



Neo-Biafra Separatist Agitations, State Repression and Insecurity in South-East, Nigeria

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Accepted: 18 October 2022 / Published online: 15 November 2022

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Abstract

The resurgence of Biafra separatism in Nigeria is largely a reaction to a perceived ethno-national superordinacy as well as the compromised state-building capacity of the Nigerian ruling groups. The tendency to attribute the upswing in ethnic nationalism, separatist agitations and the ascendancy of sectarian cleavages in Nigeria to the widening of the democratic space since 1999 is flawed. Whilst every part of Nigeria is bedevilled with one security challenge or another, the most visible existential threats to lives and livelihoods in Nigeria's South-East are coordinated attacks on state facilities by unknown gunmen and the brutal military response of the Nigerian state to the neo-Biafra separatist uprisings. Although the reinvention of Biafra separatism has received substantial scholarly attention, available studies have neglected how the persistence of state repression has lubricated the wheels of the neo-Biafra separatist movement in Nigeria. This study argues that the repressive disposition of the Nigerian state towards Biafra separatism is at the base of the current mutation of the Indigenous People of Biafra's strategy from the non-violent option to the armed movement. This article relies mainly on the analysis of secondary data on Biafra separatism and state repression in Nigeria. Drawing from the basic assumptions of the theory of state repression, this study concludes that the wanton deployment of the kinetic approach involving harassment, proscription, arrests, extraordinary rendition, torture and mass killing of pro-Biafra agitators tends to stimulate insecurity in the South-East.

Keywords Biafra separatism · State repression · Eastern Security Network · Unknown gunmen · South-East

Introduction

This study investigates how state repression accounts for the mutation of the separatist strategies of the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) from non-violence to armed struggle. There is no gainsaying the fact that Nigeria is currently facing multiple security challenges across different regions of the country. However, the main drivers of insecurity in the South-East (the heartland of Igboland) are armed transhumant pastoral attacks on farming communities, coordinated attacks on state facilities by unknown gunmen and the ferocious military response of the Nigerian state to the separatist uprisings in the region. The reinvention of Biafra separatism in 1999, almost 30 years after the end of the Nigerian Civil War (1967–1970), is an express reaction to perceived ethno-national

superordinacy and the compromised integrative state-building capacity of the Nigerian ruling groups. Although commonly attributed to the widening of the civil space for the expression of grievances that were restricted during the halcyon days of military rule (Adebanwi, 2005; Nwangwu and Ononogbu, 2014), the ascendancy of micro-ethnic nationalism and revival of primaevial political orientations in Nigeria are, in reality, merely symptomatic of the perennial inability of political leadership to promote national integration. Thus, these provincial tendencies reflect the specific nature of relations of social forces in some African states and beyond where ethnic nationalism has persisted.

The reinvention of Biafra separatism has received substantial scholarly attention, most of which is concerned with the causal factors that account for the origin of separatist agitations in Nigeria. For instance, disunity in Nigeria (Chiluwa, 2018), perceived marginalisation and feeling of collective victimhood amongst the Igbo (Ibeanu et al., 2016), traumas and documentaries associated with memories of the civil war (Ugwueze, 2019, 2021), the lopsided structure of Nigeria's federalism (Adibe, 2017) and the ineffective implementation

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of the post-war peacebuilding initiatives (Johnson and Olaniyan, 2017; Nwangwu et al., 2020a) have been identified as the main drivers of Biafra separatism in Nigeria. In particular, the role of the ineffective implementation of the 3-Rs (Reconciliation, Rehabilitation and Reconstruction) post-war peacebuilding programme in the revival of Biafra separatism in Nigeria is very persuasive. The mass mobilisation, recruitment and escalation of the activities of youth-led underclass-dominant neo-Biafra organisations are, to an extent, expressions of resentment over their economic exclusion and material deprivation (Nwangwu et al., 2020a). Although such deprivations generally reflect the broader contradictions of the Nigerian political economy, they are often perceived as ethnic bias and exclusion. This is reinforced by a perception that other parts of the country, especially the North, are unduly privileged by the federal government (Mbah et al., 2017, 2019; Otu et al., 2022). Thus, Agwu et al. (2022) suggest that if post-conflict peacebuilding processes are unable to address the basic economic needs of the poor and marginalised groups, it could be more difficult to achieve lasting peace as they may be motivated to (re)mobilise and (re)engage in violent activities.

Notwithstanding the avalanche of scholarly discourses on the causal explanations of neo-Biafra separatism, available studies are yet to account for how the persistence of state repression has continued to lubricate the wheel of the neo-Biafra separatist movement in Nigeria. Whilst the extant studies on Biafra separatism are relevant in their own rights, this study argues that the repressive disposition of the Nigerian state towards Biafra separatism explains the current mutation of the Biafra separatist strategy from non-violence to armed movement. State repression involves the use or deployment of institutional force in subduing popular dissent for the promotion of political goals in any given state. It includes harassment, surveillance, bans, arrests, torture and mass killing by government agents and/or affiliates within their territorial jurisdiction (Davenport, 2007a; DeMeritt, 2016). This study reflects on the ideological and tactical detour that accounted for the founding of the Eastern Security Network (ESN) as the armed wing of the IPOB. The study lends credence to the fact that social movements are ideologically mobile forces whose *modus operandi* is not unalterable but is often adjusted to respond to a state's authoritarian and repressive behaviour.

This article is divided into six sections. After this introduction, the second section discusses the background and trajectory of neo-Biafra separatist movements in Nigeria, whilst the third section dissects the theoretical import of state repression in the study and understanding of the IPOB's adoption of armed struggle in Nigeria. The fourth section highlights some instances of state repression meted against neo-Biafra separatist agitators, especially the members of the IPOB, and how the group correspondingly became radicalised. The penultimate section interrogates how state repression impinges on the activities of the ESN, unknown gunmen and the security of lives

and livelihood in the South-East, whilst the last section draws a more general conclusion on the implication of state repression for peacebuilding in the South-East.

Background and Trajectory of the Neo-Biafra Separatist Movement in Nigeria

The recrudescence of the Biafra separatist movement in 1999 is an indictment of the Nigerian state's implementation of the post-war peacebuilding initiatives. Hence, it is not surprising that the grievances that led to the outbreak of the war, those that emanated from how the war was fought and how post-war resettlement was implemented have not only created a sense of collective suffering and victimhood amongst the Igbo (Ibeanu et al., 2016) but also combined to incubate and fertilise the founding of neo-Biafra separatist movements in Nigeria.

Prior to the establishment of the IPOB (the most current ensemble and manifestation of the neo-Biafra separatist movement in Nigeria) in 2012 by Maazi Nnamdi Kanu, the neo-Biafra secessionist struggle was pioneered by Chief Ralph Uwazuruike who founded the Movement for the Actualisation of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) on 13 September 1999. MASSOB was established with the mandate of promoting the interest of the Igbo in Nigeria. According to Omeje (2005), MASSOB was able to secure the support of a vibrant global network of Igbo organisations such as the Biafra Foundation, Biafra Actualisation Forum, Igbo USA, Ekwe Nche and Biafra Nigeria World. Nonetheless, a coalescence of state repression and internal leadership crises weakened MASSOB and introduced deep cracks in the organisation (Ezea, 2017). This created room for the emergence of other neo-Biafra movements, including the Biafra Zionist Movement, Biafran Zionist Front, Biafra Independent Movement, Biafra Youth Congress, Biafra Revolutionary Force, Biafran Liberation Council and the now proscribed IPOB. The IPOB appeals directly to the alienated underclass of mainly Igbo descent through its digital broadcasting outlets of which the internet-based Radio Biafra is the most popular.

Similar to the above neo-Biafra separatist groups who were discredited by the IPOB for allegedly compromising the secessionist struggle, the IPOB is also founded on the avowed doctrine of non-violence. In relation to the conservative Igbo nationalists who favour dialogue and diplomacy in their pursuit of Igbo nationalism, however, the IPOB represents the militant wing of post-war Igbo nationalism which promotes the secessionist inclination that surged since the return of civil rule in 1999 (Nwangwu, 2021). IPOB's separatist campaigns have brought it on a collision course with federal security forces as well as Igbo political elite who purportedly aid and abet the state's repressive behaviour in the South-East.

The IPOB has a quasi-decentralised command and control structure led by Maazi Nnamdi Kanu. The Germany-based 15-member Directorate of State (DOS) is the highest decision-making organ of the separatist movement. Below the DOS are the regional (Asian, European, North American and African) representatives. In Nigeria, however, most states in the South-East and South-South have their state coordinators followed by zonal and unit coordinators at the local government and community levels, respectively.

On 12 December 2020, the IPOB created the Eastern Security Network (ESN) as its paramilitary wing. This led to a dramatic change of the group's separatist strategy from a non-violent mode to an armed struggle. According to Nwangwu et al. (2020a), the dominant inclination within the IPOB, ESN and other radical separatists is that the crises of governance in Igboland derive from the oppressive Nigerian state and the collaborationist role of the conservative Igbo nationalists. As the paramilitary arm of the IPOB, the ESN is mandated to defend Biafraland¹ by counteracting the murderous activities of rampaging armed Fulani herdsmen against peasant farmers and local communities (Channels Television, 2021). According to Osa-Brown and Alake (2021), IPOB formed the ESN to protect the oil-rich South-East region against incursions by ethnic Fulani herdsmen it accuses of grazing on farmlands and committing crimes against the locals.

Needless to say, the resource-use conflict between armed transhumant pastoralists and host communities has spread from the Middle Belt to other Southern communities in Nigeria. Since May 2015 when President Buhari's government was inaugurated, attacks by armed herdsmen have become more frequent and perhaps comparable only to the conflicts in the Western Sudanese region of Darfur where the Sudanese government-supported Janjaweed militia murdered, raped, mutilated, plundered and displaced local populations (Nwangwu et al., 2020b). Beyond intermittent words of condemnation, the Nigerian government has failed to formulate effective strategies to address the attendant dangers of transhumant pastoralism in the country. Unlike other sectarian uprisings and movements such as the Islamic Movement of Nigeria, Yoruba Nation Movement and Biafra separatist movements, President Buhari's administration's responses to coordinated attacks by armed herdsmen have been lacklustre (Lenshie et al., 2022; Nwangwu, 2022). Accordingly, President Buhari's government's failure to stop herder aggression in the country is attributed to his pastoral Fulani background and his position as the life patron of the Miyetti Allah Cattle Breeders' Association of Nigeria (Igata, 2016).

As a consequence of the human security implications of the needless attacks by armed transhumant pastoralists on peasant

farmers as well as the Nigerian government's reluctance to deal with the situation, different sub-national and regional strategies have been formulated in order to curb the scourge. For instance, Taraba and Benue States in the Middle Belt, and Ekiti State in the South-West, pioneered the enactment of open grazing prohibition laws as a panacea to the menace of armed herdsmen's attacks in Nigeria. Similarly, the South-West governors launched the Western Nigeria Security Network, codenamed *Operation Amotekun*, as a regional security outfit mandated to curb insecurity in the region (Kabir, 2020).

In principle, it is against the existential security threats posed by armed herdsmen in Southern Nigeria coupled with the disinclination of the South-East political leaders to launch a regional security network in the mould of *Operation Amotekun* that prompted Maazi Nnamdi Kanu to announce the founding of the ESN. The ESN is mandated to protect the South-East and South-South (especially the defunct Eastern Region) from banditry and attacks from suspected armed Fulani herdsmen. According to Comrade Emma Powerful, the Media and Publicity Secretary of the IPOB, the ESN does not depend on external sources for its arms and ammunition as all its weapons are locally manufactured (Channels Television, 2021). In reality and as discussed shortly, however, the ESN was created as a direct response to the perennial onslaught of state security forces against neo-Biafra separatist organisations. The next section focuses on the theoretical import of state repression in the study and understanding of the IPOB's separatist uprising in Nigeria.

State Repression and the Persistence of Biafra Separatism: a Theoretical Discourse

The earliest development of discourses around state repression is traceable to Dallin and Breslauer (1970), Lichbach (1987), Olson (1965), Tilly (1978), Walter (1972) and Ziegenhagen (1986). However, the latest advances in state repression research have been dominated by the works of Christian Davenport and Molly Inman. State repression is the process whereby a government or its agents control a citizenry by force for political reasons. It also involves the restriction or prevention of the citizens' ability to take part in the political life of a society, especially through harassment, surveillance/spying, bans, proscription, arrests, torture and mass killing by government agents within their territorial jurisdictions.

State repression involves the use of instruments of violence or coercion, especially by the police, military and paramilitary forces, to reduce dissident actions, dissenting opinions and collective organisations (Boykoff, 2007). Often achieved through the use of intimidation and open violence, state repression seeks to subjugate citizens and abolish their machinery of collective organisation. Hence, state repression tantamounts to a travesty of justice in which the rights of citizens and organisations

¹ Biafraland is a term used to describe the geographical location of the envisaged Republic of Biafra. It covers the defunct Eastern Region. However, the groups often argue that parts of Edo, Benue (Idoma and Iggede) and Kogi (Igala) States are also included in Biafraland (Nwangwu et al., 2020a).

(especially those who are considered anti-government) to freedom of speech and association are not only limited but citizens are also flagrantly arrested, tortured and killed within the territorial jurisdiction of the state (Davenport, 1995, 2007a; Davenport and Inman, 2012).

As Ake (1981) argues, the state is a specific modality of class domination. This is especially the case in postcolonial social formations in Africa where the relevant institutional mechanisms of repression are not adequately autonomised. The institutional mechanisms for deepening state repression can be exercised through coercion and/or ideology. The coercive apparatuses of state repression include the military, police, paramilitary formations and prisons whilst the ideological counterpart comprises the courts, legislature and state media. The former uses violence to protect the ruling class and ensure their domination over the masses, whilst the latter relies on non-violence to achieve the same objective (Ake, 1981; Althusser, 1970; Margulies, 2018). The state in both democratic and autocratic regimes uses repression to deal with internal threats to its sovereignty (Davenport, 2000). Whilst there are usually sufficient safeguards against state repression in advanced democracies (Davenport, 2007b), the use of force to silence dissenting voices and popular protests in Africa has become the norm (Coynash and Charron, 2019; Keels and Nichols, 2018). Thus, most African states, including Nigeria, are amongst the top countries with severe cases of human rights violations and the highest level of citizen distrust of government institutions (Anazonwu et al., 2021).

The repressive character of the African state is inextricably tied to its colonial history. Colonial conquest of African territories was achieved by the constabularies and other paramilitary forces that were used to suppress, aggress, repress and oppress those opposed to the imposed authority of the colonial overlords. Hence, more than six decades after independence, the Nigerian state and its security architecture have refused to decolonise; they still operate like an occupational force, especially in the South-Eastern region. This has culminated in a state of permanent hostility between the Nigerian state and some groups in the South-East. The Nigerian state is widely used by the dominant ruling groups within the centre as well as the South-East to suppress the agitation, grievances and revolt from the underclass of the Igbo ethnic stock within the IPOB. Although the official attempt to enforce the law necessarily carries with it certain coercive and punitive procedures which are, in the main, at variance with the guarantees stipulated in favour of the citizens by the constitution (Mbah and Nwangwu, 2014), the penchant of the Nigerian state for brute and unbridled force, especially against non-combatant civilian populations, is quite alarming. The Nigerian state continues to rely on repression as its major response strategy to citizens' protests and mobilisation against poor governance. In this light, Ihonvbere (2003) surmises that the proneness of the state to repression makes it serve more as a weapon of rights violations and intimidation than as agents for the protection of the citizenry and facilitation of development. After Nigeria's

independence in 1960, the postcolonial apparatuses of state repression retained their colonial character as agents of the state against civil society activists, especially trade unionists and students, as well as political opponents (Ake, 1981; Cole, 1999). Apart from unarmed pro-Biafra agitators, state repression was unleashed on purported violators of COVID-19 protocols and #EndSARS campaigners who protested police brutality across different Nigerian cities in October 2020 (Anazonwu et al., 2021; Iwuoha and Aniche, 2021; Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2020). The next section highlights some instances of state repression against pro-Biafra agitators and how they have culminated in the radicalisation of the IPOB movement.

State Repression and the Radicalisation of the IPOB Separatist Movement

The recent predisposition of the IPOB to armed separatist struggle in Nigeria is a consequence of the progressive deployment of brute force against the activities of the neo-Biafra separatist movement. Although they favoured a confrontational approach rather than a conciliatory one, the separatist agitators, including the IPOB, generally come across as non-violent organisations. As argued by Onuoha (2014), the separatists seek the realignment of the generational imbalance of power, and ultimately, an exit of the Igbo ethnic group into an alternative political and administrative arrangement. Whilst the agitators agree on secession as the only solution to the perceived Igbo victimisation, they tend to differ on the operational strategies. Prior to the founding of the ESN by the IPOB in December 2020, neo-Biafra separatist groups were closely associated with such strategies as the threat of armed struggle, and boycott of major national events such as census, elections and national identity card scheme, as well as call for a referendum.

The Nigerian state's orchestrated onslaughts against the Biafra agitators have led to the rethinking of their non-violent strategy. As far as September 2017 when the Nigerian military deployed the Operation Python Dance II, Maazi Nnamdi Kanu stated, amongst other things, that the IPOB leadership was reconsidering the viability or otherwise of continuing the separatist struggle in a non-violent manner (Vanguard, 2017; Njoku et al., 2017; Ujumadu, 2017). He also emphasised the need to begin the process of defending themselves in the face of relentless attacks from the Nigerian state. To be sure, the IPOB and other neo-Biafra separatist organisations have suffered various gradations of state repression, including arrest and killing of Biafra Remembrance Day² protesters, excessive military brutality and unprovoked shooting of unarmed protesters, illegal

² Biafra Remembrance Day is commemorated on 30 May every year. It is a day slated for the celebration of the fallen heroes during the Biafran war as well as other neo-Biafran agitators who were allegedly murdered by the Nigerian state. The day is often characterised by various awareness creations through rallies and peaceful protests.

detention of neo-Biafra separatists, failed attempts to jam the transmission channels of Radio Biafra, invasion of the Afaraukwu home of Maazi Kanu and proscription of the IPOB, as well as the extraordinary rendition of the IPOB leader from Kenya.

Following the October 2015 arrest and incarceration of Kanu on charges of sedition, ethnic incitement, terrorism and treasonable felony, there was a series of protests, marches and gatherings by IPOB members and supporters. Most of the protests and rallies were usually planned to coincide with Kanu's court appearances. As argued by Nwangwu et al. (2020a), most pro-Biafra rallies and peaceful demonstrations are often associated with various gradations of rights abuse by the Nigerian security operatives. However, these violations reached an unprecedented height during the 2016 Biafra Remembrance Day which was also the 49th anniversary of the declaration of Biafra. As widely reported by many credible media outlets and human rights campaigners, the security forces shot people during the Remembrance Day celebration in several locations, especially at Asaba, Nkpor and Onitsha (Amnesty International, 2016a, 2016b; Mayah, 2016). According to Amnesty International (2016b), opening fire on peaceful IPOB supporters and bystanders who clearly posed no threat to anyone is an outrageous use of unnecessary and excessive force and resulted in multiple deaths and injuries. Reports of harassment, torture, disappearances, abductions and extra-judicial killings of members of pro-Biafra movements by security agencies have also been documented by other rights organisations (Iroegbu, 2016; Sahara Reporters, 2015). Amnesty International (2018) also observes that the military was involved in arbitrary arrests, detentions and extra-judicial killings of IPOB members in the South-East between 2017 and 2018. Indeed, there is now a history of extra-judicial killings of supporters of Biafra, which predate the present government of President Muhammadu Buhari. In January 2013, for instance, fifty bodies believed to be Biafra supporters were found afloat in the Ezu River in Anambra State (Mamah et al., 2013). Still, none of the past and present killings has been thoroughly investigated by successive Nigerian governments.

In 2017, President Buhari's government was alarmed by the growing penetrative and mobilisational reach of IPOB, especially through 'community evangelism' and other forms of civil disobedience. 'Community evangelism' was effectively used in the build-up to the November 2017 Anambra State governorship election and it entailed moving into villages to encourage people to boycott the electoral process (Mbah et al., 2020; Nwangwu, 2018). As a consequence of the growing popularity and influence of IPOB messaging and civil disobedience, the Nigerian military was deployed in the South-East through Operation Python Dance II. Also known as *Egwu Eke II* in the Igbo language, Operation Python Dance II is the codename of the military operation that lasted from 15

September to 14 October 2017 in the South-East. The operation was deployed apparently to combat 'kidnapping', 'armed robbery', 'killing of priests' and 'violent agitation' but it later turned into a repressive tool against unarmed neo-Biafra agitators, especially members of the IPOB (Ilozue, 2018). As observed by Okafor (2017), the operation subjected unarmed and defenceless neo-Biafra youths to physical torture and other inhuman treatments such as ordering them to slap each other and forcing them to drink and eventually drown in muddy waters. Apart from invading the Afaraukwu home of Maazi Kanu with about 10 Armoured Carrier Vehicles and seven Hilux vans, Nigerian soldiers of the Operation Python Dance II also invaded the Abia State Council of the Nigeria Union of Journalists, Umuahia, where they did not only destroy valuable assets such as laptops, iPads and phones but also assaulted some officials of the union (Ayo-Aderele and Ikokwu, 2017).

The repressive behaviour of Operation Python Dance II in the South-East was quickly followed by the proscription of the IPOB and its designation as a terrorist organisation. The IPOB was first proscribed by the South-East governors, and shortly afterwards labelled a terrorist organisation by the Nigerian Army. Justifying the terrorism designation of IPOB, the military stated that IPOB members used stones, Molotov cocktails, machetes and broken bottles, on a military patrol on 10 September 2017 (Daily Trust, 2017). It was later proscribed by the Federal Government on 20 September 2017 through an order from Abdul Kafarati, the Chief Judge of the Federal High Court, Abuja (The Sun, 2017). The absurdity of the reasons offered by the military for designating IPOB as a terrorist organisation becomes self-evident when compared with President Buhari's government's coddling treatment of armed nomadic herders, bandits and 'repentant' Boko Haram terrorists whose ferocious activities have accounted for the monumental loss of human lives and livelihood opportunities in Northern Nigeria and other parts of the country. Attacks by armed bandits/herdsmen of mainly Fulani origin became more recurrent, coordinated and sophisticated since 2015 without any effective check from the relevant government authorities. Besides the IPOB, extant studies also confirm that the radicalisation of Boko Haram terrorists was stimulated by state repression, including the extra-judicial execution of Mohammed Yusuf, the sect's pioneer leader in 2009 (Lenshie et al., 2022; Onuoha et al., 2020; Onuoha and Nwangwu, 2021). Notwithstanding the repressive response of the Nigerian state to Biafra separatism, the leadership of the IPOB continues to favour a confrontational approach to Igbo nationalism due largely to wider considerations for their material conditions. As shall be seen in the next section, state repression has not only failed to bring the IPOB's separatist activities under check but has accounted for the escalation of armed violence in the South-East.

Eastern Security Network, Unknown Gunmen and Insecurity in the South-East

On 30 December 2020, barely 2 weeks after the establishment of the ESN, the Nigerian military deployed combat helicopters, gun trucks and soldiers who invaded some forests in the South-East where the ESN members were believed to be camping (Sahara Reporters, 2020). For 7 days, Orlu communities in Imo State became the theatre of war between the Nigerian military and the ESN militia. According to Njoku and Elekwa (2021), several lives were lost and billions of naira worth of properties got destroyed during the clash. Similarly, a report of the European Asylum Support Office indicates that from 1 January to 30 April 2021, a total of 32 security incidents comprising 14 battles, 1 incident of remote violence/explosions, 13 cases of violence against civilians and 4 incidents of riots were recorded in Imo State, resulting in 59 deaths (European Asylum Support Office, 2021).

Furthermore, Imo State and other parts of Igboland came under severe security threats after the end of the initial confrontations between the Nigerian military and ESN fighters in January 2021. On 5 April 2021, for instance, yet-to-be-identified gunmen, popularly referred to as ‘unknown gunmen’ in public and journalistic circles, launched a virulent attack on government facilities such as the Imo State Police Command and the Nigerian Correctional Centre, Owerri, freeing 1844 inmates of the Centre (Akingbule and Parkinson, 2021; Ayitogo, 2021; Ezeamalu and Maclean, 2021). The unknown gunmen also set the premises of the Centre (including numerous vehicles) on fire whilst other soldiers were killed at Umuoji on the Owerri-Onitsha Expressway (Nkwo-Akpolu, 2021). Table 1 presents a checklist of major attacks mainly on the Nigeria Police by unidentified gunmen in the South-East and South-South.

As shown in Table 1, every state in the South-East and other adjoining states in the South-South, especially Akwa-Ibom, Delta and Rivers States, have recorded widespread attacks on security formations, particularly police stations and checkpoints. Since February 2021, a series of deadly attacks have been launched on security formations in Anambra State, especially at Nkpologwu and Omogho communities in Aguata and Orumba North Local Government Areas (LGAs), respectively, leading to the death of 16 policemen and four naval officers (Eze et al., 2021). Imo State is undeniably the worst hit by unknown gunmen attacks as no fewer than 15 police stations had been attacked and/or razed in the state, especially at Obowo, Aboh Mbaise, Isiala Mbano, Etiti, Ehime Mbano, Orlu, Orsu, Nwaorieubi, Ahiazu Mbaise, Ezinihitte Mbaise and Mbieri (Eze et al., 2021; Onyejiuwa, 2021). Other soft targets such as markets, courts and the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) offices have also been targeted by the activities of unknown gunmen in the zones.

In particular, INEC offices and facilities have become the second most adversely affected—only coming after police stations and posts—by attacks across Nigeria. Between February 2019 general elections and May 2021, at least 41 offices of the Commission have been attacked by armed non-state actors. According to the Chairman of the Commission, Professor Mahmud Yakubu, these attacks are traceable to election-related violence, protests unrelated to elections and activities of thugs and unknown gunmen (Sahara Reporters, 2021; Yusuf, 2021). There were 18 attacks on INEC facilities by arsonists and unknown gunmen who were used to disrupt and disorganise the 2020 #EndSARS protesters across Nigeria. Of the total number of incidents, 21 attacks occurred in 2020 across nine states in Nigeria whilst 2021 witnessed 11 attacks across seven states in the country. Apart from attacks credited to arsonists who disrupted the 2020 #EndSARS protests, which were more evenly distributed in Southern Nigeria, subsequent attacks on INEC facilities by unknown gunmen since December 2020 have been concentrated in the South-East, the main domain of neo-Biafra separatist agitations. As shown in Table 2, no fewer than nine attacks on INEC facilities were recorded in the South-East in 2021.

Beyond the attacks on INEC facilities, Mbah et al. (2020) show that Biafra separatist agitation and undue military deployment accounted for low voter turnout during the 2017 governorship election in Anambra State. Similar to the 2017 experience, the outcome of the November 2021 governorship election in the state also shows that the election recorded low voter turnout as a result of the IPOB’s ‘no referendum, no election’ and ‘vote and die’ campaigns. Although the 1-week sit-at-home leading to the Anambra election which was earlier ordered by the group was reversed, the state of fear and insecurity that was created by the politics of agitation for a separate state of Biafra accounted for the postponement of the governorship election in Ihiala LGA of the state (Israel, 2021; Ukpog, 2021). Apart from the negative impacts of the agitations on voter turnout, Anambra State and indeed the South-East have been turned into a killing field since December 2020 when President Buhari’s government’s ferocious response to the Biafra separatist movement intensified. Within Anambra State, for instance, Ihiala, Ozubulu, Ukpog, Ekwulobia, Orsumoghu, Lilu, Mbosi, Isseke and Ubuluisiuzor communities are amongst the most adversely affected by the spate of killings in the state. Major victims of the wave of insecurity in Anambra State include Dr. Chike Akunyili and Chief Gabriel Ufoma who were gruesomely murdered by unidentified gunmen, and burning of the Nnewi house of Mr. Joe Igbokwe (a Lagos State-based politician), as well as the Anambra State complexes of the Department of State Services and the Federal Road Safety Commission. Hence, it is not surprising that Mr. Abubakar Malami, the Attorney-General of the Federation and Minister of Justice, mooted the possibility of proclaiming a state of emergency in Anambra State as a

Table 1 Major attacks on Nigeria police by unknown gunmen in the South-East and South-South from February to June 2021

Date	Location	Nature of attacks/casualties	Sources
1 Feb. 2021	Omoba Police Station, Isiala Ngwa North LGA, Abia State	A police inspector was killed.	Alaribe, U. (2021). "Gunmen attack police station, kill policeman in Abia." <i>Vanguard</i> , 2 February. https://www.vanguardngr.com/2021/02/gunmen-attack-police-station-kill-policeman-in-abia/ .
23 Feb. 2021	Abayi Police Station, World Bank Housing Estate, Aba	Two police officers lost their lives whilst the gunmen carted away arms and ammunition from the station.	<i>Ripples Nigeria</i> . (2021). "Again, gunmen attack police station in Aba, kill two officers." 23 February. https://www.ripplesnigeria.com/again-gunmen-attack-police-station-in-abba-kill-two-officers/ .
24 Feb. 2021	Ekwulobia in Anambra State	A police officer was killed and a patrol vehicle was razed down.	Yusuf, K. (2021). "Timeline: 10 police officers killed, six stations razed in two weeks." <i>Premium Times</i> , 19 March. https://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/headlines/449892-timeline-10-police-officers-killed-six-stations-razed-in-two-weeks.html
25 Feb. 2021	MCC in Calabar, Cross River	Four police officers were killed.	Yusuf, K. (2021). "Timeline: 10 police officers killed, six stations razed in two weeks." <i>Premium Times</i> , 19 March. https://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/headlines/449892-timeline-10-police-officers-killed-six-stations-razed-in-two-weeks.html
26 Feb. 2021	Aboh Mbaise Divisional Police Station, Imo State	A police station was razed down.	Ukpong, C. (2021). "Gunmen raze another police station in Nigeria's South-East." <i>Premium Times</i> , 26 February. https://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/headlines/445420-gunmen-raze-another-police-station-in-nigerias-south-east.html .
1 Mar. 2021	Essien Udim LGA, Akwa Ibom State	A police station was attacked, including vehicles and motorcycles parked within the station.	Yusuf, K. (2021). "Timeline: 10 police officers killed, six stations razed in two weeks." <i>Premium Times</i> , 19 March. https://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/headlines/449892-timeline-10-police-officers-killed-six-stations-razed-in-two-weeks.html
1 Mar. 2021	Iboko Divisional Police Station, Izzi LGA, Ebonyi State	The police station was attacked.	Yusuf, K. (2021). "Timeline: 10 police officers killed, six stations razed in two weeks." <i>Premium Times</i> , 19 March. https://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/headlines/449892-timeline-10-police-officers-killed-six-stations-razed-in-two-weeks.html
9 Mar. 2021	Isinweke Police Station, Ihitte/Uboma LGA, Imo State	A police station and several vehicles were burnt down.	Alozie, C. (2021). "Breaking: Another police station, vehicles burnt in Imo." <i>Vanguard</i> , 9 May. https://www.vanguardngr.com/2021/03/breaking-another-police-station-vehicles-burnt-in-imo/ .
18 Mar. 2021	A police patrol team at Okacha Junction in Neni, Anaocha LGA, Anambra State	A police officer was killed whilst two others sustained gunshot injuries	Ukpong, C. (2021). "Gunmen attack police patrol, kill officer in Anambra." <i>Premium Times</i> , 18 March. https://www.premiumtimesng.com/regional/ssouth-east/449858-breaking-gunmen-attack-police-patrol-kill-officer-in-anambra.html .
30 Mar. 2021	A police patrol team at Ikot Akpan community, Essien Udim LGA, Akwa-Ibom State	Killing of the Commander of the state Police Command's Quick Intervention Unit, CSP Ben Ajide and two other officers.	Odey, P. (2021). "CSP, two others killed, four missing in IPOB, police clash – Command." <i>Punch</i> , 1 April. https://punchng.com/csp-two-others-killed-four-missing-in-ipob-police-clash-command/ .
5 Apr. 2021	Imo State Police Command and Nigerian Correctional Services	Imo State Police Command headquarters, Owerri was razed; almost all the vehicles parked at the command headquarters were burnt. 1,844 inmates of the Nigerian Correctional Services were also freed.	Kuteyi, E. (2021). "At Least One Dead As Gunmen Attack Imo Prison, Police Headquarters." <i>Channels Television</i> , 5 April. https://www.channelstv.com/2021/04/05/gunmen-attack-imo-prison-free-inmates-and-burn-facility/ .
19 Apr. 2021	Uzuakoli Police Station, Bende LGA, Abia State	The police station was burnt down	Sampson, O. (2021). "Gunmen attack another police station in Abia." <i>The Sun</i> , 19 April. https://www.sunnewsonline.com/gunmen-attack-another-police-station-in-abia/ .

Table 1 (continued)

Date	Location	Nature of attacks/casualties	Sources
21 Apr. 2021	Adani Police Station, Uzo-Uwani LGA, Enugu State	Two police operatives were shot dead whilst the police station was set ablaze.	Isiguzo, C., Arinze, G. and Nworie, B. (2021). “Gunmen Kill Four Officers in Attack on Enugu Police Station.” <i>This Day</i> , 26 May. https://www.thisdaylive.com/index.php/2021/05/26/gunmen-kill-four-officers-in-attack-on-enugu-police-station/ .
24 Apr. 2021	Four checkpoints from Elele to Omagwa in Ikwerre LGA, Rivers State	Eight operatives were killed: three military personnel, three customs officials and two policemen. Guns and two operational vehicles were also carted away.	Odiegwu, M. (2021). “Updated: How gunmen killed eight security operatives in Rivers checkpoint attacks.” <i>The Nation</i> , 25 April. https://thenationonlineng.net/updated-how-gunmen-killed-eight-security-operatives-in-rivers-checkpoint-attacks/ .
27 Apr. 2021	A checkpoint at Urua Inyang, Ika LGA, Akwa Ibom State	Hoodlums killed two police officers, carted away rifles and burnt down a police van.	Daka, T., Abuh, A., Udejah, G., Osuji, C., Nzeagwu, U. and Jegede, A. (2021). “Again, unknown gunmen raze Abia police station, kill two cops in A’Ibom.” <i>The Guardian</i> , 29 April. https://guardian.ng/news/again-unknown-gunmen-raze-abia-police-station-kill-two-cops-in-aibom/
27 Apr. 2021	Naval checkpoint near Enamel Ware Junction, Onitsha-Owerri highway	One naval personnel was killed whilst two others were injured.	Daka, T., Abuh, A., Udejah, G., Osuji, C., Nzeagwu, U. and Jegede, A. (2021). “Again, unknown gunmen raze Abia police station, kill two cops in A’Ibom.” <i>The Guardian</i> , 29 April. https://guardian.ng/news/again-unknown-gunmen-raze-abia-police-station-kill-two-cops-in-aibom/
28 Apr. 2021	Nkporo Police Station, Ohafia LGA, Abia State	The police station, motorcycles and cars were set ablaze whilst some suspects in detention were released.	Daka, T., Abuh, A., Udejah, G., Osuji, C., Nzeagwu, U. and Jegede, A. (2021). “Again, unknown gunmen raze Abia police station, kill two cops in A’Ibom.” <i>The Guardian</i> , 29 April. https://guardian.ng/news/again-unknown-gunmen-raze-abia-police-station-kill-two-cops-in-aibom/ .
1 May 2021	Ibiaku Ntok Okpo Divisional Police Office, Ikono LGA, Akwa Ibom State	Two police officers were killed, whilst facilities, vehicles and other valuables at the station were destroyed.	Bassey, O. (2021). “Again, gunmen kill cops, burn police vehicles in A’Ibom.” <i>This Day</i> , 2 May. https://www.thisdaylive.com/index.php/2021/05/02/again-gunmen-kill-cops-burn-police-vehicles-in-aibom/ .
1 May 2021	Abaomege Police Station, Onicha LGA, Ebonyi State	A police officer was killed whilst another got injured.	Ezekiel, E. (2021). “Gunmen Attack Ebonyi Police Station, Kill Officer.” Channels Television, 2 May. https://www.channelstv.com/2021/05/02/gunmen-attack-ebonyi-police-station-kill-officer/ .
6 May 2021	Obiozara Police Station, Ohaozara LGA, Ebonyi State	A police officer was killed, office of the DPO and admin building were razed down.	Okutu, P. (2021). “Unknown gunmen attack another Police Station in Ebonyi, kill policeman.” <i>Vanguard</i> , 6 May. https://www.vanguardngr.com/2021/05/unknown-gunmen-attack-another-police-station-in-ebonyi-kill-policeman/ .
7 May 2021	A checkpoint at Choba Bridge, Port Harcourt; Rumuji Police Station, Emohua LGA; Elingbu Police Station, Igwuruta Road, Port Harcourt, Rivers State	At least seven police officers were killed at the checkpoint, two more officers were killed at Rumuji Police Station, a patrol car was set ablaze and five assault rifles were stolen.	News agency of Nigeria. (2021). “Gunmen attack police stations in Rivers kill 7 officers.” <i>The Guardian</i> , 8 May. https://guardian.ng/news/gunmen-attack-police-stations-in-rivers-kill-7-officers/ .
8 May 2021	Odoro Ikpe Police Station, Ini LGA, Akwa Ibom State	Five police officers and the wife of a serving police officer were killed. Some police vehicles were also set ablaze.	Bassey, O. (2021). “Again, gunmen attack A’Ibom Police, kill five officers.” <i>This Day</i> , 9 May. https://www.thisdaylive.com/index.php/2021/05/09/again-gunmen-attack-aibom-police-kill-five-officers/ .
12 May 2021	Bende Divisional Police Station, Bende LGA, Abia State	Criminal suspects were freed, two vehicles and three motorcycles were burnt.	Nwankwo, S. (2021). “Breaking: Gunmen attack another police station in Abia.” <i>The Nation</i> , 13 May. https://thenationonlineng.net/breaking-gunmen-attack-another-police-station-in-abia/ .

Table 1 (continued)

Date	Location	Nature of attacks/casualties	Sources
17 May 2021	Apumiri Ubakala Divisional Police Station, Umuahia South LGA, Abia State	The police station was set ablaze whilst two policemen were killed.	Udejah, G. (2021). "Again, gunmen burn police station in Abia." <i>The Guardian</i> , 18 May. https://guardian.ng/news/again-gunmen-burn-police-station-in-abia/ .
25 May 2021	Iwollo Police Division, Ezeagu LGA, Enugu State	Four police officers were killed whilst the police station was set ablaze.	Isiguzo, C., Arinze, G. and Nworie, B. (2021). "Gunmen kill four officers in attack on Enugu Police Station." <i>This Day</i> , 26 May. https://www.thisdaylive.com/index.php/2021/05/26/gunmen-kill-four-officers-in-attack-on-enugu-police-station/ .
6 Jun. 2021	Ashaka Police Station, Ndokwa East LGA, Delta State	The police station and a patrol vehicle were set ablaze.	Festus Ahon, F. and Akuopha, O. (2021). "Again, gunmen set police station, patrol vehicle ablaze in Delta." <i>Vanguard</i> , 6 June. https://www.vanguardngr.com/2021/06/again-gunmen-set-police-station-patrol-vehicle-ablaze-in-delta/ .

Source: Compiled by the author from different media sources

containment measure against insecurity in the state during the build-up to the November 2021 governorship election.

There are two broad schools of thought on the identity of the unknown gunmen and why the South-East—the most peaceful region in Nigeria before 2021—became one of the hotbeds of insecurity in the country. The first school is espoused by the Nigerian government and the relevant federal security agencies. This school argues that unknown gunmen are members of the IPOB/ESN whose simmering neo-Biafra separatist agitations are responsible for the ongoing sporadic and coordinated attacks on security agencies and other targets. It is within the purview of this school of thought that Nigeria's former Inspector General of Police (IGP), Mohammed Adamu, attributed the 5 April 2021 Easter Monday attacks on Imo State Police Command and the Nigerian Correctional Centre, Owerri, to the IPOB and ESN fighters (Omonobi, 2021; Obiezu, 2021). Just a few hours after the attacks, the former IGP noted that the attackers who came with sophisticated weapons such as General Purpose Machine Guns, Sub-Machine Guns, AK-49 rifles, Rocket Propelled Grenades and Improvised Explosive Devices are members of the proscribed IPOB/ESN. However, the IPOB and ESN have repeatedly denied any culpability in the 2021 Easter Monday attacks that lasted for about 3 hours at the Imo State Force headquarters (Okeoma, 2021). In line with Adamu's assertion above, the current IGP, Alkali Usman, during the launching of the so-called *Operation Restore Peace* at the Okpara Square, Enugu, directed policemen in the South-East to disregard the rules of engagement whilst dealing with Biafra secessionist groups (Eze et al., 2021). In his address to the Police Mobile Force and Special Tactical Squad of the Force in Enugu, the IGP states *inter alia*:

Don't mind the media shout; do the job I command you. If anyone accuses you of human rights violation, the report will come to my table and you know what I will do.

So, take the battle to them wherever they are and kill them all. Don't wait for an order. What other order are you waiting for when Mr. President had ordered you to shoot anybody carrying [an] AK-47 rifle? So, don't sit and wait for them to come; take [the] attack to them and don't lose your arms to criminals (Eze et al., 2021, online).

As a consequence of these attacks on security formations and other soft targets by unknown gunmen (read as IPOB/ESN in Nigerian government and security circles), the Nigerian government has continued to unleash security agents on suspected members of the IPOB/ESN. Apart from Umutanze in the Orlu/Orsu axis where some suspected members of the IPOB/ESN were either killed or arrested, Nigerian soldiers and police personnel also invaded the House of Prayer International Covenant Church, Okporo Orlu, and arrested over 20 members of the church as suspected members of the IPOB/ESN (Onyejiuwa, 2021). The prevailing kinetic approach of the Nigerian security operatives against armed attacks in the South-East has further exacerbated the security challenges in the region as socio-economic activities have ebbed considerably.

The second school of thought, on the other hand, is mainly associated with the Igbo (political) elite who contend that it is too hasty to attribute the ongoing carnage in Igboland to the members of the IPOB/ESN without a proper and thorough investigation. Leaning on the conspiracy theory of a false flag operation, the Igbo elite argue that the attacks are designed by external forces to subdue Igboland and create the impression that the Igbo ethnic nationality is incapable of producing Nigeria's president in 2023 (Nweje, 2021). A false flag operation is an act committed with the aim of concealing the actual source of responsibility and pinning the blame on another party. The term is popular amongst conspiracy theorists in referring to covert operations of various governments and cabals (Uscinski, 2018). Thus, some Igbo elite, including

Table 2 Timeline of attacks on INEC offices in Nigeria by unknown gunmen

Date	Location	Zone	Nature of attacks
3 Feb. 2019	Orlu LGA, Imo State	South-East	Arson
22 Feb. 2019	Obot Akara LGA, Akwa-Ibom State	South-South	Arson
23 Feb. 2019	Oriade LGA, Osun State	South-West	Political thuggery
24 Feb. 2019	Isiala Mbanjo LGA, Imo State	South-East	Arson
6 Mar. 2019	Ibesikpo Asutan LGA, Akwa-Ibom State	South-South	Arson
6 Mar. 2019	Eastern Obolo LGA, Akwa Ibom State	South-South	Arson
9 Mar. 2019	Mkpat Enin LGA, Akwa Ibom State	South-South	Arson
10 Mar. 2019	Ngor Okpala LGA, Imo State	South-East	Arson
16 Nov. 2019	Nembe LGA, Bayelsa State	South-South	Thuggery and vandalism of facilities
14 Jan. 2020	Aboh Mbaise LGA, Imo State	South-East	Supreme Court judgement on Imo Governorship Election
20 Oct. 2020	Lagos Island	South-West	Arsonists who disrupted #EndSARS protests
20 Oct. 2020	Aba South LGA, Abia State	South-East	Arsonists who disrupted #EndSARS protests
21 Oct. 2020	Arochukwu LGA, Abia State	South-East	Arsonists who disrupted #EndSARS protests
21 Oct. 2020	Nnewi North LGA, Anambra State	South-East	Arsonists who disrupted #EndSARS protests
22 Oct. 2020	Okitipupa LGA, Ondo State	South-West	Arsonists who disrupted #EndSARS protests
23 Oct. 2020	Ehime Mbanjo and Ezinihitte LGA, Imo State	South-East	Vandals who disrupted #EndSARS protests
24 Oct. 2020	Four INEC offices in Cross River State: State headquarters, Akpabuyo Bakassi, and Calabar Municipal LGAs	South-South	Arsonists who disrupted #EndSARS protests
24 Oct. 2020	Five INEC offices in Osun State: Orolu Atakumosa, Ifelodun, Irepodun and Ede South LGAs	South-West	Arsonists who disrupted #EndSARS protests
25 Oct. 2020	Wukari and Donga LGAs, Taraba State	North-East	Arsonists
26 Nov. 2020	Hawul LGA, Borno State	North-East	Boko Haram insurgents
13 Dec. 2020	Aba South LGA, Abia State	South-East	Unknown gunmen
30 Jan. 2021	Giwa LGA, Kaduna State	North-West	Bandits
2 May 2021	Essien Udim LGA, Akwa Ibom State	South-South	Hoodlums/unknown gunmen
9 May 2021	Ohafia LGA, Abia State	South-East	Arsonists/unknown gunmen
13 May 2021	Udenu LGA, Enugu State	South-East	Arsonists/unknown gunmen
16 May 2021	Enugu State headquarters	South-East	Unknown gunmen/hoodlums
18 May 2021	Three INEC offices in Ebonyi State: Ebonyi, Ezza North and Izzi LGAs	South-East	Unknown gunmen
23 May 2021	Igboeze South LGA, Enugu State	South-East	Unknown gunmen/hoodlums
23 May 2021	Anambra State headquarters	South-East	Unknown gunmen
23 May 2021	Ahiazu Mbaise LGA, Imo State	South-East	Unknown gunmen
30 May 2021	Njaba LGA, Imo State	South-East	Unknown gunmen

Source: Adapted from Yusuf, K. (2021). Timeline: 41 INEC offices attacked in 2 years. *Premium Times*, 30 May. Available from: <https://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/headlines/464658-timeline-41-inec-offices-attacked-in-two-years.html>; Sahara Reporters (2021). Timeline: 10 INEC offices attacked by unknown gunmen in May. 1 June. Available from: <http://saharareporters.com/2021/06/01/timeline-10-inec-offices-attacked-unknown-gunmen-may>

Senator Enyinnaya Abaribe, Chief Emmanuel Iwuanyanwu, Chief Chukwuemeka Ezeife, Professor Uzodinma Nwala and Mr. Goddy Uwazurike, tend to suggest that the dastardly activities of the unknown gunmen might be traceable to several early warnings and reports³ of mass movement of Islamic

extremists to more southerly parts of Nigeria (Arise News, 2021; Nweje, 2021).

With particular reference to the 5 April Easter Monday attacks in Owerri, Chief Iwuanyanwu noted that such attacks on the two strong Federal Government institutions remain strange to the Igbo. Chief Iwuanyanwu did not only exonerate the IPOB/ESN from the attacks but also attributed them to foreigners whose intention was to destroy the South-East (Uzoma, 2021). Thus, the widespread opinion in the South-East is that the attacks being carried out, in quick succession, on INEC facilities, security agencies and prominent Nigerians

³ International Crisis Group (2020), for instance, reports that some armed herders, Islamists and criminal gangs fleeing security operations in the North-West have moved to the Middle Belt and Southern states where they pose additional security problems for affected communities and the governing authorities.

are designed to discredit people from the South-East and scuttle their quest for a Nigerian president of Igbo origin in 2023. In light of a culture of hasty predisposition of the Nigerian government to blame the IPOB/ESN for insecurity in the South-East, Senator Enyinnaya Abaribe surmises that:

The time for a knee-jerk approach and fixated mindset in the investigation of criminal attacks by the security agencies has gone. It is not enough to be driven by a certain mindset, which has the tendency of foreclosing other probable leads and motives during investigations of very serious crimes like the ones we are currently experiencing. This time calls for deeper introspection and painstaking investigation by the relevant security agencies so that we nip these dangerous dimensions in the bud if the country must be rescued from falling off the cliff (Nathaniel, 2021, online).

The foregoing suggests that there is no agreement over the actual identity of the unknown gunmen who are mainly responsible for the destruction of public utilities and bloodletting in the South-East. IPOB's repeated denial of culpability in these dastardly acts implies that the armed attacks in the zone might go beyond the separatist organisation and its militia—the ESN. This conclusion largely resonates with Senator Hope Uzodinma, the Governor of Imo State, who asserts that criminal groups, many of who are sponsored by political actors and institutions, are responsible for violent attacks in the South-East (Oyero, 2021; Ufuoma, 2021). Irrespective of the actual identity of the unknown gunmen, however, everyone tends to admit that the loss of human lives and livelihood opportunities, as well as the destruction of state institutions, has increased exponentially since December 2020. The next section draws a more general conclusion on the implication of state repression in the South-East for peacebuilding in Nigeria.

Conclusion

This study investigated the wave of insecurity bedevilling Igboland, especially the South-East, as a consequence of the unhealthy interaction between Biafra separatist agitation, state repression and the menace of unknown gunmen. Although there are substantial scholarly discourses on the reinvention of Biafra separatism in Nigeria since 1999, available studies are yet to account for how the persistence of state repression has continued to oil the wheel of the Biafra separatist movement in Nigeria. Whilst the IPOB unequivocally favours a confrontational approach to Igbo nationalism, relative to the conservative Igbo nationalists, its agitation for sovereign statehood only mutated from a non-violent strategy to an armed separatist movement as a response to the coordinated

repressive behaviour of the Nigerian state against the neo-Biafra agitators.

Considering the infectious nature of insecurity, it is foolhardy to assume that the South-East would be insulated from the growing spate of civil unrest in other parts of Nigeria. Thus, there is no gainsaying the fact that insecurity in the South-East, especially the unknown gunmen phenomenon, is a reflection of the general wave of sectarian violence and political instability in Nigeria. Overall, the persistence of Biafra separatist agitations in Nigeria, more than 20 years after the return of civil rule, is not only a confirmation of Nigeria's rhetorical and hypocritical disposition towards nation-building but also a critique of Nigeria's traditional kinetic approach to dealing with dissent. As a consequence, there is a need to adopt a multi-pronged approach in addressing the underlying issues accounting for separatist agitations in Nigeria. This is because the Nigerian state's reliance on the repressive approach as seen in the arrest, illegal detention and unprovoked shooting and killing of pro-Biafra protesters and the failed attempts to jam the transmission channels of Radio Biafra, the invasion of the Afaraukwu home of Maazi Nnamdi Kanu, proscription of the IPOB and the extraordinary rendition of Maazi Kanu from Kenya have all failed to stop Biafra separatist agitations in Igboland. If anything, IPOB has demonstrated the capacity to prosecute an armed separatist struggle in Nigeria.

Acknowledgements I am grateful to the anonymous reviewers of this article as well as the editors of the *Society* journal, especially Professor Daniel Gordon, for their useful comments and suggestions.

Declarations

Conflict of Interest The author declares no competing interests.

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