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Ethnic Politics, IPOB Agitation and National Security in Nigeria: Implications for Nkwerre Local Government Area, Imo State

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ABSTRACT

Ethnic competition for power and resources has shaped Nigerian politics since independence, and the agitation of the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) has become one of the main security concerns of the South-East. This study examined how ethnic politics has contributed to IPOB agitation and how the agitation, and the state's response to it, has affected national security, with particular attention to the implications for Nkwerre Local Government Area in the Orlu zone of Imo State. It was guided by national integration theory and elite theory and adopted a qualitative documentary design. Peer-reviewed studies, court records and credible press reports were analysed thematically. The study found that perceived marginalisation of the Igbo in federal appointments, infrastructure and security, rooted in the ethnic structure of Nigerian politics, is the main driver of support for IPOB. The proscription of the group in 2017, the military operations that followed and the long trial of its leader appear to have hardened rather than reduced the agitation. The Monday sit-at-home, enforced from 2021, disrupted markets, schools and transport across the South-East, and the Orlu zone experienced repeated clashes between security forces and armed groups. Integrative mechanisms such as federal character, state creation and the National Youth Service Corps have not removed the sense of exclusion. The study concludes that IPOB agitation is a political problem with security effects, and recommends inclusive appointments, dialogue, restraint by security agencies, and local investment in affected communities.

KEYWORDS Ethnic politics • National security • IPOB • National integration • Marginalisation • Imo State

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1. INTRODUCTION

Nigeria is home to several hundred ethnic groups, but its politics has long been dominated by competition among the three largest: the Hausa-Fulani of the North, the Yoruba of the South-West and the Igbo of the South-East. The political parties of the First Republic were built largely on these regional and ethnic bases, and the contest for control of the federal centre has carried an ethnic colouring ever since (Nnoli, 1978;

Osaghae & Suberu, 2005). Because the federal government controls the largest share of public revenue, the ethnic identity of those who hold power is widely seen as deciding which groups and regions benefit. Ethnic politics in this sense refers to the use of ethnic identity to mobilise support, distribute resources and contest power (Adegbami & Uche, 2015).

The Nigerian Civil War of 1967–1970 left a lasting memory of loss in the South-East. Since the return to civilian rule in 1999, demands for the restoration of Biafra have been revived, first by the Movement for the Actualisation of the Sovereign State of Biafra and later by the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), founded by Nnamdi Kanu in 2012 (Obi-Ani, 2024). IPOB's message draws heavily on claims that the Igbo have been marginalised in the Nigerian federation. The arrest of Kanu in 2015, the proscription of IPOB as a terrorist organisation in 2017, the creation of its armed wing, the Eastern Security Network, in 2020 and Kanu's re-arrest abroad in 2021 have turned a largely non-violent movement into a central security concern (Nwangwu, 2023; Obiukwu & Njoku, 2024).

Imo State has been one of the states most affected. The Orlu zone, which includes Nkwerre Local Government Area, saw repeated confrontations between security forces and armed groups from 2021, as well as attacks on police stations, government offices and electoral facilities (Nwangwu, 2023; Onwuharaonye et al., 2025). The sit-at-home order observed on Mondays across the South-East has disrupted commerce and schooling in rural communities as well as in cities (Ekechukwu et al., 2022). This study examines the link between ethnic politics, IPOB agitation and national security, and considers what the evidence implies for communities such as Nkwerre.

Statement of the Problem

Ethnicity shapes appointments, the location of projects, the sharing of revenue and voting behaviour in Nigeria. Political elites often use ethnic identity to build support and to secure access to state resources, and groups that feel excluded tend to respond with protest and, in some cases, violent resistance (Agbiboa, 2013; Adegbami & Uche, 2015). In the South-East, the sense of exclusion has found expression in support for IPOB. Survey evidence indicates that perceived marginalisation is closely associated with support for the goal of secession (Tuki, 2024).

The state has largely treated IPOB as a security problem. Proscription, military deployments and the prosecution of its leader have been the main responses. Several studies suggest that these measures have widened mistrust and contributed to a cycle of violence involving security agencies, armed groups and criminal elements who exploit the situation (Nwangwu, 2023; Ojo, 2023). Local communities bear much of the cost. Yet much of the writing on the subject is either national in scope or focused on the economic cost of the sit-at-home, and relatively little attention has been paid to the implications for individual local government areas in Imo State. This study addresses that gap.

Objectives of the Study

The general objective of the study was to examine the impact of ethnic politics on national security in Nigeria with reference to IPOB agitation. The specific objectives were to:

1. examine how ethnic politics has contributed to the emergence of, and support for, IPOB agitation;
2. assess the effects of IPOB agitation and the state's response on national security in the South-East;
3. evaluate the performance of Nigeria's main integrative mechanisms in reducing ethnic grievance; and
4. identify the implications of these developments for Nkwerre Local Government Area, Imo State.

2. CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION

Ethnicity and Ethnic Politics

An ethnic group is a community whose members share, or believe they share, a common origin, language and culture. Ethnicity becomes politically significant when these shared identities are used as the basis for competition over power and resources. Nnoli (1978) argued that ethnicity in Nigeria is not the product of some primordial African trait but arose from competition among groups brought together in colonial towns and institutions, where access to jobs, schools and political office was scarce. Ethnic politics, therefore, is the use of ethnic identity by elites and groups to mobilise support and claim a share of state resources, often at the expense of other groups (Adegbami & Uche, 2015).

Ethnic politics need not be violent. It becomes a threat to stability when groups believe that the system is closed to them, when appointments and projects appear to follow ethnic lines, and when elites present political competition as a struggle for the survival of their group (Agbiboa, 2013). Under these conditions, loyalty to the ethnic group can outweigh loyalty to the nation.

National Security

Traditional definitions of national security focus on the protection of the state's territory and institutions from external attack and internal rebellion. More recent definitions include human security, which covers the safety of citizens from violence, want and fear, and the protection of their livelihoods (Osimen et al., 2024). This wider view is adopted in this study. National security in Nigeria is threatened both when armed groups challenge the state and when the actions of the state itself leave citizens feeling unsafe or excluded.

The Indigenous People of Biafra

IPOB is a separatist movement that seeks the creation of an independent state of Biafra covering the South-East and parts of the South-South. It grew through Radio Biafra, social media and a large network of supporters in Nigeria and abroad (Obi-Ani, 2024). Its methods have included rallies, sit-at-home orders and international advocacy. In December 2020 it announced the Eastern Security Network, which it presented as a response to insecurity in the region. The group denies responsibility for many of the attacks attributed to it, while the Federal Government holds it responsible for killings of security personnel and attacks on public facilities (Nwangwu, 2023; Obiukwu & Njoku, 2024).

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

National Integration Theory

The study draws first on national integration theory as set out by Coleman and Rosberg (1964). They distinguished between political integration, which concerns the relationship between rulers and the ruled, and territorial integration, which concerns the reduction of cultural and regional tensions in the process of creating a single political community. An integrated nation is one in which the state controls the means of violence, has a centre able to allocate resources and rewards, and serves as the main focus of political identity for most of its citizens. Integration rests on the recognition of diversity, on mutual accommodation and on common institutions through which conflicts can be settled peacefully.

The theory is relevant because IPOB agitation is, at its core, a sign of weak integration. Where a group does not see the federal centre as fair, its members are more likely to transfer loyalty to an ethnic or regional project. The theory directs attention to the mechanisms that Nigeria has used to promote integration and asks why they have not removed the sense of exclusion in the South-East.

Elite Theory

The second framework is elite theory, associated with Pareto, Mosca (1939) and Mills (1956). It holds that in every society a small minority takes the major decisions and controls the distribution of power and resources. In Nigeria, political elites drawn from different ethnic groups compete for control of the federal centre and use ethnic identity to mobilise support. When one set of elites dominates key offices, others can present their exclusion as the exclusion of their whole group (Osaghae & Suberu, 2005).

Elite theory helps to explain two aspects of the IPOB question. First, perceived marginalisation reflects the way federal appointments and projects are shared among elite coalitions. Second, the response to IPOB has been shaped by elite interests on both sides: the federal elite treats agitation mainly as a threat to be contained, while South-East political elites have often been unable or unwilling to offer a credible alternative channel for grievances (Onu et al., 2022). Taken together, the two theories explain both the structural roots of the agitation and the choices that have turned it into a security problem.

4. LITERATURE REVIEW

Ethnic Politics in Nigerian History

Ethnic politics in Nigeria has its roots in the colonial period. The 1914 amalgamation brought together peoples who had been governed separately, and the regional arrangements of the 1946 and 1951 constitutions encouraged political organisation along regional lines. In the First Republic, the Northern People's Congress drew its support mainly from the Hausa-Fulani North, the Action Group from the Yoruba West and the

National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons, despite its national origins, mainly from the Igbo East (Nnoli, 1978). Each party dominated its home region, and control of the federal centre became a contest among regional and ethnic blocs. Minority groups within each region feared domination and demanded their own regions (Osaghae & Suberu, 2005).

The collapse of the First Republic, the coups of 1966, the killings of Igbo in the North and the civil war deepened ethnic distrust. Although later constitutions required parties to have a national spread, studies continue to find that voting, appointments and the distribution of projects follow ethnic and regional lines (Adegbami & Uche, 2015; Agbiboa, 2013). The zoning of the presidency among regions, while intended to reduce conflict, has kept ethnic calculation at the centre of politics.

The Roots of IPOB Agitation

Most studies place perceived marginalisation at the centre of the agitation. Obi-Ani (2024) traces the movement to the unresolved legacy of the civil war and to the belief that the Igbo have not been fully reintegrated into the federation. Onu et al. (2022) link the resurgence of Igbo nationalism to governance failures, including the exclusion of the South-East from key federal offices and the poor state of federal infrastructure in the region. Using survey data, Tuki (2024) found that perceptions of marginalisation, rather than personal economic hardship alone, were most closely associated with support for secession. Onwuharaonye et al. (2025) reached a similar conclusion for Imo State, linking pro-Biafra agitation to bad governance at both federal and state levels.

The literature also shows that the South-East has the smallest number of states among the six geopolitical zones, with five, compared with six or seven in the others. This affects the zone's share of federal revenue, federal appointments that are distributed by state, and its representation in the Senate. These structural features give weight to claims of unequal treatment (Onu et al., 2022).

State Response and Insecurity

The Federal Government has relied mainly on coercion. In September 2017, the Federal High Court in Abuja granted an order proscribing IPOB and declaring it a terrorist organisation (Africanews, 2017). Military operations in the South-East followed, and after the formation of the Eastern Security Network in 2020 there were repeated clashes with security forces. Nwangwu (2023) argues that state repression has intensified rather than reduced the agitation, as heavy-handed operations, arrests and reports of extra-judicial killings strengthened the movement's claim that the state is hostile to the Igbo. Ojo (2023) makes a related argument, that labelling a largely non-violent separatist movement as terrorist can push parts of it towards violence.

Kanu was arrested in October 2015, granted bail in 2017 and left the country. He was brought back to Nigeria in June 2021 (Channels Television, 2021). The Court of Appeal discharged him in October 2022, but the Supreme Court reversed that decision in December 2023 and ordered his trial to continue. On 20 November 2025, the Federal High Court in Abuja convicted him on all seven counts and sentenced him to life imprisonment (AllAfrica, 2025). Each stage of this process has been followed by tension in the South-East.

The Sit-at-Home and its Costs

From August 2021, IPOB declared a Monday sit-at-home in protest at Kanu's detention. Although the group later announced that it had suspended the order, it continued to be enforced in many places by factions and by armed men who attacked those who opened shops or travelled (Ekechukwu et al., 2022). Ekechukwu et al. (2022) found that the order reduced the income of traders and transport workers, disrupted schooling and examinations and limited access to health care. Elem (2023) reported similar effects in Ebonyi State. Obiukwu and Njoku (2024) conclude that, although the movement is driven by grievance, its methods and the violence linked to it now constitute a threat to national security.

Table 1 summarises the main studies reviewed and their findings.

Table 1. *Summary of selected studies on IPOB agitation and security*

Author(s)	Focus and method	Main finding
Ekechukwu et al. (2022)	Sit-at-home; qualitative interviews, South-East	Loss of income, disruption of schooling and health services
Onu et al. (2022)	Governance and Igbo nationalism; documentary	Governance failures and exclusion fuel IPOB support

Author(s)	Focus and method	Main finding
Elem (2023)	Sit-at-home in Ebonyi State; survey	Negative effects on trade, education and transport
Nwangwu (2023)	State repression and insecurity; documentary	Repression has escalated agitation and insecurity
Ojo (2023)	Terrorist labelling of separatist groups	Proscription risks pushing movements towards violence
Obi-Ani (2024)	History of Biafra agitation; qualitative	Civil war memory and exclusion sustain the movement
Obiukwu and Njoku (2024)	IPOB and national security; documentary	Grievance-driven movement now threatens security
Osimen et al. (2024)	IPOB and human security; documentary	Agitation and response have reduced human security
Tuki (2024)	Support for secession; survey analysis	Perceived marginalisation predicts support for secession
Onwuharaonye et al. (2025)	Bad governance and agitation in Imo State	Bad governance drives pro-Biafra agitation in Imo

Source: Compiled by the authors from the studies cited.

5. METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a qualitative documentary research design. This design is suited to questions about political processes that unfold over a long period and across a wide area, where primary data collection is difficult, as was the case in parts of Imo State during the period of insecurity. Data were drawn from three types of source: peer-reviewed journal articles and books on ethnic politics, national integration and IPOB published mainly between 2013 and 2025; court decisions and official statements reported in the press; and credible national and international news reports. Sources were selected for their relevance to the objectives and checked against each other where possible.

The material was analysed thematically. Themes were developed around the four objectives: the ethnic roots of the agitation, the state's response and its security effects, the performance of integrative mechanisms, and the local implications. Nkwerre Local Government Area, one of the local government areas in the Orlu zone of Imo State, served as the point of reference for the local implications. Because no field data were collected in Nkwerre, the local implications are drawn from evidence on Imo State and the Orlu zone, and are presented with appropriate caution.

6. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Ethnic Politics and the Rise of IPOB

The first objective was to examine how ethnic politics has contributed to IPOB agitation. The evidence points to perceived marginalisation as the main link. The South-East has fewer states than other zones, it has not produced an elected president since 1999, and many in the zone believe that it has been under-represented in security and strategic federal appointments (Onu et al., 2022). Tuki (2024) found that perceptions of group marginalisation are strongly associated with support for secession, which suggests that the agitation is driven more by a sense of collective injustice than by individual poverty alone.

These findings are consistent with elite theory. Federal appointments and projects are shared through bargaining among elite coalitions, and a zone that is weakly placed in the ruling coalition can present its position as the exclusion of its people. They are also consistent with national integration theory, since a large part of the population of the South-East does not appear to regard the federal centre as the main focus of political identity (Obi-Ani, 2024). In this sense, IPOB is less a cause of disunity than a symptom of incomplete integration.

The State Response and National Security

The second objective was to assess the effects of the agitation and the state's response on national security. The literature suggests that the response has deepened insecurity. After the proscription in 2017 and

the formation of the Eastern Security Network in 2020, the South-East experienced attacks on police stations, correctional centres and offices of the Independent National Electoral Commission, together with killings of security personnel and civilians (Nwangwu, 2023). The Owerri correctional centre attack of April 2021 and the clashes in the Orlu zone in early 2021 are among the incidents discussed in the literature. IPOB denied responsibility for many of these attacks, and criminal groups appear to have exploited the situation (Obiukwu & Njoku, 2024).

Security operations, in turn, have been associated with arbitrary arrests and reports of abuses against civilians, which residents often interpret as collective punishment (Nwangwu, 2023; Osimen et al., 2024). Ojo (2023) argues that the terrorist label narrowed the space for dialogue and gave security agencies a broad mandate with limited oversight. The result has been a cycle in which repression feeds grievance and grievance feeds support for the agitation. National security, understood as the safety of citizens as well as the integrity of the state, has therefore been weakened rather than strengthened.

Integrative Mechanisms and their Limits

The third objective was to evaluate the performance of Nigeria's integrative mechanisms. Successive governments have introduced several measures intended to reduce ethnic tension. Their aims and the main weaknesses reported in the literature are summarised in Table 2.

Table 2. *Nigeria's main integrative mechanisms and their reported limitations*

Mechanism	Aim	Reported limitation
Federalism (1954)	Accommodate diversity within one state	Over-centralised in practice; strong competition for the centre
State creation (1967–1996)	Break regional dominance and protect minorities	Unequal number of states across zones, including the South-East
National Youth Service Corps (1973)	Promote contact among young graduates	Posting concerns and security risks to corps members
Federal character principle (1979)	Fair representation in public institutions	Uneven application; seen as favouring some groups (Ugoh & Ukpere, 2012)
Unity schools	Mix pupils from different states	Limited reach and declining standards
Relocation of capital to Abuja	A neutral capital belonging to all	Symbolic value weakened by uneven development
Derivation principle (13%, 1999)	Compensate oil-producing states	Does not address grievances outside the Niger Delta
University admission policies	National spread in higher education	Strong local and regional bias in intake (Akpan, 1990)

Source: Compiled by the authors from Akpan (1990), Okorie and Esheya (2013), Ugoh and Ukpere (2012) and Osaghae and Suberu (2005).

The federal character principle, enshrined in the 1979 Constitution, was meant to ensure that no group dominated public institutions. Studies suggest that it has helped to spread appointments, but that it is applied unevenly and has sometimes been used to justify the dominance of particular groups in strategic offices (Okorie & Esheya, 2013; Ugoh & Ukpere, 2012). State creation weakened the old regional blocs, but left the South-East with fewer states than other zones. The National Youth Service Corps has given generations of graduates experience of other parts of the country, but concerns about security and posting have reduced its integrative value. Akpan (1990) showed that universities, intended as instruments of national unity, drew most of their students from their immediate regions. The Constitution of 1999 set the derivation share of federally collected oil revenue at not less than 13 per cent, which responded to grievances in the Niger Delta but not to those of the South-East (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999).

These mechanisms have reduced some forms of ethnic tension, but they have not changed the underlying perception that the federal centre is controlled by ethnic coalitions from which the South-East is often excluded. From the perspective of national integration theory, they have produced common institutions without producing a shared sense of fairness.

Implications for Nkwerre Local Government Area

The fourth objective was to identify the implications for Nkwerre Local Government Area. Nkwerre lies in the Orlu zone of Imo State, an area that experienced some of the most frequent confrontations between security forces and armed groups in the South-East from 2021 (Nwangwu, 2023; Onwuharaonye et al., 2025). Although the present study did not collect field data in Nkwerre, the evidence for the state and the zone points to several likely implications.

First, the Monday sit-at-home affects the local economy, which depends heavily on periodic markets, small trading and transport. Studies across the South-East show that traders and transport workers lose a day of income each week, and that losses grow when tension leads to extended closures (Ekechukwu et al., 2022; Elem, 2023). Second, schooling is affected, since pupils lose class days and examinations are sometimes rescheduled. Third, the presence of armed groups and security operations limits movement, discourages investment and weakens the capacity of local government to deliver services. Fourth, the insecurity has contributed to the movement of young people to other parts of the country and abroad, which deprives rural communities of labour and leadership. Finally, the distrust between residents and security agencies makes it harder to gather intelligence and to separate genuine agitators from criminal groups.

These effects show that the costs of ethnic politics and of the response to it are borne mainly by ordinary people in rural communities. They also suggest that local governments, traditional rulers and community associations in areas such as Nkwerre have a role to play in rebuilding trust and in supporting dialogue.

7. CONCLUSION

This study examined the impact of ethnic politics on national security in Nigeria with reference to IPOB agitation and its implications for Nkwerre Local Government Area of Imo State. It found that the agitation is rooted in the ethnic structure of Nigerian politics and in a widespread perception of marginalisation in the South-East. The state's response, which has relied on proscription, military operations and prosecution, appears to have hardened the agitation and contributed to a cycle of violence. Nigeria's integrative mechanisms have built common institutions but have not removed the sense of exclusion. Rural communities in the Orlu zone, including Nkwerre, have borne much of the cost through lost income, disrupted schooling and insecurity.

The study concludes that IPOB agitation is best understood as a political problem with security effects, rather than as a security problem alone. Lasting security in the South-East will depend on whether the Nigerian state can convince the people of the zone that they are treated as equal members of the federation. The main limitation of the study is that it relied on documentary sources and did not collect primary data in Nkwerre. Future studies should use surveys and interviews with residents, traders, community leaders and security personnel to measure the local effects more directly.

8. RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The Federal Government should ensure fair representation of the South-East in federal appointments, particularly in security and strategic offices, and should consider the long-standing demand for an additional state in the zone.
2. Government should open structured dialogue with South-East leaders, including traditional rulers, religious bodies, community associations and representatives of the agitators, as a complement to security measures.
3. Security agencies should act within the law, avoid collective punishment of communities and investigate reported abuses, since such abuses deepen distrust and support for the agitation.
4. Imo State and Nkwerre Local Government should work with community associations and traditional institutions to restore normal market days, protect schools and support local security arrangements that operate under state oversight.
5. Federal and state governments should invest in infrastructure, employment and youth programmes in affected communities to reduce the grievances on which separatist and criminal groups draw.
6. The federal character principle and other integrative mechanisms should be reviewed so that they are applied consistently and transparently.

DECLARATIONS

Competing interests: The authors declare no competing interests.

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