

Things Fall Apart? A Social Psychological Analysis of Intra-Group Fragmentation Among Biafran Separatist Agitators

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Abstract

This study examines intra-group conflict among neo-Biafra separatist agitators in Southeast Nigeria, investigating how factionalism, ideological divergence, and social psychological dynamics weaken the movement from within. While existing literature primarily emphasizes state-versus-separatist conflict, this paper argues that internal structural fragmentation and psychological mechanisms of intra-group polarizations constitute primary inhibitors to the movement's strategic objectives. Synthesizing Resource Mobilization Theory (RMT) and Social Identity Theory (SIT), alongside theories of political entrepreneurship, the study utilizes secondary qualitative data to analyze the internal mechanics of movement breakdown. Findings indicate that the 2021 arrest and extralegal rendition of IPOB leader Nnamdi Kanu disrupted the core identity fusion and charismatic authority that bound the movement, triggering a severe leadership vacuum and shifting the group from a centralized command structure to decentralized, highly competitive sub-factions. This internal friction is further driven by conflicting collective action frames—specifically over non-violent resistance versus systemic violence—and competitive dynamics for leadership status and transnational diaspora remittances. The study concludes that intra-group schisms are as much a psychological crisis of shared identity as they are a structural fight over resources. It recommends the establishment of inclusive leadership structures and internal conflict-resolution mechanisms within civil society spaces, while advising the Nigerian government to complement kinetic responses with non-kinetic political engagement, dialogue, and systemic redress of underlying grievances in Southeast Nigeria.

Keywords: *Intra-group conflict, Separatist fragmentation, Sit-at-home orders, Political violence, Resource-mobilization theory*

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Background to the Study

The issue of self-determination has remained a persistent feature of Nigeria's political landscape, particularly within the southeastern region inhabited predominantly by the Igbo ethnic group. Since the end of the Nigerian Civil War in 1970, structural tensions surrounding political inclusion, economic equity, and national integration have continued to shape relations between the region and the state. Although the war officially ended with the declaration of "No Victor, No Vanquished," feelings of systemic marginalization have persisted, fostering a deeply ingrained sense of relative deprivation and collective trauma among generations of Igbo populations (Nwangwu, 2023; Tuki, 2024). This shared social psychological condition has periodically revitalized separatist sentiments, making the quest for Biafra an enduring emotional and political discourse in contemporary Nigeria.

For several decades after the civil war, overt secessionist activities were limited due to military repression and the lingering psychological fear of past conflict. However, the 1999 democratic transition opened a political space where suppressed grievances could be publicly articulated. Groups such as the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) and later the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) emerged, leveraging social identity mechanisms to reconstruct a distinct, shared "in-group" consciousness in opposition to the Nigerian state (Obi-Ani et al., 2020; Ojo, 2023). Through powerful rhetoric and collective action framing, these organizations reactivated Biafra not merely as a geographic ambition but as a primary social identity capable of unifying diverse segments of the population.

However, the contemporary Biafra movement has evolved from earlier, unified campaigns into a fragmented network characterized by high intra-group polarization and identity-driven rivalry. Instead of presenting a cohesive front, multiple sub-factions now compete fiercely for legitimacy, influence, and the right to define the "authentic" Biafran identity. While federal security operations, legal restrictions, and arrests have severely disrupted the movement's operational capacity (Nwangwu, 2023; Ojo, 2023), external state pressure alone does not fully account for its strategic paralysis. Rather, psychological dynamics within the movement—specifically how internal factions perceive and antagonize one another—have become central drivers of its organizational decay (Cunningham, 2013; UK Home Office, 2025). At the core of this internal breakdown are intense leadership categorization processes and competing collective action frames. The removal or displacement of key figures disrupted the identity fusion that previously bound members to a single command structure, triggering acute leadership vacuums. As competing actors scramble for authority, factions engage in the "narcissism of small differences," turning against fellow agitators with greater hostility than toward the state itself. These leadership tussles are exacerbated by ideological schisms over non-violent resistance versus systemic violence, creating deep-seated mistrust, as well as zero-sum psychological competition over lucrative transnational financial resources and diaspora remittances (Nwangwu et al., 2020).

This paper argues that while federal interventions impose significant external constraints, the Neo-Biafran movement's most decisive obstacle lies in its internal social psychological and

structural fragmentation. Competing claims to authenticity, divergent strategic frames, and rivalries over symbolic and material resources have eroded the shared social identity necessary to sustain unified collective action. In many respects, the agitation reflects Chinua Achebe's famous observation that when internal cohesion collapses, the center cannot hold. Understanding these intra-group psychological and structural dynamics is therefore essential for explaining the current decay and future prospects of the Neo-Biafran movement.

A Social Psychological Analysis of Intra-Group Fragmentation among Biafran Separatist Agitators: The Theoretical Debate

A fundamental debate in social movement literature centers on whether secessionist movements collapse primarily due to external state repression or internal structural decomposition; this study argues that the decay of contemporary Neo-Biafran agitations is fundamentally an internal, social-psychological failure of group cohesion, driven by identity fragmentation, fractured leadership categorization, and zero-sum resource competition. Relying exclusively on purely materialist paradigms like Resource Mobilization Theory (McCarthy & Zald, 1977) yields an incomplete account because, while RMT accurately posits that movement success depends on aggregating capital and maintaining centralized communication channels, it fails to explain *why* actors choose to subvert their own movement when overarching political goals remain aligned. To resolve this limitation, RMT must be synthesized with Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and concepts of political entrepreneurship (Bakke et al., 2012). This theoretical integration reveals that internal fractionalization occurs not merely because alternative nodes of resource aggregation emerge, but because rival political entrepreneurs actively reframe the "in-group" boundary, reclassifying former allies as ideological "out-groups" or "traitors" to capture both domestic loyalty and transnational diaspora remittances (Nwangwu et al., 2020; Nwangwu, 2023; Ojo, 2023). Rather than viewing fragmentation as an accidental structural defect, this framework establishes that internal conflict is driven by a social psychological fight over authentic identity, where rival elites use radicalization and outbidding as deliberate differentiation strategies to exploit collective trauma and cement their own psychological legitimacy.

Analyzing the historical trajectory from the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) to the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) through this integrated lens demonstrates that the movement's evolution was not merely a technological transition, but a systemic failure of in-group cohesion and leadership categorization. While Ralph Uwazuruike's initial mobilization of MASSOB in 1999 successfully reactivated a shared "in-group" identity around post-civil war grievances, the organization's subsequent internal crisis stemmed from a collapse in prototypical leadership (Hogg, 2001; Obi-Ani et al., 2020). When allegations of corruption and strategic inertia surfaced, followers experienced intense cognitive dissonance; Uwazuruike was no longer perceived as the ideal embodiment of the collective cause, causing follower trust to disintegrate long before state security interventions compromised physical operations. IPOB's subsequent rise under Nnamdi Kanu was achieved precisely because Kanu exploited this social psychological void, using platforms like Radio Biafra and digital media not just as technical dissemination tools (Ojo, 2023; Ifeanyichukwu & Hoffman, 2025), but as engines of identity fusion (Swann et al., 2012). By constructing

uncompromising, highly polarized "in-group versus out-group" narratives, IPOB bound the personal identities of younger demographics directly to its cause, weaponizing what Freud termed the "narcissism of small differences" to portray moderate MASSOB figures as compromised saboteurs and positioning IPOB as the sole legitimate bearer of the Biafran identity (Cunningham, 2013; Tuki, 2024).

The empirical validation of this theoretical thesis is most clearly seen in the aftermath of Nnamdi Kanu's 2021 extra-legal rendition and subsequent legal detention, an event that acted as the ultimate catalyst for organizational chaos by shattering the movement's central identity anchor. Structural accounts view Kanu's removal simply as an operational shock that created a power vacuum (Reuters, 2024; Reuters, 2025b); however, a social psychological argument proves that his absence destroyed the core identity fusion mechanism that previously enforced group discipline. Because the movement relied on absolute, charismatic authority rather than institutionalized internal conflict-resolution norms, Kanu's removal forced a horizontal scramble for control among secondary elites, triggering acute sub-factional outbidding. In the absence of a central arbiter to define movement orthodoxy, rival actors—such as competing IPOB factions—began projecting "out-group" status onto one another, weaponizing violent tactics like enforced "sit-at-home" orders to demonstrate strength and capture diaspora financial streams. Consequently, strategic disagreements over violent versus non-violent tactics escalated from simple policy debates into existential, zero-sum battles for psychological dominance. Ultimately, this historical trajectory proves that the Neo-Biafran agitation was not dismantled by external state coercion alone but imploded from within due to unmanaged social-psychological vulnerabilities: the collapse of a fused social identity, aggressive sub-factional outbidding, and the inevitable decay of a hyper-centralized leadership model.

The Autopilot Gang and the Biafra Republic Government in Exile (BRGIE)

The factional splintering between the mainstream IPOB Directorate of State (DOS) and breakaway networks like Simon Ekpa's Autopilot faction exposes how the loss of a unifying, charismatic leader triggers severe intra-group polarization and competing leadership categorization. Following Nnamdi Kanu's incarceration, the DOS attempted to maintain stewardship over IPOB's institutional framework by advocating for diplomatic engagement and legal representation, relying on institutional norms to preserve organizational continuity. However, Social Identity Theory demonstrates that when a centralized identity anchor is removed, institutional structures alone rarely prevent psychological fragmentation. Capitalizing on Kanu's enforced silence, Ekpa established a parallel power center in Finland—eventually formalizing it as the Biafra Republic Government in Exile (BRGIE) with himself as prime minister—by deliberately undermining the DOS's legitimacy (Associated Press, 2025; The Guardian Nigeria, 2025). Ekpa engaged in aggressive sub-factional outbidding, accusing the mainstream DOS of compromising with political elites in Abuja. By reframing the mainstream leadership as "out-group" traitors and positioning his Autopilot faction as the uncompromised vanguard of the movement, Ekpa manipulated followers' need for ideological purity, transforming a strategic disagreement into an existential psychological war over authentic Biafran identity.

This psychological rupture rapidly metastasized into physical and conceptual fragmentation through the creation of rival paramilitary formations and digital echo chambers. To reinforce its psychological legitimacy and prove its operational vitality, the BRGIE established the Biafra Liberation Army (BLA) as an armed wing operating independently of IPOB's traditional Eastern Security Network (ESN). From a social psychological perspective, the deployment of rival armed groups is not merely a tactical expansion, but a visceral competition for identity fusion—where violence and radical enforcement, such as forced compliance with sit-at-home orders, are used to signal strength and demand absolute loyalty from a traumatized populace. Concurrently, fringe online networks like the United States of Biafra (USB) emerged across digital spaces and diaspora communities, exploiting transnational financial pipelines and online echo chambers. Rather than acting as a cohesive force for self-determination, these splintering nodes—the DOS, BRGIE/BLA, and USB—reflect a movement trapped in the "narcissism of small differences," where competing political entrepreneurs turn their hostility inward, fighting zero-sum battles for symbolic dominance and diaspora resources while completely dismantling the movement's collective strength.

Structural Causes of Internal Fragmentation

The primary catalyst behind this internal decay is an unresolved leadership tussle driven by ethnic outbidding and deep ideological divergence over the role of systemic violence versus non-violent agitation (Rothschild, 1981). Following the incapacitation of the movement's central charismatic figure, sub-leaders engaged in aggressive psychological outbidding to capture follower loyalty; specifically, Simon Ekpa and his Autopilot faction systematically undermined the administrative authority of the mainstream IPOB Directorate of State (DOS) by framing its institutional approach as weak and compromised. By presenting himself as an unyielding, radical leader dedicated to immediate liberation, Ekpa exploited the social psychological need for an uncompromising "in-group" champion among marginalized youth, effectively fragmenting the movement along tactical lines. Consequently, this ideological split—pitting the DOS's diplomatic, non-violent posture against the BRGIE's embrace of strategic violence—transformed a political movement into a zero-sum contest over ideological purity, where rival elites weaponize radicalism to secure their own legitimacy and marginalize competing factions.

Table 1.

Strategic Vector	IPOB-DOS Mainstream	BRGIE / Autopilot Faction
Primary Methodology	Non-violent diplomatic advocacy; legal pathways for Kanu's release.	Armed resistance; kinetic confrontation with state apparatuses.
Paramilitary Arm	Eastern Security Network (ESN) - focused ostensibly on pastoralist defense.	Biafra Liberation Army (BLA) - focused on offensive enforcement.
Tactical Approach	Selective economic boycotts; coordination with regional socio-cultural elites.	Absolute regional shutdowns; complete rejection of Nigerian state legitimacy.

Source: Ojo, 2023; Associated Press, 2025

Beyond these ideological fractures lies a fierce, zero-sum struggle over resource control and the political economy of transnational capital, where competing factions weaponize radicalism to secure diaspora funding. While the DOS insists on maintaining a non-violent baseline to preserve international diplomatic recognition, Ekpa explicitly radicalized the movement by championing offensive kinetic warfare, providing a social psychological justification for armed groups in the Southeast to demonstrate operational vitality. Crucially, this ideological posturing serves as a vehicle to capture the multi-million-dollar transnational remittance pipelines—comprising diaspora crowdfunding, monthly dues, and donation campaigns across Europe, North America, and Asia (Nwangwu et al., 2020). By declaring the BRGIE, the Autopilot faction established parallel digital bank accounts and fundraising platforms, directly diverting capital from traditional IPOB defense funds; this institutional splintering converted a political struggle for self-determination into a zero-sum commercial rivalry, where ideological extremism is used to project authenticity and secure financial dominance over diaspora resources.

Manifestations of the Intra-Group Conflict

Internal Fragmentation and the Controversy Surrounding Sit-at-Home Orders

The controversy surrounding the enforcement of sit-at-home directives across southeastern Nigeria serves as a textbook manifestation of intra-group polarization, identity-driven coercion, and competing collective action frames. At its inception, the sit-at-home campaign functioned as a powerful mechanism for building in-group solidarity and reinforcing a shared social identity. By voluntarily suspending commercial activities in August 2021 to protest detained leader Nnamdi Kanu, the populace engaged in a symbolic act of collective action that converted shared historical grievances into unified civic resistance (Nwangwu, 2023; Ojo, 2023). However, as prolonged economic disruption began imposing severe cognitive and financial strain on local communities, IPOB's Directorate of State (DOS) recognized that over-taxing the population threatened to alienate their broader support base. The DOS's decision to modify the order—limiting compliance to Kanu's court appearance days—was an effort to maintain normative legitimacy by balancing strategic pressure against the lived realities of the population (Obi-Ani et al., 2020). From a social psychological perspective, this shift represented a transition from coercive compliance toward preserving long-term, voluntary identification with the movement.

This pragmatic shift, however, triggered intense sub-factional outbidding and cognitive dissonance within the movement, as a rival faction led by Simon Ekpa explicitly rejected the DOS's modification. Exploiting the absence of a central charismatic arbiter, Ekpa weaponized the "narcissism of small differences" by framing the DOS's compromise as ideological weakness and betrayal. By issuing competing, multi-day sit-at-home directives, Ekpa's Autopilot faction sought to establish its own leadership prototypicality—projecting an image of absolute, uncompromising dedication to the cause (Nwangwu, 2023; Tuki, 2024). This duel of conflicting directives fractured the shared mental model of the population: citizens were subjected to contradictory expectations from rival elites, creating severe psychological anxiety and paralysis. The movement's internal breakdown demonstrates how competing political entrepreneurs manipulate collective action frames not to achieve state

concessions, but to claim psychological dominance over an increasingly confused and divided in-group (Cunningham, 2013).

Ultimately, as voluntary compliance eroded, the sit-at-home campaign devolved from an act of social cohesion into a regime of psychological terror and violent coercion. Armed elements operating under radicalized sub-factions shifted from relying on internalized group identity to using physical intimidation—destroying markets, burning commercial vehicles, and assaulting citizens—to enforce compliance (Reuters, 2025a). This reliance on fear highlights a classic social psychological breakdown: when a movement loses its persuasive power and social identity value, it turns to terror to manufacture the illusion of unity. Far from demonstrating strength, the violently enforced shutdowns severely alienated the local populace, replacing feelings of shared identity with acute resentment, trauma, and insecurity (Nwangwu, 2023; Ojo, 2023). The sit-at-home controversy stands as compelling evidence that the Neo-Biafran movement's greatest vulnerability is not external state power but an internal decay marked by fractured authority, extreme outbidding, and the total erosion of the shared psychological bond that once united the agitation.

Digital Media Abuses, Cyber-Warfare, and Propaganda Insurgency

The intense digital cyber-warfare waged across platforms like X, Facebook, and YouTube exemplifies how competing political entrepreneurs exploit online spaces to manufacture group polarization, de-individuation, and informational chaos. Rather than directing persuasive communication toward the state, rival actors use media channels to launch weaponized psychological attacks at fellow agitators. Simon Ekpa's routine labeling of the mainstream IPOB Directorate of State (DOS) as "criminals," "saboteurs," and "DSS agents" relies on out-group derogation, a process designed to dehumanize rivals and reframe them as existential threats to the collective identity. Conversely, the DOS's framing of Ekpa as a fraudulent "political entrepreneur" exploits the audience's psychological need for moral integrity, seeking to strip him of his prototypical authority (Hogg, 2001). This digital warfare creates an environment of pervasive cognitive dissonance among the local populace, who are subjected to contradictory, highly charged streams of information. Rather than fostering collective efficacy, these online echo chambers exacerbate paranoia, break down psychological trust, and leave ordinary citizens paralyzed by fear, confusion, and manipulation.

This psychological decay deepened into tertiary factionalization following external legal intervention, proving that judicial repression without internal conflict resolution simply accelerates intra-group splintering. When Finnish authorities arrested Simon Ekpa in November 2024—culminating in his September 2025 six-year sentence for terrorism and tax fraud (Associated Press, 2025)—the loss of this second charismatic node did not restore unity. Instead, it triggered further psychological decentralization. In January 2026, the BRGIE cabinet formally replaced Ekpa with Ogechukwu Nkere, who attempted to pivot the movement toward Western institutional lobbying from Washington, DC (The Guardian Nigeria, 2026). However, this bureaucratic shift was fiercely rejected by field commanders in the Biafra Liberation Army (BLA), exposing a fundamental conflict in collective action

frames: the bureaucratic elite favored diplomatic engagement, while combatants on the ground were psychologically fused to armed resistance. Without a single, central leader to bridge these competing identities, the movement fragmented even further, fracturing into insular sub-units fighting for tactical control, resource access, and ideological dominance.

Ultimately, these endless intra-group feuds, economic disruptions, and violent enforcement strategies have caused profound social psychological demoralization across the population of Southeast Nigeria. Movements derive their social capital from a shared sense of collective purpose and high normative legitimacy; however, as the Neo-Biafran agitation shifted from confronting the state to inflicting internal violence, public perception plummeted (Cunningham, 2013; UK Home Office, 2025). Prolonged sit-at-home orders, economic hardship, and rampant civilian intimidation (Amnesty International, 2025) replaced initial feelings of shared identity with acute fear, trauma, and exhaustion. As a result, the population has experienced identity detachment, prioritizing personal safety, economic survival, and regional stability over a fragmented political cause (Nwangwu, 2023; Ojo, 2023). This loss of community trust leaves the movement stripped of its socio-political legitimacy, severely reducing its collective bargaining power and leaving its fractured nodes highly vulnerable to state exploitation, counter-insurgency infiltration, and systemic collapse.

Collapse of Psychological Trust, Intra-Group Paranoia, and Intelligence Penetration

The erosion of a unified social identity within the Neo-Biafran agitation has fundamentally dismantled the psychological trust necessary to maintain operational secrecy and organizational resilience against state pressure. In social movement theory, high in-group cohesion relies on mutual trust and shared normative expectations; however, as the movement fractured into competing sub-factions, this internal bond collapsed into pervasive paranoia and systemic suspicion (Obi-Ani et al., 2020; Ojo, 2023). Under conditions of severe intra-group polarization, members no longer perceive fellow agitators through the lens of shared identity, but rather through the cognitive filter of out-group derogation, routinely accusing rival factions of being state saboteurs or Department of State Services (DSS) informants (Nwangwu, 2023). This cognitive shift has created severe internal vulnerabilities: as psychological safety vanishes, disgruntled members and disillusioned combatants experience identity detachment, making them highly susceptible to recruitment, bribery, or coercion by state intelligence networks (Bakke et al., 2012; Cunningham, 2013). Consequently, state security agencies exploit this breakdown of trust, utilizing factional infighting, intelligence leaks, and human surveillance to systematically map, penetrate, and neutralize operational nodes with minimal state effort.

The absence of a centralized leadership arbiter has resulted in competing, mutually exclusive collective action frames, paralyzing the movement's capacity for strategic decision-making and unified resistance. Social psychology demonstrates that a movement's bargaining power depends on a shared mental model—a unified understanding of targets, tactics, and ultimate goals (Benford & Snow, 2000). In the Neo-Biafran context, however, rival political entrepreneurs issue conflicting directives—ranging from the Directorate of State's (DOS) diplomatic posture to the Autopilot/BRGIE's enforced sit-at-home orders and kinetic

violence—generating intense cognitive dissonance and confusion among followers (Tuki, 2024). This strategic incoherence severely diminishes organizational efficiency: instead of directing collective energy outward against the state, factions expend critical material and psychological resources waging zero-sum battles against each other for internal dominance (Cunningham, 2013; UK Home Office, 2026). State counter-insurgency apparatuses directly capitalize on this strategic paralysis, selectively engaging, isolating, or containing individual factions independently, thereby preventing the movement from ever mobilizing a coordinated, region-wide campaign.

Ultimately, the bitter, public infighting among competing factions has stripped the movement of its prototypical authority and socio-political legitimacy, allowing state actors to easily marginalize and contain the agitation. A movement's resilience against external pressure relies heavily on its normative legitimacy—the belief among the population that the movement's leaders genuinely embody the collective interest (Hogg, 2001). As rival sub-factions engage in mutual mudslinging, economic extortion, and violent civilian enforcement, ordinary citizens undergo profound psychological demoralization, increasingly viewing faction leaders not as heroic champions of self-determination but as self-interested political entrepreneurs (Ojo, 2023; Associated Press, 2025). This widespread loss of community trust erodes the movement's social capital, leading the broader populace to prioritize personal safety and economic stability over political participation. Deprived of its psychological anchor within the local population, the fragmented Neo-Biafran movement loses its capacity for mass mobilization, enabling government authorities to frame counterinsurgency operations not as political suppression but as necessary law-and-order interventions to protect the public from factional criminality and instability.

The breakdown of centralized authority within the Neo-Biafran agitation has generated a dangerous security vacuum, triggering a process of de-individuation, opportunistic identity theft, and moral disengagement. As the movement fractured into competing sub-factions, the absence of a unified command structure destroyed the normative boundaries that previously regulated cadre behavior. This structural and psychological collapse enabled criminal syndicates and rogue armed actors—commonly operating under the umbrella of "Unknown Gunmen"—to exploit the movement's collective trauma and symbols (Ojo, 2023). By weaponizing Biafran rhetoric, flags, and slogans, these actors engage in cognitive framing manipulation: hiding illicit economic activities like kidnapping, extortion, armed robbery, and targeted assassinations behind the noble veneer of political self-determination (Amnesty International, 2025; UK Home Office, 2026). Consequently, the boundaries between authentic political agitation and organized crime have dissolved, as opportunistic actors leverage the emotional resonance of the Biafran social identity to rationalize criminal enterprise and evade moral accountability.

This security crisis is exacerbated by a state of diffused responsibility and acute cognitive dissonance, creating a climate of impunity that completely erodes the movement's normative legitimacy. Whenever violent atrocities or economic extortion occur, competing leadership structures engage in systematic denial and out-group projection; the mainstream Directorate

of State (DOS) routinely attributes violence to rogue sub-factions or government provocateurs, while rival groups like the Autopilot/BRGIE point fingers back at the DOS or state actors (Cunningham, 2013; UK Home Office, 2026). This psychological game of blame-shifting prevents any single entity from taking organizational accountability, leaving local populations in a state of hyper-vigilance and profound psychological exhaustion (Tuki, 2024). Ultimately, as the agitation becomes synonymous with rampant criminality, terror, and economic paralysis rather than collective liberation, the broader populace experience's severe identity detachment (Ojo, 2023; Associated Press, 2025). The movement's socio-political legitimacy collapses under the weight of its own internal anarchy, transforming what was once a unified struggle for self-determination into an uncoordinated, predatory ecosystem of criminal exploitation.

Conclusion

The contemporary evolution of Neo-Biafran separatist movements provides a compelling empirical case study of how social psychological breakdown, identity fragmentation, and leadership rivalry can dismantle an ethno-nationalist movement from within. While state-centric security analyses focus on the counter-secessionist operations of the Nigerian government as the primary constraint on the agitation, this study proves that internal structural decomposition and the collapse of shared in-group identity constitute the decisive operational inhibitors to the movement's objectives. The removal of Nnamdi Kanu from the operational theater in 2021 shattered the central identity fusion anchor that bound the movement, exposing severe psychological vulnerabilities and transforming a centralized command structure into a predatory ecosystem of competing elites. Driven by leadership tussles, incompatible collective action frames regarding non-violent resistance versus kinetic warfare, and zero-sum competition over transnational diaspora financial flows, these sub-factions engaged in aggressive ethnic outbidding. This internal friction manifested in coercive sit-at-home directives, digital cyber-warfare, and rampant criminal opportunism under the guise of political liberation. Even major international judicial interventions—such as the 2025 conviction of Simon Ekpa in Finland and the subsequent leadership transfer of the BRGIE to Ogechukwu Nkere in early 2026—failed to restore organizational cohesion, instead generating tertiary factionalization and field-level resistance. Ultimately, by weaponizing the narcissism of small differences, these rival factions have systematically eroded their own normative legitimacy, alienated the local populace, and invited state infiltration, proving that an agitation divided against itself cannot sustain a viable quest for self-determination.

To address this complex crisis, a comprehensive strategy must simultaneously address the root socio-economic grievances of the Southeast while dismantling the internal and transnational drivers of factional violence. The Nigerian government must transcend purely kinetic responses by convening a genuine multi-stakeholder dialogue involving regional political leaders, traditional authorities, and civil society, supported by the immediate operationalization of the Southeast Development Commission to revitalize the local economy, create youth employment, and undercut the appeal of militant recruitment. Concurrently, security agencies must recalibrate their operations to distinguish between

legitimate political expression and criminal enterprise, deploying precision intelligence to protect civilian economic spaces from coercive shutdowns while strengthening bilateral agreements through the Nigerian Financial Intelligence Unit to audit transnational diaspora fundraising networks and disrupt terror-financing pipelines. For the broader movement and civil society, there is an urgent need to foster inclusive, institutionalized conflict-resolution mechanisms that can manage intragroup disputes before they escalate into violence while empowering moderate civic voices to build non-violent pathways for political advocacy. Ultimately, unless the Nigerian state addresses underlying regional marginalization through equitable governance, and unless separatist actors overcome the destructive social psychological dynamics that drive intra-group subversion, the Southeast will remain trapped in a cycle of instability, where internal fragmentation continually undermines regional security and human development.

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