Ethnic Nationalism and Secessionist Agitations in Post-Colonial Africa: A Comparative Study of Biafra and Ambazonia

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Abstract

Secessionist agitation in Africa remains a recurring challenge in the postcolonial era, largely shaped by ethnic nationalism, identity politics, and systemic marginalization. These movements are often rooted in grievances stemming from political exclusion, economic inequality, and historical injustices against minority ethnic groups. The Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) in Nigeria and the Ambazonia separatist movement in Cameroon are examples of such struggles, seeking autonomy in response to perceived domination by the majority ethnic groups. While the IPOB's agitation traces its origins to the 1967 declaration of Biafra and the subsequent civil war, the Ambazonian crisis is a consequence of the longstanding marginalization of Anglophone Cameroonians in a Francophone-dominated state structure. A qualitative research method that interrogates secondary data sources, including historical archives, policy documents, and scholarly literature was adopted. The findings indicate that these movements are not merely relics of colonial legacies and ethnic grievances but are also shaped by contemporary socio-economic challenges, systemic exclusion, and state repression. Moreover, the security implications extend beyond Nigeria and Cameroon, posing significant threats to the regional stability in West Africa. Therefore, inclusive governance, equitable resource distribution, and diplomatic interventions by regional and international organizations are essential for mitigating tensions. Meanwhile, political restructuring, economic reforms, and sustained dialogue remain critical pathways for achieving sustainable peace and stability in Nigeria and Cameroon.

Keywords: **Ambazonia, Biafra, coup, IPOB, separatism**

1. INTRODUCTION

Africa's post-colonial trajectory has been marked by persistent conflicts driven by secessionist agitation, largely rooted in ethnic nationalism, identity politics, and perceived political and economic marginalization. Secessionist movements across the continent have sought to assert autonomy, often contending that dominant ethnic groups monopolize political and economic power at the expense of minority groups. These agitations are framed within the broader struggle for self-determination as regions that perceive themselves as a subjugated push for political independence (Akinyetun, 2018; Thomas & Falola, 2020). The cases of Nigeria and Cameroon illustrate these dynamics, with the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) and the Ambazonia secessionist movement sustaining prolonged conflict in both states. IPOB agitation in Nigeria traces its origins in the late 1960s, when the Republic of Biafra was declared in 1967. This declaration, spearheaded by Lieutenant Colonel Emeka Odumegwu Ojukwu, the then-military governor of Nigeria's Eastern Region, was a response to the perceived political exclusion, economic marginalization, and ethnic persecution of the Igbo people (Ifedayo & Azabagun, 2020).

The ensuing civil war lasted 30 months (1967-1970), resulting in massive human and material losses. Despite post-war reintegration policies, Biafran secessionist sentiments have endured, culminating in the emergence of the IPOB in 2012 as a radical movement advocating for independence. Similarly, the Ambazonia secessionist movement in Cameroon is deeply rooted in its colonial history. Britain administered the English-speaking Southern Cameroon before its contested unification with Francophone Cameroon in 1961 (Takougang & Amin, 2018). Over the decades, anglophones have resisted what they view as cultural and political domination by the Francophone-led central government. Tensions escalated in 2016 when the government-imposed French as the primary language in schools and courts within Anglophone regions, sparking widespread protests and culminating in the unilateral declaration of the Republic of Ambazonia in 2017 (Ifedayo & Azabagun, 2020). The state responded with a heavy military crackdown, intensifying the conflict (International Crisis Group 2017).

Ethnic heterogeneity and colonial legacies have made national integration a formidable challenge for Africa. Countries such as Ethiopia, Senegal, Angola, Ghana, Nigeria, Cameroon, and South Africa have all faced secessionist struggles at various points (Akinyetun, 2020; Bamfo, 2012). Arbitrary colonial boundaries that merged distinct ethnic groups into single states resulted in enduring contestations over political and economic dominance. In both Nigeria and Cameroon, these historical ethnic divisions continue to fuel conflict, threatening national stability and security. The persistence of secessionist struggles in post-colonial African states is also linked to governance failures, corruption, socioeconomic grievances, and unresolved historical injustices (Raleigh, 2009). In Nigeria, the IPOB's resurgence is partly driven by economic neglect and environmental degradation in the oil-rich Niger Delta, where federal revenues are centralized, while local communities suffer the consequences of extractive industries (Ifedayo & Azabagun, 2020). Likewise, Cameroon's Ambazonian crisis stems from the government's refusal to recognize the distinct identity and rights of Anglophones instead of imposing a Francophone-dominated system (Chi, 2014).

Despite the brutal civil war that lasted over two years, Biafran's nationalism persisted. The grievances of ethnic marginalization and economic disenfranchisement have continued to fuel renewed secessionist agitation, further exacerbated by political exclusion at the federal level (Tukumo, 1970). The 1966 coup, which led to the massacre of Igbos in the North, played a pivotal role in the initial push for Biafran independence (Nafziger & Richter, 1976). Similarly, in Cameroon, the political marginalization of Anglophones following independence, coupled with forced assimilation policies under the Biya regime, catalyzed the push for Ambazonian independence (Koigi, 2019).

Beyond ethnic grievances, economic inequalities have sustained a secessionist agitation in Nigeria and Cameroon. Widespread poverty, unemployment, and a lack of infrastructural development in marginalized regions have fueled disillusionment with central governments. This economic neglect has not only intensified separatist sentiments but has also created fertile grounds for the recruitment of disenchanted youth into these movements (Bamfo, 2012). This study seeks to examine the complexities surrounding secessionist movements in Nigeria and Cameroon by through a comparative analysis of the IPOB and Ambazonia. It aims to contribute to the discourse on ethnic nationalism, identity politics, and the challenges of state cohesion in postcolonial Africa.

2. HISTORICAL UNDERPINNINGS OF SECESSIONIST CONFLICTS
2.1 THE NIGERIAN PERSPECTIVE

The agitation for secession in Nigeria dates back to the mid-1960s, when the Eastern Region, predominantly inhabited by the Igbo ethnic group, sought to establish the Republic of Biafra. This ambition led to the Nigerian Civil War (1967-1970), one of the most devastating conflicts in postcolonial African history. The war resulted in widespread starvation, mass displacement, and immense loss of life (Thomas and Falola 2020). 68). Hunger was weaponized as a tool of war, disproportionately affecting the Biafran population, whereas the international community responded with humanitarian aid, although military support remained largely absent. The war reaffirmed the supremacy of the Nigerian state and signaled to other secessionist movements in Africa the difficulty of securing international recognition and support (Ebonine & Akinyetun, 2021; 2022; Thomas and Falola, 2020). Despite Biafra's defeat, the embers of secessionist agitation persisted and resurfaced in various forms across Nigeria.

The roots of the Biafra conflict lie in Nigeria's colonial history and the British administration's structural division. The colonial authorities divided Nigeria into three major regions, Northern, Western, and Eastern, creating an artificial federation marked by ethnic and regional disparities. The West was dominated by Yoruba, the East by Igbo, and the North by Hausa-Fulani, with smaller ethnic groups in the Midwestern region (Ebonine & Akinyetun, 2021; 2022). British colonial rule operating under the 'Dual Mandate's policy fostered economic interdependence while maintaining distinct cultural identities (Lugard, 1965). The British viewed the Igbos as industrious and Western-oriented, investing disproportionately in education and administrative opportunities in the eastern region, which fueled resentment among other ethnic groups.

A significant shift occurred in 1914, with the amalgamation of the Northern and Southern Protectorates into a single colony under British administration. The North, governed under indirect rule, retained its traditional Islamic political structure, while the more politically sophisticated and Western-educated South found itself in a disadvantaged position. The North's larger geographical and demographic size cemented its political dominance, a pattern that persisted after Nigeria gained independence on October 1, 1960. The parliamentary system adopted at independence further entrenched northern dominance, as its larger population translated into electoral superiority. While Igbos were widely dispersed across Nigeria, excelling in the commerce, administration, and professional sectors, they remained unable to shift their political balance (Thomas & Falola, 2020).

In post-independence Nigeria, Easterners perceived themselves as relegated to a subordinate status, particularly in the allocation of national resources. The North remained primarily agrarian, while economic power was concentrated in the south. Lagos, in the Western region, flourished as a commercial hub due to its seaports and infrastructure, while the discovery of oil in the eastern region and the Niger Delta in 1956 (Thomas & Falola, 2020) transformed the area into Nigeria's economic powerhouse. Multinational corporations such as Mobil, Texaco, Gulf Oil, and Shell-British Petroleum capitalized on these resources. However,

despite generating nearly half of Nigeria's total revenue, wealth remained under the control of the northern-dominated federal government. This economic imbalance, coupled with environmental degradation and neglect of local communities, fueled resentment among Eastern leaders, who saw their resources being exploited to develop other regions while suffering (de St. Jorre, 1973).

The political and economic discontent between the conservative, northern-controlled federal government and the Eastern region set the stage for the Nigerian Civil War. Tensions escalated following a series of military coups, beginning with the January 15, 1966, coup led by young Igbo officers accusing the government of corruption and misgovernance (de St. Jorre, 1971). The crisis was further exacerbated by allegations of electoral malpractice in the Western region, where the 1965 elections were marred by widespread fraud and political violence. Reports indicate that over 300 individuals have been incarcerated for electoral offenses (de St. Jorre, 1971). The disputed election saw Chief Samuel Ladoke Akintola, a staunch ally of the Northern establishment, declare Premier of the Western Region, with his party, the Nigerian National Democratic Party (NNDP), securing the majority of legislative seats (de St. Jorre, 1971). The legitimacy of this election deepened Nigeria's political instability, reinforcing regional tensions and pushing the country closer to civil war.

The coup of January 1966, though intended to eliminate corruption and misgovernance, did not achieve its anticipated objectives. Instead, it resulted in a transfer of power to senior military officers, with Major General Johnson Aguiyi-Ironsi, an Igbo officer, emerging as the Head of State after rallying loyal troops to suppress coup plotters. However, the coup turned into a bloodbath, disproportionately targeting political leaders from the Northern and Western regions. High-profile casualties included Nigeria's first Prime Minister, Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa; the Premier of the Northern Region, Sir Ahmadu Bello; and the Premier of the Western Region, Sir Samuel Ladoke Akintola. Additionally, senior Northern military officers, such as Brigadier General Maimaleri and Lt. Col. Largerma, were executed. These targeted killings were perceived in the North as an ethnically driven assault, especially because five of the six coup plotters were of Igbo origin. The perception that the new Igbo-led military government failed to adequately punish the coup perpetrators further intensified ethnic animosities, leading to widespread retaliatory violence against the Igbo population in the north (Thomas & Falola, 2020).

These events catalyzed a cycle of political instability, culminating in the July 1966 counter-coup, which was orchestrated by northern officers seeking retribution. The widespread massacre of Igbos in the North and the subsequent declaration of the Republic of Biafra in 1967 set the stage for Nigeria's most defining conflicts. The Nigerian Civil War had profound socio-political consequences that shaped Nigeria's national identity and governance in the decades to come. The ethnic composition of the January 1966 coup plotters fueled deep resentment in the north, as five of the six key figures were Igbos, and the new Head of State, Major General Aguiyi-Ironsi, was of Igbo origin, though widely regarded as politically neutral. The North viewed the coup as an ethnically motivated attack, particularly because the political casualties – Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, Sir Ahmadu Bello, and Sir Samuel Ladoke Akintola – were primarily from the North and West. The perceived leniency in handling coup plotters, who were merely incarcerated rather than executed, further exacerbated tensions. In response, anti-Igbo sentiments intensified, leading to widespread attacks against Igbos living in Northern Nigeria. Despite growing hostility, Aguiyi-Ironsi managed to hold the country together under a military government with four regional administrations (Thomas & Falola, 2020).

The fragile stability was shattered on July 29, 1966, when northern military officers launched a counter-coup. Unlike the January coup, which was framed as an anti-corruption purge, the July coup was a calculated effort to reclaim power for the North. Northern officers

perceived their region as sidelined under Aguiyi-Ironsi's administration and believed that the January coup was an Igbo-driven conspiracy to dominate Nigeria's political and military institutions (Thomas & Falola, 2020). Their fears were further heightened by the fact that while the majority of non-commissioned officers in the Nigerian military were of Northern origin, senior military leadership was largely composed of Southerners, particularly Igbos (Thomas and Falola 2020). Tensions escalated when Aguiyi-Ironsi announced the dissolution of Nigeria's federal system in favor of a unitary government system. His objective was to unify the country within a single administrative structure and eliminate regionalism. However, Northern elites interpreted this move as an attempt by Igbos to impose total control over Nigeria (Červenka, 1977).

Northern military officers reacted swiftly and brutally. Ironsi's policies, perceived as a direct threat to Northern political interests, fueled rebellion within the Nigerian Army (Červenka, 1977). The July coup was far bloodier and more vengeful than its predecessor did. Unlike the January coup, which targeted political figures accused of corruption, the countercoup unleashed systemic violence against Easterners in the military. Aguiyi-Ironsi was arrested, beaten, and eventually assassinated alongside his host, Lt. Col. Adekunle Fajuyi, in Ibadan by Northern soldiers (Červenka, 1977). The coup plotters then initiated a systematic purge for Igbo military personnel. Reports indicate that eastern officers and soldiers were executed in military barracks across Ikeja, Lagos, Kaduna, Kano, Ibadan, and Abeokuta. Over 200 military personnel have lost their lives, including 43 officers and 170 non-commissioned officers and men (Červenka, 1977). This massacre entrenched ethnic divisions within the Nigerian military and deepened national tensions, setting the country on an irreversible path toward the Nigerian Civil War.

After the July coup, the young Northern officers who orchestrated the takeover found themselves unable to consolidate power as expected. Existing military governors have managed to stabilize the situation to an extent, preventing an outright collapse of governance. Eventually, Lt. Col. Yakubu Gowon was established as the new Head of State, backed by influential military officers. This development created the impression that the Nigerian military, which had become deeply fractured along ethnic lines, was now on the path to unity and cohesion. However, the coup leaders put forward two key demands: first, that Nigeria revert to the regional system of government that had existed before Aguiyi-Ironsi's unitary decree, and second, that all Southerners and Northerners be relocated to their respective regions of origin. Despite these demands, neither was implemented (Červenka, 1977). While North briefly considered secession, this did not translate into any significant separatist action. Gowon, now faced with the daunting task of holding a fragile nation together, publicly vowed to restore peace and order, declaring that he would do everything within his power to prevent further bloodshed and rebuild national confidence (Col. Yakubu Gowon's speech, 1966, cited in Červenka, 1977).

However, this commitment did not translate into an immediate action. In September of that year, an ad hoc constitutional conference convened to address the deepening crisis of the country. As representatives from across Nigeria engaged in discussions on the future political structure, reports emerged of escalating violence in the north. Unlike the previous wave of military-led violence, this time, civilians in the North took the lead in widespread attacks against Igbos and other Easterners living in cities such as Sokoto, Gombe, Jos, Makurdi, Zaria, and Gboko. What followed was an orgy of violence, including arson, looting, and mass killing. Igbos were brutally murdered, their homes and businesses set ablazes, and those who survived were forcibly displaced (Col. Yakubu Gowon's speech, 1966, cited in Červenka, 1977). Estimates suggest that between 3,000 and 10,000 lives were lost, while approximately 500,000 to 2 million Igbos were forced to flee back to the east (Col. Yakubu Gowon's speech, 1966, cited in Červenka, 1977).

For many Easterners, the notion of "One Nigeria" was shattered. The large-scale massacre, coupled with what they perceived as the central government's indifference, reinforced the belief that their safety and future could no longer be guaranteed in Nigeria (Thomas & Falola, 2020). Their skepticism was not unfounded, as hostility against them had deep roots. Even after the first coup, Igbos were targeted in the North, prompting many to leave. The events of 1966 reinforced the growing sentiment that Nigerian state had failed. Initially, Lt. Col. Odumegwu Ojukwu, the Military Governor of the Eastern Region, urged Igbos to return to the North in the interest of national unity and economic stability (Thomas & Falola, 2020). However, following the second coup and scale of the massacres, Ojukwu's stance hardened. He emerged as the foremost champion of the Eastern cause, rejecting any further attempt at reintegration. His firm position was evident when the constitutional conference reconvened and no Eastern representatives were present, signifying that the region had abandoned the idea of a united Nigeria (Ebonine & Akinyetun, 2021; Thomas & Falola, 2020).

Despite this, efforts have been made to achieve peaceful resolution. A high-level meeting was convened in Aburi, Ghana, in 1967 between Ojukwu and Gowon's federal government convened in Aburi, Ghana. During the negotiations, a federal arrangement was discussed as a possible solution to the crisis. However, upon returning to Nigeria, the federal government rejected the agreement, labeling it impracticable (Thomas & Falola, 2020). Meanwhile, as tensions mounted, Gowon sought to appease different regions by proposing the creation of new states and the withdrawal of northern troops from the West. The North, West, and Mid-West regions aligned with this plan, but the Eastern leadership saw it as a ploy to diminish their influence and strip control over the oil-rich Niger Delta (Červenka, 1977). This was unacceptable for Ojukwu and his supporters. With diplomatic efforts yielding no breakthroughs, the Eastern Region made a decisive move. On May 27, 1967, a Constituent Assembly convened in Enugu and unilaterally declared the Eastern Region an independent state, adopting the name "The Republic of Biafra" (Akuchu, 1977). This bold declaration marked the point of no return, setting the stage for a brutal civil war that would test Nigeria's unity and threaten the very fabric of its existence as a sovereign state.

The Nigerian Civil War, which fought between 1967 and 1970, was a culmination of deep-rooted ethno-political tensions that had simmered since independence. The conflict, which pitted the secessionist state of Biafra against the Nigerian federal government, resulted in one of the most devastating humanitarian crises in postcolonial Africa (Ebonine & Akinyetun, 2022). Over 3.5 million people - predominantly civilians - have lost their lives due to direct combat, starvation, and disease (Murray, 2007). Although the federal government succeeded in preserving Nigeria's territorial integrity, scars of war remained, particularly for the Igbo people. The war left an enduring legacy of mistrust, shaping Igbo's political consciousness and influencing their interactions within Nigeria (Ifedayo & Azabagun, 2020; Murray, 2007).

Rather than fostering genuine reconciliation, the post-war era was characterized by exclusionary politics, further deepening the gulf between the Igbo people and the Nigerian political elite. Calls for equitable representation and political inclusion grew louder, reflecting the lingering grievances of people who felt perpetually marginalized within the federation. With Nigeria's return to civilian rule in 1999 and the advent of the Fourth Republic, secessionist sentiments among Igbos have resurged. The push for autonomy gained renewed traction, as many in the Southeast perceived continued alienation from national decision-making structures. This growing discontent culminated in the formation of the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) under Ralph Uwazuruike's leadership in 1999 (Akinyetun, 2018; Ifedayo & Azabagun, 2020).

Unlike the initial Biafran struggle, which escalated into a full-scale war, the MASSOB largely adopted non-violent strategies to press for self-determination. However, the Nigerian state responded with a forceful crackdown, effectively suppressing the movement. MASSOB's inability to mount a sustained challenge against government forces eventually led to its decline, leaving a vacuum in the pro-Biafra struggle (Gollous, 2020). The weakening of the MASSOB paved the way for the emergence of a more radical and confrontational movement. In 2012, the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) was founded by Nnamdi Kanu, who quickly became the most prominent figure in the renewed agitation of Biafran independence. Unlike its predecessor, the IPOB employed aggressive mobilization tactics, utilizing media propaganda, protests, and strategic grassroots activism to amplify its cause. The movement's rhetoric centered on the assertion that Nigeria's political framework was structurally biased against the Igbos, perpetuating their systemic exclusion and economic marginalization within the federation (Bybee, 2017).

Under Kanu's leadership, the IPOB intensified its advocacy for Biafran self-rule, leveraging radio broadcasts, social media platforms, and mass demonstrations to garner support. However, the federal government perceived the movement as a direct threat to national cohesion, prompting a series of countermeasures to dismantle its operations. The confrontation escalated on October 19, 2015, when Nigerian security forces arrested Nnamdi Kanu, charging him with sedition, ethnic incitement, and a reasonable felony (Ifedayo & Azabagun, 2020). Kanu's detention ignited widespread protests across the southeast, reinforcing perceptions of systemic suppression and deepening the political fault lines between the region and the central government.

2.2 THE CAMEROON EXPERIENCE

The contemporary state of Cameroon is a direct product of colonial partitioning and subsequent administrative policies imposed by European powers. Initially referred to as 'Camaroes' by Portuguese explorers, the territory was later annexed by Germany in 1884 following the signing of the German-Douala Treaty, which designated Cameroon as a German protectorate (Ifedayo & Azabagun, 2020). However, Germany's defeat in the First World War (1914–1918) led to the loss of its African colonies, including Cameroon, which was subsequently divided between Britain and France under the League of Nations' mandate (Ifedayo & Azabagun, 2020). The division resulted in two distinct colonial administrations: the French-controlled East Cameroon, which encompassed four-fifths of the territory, and the British-administered West Cameroon, which comprised the remaining one-fifth of the territory (Elango, 1985; Gollous, 2020).

Upon gaining independence in 1960, the French-controlled region was renamed 'La République du Cameroun,' while the British-administered Southern Cameroons remained under British trusteeship until 1961, when it opted for unification with French Cameroon, forming the Federal Republic of Cameroon (Ifedayo & Azabagun, 2020). Following unification, a new constitution was drafted, establishing a federal system that retained two distinct regions: East Cameroon (formerly French Cameroon) and West Cameroon (formerly Southern Cameroons). Although the constitution theoretically granted autonomy to federating units, power was heavily concentrated within the Francophone-dominated federal government (Ifedayo & Azabagun, 2020). Given that the French historically controlled a larger portion of the territory, they dominated political representation, creating an imbalance in governance. President Ahmadou Ahidjo, the first leader of the newly unified state, initially promoted a multiparty democracy.

However, in a dramatic reversal, he declared Cameroon a one-party state in 1966, dissolving opposition parties and consolidating political power under the ruling Cameroon National Union (Ifedayo and Azabagun, 2020). This shift significantly altered the trajectory of West Cameroon, as Francophone administrators began to assert greater influence, gradually

diminishing Anglophone Cameroon's autonomy. In a bid to further centralize authority, President Ahidjo initiated a constitutional referendum to abolish the federal system in favor of a unitary state. The referendum, widely seen as a strategy to assimilate Anglophone Cameroon, resulted in the transformation of the country's official name from the 'Federal Republic of Cameroon' to the 'United Republic of Cameroon.' Moreover, West Cameroon was subdivided into two administrative units– Northwest and Southwest provinces–effectively eroding the distinct identity of the Anglophone population (Mbile, 2011).

A major political transition occurred in November 1982, when President Ahidjo resigned, handing power over to his successor, Paul Biya. However, rather than reversing the policies of his predecessor, Biya entrenched existing centralization efforts and further marginalized the anglophone population. Following an attempted coup against his government, Biya enacted another significant change: in February 1984, the official name of the country reverted from the 'United Republic of Cameroon' to the 'Republic of Cameroon,' the same name it held before unification with Southern Cameroons. This move was perceived by many anglophones in an attempt to erase their history and suppress their cultural identity (Jumbam 2018). Although Biya justified this change by arguing that Cameroon had achieved political maturity and should move beyond linguistic and cultural divisions, tensions continued to mount. By the mid-1980s, calls for secession by Southern Cameroonian elites intensified, driven by grievances of cultural assimilation, political exclusion, and economic marginalization (Ifedayo & Azabagun, 2020).

In response to these grievances, Anglophone leaders sought to restore the federal governance system. The All Anglophone Conference (AAC) convened in Buea in 1993 to deliberate on the region's political future. A follow-up conference held in Bamenda reinforced these demands and called for the restoration of a two-state federation. However, as frustrations grew, a more radical faction emerged, advocating outright secession rather than a return to federalism (Takougang & Amin, 2018). These longstanding grievances and failed attempts at political restructuring laid the foundation for the contemporary Anglophone crisis, which continues to shape Cameroon's political landscape.

3. THE ANGLOPHONE SECESSIONIST AGITATION AND THE AMBAZONIA CRISIS

The year 1995 marked a significant turning point in the secessionist agitation of the people of Southern Cameroon. That year, Cameroon was admitted to the Commonwealth of Nations, an acknowledgment of former Southern Cameroon as a British colonial territory–an event that occurred despite objections from some Anglophone Cameroonians who viewed it as a superficial gesture with little practical impact on their political status (Ifedayo & Azabagun, 2020). This period witnessed the emergence of various pressure groups advocating for Anglophone self-determination, culminating in the formation of the Southern Cameroons National Council (SCNC). The SCNC sought international recognition and support for its cause by petitioning institutions such as the United Nations, Commonwealth, African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights, and foreign diplomatic missions. In a further bid to bolster its legitimacy, the Southern Cameroons/Republic of Ambazonia joined the Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organisation (UNPO) in 1995, renewing its membership in 2018 (Ardener, 1967).

The growing calls for self-determination and political autonomy deepened the already fragile relationship between the Anglophone minority and Francophone-led central government. As a result, Anglophone representation in governance steadily declined, exacerbating perceptions of exclusion. By 2017, only one Anglophone minister had been appointed among the 36 federal cabinet ministers, reinforcing the sentiment that Anglophones were being systematically marginalized within the Cameroonian political framework (Rodney, 1975). These developments laid the groundwork for the Ambazonia crisis, a protracted conflict that has since been defined as post-colonial Cameroon. The so-called "Anglophone problem" has remained a contentious issue, making national unity and integration an elusive goal. The

roots of the ongoing civil conflict can be traced back to Cameroon's political trajectory following its unification. At the time of independence, there was no clear framework outlining the structure of the federation or mechanisms for safeguarding the interests of the constituent regions. The inherited dual colonial legacy of Britain and France further complicated governance, particularly economic and administrative structures. The Francophone-controlled Eastern region had a significantly larger landmass and population than Anglophone West Cameroon, creating a fundamental political and economic imbalance from the outset (Pelican, 2022).

This imbalance led to West Cameroon's growing financial dependence on the Francophone-dominated federal government, as most of the state revenue was generated from the Eastern region. Rodney (1975) aptly describes this dynamic, arguing that when two societies of unequal socio-political and economic development interact at any level, the more advanced one will exert total influence on the less advanced one. In the case of Cameroon, Francophone Eastern Cameroon held overwhelming political and economic dominance over Anglophone West Cameroon, further entrenching systemic segregation and marginalization. The perception of forced assimilation into a Francophone-dominated state, particularly in terms of governance, language policy, and resource allocation, fueled discontent, culminating in what has been widely described as a bloody civil war (Amnesty International, 2016).

3.1 IPOB AND THE RENEWED BIAFRAN AGITATION

Since the conclusion of the Biafran Civil War in 1970, secessionist sentiments among the Igbo people of Eastern Nigeria have persisted, manifesting in different forms over decades. In the early 2000s, the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB), led by Ralph Uwazuruike, emerged as a key agitator of Biafran independence. However, government security forces swiftly clamped down MASSOB's activities, effectively neutralizing the movement (Akinyetun, 2018). By 2010, what had initially appeared to be a series of protests escalated into full-scale confrontations, culminating in the emergence of a more radical secessionist group, the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), under the leadership of Nnamdi Kanu. On October 19, 2015, Kanu was arrested by the Department of State Security Services, triggering widespread violent protests across the Southeast among his supporters and pro-Biafran sympathizers (Amadi et al., 2023). According to a report by Amnesty International (2021), multiple deaths result from clashes between IPOB members and security forces. The report attributed these fatalities to the excessive use of force by the Nigerian military and police, particularly in the states of Enugu, Anambra, and Abia.

Amnesty International (2021) further alleged that between May 29 and May 30, 2016, security operatives executed a crackdown on IPOB supporters, killing dozens of unarmed demonstrators who attempted to hold a rally at a motor park (Amadi et al., 2023). The Nigerian Army, however, contested these allegations, claiming that they acted in self-defense and that only five people had been killed, as opposed to the fifty deaths reported by IPOB and human rights groups (Ojo, 2023). Further corroborating Amnesty International's claims, Maya (2016) reported that various human rights organizations documented numerous extrajudicial killings in the South-East between August 2015 and February 2017. It was further suggested that approximately 170 unarmed civilians were killed, while approximately 400 others were arrested and detained without trial (Maya, 2016). Supporters of the IPOB have continued to demand the unconditional release of Nnamdi Kanu, as well as the release of all pro-Biafran activists detained alongside him. Calls for a referendum on Biafran independence have intensified, with the IPOB insisting that a date be set without further delay (Vanguard, 2015).

On November 8, 2016, the Nigerian government formally arranged Nnamdi Kanu, charging him with a criminal conspiracy, membership in an illegal organization, and intimidation (Onyeji, 2019). Pressure from various interest groups, including the Igbo Summit Group, led to

his conditional release in April 2017 on health grounds. As part of his bail conditions, Kanu was prohibited from attending public rallies, granting media interviews, or participating in gathering exceeding ten individuals (Onyeji, 2019). However, tensions escalated in September 2017, when the Nigerian military launched an operation in Umuahia, targeting Kanu's residence. While the military denied orchestrating an attack, reports indicated that Kanu went underground after the incident. In response, Kanu accused then-President Muhammadu Buhari of attempting to eliminate him in a covert operation (Ifedayo & Azabagun, 2020). Speculation regarding Kanu's whereabouts intensified, with rumors suggesting that he fled to Israel. However, Israeli authorities denied this claim, stating that there was no evidence of his presence within their territories (Maya, 2016).

Amid the escalating unrest fueled by the military wing of the IPOB, the Eastern Security Network (ESN) and its supporters, the Federal Government of Nigeria, intensified efforts to suppress the secessionist movement. In a decisive legal maneuver, the government approached the Federal High Court in Abuja, seeking to officially proscribe IPOB and designate it as a terrorist organization. On September 18, 2017, the court ruled in favor of the government, formally labeling the IPOB as a terrorist group (Ebonine & Akinyetun, 2021; Ojo, 2023). The designation of the IPOB as a terrorist organization was met with strong opposition from the group's supporters, who challenged the ruling in court (Adesomoju, 2018). However, their appeal was unsuccessful, as the appellate court upheld the original judgment, reinforcing IPOB's classification as a terrorist entity. Following Nnamdi Kanu's failure to appear in court, his bail was revoked, and Justice Binta Nyako issued an order for his immediate arrest, with a trial set to continue absentia (Akinwotu, 2022).

Despite these legal setbacks, violence has intensified in the eastern region. In August 2020, the IPOB accused the Department of State Services (DSS) of orchestrating the unlawful detention and extrajudicial killings of its members, claiming that 47 of its supporters had been arrested and held in undisclosed locations (Al Jazeera, 2021). Undeterred by government crackdowns, Nnamdi Kanu made a bold declaration on December 12, 2020, announcing the establishment of an (ESN) (Opejobi, 2021). The ESN was purportedly created to defend the region against criminal elements, particularly bandits and Fulani herders whose violent clashes with farmers intensified in the southeast. In response, the Nigerian military launched a large-scale offensive against ESN, commencing an invasion of Orlu, Abia State, on January 22, 2021, leading to the destruction of at least eight buildings, resulting in the loss of civilian life (Adebayo, 2021). Subsequent military engagements escalated tensions further, with clashes between ESN operatives and Nigerian security forces leading to the deaths of five civilians and four soldiers (Asare, 2022). The Nigerian Air Force was deployed in the offensive, utilizing aerial bombardments to dismantle ESN strongholds. Recognizing that the ESN was outmatched by the combined firepower of the Nigerian Army and Air Force, Kanu issued a directive for the ESN to stand down, effectively marking the end of the confrontation (Akinwotu, 2022).

One of the most devastating consequences of these hostilities was the collateral damage inflicted on civilians. Many unsuspecting residents were caught in the crossfire between security forces and IPOB militants, leading to a significant loss of life and property. Reports have also implicated IPOB in targeted killings of civilians, including children. A particularly gruesome incident occurred in May 2022, when a pregnant woman and her four children were murdered in Anambra State, allegedly by IPOB operatives (Akinwotu, 2022; Ifedayo & Azabagun, 2020). Following Kanu's disappearance in September 2017, speculation regarding his whereabouts persisted until June 29, 2021, when the Nigerian government announced that he had recaptured. Security sources later revealed that he had been apprehended in Kenya and subsequently extradited to Nigeria, where he was arraigned and remanded in prison (Paul 2021). Despite his incarceration, Kanu's supporters have remained resolute in their demand

for his release. However, the Nigerian government has shown no indication that it intends to grant freedom in the near future. In a show of defiance, the IPOB instituted a weekly sit-at-home order, effectively paralyzing economic activities across the southeast every Monday. Those who defied the directive risked severe repercussions, including a loss of life. The enforcement of this order has further exacerbated the already precarious economic conditions in the region, disrupting livelihoods and deepening economic hardships for millions of residents (Ebonine & Akinyetun, 2022).

3.2 THE AMBAZONIAN CRISIS: ORIGINS AND ESCALATION

The roots of the Ambazonian crisis can be traced back to the colonial partitioning of Cameroon, which institutionalized the marginalization of the Anglophone-speaking population by the Francophone-dominated central government (Agwanda & Asal, 2021; International Crisis Group, 2019). The crisis erupted on October 11, 2016, following what initially began as a peaceful protest by anglophone teachers and lawyers. Their grievances stemmed from the government's deployment of French-speaking teachers and legal practitioners in Anglophone schools and courts, coupled with what they perceived as a systematic effort to erode Anglophone laws and traditions (Bang & Balgah, 2022; International Crisis Group, 2019). The government's militarized response to these protests significantly escalated tensions, transforming what began as civil disobedience into a full-scale humanitarian crisis. On October 1, 2017, the separatist movement formally declared the restoration of Southern Cameroon as an independent state of Ambazonia. This declaration was met with swift and forceful repression by the central government, leading to mass arrest, widespread imprisonment, and the death of several protesters (Agwanda & Asal, 2021; Amnesty Report, 2021; Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect).

The conflict between separatist fighters and state security forces has resulted in large-scale displacement, with approximately 700,000 people forced to flee their homes and over 63,000 seeking refuge in neighboring Nigeria. The crisis has also led to the death of hundreds of security personnel and nearly 4,000 civilians (Craig, 2021; Hazbun, 2020). Despite the enormous loss of lives and destruction of property, hostilities between the Cameroonian government and separatist movement continue unabated. The government has responded to intensified military crackdowns, including prolonged curfews and shutdown of communication networks across the country (Bang & Balgah, 2022). Meanwhile, separatists have remained resolute in their demands, staging protests and continuing armed resistance. In a bid to quell tensions, the government established a commission tasked with investigating Anglophone grievances, particularly regarding language policies in schools and courts, as well as concerns over the excessive use of force by security agencies (Ifedayo & Azabagun, 2020; International Crisis Group, 2021).

However, what initially appeared to be a step toward conflict resolution soon unraveled as attempts at dialogue collapsed, with both parties refusing to de-escalate hostilities. In response to the impasse, key Ambazonian nationalist groups called for unity among secessionist factions to consolidate their struggles against the Francophone-led central government. This led to the formation of the Southern Cameroons Ambazonia Consortium United Front (SCACUF), under the leadership of the Sisiku Ayuk Tabe (Ifedayo & Azabagun, 2020; International Crisis Group, 2017; Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, 2024). On October 1, 2017, coinciding with the anniversary of Southern Cameroon's independence from the United Kingdom, the SCACUF formally declared the Republic of Ambazonia (Essa, 2017; Jalloh, 2018). In a bid to transition to statehood, the movement established an interim government, appointing Ayuk Tabe as the first interim president. The declaration triggered violent confrontations, resulting in the deaths of at least 17 civilians, while attacks by the Ambazonian Defence Forces (ADF) led to the deaths of 14 Cameroonian military personnel (AfricaConfidential, 2023; Sonkey, 2017).

The federal government, led by President Paul Biya, condemned the declaration in its strongest terms, asserting that it lacked legal legitimacy and constituted an act of treason. On November 30, 2017, Biya ordered a total military crackdown on Anglophone separatists (International Crisis Group, 2017). This declaration of war resulted in large-scale military deployments, mass displacement of civilians, and the imposition of curfews, effectively eliminating any prospects for diplomatic resolution. The conflict evolved into a full-fledged war, with separatist groups adopting guerrilla warfare tactics in their fight against government force (Caldwell, 2017; Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, 2024). As the war spiraled out of control, the human and material costs became catastrophic, prompting scholar Mark Caldwell to describe the situation as 'bitter' (Caldwell, 2017). Fighting led to indiscriminate killings on both sides, while the proliferation of armed factions further complicated the conflict. The Ambazonian Self-Defense Council, serving as the military wing of the interim government, emerged as one of the dominant forces within the separatist movement (Allegrozzi, 2021; Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, 2024).

Additionally, various other militant groups, including the Ambazonia Defence Forces (ADF), Southern Cameroons Defence Forces (SOCADEF), Tigers, Red Dragons, ARA, Seven Kata, and ABL, have continued to engage in armed resistance, each aligning with different factions of the Ambazonian political struggle (Cameroon News Agency, 2018; Chothia, 2018). Despite internal divisions within the political leadership of the Ambazonian movement, violence continued to spread across the region (Cameroon News Agency 2018). Efforts by the international community to mediate the crisis gained traction, with the United Nations Security Council holding informal discussions on May 13, 2019, to explore potential resolutions. This diplomatic initiative followed peace talks facilitated by the Swiss government, reflecting growing international concern over the escalating humanitarian catastrophe (Amnesty International, 2021; Browne, 2019).

4. SECESSIONISM IN NIGERIA AND CAMEROON: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

The persistence of secessionist struggles in postcolonial Africa necessitates a comparative analysis, particularly in the cases of Nigeria and Cameroon. These conflicts, which occur within geographically proximate nations, share striking similarities in their origins, dynamics, and implications. Parallels in their modes of operation highlight significant security concerns for both central governments, while the growing collaboration between separatist groups in the region exacerbates unrest and contributes to an escalating humanitarian crisis (Amnesty International, 2021). At the core of these separatist movements is the issue of political marginalization and systemic exclusion. In Cameroon, the Ambazonian struggle sought to establish an independent state driven by deep-seated grievances against the Francophone-dominated central government.

Anglophone Cameroonians have long decried about their subjugation, contending that the annexation of West Cameroon by East Cameroon in 1961 initiated an era of political and economic discrimination (Jua, 2004; Agwanda & Asal,2021). Tensions escalated further when President Paul Biya altered the country's official name from the 'United Republic of Cameroon' to the 'Republic of Cameroon.' This renaming, particularly in its French form, 'La République du Cameroun,' was perceived as an attempt to erase the distinct identity of the Anglophone regions and to reassert the dominance of Francophone Cameroon (Gollous, 2020). Further deepening these tensions was Biya's controversial political maneuvering. In 2008, he orchestrated constitutional amendments that effectively removed presidential term limits, thus allowing him to contest elections indefinitely. His ruling party, the Cameroon People's Democratic Movement, has since been accused of rigging parliamentary elections to consolidate power, particularly since the disputed 1992 elections (Ifedayo and Azabagun, 2020). The systematic exclusion of anglophones from governance became even more evident in 2017, when out of 36 federal cabinet ministers, only one was anglophone (Ifedayo &

Azabagun, 2020; International Crisis Group, 2017; Jua, 2004). This imbalance further entrenched cynicism and fueled secessionist sentiments, ultimately culminating in violent confrontations between Ambazonian separatists and governmental forces.

In Nigeria, the grievances driving the Biafran secessionist movement mirror those of Ambazonians. The issue of marginalization has remained unresolved since the Biafran War (1967-1970), with ethnic and political imbalances continuing to shape the IPOB's agitation (Ebonine & Akinyetun, 2021). Following the coup that deposed Major General Aguiyi-Ironsi and installed General Yakubu Gowon as the military Head of State, the Igbo people have largely been sidelined by national leadership (Ebonine & Akinyetun, 2022). This perceived exclusion has fueled longstanding debates over the viability of 'One Nigeria' in a nation characterized by ethnic diversity. Many Igbos view the dominance of the Hausa/Fulani and Yoruba elites as a deliberate strategy to marginalize and weaken other ethnic groups, particularly in political representation and economic opportunities (Nsoedo, 2019). Economic grievances have also played a pivotal role in Biafran separatist agitation (Akinyetun, 2018). The discovery of oil in the Niger Delta in 1956 made the eastern region a major contributor to Nigeria's economic strength. However, since independence, the primary grievance among Easterners has been that the revenues generated from the region's oil wealth are controlled by the northern-dominated federal government (Bello & Nwaeke, 2023). Meanwhile, local communities continue to bear the brunt of environmental degradation and economic neglect (Ifedayo and Azabagun, 2020). These frustrations have persisted in Nigeria's Fourth Republic, with various ethnic groups demanding greater inclusivity in their national governance. It is within this broader context of political and economic discontent that IPOB has gained significant traction, positioning itself as the leading voice for the secessionist aspirations of the Igbo people.

The colonial histories of Nigeria and Cameroon played a pivotal role in shaping crises that continued to define their political landscapes. In the case of Cameroon, the partitioning of territory after Germany's defeat in the First World War created a deep-rooted structural divide. Under the League of Nations mandate, Britain was assigned one-fifth of the territory (Southern Cameroon), while France controlled the remaining four-fifths (Eastern Cameroon) (Gollous, 2020). The French governed East Cameroon from 1916 until its independence in 1960, whereas the British administered Southern Cameroon until 1961, when the territory was integrated into Cameroon through a controversial plebiscite (Gollous 2020). These differing colonial experiences entrenched ideological and administrative disparities, which contributed to the marginalization of Anglophones within a Francophone-dominated political system.

Therefore, the Ambazonia crisis represents an unresolved colonial legacy that continues to shape Cameroon's political trajectory. Given the country's heterogeneous nature, addressing this crisis requires a constitutional framework that guarantees equitable representation, particularly for English-speaking minorities. Nigeria's colonial experience under British rule followed a different trajectory, but produced similarly divisive consequences (Akinyetun, 2020). The British administration employed a divide-and-rule strategy that exploited ethnic and regional fault lines to maintain control. Even after Nigeria gained independence on October 1, 1960, political, ethnic and religious tensions remained deeply entrenched. The parliamentary system introduced at independence was structured around regional power blocs, undermining the federal principle meant to unify the country (Ifedayo & Azabagun, 2020). This structure allowed political parties to develop along ethnic lines, reinforcing regional rather than national allegiance. The long-term consequences have been a persistent struggle for political dominance among major ethnic groups, fueling grievances that continue to shape secessionist movements in the country (Uwaifo, 2016).

The economic and security ramifications of secessionist agitation in both Nigeria and Cameroon are far-reaching. In Nigeria, the IPOB's activities disrupted economic stability, particularly in the southeast. The group's enforcement of the Monday sit-at-home order significantly hampered trade, investment, and business operations, forcing many entrepreneurs and investors to relocate to other regions (Ebonine & Akinyetun, 2022). This mass exodus has led to a decline in internally generated revenue, exacerbating economic stagnation in the southeast (Okoye 2021). Similarly, the Ambazonian crisis had devastating consequences for Cameroon's sociopolitical and economic development. Since the onset of the crisis on October 11, 2016, an estimated 700,000 civilians have been displaced, with over 63,000 seeking refuge in Nigeria. The conflict has also resulted in the deaths of approximately 4,000 people, as clashes between separatists and government forces continue to escalate (Amnesty International, 2021). The similarities in their struggles have fostered a growing collaboration between the IPOB and Ambazonian separatists, particularly in their tactical approaches. Both groups have adopted guerrilla warfare strategies, recognizing their limited capacity to engage in direct military confrontation with state forces.

In Cameroon, the protracted conflict gave rise to multiple armed factions under the umbrella of the Ambazonia Self-Defence Council. These include the Southern Cameroon Defence Forces (SOCADEF), Ambazonia Defence Forces (ADF), Red Dragons, Tigers, Seven Kata, and other militant groups aligned with the broader Ambazonian political movement (Chothia, 2018). Similarly, in Nigeria, IPOB's militant wing, the Eastern Security Network (ESN), plays a central role in violent confrontations. ESN operatives have been accused of attacking civilians deemed unsupportive of the cause of Biafran, further exacerbating tensions in the region. One of the most widely condemned incidents attributed to the group was the killing of a pregnant woman and her four children in Anambra State in May 2022, an act that sparked widespread public outrage (Akinwotu 2022). The growing links between the IPOB and Ambazonian fighters underscore the transnational dimensions of secessionist movements in the West African sub-region, raising serious security concerns for both Nigeria and Cameroon.

The alliance between the IPOB and Ambazonian separatists has largely been facilitated by their geographical proximity. IPOB operates in Eastern Nigeria, a region that shares a border with Cameroon's Anglophone areas, the epicenter of the Ambazonian crisis. This proximity exacerbates humanitarian crises along the border, leading to increased cross-border violence. The Centre for Human Rights and Democracy in Africa (CHRDA) warned that this growing alliance could escalate ethnic violence in the region, with significant security implications for both Nigeria and Cameroon (Human Rights Watch, 2021). A critical aspect of this collaboration was the trafficking of arms across the Nigerian-Cameroonian border. Intelligence reports indicate that the flow of illegal arms has strengthened Ambazonian separatists, who rely on these networks to acquire weapons. To curb this illicit trade, Nigerian Immigration Services arrested three suspected arms smugglers at the Mfun Border in Ikom, Cross River State, Nigeria. Investigations suggest that Ambazonian fighters have been able to access weapons through IPOB networks, as Biafran separatists reportedly have greater access to ammunition via Nigeria's black market (Asare, 2022). This development underscores the transnational dimension of these conflicts, which poses significant security risks to the broader West African region.

5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The persistent activities of secessionist movements in Nigeria and Cameroon pose significant threats to regional stability, security, and socioeconomic development. The deepening alliance between the IPOB and Ambazonian separatists has not only intensified cross-border violence but has also contributed to escalating humanitarian crises, with

thousands of civilians being displaced and vulnerable to violence, economic hardship, and human rights abuses. Given the transnational nature of these conflicts, it is imperative that both Nigerian and Cameroonian governments adopt a coordinated approach to address the root causes of these agitations. A fundamental step towards resolving these crises lies in fostering inclusive governance that prioritizes justice, equity, and national cohesion. The systematic marginalization and exclusion that fuel these secessionist movements must be addressed through meaningful political and economic reforms.

Both governments should commit to policies that eliminate ethnic discrimination, tribalism, and exclusionary politics, while promoting a governance model that accommodates regional diversity. This includes implementing fair power-sharing arrangements, equitable resource distribution, and constitutional reforms that reflect the multiethnic and multilinguistic nature of both states. In addition, security responses to secessionist activities must go beyond military crackdowns. While ensuring national security remains paramount, over-reliance on force has historically exacerbated tensions, leading to cycles of repression and resistance. A shift towards dialogue and negotiation is essential.

Establishing conflict resolution mechanisms, including truth and reconciliation commissions and structured peace talks, will create opportunities for meaningful engagement between separatist leaders and their communities. Nigerian and Cameroonian governments must also work collaboratively to curb arms trafficking and dismantle the logistical networks that sustain these separatist groups. Beyond national efforts, the role of regional and international actors is crucial in preventing these conflicts from escalating. Organizations, such as the African Union (AU) and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), must take proactive measures to mediate these disputes and provide diplomatic solutions that prioritize long-term stability. These bodies should push for multilateral cooperation in counterinsurgency strategies, border security, and humanitarian assistance.

Additionally, the United Nations (UN) and international human rights organizations must intensify their efforts to monitor human rights violations and advocate for political solutions to these crises. Post-colonial secessionist conflicts in Africa have resulted in significant loss of life and destruction of property, and if left unaddressed, they will continue to fuel organized crime, human trafficking, and broader instability across the region. Tackling these challenges requires a multifaceted approach that combines political will, economic reforms, security collaboration, and diplomatic engagement. Only through concerted efforts by national governments, regional bodies, and the international community can lasting peace and stability be achieved in Nigeria, Cameroon, and the broader West African subregion.

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