

Rethinking the drivers of secessionist agitations (Biafra) in Nigeria and their implications for national unity and security

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Abstract

Socio-political instability and ethno-cultural conflicts have brought severe destructions on human societies, including Nigeria. Despite various political and non-political measures geared toward tackling Nigeria's socio-political and ethnic challenges, the country continues to grapple with these persistent issues, fuelling calls for self-determination among some ethnic groups. Consequently, leveraging extant literature, this paper critically examines the underlying factors sustaining persistent secessionist agitations in Nigeria and their associated challenges. It critically assesses the approaches adopted by past and present administrations in Nigeria toward secessionist agitations, with a brief review of the effects of ethno-political tensions on the country's national unity and security. Anchored on the framework of Frustration-Aggression theory, the paper criticises the evocation of force by the government in suppressing secessionist agitations and their agitators, especially unarmed agitators. The study recommends, *inter alia*, a comprehensive redefinition and redesign of Nigeria's federalism, along with the elimination of all forms of ethnic domination. This would

ensure the protection of the rights and interests of all ethnic groups, particularly the three major ones.

Keywords: Rethinking, Secession causes, Secessionist Agitation, Nigeria's Unity, Security

Introduction

Secessionist agitations in Nigeria dates to Lugard's amalgamation of the Southern and Northern protectorates in 1914 (Bamfo, 2012). Nigeria, a nation formed by the amalgamation of diverse pre-colonial kingdoms and societies following British conquest (Majekodunmi, 2015), has not experienced lasting stability or unity since its creation. This is largely due to the diversities found in the country, "tribalized" governance, and non-inclusive leadership that often characterize its polity. El-Rufai (2017) states that the entire crisis in Nigeria revolves around power and resource allocation among its ethnic groups.

Ethnic interest and cultural sensitivity have been there, even in the pre-colonial Nigeria. However, the British colonialists laid the foundation of the instability and dissection being experienced in the country today (Lenshie & Yenda, 2015). This is because, the economic and political interests of Britain were the catalysts for the creation of Nigeria through Lugard's amalgamation (Amanambu, 2017). Factors such as

ethnic superiority, religious bigotry, marginalization, etc. have always militated against the amalgamation, and by extension, the peaceful co-existence of the country (Adangor, 2017). The amalgamation led to a state of dominance of one group over others, thus sustaining tensions in the country (Amadi & Nnamani, 2014). Certainly, the continued separatist agitations in Nigeria by some ethnic groups such as the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), Movement for the Emancipation of Niger Delta (MEND), Arewa Youths' Consultative Forum, and so on, spells doom for the country (Adangor, 2017). Therefore, many have viewed the Nigerian nation as sitting on a cache of gun powder, leading to many predictions of its dismemberment in 2015 (Oluwarotimi, 2015).

Marginalization of some regions in the affairs of the nation will always elicit struggles for self-determination. With the continued injustice in governance, management of the nation's resources, and distribution of power and political appointments, ethnic nationalities who

feel "left behind" will always agitate for independence, castigating the 1914 amalgamation (Amanambu, 2017). As Njoku (2002) asserts, the use of political powers to secure personal and group socio-economic advantages in Nigeria has brought about the politics of ethnicity, consequently, promoting separatist inclinations.

The Southern Nigeria, particularly the Southeast, have been crying out against neglect and subjugation in Nigeria. Available data on allocation of appointments and citing of federal projects lend credence to their claims (Amanambu, 2017). Ojo (2009) had earlier observed that percentage representation in government, including Ministries, Departments and Parastatals (MDA's), since Independence has favoured mostly the northerners. Consequently, the nation's continued existence is threatened, not just by secessionist agitations, but also by the approach of government to the agitations. The current study discusses the situations sustaining separatist agitations in Nigeria, especially that of Biafra, and their impact on the unity and security of the country. The focus on Biafra is hinged on its prominence and persistence among the secessionist agitations in the country, after leading to a civil war.

Theoretical background

The theoretical background of this study is the Frustration – Aggression Theory, which is deemed most appropriate to explicate the secessionist agitations in Nigeria, especially that of Biafra. The theory is comprehensive in its delineation of the factors that can lead to turbulence or push people into aggressive behaviours. According to Breuer and Elson (2017), frustration – aggression theory or hypothesis was originally proposed by Dollard et al. (1939). They posit that aggressive behaviour always results from frustration experienced by an individual or group in the pursuit of goals, defining frustration as a "curse of extinction" (p. 4). Breuer and Elson maintained that aggressive behaviour occurs when anticipated reward is reduced, delayed, or removed completely.

Aggression is a malicious behaviour exhibited in reaction to a frustrating situation. In 1941, the frustration-aggression theory was reviewed by its proponents who noted that while frustration can lead to aggression, the latter is not the only form of instigation the former may produce (Breuer & Elson, 2017). This implies that aggression is one of the many possible resultant outcomes of frustration. Frustration can increase prejudice (Grossarth-Maticek et al., 1989); it can also lead to depression

(Seligman, 1975). There is also a correlation between attribution and arbitrariness, and the various manifestations of the frustration-aggression dynamic (Zillman & Cantor, 1976).

The sources of frustration can also determine the intensity of aggression. Also, the gender of the aggressor can affect the intensity of aggression (Dollard et al., 1939). Verona and Curtin (2006) also posit that men are usually more aggressive than women. For Harris (1974), aggression is fiercer in a same-sex relationship. The above points indicate that gender plays a factor in the frustration-aggression hypothesis. Breuer and Elson (2017) also delineated some other impulses that could lead to aggression to include phobias of punishment, stress of social norms, etc. It is also worth noting that aggression can be wrongly channelled (Geen, 1968).

Berkowitz (1989, p. 71) reformulated the frustration-aggression theory. He argued that frustration can still be offensive, but can "generate aggressive inclinations only to the extent that they produce negative effort." This implies that the actual cause of aggressive behaviour is not frustration, but a negative impact, and frustrations are not the only causes of negative impacts. Other causes of aggressive

inclinations are affront or sarcasm, nervousness, and so on (Hokanson, 1961). Worthy of note in the Berkowitz's reformulation is the shift from aggression to aggressive inclination.

The persistent experience of frustrations – such as severe economic collapse, limited access to essential resources, and systematic and institutionalised marginalization – can result in intense outbreaks of violence among affected groups (Gurr, 1970). This is mostly the case with secessionist agitators in Nigeria, especially in the Southeast. There are various manifestations of aggressive behaviour and/or inclinations in Nigeria as witnessed in secessionist agitations and a plethora of strike actions in virtually every sector of the country – health, education, civil service, petroleum, and so on.

Factors sustaining secessionist agitations in Nigeria

The reasons behind the persistence of secessionist agitations in Nigeria by different ethnic groups and regions have been a subject of intellectual discourse. Adibe (2017) argued that while some groups meant to secede, others simply use it as a means of getting the attention of the federal government towards a given concern. He identified three motives behind secessionist movements

in Nigeria as including personal gain, negotiation with government, and self-determination. In all the secession bids in Nigeria, the quest for self-determination by the Igbo ethnic group is the most serious. Regrettably, this led to the declaration of the Republic of Biafra in 1967, which culminated in a civil war that claimed millions of lives and caused huge economic losses and untold hardship. Unfortunately, the dynamics and incidents that precipitated the civil war are still very much unresolved today (Amadi & Nnamani, 2014). Indeed, no individual who witnessed the civil war would like to see its replication (Aremu & Buhari, 2017). Hence, the continued agitations, threats, and counter-threats, which have increasingly sparked ethno-political conflicts, insecurity, and disunity in Nigeria must not be trivialised.

The 1914 amalgamation

Nigeria was born out of the amalgamation of its Southern and Northern Protectorates, imposed upon it as a British Colony, for the managerial suitability and business interest of the British colonialists. This was without the consent of the peoples of Nigeria, and since then, the amalgamation has been controversially discussed, with virtually all the crises that have befallen the country, especially after Independence,

being connected to it (Audu et al., 2013). One can hardly explore the root causes of Nigeria's problems without reference to the basis of the amalgamation. Ishiekwene (2011, p. 2) opined that the amalgamation was a "fraud." Lagos Colony and the Protectorate of Southern Nigeria were first amalgamated in 1906, and in 1914, the Colony and Protectorate of Southern Nigeria and the Northern Nigeria were amalgamated (Uhunmwuangho & Ekpu, 2011).

Resentments have always trailed the 'merger' of Southern and Northern Nigeria. Negative statements made against the amalgamation include: "the mistake of 1914" by Sir Ahmadu Bello; "the basis of unity is not there" by General Yakubu Gowon, as well as "ours is hardly a Federation except in name" by Alex Ekwueme (Amanambu, 2017, pp. 62-62). Also, according to Chief Obafemi Awolowo, "Nigeria is not a nation. It is a mere geographical expression" For Tafawa Balewa, "Nigeria existed as one country only on paper. It is still far from being united. Nigerian unity is only a British intention for the country" (Audu et al., 2013, p. 113). Prof. Ango Abdullahi described the amalgamation as a "fundamental mistake" and maintained that "the question of a likely disintegration is not a too distant feature" (Adangor, 2017, p. 4), while El-

Rufai (2017, p. 3) avers that "Nigeria was founded by British fiat in 1914, bringing together the diverse peoples and cultures of a vast land under one polity." Almost all the ethnic nationalities in the country have publicly decried the 1914 amalgamation as a burdensome legacy afflicting the nation. The colonial masters did not take into consideration the problems associated with bringing together peoples of divergent cultures into one political entity (Njoku, 2002). Consequently, it has remained an issue in Nigeria.

Lack of true federalism

The present system of government practised in Nigeria is far from what a true federalism represents. Sagay (2008) stressed that Nigerian federalism is in theory and not in practice. According to Ojo (2009), Nigeria's system of government is practically more of a unitary arrangement than a federal one due to over-centralisation and hegemonic influence. "Federalism is a system meant to integrate people in a society who are diverse ethnically, culturally, geographically, and religiously. It therefore, becomes imperative that once a government is in place, it must endeavour to adequately and equitably distribute powers, functions, and resources among these diverse groups"

(Uhunmwuangho & Ekpu, 2011, p. 147). Power sharing and rotation, the generation, control, and distribution of resources, as well as the historical evolution into statehood and federation, are among the problems affecting Nigeria's federalism (Lenshie & Yenda, 2015). Meanwhile, the need to avoid ethnic dominance and social exclusion among the ethnic nationalities in Nigeria, informed the choice of federalism, which guarantees inter-ethnic cooperation among diverse cultural groups (Imuetinyan & Uyi-Ekpen, 2016).

There has always been apprehension among the socio-cultural groups in Nigeria, leading to the choice of federalism (Dudley, 1982). By adopting federalism, the diversity within the country, ought to be acknowledged both in governance and administrative operations. However, the lack of true federalism has had devastating socio-economic and political consequences in Nigeria. The Nigeria-Biafra war, annulment of the June 12, 1993, election, and so on, all have a direct causative link to the non-application of the principles of federalism (Ojo, 1989). Notwithstanding, the country has continued to wallow in ethnic domination, resulting in inter-ethnic tensions. Consequently, there have been persistent calls for the restructuring of

Nigeria or return to regional arrangement as it were at Independence. The Southern and Middle Belt Leaders Forum (SMBLF) comprising Pan Niger Delta Forum (PANDEF), the Pan-Yoruba socio-political organisation (Afenifere), Ohaneze Ndigbo, and the Middle-Belt Forum, are calling for, inter-alia, immediate restructuring of Nigeria, without which disintegration is imminent (Umoru, 2021). For this reason, true federalism is strongly advocated, without which secessionist agitations, conflicts, political tumults, etc., would remain inevitable (Amadi & Nnamani, 2014).

Federalism ensures dynamism and pragmatism, hence, it can be harnessed to address the inherent malignant tension and instability in Nigeria, and not to be employed as a tool for dominance, oppression, nepotism, and social exclusion (Majekodunmi, 2015). The greatest challenge to Nigeria's federalism is the political class, who have refused to imbibe the political will to ensure inclusive governance and full integration of all zones in the country. This submission is in line with the position of Okwudiba Nnoli as cited in Njoku (2002), that the problem of Nigeria's federal system of government is traceable to the human factor of ethnic politics. Frankly, until Nigeria's federalism supports the eradication of ethnic domination,

creation of a level playing ground, and equal opportunity for all, unity and stability can never be guaranteed (Adangor, 2017).

Ethnicity and nepotism were part of the reasons why the administration of Abubakar Tafawa Balewa was overthrown in the coup d'état of 15th January, 1966 (Aremu & Buhari, 2017). The hope of ending ethnic rivalries, secessionist agitations, and similar problems remains a mirage as long as Nigeria still has the above "vices" accommodated in its federal system. The persistent ethnic dominance of the federal system by the Northern tribe of the country (Akinyetum, 2018) will continue to spell disaster for Nigeria, if left unaddressed.

The use of states as federating units is problematic, given that the creation of states and local governments in Nigeria were politically driven and marred by controversy and perceived injustice. This explains the sustained calls for further creation of States to address the existing imbalance (Aremu & Buhari, 2017). Therefore, it has been suggested that Nigeria can return to the three-regional arrangement used at Independence, since this captures the essence of federalism as a system of government in which power is constitutionally shared between a central government and federating units

(Director of Intelligence, 2001). This could restore the hitherto eluded peace, balance, and development the nation is searching for ("Reviewing the Revenue Allocation Sharing Formula," 2019). It will likely enhance the attainment of fiscal federalism needed in a true federalism to allow the regions to control their resources and utilise same for their benefit and development (Majekodunmi, 2015).

Ethnic consciousness and rivalries

Ethnicity in Nigeria and by extension Africa, is a sensational and delicate issue, that and can hardly be detached from the country's existence, particularly in politics (Ottaway, 1999). This is because, politics and other facets of Nigeria's existence have always been played and considered along ethnic lines (Adibe, 2017). Intra-ethnic relations may be "pleasurable", but inter-ethnic politics within a country like Nigeria where you have more than 250 ethnic groups (Aziegbe, 2014), can mar the existence of a nation. Nigeria is one of the most ethnically diverse countries of the world, and has continued to suffer an intractable problem of ethnicity (Majekodunmi, 2015). Thus, as Duruji (2012) lamented, ethnic consciousness has become more pronounced in Nigeria following the politics of decolonization

and has made messier inter-ethnic conflicts in the country.

A good example of the assertion above is the perception in some sections of Nigeria that the coup d'état of 15th January, 1966 was an Igbo coup (Aremu & Buhari, 2017). This perception led to a reprisal coup on July 29th of same year by military officers from the North, the pogrom against the Igbos in the North, and eventually, the civil war which deepened the country's ethnic divides, and weakened the fragile bond holding the nation together. However, the above perception was sponsored by the British in line with their divide and rule policy (Audu, Osuala & Ibrahim, 2013). Bamfo (2012) aligns with the idea that the January 1966 coup was led by Igbo military officers and its main victims were high ranking military officers and politicians from the North. On the contrary, Inyang (2017) exonerated Ojukwu and the Igbos from complicity in the coup by arguing that Ojukwu was a distinguished, decisive, and disciplined military officer who turned down the request for collusion by the coup leader, Major Nzeogwu and frustrated the coup in his area of command in Kano. Besides, an Igbo man was also killed in the coup (Aremu & Buhari, 2017), which suggests that the ethnic colouration given to it was superfluous, and the Colonial

Masters sponsoring the idea did not mean well for Nigeria. However, the coup saga is a typical example of how calamitous inter-ethnic relations could be in a multi-ethnic, multi-lingual, and multi-religious society like Nigeria.

Furthermore, the infiltration of Nigeria's military, paramilitary, civil service, and so on, by ethnic politics and the eventual formation of political parties along ethnic lines, even when it was obvious that the British would grant independence to the country were bad omen for the nation (Akinyetum, 2018). Duruji (2009, p. 54) aligned with the above stance when he noted that "deep rooted ethnic grievances and rivalry among the major Nigerian ethnic groups had accompanied the politics of decolonization." He also avers that the counter coup of 1966, which led to the emergence of General Gowon as the head of state, depicts the Nigerian Army and the entire military as effective instruments of ethnic bigotry, as against national unity. The Nigerian military became distorted after the civil war with ethnic cleavages being so pronounced in the recruitment, postings, and promotions of officers and this can be traceable to the event of the 1966 coup (Aremu & Buhari, 2017).

Empirical data have shown that Nigerian citizens are more inclined to ethnic

identity and loyalty than to country. Even before the amalgamation, ethnic groups were so conscious of their distinctiveness and Nigeria was polarized along ethnic lines (Adangor, 2017). The 1976 Constitution Drafting Committee took cognizance of this in doing their assignment, but shelved it for the sake of national unity. Hence, the issue of ethnicity was, and is still strong and so evident to be denied in socio-economic and political activities in the country. The Colonial Masters gave impetus to diversities in religion, culture, and ethnicity in Nigeria, and made no effort to unite the northern and southern parts of the country (Akinyetum, 2018). Currently, Nigeria has reached the point where every sphere of its national life - politics, education, resource control, and so on, is characterized by ethnic and religious bigotries. Thus, El-Rufai (2017) lamented that official government forms in Nigeria still contain questions on state of origin, ethnicity, religion, and so on, which depict how deeply the nation and its systems are immersed in ethnicity.

Till the time of Independence in 1960, some of the founding fathers and leading politicians of Nigeria were still sceptical about whether the country could ever survive as one, owing to its complexity in ethnicity and religion (Audu et al., 2013). Bamfo (2012, p. 39) remarked that "the

disparate manner in which Nigerian nationalism developed foreshadowed the ethnic divisions that would emerge after Independence." The Nigerian polity since Independence had been a 'thug of war' due to the quest for power and resource control, and lack of cohesion among the three major ethnic groups of the country. Hence, ethnic nationalism became rooted and widespread like a wildfire, which has been attributed to a lack of social inclusion and participation meted out to other groups in the business and benefits of governance by the ethnic group in power (Nafziger & Richter, 1976). Thus, Duruji (2012) attributed Igbo nationalism in Nigeria to the non-integration and continued marginalization of the Igbo by the Nigerian State. Yoruba nationalism heightened in 1948 because they perceived that the Ibos were more represented in the leadership of the Nigerian nationalist movement. Later, that of Hausa escalated in reaction to the perceived dominance, economically and politically, of the country by the Southern people (Bamfo, 2012).

Undoubtedly, there is ethnic consciousness towards tribal interests and well-being among the ethnic groups in Nigeria. However, it is most pathetic when the government exhibits parochialism and nepotism in their operations, instead of being a uniting

force. The ethnically inclined and lopsided manner of appointments and recruitments in Nigeria since 2015 has been a subject of discourse and criticism. The exclusion of the Ibos in the appointments and recruitments is an identifiable reason for their secessionist agitation (Amanambu, 2017).

The immediate past administration in Nigeria was blamed by many for its penchant towards nepotism in favour of the Fulani-Hausa ethnic group. This is more evident in the condoning of the evils perpetuated by the Fulani herdsmen in the name of protecting their rights. In 2015, the Global Terrorism Index rated the Fulani herdsmen as the fourth deadliest terror group in the entire globe (Inemugha, 2018). The Global Terrorism Index also rated Nigeria as the third most terrorised country in the world (Vision of Humanity, 2019). However, it baffles many, that despite the level of carnage being perpetrated by the Fulani herdsmen in Nigeria, they are yet to be made to face the full wrath of the law. Herdsmen killings have continued unabated, as evident in the killing of over 115 persons in Benue and Plateau States within the space of two days (Ejemb & Bere, 2001). Agwu (2021) also reported that herdsmen attack in Ebonyi communities, has claimed more than 30 lives. Every part of Nigeria has its fair share of this menace

which is still ongoing. The trivialization of the killings has been alluded to the fact that the herders are kinsmen to the immediate former President of Nigeria, who was the grand patron of Miyetti Allah Cattle Breeders Association of Nigeria (MACBAN) (Adinonyi & Emejo, 2018). On the other hand, the former President was poised to continue, regardless of public outcry, his unrelenting drive and support for Cattle Colonies, RUGA settlement, and recovery of cattle routes for the business and well-being of the Hausa-Fulani ethnic group, threatening the unity and stability of the nation.

Sectionalism, unfair allocation of appointments and resources, lead to ethnic rivalry, and this must be avoided since Nigeria has experienced many ethno-religious and political conflicts (Uhunmwangho & Ekpu, 2011). Adangor (2017) blamed the continued separatist agitations in the country on ethnic political domination by the North and lack of equity in the distribution of resources, appointments, infrastructural, and economic developmental projects. For Bamfo (2012), allocation to regions by governments in Africa is not based on need or the locus of production, but entirely on politics, as regions that dominate or wield political power tend to appropriate everything to themselves.

The agitation for secession and calls for the restructuring of Nigeria seem to be at their peak in recent time, with a very high threat and possibility of another civil war. Ethnic groups now express hostility, issue quit notices to one another, threaten violence or annihilation, and establish their own security outfits. In retrospect, the coup and counter coups of 1996 and the pogrom dealt with ethnic relations in Nigeria (Adibe, 2017). Therefore, the government of Nigeria needs to be proactive, in avoiding anything that may mar the fragile peace of the country and plunge the nation into another civil war.

Tribal/nepotistic style of leadership

Tribalism and nepotism are responsible for the lack of visionary and focused leadership witnessed in Africa, and Nigeria in particular. Majekodunmi (2015) confirmed Nigeria's leadership problem when he rightly emphasized that Nigerians must make every effort targeted at getting political leaders who would inspire a spirit of nationalism in the citizens. According to him, this calls for candour, restraint, and compromise on the part of the politicians.

The level of underdevelopment and poverty in most African countries, including Nigeria, despite the presence of huge natural, material, economic, and human resources, attests to the existence

of leadership failure. Achebe (1983) opined that "... the trouble with Nigeria is squarely a failure of leadership" (as cited in Njoku, 2002, p. 263). Nigeria lacks visionary and competent leaders, who can unite and manage the country effectively, while driving nation-building through fairness, equity, transparency, patriotism, a sense of purpose, and accountability. Remarkably, ineptitude and corruption, interalia, were responsible for both the coup of 1966, and the embezzlement of the resources meant for the rebuilding of the country after the civil war (Aremu & Buhari, 2017).

Consequently, the African continent in general is not developing; yet the leaders are averse, not only criticism, but secession, which is against the civil and political rights of the citizens (Kamanu, 1974). African leaders often assert that negotiating with secessionist groups will entail an unacceptably high political cost, potentially triggering widespread repercussions across the continent.

Studies on separatism in Africa, including Nigeria, such as Evelyn Rich and Immanuel Wallerstein show a close causative correlation between corrupt practices and agitation for secession (as cited in Njoku, 2002, p. 264). In his investigation of the problem of Nigeria, Jeffrey Herbst concluded that "Nigeria's problems actually stem from the

peculiarly corrupt political economy, combined with an unfortunately generous oil reserve" (as cited in Njoku, 2002, p. 264). All these point to parochially-depraved leadership, which is the bane of Nigeria and Africa at large. The political elites have not been able to address the issues of insecurity and secessionist movements in the country (Aremu & Buhari, 2017).

The fact that people still live in abject poverty and the most horrifying environments in Nigeria is unfathomable. Though Nigeria is significantly endowed with natural resources and at the same time, a leading economy in Africa, its citizens are grossly disillusioned with its entire system due to bad leadership. Political culture and processes are part of the problems of the country (El-Rufai, 2017). While acknowledging poor leadership as the basic reason behind the creation of more states in Nigeria, Mohammed (1975) maintained that creation of more states demonstrates government's inability to care for all the sections of the country. If leaders are detribalized in the act of governance, advancement of policies and projects, and making developmental strides that will favour all and sundry, it would be rare to see ethnic groups agitate for secession. People incline to their group identities when they perceive unfair treatment, in

order to unite against common misfortunes. Bamfo (2012) asserts that indifference by the government to issues for which any part of the country is seeking secession will worsen matters. He further condemned the ideology by Nigerian and African leaders, that secession is non-negotiable, as that is against any region's right to secession, and also fuels the "cruel" stance of political leaders toward secession, which has always been counter-productive.

Ethnic tensions in Nigeria have been attributed to the unfair sharing of appointments and resources (Majekodunmi, 2015). This has unprecedentedly awakened ethnic consciousness and invigorated secessionist agitation, resulting in political unrest and ethnic clashes. By and large, national interest and security should be prioritized by leaders above ethnic and regional sentiments, and Nigerian's federalism should reflect the diversity in the country. If Nigerian and other African leaders have been living up to the imperative obligations of governance, secessionist agitations would have fizzled out from the continent. The Nigerian civil war would have been averted if Nigeria's leaders – and African leaders as well, particularly the Ghanaian administration under Lt. General Ankrah, who represented the International

community at the Aburi Accord – had been sincerely committed to resolving the challenges created by colonialism in Africa. Thus, "the survival of Africans is in the hands of Africans themselves ... African leadership and their governments should be determined to confronting African problems with African solutions" (Audu et al., 2013, p.114, 117).

Critical assessment of past and present administrations' approach to secessionist agitations in Nigeria, particularly Biafra

Successive administrations in Nigeria have approached secessionist agitations differently, making matters either worse or better. It is obvious that the agitations have not been well managed, given their persistence, particularly that of Biafra. The typical approach of the Nigerian government is to 'demonize' a secessionist group and send security apparatus to unleash mayhem on them. The killing of at least 150 members of IPOB by the Nigerian military under President Buhari was seen by the Igbos as an opportunity for the Buhari Administration to inflict pain on them, – a scenario that certainly aggravated the precarious situation (Adibe, 2017). Adekunle (2017) lamented the case of the IPOB leader, who was incarcerated for about two years without proper judicial trial, and later released on bail under stringent conditions – developments that

elevated him to the status of a "monumental" figure. His subsequent re-arrest, torture, and extradition from Kenya – carried out in defiance of established international laws and Nigeria's own extradition treaty, and in violation of his fundamental human rights – became another burning issue. His re-arrest resulted in a fourteen (14) months legal battle while he remained in detention. The appellant court of Nigeria, struck out all the terrorism charges against the embattled IPOB Leader, ordering his discharge and immediate release (Okoli et al., 2022; Ejekwanyilo, 2019). However, the Federal Government of Nigeria (FGN) is yet to obey the order of the appellant court, hence, the IPOB Leader is still in detention till date. Such scenario aggravates ethnic tension and heats up the polity, while simultaneously endearing secessionist figures not only to their ethnic group but also to the international community, thus granting them the level of popularity they might not have otherwise earned.

After the Nigerian civil war, the Igbo ethnic group has been grappling with the challenge of fully integrating into the Nigerian society, to escape political marginalization. This is because, as observed by Duruji (2009), "the end of the war was followed by deliberate social, political, and economic policies aimed at

reducing the capacity of the Igbo people to challenge the dominance of the victorious groups" (p. 54). Nigeria's return to Democracy in 1999 was hoped to remedy this situation (Igbokwe, 2005); hence, some social movements were provoked into existence from the Igbo ethnic group, to fight the perceived injustice against their people.

One of the earliest movements, the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB), was ruthlessly dealt with by the administration of President Obasanjo. The reprimand and torture of MASSOB leader, Ralph Uwazulike gave more "impetus" to Biafra agitators who were mainly the youth (Adibe, 2017). The use of force by former President Obasanjo undermined his magnanimity in granting state pardon, and conversion of dismissal to retirement, for all personnel of the Police and Armed Forces who fought on the part of Biafra during the civil war (Duruji, 2009). This attitude to secession is counterproductive and is still practiced till this day (Amanambu, 2017). The use of violence by security forces to quell secessionist agitations is never the best, especially when the secessionist group has not taken to arms; dialogue remains the best approach. The National Conference convened under Obasanjo's Administration was considered a step in

the right direction to correcting the observable social injustices in the Nigerian political system. However, El-Rufai (2017) dismissed both Obasanjo's conference and that of former President Goodluck's administration as deliberate arrangements to advance the interest of some sections of the Nigerian society. This assertion may be because the two former presidents came from the southern part of Nigeria. However, the assertion can be disputed on the ground that, the later conference was adjudged credible by many observers.

Biafra agitation was minimal during the Goodluck administration, not only because the President came from a close ethnic group to the Igbos, but mostly for the diplomatic approach with which he handled the issue. While he ignored the Radio Biafra, the administration of Buhari over popularized it in its "hunting" of the agitators. This, however, gave much publicity, sympathy, and impetus to the activities of the agitators, thus bringing them to a lime light (Adibe, 2017).

Abacha's regime deployed excessive force against Ogoni people when they protested against environmental pollution and other social injustices. Senseless killings of protesters and agitators defined Abacha as a "heartless" dictator. Wole Soyinka, a Nobel Laureate and

consistent revolutionist held that "repression strengthens ethnic identity and encourages separatism", and further advised that secession protests be treated with less violence (Njoku, 2002).

Secessionist agitations are not usually taken lightly by state authorities. Secessionist agitators all over the world are regarded as hoodlums (Douglass & Zulaika, 1990). Many governments when confronted with secessionist agitation have always used military force to try to stifle it, but the idea of force, especially by African leaders is counter-productive. The feeling that negotiating with secessionist groups will produce a negative result is condemnable (Bamfo, 2012). The massacre of #EndSARS# protesters at Lekki Tollgate, Lagos, Nigeria by the Military in 2020 is an example of African leaders' spirit towards agitations (Egbejule, 2021), - a stance that was observed by Kamanu (1974) as a threat to, and violation of, foreign policy.

Effects of secessionist agitations on Nigeria's unity and security

From the foregoing, it can be argued that Nigeria's security and unity, even its sovereignty are largely threatened. Every crisis Nigeria has had or is still having, has a bearing on the factors discussed above. The coup and counter coup of 1966, alongside the pogrom which

caused the mass migration of the people of eastern Nigeria back to the east, contributed immensely, to the rupture in the national unity of Nigeria, and the worsening of the problem of insecurity. As observed by Adangor (2017), "the unity of Nigeria is visibly threatened by mounting separatist agitations" (p. 14), thus, disunity and chaos are inextricably interwoven with insecurity, as cohesion and peace can hardly thrive in an environment of conflict. The current spate of attacks by gunmen on security forces and government facilities, especially in the Southeast, alongside its resultant carnage and destruction of properties, is appreciably worrisome. While the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) and Eastern Security Network (ESN) deny involvement in the attack on the Nigerian Correctional Services and the Police Headquarters in Imo State, the Federal Government of Nigeria (FGN) has insisted that these groups are responsible for the attacks (Ogugbuaja et al., 2021). This is indicative of the degeneration of secession problems and insecurity in Nigeria.

Peaceful co-existence among ethnic nationalities seems impossible in Nigeria due to years of hostilities. Any country once "threatened" by separatist agitations may never blend again in terms of stability, owing to misgivings,

mistrust, scepticism, and insecurity already sown in its social system (Bamfo, 2012). This above statement can be validated by the fact that since the post-independence crises in Nigeria, the country is yet to return to peaceful coexistence. Adangor (2017) argues that unity and stability can never be attained in Nigeria with the present unjust structure, wherein government apparatus is manipulated to favour one section of the country. He further maintained that "the increasing drums of separatism being beaten by several ethno-cultural and militant groups ... are irrepressible signs of the fractured state of the federation of Nigeria" (p.2). Hence, the unity of Nigeria is being continuously weakened (Aremu & Buhari, 2017). As long as the issues of inequity and social exclusion are not addressed, individuals vis-à-vis groups will always be ethnically inclined (that is, ethnic nationalism), instead of being patriotic, thus generating more chaos in the nation (Amanambu, 2017). As noted by El-Rufai (2017, p. 7) "most Nigerians...seek the enthronement of a fairer, meritocratic system that puts social justice above everything else."

Separatist movements by ethno-cultural groups in Nigeria have also led to the proliferation of arms in the country, which has exacerbated its security

challenges, such as criminality and banditry. The circulation of weapons impacts negatively the socio-economic and political development of Nigeria (Aremu & Buhari, 2017). This is in line with Gilbert (2013) assertion that the activities of ethnic-based militia groups have aggravated the challenge of internal security and as well, heightened mutual mistrust in the relationships of inter-ethnic groups in Nigeria. Nonetheless, the rights of ethno-cultural groups and the interests of their members should be vitally guaranteed for the sustenance of national unity and security in Nigeria (Njoku, 2002). This underscores the importance of social justice, all-inclusive governance, and the need to tackle separatist activities circumspectly.

The infiltration of ethnic and religious politics into the Nigerian military made more vulnerable the security of the nation. Appointments and promotions in the military are not on the basis of merit, but nepotism, thus depleting the efficacy of the military as a symbol and instrument of security, unity, and cohesion (Aremu & Buhari, 2017). Lack of security, not sovereignty, suffered by the Biafrans orchestrated the current virulent, calamitous, and agonizing conflict in Nigeria (Iyang, 2017). Duruji (2012, p. 336) also claims that "the imperative of security of the Igbo people

informed the declaration of Biafra in 1967." Therefore, it is expedient that the issues activating disunity and feelings of insecurity are religiously addressed.

The structure of Nigeria as a nation is not balanced, creating a dire need for structural rebalancing, hence the rancour, agitations, and chaos everywhere (El Rufai, 2017). Unless the concerns exacerbating conflict and agitations are absolutely tackled, political instability and ethnic conflicts would remain eternal and inevitable in the country. This is because, ethnic groups that feel not reckoned with, will continue to be restless (Ojo, 2009). Therefore, political leaders should eschew ethnicity, nepotism, and parochialism, and imbibe sincerity, as well as mustering the political will to correct the conspicuous existing inequality and anomalies pervading every facet of Nigeria. Decentralization of power may offer the country the much-needed national unity that has remained elusive (Lenshie & Yenda, 2015). When unity is achieved, national security is feasible.

Conclusion and recommendations

Separatist agitations, ethnic conflicts, and political tensions have been recurring decimals in Nigeria. More than a century after the amalgamation of the Southern and Northern Protectorates and almost

six (6) decades after its civil war, Nigerian is yet to achieve peaceful harmony as one political entity. Persistent secessionist agitations and their attendant consequences depict long-age social injustice and frustration in the affairs of the nation. If not confronted, these maladies will continue to protract ethnic agitations from different sections of the country that feel marginalized. Such sections will endlessly agitate for political inclusion and rightful placement in the affairs of the nation, until justice is served; hence, sustaining anarchy in the nation (Duruji, 2012).

Nigerian government as a matter of national urgency and public importance, should look into the triggers of secessionist agitations: political unrest, and ethnic squabbles, in the nation. Secessionist activism will never cease until government conscientiously tackles their root causes. This study supports Bamfo's (2012) recommendation that regions should be recompensed adequately for contribution to the national productivity and frugality (economy) of the Nigerian State, as this will help ameliorate the political cataclysm, and as well, encourage federating units to strategize towards economic and financial autonomy. Most preferably, political autonomy should be

encouraged to avoid sudden collapse of the country (Majekodunmi, 2015).

Furthermore, the fact should be established, and put into effect by way of principles and constitutional provisions, that Nigerians irrespective of ethnicity, cultural background, class, position, or social status have equal entitlement to opportunities, and are free to live wherever they choose within the country without fear of intimidation, oppression, and deprivation (Njoku, 2002; El-Rufai, 2017). It is expedient for the representatives of the ethno-cultural groups in Nigeria and possibly the International community to come together in a sincere and thorough convention to discuss the way forward for the country, thus agreeing on the terms of continued co-existence as one political entity if they so desire (Majekodunmi, 2015). The FGN has been perpetually under the control of the Hausa-Fulani ethnic group, which threatens the political stability of the nation, as the struggle by the suppressed groups for participation generates unending tension, secessionist agitations, and inter-ethnic rivalry (Adangor, 2017). The current federalism being operated in the nation and the absolute power of the FGN over the ownership and control of the resources of the nation, *inter alia*, should form part of the agenda for the

summit suggested above. Based on the discussions above, the following specific recommendations were proposed:

- ✓ Re-definition and social engineering of Nigerian's federalism, towards securing and protecting the interest of all ethnic groups to ensure total eradication of ethnic domination.
- ✓ Regionalization or restructuring of the country into three (3) regions as it were at Independence.
- ✓ Decentralization of power and governance to the regions as this will ensure viability and enhance capacities of the constituent units to develop maximally.
- ✓ Entrenchment of good and effective governance or at least, a constitutional review that will encapsulate the Rotation of Presidency among the different regions or major ethnic groups in the country, to give a sense of inclusion to the entire peoples of the country.
- ✓ Devolution of control and management of natural resources to regions where these resources emanate from.
- ✓ A sincere and thorough review of the 1914 amalgamation.

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