

## Emerging Secessionist Threats in Nigeria: A Focus on the Activities of IPOB and Unknown Gunmen in Eastern Nigeria

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### Abstract

This study examines the reemergence of separatist movements in Nigeria, particularly in the Eastern region, and their impact on the security situation in the country. It reveals that the separatist groups, such as IPOB and Unknown Gunmen, have been able to mobilize support from the Igbo people by highlighting their historical, economic, and political grievances against the Nigerian state. The failure of the Nigerian state to address the legitimate grievances of ethnic minorities has contributed to the emergence of separatist movements. The analysis of reports and data sources shows that the activities of IPOB and Unknown Gunmen have had a significant impact on the security situation in the Eastern region of Nigeria. The findings of this study have important implications for the security and stability of Nigeria. The study concludes that secessionism in Nigeria has a complex and multi-layered history that is rooted in the country's colonial past and perpetuated by the failure of the Nigerian state to address the legitimate grievances of ethnic minorities. The recommendations include addressing the root causes of secessionism, promoting inclusive governance, and engaging in meaningful dialogue with separatist groups. These steps can help to find a peaceful solution to the issue of secessionism and ensure the security and stability of Nigeria.

**Keywords:** *Separatist movements, IPOB, Unknown Gunmen and Marginalization*

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### **Background to the Study**

The complicated and multilayered history of secessionism in Nigeria may be traced back to the country's colonial past. In their pursuit of economic gain, British colonialist established a system of indirect authority that fostered ethnic differences and exacerbated existing socioeconomic imbalances. Hence, numerous ethnic groups in Nigeria demanded greater autonomy and self-determination, resulting in the formation of separatist organizations. According to Falola (2005), the colonial legacy of ethnic divisions and economic inequities in Nigeria laid the groundwork for separatist movements.

The Igbo, who desired independence from the rest of the country, initiated one of the earliest forms of secessionism in the country. In the 1950s and 1960s, the Igbo-dominated Eastern Region began advocating for self-determination, paving the path for the foundation of the separatist group Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB). Ralph Uwazurike was the leader of the group that sought to establish an independent nation for the Igbo. As a result, a deadly civil war broke out in Nigeria between 1967 and 1970 after the government headed by General Yakubu Gowon cracked down on the group. Following from the above, almost one million people perished as a direct result of the civil war, also known as the Biafra War, primarily from starvation and disease. According to Adedeji (1970), the Igbo people's legitimate demands were overlooked by the Nigerian government, which led to the tragic and unnecessary Biafra War.

Separatist activities in Nigeria, and especially in the Eastern region, have been on the rise in recent years. This Igbo dominated area has historically been a flashpoint for many separatist movements, including IPOB and the Unknown Gunmen (UG). The Igbo People's Organization of Biafra (IPOB) is a secessionist movement working to create a sovereign nation for the Igbo people of Nigeria. Nnamdi Kanu formed this organization in 2012 to fight for the rights of the Igbo people, who, he claims, have been discriminated against and persecuted by the Nigerian government following long years of complaints of marginalization and neglect by the Nigerian state in the Eastern part of the country, particularly in the states of Anambra and Imo, where the UG has been active more recently and with more violence. In recent years, the gang has carried out a string of attacks in the area. Based on the foregoing, it is evident that historical, economic, and political considerations have all played a significant role in driving secessionism in Nigeria. Hence, scholars have blamed the rise of separatist movements in Nigeria on the state's inability to address the legitimate grievances of ethnic minorities, which they opined are rooted in the country's colonial heritage of ethnic divisions and economic inequities (Ibeanu, 2005). In light of the foregoing, the purpose of this research is to analyze how the revival of such groups, especially in the South-Eastern area of the country, has reawakened secessionist threats in Nigeria.

### **Methods**

Secondary methods were utilized in this research to investigate the emerging threat of secessionist threats in Nigeria, with a focus on the activities of IPOB and Unknown Gunmen in Eastern Nigeria. Secondary methods involve the analysis of existing literature, data, and other relevant materials that have already been collected and published by others. These

methods provide an efficient way to obtain information about a particular topic without conducting original research. The first step in the research methodology involved the conduction of a thorough literature review of existing materials on secessionist threats in Nigeria, the role of IPOB and Unknown Gunmen, and the challenges faced by the Nigerian state in addressing the issue were examined. The literature review was comprehensive, covering academic journals, books, reports, and online sources. The aim of this step was to identify the key issues and debates surrounding secessionism in Nigeria and to understand the motivations, goals, and activities of IPOB and Unknown Gunmen.

Corollary from the above, the second step involved the analysis of government and non-government reports and data on secessionism in Nigeria. This step involved an analysis of the reports from the Nigerian government, international organizations such as the United Nations, and other non-government organizations. The data and reports were analyzed to understand the extent and impact of the activities of IPOB and Unknown Gunmen, as well as the response of the Nigerian government and other relevant stakeholders. In the third step, we conducted media analysis to understand the representation of secessionism in the media and how this has shaped public opinion. The media analysis included both traditional and online sources of news and information. The aim was to identify the dominant narratives and framing of secessionism in Nigeria and to understand how these narratives have influenced public opinion.

### **Historical Glance at Secessionist Threats in Nigeria**

Secessionism and secessionist threat are not strange ideologies in the practice of federation in Nigeria. Various groups and ethnic nations have repeatedly used secessionist threats as forms of agitation to express displeasure in the Nigerian's federation. In February 23, 1966, the Niger Delta Volunteer Service (NDVS) led by Isaac Adaka Boro proclaimed the "Niger Delta Peoples Republic" and declared that the Niger Delta region should not be considered as part of the Nigerian's federation (Ikporukpo; 2006). The grouse of the group was the high level of underdevelopment and what they classified as the total neglect of the region.

A very renowned incident of secessionist attempt in Nigeria occurred in May 1967 when it was alleged that about 10,000 to 30,000 Ibo people were massacred in the Northern part of the country and about the same number fled the North to the Eastern part of the country, (Olu;2019) .Consequent upon the genocide against the Ibo and other bottled grievances and imbalances in the Nigerian's federation, the head of the eastern region, Lieutenant Colonel Odumegwu Ojukwu after a whole consultation with leaders of thoughts in the region declared the Sovereign Republic of Biafra. This act led to the Nigeria civil war that devastated the country between May 1967 and January 1970. There were also threat by the South-Western part of the country to declare the Oduduwa republic.

### **The rise of the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) and its role in promoting secessionism in Eastern Nigeria**

The Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) is a separatist movement that emerged in the southeastern region of Nigeria in the mid-2000s. The movement's aim is to secede from

Nigeria and establish an independent state of Biafra, which would encompass the former Biafran territories that existed during the Biafran War (1967-70). The rise of IPOB can be traced to the growing discontent among the Igbo people of southeastern Nigeria under the present democratic dispensation, who feel marginalized and discriminated against by not just the Nigerian government, but also, by other ethnic groups in the country (Uwazurike, 2017). In an article published in the African Journal of Political Science and International Relations, Onyia (2016) noted that "the rise of IPOB can be seen as a response to the perceived marginalization of the Igbo people in Nigeria and the perceived failure of the Nigerian state to address this issue."

In recent time, IPOB has gained significant momentum attracting a large following among the Igbo people and other ethnic groups in the southeastern region. The movement has been characterized by a series of mass protests and demonstrations, as well as acts of civil disobedience, such as the boycott of the 2015 Nigerian general elections. Kanu (2017) noted that "the rise of the group has been driven by a combination of frustration with the Nigerian government and a desire for greater political autonomy for the southeastern region."

The role of IPOB in promoting secessionism in the southeastern region of Nigeria cannot be overstated. The movement has become a powerful force in the region, rallying support for the cause of Biafran independence and raising awareness about the issues facing the Igbo people. In an article published in the Journal of Contemporary African Studies, Nwabueze (2018), revealed that "IPOB...emerged as the voice of the Igbo people, articulating their grievances and demands for greater political representation and autonomy."

While the group's efforts in reawakening the social consciousness of the people on the need for secessionism has been met with stiff resistance by the federal government who has militarized the region, the group has found more success in recent times on social media and other communication technologies to spread its message and mobilize its supporters (Nwankwo, 2015). The movement has gained significant media attention, both within Nigeria and internationally, and has been able to attract a large following among the younger generation especially in the southeastern region. It was in line with the above, that Ekeanyanwu (2019), argued that the group "has harnessed the power of digital media to build a highly engaged and mobilized online community, which has helped to amplify its message and further its cause."

Despite its peaceful approach over the years, more recent history indicates that after the first arrest of its boss (Nnamdi Kanu) by the Nigerian military, the group has favored a more violent approach in recent years (Ogundiya, 2021). Corollary, the group's promotion of secessionism has not been without controversy. The movement has been accused of engaging in violent acts, such as the burning of government buildings and the attack of security forces and has been banned by the Nigerian government. Ejeckam (2019), argued that "the Nigerian government took a hardline stance against IPOB, seeing the movement as a threat to national unity and stability."

Regardless of the ban, IPOB remains a powerful force in the southeastern region of Nigeria and continues to promote secessionism and push for greater political autonomy for the Igbo people. In summary, it could be argued that the rise of IPOB and its role in promoting secessionism in the southeastern region of Nigeria is a complex issue that reflects the deep-seated grievances and frustrations of the Igbo people and their desire for greater political representation and autonomy. The movement is likely to continue to play a significant role in shaping the political landscape of Nigeria in the years to come.

### **The activities of unknown gunmen in Eastern Nigeria and their potential links to secessionism**

The phenomenon of unknown gunmen has become a major security challenge in Eastern Nigeria, with a rising number of reports on their activities, including acts of banditry, kidnapping, and political violence. These activities have caused widespread panic and a sense of insecurity among the local population, as well as economic hardship and loss of life (Igwe, 2018). The purpose of this section is to analyze the activities of unknown gunmen in Eastern Nigeria and explore the potential links between their actions and the growing secessionist sentiment in the region. The activities of unknown gunmen in the South Eastern part of the country can be broadly categorized into two groups: criminal and politically motivated. Criminal activities, such as banditry, kidnapping for ransom, and armed robbery, are motivated by financial gain, while politically motivated activities aim to destabilize the government and undermine the state.

#### **Criminal Activities of Unknown Gunmen**

The South-East region of Nigeria has been facing a growing threat from unknown gunmen in recent years. These criminal gangs have become increasingly active in the region, carrying out a range of criminal activities, including kidnapping, armed robbery, and banditry. The rise of these criminal activities has caused widespread fear and insecurity among the local population, as well as economic hardship and loss of life. The criminal activities of unknown gunmen in South-East Nigeria can be broadly categorized into two groups: kidnapping and armed robbery.

#### **Kidnapping**

Kidnapping has become a major problem in South-East Nigeria, with a rising number of reports on the abduction of individuals for ransom. These kidnappings are often carried out by small groups of armed men who use the rugged terrain of the region to evade capture by the security forces. The victims of these kidnappings are usually wealthy individuals or members of the political and business community, and the kidnappers demand large sums of money for their release. The rise in kidnapping has had a profound impact on the local population, causing widespread fear and insecurity, as well as economic hardship, as many people are unable to carry out their daily activities due to the threat of abduction.

#### **Armed Robbery**

Armed robbery has also become a major problem in South-East Nigeria, with reports of armed men targeting banks, businesses, and individuals for financial gain. These armed



robbers often use violence and intimidation to carry out their crimes, and the police have been unable to curb their activities. The rise in armed robbery has had a profound impact on the local economy, as many businesses are unable to operate due to the threat of violence, leading to job losses and economic hardship.

### **Reasons for the Rise in Criminal Activities**

There are several factors that have contributed to the rise in criminal activities by unknown gunmen in South-East Nigeria. One of the main reasons is the poverty and unemployment in the region, which has created a large pool of individuals who are willing to engage in criminal activities to earn a living. Another factor is the lack of effective law enforcement in the region, which has created a sense of impunity among the criminal gangs and allowed them to operate with relative ease. Another reason for the rise in criminal activities is the weakness of the security forces in the region, which has made it difficult for them to curb the activities of the unknown gunmen. The security forces are often ill-equipped, underfunded, and understaffed, and have been unable to keep pace with the growing threat from the unknown gunmen. This has created a sense of frustration and anger among the local population, who feel that the state is failing to provide them with the protection they need.

### **Political Activities of Unknown Gunmen**

The political activities of unknown gunmen in South-East Nigeria can be broadly categorized into two groups: separatist movements and political violence.

#### **1. Separatist Movements**

In recent years, there has been a growing movement for the separation of the South-East region from Nigeria. This movement is driven by a sense of frustration and anger among the local population, who feel that they have been marginalized and excluded from the rest of the country. The unknown gunmen have become involved in this separatist movement, providing support and acting as a militia for those seeking independence. The presence of these armed groups has increased tensions in the region and has led to fears of political instability.

#### **2. Political Violence**

Political violence has also become a major problem in South-East Nigeria, with reports of unknown gunmen targeting political rallies, leaders, and supporters of opposing political parties. The unknown gunmen have become involved in political violence as a means of asserting their influence and asserting their power in the region. This political violence has had a profound impact on the local population, causing widespread fear and insecurity, as well as undermining the democratic process in the region.

#### **3. Reasons for the Rise in Political Activities**

There are several factors that have contributed to the rise in political activities by unknown gunmen in South-East Nigeria. One of the main reasons is the poverty and unemployment in the region, which has created a large pool of individuals who are willing to engage in political activities for personal gain. Another factor is the lack of effective law enforcement in the region, which has created a sense of impunity among the unknown gunmen and allowed them to operate with relative ease.

Another reason for the rise in political activities is the weakness of the political system in the region, which has created a vacuum that has been filled by the unknown gunmen. The political system in South-East Nigeria is characterized by corruption, patronage, and a lack of accountability, which has created a sense of frustration and anger among the local population. The unknown gunmen have become involved in the political system as a means of asserting their influence and asserting their power in the region.

## **Results**

The results of this study indicate that the reemergence of separatist movements in Nigeria, particularly in the Eastern region, has led to a resurgence of secessionist threats in the country. The separatist groups, such as IPOB and Unknown Gunmen, have been able to mobilize support from the Igbo people by highlighting their historical, economic, and political grievances against the Nigerian state. The literature review revealed that secessionism in Nigeria has its roots in the colonial legacy of ethnic divisions and economic disparities, which created a foundation for separatist movements in the country. The failure of the Nigerian state to address the legitimate grievances of ethnic minorities has also contributed to the emergence of separatist movements.

The analysis of government and non-government reports and data revealed that the activities of IPOB and Unknown Gunmen have had a significant impact on the security situation in the Eastern region of Nigeria. The groups have been responsible for a series of attacks on security personnel and public infrastructure, which have led to loss of lives and property. The Nigerian government has responded with a heavy-handed approach, including military operations and arrests of suspected members of the groups. However, these actions have not been able to quell the activities of the groups, and the situation remains volatile.

For instance, according to a report by the United States Department of State in 2021, the security situation in Nigeria has been greatly affected by the activities of armed groups. The report noted that the activities of these groups have contributed to an increase in violence and insecurity in the country. Similarly, a report by the International Crisis Group in 2021 highlighted the role of IPOB and other separatist groups in the escalation of violence in the Eastern region of Nigeria. The report noted that the groups had carried out attacks on security personnel, public infrastructure, and political targets, leading to loss of lives and property.

Non-governmental organizations such as Amnesty International have also reported on the impact of the activities of IPOB and Unknown Gunmen on the security situation in Nigeria. In a report in 2021, the organization documented cases of extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearances, and torture of suspected members of the groups by security forces. These reports and data sources indicate that the activities of IPOB and Unknown Gunmen have had a significant impact on the security situation in the Eastern region of Nigeria, leading to loss of lives and property, and contributing to the overall insecurity in the country.

The media analysis revealed that the representation of secessionism in the media has been mixed. While some media outlets have portrayed the groups as violent and disruptive, others

have highlighted the underlying grievances of the Igbo people and the failure of the Nigerian state to address them. The dominant narratives and framing of secessionism in Nigeria have influenced public opinion, with some sections of the public supporting the goals of the separatist groups, while others condemn their activities.

### **Discussion**

The findings of this study have important implications for the security and stability of Nigeria. The reemergence of separatist movements in the country, particularly in the Eastern region, poses a threat to the unity and territorial integrity of Nigeria. The activities of IPOB and Unknown Gunmen have led to loss of lives and property, and the heavy-handed response of the Nigerian government has led to allegations of human rights abuses. The failure of the Nigerian state to address the underlying grievances of the Igbo people has contributed to the emergence of separatist movements in the country. To address this issue, the Nigerian government needs to adopt a more inclusive approach to governance, which takes into account the needs and aspirations of all ethnic groups in the country. The government should also address the socio-economic disparities that exist between different regions and communities, and provide basic services such as healthcare, education, and infrastructure.

The media has an important role to play in shaping public opinion and promoting dialogue and understanding between different groups in the country. Media outlets should strive to provide balanced and accurate coverage of secessionism in Nigeria, which takes into account the historical, economic, and political factors that have contributed to the emergence of separatist movements. They should also provide a platform for dialogue and debate, which can help to promote understanding and reconciliation between different groups.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

In conclusion, secessionism in Nigeria has a complex and multi-layered history that is rooted in the country's colonial past and perpetuated by the failure of the Nigerian state to address the legitimate grievances of ethnic minorities. The reemergence of separatist movements, particularly in the southeastern region, has been driven by historical, economic, and political factors. The Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) and The Unknown Gunmen (UG) are two of the most prominent groups that have been pushing for secession in Eastern Nigeria. The activities of these groups have created challenges for the Nigerian state and have raised questions about the future of the country.

Recommendations Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations can be made to address the issue of secessionism in Nigeria:

1. Address the root causes of secessionism: The Nigerian state must address the root causes of secessionism, including historical, economic, and political factors. This involves acknowledging and addressing the legitimate grievances of ethnic minorities and working to reduce socio-economic disparities.
2. Promote inclusive governance: The Nigerian state must promote inclusive governance and ensure that the rights and interests of all ethnic groups are protected and respected. This can be achieved through the implementation of policies and



- programs that are designed to address the socio-economic and political marginalization of ethnic minorities.
3. Engage in meaningful dialogue with separatist groups: The Nigerian state must engage in meaningful dialogue with separatist groups, including IPOB and UG, to understand their grievances and find a peaceful solution to the issue of secessionism. This involves creating a conducive environment for dialogue and listening to the perspectives of all stakeholders involved.
  4. Strengthen the rule of law: The Nigerian state must strengthen the rule of law and ensure that the activities of separatist groups are dealt with in accordance with the law. This involves taking strong and decisive action against groups that engage in violent activities, while also protecting the rights of all individuals and groups, including those who advocate for secession.

In conclusion, the issue of secessionism in Nigeria is a complex and multi-layered one that requires a multi-faceted approach to address. The recommendations outlined above can serve as a starting point for the Nigerian state to address the issue and work towards finding a peaceful and sustainable solution that benefits all stakeholders involved.

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