

Fifty years after the Civil War: Nigeria and the Renewed Demand for Biafra

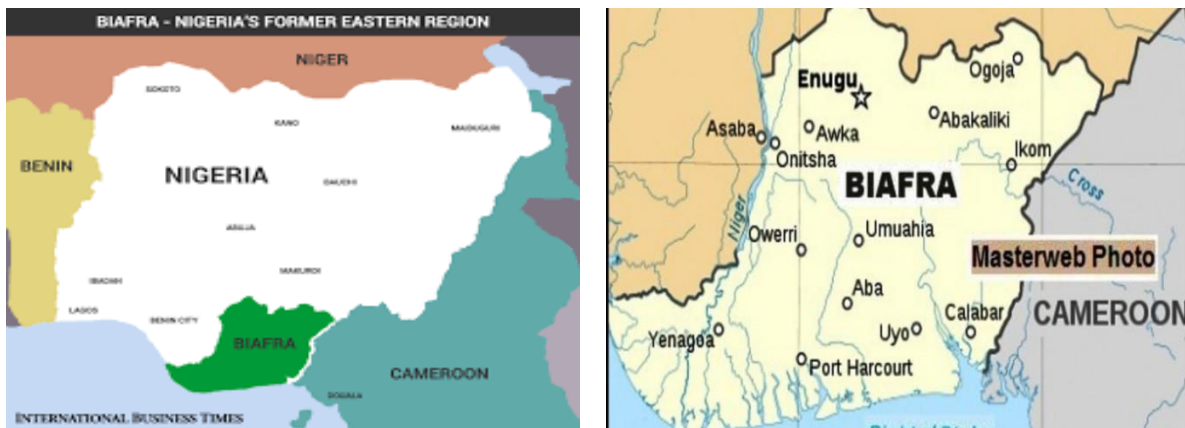
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1. States of the Issue

Though the renewed demand for restoration of Biafra Republic in Nigeria started in 1999 with the formation of the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB), the agitation was considered marginal with little government attention sequel to the emergence of the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) which was diaspora led using a pirate Radio Biafra based in London for outreach (Gaffey, 2017). Beside radio, IPOB also used social media maximally. The visibility of the organization grew following the futile attempt by General Mohammadu Buhari administration to jam the radio relaying its broadcast to major cities and towns of the former Biafra Republic on frequency modulated bands. The agitation intensified and became popular after the government arrested Nnamdi Kanu the Director of Radio Biafra and leader of IPOB and refused to obey courts orders that granted him bail. Consequently, protests erupted in Nigeria and across cities of the world demanding for his release (Laccino, 2016). The seriousness of the agitation became obvious to the government following the total compliance in eastern Nigeria to a sit-at-home order issued by IPOB on May, 30, 2017 (Gabriel et al, 2017). Building on that success, the group is now asking the government to set a date for referendum or there will be no more election in the region (Ebuka, 2017).

Figure 1: Map of Republic of the Republic of Biafra



Source:: pinterest.com

2. Causes and Analysis

The demand for Biafra from Nigeria, stem from the fact that the country was not an organic state but a British colonial creation that came into being in 1914 following the merger of disparate ethnic entities (Duruji, 2010). The British administrative policy of Native Authority system never encouraged unity, thus given rise to struggle for dominance by the major ethnic groups. This was manifested in the politics of decolonization as the major parties represented the three ethnic groups which incidentally dominated each of the three regions of Nigeria (Duruji, 2010)

The destructive and competition and rivalry among the disparate ethnic groups came to a climax in 1966 as a result of coup de tat and counter coup de tat and the splitting of the four regions into twelve states after a peace talk in Aburi Ghana, compelled the Igbo dominated Eastern Region proclaimed its

independence as Republic of Biafra, as a result of pogrom against Biafrans in the north (Ojibara, 2016). The chains of events culminated into an avoidable 3 years long war between Biafra and the rest of Nigeria that eventually led to the defeat and surrender of Biafrans who were re-absorbed into Nigeria (Ojibara, 2016).

Figure 3: Nnamdi Kanu (IPOB Leader) in Court



Source: Thisdaylive.com

Figure 4: IPOB peaceful march in Nigeria



Source: Inc-usa.org

Although the victorious Federal Military government declared at the end of the war that there is no victor, no vanquish, the post-war political scenario in Nigeria presented otherwise, as a sustained policies of marginalization aimed at containing the rebels in the Biafran enclave was the order (Duruji, 2010). It was the transition to democracy in 1999 that opened up space for the suppressed and bottled grievances to burst open, thus creating the environment for the renewed calls for Biafra in Nigeria with the formation of MASSOB led by Mr. Ralph Uwazurike (Duruji, 2012). The group stated with sensitization protests in Lagos and later spread to the south east of Nigeria. Though Uwazurike and his comrades had clashes with the government and were arrested and incarcerated from time to time, the agitation remained at the fringe of Nigerian politics (Aham, 2004; Dike 2006).

Figure 4: Empty Streets of Biafraland, May 30, 2017.



Sources: Punchng.com

The entrance Nnamdi Kanu's IPOB and Radio Biafra reinvigorated the struggle and widened its dimension through galvanization of the diaspora. His arrest on the 14th of October 2015 in Lagos and refusal of the Mohammed Buhari government to obey the court orders granting him bail won more sympathy to the cause of Biafra (Jannah, 2017). The protests in the former Biafra territory saw unprecedented turnout of people causing disruption of social and economic activities and often pitching the protesters with security operatives that resulted in arrests and loss of the lives of unarmed IPOB activists (Opejobi, 2015). For eighteen months, there was back and forth in the court case of Nnamdi Kanu and his comrades, until he was eventually released on bail.

The success of the May 30 sit-at-home awakened consciousness of bystanders leading to reactions across Nigeria. It reactivated the call for equitable restructuring of the country by elements that want the unity of Nigeria to be maintained (Eze, 2017). Tension was escalated in the country when Arewa youths from northern Nigeria issued a quit notice to Igbo residing in the region by October 1, 2017 as a way of deflating the agitation for Biafra (Akhaine et al, 2017). In response to the quit notice, groups in the Niger Delta also issued a counter notice to northerners residing in the oil rich Niger Delta to quit by the same date of October 1, 2017 (Tony, 2017). The rising tension forced the government under the leadership of Yemi Oshinbajo to start holding stakeholder meeting of ethnic and religious leaders across the country to douse it (GVE, 2017; TVC, 2017). However, the failure of the National Assembly to advance the debate on restructuring gave fillip to the demand for Biafra as visits to Nnamdi Kanu and huge turnout of people to his rallies indicate.. President Buhari observing the danger of IPOB activities continued unity of the country, threatened to crush the agitation using the military in a national broadcast on his return from over 3 month medical leave (Daily Nigerian, 2017).

3. Expectation and Implication

The renewed demand for restoration of Biafra indeed started like a joke in the sense that the government and people of Nigeria did not take the agitators serious but continued marginalization of the Biafrans and heavy-handedness of the government made activists more resilient and the demand growing phenomenally. The issues fuelling the agitation which revolve on justice and equity among the ethno-regional groups in Nigeria, seems difficult to address through constitutional engineering. More so the administration of Mohammed Buhari through its utterances and actions, has shown disdain for the people of the former Eastern region who did not vote for him. These issues coupled with the stance of the government to crush the agitation, has led many analysts to conclude that the country is headed into a crisis (Adeogun, 2017). As it is now, the euphoria of its success of May 30, 2017 sit-at-home, the IPOB has become more resolute by insisting that the government give them a date for referendum or there will be no more election in Biafraland area of Nigeria (Onyeji, 2017). If this threat is carried out, it will sure create a constitutional crisis for Nigeria.

4. Conclusion

Apart from all the multiple problems confronting Nigeria such as insurgency, communal crisis, herdsmen menace, kidnapping and armed robbery, corruption recession and economic crisis, the issue of likely breakup of the country as represented by the renewed demand for the restoration of Biafra is the most worrisome to the Mohammedu Buhari government. The calls to make Nigeria equitable through restructuring have become louder to prevent a likely breakup. However, the government is in a dilemma because the north which might lose some privileges are not in support of either disintegration or restructuring that whittles down power of the central government.

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