nigerian/Biafra civil war broke out barely seven years after the independence of the country and lasted for approximately two years (Achebe, 2012; Obasanjo, 2012). In the literature, war has been studied in various ways. It has been described as an outcome of failed nationalism (Falola & Heaton, 2008; Okonta & Meagher, 2009; Okaisabor, 2023) and the implications of the unsatisfactory resolution of identity and governance issues (Falola & Heaton, 2008; Okonta & Meagher, 2009). The war has

been understood as the product of unresolved 'national questions' and the politicization of ethnic identity since the colonial era (Isumonah, 2004; Falola & Heaton, 2008). From another perspective, Akinyele (1996) explained how the formalization of regionalism as a structure of governance in the Lyttleton constitution of 1954 promoted ethnicity in the national lives of the country. Ifidon (1996) claimed that citizenship became pronounced with ethnic affiliation, and benefits were allotted, enjoyed, and shared accordingly.

It is important to bring into perspective the statement of Kirk-Greene (cited in Obasanjo, 1980:1) that the momentum of the Nigerian civil war was gathered across 1900, 1914, the 1950s, and 1966. It can be deduced from the above position that the origin of the war transcends immediate factors and spans the beginning of colonial rule (which is also the origin of the country). In line with the above, Ademoyega (1981) traced issues with governance in the country in a carefree manner and the approach adopted by the British colonial government in forging a nation from an ethnically diverse territory, which, despite being constituted into a state, was never integrated. The departure of colonialists resulted in the resumption of a fight for political entitlement among ethnic groups (Ademoyega, 1981). This explains the reasons for the civil war.

Similarly, Adamu (2016) noted that civil or inter-state wars prosecuted in the post-colonial era in African countries were the continuation of pre-colonial ethnic/tribal conflicts. It is necessary to note that the creation of states in Africa can be categorized into three eras: pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial (Isumonah, 2004) or pre-colonial and colonial state formation (Thompson, 2010). In the analysis of Thompson (2010:11), pre-colonial state creation in Africa followed different conditions, including population convergence for migration and settlement for governance resulting from economic activities and a quest for security. There was annexation of territories through wars in pre-colonial Africa such that the war was about winning booty

such as slaves, gold, and cattle, and there was a probability of inter-ethnic confrontation in their quest (Thompson, 2010:11). This established the unstable nature of pre-colonial African societies.

The Berlin Conference of 1884-85 was responsible for the creation of modern states in Africa (Thompson, 2010). At the Berlin Conference, African territories were shared among European powers even without the consent of dwellers and adequate consideration of ethnic uniqueness. Thompson (2010:13) noted that the separation of African territory into modern states was the most outstanding legacy of colonial rule on the continent. Nigeria was one of the states that was created through colonial rule. While there are many ethnic groups within the created states, this does not necessarily imply a civil war in Nigeria after colonial rule. Thus, Achebe (2012) presented a view of southeastern/Biafrans on the origin of the war. After all, he was an easterner and a writer. Thus, according to Achebe (2012), the civil war originated from the coup and counter-coup witnessed between the 15th of January and the 29th of July, 1966. After the military coup d'état, there was a pogrom against the Biafrans in other parts of the country. The development lasted for over four months. This prompted the conclusion after repeated calls from the Biafrans for the stoppage of the pogroms that the government of Nigeria does not deserve allegiance because it has failed to safeguard their lives and property. Hence, the government must accept the rights of Biafrans to ensure their safety through means such as secession from the country (Achebe, 2012). Despite their submission to the opt-out of the federation, civil war ensued to prevent the dissolution of the Nigerian federation because if the Biafran successfully secede, other ethnic groups would follow, which would imply the end of the arrangement (Achebe, 2012).

Insights to the Contemporary Secessionist Agitation in South-East of Nigeria

Identifying the factors responsible for Biafra secessionist agitation in Nigeria is important. Personal ambition, violation of political and

economic rights, and state violence against a group were notable factors that stimulated Biafran separatist agitation in Nigeria (Ibeanu, 1999; Collier & Hoeffler, 2004; Thoms & Ron, 2007; Forest, 2012). Obasanjo (1980:29) traced the Biafran War to Ojukwu's ambition, which he claimed to have been nurturing as a junior officer in the Nigerian Army. Ojukwu was claimed to have nurtured the ambition of ruling a nation, and the ethno-political atmosphere in the country up to the second coup d'état offered the possibility of pursuing ambitions through the declaration of the Biafra nation (Obasanjo, 1980). In another dimension, Ibeanu (1999) noted that inter-group conflict often manifests state aggression towards certain ethnic groups in the country. According to Okonta and Meagher (2009) and Okwuosa et al. (2021), the civil war in Nigeria was against the Igbo ethnic group, which may explain the separatist agitation in the concerned region of the country. Collier and Hoeffler (2004) further noted that rebellion manifests severe grievances, including disenfranchisement, internal division along ethnic and political lines, and rising inequality.

Further, the government is perceived to have failed to deliver an egalitarian system of government, an acceptable power-sharing formula between the levels of government, and to ensure a system of government based on accountability to the members of the public (Atoyebi et al. 2013; Yagboyaju & Akinola, 2019). Specifically, Yagboyaju and Akinola (2019) classified these manifestations into three areas: Nigeria's failure to provide security for the lives and property of its citizens, ensure the rule of law, and provide leaders with visions for the country. From the resource control perspective, the above analysis of agitation in southeastern Nigeria was aptly presented by Ota et al. (2022). There is an unequal relationship between the (federal and state) government levels in the country regarding revenue sharing (Atoyebi et al., 2013; Yagboyaju & Akinola, 2019). Forest (2012:28), explaining the resources-induced aspect of the civil war, noted that the (1967-70) war was prosecuted over the oil-rich area inhabited by the Igbo

against the federal government. Hence, from the above perspectives, it is useful to submit that there are endless explanations for the causes of Biafra nation agitation.

Global Environment and Biafra Nation Agitation in Southeastern Nigeria

The proliferation and radicalization of separatist agitation in states in the international system has been attributed to the failure of nationalism or national cohesion (Okaisabor, 2023). This may be one of the factors responsible for prosecuting the Biafran/Nigerian civil war, which has remained a significant landmark in the country's existence and relationship with states in the international system. Aluko (1971), for instance, explained that Nigeria realized through the war the importance of not relying on one power bloc and maintaining a good relationship with neighboring states. At the onset of the war, Western powers refused to make weapons available, whereas the Soviet Union assisted the Nigerian government in this regard (Aluko, 1971). It was believed that the Biafran agitators received a supply of weapons and relief materials, whereas the Nigerian state was denied the same despite requests from the Western bloc (Aluko, 1971).

It was obvious that accessibility to weapons made it possible for the Biafra agitator to confront Nigeria. Mustafa (2005) noted that the prosecution of conflict through proxy has led to the proliferation of ammunition, which was responsible for the surge in ethno-religious wars within and between states. Hence, militias and armed civilians prosecuted the war (Mustafa, 2005). In addition, Shihundu (2022) explained that most armed conflicts in Africa have a nexus with the proliferation of ammunition. This is because Africa has assumed theatre for power rivalry between the world power blocs through their agents, such as mercenaries and proxies (Shihundu, 2022).

Internal and External Dimensions of Biafra Agitation

The recurrence of Biafra separatist agitation in southeastern Nigeria since the Nigerian/

Biafran civil war has continued to inform studies to explain the factors sustaining the phenomenon. Hence, understanding the drivers and sustenance of Biafra separatist agitation in Nigeria has informed the classification of factors identified by studies into internal and external dimensions. Specifically, the external factors driving and sustaining Biafra separatist agitation include the proliferation of ammunition and the influence of power blocs (Shihundu, 2022). In addition, the record of secession in the federal state or federating organization has the capacity to sustain Biafra separatist agitation in the country (Odehale et al., 2023).

The internal factors driving Biafra separatist agitation have been attributed to failed nationalism (Okaisabor, 2023), which may have resulted from increased marginalization in the governance of the country (Okwuosa et al., 2021; Okaisabor, 2023). Odehale et al. (2023) has itemized factors promoting separatists' agitation in the country to include rampant cases of corruption, crisis of leadership, and poor economic conditions in the country. Hence, while Nwafor-Orizu et al. (2018) listed the issues confronting the administration of the country to include the interests of the elites, ethnic domination suspicion, and political idiosyncrasy, Othman et al. (2019) argued that elite vis-à-vis political merchants' interests are pronounced in agitations in the country. In addition, the continuous deployment of an instrument of force, such as the military, to combat separatist agitation is noted to propel the movement (Nwangwu, 2023). Elites are the driving force behind separatist agitation in Nigeria (Nwafor-Orizu et al., 2018; Babalola & Onapajo, 2019; Othman et al., 2019).

In line with this is the remark of Babalola and Onapajo (2019) that restructuring and agitation in the country are increasingly becoming an elite tool in sustaining power and mobilizing material resource opportunities. As such, it will remain an endless issue. Similarly, Epelle and Nweke (2019) noted that restructuring agitation

is synonymous with the elites' perspectives and interests.

In another dimension, while Poroma et al. (2019) identified the problem confronting the Nigerian state with how to ensure the constructive nature rather than the destructive nature of war, Ohazurike et al. (2020) recognized the unwillingness of the executive and the legislative arm of government and the absence of knowledge vis-à-vis cultural/ethnic interest as factors preventing restructuring of the Nigerian federal system, which is also sustaining south-eastern separatist agitation in the country. Hence, Collier and Hoeffler (2004) have explained that grievance is a breed of rebellion in any political system and that grievances may manifest in the form of inequality between the citizens, disenfranchisement among the population, and division of the people along ethnic/religious lines in society, it is obvious that the elite is the most beneficial. It is useful to argue that grievances in any political system are at the will of the elite. This is because the unity of the elite is national unity and vice versa.

Conclusion

The study raised the following question: What are the factors sustaining separatist Biafra separatist agitation in southeast Nigeria? The objective of this study was to examine the factors that sustain separatist agitation in the region. The study noted that factors sustaining separatist agitation in the country's south-eastern part are both internal and external. Internal factors include military responses from the government, corruption, and elite interests, while external factors consist of issues outside the country. These include ammunition proliferation and the vulnerability of African states to power blocs. Hence, with reference to the theoretical framework of the study, which is a synthesis of the greed and grievance theory and elite theory, it is sufficient to explain that while disenfranchisement, inequality among citizens, and categorization along ethnic or religious identity are reasons for greed and grievances, elites are a necessary attribute of human orga-

nization with distinguishing features including intelligence, access to information, and control of political power at the group level. Therefore, it suffices to conclude that with such factors allowing for greed and grievances in a state, the elite will emerge in response to such a situation, and separatist agitation will be sustained. This paper recommends adequate public orientation to the masses and strengthened government institutions to provide services for citizens.

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