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THE INDIGENOUS PEOPLE OF BIAFRA'S (IPOB) SIT-AT-HOME ORDER IN THE SOUTHEAST OF NIGERIA: AN INFRINGEMENT ON HUMAN RIGHTS

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Abstract

From time immemorial, agitation from a group of people who are aspiring for self-governance, which has always taken diverse strategies, has been prevalent. However, in Nigeria, the federal government's prolonged arrest and detention of the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) leader propelled the group in the southeast to issue an "every Monday-sit-at-home" order. It is a fact well-acknowledged that the government of Nigeria has not really given in to the agitation which is now taking another dimension, as the group is now infringing on the human rights of the citizens in that part of the country, effectively bringing to a halt economic activities the region. This study examined the effect of mandatory closure of roads, markets, schools, etc. on Mondays by IPOB in South-east, Nigeria. The study made use of secondary data collection and its analysis showed that the sit-at-home order has adverse effects on the economic and social lives of the south-easterners of Nigeria. The consequences of these affect the standard of living of the people within the geopolitical zone. Citizens of the region now live in fear and uncertainty, while those who depend solely in their daily work to feed are the worst hit. This order equally affects rights to work and earn a living as those working in companies, bank, state and federal offices within the geopolitical zone are not left out. The study concluded that the sit-at-home order is drastically affecting the South-eastern zone in particular, and the Nigerian nation in general, and as such recommends that Nigerian government should respond to the agitations of the Indigenous People of Biafra since their actions are threatening the peace, security and unity of the nation, and also infringe on the fundamental human rights of the people. It further recommended that the federal government should adopt all-inclusive governance as this will return full rights and activities to the zone

Keywords: IPOB, Sit-at-home, human rights and South-east, Nigeria

Introduction

Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) in the Southeast issued an every Monday sit-at home order, which effectively, is infringing on the human rights of the region. This study examined the effect of the mandatory closure of markets, restriction of movements, violence, etc. on Mondays by IPOB in the Southeast, Nigeria. According to Ekpo and Agorye (2019), there is evidence of unfair treatment of the Igbo in the present political dispensation. It is also a fact that the fears of the unknown hovers around the air in the region as people no longer trust their next-door neighbors. Public offices, private businesses, schools, and markets are shut down every Monday completely in compliance with the order and directives of the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB).

The group however, adopted the use of non-violence approach that was characterised by peaceful protest in their struggle. This approach was equally abused by the Nigeria government who employed the services of the security agencies that applied force to quell their protest. Alumona et.al (2019) avers that a number of agencies have responded to the Biafran challenge with brutal display of force causing casualties in its wake. A lot of Biafra supporters were killed during their demonstrations, more were injured and properties of

residents destroyed. Hence, another approach was used by the IPOB in their struggles which are media propaganda and sit-at-home order. They succeeded in establishing an underground Radio Station known as Radio Biafra which they always use to disseminate information to their supporters.

The IPOB is an offshoot of Raph Uwazuruike's Movement for the Actualisation of Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB). The latter group had the same objective as the IPOB but was very diplomatic in approach when juxtaposed its activities with that of IPOB in recent times (Ekpo and Agorye, 2019). The sole aim of the group is to secede from Nigeria and achieve the Republic of Biafra through a peaceful process. It is worthy of note that the agitation for the achievement of the Sovereign State of Biafra started in the 1960s, following the coup d'état and civil unrest that accompanied it which led to the death of many Igbo residents in the North; and millions of people returned to the east only with their heads. (Madiebo, 1980). The unrest and the killing of Igbo people in the North prompted the secession of Biafra in 1967, led by Emeka Odumegwu Ojukwu. The brutal civil war that ended fifty-two years ago claimed the lives of approximately three million people of Igbo descent, leaving an indelible mark on the Igbo people's minds (Achebe, 2012). The civil war was triggered by the attempted secession of the state of Biafra from Nigeria, which was widely considered an unhappy episode best forgotten, but for the Igbo people who fought in the war and their descendants, it was nothing short of a life-defining event (Osita et.al 2022).

Biafra surrendered to Nigeria's brutal military force on the 15th of January 1970, and the war ended officially. The then government, led by General Yakubu Gowon came up with a policy of "no victor, no vanquished" and (3Rs) policy of Reconciliation, Reconstruction, and Rehabilitation, adopted by the military government to conceal the effects of the war. This approach may have resulted in a lack of official reflection, but Nigerians of oriental descent grew up hearing war memories from their fathers and mothers (Vanguard News, 2021).

The preponderance of evidence in the literature appears to suggest that the mismanagement of General Yakubu Gowon's Reconciliation, Reconstruction, and Rehabilitation (3Rs) policy, which the military government put in place to wipe out the cicatrix of the war, was the obvious and fundamental reason for the resurgence of Biafra uprisings in Nigeria's current democratic dispensation. The inability of the Nigerian government to acknowledge the marginalisation of people in south-eastern Nigeria was also the catalyst for the formation of the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) and the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB). So, the rebirth of Biafra agitation by IPOB was triggered following the nature of Nigeria's political imbalance cum political appointments that are perceived to be disadvantageous to the Igbo people. Perceived evidence of marginalisation and the activities of herdsmen in the Southeast region of Nigeria could also not be overlooked. The purported marginalisation which was made manifest by Buhari's administration has been captured by scholars and the preponderance of the evidence in the literature includes political alienation, uneven resource distribution, maiming and killing of civilians by the cohesive agents of the government, covert and overt activities of Fulani herdsmen and among other factors (Owoeye, Ezeanya, and Obiegbunam, 2022). Allison (2017), in consonance with the above statement, also avers that: some nefarious activities carried out by the government of Nigeria and their cohorts resulted in

the formation of the IPOB by Mazi Nnamdi Kanu; in the year 2012, with the express goal of regaining Biafra's independence.

Meanwhile, following the re-detention of IPOB leader, Mazi Nnamdi Kanu, by the Nigerian government on June 29, 2021, the Monday sit-at-home order became an alternative. Since then, the sit-at-home order has been the main strategy used by IPOB and their sympathizers across southeastern Nigeria to protest the leader's arrest, as well as to persuade the Nigerian government to unconditionally release their leader, Mazi Nnamdi Kanu, from what they believe is illegal detention characterised by inhuman treatment and incarceration on a scale never seen before (Omole, 2021). It is also on record that active youths who are hitherto gainfully and self-employed are struggling to make ends meet as the economic hardship bites harder due to the effect of the order (Anoke, Osita, Eze and Muogbo, 2021).

However, the mandatory and weekly sit-at-home order and its unlawful enforcement on the citizens of the region have prompted numerous disagreements between the group and the government (especially the southeastern state government) of Nigeria with deadly unprecedented consequences similar to that of the Nigeria-Biafra civil war on human right activities of the southeast region. Besides, the sit-at-home order in the South-East is very effective as people are complying seriously either as a support to their struggle or as a result of fear of being killed. The current Monday sit at home order in the South-East which came up as a result of Nnamdi Kanu's arrest on June 29, 2021 by the federal government has hampered the rights and liberty of the people of South-East. Our task in this paper is to critically analyze the IPOB sit-at-home order in the southeast as an infringement of human rights.

Historical Context of the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB)

The IPOB is a separatist group located in Southeast Nigeria, with members from all over the world where Igbo people live. This group aims to restore the defunct independence of Biafra through non-violence activities (Ekpo & Agorye, 2019). The leader of the group is Mazi Nnamdi Kanu. The group is a spin-off of the Movement for the Actualisation of a Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB), and it shares IPOB's goals and aims. IPOB is a group that is driving the movement for Biafra (the ancient eastern region) to secede from Nigeria. It is a re-organisation of the Movement for the Actualisation of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) and the Biafran Zionist Movement (BZM), two weakening pro-secessionist parties with the same goal of establishing an independent state for the people of the defunct Biafra territory (Jacob, Nwobi, and Igboji, 2020).

According to the group, IPOB was created as a result of marginalisation and a "political back seat" given to the southeastern people of Nigeria by the northern Nigeria ruling class. According to the group, the only remedy for the clear perceived great injustice and marginalisation of the Igbo nationality by the federal government of Nigeria is for Biafran nation to secede from Nigeria. Furthermore, the overwhelming evidence in the literature implies that the group is advocating for a democratic and peaceful referendum to be held in Igbo land to resolve the Biafra problem (Nwaiwu, 2016; Okafor, 2017).

The leader of IPOB, Mazi Nnamdi Kanu born in 1967 to a royal, middle-class Igbo family in Abia State, Nigeria, is a naturalized British citizen. After founding the IPOB in 2012, Kanu has, through various non-violent means, sought to make people of Igbo extraction aware of the obvious institutional marginalisation and exploitation of the Biafrans

in the hands of Nigerian governments, piloted by northern oligarchy. He established Radio Biafra through which he reaches millions of IPOB supporters throughout the entire old Eastern region of Nigeria. Mazi Nnamdi Kanu was believed to have garnered enough followership through his radio program that exposes the "evil" meted out on his people, the Igbo.

Upon his return to Nigeria in October 2015, Mr. Kanu was arrested and detained by the federal government on charges of treason and belonging to an unlawful group. Kanu was held at an undisclosed location until April 2017, when he was released on bail after being detained for nearly two years. After his release from prison, Kanu's home was raided by Nigerian military officials, thereby forcing his escape from Nigeria to save his life. In that same year, 2017, the federal government of Nigeria led by the former President Muhammadu Buhari declared the IPOB a terrorist group, arguing that the group was no more civil in its operations. The declaration of IPOB as a terrorist was condemned by well-meaning Nigerians and other international organisations. The United States embassy in Nigeria is one of the international organisations that reiterated that Nigeria's declaration of the IPOB as a terrorist organisation was improper and undemocratic in a democratic government. In March 2019, a Nigerian judge, Justice Binta Nyako ordered Kanu to be rearrested over his inability to attend court hearings for months after his release on bail. The inability of the judge to consider why Mazi Nnamdi Kanu has been absent from his trial was criticised by all and sundry.

It is important to recall, however, that the main secessionist attempt that shocked the entire federation emerged in 1967 when the Eastern region launched massive attempt to break away from Nigeria. This started when the Igbo in the Northern Nigeria were massacred in cold blood and their bodies were brought back to the eastern Nigeria. Duruji (2021) buttresses this fact by saying that the counter-coup and the pogrom that followed saw to the massive massacre of Igbo residing in northern Nigeria. It was this massacre in that pushed Col. Emeka Odumegwu Ojukwu to declare Republic of Biafra in 1967. He argued that since Nigeria government and law enforcement were not able to protect the Igbo residing in the other regions that it was better for them to return to the eastern region where they will be safe. On this very issue, Alumona et.al (2019) avers that the sad event encouraged Igbo to believe that they were unwanted persons in other parts of the country and those who survived the pogrom returned in droves. This widened the crack in national unity.

The Igbo feel completely marginalised by the federal government of Nigeria. They claim that they are the victims of an unfair relationship and treatment at the centre. For them, a complete independence from Nigeria is the ideal solution. Owem (2016) writes that group agitating for revival of Biafra reappeared shortly after the return to democracy in 1999 alongside other ethnic nationalistic movement across Nigeria. Igbo are still hammering that the failure of Nigerian government to address the issue of fundamental social difference, political tension, economic competition and ethnic imbalance since the amalgamation is an injustice on the Igbo. In line with this thought, Ekpo and Agorya (2019) agrees that the agitation for the restoration of Biafra is a product of the failure of the Nigerian government to create a sustainable transitional justice system after thirty months of Nigerian-Biafran war (1967-1970). Similarly, Owem (2016) states that the fundamental issues for which the Igbo went to war in the first place were not addressed in the interregnum.

As earlier observed, the agitation for Biafra has resurfaced with much vigour, and the attitude of the Nigerian government towards the agitators is not commendable. It has

rather brought fame and recognition to the agitators. The Igbo is still complaining of being relatively deprived economically, politically, religiously and socially. The vintage of horizontal inequality meted against the Igbo by other groups in Nigeria is the force behind the emergence of these secessionist group called IPOB. They are agitating for fairness in the distribution of National resources, favourable recognition or total breakaway from the Nigeria state to form an ideal and conducive state of Biafra.

More so, IPOB which started in 2009 had made a smart move by using radio Biafra in its Radio propaganda. Radio Biafra was very symbolic because that was the name of the National Radio station of the defunct Biafra State. Through the power of its media, they were able to criticise the Nigeria government for poor investment, ethnic marginalisation and inequitable resource distribution in the southeast Nigeria. The leader of IPOB Nnamdi Kanu became famous through his online broadcast via Radio Biafra. Ekpo and Agorya (2019) confirms that the activities of the IPOB have been superficial and tirade, and all the media frenzy were largely ignored by the then President Dr. Goodluck Jonathan's administration.

It was not until October 19, 2015 when Nnamdi Kanu, the leader of IPOB was arrested in Nigeria by Buhari's government that his members started protesting for his release. His arrest had pushed IPOB supporters into gaining further fraction as their mobilization grew. Ekpo and Agorye (2019) underscore the fact that his arrest marked the beginning of the escalation of the conflict between IPOB and Buhari's administration. The clash between the IPOB and security operatives has led to the killing of innocent people and destruction of properties worth billions of naira. Alumona et.al (2019) concurs:

Apart from the arrest and continued detention of some of its leaders, it has also met the agitators with brutal force, using the security agencies not only to disrupt their rallies, but also to shoot them. In the process, many were killed and many more got maimed. This is even as the agitators were always unarmed. This has attracted the attention of the international community's as well as some interested parties who have beginning to question the human right implication of government response.

On September 18, 2017, the IPOB was labeled a terrorist organization by the Federal High court in Abuja. Their effort to fight this proscription and reverse the court decision has proved abortive. Besides, this proscription has not yielded any result with regards to terming the activities of the IPOB. It has rather intensified their quest for separation. It is obvious that instead of seeking for a lasting solution for this quest for separation, the Nigeria government has opted for the use of force. As observed by Obasi (2017) the use of force by President Muhammad Buhari in responding to the IPOB's agitation has not been productive as it inflames passion and increase peoples sentiments on separation that may eventually led to political instability. It is worthy to note that the recent arrest of Nnamdi Kanu on June 29, 2021 has created serious tension in the southeast region of Nigeria. It was this arrest that brought about the ongoing Monday sit-at-home order by IPOB. The south-eastern part of Nigeria was a region that sought independence from Nigeria in the 1960s which led to millions of civilians and women being massacred during the Nigerian-Biafra Civil War. This is a civil war that many international human rights labeled genocide; meted out against ethnic and religious minorities of eastern Nigerian extraction. The main objective of IPOB, according to the group was the independence of Biafra (the old eastern region) through referendum and not through the barrel of a gun.

Mandatory Monday Sit-at-home Order: an Overview

According to IPOB, the sit-at-home order is a means of persuading and financially suffocating the Nigerian government to free their leader, Mazi Nnamdi Kanu, who is on trial for treason and terrorism. Residents of south-eastern Nigeria are forced to shut down their businesses, social activities, and stay at home every Monday and on the days their leader would be going to court. According to the President, International Solidarity for Peace and Human Rights Initiative, Osmond Ugwu, who was interviewed in the Punch newspaper (2021) says that "the desertion of the streets and markets in southeast Nigeria is a show of manifestation of honour and voluntary loyalty to the leader of IPOB; that full compliance with the order is not based on coercion, as the government and anti-IPOB elements have falsely claimed." Compliance is an outward demonstration of people's commitment to what they believe in. It is all about what Mazi Nnamdi Kanu stands for, which is total freedom and Political liberation of his people (Owoeye, Ezeanya, Obiegbunam, 2022). As a result, people's adherence to the sit-at home order demonstrates complete solidarity with IPOB's leader. That is why, despite the government's threats and intimidation, people continued to obey, although it had negative consequences on the region's human right.

What Are Human Rights?

Human rights are the basic rights and freedoms that belong to every person in the world, from birth until death. They apply regardless of where you are from, what you believe or how you choose to live your life. They can never be taken away, although they can sometimes be restricted – for example if a person breaks the law, or in the interests of national security. These basic rights are based on shared values like dignity, fairness, equality, respect and independence. These values are defined and protected by law.

IPOB Sit-at-Home In the Southeast: An Infringement of Human Rights Fear of Unknown

The Eastern Security Network, the armed wing of the Indigenous People of Biafra separatist movement, staged multiple attacks on government buildings, including police stations, in the South East and reportedly killed dozens of security force officers and, of course, those who are not abiding to the purported sit at home order are at their detriment, this has created fear and uncertainty in the hearts of many in south-east Nigeria. No doubt, it's an infringement of human rights as people move around in fear of death. There were reports of disappearances by or on behalf of government authorities. According to Amnesty International, the whereabouts of at least 50 suspected supporters of the Indigenous People of Biafra group arrested in Rivers State between October and November 2020 remained unknown at year's end.

Abduction and Kidnapping

Criminal groups in disguise of IPOB have abducted civilians throughout the southeast, especially in the remote areas of Imo state, Isuochi, Okigwe, etc. School children and vulnerable populations were prime targets of abduction, as were religious leaders, local government leaders, police officers, university students, and labourers, among others. The Uturu-Leru-Okigwe road axis remained a major target for kidnappers, forcing many travellers to transit by air or take a longer route to their destination.

IPOB Attacks on Civilians and Security Personnel

The group attacked government centres and security personnel in the South-East; these groups targeted persons, markets or villages perceived as disagreeing with the group's order of sit-at-home. IPOB demonstrated an increased ability to conduct complex attacks against military outposts and formations. Violence surged in the South-East following the Indigenous People of Biafra's launch of its military wing, the Eastern Security Network, in December 2020. In the first quarter of the year, local media reported 54 violent attacks on civilians and security forces and 222 deaths, representing a 59 per cent and 344 per cent increase, respectively, compared with the quarter prior to the Eastern Security Network's establishment. On August 5, Amnesty International issued a statement alleging security forces including the military, police, and Department of State Services killed at least 115 persons in the South-East between March and June as part of security operations against the separatist Indigenous People of Biafra movement and its armed wing, the Eastern Security Network. According to Attorney General Malami's public announcement on October 22, the Indigenous People of Biafra movement together with its militant wing, the Eastern Security Network, was responsible for the deaths of more than 175 security personnel and attacks on 164 police stations in the South East. The Eastern Security Network/Indigenous People of Biafra have consistently denied responsibility for the attacks and South-East-based government officials raised the possibility that some of the attacks were politically motivated or perpetrated by criminals seeking to take advantage of a state of insecurity in the region.

Lack of Respect for Civil Liberties and Freedom of Expression, Including for Members of the Press and other Media

Although the constitution and law provide for freedom of expression, including for members of the press and other media, in some cases, the government restricts these rights. Freedom of Expression: The constitution entitles every individual to "freedom of expression, including freedom to hold opinions and to receive and impart ideas and information without interference." There were also reported cases in which the government abridged the right to speech and other expression. Authorities arrested individuals in the South-East who spoke on referendum and separation, which fueled the agitation. They were arrested for blasphemy and incitement through contempt of the Cultural and Ethnic creed, which some critics attested was a restriction of free speech.

Also, anyone found speaking against the sit-at-home is often regarded as a rebel and is treated by the group as one. Although a large and vibrant private domestic press frequently criticised the government in issues regarding the IPOB group, but critics reported at times being subjected to threats, intimidation, arrest, detention, and sometimes violence (see also section 1.e., Trial Procedures, trial of Nnamdi Kanu). In July the Federal High Court in Abuja announced it would only accredit 10 media organizations to cover the trial of Nnamdi Kanu, the leader of the Indigenous People of Biafra, due to security and COVID-19-related concerns. Media organizations protested the decision as an attempt to restrict freedom of the press and circumscribe Kanu's right to a fair, public trial (see section 1.g.).

Violence and Harassment

There were reports that security services detained and harassed journalists, sometimes for reporting on sensitive problems such as political corruption and security. Security services

including the Department of State Services and police occasionally arrested and detained journalists who criticized the government on the IPOB sit at home, the Group is not also left behind as they are not left behind in melting out attacks and violence on any person, or political or religious leader who is not in favour of their movement.

Censorship or Content Restrictions

The government controlled much of the television and radio programming through the National Broadcasting Commission, which is responsible for monitoring and regulating broadcast media. The law prohibits local television stations from transmitting programmes from other countries except for special religious programs, sports programs, or events of national interest. Cable and satellite transmission was less restricted. For example, the National Broadcasting Commission permitted live transmission of foreign news and programs on cable and satellite networks, but the networks were required to dedicate 20 percent of their programming time to local content.

On June 4, the government announced it had indefinitely suspended Twitter's activities in the country because of the "persistent use of the platform for activities that are capable of undermining Nigeria's corporate existence", such as IPOB agitations. On June 2, Twitter removed a June 1 post from President Buhari's official Twitter account and announced it was suspending his account for twelve hours for violating Twitter's "abusive behavior" policy. Buhari's tweet on June 2 referenced the Biafra civil war that killed one million persons, warning "those who were misbehaving" in the South East that "those of us...who went through the war, will treat them in the language they understand." At the year's end, Twitter remained suspended as government and the social media company negotiated the preconditions for unblocking the platform.

Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and Association

The constitution and law provide for rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and association, but the government limited these rights. Freedom of Peaceful Assembly The constitution and law provide for freedom of assembly. The government occasionally banned and targeted gatherings when it concluded their political, ethnic, or religious nature might lead to unrest. The government put limitations on public gatherings. In areas that experienced societal violence, police and other security services permitted public meetings and demonstrations on a case-by-case basis. Security services sometimes used excessive force to disperse demonstrators (see sections 1.a. and 1.c.).

Freedom of Association The constitution and law provide for the right to associate freely with other persons in political parties, trade unions, or other special interest organizations. While the government generally respected this right, on occasion authorities abrogated it for some groups. In 2017 the government designated Indigenous People of Biafra a terrorist organization. Human Rights groups reported the law had a significant chilling effect on free association among the south East Nigeria because of the sit-at-home order

Conclusion

The effect of mandatory sit-at-home on Mondays by IPOB and its infringement on the human rights of the citizens of Southeast Nigeria was examined. It was exposed that the order with total compliance in the region has a negative implication on not only the region

but the country at large. The study concludes that the sit-at-home order on Mondays by IPOB in the South-eastern parts of the country has brought loss of life, fear of the Unknown and has encouraged criminals to use the purported sit-at-home to perpetuate evil in disguise of the IPOB group to the region and recommended that the regional government (South-eastern), religious bodies, traditional rulers, and other key stakeholders, should diplomatically and politically engage the central government of Nigeria for the release of IPOB leader while the federal government of Nigeria should adopt all-inclusive governance as these will return full economic activities to the zone.

Recommendations

In the words of Abalogu (2023):

- The federal government should suspend the use of force in tackling the issue of IPOB in the south east. They should seek for advice from those countries that have witnessed such agitation.
- Government should address the problem of unemployment in Nigeria. The percentage of unemployed youths in Nigeria is quite alarming and majority of the separatist groups are youths. Of a truth an idle mind is the devils workshop.
- Since agitation for Biafra by the IPOB is basically centered on inequalities and injustice in the distribution of power in the country, government should correct those imbalances.
- There is need for genuine reconciliation. It is obvious that the wounds of the civil war are not yet healed. The federal government should urgently establish a true reconciliation commission whose members should be drawn from religious leaders, traditional institutions and the academia.

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