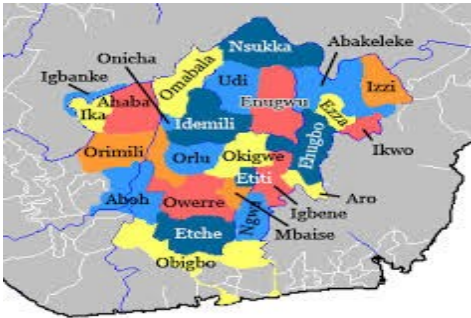


# Conflict Briefing:

## Biafra Agitation and Ethno-Political Polarization in Nigeria

November 2017



### Introduction

Exactly fifty years ago, Nigeria's South East region comprising Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu, and Imo formally announced its break away from Nigeria and proclamation of a new nation called Biafra. The Federal Government effectively subdued the secessionist action after almost three years of devastating civil war that resulted in over one million deaths, largely children through starvation and aerial bombardment, between 1967 and early 1970. Despite the devastation and loss of life, five decades later, agitation for the state of Biafra has resurfaced. The renewed agitation over the independence of Biafra has again become one of the most pressing and contentious issues in recent times, calling into question the very existence of Nigeria as a unified country. Several historical and contemporary factors have intersected and lent increased vigor to these agitations.

Since 2015, the Pro-Biafra movement has been making steady progress in raising awareness, and drawing sympathizers and supporters to its cause in the South East, as well as extending its reach into the Niger Delta region. It is worthy of note that there are numerous Pro-Biafra organizations with varying degrees of influence and followership. The most prominent groups among them are: The Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB); the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB); and the Biafra Zionist Movement (BZM).

Between 2<sup>nd</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> November, the PIND/ P4P peacebuilding team conducted key informant interviews with stakeholders representing local and national government, as well as members of the pro-Biafra movement and civil society representatives.

This brief explores the extent to which the Pro-Biafra movement and other Niger Delta protest groups are mutually reinforcing in the context of deepening ethno-political polarization nationwide, comparing election cycles and considering the implications for election violence mitigation in 2019. It is critical to consider the implications now, as far too often, relevant stakeholders commence election violence prevention programming too late to ensure that peace messaging is effective, lines of communication are open, and strategies and scenario planning aimed at preventing violence are effective. Therefore, this brief is a call to early action.

### Ethno-Political Polarization between North and South (2011-2017).

Elections are synonymous with violence in Nigeria. It is imperative to note that all the nine general elections held in Nigeria since her independence in 1960 (including 1964, 1979, 1983, 1993, 1999, 2003, 2007, 2011, and 2015 elections) have been marred by various degrees of violence. Thus, elections are pivotal moments when examining the historical trends of protests and violence in Nigeria.

In recent times, political polarization between the North and South got inflamed in the North immediately after the 2011 presidential election when the then incumbent president, Dr. Goodluck Jonathan (from Bayelsa State, Southern Nigeria) was re-elected. Likewise, some analysts link the

current wave of Biafra agitation and the resurgence of militancy in the South East and Niger Delta, respectively, to the victory of Gen. Muhammadu Buhari (from Katsina State, Northern Nigeria) in the 2015 presidential election, having contested against President Jonathan.

There was post-election violence in 2011 in the North targeting particularly the Igbo and other southern Christians in general. Human Rights Watch reported that the deadly election-related and communal violence in northern Nigeria following the April 2011 presidential voting left more than 800 people dead. The victims were killed in three days of rioting across 12 northern states. In Q3 of the same year, some northerners reportedly attacked and burnt a Marco Polo luxury bus conveying mostly Igbo traders; killing 41 of them in Jos-South LGA of Plateau.

Similarly, since the conclusion of the 2015 elections, incidents of violence relating to the ethnic groups have shifted from North to the South with varying degrees of intensity. In the last quarter of 2015, nine persons (including 2 policemen and a street hawker) reportedly lost their lives in a clash between Pro-Biafra groups (IPOB and MASSOB) and security forces during the former's protest in Onitsha, Anambra State. Also, in Q2 of 2016, another clash between security operatives and members of MASSOB reportedly led to the death of 32 people at different locations still in Onitsha.

Available data show there has been equally an increase in Biafra protests and tensions outside of Igbo-land since the 2015 elections with the attendant casualties and fatalities. For example, in January 2016, some IPOB members protested in Asaba (Delta State) and Port Harcourt (Rivers State) calling for the release of their jailed leader, Nnamdi Kanu. Likewise, in January 2017, 11 IPOB members allegedly lost their lives and several others were injured by security forces during what the group termed a

“Donald Trump Solidarity Rally” in Rivers State. Some suspected members of IPOB in September 2017 reportedly attacked a Hausa settlement in Asaba killing four persons. Further attacks against the Hausa community at the Oyigbo section of the Ajaokuta-Harcourt expressway in Rivers State reportedly resulted in four fatalities.

The Pro-Biafra movement has also held a series of rallies and protests within and outside the South East zone. The culmination of these events was the “sit-at-home” order issued by the group and accepted by all residents, including non-Igbo residents, who voluntarily complied in the five South East states on May 30<sup>th</sup> 2017 to commemorate the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the declaration of Biafra. This angered other Nigerians whose right to freedom of movement and legitimate livelihood activities were adversely affected by the order. In reaction to the sit-at-home order and several other divisive actions and utterances of particularly the IPOB leadership, a coalition of Arewa Youth in June 2017 asked the Igbo to vacate the northern part of the country before October 1, 2017. Worsening the already tense situation, the Coalition of Niger Delta Agitators, CNDA, on August 10<sup>th</sup> asked northerners and those of Yoruba extraction to leave the oil region before October 1st ahead of the resumption of attacks on oil installations. Further aggravating the ethnic tensions across the country was the circulation of anti-Igbo songs in the North, and widespread inflammatory statements by many across Nigeria.

In an effort to save the country from a greater ethnic fragmentation and possible implosion, the federal government responded by deploying a detachment of combat-ready military personnel to the South East on a special operation code-named *Egwu Eke II* (Python Dance II), which was conducted between September 15th and October 14th, 2017. The operation attracted considerable comments and controversies from across Nigeria. Also, following an *ex-parte* motion filed by the Attorney General of the Federation, an Abuja Federal High Court on September 21st declared IPOB a terror group and proscribed its activities. This equally generated mixed reactions but, together with the Python Dance II, has contributed to the relative stability in the South East and some parts of the Niger Delta where Biafra protests had spilled. There has also been a significant reduction in inflammatory comments in the society.

When questioned why there have been Pro-IPOB protests in Rivers and Delta States, which are not South East States, respondents said it was to legitimize the inclusion of the Niger Delta region in the Biafran map. It is contended by many Biafra agitators that the entire Niger Delta region is part of their homeland. The IPOB Coordinators interviewed by PIND and its partners argued that the geographic space called the “Niger

Delta” or “South-South” is a political creation of the North to divide and weaken the Eastern region and favorably pit the minority ethnic groups in the area against the Igbo. This thinking, many believe, draws from the constitutional and political structure of Nigeria at the time the republic of Biafra was declared in May 1967, but completely ignores the current socio-political realities in the country.

## Pro-Biafra Agitators and Niger Delta Ex-Militants: A Mutually Reinforcing Alliance?

Biafra agitators reportedly enjoy some level of explicit and strategic support from some ex-militants of the Niger Delta. This has the potential to be combustible and could lead to an increase in insecurity and economic instability in the two regions (South East and South South) and in Nigeria at large. For example, while the leader of IPOB, Nnamdi Kanu, was in detention in Kuje Prison, some ex-militants gave the federal government a 31-day ultimatum to release him or face the consequences. They threatened to resume abduction of expatriates and to carry out attacks on oil installations if he was not freed at the expiration of the ultimatum. Some of the ex-militant leaders have been widely heard voicing their support for the Pro-Biafra movement, saying they believe it is an opportunity to also achieve their own goal.

Also, the office of the National Security Adviser (NSA) was in late 2015 reported to have been investigating alleged “subversive activities” involving the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) and the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) and their link with some Niger Delta militants. Confirming the alliance, the leader of a faction of MASSOB, Uchenna Madu, was quoted as saying: “Some Niger Delta militants have shown interest in working with us.” The alliance is strengthened by the mutual perception that the present administration has not done much for the two zones in terms of development projects and political appointments.

### Biafra Agitation and Militancy (South-South and South-East)

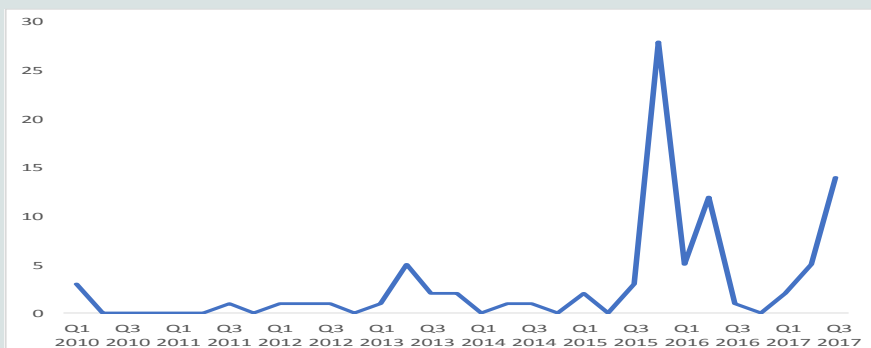


Figure 1: Reported incidents in the South East and Niger Delta regions of Nigeria from Jan 2015 - Sep 2017 show the increase in the level of pro Biafra agitation and Militancy after the 2015 election where Buhari unseated the incumbent President – Goodluck Jonathan. Data sources: All sources used from integrated P4P Peace Map <http://www.p4p-delta.org/> <http://www.p4p-nigerdelta.org/>

Our findings reveal, however, that the ordinary people of the Niger Delta do not have any attachment to the Biafra movement. It is not clear whether the political leadership in the Niger Delta buys into the movement. Thus the current risk of a future alliance is essentially between the ex-militant leaders and the Biafra agitators who perceive the government at the center as a common enemy.

### Implications

There are several implications of the renewed Biafra agitation. The constant protests and rallies by Pro-Biafra groups and the clashes between these groups and the security agencies have specific regional and national security implications, including the chances that mobilization of potential protesters could escalate armed violence and worsen the existing levels of insecurity.

Similarly, the agitation has great consequences for political stability and deepening of democratic culture in Nigeria. Though the alliance between the Pro-Biafra movement and some Niger Delta ex-militants may seem not to pose much of a threat, taking into account the regional dimension the movement fueling greater uncertainty around the 2019 general elections - particularly in the South East and the Niger Delta - it might nevertheless drive a degree of violence that would be peculiar to some individual states. Presently, although IPOB may appear to have been decimated by the twin effects of Operation Python Dance II

and the proscription as a terror group, it is not dead and neither is the Biafra movement. The responses of government specifically on the issues of development projects and inclusivity in governance will determine how much support IPOB and the Biafra movement will have going forward.

Interestingly, the two major political parties in Nigeria appear to have either focused their presidential tickets on the North or are tilting towards doing so. If that happens, it means in 2019 there most likely will not be election-related violence and resentment between the North and South as was experienced in the post-election period of 2011 and in 2016 – 2017. However, the growing discontent and tensions within and between political parties and across ethnic nationalities will likely escalate given the previous trends as politicians may want to exacerbate the fault lines to make political gains.

### Timeline: Pro-Biafra Movement

**May 1966**– Igbo pogrom in the North which led to the secession attempt of the Eastern region.

**July 1967**– Outbreak of the Nigerian Civil War which lasted for three years and left over 1 million dead.

**May 2014**– Nnamdi Kanu formally takes over the leadership of IPOB—Indigenous People of Biafra

**October 2015**– Anti government sentiment and protests lead to arrest of IPOB leader.

**May 2017**– Sit at home order given by IPOB spurs both North and South indigenes to demand settlers leave their lands. Military response in the East condemned.

**September 2017**– IPOB labelled a terrorist group by a Federal High Court. This proscription is frowned upon by local and international observers

### Fatalities Related to Biafran Agitation.

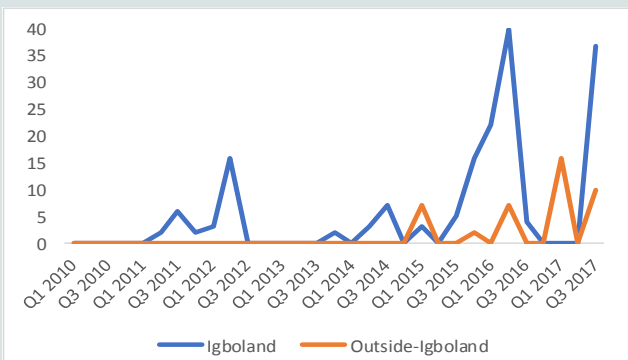


Figure 2: Reported fatalities within and outside Igboland from Jan 2010 – Sep 2017, show a spike in fatalities within and outside Igboland after the 2015 elections. Data sources: All sources used from integrated P4P Peace Map <http://www.p4p-nigerdelta.org/> using ACLED and Nigeria Watch Data

### Lethal Ethnic Tension (Igbo/Hausa-Fulani).

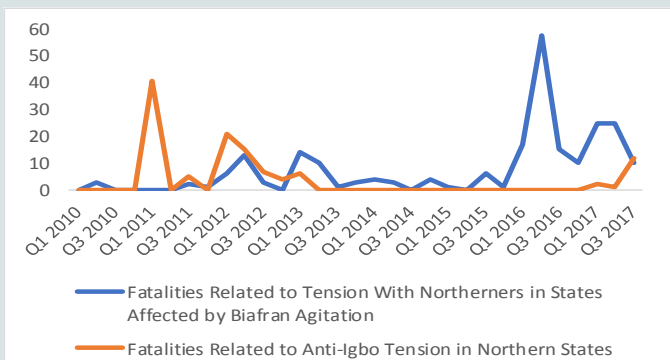


Figure 3: Reported fatalities in the country from Jan 2015 – Sep 2017 show the violence levels in each region depending on the election results. Data sources: All sources used from integrated P4P Peace Map <http://www.p4p-delta.org/> <http://www.p4p-nigerdelta.org/> using ACLED and Nigeria Watch

## The Way Forward

1. There is an on-going argument across different groups of people in favor of restructuring Nigeria. The majority of Nigerians tend to agree that restructuring is ripe to deal with both the pervasive sense of perceived and actual exclusion and marginalization threatening the unity of the country. This needs to be handled in a manner that will be beneficial to all through dialogue.
2. The Federal Government should engage more with the South East region to identify the underlying reasons for the secessionist agitations with a view to addressing those grievances. Satisfactory attention should be paid to addressing the governance and structural issues that are at the heart of the renewed agitation.
3. Dealing with the adverse effects of the persistent demand for Biafra independence requires well thought out conflict resolution strategies. However, the current government's strategy for dealing with the issue focuses mainly on security crackdown and has not been very useful in addressing the problem. The strategy needs to take cognizance of the underlying factors driving the agitation for Biafra and make concrete moves to address such grievances.
4. Considering the dynamics of what has been discussed so far and the fact that sectarianism has been substantially mitigated in the North, as we look forward to 2019 elections, it is very important for Government and Civil Society to recognize these tensions and develop similar mitigation and prevention strategies.