

NON-VIOLENT CAMPAIGN FOR SELF-DETERMINATION: THE IPOB AND THE IGBO AGENDA

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Abstract

The non-inclusive nature of governance in Nigeria and its conscientious and intentional marginalization to the Igbo tribe/extraction is of great concern to the national polity. Moreover, this has led to the exclusion of the Easterners from the mainstream of Nigerian politics and life, and has logically fanned into flame their spirit of self-determination through movements like the MASSOB and IPOB. This paper aims to show how injustice meted to the Igbo extraction is the main root of the Easterners' non-violent campaigns for self-determination. Thus using the analytic method, this paper demonstrates how injustice against the Easterners encourages the non-violent campaigns for self-determination amongst the people. The scope of this research studies the justification for self-determination, Nigeria's amalgamation theory, IPOB agitations, and non-violent agitations for self-determination. This study establishes that there has been no plans to reintegrate the Igbos (Easterners) into the mainstream of Nigerian politics and life but to relegate them as second class citizens. The people have been maliciously abandoned and excluded from being part of major players in decision making whereas their resources are exploited, hence giving rise to different forms of agitations. The quest for self-determination as the major agenda of the IPOB/Easterners is justified since Nigerian governance has continued to promote injustice and renege on its promises for inclusive governance. In conclusion, non-violent campaigns is an undeniable catalyst to the success of the quest for self-determination..

Keywords: Igbo, Self-determination, Non-violent campaigns, IPOB, Amalgamation theory etc.

Introduction

After the Nigerian civil war where the Igbos, one of the major tribes of the country tried to take their own destiny in their hands (self-determination), citing perceived injustices and attempts at their extermination as reasons. Nigerian government had tried to correct the history with a consoling declaration of 'no victor, no vanquished' and an added promise of a program to reconcile, reconstruct and rehabilitate the Eastern region (Igbo region). This promise however has never been upheld; there has not been an outright intent and display to reintegrate the Igbos (Easterners) into the mainstream of Nigerian politics and life but to relegate them as second class citizens. The Easterners have been abandoned to their fate with the gazetted program never again to allow them resurrect. Whereas their resources are exploited, they are never considered in the developmental projects of the land, excluded from being part of major players in the decision on how the land should be run and banned even to operate in various areas or pursuits that aid the development of their potentials.

It is the above scenario, the inability of the Nigerian State to run inclusive governance and cater for all the elements that make up the country that has now triggered the impulse for self-determination in the Eastern part of the country, and revived the spirit of Biafra through popular movements like MASSOB and IPOB. It is the aim of this paper then to show that injustice is at the heart of all social revolutions and quest for self-determination; it is the instigator of conflicts and until it is eliminated in Nigeria, the agitations seem inescapable and certainly justified; but history shows that effective instrument to success in this regard is found in non-violent campaigns.

Justification for Self-Determination

Human quest for autonomy or self-determination is rooted in the principle of being human, a rational substance. Hegel would make us understand that the essential destiny of reason is Freedom. He maintained that "the history of the world is none other than the progress of the consciousness of Freedom."¹ Man desires to be free and is in constant struggle to eliminate all forms of barriers or obstacles to living out his full existence of freedom. Plato exemplified it in his classic expression of the

body as ‘a prison for the soul’.ⁱⁱ He explains the relationship between the soul (form) and the body (matter) as that where the soul constantly tries to flee from the body which it considers as impediment to its full existence or realisation of its full potentials. At state level, man seeks to construct a social group that allows the full flourishing of his potentials but like the soul, it flees from those social constructs that strangulates its growth. In Nigeria today where the Igbo are systematically asphyxiated in their growth and constantly deprived of that which makes the essence of being human, they make a demand to form their own society that would enable the development of the inner spirit and freedom; they seek their self-determination which is defined as “the process by which a group of people, usually possessing a certain degree of national consciousness for their own state, choose their own government.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Nigeria’s amalgamation theory and renewed uprising

Since the centenary of Nigeria’s amalgamation of Northern and Southern protectorate, consciousness has been high about the continuous existence of Nigeria as one single socio-political entity. Sizeable voices have maintained that Nigeria should split into two parts, retaining the status quo ante before the amalgamation of Jan. 1, 1914, taking for their reason the words of one of the architects of the amalgamation agenda, Richard Palmer, who said that Nigeria is no more than ‘a mere geographical expression, the European label attached to three divergent though contiguous chunks of Africa’.^{iv} It is a view which is subsequently echoed by Chief Obafemi Awolowo and Sir Ahmadu Belo in 1940, stating clearly that they both regard Nigeria as a mere geographical expression and not a united country, with the latter complaining publicly how the amalgamation which he regards as ‘the mistake of 1914 has come to light’. Speaking in the Northern House of Assembly in 1952, Sir Tafawa Balewa who later became Nigeria’s prime minister (1960-1966) dismissed the amalgamation of Nigeria by the British Government. He declared:

“...the Southern people who are swarming into this region daily in large numbers are really intruders. We don’t want them and they are not welcome here in the North. Since the amalgamation in 1914, the British Government has been trying to make Nigeria into one country, but the Nigerian people are different in every way including religion, custom, language and aspiration. The fact that we’re all Africans might have misguided the British Government. We here in the North, take it that ‘Nigerian unity’ is not for us.”^v

As ‘a mere geographical expression’ and as indicated above by Tafawa Balewa, the separatist groups cue into the theory that Nigeria was not meant to remain a united nation as there were no points of harmony. They are further emboldened in this idea of tearing apart by a purported highly classified secret document written by the British colonial masters and said to contain the expression that amalgamation was simply a political ‘experiment’ meant to last for 100 years only.^{vi} They claimed that U.S.A had the knowledge of this document and was consequently preparing for a smooth and non-bloody transition should Nigeria eventually split. Their insistence therefore is that amalgamation was a ‘fraud’ contrived only to solve some administrative needs in Nigeria’s colonial history.

Sources abound that amalgamation was enacted for administrative convenience and purposes – to solve the delays and asphyxias the enactment and execution of national policies were facing.^{vii} It was a compromise introduced by the federal system as best suited to Nigerian conditions and makes governance easier for the colonial rulers. Other writers explain the amalgamation from the economic aspect, i.e. that the Northern Protectorate ran on budget deficit, while the Southern Protectorate ran on surplus; thus, amalgamation was primarily to enable the use of the Southern surplus to off-set the deficit.^{viii} For either one of these cases or for both reasons^{ix}, the need was there to integrate Nigeria to shore off total collapse. If the amalgamation of 1914 solved such a problem then, some people choose to see it as an engine which set the motion for Nigeria’s gradual development to independence granted eventually in 1960^x, thus the need to remain one. But others continue to slam it claiming that it has been a total failure, a historical mistake and the source of the countless problems the country is presently facing. For this group, the remedy is not to be sought in any manner of reform but in clear separation into original parts and autonomous governments.

At the front burner of the latter group are the MASSOB (Movement for the Actualisation of the Sovereign State of Biafra) and IPOB (Independent People of Biafra); they are sister organisations divided on ideological means and leadership but united in seeking for the autonomy of the Eastern enclave, i.e. one of the three regional governments after the amalgamation. The Easterners (Igbo) were at some point not only unfairly treated but almost earmarked for total extermination from Nigerian history, leading to their secession as Biafra in 1967 and the eventual civil war that ended in 1970. The reason for this total extermination and the declaration of the Sovereign State of Biafra came in the aftermath of the failed coup of 1966, falsely perceived as Igbo coup since the main actors in the coup d'état were Igbo, coupled with the fact that none of their elites in power came under the bullets of the coup plotters whereas most of the Northern elites were killed.^{xi}

When the counter coup of July 1966 brought in General Yakubu Gowon as the Head of State, the fortunes of the Easterners (Igbo) changed. A pogrom which aimed at exterminating Igbo tribe was entrenched and they were massacred in their numbers (ca. 30,000) prompting their fleeing from all the parts of Nigeria to the East, their ethnic home. This sin was never expiated and when situation did not abate, and all the diplomatic efforts by the Federal and Eastern governments failed to reconcile, on 26 May 1967 the Eastern region voted to secede from Nigeria. On 30 May, 1967 Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu announced the Republic of Biafra, citing the massacre of Easterners in the post-coup violence as reason.^{xii} Being very ill-equipped for the ensued civil war and out-gunned by the military of the other rest of Nigeria, Biafra surrendered to Nigeria. This experience and quest for separate identity still live actively with the Igbos and refuse to die. It is a philosophy for them, heightened and complicated by structural injustice built in Nigerian system.

The present configuration of Nigeria and the naked injustices on certain segments of the nation's population, especially on the Igbo stare everyone on the face with unimaginable degree of hopelessness in the corporate existence of Nigeria. The social insecurity and strategic policies to impoverish this very segment coupled with the economic exploitation of the region's resources fuel in no little measure the agitations for self-determination within the Eastern enclave. A good number of people seek for a re-organisation of the existing political structure as a solution to the perceived social collapse. But the separatist groups, the MASSOB and its sister organisation IPOB see it differently. The IPOB which is becoming more militant had even sued the Federal Republic of Nigeria for the right to self-determination within their region as a sovereign state.^{xiii}

Massob/Ipob's agitations for Self-determination

Until recently, Igbo have never seriously had the urge to exit from Nigeria although glaring injustices abound calling for it. For the combined years of Obasanjo and Yar'Adua/Jonathan's presidencies (16 years running), there was never a headline on the demand for Biafra. But since the presidency of Buhari, the Igbo's demand for Biafra had become entirely ear-splitting and the blame for this new impulse is firmly laid on the doorstep of the President Buhari, who instead of dousing the rising consciousness of injustice on the Igbo and seeking ways to right the wrong, had rather exacerbated the separatist tendencies in the country. It is natural then that the Ipob, in the words of Martin Luther King Jr., feel that "now is the time to let justice roll down like water and righteousness like a mighty stream."^{xiv}

On his visit to the United States Buhari made clear to the world his determination to treat with little regard those who did not vote for him at the election, and he had no other people in mind than the Igbo who cast most of their votes for Jonathan. Going by the election results he said: "The constituencies that gave me 97% [of the vote] cannot in all honesty be treated, on some issues, with constituencies that gave me 5%. I think these are political realities".^{xv} He continued: "While certainly there will be justice for everybody but the people who voted, and made their votes count, they must feel the government has appreciated the effort they put in putting the government in place."^{xvi}

Till today, the president has continued to make good the above threat. Apart from the constitutionally stipulated requirement that every state be represented in the cabinet of the president, Buhari has virtually ignored the Igbo in all his appointments. And even recently, the injustice came out clear when he appointed 47 people to take care of the critical functions in his government and no one from the South

East was included. The roads in in the South East are all death traps; the region is completely excluded from Buhari's billion dollar railroads that pass across all other geo-political regions, yet the Igbo states are force to contribute in repaying the money borrowed to finance the project in other regions.

Anyone who has fair judgement knows that as one of the major ethnic groups in Nigeria, the Igbo have been hard done by. For 48 years since the end of the civil war the Igbo have been treated as if they were a minority ethnic group in Nigeria when in fact they are one of the major tribes. No Igbo man had been considered for presidency because Nigeria has placed an embargo on any Igbo man becoming Nigerian president. The South East of Ndigbo is the only one of the six geopolitical zones with the least number of states and correspondingly local government councils, which automatically places them at the lowest rung of the ladder in revenue allocation from the federal government. A situation where national resources are distributed according to local government ratios, and where there are now supposedly only 96 local government councils in the South-East relative to 186 in the North-West, suggests lack of equity and justice.

Apart from the fact that government after government have simply ignored the Igbo, every so often the Igbo are slaughtered in the North under one guise or the other and their properties burnt. Many are forced to abandon their homes and businesses to run for dear life. The people who perpetrate these acts never seemed to be arrested or prosecuted.

Olusegun Obasanjo, who though not a saint but far much better than Buhari, had confessed the structural injustice against the Easterners in his interview, the BBC Hardtalk. He said that "after the civil war, despite the 'no winner, no vanquished' program, Nigeria placed glass ceilings and no-go areas for Igbos. The war reconstruction program was observed more in the breach. There was the 'abandoned' property program that was introduced to drive a wedge between components of the former South-East Nigeria. While the country was too embarrassed to put the discrimination program down in an official gazette, it was there for anyone who cared to look".^{xvii} He continued that "since the 70s and the oil boom. Nigeria has invested in commercial industries across the country. None has been sited in the South East. None: Refineries, Steel Plants, Cement Firms, any Industry. The South East was systematically de-industrialized. Even when it was the best location for any industry, there was always a reason why it should not be sited there".^{xviii}

When as a major tribe the Igbo are treated procedurally as second-class citizens in their own country, a demand for self-determination is imperative. When a group of people feel unsafe in their own country, they cannot but be expected to opt out willingly. It is not the responsibility of the government to imprison the Igbo in Nigeria but to ensure and guarantee that they feel safe and are treated with respect. Where the government fails to carry out this obligation, it must be prepared to contain the protests or agitations of Igbo people for separate government.

"No nation", said Obasanjo, "will like to be in perpetual servitude. That Nnamdi Kanu's supporters starred down army tanks with sticks is a sign that the next generation will be ready to fight bare hands if necessary to stop Nigeria treating the Igbo nation as second-class citizens. There will be fiercer and angrier Kanus in our immediate future if Nigeria does not officially stop the "vanquished" program against the Igbo who fought the civil war. You cannot preach unity and indivisibility of the country on TV and all your actions point at discriminating against the components of the country".^{xix} He ended his BBC Hardtalk interview saying: "History has shown that you cannot decree peace. You cannot decree unity. You cannot force any group to belong to a country by force; it may work for a time. But never sustainable".^{xx}

Non-violent Agitations for Self-determination:

It is agreed that Igbo under their organised leaders should fight for their freedom. This is so because "freedom", according to Martin Luther King Jr., "is never voluntarily granted by the oppressor. It must be demanded by the oppressed. Freedom is not some lavish dish that the power structure and those in policy making position will voluntarily hand out on a silver platter while the oppressed merely furnishes

the appetite. The oppressed must have to struggle for it. Nothing is gained without a pressure. Privileged class never give up their privileges without resistance”.^{xxi}

But, no matter the level of grievances borne, this struggle for freedom must not be violent. Often, those who advocate violence in the course of their struggles think ‘real damage sends signals to all sides that the problem is serious and critical’. This idea brings to mind the famous statement by Frantz Fanon that “when we revolt it’s not for a particular culture. We revolt simply because, for many reasons, we can no longer breathe”.^{xxii} By such revolts, people go about destroying properties, looting and causing panic. They justify their actions by thinking, according to Adams, that “peaceful protesting is a luxury for those who can be assured that their voices will be heard without violence, those who can afford to wait for the change they want”.^{xxiii} For them therefore, there is not much time to engage in the luxury of peaceful protests.

Under their organised groups, especially the Ipob, the Igbo seem now to imbibe the same ideology, emboldened by the way other minority groups who took up arms in the country had quickly been appeased but they are always left out of the equation. Obasanjo signalled to it when he alluded to how other parts of Nigeria have bombed Nigeria into submission to get their sons to Aso Rock but the Igbos have little capacity to blackmail Nigeria to the presidency.^{xxiv} His compromises to the Niger Delta as the president also came on the heels of a violent armed struggle and hostage taking by the “Movement for the emancipation of the Niger Delta”. He appeared then to say that violence or arms struggle is a legitimate voice for the oppressed; if you do not take up arms, we shall not take you serious.

Certainly, the Igbos cannot risk to be slaughtered again and so must stick to non-violent struggle. Non-violent resistance is neither a form of luxury nor quietly sitting and waiting for a change while enduring injustice, but a very strong force, where one stands up with all his might against an evil system. It is no cowardice of a type either; one is strongly resisting, but one comes to see it tactically and morally better being nonviolent. In the case of the Igbo, even if one doesn’t want to deal with the moral question in violent means, it would just be impractical for them to talk about making their struggle violent. The Igbo constitute less than 20 percent of the population of Nigeria and it would be foolish for one to think they can win a violent campaign. They do not even have the strategic terrains for military success like the Niger Delta people. The military resistance has been tried at the declaration of the Republic of Biafra which catalysed into the civil war and millions of people were killed without the conditions of Biafrans being better afterwards. Massob/Ipob must then throw violence into an eternal limbo if the Igbo are to survive.

Martin Luther King Jr. gave the same wise advice to the Negro in their period of fight against apartheid, persuading them to keep to non-violent struggles: “In the event of violent revolution, we would be sorely outnumbered. And when it was all over, the Negro would face the same unchanged conditions, the same squalor and deprivation –the only difference being that his bitterness would be even more intense, his disenchantment even more abject. Thus, in purely practical as well as moral terms, the American Negro has no rational alternative to nonviolence”.^{xxv}

It is therefore seriously advocated that in this struggle, the Igbo stick to non-violent means in actualising their dreams. This should not be confused with passive resistance –an unrealistic submission to evil power. No, non-violent resistance is “a courageous confrontation of evil by the power of love, in the faith that it is better to be the recipient of violence than the inflictor of it, since the latter only multiplies the existence of violence and bitterness in the universe, while the former may develop a sense of shame in the opponent, and thereby bring about a transformation and change of heart”.^{xxvi}

Martin Luther King Jr., attested firmly to the power of non-violent agitation. In his jail room, using the margins of scrap paper which was smuggled into his cell, King drafted his “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” in which one sees clearly the representation of his philosophy. He wrote: “Nonviolent direct action seeks to create such a crisis and foster such a tension that a community which has constantly refused to

negotiate is forced to confront the issue.”^{xxvii} For him, it dramatizes the situation in such a manner that it can no longer be overlooked.

Historical evidence and researches show that an uprising has about 50 percent chances of failure if it turns to violence. It seems to be the case that once agitators pick up arms, it legitimizes the state's use of overwhelming violence in response. In other words, security forces are much more likely to open fire -- and individual police or soldiers are much more likely to follow that order if they find the opposition shooting at them. That's a normal human reaction, since one has the right to self-defence to avoid being killed; secondly it is part of government's internal politics to protect its citizens.

We have seen it play out in the history of the black American struggle against apartheid. In his litany of articulating the despair of the black people of America without verily offering any positive creative alternative except inciting them to take up arms, Malcom X did himself and his people a great disservice. He made fiery, demagogic oratory in the black ghettos, urging the blacks to arm themselves and prepare to engage in violence, and what the people reaped was nothing but grief. He was assassinated as well as countless number of youths killed, a sorely and unfortunate tragedy which did not earn anything good for the struggle; a pointer that violence breeds violence.

This situation is not too far from what has happened to the Biafran struggle. Nnamdi Kanu equally brilliant and inflammatory in speeches had won a lot of followers. But, as soon as he reverted to hate speeches spitting fire and storm, high level insults to constituted authorities, even to his own kith and kin the Ohaneze, soliciting arms and effectively arming certain groups of his followers, the Federal troop and tank came and ended his public presence. Some people claimed he had been killed with so many of his followers but others assumed he escaped. Till today, not many people had risen up to ask his whereabouts and the uprising seemed to be dying down. In other words, there were no or almost insignificant sympathisers, a tragic nightmare that should teach us a lesson to always heed to Christ's instruction to all potential Peter: 'sheath your sword' (*Jn. 18:11 & Mtt. 26:52*).

It is clear from facts of life that using violence tends to reduce public support for an uprising. In the first place, the use of violence is not only physically demanding but potentially dangerous, thus scaring off participants. Again, it can end up polarizing people in support of the government, whereas a government crackdown against a nonviolent uprising will often reduce public support for the regime.^{xxviii} Writing on "Why nonviolent protests work", Jesse Marczyk says:

“When property is destroyed, people are attacked, and the ability of regular citizens to go about their lives is disrupted by violent protests, this generates a need for social support on the part of those targeted or affected by the violence. It also generates worries in those who feel they might be targeted by similar groups in the future. ... The net result of that violence is now that third parties side against the protesters, rather than with them. By contrast ... if the protesters have needs they want to see met and they aren't inflicting costs on others, this can yield more support for the protester's side”.^{xxix}

Violence can push away existing social support and make enemies of those who had been allies. For Ijob or any other pressure group to win the struggle for justice or freedom for the Igbo tribe, they need inevitably the coalition of conscience and this is gained not by violence that even affects possible sympathisers.

Conclusion:

The Ijob/Massob quest for self-determination must not be seen as a crime but a right. It is in the nature of man to decide what sort of alliance enhances his being and to work up the actualisation of his being human. The government must not give the impression therefore that Nigeria is a prison where we must all live, irrespective of the living conditions. Indeed, the idea of Biafra cannot be killed with a sledge hammer or by rolling out of Tanks. As long as those conditions of injustices as shown above exist, so long will the Igbo agitations to take their destiny into their own hands will continue. What is required then is to address the root causes that provoked the renewed quest for Biafra --the various levels of injustices and marginalisation of the Igbo nation which includes non-passable highways and bridges,

railway links to the region, development of their seaways and robust international airports, equitable appointments to key positions in the political sphere, additional state that bespeak equity and fairness, right to presidency etc.

It is clear that the people of the Eastern Nigeria represent a frustrated group. They have been denied the opportunity to realise their full potentials within the confines of the country called Nigeria. In fact, since the end of the civil war, both the military and civilian governments that enjoyed the goodwill of the Igbo (who gave up their initial demand for autonomy) have failed to accommodate the Igbo. It is this scenario which is at the nethermost of the formation of various self-determination groups aiming to achieve the lost Republic of Biafra. The government should therefore realise that this disgruntlement in the South-East about the Nigeria project will not disappear by ignoring it. It will not disappear by arresting or killing Nnamdi Kanu, the leader of the Ijob. It will not disappear by issuing threats and killing the protesters. Neither will it disappear by denying the youth of the South-East their freedom of speech and assembly.

However, it is highly recommended that while Massob/Ijob seek redress for these injustices or alternatively demand to opt out of the commonwealth which is Nigeria, they choose nonviolent means in achieving this purpose. Explaining to them why they must stick to non-violent means in their struggle against apartheid in America, Martin Luther King wrote:

“If we as Negroes succumb to the temptation of using violence in our struggle, unborn generations will be the recipients of a long and bitter night of—a long and desolate night of bitterness. And our only legacy to the future will be an endless reign of meaningless chaos.”^{xxx}

Igbo must stick to nonviolent means if they are to achieve the reign of justice and love in the society. Violence must be thrown into the profundity of ocean if we are to survive. The Igbo constitute not too great a percent of the Nigerian population for them to think they can win their freedom fight or their just demands violently and all alone. A coalition of conscience is indispensable and that can only be gained through peaceful agitations and not violent campaign. It is impractical to think of violence; the very moment it is started, the result will be endless loss of lives; countless lives would be wasted unnecessarily. But, with nonviolent campaign the consciences of people would be aroused to the evils of the regime and their collective clamours will impel the government to act justly. Thank God, this is already taking place with a large segment of the population now seeking a restructure of the larger polity called Nigeria as a way of eliminating injustices and propelling national growth.

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