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IPOB AS HYBRID CIVIL SOCIETY: FROM NON-VIOLENT ADVOCACY TO MILITANT ETHNO-NATIONALISM

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Abstract
The Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) has evolved from a non-violent advocacy group to a militant ethno-nationalist movement, reflecting broader socio-political challenges within the Nigerian state. This paper examines IPOB as a hybrid civil society actor, emphasising its dual role in civic engagement and resistance. Drawing on qualitative data, including an extensive literature review, desk research, and the group's public communication, the study explores IPOB's emergence, strategies, and trajectory. It situates the group within the historical and structural context of Nigeria's post-colonial state-building challenges, including systemic marginalisation and ethnic tensions. The analysis highlights IPOB's use of peaceful demonstrations, digital media, and the establishment of the Eastern Security Network (ESN) as pivotal strategies, alongside the Nigerian state's militarised and coercive responses. The paper underscores how these state responses, particularly the detention of IPOB leader Nnamdi Kanu, have escalated tensions, fostered radicalisation, and deepened narratives of ethnic marginalisation. The study concludes that the Nigerian state's reliance on force-based approaches exacerbates conflicts, urging a shift toward inclusive, dialogue-based strategies to address ethno-nationalist grievances and foster sustainable peace.
Keywords: *Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), Hybrid Civil Society, Ethno-Nationalism, Eastern Security Network (ESN), Post-Colonial State-Building*

1 Introduction

The inability of the post-colonial Nigerian state to completely reform its ontological basis, which consists of its institutions and approach to governance, has consistently been a source of security challenges. Its continuous existence as a predatory entity ensures that it is a routine recipient of attempts from non-state actors questioning its inability to attain inclusive governance. It continues to be questioned whether the Nigerian state can transform into an entity that is representative of diverse ethnic groups, with such critical questions gathering around

advocacy that seeks to extract ethnic groups from a situation where they have "found themselves lost in the scheme of things" (Abada, Omeh, & Okoye, 2020). In recent times, the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) have emerged as a particularly vocal representative of grievances by the Igbo ethnic nationality, which it has channelled in the form of agitations for the revision of Nigeria's political configuration (Terhile, Edet, Undiandeye, & Edet, 2024). Conversations in literature have centred around illuminating the output of the group's agitations and the symbolism of its activities. As such, discussions have been about the economic consequences of the group's activities (Mbanusi, 2023; Asogwa & Uche, 2023; Terhile et al., 2024). Beyond that, demonstrable links have been drawn between the group's actions and the political and structural inefficiencies of the modern Nigerian structure (Henry et al., 2020; Owoeye et al., 2023). Ugorji (2017), however, has demonstrated that IPOB represents a social movement with immense socio-political significance. This paper extends this argument further and describes the IPOB as a logic of the faulty state of relations between the Nigerian state and the civil society sector, which continues to cohere to a state defined by uneasy complementarity and general antagonism. Part of the paper's arguments include the establishment of the "*civil society*" character of the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), wherein the paper buttresses the point that IPOB's emergence onto the scene was not an outlier and that its actions derive an ontological basis from various factors embedded within the civil society space in southeastern Nigeria

2 Re-conceptualising civil society

Notions of civil society as a realm dominated by human associations that oppose the state and its claim to authority are, as Akande et al. (2024) note, a dominant theme within studies of civil society groups. However, it is pertinent to note that such conceptions are best contextualised, given the concept's imprecision and fluidity, which often results in the proliferation of different epistemologies around the concept (Edet et al., 2024). This imprecision connects to the concept's flexibility. This flexibility has been illustrated in and reinforced by the civil society label's encompassment of organisations of diverse identities (Neji & Edet, 2023), which occupy a broad spectrum of actors drawn from different identities within a social system, constructed based on gender, faith and ethnicity (Doyle, 2017). In elucidating further on the fluidity of the concept, Akande et al. (2024) have argued that the label also captures hybrid organisations that legitimate their activities that violent established norms of behaviour using rationalisations drawn from legitimate grievances held by a mass collective. Such organisations blur the lines between legitimate causes and violent insurgency, challenging the traditional conceptions of civil society organisations. In southeastern Nigeria, this concept of hybrid civil society becomes particularly significant when examined through the lens of groups like the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB).

Drawing on Akande et al. (2024)'s notion of hybrid organisations, IPOB can be seen as a unique civil society actor whose actions are shaped by a combination of legitimate grievances and a direct challenge to established state norms. The group embodies the fluidity and diversity of civil society, as its composition and goals are rooted in ethnic identity and a shared historical experience of marginalisation that traces back to the Biafra War. As Akande et al (2024) have submitted, hybrid civil society actors, such as IPOB, often are able to simultaneously function as representatives of collective grievances through their ability to instrumentalise their civil society identity for resistance mobilisation and articulation. Seen that way, IPOB exists as a space for accommodating grievances about systemic inequalities in an organised form. Such grievances are rooted in historical dynamics perpetuated in the modern epoch, specifically concerning the post-colonial state-building project of most African states, Nigeria inclusive.

3 Review of Related Literature

Nigeria's post-colonial state-building project has continuously been beleaguered by challenges that have sought to undercut its effectiveness. Such challenges have been apparent in the continuous friction between its component units and peoples, as their relations remain grounded in competitive rather than cooperative norms. As Okpaga (n.d) notes indubitably, the consequent state of tensive co-existence is representative of the continuation of fractious interactions between major and minor ethnic groups, who have continuously grappled with the question of ethnic balancing, which has been a general bane of African post-colonial systems. Within such a mix, the state has adopted the position of a participant in a state of "competitive, conflictual" relations with civil society and all associations within it (Odey, Edet, Agboh, & Ngoro, 2024). This lack of cordiality is worsened by the continued absence of a national identity reflected in statements made by past and present political elites. Indeed, the literature contains references to statements made by Tafawa Balewa that state that "…many Nigerians deceive themselves by thinking that Nigeria" (Ekeh, Cole, & Olusanya, 1989, p. 93) and that Nigeria's unity could only be intelligently interpreted as a relic of colonial intentions (Idowu, 1999, p. 39) as well as that of Nnamdi Azikiwe which construed Nigeria to represent "…a mere geographical expression" (Ekeh, Cole, & Olusanya, 1989, p. 92) (Ekeh, 1989, p. 92). Such gaps have created spaces for the emergence of groups that channel disgruntlement with what may be discussed as integrating various ethnic groups into "an imagined nation" (Endong & Obi, 2022). The Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), which emerged in the late 2010s, represents a notable example of such groups. Although often perceived as an autochthonous movement, the group's origins can effectively be traced to a diasporan project initially led by two United Kingdom-based Igbos, Nnamdi Kanu and Uche Mefor(Nwonwu, 2023).

At the ideological level, the group's ontological basis in "liberation theology" is well demonstrated by its numerous exertions of claims to fight for the freedom of the people (Akpan, 2021). The literature has broad links between this "claim" and aspirations embedded within the Igbo civil society, specifically as related to the political dynamics of the modern Nigerian state described in succinct terms by Ojukwu and Nwaorgu (2016)'s observation that: "Since the return to civil rule in 1999, the Igbos have continually craved for a just society where every ethnic group can compete favourably for political power and where economic resources are equitably distributed through non-violence". Nonetheless, from the literature, it becomes clear that IPOB's claims to these issues notwithstanding, their campaign and activities are hampered by several challenges extending from social and political contexts. In the first instance, the group's non-recognition by the United Nations is discussed as a consequence of complex political dynamics and the embedded convention of territorial integrity preservation upheld by member states (Oguejiofor, 2024), while at the same time, the group's activities are seen as a continuation of the struggle for recognition and autonomy within a multinational state (Nduba, Nnamdi, & Chukwuebuka, 2020). The militaristic response of the Nigerian state and factionalisation within the group further complicates such dynamics (Okaisabor, 2023).

The general tendencies of existing literature indicate that extant scholarship has discussed the IPOB's origins, connections to Nigeria's eastern civil society space, and interactions with the Nigerian state. However, considerations of the 'dual faced' character of the operations of IPOB remains underexamined. This paper addresses this gap by discussing IPOB's hybridity, as captured in the hybrid civil society concept, which is displayed in its ability to draw on legitimate grievances and simultaneously employ confrontational resistance.

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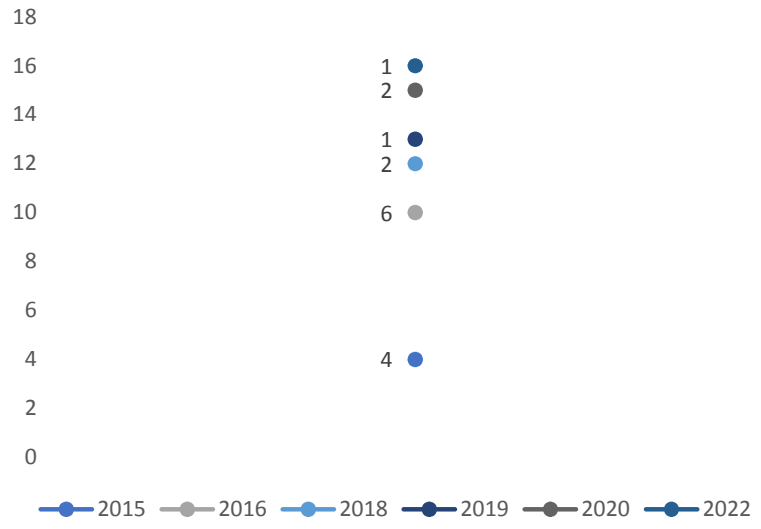
4 Methodology

This paper's arguments are based on a qualitative dataset constructed from an extensive literature review and desk research on the activities of the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) and the Nigerian state's responses between 2015 and December 2024. The focus is on the activities of the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) and the Nigerian state's reactions between 2015 and December 2024. The research also closely observed IPOB's public communication and information dissemination platforms from November to December 2024 to gain firsthand insights. This included monitoring their official website, social media accounts like Facebook, Twitter, and Telegram, and public statements from their leadership. The aim was to understand how IPOB frames its messages, mobilises support, and addresses its audience. These observations revealed recurring themes in their communication, shedding light on how they present their cause to their supporters and the broader public. The paper also draws on a publicly available dataset created by Oluwatoye (2023), which offers detailed accounts of Nigerian state responses to IPOB. Using this dataset, combined with thematic analysis of media reports, the research could better analyse how the state's strategies have influenced the trajectory of the IPOB movement, from moments of heightened tension to occasional periods of calm. To ensure the reliability of the dataset from Oluwatoye (2023), the data sources were manually vetted for accuracy, and data from the dataset was triangulated with news reports on the specified incidents published by verifiable national dailies, including Premium Times and Guardian Nigeria. This study adopts an interpretive approach to analysis, emphasising understanding the perspectives and meanings behind the actions of both IPOB and the Nigerian state.

4 IPOB as "hybrid civil society": From non-violent activism to 'militant' ethnonationalism

Functioning as a 'spear' of a grassroots civil society organisation, the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) has typically used an eclectic strategy that borrows civic and violent advocacy elements. Activism using non-violent forms has been a documented feature of activism by the Indigenous People of Biafra since its establishment. This pivot towards peaceful demonstrations as a particular form of activism was a key characteristic of the movement in its early days. Between 2015 and 2016, the group engaged in 10 peaceful demonstrations (Figure 1), accounting for 62.5% of such engagements before 2022.

Figure 1: IPOB peaceful demonstration data (2015-2022)



Source: Adapted from Oluwatoye (2023).

Such demonstrations were spread across the states in the southeast region, often resulting in fatal consequences due to state action. In the time between 2015 and 2016, at least 150 fatalities were recorded because of forceful responses by security forces against supporters of the group. (Amnesty International, 2016). Such dynamics, seen in the fatalities, corresponded with a general condition of 'oppositional' interactions between the state and the group, with attempts at suppressing the narrative embedded in the idea espoused by the group.

A prominent strategy of IPOB's activities has been using the media space to target and raise domestic and international bases of support. New forms of digital media, such as Facebook and Twitter, have been at the heart of IPOB's media strategy. In 2022, the Nigerian government held meetings with Facebook to advocate for stringent punitive measures designed to prevent the continued use of the social media platform for the propagation of violent and divisive rhetoric by the IPOB (BBC News Pidgin, 2022). Facebook has mainly been a fecund dissemination area, with many groups and pages. In 9 years, over a hundred public groups and pages framed around the thesis advanced by IPOB or its adjoining messaging have been created on the social media platform Facebook. As has been underscored in the literature, these information outlets have functioned as "channels" for perpetuating a language discourse that revolves around violence, protest, threat, and crime as a form of mobilising sympathy towards the group's cause (Amadi, 2022). IPOB's attempts to dominate the traditional and digital media space encounters aggressive responses from the Nigerian state which has at various times, and to a considerable extent, shut down communication channels of the group, including Radio Biafra and IPOB's related webpages.

Eastern Security Network (ESN)

The 'violent turn' could best be described as beginning with establishing the Eastern Security Network. Again, the formation of this group sufficed as an extension of the 'liberation' messaging at the fore of the group's messaging. In that sense, the ESN was a security guarantee extended to residents of the southeastern region, a culmination of deep-seated frustration with what was the failure of the conventional structures of governance at the task of securing the people and preventing their gradual elimination by criminal elements (Shibayan, 2020). Consequent messaging has consistently sought to buttress the utility of the ESN as the security vehicle and solution for a sense of security crisis embodied by the Nigerian government (Nwaiwu, 2024). Supporters of the ESN have emphasised its value as "a symbol of resistance" whose function revolves around protecting local communities from external threats, maintaining peace and security, and responding to "perceived neglect by traditional security agencies" (George, Udoudo, & Nwachukwu, 2024, p. 72). Although the ESN was projected as a facsimile of state-backed localised policing initiatives, specifically the Amotekun (Shibayan, 2020), it is entrenched in a context of consistent opposition from the Nigerian government, which is informed by broad ties to illicit activities or its virtual character as an armed wing of IPOB.

Such descriptions draw validation from the group leader's description of ESN as "IPOB's first and last line of defence" (Ishaku, 2020, p. 1). Resistance overlapped with opposition from elements of the Igbo civil society, specifically the youth wing of the Ohanaeze Ndigbo, which has sought to alienate (Ishaku, 2020). To an extent, the formation of the Eastern Security Network indicates the group's attempts to contest sovereignty and state monopoly of force. The Nigerian state has persistently faced such challenges. Apart from the deployment of military assets and personnel, which often has resulted in severe clashes (Sahara Reporters, 2021), there have been raids by special task forces (Punch, 2024), some of which have included the recovery of improvised explosive devices (Abdullah, 2024).

Over time, the introduction of the ESN has increasingly brought the IPOB group within the overlap with illicit economies. The IPOB has fractured into several splinter groups that have increasingly connected with local and trans-local organised crime activities and networks in recent years. Organisational entities operating under the IPOB's name continue to be linked with activities such as extortion, incentive-based kidnapping, arms trafficking and smuggling operations.Cameroonian government and Nigerian state officials have reported that the group has participated in micro-scale transnational weapons smuggling operations (Bish, et al., 2022). There are reports of the busting of kidnapping and robbery syndicates linked to IPOB/ESN (Nwachukwu, 2024; Okolie, 2024), while the IPOB has denied participation in kidnapping for ransom (Njoku, 2024), re-echoing an earlier position that has advanced the thesis that attempts to link the group to kidnapping and robbery extends from a deliberate ploy by the Nigerian state to mischaracterise the group (Opejobi, 2021). However, such rejections of links occur at the same time as documented instances where the group has been identified as culpable in cases of targeted abductions of residents (Ojukwu, 2022).

5 Nigerian State Responses to The Indigenous People Of Biafra Advocacy And Implications

Nigerian state responses follow a general pattern which has adopted a non-permissive stand towards the actions of the IPOB group. Endong and Obi (2022) hold that the Nigerian state has adopted a rabidly intolerant and aggressive posture towards the group. This is evident in initial responses to the non-violent activism adopted by the IPOB in the early days of its activism. Initial responses focused on repression rather than engagement. Summarising the extent of the forceful response, this Amnesty International (AI) summary of its report may thus be instructive:

> "Analysis of 87 videos, 122 photographs and 146 eye witness testimonies relating to demonstrations and other gatherings between August 2015 and August 2016 consistently shows that the military fired live ammunition with little or no warning to disperse crowds. It also finds evidence of mass extrajudicial executions by security forces, including at least 60 people shot dead in the space of two days in connection with events to mark Biafra Remembrance Day." (Amnesty International, 2016, p.1).

A pivotal moment in this trajectory was the arrest and continued detention of IPOB leader Nnamdi Kanu. Initially detained in October 2015 on charges of treasonable felony, Kanu's case has become a symbol of the state's broader approach to dissent. Although he was released on bail in 2017, his rearrest in June 2021 under circumstances described by some as extraordinary rendition reignited tensions. The Nigerian government has justified his prolonged detention as necessary for national security. From this standpoint, the detention of Nnamdi Kanu has been cited as a necessity to maintain security in the south-east (Nnochiri, 2022).

However, as Akande et al (2024)'s construct of hybrid civil society suggests, state repression of contentious non-state actors often radicalises such actors, transforming them into entities that blend civil resistance with militant action. This dynamic manifests succinctly in the IPOB's evolution from a primarily non-violent movement into a hybrid organisation with the emergence of the Eastern Security Network (ESN).

The continued detention of Kanu and his arrest have arguably contributed to the 'radicalisation' of sections of IPOB supporters, many of whom now view peaceful advocacy as ineffective. This dynamic is reflected in the emergence of the ESN and the increasing prominence of splinter factions such as the Simon Ekpa group, which has capitalised on his continued incarceration as

the basis for the declaration of several violent actions. Notably, the emergence of the ESN illustrated a reversal of the dynamics of the 'relationship of violence' between the Nigerian state and the IPOB group, such that the IPOB transitioned from a plaintive to a radical group. Between January and April 2021, at least twenty violent assaults on security personnel and structures were recorded in the southeastern region (Wodu, 2021). Such actions indicate the adoption of more confrontational postures against state security structures, which have negative implications for regional stability, disrupt economic activities in the area, and have negative consequences for local livelihoods and economic activities. Politically, the impact of state responses deepens feelings of grievance within the southeastern region, owing to Nnamdi Kanu's status as an embodiment of Igbo resistance to perceived marginalisation and his arrest is interpreted as an attack on the Igbo ethnic collective. Such ideas have been noted extensively. For instance, a press release dated March 10, 2017, published by the Sun Newspapers has argued that:

> "Each day he is held in detention is an extra day he garners more support, he grows in stature as a prisoner of conscience and as a freedom fighter. The longer he is held, the more he is seen as bearing the cross of the Igbo people, and the more the persecution perception of the Igbo takes on greater reality." (The Sun Nigeria, 2017, p. 1).

The quote above indicates that state responses only further reinforce a historical grievance trope as well as a narrative of "Igbo marginalisation", which presents Kanu's detention as a symbol of a general persecution of the Igbo nationality, which potentially deepens ethnic tensions and alienates members of the Igbo ethnic nationality from the Nigerian state. Such messages can be consolidated into robust frames for socio-political mobilisation.

6. Conclusion

State responses to ethno-nationalist challenges to its sovereignty and structure have consistently failed to foster inclusiveness. The emergence and persistence of the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) highlight these deep-seated issues and underscore the need to shift from coercive, force-based strategies to consensual, deliberative processes that address and accommodate grievances. The current approach has exacerbated, rather than mitigated, the challenges IPOB poses. Actions such as the detention of the group's leader, the suppression of non-violent demonstrations, and the disproportionate use of force have escalated tensions, reinforced narratives of marginalisation, and undermined peacebuilding efforts. There is an urgent need to de-securitise the Nigerian state's response to groups like IPOB. Failure to do so risks transforming these groups from purely civic organisations into hybrid entities that combine civil advocacy with violent resistance. To do so, there is need for future research to consolidate focus on the development of sustainable non-adversarial, inclusive models for managing ethno-nationalist aspirations through sustained critical inquiries, which should allow for the comprehensive interrogation of the unintended dynamics of state securitisation of responses to issues raised by the civil society and how such shapes the trajectory of hybrid organisations that operate at the intersection of civil resistance and violent militancy.

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