

POLITICAL AND ETHNIC MARGINALIZATION OF THE IGBO IN NIGERIA FOURTH REPUBLIC

James N. Nnoruga

Abstract

This research delves into an examination of political and ethnic marginalization in Nigeria by the political class, with a particular reference to the Igbo people in the Fourth Republic. Employing a multi-dimensional approach, which draws from historical records, governmental reports, and contemporary academic literature, a lot of findings were made. This approach enables a comprehensive exploration of the historical and socio-political factors that contribute to Igbo marginalization, shaped by some factors such as colonial rule, the Nigerian Civil War, and shifts in Nigeria's political framework. Through systematic analysis, the study highlights ongoing consequences, Monday sit-at-home syndrome, challenges, including limited political representation, economic disparities, and unresolved grievances from past civil war. Findings indicate that these factors collectively hinder social justice, economic opportunities, and equitable national participation for the Igbo, contributing to broader implications for national unity, economic stability, and social cohesion in Nigeria. The research argues that addressing Igbo marginalization is vital to fostering a more inclusive Nigerian democracy. It presents policy or recommendations to mitigate these issues, including constitutional reforms, affirmative action initiatives, the establishment of truth and reconciliation processes, and mechanisms for enhanced representation. These measures are proposed as essential steps toward reducing ethnic tensions and promoting equity within Nigeria's diverse society.

Introduction

It is a known fact that Nigeria is a multi-ethnic nation with over 250 distinct ethnic groups, forming a complex socio-political landscape that has shaped the Nigeria's history, cultural heritage and development. Fashola (1999) and other scholars agreed that the three largest ethnic groups, the Hausa-Fulani in the north, the Yoruba in the west, and the Igbo in the east, each has a unique political, cultural, social, and economic systems prior to the coming of the British people. The minor ethnic groups found in Nigeria, like the Tiv, Kanuri, and Ijaw, and so on, further add to the country's diversity, bringing a variety of cultural identities and governance structures into unity (Ukiwo, 2003). This ethnic diversity has played a significant role in shaping issues of identity, political power, and resource distribution in Nigeria, making ethnicity in abnormal way, a central factor in both cooperation and conflict among Nigerian people (Suberu, 2001). Many parts of countries in Nigeria have cried out for marginalization, neglect due to tribal and ethnic marginalization meted out to them. Recently President Tinubu has pledged to honor the martyrs of Ogoni and put up a kind of reconciliation process to pacify for wrongs done to them in the past and promised to clean Ogoni land as was started by the previous presidents of the country.

Nigeria maintained a regional type of government in the past in their political system, which closely aligned with the respective cultural and societal values, this facilitated the development of each region before the civil war broke out. In the north, the Hausa-Fulani societies were organized into centralized emirates under the Sokoto Caliphate, a theocratic state that followed Islamic law (Lovejoy, 1980). In contrast, the Yoruba people in the west developed a monarchical system in city-states such as Oyo and Ife, with a structure that included checks and balances between royal councils and ruling elites (Peel, 2003). While Isichei 1976, posited that the Igbo in the eastern region practiced a highly decentralized, village-based democratic structure that emphasized collective decision-making through councils of elders. This system of government was sometimes seen as the reason why some scholars argued that Igbo people has no king (*Igbo enwe eze*), hence the British government introduced indirect rule in the eastern region of Nigeria. These indigenous political systems were generally effective at maintaining social cohesion and meeting the needs of the societies (Achebe, 1984).

The Nigerian political instability which later metamorphosed into all kinds of marginalization against its citizens, started with the arrival of the British government into the affairs of the Nigerian polity, significantly altered Nigeria's socio-political landscape and harmonious existence, as colonial authorities imposed new administrative boundaries and centralized governance. With the British amalgamation of Nigeria, confusion and corruption gradually set in, to once fast and competitively growing regions of Nigeria known for her culturally, economically and politically distinct regions into a single political entity, there by disregarding traditional boundaries. This single political action or step taking by the colonial masters created a unified territory for its own administrative convenience which contributed to Nigeria's enduring political instability till date. The policy of indirect rule introduced by the British, using local leaders as intermediaries to enforce colonial policies favored certain regions over others while more decentralized region, like the Igbo, were marginalized under a centralized colonial system (Ekeh, 1975). This differential treatment or policy established a foundation of political imbalance and instability that continues to fuel inter-ethnic tribal wars and crisis of subjugation in Nigeria today (Osaghae, 1991).

Madiebo (1980) explained that the legacies of ethnic favoritism and centralized power continued to influence political relationships negatively, and the crave by the different regions of the country to be government at the center by different power brokers, eventually led to the Nigerian Civil War (1967–1970), where ethnic tensions contributed to the conflict that saw the Igbo region attempt to secede as the Republic of Biafra. The civil war between the eastern region and the rest of the Nigerian populace formed the foundation for hate, stigmatization and marginalization meted out consciously or unconsciously for the Igbo people till date. The post-war period further entrenched the marginalization of the Igbo, who have faced political and economic exclusion within the federal structure, often viewed as a “marginalized majority” (Nnoli, 1978) due to the initial secession. According to Suberu (2001), this was carried on, to the Fourth Republic, established in 1999, issues of ethnic marginalization and

political exclusion remain prevalent in different forms, influencing elections, policy-making, and regional development.

The Igbo People of Nigeria

To understand this research, which delves into the political and ethnic marginalization of the Igbo people in Nigeria, particularly during the Fourth Republic, to understand the root causes, current manifestations, and potential pathways for resolution, there is need to understand the background, cosmology about life and its environs of the Igbo people in the southeast of Nigeria. This will, to a great extent, explain the interaction and relationship of the Igbo people with the other regions of Nigerian and to the whole world. The Igbo people being one of the major tribes in Nigeria is located geographically in the eastern part of the country. With amalgamation of Nigeria in 1914 by Lord Lugard, the strength and weakness of Nigeria became evident. The origin of Igbo has been debated or written by many scholars (Basden, Isichei, Orji, Afigbo and others), till today the debate is still on going and sometimes controversial (Obiefuna, 2009). The Igbo people have diverse accounts of origin, but when reconciling oral traditions and micro-historical studies, with archaeological and linguistic evidence, Orji (2018) argues that:

The diverse cultures, economies, and politico-religious organization of Igbo are a product of the intersection of internal factors such as technological innovations, ecological changes, and demographic movements, and external factors like the changing Atlantic economies of the slave trade, legitimate commerce and colonialism. (p. 129).

From the religious point of view, Obiefuna (2009) explained that the Igbo people are deeply religious and their religion gives meaning to their culture. The Igbo world view is such that there is no clear demarcation between the supernatural and the physical worlds. The religious character of the Igbo people who were mainly traditionalists before the advent of Christianity, permeates every facet of the day-to-day activities like social, economic, cultural and political aspects. This means that by nature they are religious. Though as of today, with a notable presence of Roman Catholics and Protestants churches, majority of Igbo are now Christians, while traditional religious practices continue to coexist alongside Christianity, in rural and urban areas (Isichei, 1977). This duality reflects the Igbo's adaptability and the enduring influence of indigenous belief systems, particularly in moral and social matters.

Culturally, Igbo people is marked by a strong emphasis on individual achievement and communal values, which are manifested in various aspects of daily life, including language, governance, and social practices. One notable feature of Igbo culture (politically) is its decentralized democratic governance, which contrasts with the hierarchical systems of some other Nigerian ethnic groups. Igbo communities often operate under a republican system, where decisions are made by councils of elders, community leaders, and titled men rather than a central authority (Afigbo, 1981). This system emphasizes equal participation of everyone in the village assembly meetings. Igbo art and aesthetics are equally reflective of their social values. Traditional art forms, such as Uli (body and wall painting) and Mbari (sacred sculptures and shrines), are integral to Igbo spirituality and serve as expressions of community values and

identity (Cole & Aniakor, 1984). Festivals, including the widely celebrated New Yam Festival, reinforce these cultural ties, emphasizing the Igbo's agricultural roots and communal solidarity (Oriji, 1994).

In modern Nigeria, the Igbo are known for their entrepreneurial spirit and economic dynamism, which involves mentoring the younger people in different kinds of business. This aspect of mentoring people in different kinds of business has produced many wealthy people in the southeast of Nigeria. Hence many Igbo people are involved in small and medium-sized enterprises across the country, often dominating sectors such as retail, trade, and transportation (Nnoli, 1978). The emphasis on self-reliance and business acumen is deeply embedded in Igbo culture which has helped the Igbo to survive again after the civil war where they lost everything to war. Education also was seen as a vehicle for economic success and social mobility by the Igbo people. This drive for economic advancement has also contributed to the Igbo diaspora, to pursue opportunities outside Igboland, contributing to Nigeria's economy and beyond (Nwosu, 1990). Historically, the Igbo economy has also been rooted in agriculture, with yams, cassava, and palm oil as staple crops. The yam is especially important in Igbo culture, symbolizing prosperity and success, and is central to social practices like the New Yam Festival, which marks the harvest season (Nafziger, 1972). However, the Igbo people has failed to develop their region structurally and otherwise as they do in other regions of Nigeria, hence there is a call as of today to develop their homes of origin (*aku-luo-ulo*) for all the Igbo people.

In general, the Igbo people of Nigeria embody a distinct ethnic identity shaped by a rich cultural heritage, economic ingenuity, a unique social structure, and a profound adaptability to changing social and political landscapes. These characteristics are central to understanding the resilience of the Igbo within Nigeria's complex multi-ethnic framework.

Igbo Marginalization in Nigeria

Nigeria, a nation of diverse ethnic groups, has long grappled with issues of political and ethnic marginalization which has led to different secessionist groups in the country, who agitate for one thing or the other with its consequent crisis which ranges from crime and social unrest in a society. Among the most affected group is the Igbo people, who have historically faced significant challenges in achieving equitable representation and participation in the country's political and economic spheres. Marginalization in this research patterns more about exclusion or neglect or process of relegating individuals or group of people to unimportant position. This may be may be total or partial exclusion, in which ever way, whether partial or full, once it is obvious it brings in a disorder in a complete ecosystem of human endeavors and interactions.

Gurr's (1993), Ethnic Conflict Theory (ECT) provides a useful framework for understanding the marginalization of ethnic groups such as the Igbo. According to Gurr, ethnic groups that experience exclusion from political and economic opportunities are more likely to engage in violent conflicts. This theory helps to

explain the sense of grievance that drives movements like the indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), which seeks independence for the Igbo. Silver's (2010), Social Exclusion Theory (SET) complements Gurr's (1993) (ECT) theory, suggesting that marginalization is a multidimensional process that includes political, economic, cultural, and social exclusion. Silver (2010), asserts that social exclusion not only limits access to resources but also diminishes individuals' participation in civic life, further entrenching their marginalized status. Both Gurr (1993), and Silver (2010), argue that marginalization leads to a cycle of exclusion that impedes social, political and economic developments. These aspects of marginalization are evident in the Igbo experiences, where ethnic exclusion continues to prevent them from accessing political power and economic resources, despite their significant contributions to the nation's development.

Historical Context of Igbo Marginalization and Its Consequences

Many scholars have argued that the break out of civil war in Nigeria officially marked out the marginalization of the Igbo people in Nigeria from economic, political to all sorts of marginalization. Adigbuo (2017), supported the above view that the Biafran Civil War (1967-1970) marked a pivotal moment in the history of Igbo marginalization. The war, which resulted in all forms of marginalization, exacerbated ethnic tensions and institutionalized patterns of exclusion. Egwu (2019), emphasized that the war entrenched an exclusionary political, structural, cultural and economic system that continued to limit the participation of the Igbo in national governance. The war's legacy, according to Nnoli (2008), resulted in policies that both subtly and overtly excluded the Igbo from key political and economic opportunities, leading to the second-class citizens in Nigeria. Egwu (2019), further explores Nigeria's ethnic diversity and its role in fostering political marginalization, particularly regarding the Igbo. He argues that the competition for political power among Nigeria's major ethnic groups has often resulted in the systematic exclusion of the Igbo from the political mainstream. Adigbuo (2017), states that this marginalization is evident in the underrepresentation of Igbo in key political offices in the fourth republic, despite the group's significant population and contributions to Nigeria's development. One can easily observe that the political structure in Nigeria has often favored the northern and southwestern regions, leaving the southeast primarily inhabited by the Igbo on the periphery of political power.

Adigbuo (2017), also highlights that the political systems in the Fourth Republic continue to perpetuate ethnic favoritism, where political offices are distributed based on ethnic considerations. The political exclusion of the Igbo is compounded by a lack of significant representation in the federal executive, legislature, and judiciary, which limits their influence in national decision-making processes. This underrepresentation fosters political disillusionment and perpetuates a cycle of marginalization for the Igbo people. Nnoli (2008), identifies economic inequality as a central element of Igbo marginalization, pointing out that the Southeast has historically been neglected in terms of infrastructure development and federal resource allocation. Egwu (2019),

concurr, asserting that the Igbo's economic exclusion is a consequence of both historical and contemporary policies that have restricted their access to national resources. Despite the Igbo's entrepreneurial drive and economic success in the private sector, they face systemic barriers in accessing government resources and opportunities as citizens of the federal republic of Nigeria. Politically, the Igbo people have witnessed various manifestations of marginalization during this fourth republic which started in 1999 till date. This marginalization is often reflected in the exclusion from national leadership positions, disproportionate allocation of political resources, and strategic underrepresentation in federal decision-making. Since Nigeria's return to democratic governance in 1999, the presidency has alternated primarily between the Hausa-Fulani (North) and Yoruba (Southwest) ethnic groups, leaving the Igbo underrepresented in the nation's highest political office. For example, Nigeria's political landscape has been dominated mostly by the two main ethnic groups: Hausa-Fulani, Yoruba. Olusegun Obasanjo (President) and Atiku Abubakar (Vice President) from May 29, 1999 – May 29, 2007, Umaru Musa Yar'Adua (President) and Goodluck Jonathan (Vice President) from May 29, 2007 – May 5, 2010 (Yar'Adua's death) Goodluck Jonathan (President) and Namadi Sambo (Vice President) from May 6, 2010 – May 29, 2015 (Jonathan completed Yar'Adua's term, then served a full term). Muhammadu Buhari (President) and Yemi Osinbajo (Vice President) from May 29, 2015 – May 29, 2023. Bola Ahmed Tinubu (President) and Kashim Shettima (Vice President) **from** May 29, 2023 till date. This shows that no Igbo person have held the presidency since the end of the civil war in 1970.

The above situation is manipulated through the party elections conducted by the members of different political parties. Before the primaries of Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) everything was allegedly done to the election of President Obasanjo who came out from the prison then, but the candidate from southeast Dr. Alex Ekwueme was denied from being the flag bearer, by conspiracy of the PDP party members from other part of the country. This eventually led to the election of President Obasanjo in 1999 presidential election. Cursorily, survey on the previous presidents since the inception of the fourth republic, has shown that Olusegun Obasanjo (1999–2007), Umaru Musa Yar'Adua (2007–2010), Goodluck Jonathan (2010–2015), and Muhammadu Buhari (2015–2023) and now Tinubu (2023- till date) and no Igbo person has become president, despite calls for an equitable rotational presidency that includes the Southeast.

During the 2023 presidential election, there was a call by different groups of people to different political parties to zone their presidency to the southeast for emergence of presidential candidates from the southeast but this was not heeded by political parties. Akinwale (2022) reported that:

A group under the auspices of United for Better Nigeria Initiative (UBNI) has urged all the political parties in the country to zone their presidential tickets to the South-East region...zoning the presidency to the Southeast would bring unity to the country...that Southeast and

Northeast are the only regions that have not had a shot at the presidency. (no. p).

The continued exclusion of the Igbo from the presidency has fueled perceptions of systemic marginalization and alienation within the national political framework. But its inclusion will bring about cohesion and further bind the cords of unity and progress to Nigeria as a country. From the point of view of federal appointments, (Nwaeze, 2017) commented that in allocation of power, the Southeast are known to receive fewer strategic roles in comparison to other regions of the country. For instance, under President Muhammadu Buhari's administration, key ministerial and security positions were overwhelmingly concentrated among individuals from the North and Southwest, sidelining the Southeast hence it contributed to insecurity in the southeast without anyone to give account of what happens in the region as regards to security in the national security meetings. This imbalance in appointments has undermined the Igbo's ability to control insecurity in the southeast region, leading to operation of non-state actors in kidnapping, killing and forming dangerous groups gearing for secession.

The Southeast region (Igbo) has suffered from poor federal infrastructure investment from different governments in the fourth republic, which many scholars interpret as a form of political and economic marginalization or hatred accruing from civil war. For example, the construction of railway line through all the parts of the country in the fourth republic passed through most of the regions but non was constructed towards the southeast or passed through it. Again, the Enugu-Onitsha Expressway and the Second Niger Bridge faced significant delays and underfunding for years, despite being essential to the region's economic growth (Okonkwo & Uchenna, 2020). Although the Second Niger Bridge was completed in 2022, its protracted construction timeline symbolized the government's historical neglect of the region. In 2019, the Akanu Ibiam international airport in Enugu was closed down for several months for repairs which is going on now. In the energy infrastructure, the southeast has some of the lowest power generation and distribution capacities in Nigeria when compared with other regions. This leads to frequent power outages and lack of foreign investors and citing of industries in the southeast. In the areas of educational and health infrastructures, the southeast has fewer federal infrastructures compared with other regions and at that they are being underfunded.

One of the consequences of the Igbo marginalization is resurgence of separatist movements and non-state actors, such as the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) and the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), has brought the issue of Igbo political marginalization to the forefront. The federal government's military operations in the Southeast such as *Operation Python Dance* in 2017, in the bid to check-mate the above groups, resulted in widespread violence, human rights abuses, and the suppression of people (Amnesty International, 2018). The southeast zone has been a hot zone for killing, kidnapping, and place of unrest for the Igbo people. This explains why Igbo have consistently been underrepresented in Nigeria's national security leadership. During the Buhari administration, no Igbo individuals were appointed to lead key security agencies such as the Nigerian Army, Navy, Air Force, or Police, raising concerns about deliberate exclusion (Obi, 2019).

Given the strategic importance of these roles, the absence of Igbo leaders has been seen as a systemic attempt to marginalize the region politically.

The Igbo people has been greatly marginalized due to her bulk votes being given to candidates they preferred to vote for in any election during any presidential elections. This electoral processes in the Fourth Republic have often reflected systemic disadvantages for Igbo candidates. For example, during the 2019 presidential election, many Igbo leaders and organizations supported opposition candidate Atiku Abubakar of the People's Democratic Party (PDP) rather than incumbent Muhammadu Buhari. The Southeast region's overwhelming support for the opposition led to perceptions of federal retaliation, including further neglect of the region's political and economic needs (Afigbo, 2019). The marginalization of the Igbo people reached to its apex when the leader of IPOB in the person of Mazi Nnamdi Kanu was incarcerated by Buhari government for years even when the competent court of jurisdiction set him free of charges allegedly committed. Yet the federal government still detained him till date, Sunday Adeyemo popularly known as Sunday Igboho an activist and freedom fighter from the Yoruba ethnic group was detained and released in October 2023 with the order of the corth, while Nnamdi Kanu is still being detained till date. This singular act has been fueling all sorts of disorder in the southeast.

Conclusion

The marginalization of the Igbo people in Nigeria's Fourth Republic remains a critical issue with far-reaching implications for national unity, stability, and development. This study highlights that the systematic exclusion of the Igbo from key political positions, underrepresentation in strategic federal appointments, neglect of infrastructure in the Southeast, and perceived inequities in governance have perpetuated feelings of disenfranchisement and alienation among the Igbo populace. These factors are rooted in historical grievances, including the legacy of the Nigerian Civil War and structural imbalances within the federal system. Hence there is need to maintain federal character as enshrined in the 1979 Constitution of Nigeria which involves geographical spread, quota system, and ethnic balancing in sharing the resources of the country, which is meant for the multi-linguistic and multi-ethnic character like Nigeria.

The findings underscore the urgent need to address these disparities through deliberate measures aimed at fostering inclusivity. Such measures could include equitable rotational arrangements for the presidency, fairer allocation of political appointments, increased federal investment in Southeast infrastructure, and genuine efforts at reconciliation to heal historical wounds. Furthermore, integrating the Igbo into Nigeria's national framework is essential not only for addressing their marginalization but also for ensuring a sustainable and stable future for the country. For proper reconciliation to heal Igbo historical wounds, there should be establishment of institutional arrangements that would facilitate the implementation of redistributive policies. Abubakar (1997) believed that such policies would not only reduce the

negative effects of marginalization, but they would also enhance participation by different sections of society in the political process.

Promoting inclusivity is not merely a moral imperative but a strategic necessity. A truly representative governance structure that accommodates all ethnic groups, including the Igbo, will strengthen national unity, enhance economic development, and build a cohesive society where every citizen feels a sense of belonging. This approach is vital for Nigeria's aspirations to consolidate its democracy and achieve long-term peace and prosperity. With this inclusivity in power sharing, it will potentially accelerate the level of ethnic harmony, and develop a system of trust in the governance of the country. Hence, the issue of kidnapping and secession in the southeast will disappear gradually.

James N. Nnoruga, PhD

Department of Religion & Human Relations

Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka, Nigeria

Email: jn.nnoruga@unizik.edu.ng

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