

## **THE INDIGENOUS PEOPLE OF BIAFRA: A HISTORICO-HERMENEUTIC STUDY**

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### **Abstract**

*This paper traced the historical evolution of IPOB activities in southeastern Nigeria. IPOB which has caused and still causing a lot of havoc in the Southeastern Nigeria became a threat to both the government and the people of the region. The paper set out to know how this militant group came into existence, who is the founder, what their modus operandi is and what is their source of income. The paper discovered that IPOB is the continuation of the struggle for the self-determination, preservation and development of the Igbo people. As a pro-Biafran group, IPOB formation can be traced down to the Nigerian civil war, a war fought for Biafran independence in Nigeria (1967-1969). The study identified Igbo nationalism, anti-Fulani sentiment and non-violence resistance as IPOB ideology. It started as non-violent group then proceeded to being violence as its founder/leader; Mazi Nnamdi Okwu Kanu has been quoted to issue death threats and hate speech, which are against the principles of non-violence. The reason for these rising protests is attributed to the claimed political disenfranchisement among the Igbo people and much trauma that had continued as an effect of the Nigerian civil war. They have engaged the Nigerian military and even civilians in violent conflict resulting in the loss of lives and properties. For the purpose of this study, a historico-hermeneutic approach was employed.*

**Keywords:** Historical, Evolution, IPOB, IPOB Activities, Ideology, financiers, South-East, Nigeria

### **Introduction**

Seven years after the independence of Nigeria, the Igbos of the Southeastern Nigeria attempted breaking away from Nigeria which led to the Nigerian-Biafran war of 1967 to 1970. As a fall-out to that civil war, a lot of groups agitating for emancipation of Biafra have come up. The Southeastern Nigeria has experience the rise and fall of many of these ethno-nationalist groups. These ethno-nationalist groups have existed in different forms and epochs but having one aim; to establish an independent state of Biafra in the Southeast of Nigeria. Notable among others are; The Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) which began gaining attention toward the end of 1900s, together with the Biafra Zionist Movement (BZM) but became popular in 2012 and Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) which emerged in 2012. It is believed that IPOB came up to continue the movement that was began by MASSOB. MASSOB as a pro-Biafran group was formed in 1999 by leader Ralph Uwazuruike. The organization was immediately faced with serious setback following the alleged state suppression and crisis within the group about leadership.

At this point in time, MASSOB members complained that Uwazuruike is associating himself with mainstream Nigerian politics instead of furthering the cause of Biafra. This internal crisis led to the breaking off and formation of Biafra Zionist Movement (BZM). Biafra Zionist Movement has Benjamin Igwe Onwuka as its leader. Onwuka championed this group until the arrest of many of its members for treason by the Nigerian government at a rally which took place on 5 November 2012 in Enugu State. With the arrest and trial of Onwuka, the activities of BZM were enfeebled and gradually faded off, given way to yet another pro-Biafran organization named IPOB.

This work traces the historical evolution of the activities of IPOB in South-East, with the aim of understanding the meaning of IPOB, its leader, the reason for its formation and the nature of their activities which have caught the attention of the media more than other pro-biafran groups. For better understanding and assimilation of the long history of IPOB, the researchers divide the historical aspect into three; Biafran formation, pro-Biafran groups formation and, the formation and activities of IPOB.

### **IPOB, What Is It?**

The Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) is a nationalist separatist group in Nigeria that aims to restore the Republic of Biafra, a country which seceded from Nigeria prior to the Nigerian Civil War (1967-1970) and later rejoined Nigeria after its defeat by the Nigerian military (Allison, 2017). It was founded in 2012 in the southeastern Nigeria to continue the fight for an independent Biafran nation. IPOB criticized the Nigerian federal government for poor investment, political alienation, inequitable resource distribution, ethnic marginalization, and heavy military presence, extrajudicial killings in the South-Eastern, South-Central and parts of North-Central regions of the country (Mahr, Oluwatosin Adeshokan, Krista, 2019). The organization came to spotlight in 2010 and became the largest pro-Biafran group in terms members and followership since the inception of the agitation for Biafran nation.

Recently, IPOB has become famous because of her frequent target of political repression by the Nigerian government which has always brought them to the public media and the numerous means of communicating information and news to its members. IPOB members and supporters cut across the five (5) states that make up the South-Eastern Nigeria with members extending to some other neighbouring states in the country and other strong members and supporters of Igbo in diaspora and foreigners. In 2017, IPOB was adjudged a terrorist organization by the Nigerian government under the Nigerian Terrorism Act. This is because IPOB has been fighting a low-level guerilla conflict in southeastern Nigeria against the Nigerian government. As a result of this, from May 2022, the United Kingdom started denying asylum to members of IPOB who engaged in human rights abuses, though the U.K government has come out strongly to clarify that IPOB had not been designated as a terrorist organization (Elusoji, 2022).

### **Founder/Leader of IPOB**

The Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) was founded by Mazi Nnamdi Okwu Kanu who was born on 25th September 1967 in Umuahia, Abia State. Mazi Nnamdi Kanu is a British-Nigerian political activist known for his advocacy for the contemporary Biafran independence movement. Troubled that the dream and aspiration for the independence of Biafra will not be actualized through Uwazuruike led MASSOB, Kanu decided to make use of the emerging mode of communication; the social media and online radio to drive millions of pro-Biafra independence activists, supporters and sympathizers to his Biafran cause.

In 2009, when Chief Ralph Uwazuruike, the founder of MASSOB re-established Radio Biafra in the United Kingdom, he made Nnamdi Kanu his radio director; later Kanu was said to have been dismissed from MASSOB because of accusations of supporting violence. This was a radio station from London that broadcast messages that called for freedom of Biafrans and criticized corruption in the government of Nigeria. Radio Biafra called for an independent state for the Igbo people and broadcast to Nigeria from London. The use of Radio Biafra as a means of communication was a smart move because of the name, Radio Biafra is very symbolic. It was the national radio station of the defunct Biafran state, and it operated from 1967 to 1970. At a time, it was used to promote the Igbo nationalist narrative to the world and to mold the Igbo consciousness within the region. Mazi Nnamdi Kanu was relatively an obscure figure until 2009, when he became the director of Radio Biafra. Radio Biafra catalyzed Kanu's rise to the public scene, as he was previously an unknown figure.

## **Ideology of IPOB**

### **a. Igbo Nationalism**

IPOB is an Igbo nationalistic ideology based on self-actualization and determination. It brings to consciousness the existence and acknowledgement of the Igbo tribe. Aro and Ani (2017) assert that, "The Igbo people as we have them today were united into the framework of what is currently known as Nigeria in 1914." Through the process of integration, Igbo sovereignty was limited and often frustrated by the sovereignty of the British colonial power. However, when the colonial masters left, Igbo intellectuals took charge of the formation of political parties. Harnischfeger (2011) opines that, the first national party, which was the National Council of Nigerians and Cameroon (NCNC), was founded in 1944 and led by journalist and future president Nnamdi Azikiwe. Aro and Ani described Azikiwe as a man of Igbo descent, who was received as a distinctly Igbo figure as opposed to a pan-Africanist or a Nigerian nationalist (2017). Thus, the actions of the NCNC gave birth to an organized Igbo nationalism a means through which Igbo political interests could be realized. Owing to the fact that the civil war resulted in the wanton destruction of the lives of millions of Biafrans either through military engagements, acts of ethnic cleansing, or starvation, the pro-Biafran Igbo nationalist movement did not reappear until 1999.

In 1999, Chief Ralph Uwazuruike an Igbo political elite founded MASSOB to restore and reawake Igbo nationalist passion to combat the incessant marginalization of Igbo people. The contemporary revitalization of Igbo nationalism points to the killing of Biafrans by Boko Haram insurgents in northern Nigeria as a reason for the reanimation of the Biafran group. Thus, MASSOB and IPOB are two Igbo nationalist groups, fighting for the self-determination, development, preservation and revival of the Igbo people.

### **b. Anti-Fulani Sentiments**

The farmers/herders conflict in the south east is perceived as a tool used by Fulani herdsmen to continue the cause of Nigerian civil war. This is the reason for anti-Fulani sentiment in Nigeria. Anti-Fulani sentiment is the hostility that exists towards Fulani people in Nigeria and the discrimination that they are subjected to as a result of it. The Fulani are a semi-nomadic ethnic group that is dispersed across several West African countries. Fulani people represent 6% of Nigeria's population ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anti-Fulani\\_sentiment](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anti-Fulani_sentiment)). There is a common believe that Fulanis are part of Islamic terrorist groups such as Boko Haram. Of recent, this common belief has been contested as they (Fulanis) are sometimes also victims of terrorist attacks. This belief have stimulated some ethno nationalist groups in Nigeria, such as

the Igbo nationalist group; the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), which is spreading anti-Fulani sentiment.

To achieve this, IPOB insist that it is a peaceful freedom movement; however, they have a duty as a group to protect biafran people and land against Fulani terrorist Herdsmen. Thus, Nnamdi Kanu, demanded bullets and guns from a group of US-based Nigerians for self-defense against the incessant attacks on Igbos by the Fulani herdsmen which were currently reoccurring in Biafra lands (Chijioke, 2017). He further stated that, “We are not begging Fulani terrorists to vacate our farmlands and forest, but we will chase them out of our bushes and forests where they stay to kidnap, kill and rape our mothers, wives and sisters on the farms.” Opejobi (2022) quoted IPOB members saying.

Nigeria’s military should be appreciative that we are helping them to stop Fulani terrorists, the fourth most deadly terror group in the world terror index here in Biafraland, formerly the Eastern Nigeria. But they will not because the Fulani terror Herdsmen is their foot soldiers and one and the same with the Nigerian army. In the North, Civilian JTF assisted them against the Boko Haram group, and the army cooperated with them.... Instead of appreciating us for helping to checkmate the activities of these mass murderers, the Nigerian army is after us. The Nigerian Army and its sister security agencies, especially DSS should stop giving false intelligence reports to cause confusion because of the hatred they have for Biafran people, particularly the IPOB family group. We must chase the murderous Fulani terrorists masquerading as Herdsmen and killing innocent citizens who are going about their farm work out of Biafraland.

From the following, the IPOB ideology is about protecting the Biafran land from the people they perceive as invaders, who want to conquer and dominate their land.

### **c. Non-Violence Resistance**

The IPOB pronounced strategy has been the application of civil disobedience in pressing home their demands for the freedom of Biafran people. In various air broadcasts, Mazi Nnamdi Kanu stated how he has been influenced by Martin Luther King Jr. and Mahatma Gandhi, and how adopting their approach will lead to the actualization of Biafra. In an interview granted to Newsweek, Mazi Nnamdi Kanu stated his belief in the teachings of Martin Luther King Jr and Mahatma Gandhi, he says, “I hope that what we are looking for can be accomplished peacefully. I am an advocate of passive resistance. He continued Gandhi and Martin tried it to very good effects, so why should it not work in our case?” One example of this non-violence resistance is the planned boycott of 2019 presidential election by IPOB, an expression of their resentment of Nigeria and what it represents. This position Onyeji (2019) described as “signed, sealed and delivered.” Although, this position was widely criticized by local Nigerian politicians who argued to the contrary, that led to him lifting the boycott on the eve of the election. Another non-violence resistance method used by Kanu and IPOB is the sit-at-home on Mondays and some other special days for IPOB.

This IPOB ideology has been criticized heavily by some people who hold that his death threats and calls for violence and hate speech against other ethnic groups are contrary to the principles non-violence resistance. The question why he claims to be using non-violent resistance method and yet promote violence through his utterances. He was once accused of threatening the life of Pastor Kumuyi saying, “Pastor Kumuyi should be stoned and dealt with thoroughly if he comes to Aba for his planned crusade” (Opejobi, 2021). Mazi Nnamdi Kanu was also seen in

a video released in 2017 openly issuing death threat to former Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo. Again, Opejobi (2021) quoted Kanu to have said, “Nigeria should prepare for war, we are coming to annihilate you, my secret service are already studying the zoo and strategizing.”

On the issue of instigation through hate speech, Ojo (2021) quotes Nnamdi Kanu saying, “if you find anybody in your village asking after Radio Biafra, kill the baboon Hausa, Fulani or Yoruba bastard. Let them keep searching as we keep tweeting for #Biafra.” “Any army they (the Federal Government) send to Biafraland will die there. None will return alive even if it require sacrificing my people I will do it.” His hate speech against other ethnic groups includes, “Niger Deltans are cowards; we know what to do to them. Akwa Ibom, Beyelsa, Delta, Rivers, Edo, and Cross River States are our territory, and anybody who tries to oppose us will be crushed” (Ojo, 2021). Omokri quoted Kanu to have said “Yoruba Pentecostalism is the reason why Fulanis are invading us today” (Omokri, 2021).

### **Funding of IPOB**

The source of financing militant groups such as IPOB in Nigeria has been a serious controversy. The question has always been, what are the sources of income for IPOB, who are their financiers and how do they procure their weapons? Some of the perceived sources of income for militant groups like IPOB are; money laundry, kidnapping for ransom, low-level fraud, illegal oil bunkery, ravaging of villages and towns, arm robbery and corrupt politicians and looters of public fund. To clear this controversy, IPOB spokesperson, Emma Powerful posit that, “For the umpteenth time, no single individual can sponsor IPOB. We are a global movement and millions of our family members; home and abroad remain the source of our SPONSORSHIP.” (Vanguard News Nigeria, 2021) IPOB is mainly sponsored through voluntary donation and monthly contribution of members and supporters all over the world. This is substantiated by the spokesman of the Imo state police command, CSP Mike Abattam, who disclosed that the man identified as Boniface Okeke is said to have contributed 10 million naira in funding IPOB. Abattam said, “On interrogation, he confessed of being a facilitator and financier of IPOB/ESN Operation in the state to the tune of 10 million naira while he was outside the country.” (News Desk, 2021)

Speaking on the involvement of corrupt politicians and looters, Emma Powerful exempted politicians as their sponsors saying, “IPOB is well grounded and we don’t need any Okorocho, Uche Nwosu or Hope Uzodinma or any politician for that matter to sponsor us. We have no dealings with corrupt politician and people with questionable source of wealth.” (Vanguard News Nigeria, 2021) IPOB have also come out to disassociate themselves from the kidnapping and killing in the South-East region by saying that those funding the criminal gangs in the South-East Zone are the ones responsible for the killings and kidnappings in the South East region (Alozie, 2022).

### **Historical Evolution of IPOB Activities In Southeast**

#### **1. Biafran Formation (1967-1970)**

Nigeria gained independence in 1960 from the British government. This is almost the same time when many other African countries were becoming independent. As a young nation, the regional demarcations of the country did not take into cognizance the earlier cultural, ethnic, political, or religious boundaries. Thus, the northern region of the country primarily made up of territory of the indigenous Sokoto Caliphate has a Muslim majority. The southern region

comprising the indigenous Yoruba and Igbo states in the west and east respectively is predominantly Christian. Following the independence, Nigeria was divided along ethnic groups, with the north mainly Hausa and Fulani, Yoruba occupying the West, and Igbo in the East. After the independence, a series of ethnic tension and military coup arose. The tension is between Northern Muslims and the Igbo, and other small ethnic groups of Eastern Nigeria Region living in the North.

This ethnic tension reached its climax in January 1966, when during a military coup, a group of predominantly Igbo army officers assassinated about 30 political leaders, including Nigeria's Prime Minister-Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, the Northern premier-Sir Ahmadu Bello and four senior officers of Northern origin. Interestingly the President Nnamdi Azikiwe of Igbo extraction and Obafemi Awolowo the favored western region politician were not killed. The commander of the army, General Aguiyi Ironsi seized power to maintain order (Omoigui, 2008). Six months later, some northern army officers staged a counter-coup, assassinating General Aguiyi Ironsi and several southern officers and, named a General from a small Northern ethnic group; General Yakubu Gowon the head of the Federal Military Government. These two coups deepened Nigeria's ethnic tensions. With the death of General Johnson Aguiyi-Ironsi after the failed peace negotiations, the regional government of Eastern Nigeria at the Aburi Talks in Ghana in 1967 to secede and have an independent nation. Daly and Fury (2020) gave a preside date for this secession saying that the regional council of the peoples of Eastern Nigeria deciding that the region should secede and proclaim the Republic of Biafra on May 30, 1967. Although, before the declaration by Lieutenant Colonel Odumegwu Ojukwu, Biafra had existed as an independent multi-ethnic Republic comprising of the Igbo, Efik, Ibibio and Ijaw peoples to name a few. Colonel Emeka Odumegwu-Ojukwu made this formal declaration and became the head of state of the new republic with the following speech:

Now, therefore, I, Lieutenant-Colonel Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu, Military Governor of Eastern Nigeria, by virtue of the authority, and pursuant to the principles, recited above, do hereby solemnly proclaim that the territory and region known as and called Eastern Nigeria together with her continental shelf and territorial waters shall henceforth be an independent sovereign state of the name and title of "The Republic of Biafra".

In making this declaration, Ojukwu cites the Igbo killed in the post-coup violence as reasons for the declaration of independence. It is believed that this was one of the major factors that sparked the Nigerian-Biafran war. The federal government fought hard to preserve the unity of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, and did not like the idea of an independent state of Biafra. The huge quantity of oil found in the region is one of the main drivers to the conflict, as oil was already becoming a major component of the Nigerian economy. Omoigui attests to the fact that Biafra was ill-equipped for war, with fewer army personnel and less equipment than the Nigerian military, but had advantages over the Nigerian state as they were fighting in their homeland and had the support of most Biafrans (2007).

Immediately after the declaration and secession, the Nigerian military proceeded to invade Biafra, resulting to the Nigerian Civil War (also known as the Nigerian-Biafran War), which lasted from 6 July 1967 until 15 January 1970. Keil recounts that several million Eastern Nigerians died from the pogroms against them, such as the 1966 anti-Igbo pogrom where between 10,000 and 30,000 Igbo people were killed. Many homes, schools, and hospitals were destroyed in the conflict (1970). In addition, Achebe asserts that "Thirty thousand civilian men,

women, and children were slaughtered, hundreds of thousands were wounded, maimed, and violated, their homes and property looted and burned-and no one asked any questions” (2012, p.82). After the civil war, the Nigeria government denied the reabsorbed Igbo people access to their savings placed in Nigerian banks and provided them with little compensation. They were also issues of discrimination against the Igbo people at the hands of other ethnic groups after the war. However, Odumegwu-Ojukwu states that these three years (1967-1970) of their freedom allowed Igbo people to become the most civilized and most technologically-advanced black people in the world.

After about three years of the Nigerian civil war, Biafran forces under Nigeria’s motto of “No-victor, No-vanquished” surrendered to the Nigerian Federal Military Government (FMG), because of death from starvation caused by the total blockade of the region by the Nigerian government (Jacos, 1987). The surrender was facilitated by the Biafran Vice President and Chief of General Staff, Major General Philip Effiong, who assumed leadership of the Republic of Biafra when the original President, Colonel Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu, fled to Ivory Coast. After the surrender of Biafra, the federal government re-absorbed Biafra into Nigeria (Minogue and Judith 1974, p. 393). Not without the help of international body as stated by Akuchu (1977), “In 1970, the Biafran forces surrendered through the armistice brokered by the defunct OAU.”

## **2. Pro-Biafran Groups Formation (1999-2014)**

At the end of the 20th century, new waves of agitation began because many were not happy with how the Nigerian-Biafran conflict ended or how the problems that caused it were resolved. The Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB), founded in 1999 by Ralph Uwazuruike, an Indian-trained lawyer, was the first non-violent social movement to draw widespread attention. Despite the fact that MASSOB's efforts resulted in multiple run-ins with the authorities and the imprisonment of its head, it received little coverage from the worldwide media and community. However, reported official repression and dissension within the group over leadership severely crippled the organization. Uwazuruike was charged by MASSOB with being involved in “mainstream Nigerian politics.” These conflicts contributed to the formation of another faction named Biafran Zionist Movement (BZM). BZM leader Benjamin Igwe Onwuka and many members of the group were arrested for treason by the Nigerian government at a rally that took place on 5 November 2012 in the region of Enugu. BZM's activities were scaled down because of arrests and trials of many lead members of the organization. Other pro-Biafran groups that have come into existence within this period are; the Biafra Nations League (BNL; initially known as Biafra Nations Youth League/BNYL), and the Biafran National Guard (BNG).

The Nigerian Federal Government accuses MASSOB of violence; MASSOB’s leader, Ralph Uwazuruike, was arrested in 2005 and was detained on treason charges. He later re-established Radio Biafra in the United Kingdom in 2009, with Nnamdi Kanu as his radio director; later Kanu was said to have been dismissed from MASSOB because of accusations of supporting violence. This Radio station was first established by the extinct Biafra in 1967 with the aim of championing the Biafran cause. When Mazi Nnamdi Kanu left MASSOB, he created IPOB after he initially gained fame from his broadcasts on Radio Biafra of his master; Chief Ralph Uwazuruike. Millions of Igbo listeners have been captivated to the new Radio Biafra's nationalist rhetoric since it began broadcasting online from London in 2009. Director of Radio Biafra and self-declared IPOB leader Mazi Nnamdi Kanu chose to utilize controversial language and sentiments to attract the attention of the Nigerian government, some of which are

seen as hate speech and incitement to violence and war. He frequently broadcast programs in which Nigeria was depicted as a zoo and Nigerians as mindless animals. The slogan on the Facebook and website of his radio station was “The zoo called Nigeria.” If the northern Hausa-Fulani people refuse to recognize Biafra's independence, he demanded the provision of weapons and ammunition so that Biafra might conduct war against them.

The Nigerian government has attempted to stifle Radio Biafra through the Broadcasting Organization of Nigeria and Nigerian Communications Commission, albeit with varying degrees of success. Another group in favor of Biafra was established later in 2012: the Supreme Council of Elders of the Indigenous People of Biafra. Some well-known figures from the Biafra region make up the body. The Federal Republic of Nigeria was sued for violating their right to self-determination. The case's principal advocate was Debe Odumegwu Ojukwu, the eldest son of former President and General Ojukwu and a lawyer located in Lagos state. They lost the case and their cause died naturally. This was the same time when Mazi Nnamdi Kanu was busy forming his own group.

### **3. Formation and Activities of IPOB (2012-till date)**

When Mazi Nnamdi Kanu was dismissed from MASSOB, in 2012 he founded IPOB as another pro-Biafran group to continue the contemporary Biafran independence movement. Ibeanu, Iwuamadi and Nkwachukwu (2016), opine that MASSOB and BZM set up the rise of IPOB which continues championing the same cause. Like other pro-Biafran groups, IPOB has been staging a peaceful protest in the country until the arrest of its leader Mazi Nnamdi Kanu by Nigeria's Department of State Services (DSS) on 19 October 2015. His arrest has pushed IPOB supporters into gaining further popularity, as their mobilization grew. Since then, there have been many protests and police clashes; Maya reported that, on 2 December 2015, nine protesters and two policemen were killed at a protest in Onitsha, Anambra State. Several other protesters were reportedly killed by policemen in Aba, Onitsha, Enugu and Umuahia. The reason for these rising protests is attributed to the claimed political disenfranchisement among the Igbo people and much trauma that continues as an effect of the Nigerian civil war. They are calling for the immediate release of Nnamdi Kanu and other Biafran activists that have been jailed. Most importantly they want an independence referendum to have a date set by the government. This position was supported by Conor (2015) who believes that the main reason for their protests is because they want the opportunity to vote for independence.

Seeing how determined and courageous this group is the Nigerian Government has tried to subdue them in many ways. First, the Federal High Court in Abuja on 18 September 2017 labeled the IPOB as a terrorist organization. IPOB members and supporters have fought against this proscription, and sought to reverse the court's decision in 2018 to no avail. However, their attempt has ultimately been unsuccessful, and they continue to be declared as terrorist organization under Nigeria's Terrorism Act. Secondly, the Nigerian State has utilized violent and excessive police force in order to silence IPOB protesters. For Ibeanu et al (2016), this police violence has been ongoing from 2014, first targeting MASSOB and IPOB after its formation. In 2008, MASSOB alleged that the state had murdered 2,020 of its citizens without due process. According to a report published by Dutch Amnesty International in 2019, numerous IPOB protestors were killed between May 29 and 30, 2016, as a result of a government effort to stop IPOB members from moving from Nkpor Motor Park to a rally. In response, the Nigerian army asserts that five people were killed rather than fifty because they were acting in self-defense. These killings have not been investigated by Nigerian government, despite urgings from Amnesty International. Maya attested to the fact that, Human rights



organizations have been keeping records of extrajudicial killings in Biafra. They claim that from August 2015 through February 2016, 170 unarmed civilians were killed and that 400 were arrested, charged or detained without a proper trial (2016).

Since April 25, 2017, Mazi Nnamdi Kanu, the leader of IPOB, has refused to show up in court to defend himself against the allegations brought by the federal government. He had previously been held without charge for more than a year before he was charged with criminal conspiracy, affiliation with an unlawful group, and intimidation on November 8, 2016. After multiple protests, including the World Igbo Summit Group in April 2017, the judge decided to release him on bail due to health issues that required better medical care than could be offered in a jail environment. However, he was barred from granting interviews, meeting in groups larger than ten individuals, organizing and attending rallies or social functions. Kanu disappeared after a premeditated attack on his home village, Umuahia by the combined forces of the Nigerian Air force and Army in September 2017. Through a Radio Biafra broadcast he explains that his disappearance is because President Muhammdu Buhari sent the military to execute him in his home (Onyeji, 2019). The military denies the occurrence of this raid, despite an obvious video footage of the gruesome attack (Mahr et al, 2019). While Mazi Nnamdi Kanu is on self-exile, IPOB members back at home continue the struggle with the Nigerian Government. Later on, the Eastern Security Network (ESN) was formed as a paramilitary wing of IPOB to protect biafran land. Following their formation, the army was sent out by the Nigerian government to find ESN camps. The Nigerian Army proceeded to suppress this paramilitary arm of the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) on January 22, 2021, which led to a military clash in the city of Orlu, Imo State. In the ensuing conflicts, eight buildings were set on fire and one person was killed. Three days later, security forces returned to the region and engaged in combat with the ESN, inflicting at least five fatalities before the ESN drove them back. In the conflict that followed, four Nigerian troops perished. The conflict escalated after the ESN managed to repulse the initial push by the Nigerian Army, but IPOB ended the initial crisis by unilaterally withdrawing the ESN from Orlu. Daly et al (2020) recounts that, after a few weeks of quiet, Nigeria army launched a military offensive in the area to destroy the ESN.

Around this period, armed men stormed a prison in Owerri, enabling some 1,800 inmates to escape. The Nigerian government accused IPOB of the prison break, which they in turn denied any involvement. Jowett asserts that, “At some point in mid-February, the Nigerian Army 34 Artillery Brigade launched an operation to find ESN camps around Orlu and Orsu. The Nigerian Army also reinforced Orlu, deploying military helicopters to the city” (2016, p.18). Hostilities were renewed on 18 February, when the Nigerian Army and the ESN fought a gun battle in the forest outside Orlu while the Nigerian Air Force conducted air strikes in the area. A day into the fighting, the confrontation had spread to Ihiala, Anambra State. Nigerian forces captured an ESN base in the village of Udah outside Orsu on 21 February. The Nigerian Army 82 division also arrested 20 suspected IPOB members and confiscated their weapons (Bortolotti, 2004). The same day as hostilities were renewed, IPOB said that the military deployment constituted a declaration of war against the Igbo and accused the Nigerian government of planning a final solution to the Biafran question. The group declared that Nigeria had crossed the line of no return and that Igbo now had no choice but defend themselves. The next day, IPOB declared that the “second Nigeria/Biafra war” had begun on 18 February, and that unlike in the 1967–1970 Nigerian Civil War, Biafra would win (Daly et al, 2020).

In 2021, the Southeast governors introduced Ebube Agu, a pro-government security network, in the middle of April. The ESN, which IPOB claimed was sufficient, was accepted in place of

this group, and it was claimed that Ebube Agu's real goal was to oppose the ESN. The ESN/Ebube Agu debate persisted until December 2021, when the Federal Government gave the governors of the five states in southeast Nigeria the responsibility of eventually organizing the Ebube Agu security network. Once more, IPOB severely criticized this security organization, claiming that similar organizations had previously failed to stop robbers and that the new force was still attempting to stifle the ESN.

On 24 April, the top ESN commander known as Ikonso was killed when the Nigerian Army allegedly raided an ESN camp in Imo State. IPOB blames Governor Hope Uzodinma, as their intelligence stated he was killed in his house. Ahmad Gumi, an Islamic preacher, claimed in the latter part of June that while bandits only kidnapped students for ransom, IPOB was killing northerners. In response, IPOB leader Kanu reiterated that the ESN was primarily concerned with combating banditry by “Fulani jihadists” and accused Gumi of becoming a “mouthpiece for bandits and terrorists” (Opejobi, 2021). In addition, five governors of states in southeast Nigeria criticized pro-Biafran organizations, prompting rebukes from IPOB and the BNL. As the conflict was going on, the court revoked the bail of Kanu and the trial judge Binta Nyako ordered the immediate arrest of Kanu and stated that his treasonable felony will precede despite his absence. Mazi Nnamdi Kanu was still missing as of June 29, 2021, when news of his re-arrest by Interpol in Kenya or another country, extradition to Nigeria, and handover to Nigerian authorities awoke Nigerians. He was subsequently charged to court again and remanded in the custody of the Department of State Services. On 9 August, IPOB supporters began a stay-at-home protest with the intention of putting pressure on the government to release Kanu. Okonkwo (2022) asserts that:

When IPOB first introduced the sit-at-home order; the idea was to show that most people in the South-East support their quest for an independent nation of Biafra. It started as a once-a-year event, partly to remember those who died in the Nigeria-Biafra War. In the beginning, so many people in the region did not mind sacrificing a day to remember the dead. It soon transformed into a tool for achieving other goals... .

A majority of settlements in southeast Nigeria participated with the lockdown despite government orders to disregard IPOB's appeals for the action. At least three buses whose drivers declined to participate in the protest were set on fire by IPOB members. In October 2021, Kanu's trial in Abuja got underway after he entered a plea of not guilty to all 15 of the Federal Government's allegations against him. Following this trial, a new “sit-at-home” strike shut down the majority of services and businesses in southeast Nigeria. Around the same time, Simon Ekpa, a follower of Mazi Nnamdi Kanu, declared that IPOB would no longer follow Kanu's directives because he was unable to do so while in prison. However, a large section of IPOB disapproved of Ekpa's position. The strikes in the southeast also continued, and even as Mazi Nnamdi Kanu continue to appear in court from prison.

## **Conclusion**

History has always been the transformation and evolution from one stage to another. The birth and growth of IPOB is the aftermath of Nigerian-Biafran war. With persistence and resistance IPOB has made their voices heard both locally and internationally. They have lasted because they believe strongly in the cause of their ideology. At certain stage, the people who initiated the struggle lost control that they cannot pull it back. Freelance actors, breakaway factions, and others outside the original IPOB, have even seen the sit-at-home as one tool to exert control over the populace. They and their supporters argue that despite the groaning of the people, it is

worth the sacrifice. With the killings, maiming and destruction of properties they have rendered the South-East one of the most unsafe and insecure regions in Nigeria. However, the pains and deprivation that came with it and the sheer economic cost on businesses and the livelihoods of individuals and households over a long period of time have rendered it insufferable. Besides, citizens, residents and businesses in the states of the region have endured the resulting pain and hardships without any assurance that their sacrifices have had or will have any impact on the Federal Government.

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