From Civil to 'Uncivil' Society? Separatist Social Movements and the Shrinking Civic Space in South-East, Nigeria

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Abstract

Despite the availability of extensive literature on factors accounting for the shrinking civic space in Nigeria, it is still unclear what roles social movements play, particularly as it concerns the southeast region. This paper relying on review of secondary data collected from newspapers, and journals examined the activities of separatist social movements in the southeast and the forms of threats they pose to civic space in the region. With specific focus on the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), the paper argued that the civic space in the southeast is rapidly shrinking due to some identifiable "uncivil" conducts associated with separatist groups and these include the use of propaganda, labelling, cyber bullying, forced restrictions/sit-at-home, and threats/intimidation. The paper argues that while state repression triggered violent resistance movements in the region, this situation has created a space for separatist groups to create an 'uncivil society' characterized by violence and repression of the basic rights of the civil population. The paper concludes that the circle of violence from the state and separatist groups has negatively impacted the civic space making it difficult for residents of the south east are to freely exercise their rights to expression, association, movement and assembly.

Keywords: *Separatist social movements, Civic space, IPOB, Southeast, Igbos, Nigeria*

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Background to the Study

Social movements are an integral aspect of civil society and are generally regarded as large groups organised to effect or resist social, political, economic and cultural change in society. These movements often take the form of political associations, interest or pressure group to express certain grievances against the state, private sector, as well as non- state actors in some cases. According to Cloke (2013), social movements engender social change by drawing public attention to social injustices, inequalities, marginalisation, and advocating or supporting public policies, reinforcing progressive values, safeguarding human rights and freedoms in society. Just as with any other social group, social movements are ubiquitous across societies and their activities in the recent past cuts across a broad spectrum of issues from abolitionist movements against slavery, non-violence movements, feminist movements, civil rights movements, nationalist movements, anti-Apartheid movements, and in contemporary times environmental/climate movements, and the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) movements etcetera. The need for the creation of a more equitable and just society through social, political and economic changes necessitated the emergence of social movements who promote their ideas through advocacy, campaigns and in some cases protests. Social movements mostly emerge in response to prevailing socio-political and economic problems, for instance, in the last decade, the global food, fuel and financial crisis that occurred between 2007- 2012 were marked by protests, riots and more enduring forms of organized social movements such as the Indignado in Spain, Occupy Nigeria Movement in Nigeria, as well as the anti-authoritarian struggles in the Arab world popularly known as the "Arab spring", (Ortiz et al, 2013; Barnett 2011; Carothers and Youngs 2015; Anderson, 2011; Ansani and Daniele 2012; Tadros, 2012).

In Nigeria, social movements have been an integral part of the country's socio-political history. The complexities of the Nigerian society, as a multi-ethnic society has characterized the prevalent forms of social movements in the country mainly focused on indigenous people and minority rights struggle. Some of these ethnic based rights movement include the Oodua People's Congress (OPC), and IIana Omo Ododua group, which have been at the forefront of the struggle for a sovereign Yoruba nation, the Movement for the survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP) for minority and environmental rights of Ogonis of the Niger Delta, the Maitatsine Islamic group, that sought to impose Sharia legal system in Northern Nigeria, the Ijaw Youth Congress (IYC) focused on protecting the environmental rights of the Ijaw people of the Niger Delta, the Movement for the Actualisation of Biafra (MASSOB) and most recently the Indigenous Peoples of Biafra (IPOB), a South-eastern separatist movement seeking for an independent Biafra state.

Social movements operate within certain environmental or social conditions known as the 'civic space' - which implies a set of conditions that determine the degree to which all members of society can exercise their fundamental freedoms of association, assembly and expression (CIVICUS, 2020a; Malena, 2005). For social movements to function effectively, the right conditions must exist or be enabled in any given society. Therefore, civic space refers to an ecosystem to share ideas, create new ones, organise and collaborate with others, solve problems, protect human rights and improve wellbeing (Oxfam, 2020). Thus, enabling

individuals, organisations and social movements to actively participate in civic duty, make informed decisions on the social, economic and political development, impact the structures around them, advance enlightened self-interest and build democratic societies (CIVICUS, 2020b).

This notwithstanding, 24 years of uninterrupted democratic experience in Nigeria, has ironically failed to promote a thriving civic space (CIVICUS, 2020). This is due to rising intolerance among the ruling class towards social movements and civil society actors, especially those demanding respect for human rights, civil and political rights, social justice and self-determination. In the quest to hold on to power and perpetuate their dominance over the masses, the ruling elites have attempted to silence and gag social movements and expand their grip on power. Clearly, open civic space suggests that social movements are able to coordinate, communicate and participate in promoting social change without unnecessary encumbrances from the state or other non-state actors and in doing so, impact the social, economic, cultural and political structures around them. These actors are mainly critical of the state, power holders, political leadership in control of the apparatus of the state, building solidarity around shared interest or vision, which could be religious, social, cultural, economic or political. They often adopt non-violent means of engagement- dialogue, peaceful protest, information dissemination, petitions and litigation to amplify and advance their cause. Unfortunately, attempts by social movements, particularly indigenous and ethnic based movements to protest apparent repressive powers of the state or bring about social change, have been fiercely resisted by state authorities and continue to be drivers of conflict in most societies (Cloke, 2013). By this, the state instruments the use of force to repress social movements that are perceived to be anti-government and, in the process, violate the basic rights of the people to freely associate, assemble and express themselves- leading to the shrinking of the civic space.

Instructively, while there is a plethora of studies on the restrictive actions of the state against social movements in Nigeria, little has been researched on how expressive activities of social movements themselves clog and shrink the civic space. Clearly, Clapham (2006) has noted that corporations, mercenaries, international organisations, transnational companies, criminal and pro-government organisations have demonstrated capacity to abuse human rights and shrink civic spaces. Therefore, in recognition of the capacity of social movements to engender civic space repression they ordinary ought to protect in itself demonstrates a paradigm shift from a conventional state-centric focus to unconventional non-state led abuse of people's rights. It is in the light of this that this study amplifies how the distribution and redistribution of power outside of the state, engenders civic space repression and human rights abuse from non-state actors. In the same vein, Tilly (2007) has pointed out that it is imperative to examine the coalitions, rivalries and confrontations among political actors outside of the state; and in the case of this study our focus is on emergent social movements in south-eastern Nigeria, particularly, the separatist group, the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB). While it is common knowledge that repressive and exclusionary state policies by successive Nigerian governments accounts for the emergence of separatist movements in the south east, such as the Movement for the Survival of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) and the Indigenous People of

Biafra (IPOB), these groups particularly the later, responding to perceived state repression, has metamorphosed into a violent separatist group whose activities in recent years engenders human rights abuse and endangers the civic space in Nigeria's south-east region.

The Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) and other splinter separatist groups have become for many a questionable expression of social movements in south east Nigeria. In the process of advancing their cause, they have been noted to have engaged in armed struggle and violent resistance against the Nigerian state, with implications for human rights abuse in the region. In view of the forgoing, this study hence seeks to examine the separatist social movements in the south east particularly IPOB and how the activities of the group contribute to the shrinking of the civic space in region. Based on the foregoing, the study addresses three research questions: Firstly, we seek to identify what accounts for the emergence of separatist social movements in the south east region of Nigeria? Secondly, we seek to explore how the activities of separatist social movements contribute to the shrinking of the civic space in Southeast, Nigeria? Lastly, we seek to explore how the Nigerian state has responded to the threats posed by separatist social movements to civic space in Southeast?

Social Movements and the Shrinking Civic Space: From Civil to "Uncivil" Society Organizations

The proliferation of civil society organisations in the last three decades has produced a myriad of analytical perspectives on their role in influencing states (Frantz, 1987; Putnam, 1993; Vakil, 1997; Coston, 1998; Mann, 2008). From the provision of public goods and services to platforms for participation in governance, civil society organisations have been at the forefront of an associational revolution (Salamon, 1994). While the gamut of civil society is large, our focus is on social movements, particularly indigenous people's movements. The concept of social movements has a chequered and variegated history as the opinions of scholars, activists and others differ. Olesen (2005) define social movements as "extra-parliamentary and organised attempts to obtain social and political change with the use of non-institutional repertoires such as public protest, information distribution and lobbying" Similarly, Tilly (2004) asserted that social movements are a large series of contentious performances, displays and campaigns by everyday people with shared interest, shared values and solidarity in sustained engagement with leaders, institutions and opponents in order to cause social change in a given society. Clearly, social movements involve coming together of people with a common goal in organized groups aimed at carrying out series of actions to express their grievances, agitate for change and advance a cause. Social movements as a subset of civil society are crucial in facilitating social change, public accountability and protection of indigenous people's rights (Sikkinik, 1993; Keck and Sikkinik, 1998; Rise and Sikkinik, 1999).

This notwithstanding, the early part of the 21st century, witnessed the proliferation of "uncivil society" (racist, sexist, nationalist, extremist or exclusionary faith-based groups, armed or violent non-state actors in many regions of the world – with the southeast of Nigeria as no exception – this wave of protest movements and demonstrations, including uncivil activism (Alverez et al, 2017) or unruly politics (Tadros, 2011; Khana 2012) occupied a large portion of civil society space. These mobilisations corresponded with socio-economic and political

inequalities and volatilities in the global economy and erupted in apparently extemporaneous mob actions that defied social movement theorising and the traditional categorisations of neo liberal civil society thoughts. The challenge of shrinking civic space is not solely orchestrated by the state, as there are non-state collaborators known as "uncivil society" organisations, who sometimes also act independently to further their group interests. This "uncivil society" organisations act differently away from the traditional civil society organisations, they do not respect fundamental human rights, and are totalitarian by nature. Though it is pertinent to acknowledge that diverse opinions enrich democratic experience, public debate and public good in society, "uncivil society" or non-state actors uses nationalist, illiberal, extremist, and exclusionary methods and motives to confront democratic values.

The shrinking of the civic space is mostly aimed at preserving the status quo, and to consolidate or increase the power of the state or political actors and non-state actors (Hayman, 2016; Poppe & Wolff, 2017). According to Buyse (2019), shrinking of the civic space is strongly related to limitations of freedoms of assembly, the freedom of association and the freedom of expression. It is these human rights – or more particularly the violation of these political and civil rights enshrined in the constitution of Nigeria and in international law, treaties or conventions, that limits people's ability to enjoy and exercise these freedoms thus restricting the civic space.

The state in this context plays a dual role as the duty bearer of human rights (protector) on one hand and on the other hand it is the principal threat to human rights (Donnelly, 2013). Given this concurrent role, some scholars have highlighted that if states fail to enforce human rights standards, non-state actors can exploit state inaction to advance their own agenda through illiberal actions (Fearon & Laitin, 2003; Englehart, 2009). If the state fails to police and uphold human rights, then social movements can increase repressive activities with little fear of consequence or reprisal (Migdal, 1988). Naturally, states who are unable to police their borders, control their agents and ensure compliance with the various standards, regulations and laws of administration of the civil and criminal justice system are more likely to experience rights violations. Thus, weak states and extractive leadership creates conditions where social movements can conduct illicit activities (Jochnick, 1999; Englehart, 2009). This has been attributed to the state's inability to enforce its laws across board – control and prosecute powerful actors who break the law (Clapham, 2006). This is evident in so many ways, as for instance, a weak judiciary is prone to corruption and can easily be influenced by powerful political interests to repress protesters rights. In other cases, weak state infrastructural capacity can stimulate the formation of armed non-state actors (Fearon & Laitin, 2003). To this end, if the state fails to assert its legitimate authority or lacks the power to enforce law and order, others will step in to fill the void in ways that will shrink the civic space.

The emerging facts are that, not all civil society organisations promote progressive or rights-based agenda as conceived by the neo liberal school of thought (Stewart, 1997; Rahman 2002; Kopecky & Mudde, 2003; Kotkin, 2010). The near overwhelming prominence of nationalist, extremist, exclusionary or identity-based concerns and of social movements that are inimical to civic society as a means to propagate their cause, seems likely to contribute to the shrinking or clogging of the civic space.

Theoretical Framework

Broadly, social movement theories are largely focused on the emergence of social movements as an outcome of the dysfunctional relationship between systems such as social inequality and injustice in a given society. This dysfunctional relationship gives impetus to the generation, regeneration and degeneration of social inequalities and injustices to the extent that groups emerge to resist the status quo or advance their own agenda. There is a plurality of scholarly opinions on why social movements emerge, their evolution, the dynamics of conflicts, revolution and protestation, so there is hardly a consensus on the subject. However, the conflict persuasion stresses a social phenomenon in which a minimum of two distinct actors seek to acquire simultaneously a set of scarce resources (Wallenstein, 2002). The focus here is on the fundamental needs and grievances of the conflicting social actors and it argues that the origin of conflicts is to be located in the deprivations and denial of the needs of individuals or groups such as self-determination or control of natural resources within their space, the violation of or non-existence of human rights (Gurr, 1993; Vincent, 1998; Donnelly, 1989). The theory of relative deprivation is relied upon in analysing the variables (civil society, uncivil society, shrinking civic space) contained in this study. The theory is imperative to this study because of its relatedness to social movements and group mobilisation, particularly those who feel marginalised and organise to seek social justice for themselves and those of the same community. For example, members of the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) who feel that Igbos are marginalised and do not have a sense of belonging in the Nigerian state. This theory has been used by political scientists and sociologist to examine group action, whether formal or informal as the case may be with a view to changing the political or social system. However, relative deprivation theory critics, primarily are challenged by its seeming lack of depth or acknowledgment of how non-participants in a social movement also benefit from the campaign or actions and went on to suggest that it did not take into cognizance why those not directly impacted or not part of the affected community participate in organising or mobilising resources for social movements as it is evident that they are not deprived or do not feel deprived in that context for instance, why do people not living with disability community in fighting and advocating for their rights.

This deprivation and denial of needs can range from relative inequality, social injustice, marginalisation, to lack of resources for personal or group survival (Booth, 1995; Harrison, 1992; Renner, 1996; Shue, 1996). Lewis Coser (1956, 1967) also highlighted the importance of access to political system as one of the major reasons for conflicts but also as one of the solutions to conflicts, revealing that it has the potential to reduce the level of general grievances as well as the acceptance of not fulfilled needs. For deeper analysis and understanding of the social movement phenomenon, Gurr's theory of relative deprivation opens a pathway to articulating the basis for the social dislocations that is impacting the civic space in the Southeast region of Nigeria. The theory states that actors' perception of discrepancy between their value expectations (goods and social conditions to which they believe they are justifiably entitled) and their value capabilities (the degree of those goods and social conditions that they think they are able to get and keep) are the cause of the perceived deprivation. Clearly, it gives context to situations in which people perceive a wide gap between what they expect and what they think, they can get as bonafide members of a group or society compared to what others are

getting or would get, they become frustrated, aggrieved and may embrace aggression. This seem to be the case with the Igbo ethnic nationality in Southeast Nigeria, who feel excluded, marginalised and repressed by the Nigerian state. The Igbos have long expressed their grievances towards their marginalized position in the Nigerian state, culminating into the Nigeria-Biafra civil war (1967 – 1970).

Five decades after the civil war, the conditions of the Igbos have remained largely unchanged, with their perceived feelings of marginalization and exclusion within the Nigerian state has only exacerbated. This has resulted in the emergence of new separatist movements, particularly the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) led by Mazi Nnamdi Kanu. The group's mission is to restore the Biafra republic for the Igbos, following the longstanding grievances about differential treatments against the Igbos, evident in restrictive and selective distribution of resources, political marginalization - as the south east remains the only region composed of 5 states as against 6 states in other regions, and inaccessibility to occupying the office of the president of the federal republic of Nigeria. It is the long-standing resistance of these conditions that have degenerated into the adoption of "uncivil actions" of these by separatist social movements, particularly the IPOB which is unintendedly becoming an emerging threat to the civic space in Southeast, Nigeria.

Research Methods
The study adopted the desk research approach, relying on an extensive collection and analysis of secondary data sourced from relevant and related texts in periodicals, newspapers, journals, books and social media feeds. The data gathered was analyzed using the thematic analysis technique which enabled the researchers to develop categories of themes addressing the research questions and providing opportunity for contextual analysis of the data. The study was limited to the activities of separatist social movements, particularly the IPOB, and how the strategies adopted by the group shrinks the civic space in the south-east region.

Fig 1.: Map of Nigeria showing the south-east.
Source: Emmanuel (2022)

The south-east region which comprises of five states- Anambra, Abia, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo (see figure 1) have an estimated population of 17,082, 729 persons. It is the homeland to

indigenous Igbo people. Igbos are traditionally farmers and traders, and land is regarded as a premium resource owned communally by kin groups and is made available to individuals for farming and building in a hierarchical order. Also, some priced livestock are kept as a source of prestige and for use in sacrifices, while local crafts and wage labour is also a predominant livelihood activity. The primary export of the Igbos for several decades has been palm oil and palm kernels and staples such as yam and cassava. Igbos trade based on four market days of Ori, Eke, Afor and Nkwo, which also form the Igbo calendar and is in tandem with the inter-communal market activities and demonstrates the entrepreneurial nature of the people. This traditional calendar also provides the basis upon which social activities are structured such as meetings, marriages, funerals and so on.

The Igbos are described as being republican in nature with decentralized political structure in tight/close knit autonomous communities, which guaranteed its citizens equality and justice. This notwithstanding, a few notable exceptions in some Igbo towns such as Onitsha, Nri and Arochukwu who have Kings called Obi or Priest Kings. Given, the social structure of the Igbo society, civic space thrived because of their participatory and inclusive decision-making process that goes through a general assembly in which each household had a representative ensuring a robust civic engagement that enabled the exercise of the fundamental rights to association, assembly and expression. Having gone through a civil war between 1967- 1970, the south-east region's seeming sense of political exclusion at the highest levels has resulted in socio-economic and political disempowerment (Onumonu, & Anutanwa, 2017) which continues to fuel discontent and secessionist agitations in the region.

Findings
This section of the paper presents the findings of the research and these are discussed according to the following thematic considerations:

Drivers of separatist social movements in southeast region of Nigeria
The recent wave of agitations for a sovereign state of Biafra by the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) and other separatist groups according to Igboayaka (2022) is largely due to the inability of successive Nigerian Governments to implement the 3Rs (Reconstruction, Rehabilitation and Reconciliation) policy that was introduced after the end of Nigeria-Biafra civil war. He noted that, while the Federal Government is yet to implement as little as 0.5% of the 3Rs policy, the perceived injustice and marginalisation against the Igbos of the southeast remained over the last 5 decades, hence the resurgence of Biafra separatist agitation in the region. The formation of the group (IPOB) has historical as well as cultural connotations - the penchant of Igbos to seek secession of the Biafran nation from Nigeria as a consequence of perceived gross social injustice and marginalisation of Igbos by the Federal Government of Nigeria (Nwaiwu, 2016; Okafor, 2017).

Chiefly, amongst the reasons why social movement emerged in the southeast is the people's perception of history, identity and present or past discrimination or exclusion from highly political and economic rewarding opportunities, which inspires privileged groups that have achieved social power to adopt self-protective offensive strategies to prevent future travails

before they occur (Gardner, 2002). Clearly, the call for secession is an ask and an opinion that if Nigeria cannot be united in justice, fairness and equity, then Nigeria can as much work and survive as separate nations in the wider comity of nations. It is these exclusionary structures that have supposedly undermined the ability of the people of the south-east to co-exist peacefully as equals in the Nigerian state making them perpetually in search of a more meaningful alternative.

Broadly, self-determination grievances, that relates to opposition to resource control, tenure ship of treaties or development projects that impact and significantly change the indigenous landscape, associated with human rights violations, environmental degradation, militarisation of traditional land, discrimination and exclusion from the larger political system can lead to violent agitation and the restriction of the rights of people in affected areas to freely associate, assemble and express their thoughts, amounts to shrinking of the civic space. Similarly, inequalities related to real or apparent differences in political participation, economic access, income, education, or social status among recognisable groups in society can be manipulated by the political class to exaggerate group identity and to incite public sentiments towards violent social action. Sometimes, vainglory or personal aggrandizement can motivate the leaders of social movements or their followers to engage in violent agitation.

Separatist movements, uncivil actions and the shrinking civic space in Southeast, Nigeria
The recognition of the capacity of social movements to shrink the civic space takes away attention from the traditional culprit, the state. In an attempt to seek more power and recognition, leaders of separatist social movements in the southeast have engaged in volatile rhetoric and megalomania behaviour that has fueled armed violence when they feel threatened or when they see opportunity to consolidate their authority. In a report by Sahara Reporters in 2021, it was stated that the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) Monday sit-at-home strategy has caused fear and insecurity in the minds of students in the South-East region. According to Owoeye, et al (2022) the region has presumably experienced different truncation of political activities as a result of IPOB's sit-at-home directive such as violation of civic and sociopolitical rights of Nigerians, which include but not limited to restriction of movement, threat to life, undermining of the electoral process, cum work as staff or ad hoc staff at the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) Succinctly put, separatist social movements, particularly the IPOB has demonstrated capacity to constitute human rights abuse and the shrinking of the civic space through several "uncivil" actions. Some of these actions include but not limited to the following: Clearly, separatist social movements, particularly the IPOB has demonstrated capacity to constitute human rights abuse and the shrinking of the civic space through several "uncivil" actions such as the forceful announcement and implementation of weekly sit-at-home orders in the south east. The compulsory sit-at-home orders violates the rights of residents to move freely from place to place both in and out of the region without encumbrances. This increasing corpus of literature highlighting the roles of social movements in restricting the civic space and perpetuating human rights violations cannot be overstated (Sikkink, 1986; Paust, 1992; Thomas & Beasley, 1993; Jochnick, 1999; Brysk, 2005).

Propaganda: Separatist movements in the south-east particularly, the IPOB engage in massive propaganda in the form of ad hominem attacks on real and perceived critics or those who do not agree with their method of engagement through the use of radio and social media platforms. These tactics is deployed to discredit and delegitimize divergent views, rather than speak to the issues, the character of the individual is constantly under a barrage of attack. It is also used to intimidate and undermine legitimate voices both local and in diaspora, as well as those emanating from other media platforms. Beyond, shrinking the civic space, the increasing use of hateful rhetoric is radicalising a large number of unwitting young southeasters inciting them to engage in political violence against state security actors and the general population. For example, the revolutionary "Radio Biafra" was instrumented to drive millions of pro-Biafra independence activists, supporters and sympathisers to Nnamdi Kanu's cause. This novel online radio – which derived its name from the defunct national radio – station of the defunct Biafran state drew millions of Igbo listeners to its nationalist propaganda. Mazi Nnamdi Kanu, the director of the radio station and self –styled leader of IPOB, decided to use ad hominem attacks and rhetoric considered by the Nigerian government as a tool for inciting violence and armed insurrection. Mr Kanu often referred to Nigeria as a "zoo", while spreading false information about the Nigerian government – this level of misinformation and disinformation violates the right of citizens to reliable and verifiable information and has degenerated into violent conflict that is restricting citizens and residents of southeast to enjoy other fundamental human rights.

Cyber Bullying: The new media, particularly social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp and Instagram have radically revolutionized the mass media and has changed how individuals and groups communicate and broadcast information. Separatist social movements such as the IPOB use these platforms to spread hate, blackmail, physical threats and incite violence thereby amplifying competitive contestation of viewpoints within these spaces. These contestations have multiplied risks, harassments, defamation, cyber bullying and sometimes violent attacks on and off the cyber space.

While the cyber space is borderless, in Nigeria and the southeast in particular, targeted cyber bullying on civil society by members of separatist social movements referred to as "online soldiers" or "digital militias" is on the increase. These so-called online soldiers organise actively online, and attempt to bully those with contrary opinions thereby continuously suffocate the online space. These bullies intentionally target civil society organisations, state actors and individuals that may not agree with their cause. They also distort and manipulate social media content to mobilise support for their cause and employ labelling to discredit others, thereby infringing on the rights of individuals to freely associate, assemble as a virtual community to express themselves or even dissent.

Restrictive 'Sit-at-home' Orders: Non-violent collective action is synonymous with social movements, highly permissible in a civil society and is one of such methods employed to put pressure on the state to cause a social, economic and political change. In the process of amplifying their grievances and mobilizing support for their cause social movements adopt different strategies. However, for separatist movements like the IPOB, the weekly sit-at-home

orders has increasingly become a non-voluntary action forced down on the people through intimidation and threat to lives and property on several levels. This sit-at-home orders which initially were observed to protest the continuous detention of Nnamdi Kanu by the Nigerian government, has become more frequent with splinter groups declaring and executing these impromptu orders.

These illegally imposed lockdown orders against the will of residents of south eastern states, continues to infringe on the liberties and freedom of the citizens. During lockdown periods, usually Mondays, all economic, social and political activities are grounded – from businesses to markets and all social life of the people are paralyzed, including essential services, urban streets, highways and sometimes schools are deserted (Eleke, 2022). As observed by the Vice President of Nnewi Chamber of Commerce, Industry, Mines and Agriculture (NCCIMA) Chief Moses Ezukwo, the chambers of commerce, business owners and traders losses about N8 billion Naira every Monday that the sit-at-home order is observed and that the situation has robbed the region of over N50 billion, adding that the loss in the private sector amounted to over 65% with the transport sector losing at least N3 billion any day there is lockdown (Ogbonnaya, et al. 2021). Similarly, Okoye (2021) asserted that the impact of IPOB weekly Monday sit-at-home on national development cum political activities of the southeast region have inadvertently dealt a fatal blow on the education in the zone and has dented the socio-political activities in the region.

It is evident that people's compliance with the sit-at-home order by IPOB is not in wilful obedience to the separatist struggle but rather because they feared for their lives and property. To enable the public, engage in their lawful activities and exercise their rights to free movement, the law enforcement occasionally gets into confrontation with members of IPOB and splinter groups implementing these lockdowns. Those who ventured out to engage in the daily business and social activities have been reported to be attacked by enforcers, thereby evoking fear and forced compliance (Onwuka, 2021). These restrictive orders have resulted in a significant loss of lives and gravely destroyed economic and social activities in the South-East (Egbo, 2023). Although the Nnamdi Kanu led faction of IPOB has since 5 August, 2023 announced the annulment of all sit-at-home protests in the region, replacing it with a declaration of the observance of Mondays as Economic Empowerment Day (EDD), the Simon Ekpa's led faction has continued to declare sit at home orders in the region.

State based responses to uncivil actions of separatist social movements in southeast Nigeria
The national and sub-national governments have reacted to the restrictions on the rights to association, peaceable assembly and expression by separatist social movements in the south east region. The space in which separatist social movements operate is a highly contested arena as the state perceives activities of these groups as a threatening social stability while also competing with the state's monopoly of ownership and control of coercive force. Social movements across Nigeria hardly share the same vision or interest with the government on many issues and at different levels thereby reinforcing that suspicion. The "gunboat" or "knee-jerk" approach towards social movements increases the level of contestation and leave very little room for dialogue, which would have provided an opportunity for all sides to understand the issues and find a common ground for a mutually acceptable solution. The repressive nature

of the state's response to the emergence of social movements in Nigeria and the southeast in particular, in spite of the nature and character of the groups have been counterproductive and have led to the exacerbation of the contentious social phenomenon rather than understanding it and finding ways to resolve the issues related to the emergence of these social movements.

Although some scholars have emphasised the relationship between repression and dissent (Lichbach, 1987; Henderson, 1993; Moore, 1998, 2000; Carey, 2006, 2010), fundamentally, the consensus lies in the fact that dissent triggers repression (Ritter & Conrad, 2016). It is paramount to state that restrictive actions on social movements begins the emergence of "uncivil society". Understandably, repression is an enabler of "uncivil conduct" by social movements that directly or indirectly inhibit or limit the state and civil society from exercising their rights to assemble, associate and expression in the south eastern states. In this context, repression is regarded as any legal, extra-legal, violent or non-violent actions which prevents effective participation in governance and associational life with adverse implications on the exercise of human rights in a given society (Nordas & Davenport, 2013; Sullivan, 2016).

Instructively, some of the direct repressive actions of the state include the outright proscription of separatist social movements - IPOB specifically, labelling them as terrorists' groups and the subsequent arrest of their leadership and members – which borders on their rights to association, assembly, expression and peaceful protest. The military action popularized as 'Operation Python Dance' in 2016 was an amplification of confrontation between IPOB members and the joint security tasks force of the Nigerian Police Force (NPF), Department of State Services (DSS) and the Nigerian Military – which culminated in extra-judicial killings (Adebayo, 2022). For instance, Igbokwe (2021) noted the extra judicial killing of civilians by the Nigerian Military and that the alleged siege in the south east had a history from December, 2015, when 12 youth were gunned down and scores of others wounded at the Onitsha Head Bridge. Similarly, troops of the Joint Task Force codenamed 'Operation Udoka' which began on February 11, 2024 has conducted multiple raids on IPOB and its armed milita, the Eastern Security Network (ESN) in the south-east. The ongoing operation has led to the killing of 20 IPOB fighters and the destruction of about 50 camps, including the supreme headquarters of IPOB in Imo state (Odeniyi, 2024; Ugwu, 2024).

Drawing from the foregoing, the militarized response of the state using security forces to brutalise and repress the initial emergence of social movements in the southeast was a major driver of counter mobilisation- the federal government did not only proscribe IPOB but also labelled it a terrorist group; therefore, foreclosing any pathway to formal dialogue with the group. Meanwhile, the leader of the group, Mazi Nnamdi Kanu had been held in detention since June 2021 after his arrest in and extradition from Kenya on fifteen counts of terrorism and treasonable felony. His continued detention and prosecution by the state rather than de-escalate tensions in the south east has further exacerbated unrest and violent insurgency which further shrinks the civil space with severe implications for human rights violations, socio-economic and cultural deficits for people of the south east Nigeria.
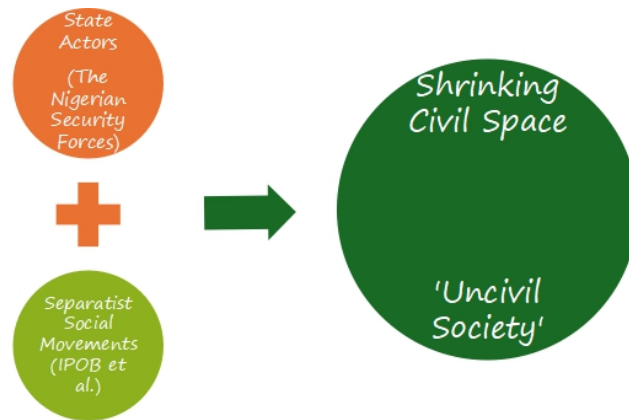
The making of an 'Uncivil Society' in South-East Nigeria

Fig 2.: The making of an 'uncivil' society in South-East, Nigeria.
Source: Compiled by Authors

The civic space in the southeast is primarily dominated by agents of the state, particularly the security apparatus and the separatists' movement to the extent that it has led to constriction by both actors. Given, their tactics of engagement, though they begin with the power of persuasion on the side of social movements, while the state engage in subtle coercion but at some point, both the state and the separatists' movements changes gear; "signaling the emergence of uncivil society" because of their "uncivil actions" both begin to engage in unorthodox and repressive strategies to further their agenda, thereby shrinking the civic space in the southeast, Nigeria. This situation validates the position of Clapham (2006) that corporations, mercenaries, international organisations, transnational companies, criminal, social movements and pro-government organisations have demonstrated capacity to abuse human rights and shrink the civic space.

Conclusion
The central objective of this paper was to examine the drivers of separatist social movements in the south east region of Nigeria, and how the emergence of these groups contributes to the shrinking civic space in the region, as well as responses of the Nigerian state. The study has demonstrated that while social movements are an integral part of civil society in Nigeria despite the regime structure – be it democratic or authoritarian, social movements in the south east region of the country emerged particularly to protest perceived historical marginalization against the Igbos in the country's socio-political structure. With specific focus on the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), the paper argued that while most of these groups started as non-violent movements, state repression through militarized responses, forced groups like IPOB, to adopt "uncivil actions" to make demands on the national government for fair representation within the Nigerian project or self-determination in a sovereign state of Biafra. These separatist movements, particularly IPOB has deployed violence against state institutions, propaganda, cyber bullying, and forced sit-at-home protests as strategies to actualize their goals. These uncivil strategies however have resulted in destruction of lives and properties. The conclusions drawn in this study are that the civic space in the southeast of

Nigeria is shrinking due to the "uncivil actions or the activities of separatist social movements and that the Nigerian state is largely responsible for the metamorphoses of these movements from civil to uncivil societies as they have responded to their emergence with heavy restrictive tactics. To this end, the circle of violence from the state and separatist groups has negatively impacted the civic space making it difficult for residents of the south east are to freely exercise their rights to expression, association, movement and assembly.

Recommendations
In the light of the findings of this study, the following recommendations are put forward:
  i.   There is an urgent need for government at all levels to engage the separatist groups with diplomacy and open dialogue, as the militarization of the south east region has been counterproductive.
  ii. The Nigerian state should as a matter if urgency address the concerns of the Igbos occupying south east Nigeria, and provide them some level of integration and sense of belonginess to the Nigerian project.
  iii. Social movements particularly those in the south east should adopt the grand principle of non-violent resistance to repression - which naturally deescalates conflict and has the potential to produce positive outcomes in the long run as against the tit for tat approach that has escalated the conflict and caused the shrinking of civic space.
  iv. Pertinently, the cyber space cannot be left "ungoverned", the Nigerian government should put mechanism in place to checkmate radicalization of young people through misinformation and disinformation on social media platforms such as Facebook, twitter (X), Instagram, TikTok etcetera.

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