



# The Indigenous People of Biafra's (IPOB) Self-Determination Movements and the Role of the United Nations

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## Abstract

This study examines "The Dynamics of Self-Determination Movements and the Role of the United Nations: A Case Study of the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) in Nigeria." The UN's lack of action and formal recognition of IPOB's agitation has undermined the protection of the rights of indigenous people in Nigeria, particularly the Igbo community. The study adopts a qualitative methodology, utilising a time-series research design and documentary analysis of credible secondary sources, including international NGO reports and UN documents. The theoretical framework employed is the Theory of Social Constructivism, which posits that the actions of states and international organizations are shaped by socially constructed norms, ideas, and identities. One key finding is that the UN's indifference can be attributed to complex political dynamics, member states' economic interests, and the prioritisation of territorial integrity over self-determination claims. It is recommended, inter alia, that the UN establish an independent commission or a special rapporteur to investigate allegations of human rights violations against IPOB members and the Igbo community, and hold the Nigerian government accountable for any violations.

**Keywords:** Self-determination, Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), United Nations, Nigeria, Indifference.

## Introduction

In international relations, the subject of self-determination in general and secession in particular is complicated. Nobody can genuinely claim that secession violates international law these days. The right to secede is recognized by international law, and no one is required by the law to refrain from doing so (Lalonde, 2002). Minorities only have the right to internal self-determination, according to some detractors, and not the right to exterior self-determination (secession). As the United Nations put it in 1992, "if every ethnic, religious, or linguistic group claimed statehood, there would be no limit to fragmentation, and peace, security, and economic well-being for all would become ever more difficult to achieve." This is precisely the general perspective that serves as support for their argument (Avedian,

2022). The legal idea of self-determination consists of two secondary elements: internal self-determination and exterior self-determination (secession). It is believed that "every people has the right to form its own nation-state or to integrate into, or federate with, an existing state." This is how Senese (1989, p. 19) defines external self-determination, or secession. Internal self-determination, on the other hand, is defined as "the right of people to freely choose their own political, economic, and social system." This can be achieved by acquiring autonomy within existing states, thus it's not always necessary to start a new state. Although secession is not prohibited by international law, it does establish a framework in which, depending on the situation, some secessions are supported and others are opposed.

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Having control over one's own life is the basic meaning of self-determination. In a political context, this refers to a country's citizens' ability to determine its own form of government

(<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/self-determination>). When President Wilson first used the phrase in this context during the 1919 Versailles Peace Conference, his Secretary of State, Robert Lansing, issued a warning, saying that "the phrase is loaded with dynamite." As Lansing (1921) put it, "It will raise hopes that will never come true." It is crucial to remember that this principle must always be used in conjunction with the Montevideo Criteria, which are now considered a *jus cogens* criterion for determining whether a region qualifies as a state (Abel, 2020).

Over the course of the last century, the nation of self-determination has seen major changes in its political and legal ramifications. The first international legal case involving self-determination was the Aaland Islands case, heard in 1920. In order to determine if the Aaland people might use their right to self-determination and return from Finland to the Kingdom of Sweden, the archipelago brought the issue before the League of Nations (Abel, 2020). The Security Council ruled that "Positive international law does not recognise the right of national groups, as such, to separate themselves from the State of which they form a part by the simple expression of a wish." Still, they pointed out one exception in which citizens had the right to secession: "when the State lacks either the will or the power to enact and apply just and effective guarantees" (League of Nations, 1920). As a result, the right to self-determination was not expressly considered to imply the right to secede.

Articles 1 and 55 of the United Nations Charter, which came into effect in 1945, include reference to the right to self-determination. One of the goals of the United Nations, according to Article 1 of the Charter, is to "develop friendly relations among nations based on respect for the principle of equal

rights and self-determination of peoples." Over the past three decades, a movement led by indigenous peoples, civil society, international mechanisms, and states at the domestic, regional, and international levels has made the right to self-determination and the rights of indigenous peoples an indispensable part of international law and policy. The United Nations Human Rights Council and its mechanisms, in partnership with other important actors like the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, are continuing the work started by organizations like the United Nations Working Group on Indigenous Populations. The human rights system—its laws, policies, and mechanisms—has been at the center of these developments. One of its great achievements was the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which was approved by the General Assembly in 2007 and, by 2010, supported by the vast majority of UN Member States and opposed by none. It culminated decades of discussion between states and indigenous peoples who joined forces in a spirit of partnership to support the Indigenous Declaration. It applies human rights to indigenous peoples and their unique circumstances, assisting in reversing their historical exclusion from the international legal system.

The Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) is a separatist organization that supports a referendum overseen by the United Nations to grant the former eastern part of Nigeria independence from Nigeria. The Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) and other pro-Biafra movements failed to achieve their objectives, and the group formed in response to the Igbo people's perceived marginalization and deaths in Nigeria (Oduah, 2017). The group's agitation for independence is rooted in historical, political, and ethnic factors that have shaped Nigeria's development since its inception. The quest for the independence of Biafra can be traced back to the political, economic, and ethnic tensions that emerged in Nigeria following its independence from

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Britain in 1960. However, the most significant event that marked the beginning of the Biafra independence movement was the declaration of the Republic of Biafra by Colonel Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu, the military governor of the Eastern Region, on May 30, 1967, following the massacre of the people of the defunct eastern region of Nigeria in the northern region of Nigeria. This declaration led to the Nigerian Civil War (1967–1971), also known as the Biafran War, fought between the Nigerian government and the secessionist state of Biafra.

In January 1966, a group of young military officers, mainly of Igbo origin, staged a coup d'état, overthrowing the government and killing several high-ranking politicians, including Prime Minister Abubakar Tafawa Balewa and the Premier of the Northern Region, Amadu Bello. The ethnic background of the figureheads of the coup resulted in the coup being termed an Igbo coup, without recourse to the fact that other team members that actively participated in the coup were not ethnically Igbo. This coup was followed by a counter-coup in July 1966, led by northern military officers, which resulted in the death of the Head of State, General Aguiyi-Ironsi, an Igbo, and the installation of General Yakubu Gowon as the new leader.

The counter-coup led to months of massacres against the Igbo living in the north. Tens of thousands were killed, while about a million fled to what was then known as the Eastern Region (B.B.C., 2020). In response to the violence and perceived marginalisation, the military governor of the Eastern Region, Colonel Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu, declared the region's independence as the Republic of Biafra on May 30, 1967. The declaration of Biafra's independence led to a brutal civil war between the Nigerian government and the Biafran forces. The war lasted for almost three years, resulting in the death of an estimated 1-3 million people, mainly due to starvation and disease (Leapman, 1998; Uwechue, 1991; Forsyth, 1977; de St. Jorre, 1972; Garrison, 1970;

International Committee on the Investigation of Crimes of Genocide, 1969).

The U.N. never discussed the conflict despite Biafra's appeal to it in December, 1967. In this appeal, the Biafran government charged the Nigerian government with genocide and "deliberate and continuous" contravention of the U.N. Charter provisions on human rights (Nanda, 1981). The atrocities committed by the Nigerian soldiers during the war and their disregard for the restraints of war conventions are seen as indications of deep-seated hatred of the Igbo. Throughout the period of the war, Nigerian soldiers were accused of concentrating their attacks on civilian targets (Aneke, 2007; Korieh, 2013). The Biafran government made a strong case for civilian massacres in cities and towns like Aba, Onitsha, Calabar, Uyo, Oji River, Okigwe, and Asaba. The United Nations has shown indifference towards the massive genocide perpetrated against the people of defunct Eastern Nigeria (the Biafran people) during the Nigerian civil war. The Asaba massacre that happened in October 1967, which has been extensively covered in media reports, articles, and books, stands out as an indisputable example of a large scale killing of civilians by Nigerian soldiers. It is believed that over 700 men and boys lost their lives at the hands of Nigerian troops during the massacre. Azikiwe (1969, 22) in his book *Peace Proposals for Ending the Nigerian Civil War* called on the United Nations (U.N.) to ensure: "Total arms embargo; armistice embracing cessation of hostilities on land, sea, and air; revocation of blockages including economic and administrative sanctions establishment of an international peace force, to act for and on behalf of the Security Council to assume administration of the war zones; to demobilise troops engaged in war zones, to conduct a plebiscite to ascertain the wishes of the inhabitants of the war zones, whether they want one Nigeria or a divided Nigeria". Even with all the reports of the genocidal activities of the Nigerian Military in the period of this war, which led to massive civilian casualties estimated to be about 1-3 million people, the

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United Nations has not formally recognised this genocide in any of its memoirs or resolutions, nor has it investigated these reports to either affirm or refute them. It is leaning on this background that this paper is made to study the relationship between UN policies on self-determination and self-determination within the context of Nigeria.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Article 1 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966) states that; Every group of people has the inherent right to self-governance. This right empowers them to independently decide their political affiliations and actively engage in their economic, social, and cultural growth. Secondly, all groups are entitled to manage and utilise their natural resources for their own benefit, without violating any commitments made under international economic cooperation, which is based on mutual advantage and international law. It is imperative that no group is denied the resources necessary for their survival. Thirdly, the signatories of the Covenant, including those overseeing Non-Self-Governing and Trust Territories, are obliged to foster and respect the right to self-determination, in accordance with the United Nations Charter.

"Indigenous communities, peoples, and nations are those that, having a historical continuity with pre-invasion and pre-colonial societies that developed on their territories, consider themselves distinct from other sectors of the societies now prevailing on those territories, or parts of them," according to the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2004). They currently make up non-dominant segments of society, and they are committed to maintaining, expanding, and passing down to the next generation their ethnic identity and ancestral lands as a means of ensuring their continued existence as a people, in line with their own social structures, legal framework, and cultural norms."

Even with these international principles codified in international law and espoused by United Nations, they have allowed the Federal Republic of Nigeria a pass on enforcing

international human rights compliance, especially as it concerns self-determination on the basis of sovereignty. Nigeria has ratified many human rights accords, but its state-centered strategy has aimed to evade any enforcement actions. Chapter one of the 1999 Nigerian constitution states, "Nigeria is one indivisible and indissoluble sovereign state to be known by the name of the Federal Republic of Nigeria." This avoidance has never been more blatant than its denial of any obligations pertaining to the rights of indigenous peoples. According to the U.N. General Assembly (2008), Nigeria did not cast a vote in favor of or against the 2007 United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP).

The UNDRIP notes that "indigenous peoples" exist everywhere, even if it does not define the term precisely. "Communities... which, having a historical continuity with pre-invasion and pre-colonial societies that developed on their territories, consider themselves distinct from other sectors of the societies now prevailing," according to a 1986 United Nations Economic and Social Council study, was one definition put forth in an attempt to define it. There is no question that the emphasis on unique self-identification applies to IPOB.

UNDRIP offers a variety of standards that could be utilised for assessing current situations in the IPOB movement for self-determination. Article 1 of the preliminary draft emphasizes the following: "the fundamental importance of all peoples' rights to self-determination, under which they freely determine their political status and pursue their economic, social, and cultural development"; "the right of indigenous peoples to freely determine their relationship with states"; "treaties, agreements, and constructive arrangements with states are matters of international concern"; and "no one shall be denied the right to exercise self-determination in conformity with international law." It is widely acknowledged that Southeast Nigeria is highly militarised and that the Igbo people that inhabit this region have never had a free choice in their

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affiliation with Nigeria (Thisdaylive, 2021; Nsoedo, 2019). Efforts by the IPOB leadership to register their discontent over these matters to the Nigerian government have been repeatedly met with repressive policies and actions by the government (Nwangwu, 2023). Numerous non-governmental organisations, national and international reports have addressed global concerns about these issues (Iroegbu, 2016; Sahara Reporters, 2015). The main text of the U.N. Declaration ensures that indigenous peoples have the right to self-determination; the ability to exercise autonomy or self-governance in matters concerning their internal and local affairs; the freedom to express, practise, cultivate, and educate others about their spiritual and religious traditions, customs, and ceremonies, including private access to their cultural and religious sites and control over their ceremonial items; the right to be involved in decision-making processes that impact their rights, through representatives they select based on their own methods; the right to consultation and prior consent via their representative institutions before implementing state laws and administrative actions; and the right to have treaties, agreements, and other constructive arrangements acknowledged, respected, and enforced. They are also guaranteed the rights granted by different human rights treaties and covenants. Nigeria's widespread imposition of top-down authority, flippant responses to IPOB's appeal for a referendum on the Igbo people's view on continued existence in Nigeria, and its overall lack of protection of fundamental human rights fall short of these standards.

The Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) emerged in 2012 as a separatist group seeking self-determination and secession of the old eastern region from Nigeria. IPOB's agitation is rooted in grievances linked to perceived marginalization of Igbos after the Nigerian civil war, unaddressed claims for reparations, and feelings of political exclusion (Ugorji, 2017). IPOB advocates for the restoration of the statehood of the former Republic of Biafra

through nonviolent strategies and civil disobedience. It frames its ideology as the right to self-determination as enshrined in the African Charter on Human and Peoples Rights. IPOB has a decentralized cell-like organizational structure with Nnamdi Kanu as the supreme leader and the Directorate of State issuing directives. IPOB strategy involves using social media and Radio Biafra to mobilize support, share grievances, and broadcast pro-Biafra messages to millions of listeners across Nigeria and globally (Ojukwu & Oni, 2017). IPOB initially employed episodic nonviolent mass protests, marches and rallies to pursue its goals but later adopted a strategy of sit-at-home civil disobedience, calling for Igbo to stay home from work and close businesses for specific days as a symbolic protest (Ekechukwu, Uzoh & Udeji, 2023).

Nnamdi Kanu, the leader of the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), has been arrested and incarcerated multiple times by the Nigerian Government. These arrests have raised concerns about human rights violations and the government's commitment to upholding the rule of law and due process. Nnamdi Kanu was first arrested on October 14, 2015, by the Nigerian Department of State Services (D.S.S.) in Lagos (Amnesty International, 2016a). He was charged with criminal conspiracy, intimidation, and membership of an illegal organisation (B.B.C. News, 2015). The arrest came after Kanu had gained prominence as the director of Radio Biafra. This station broadcast pro-Biafra messages and called for the secession of the south-eastern region of Nigeria (Aghedo & Eke, 2013). Following his arrest, Kanu was detained without trial for over a year, despite several court orders for his release on bail (Amnesty International, 2016a). This prolonged detention without trial raised concerns about violating Kanu's right to liberty and security and his right to a fair trial, as stipulated in international human rights law (Donnelly, 2013).

After being released on bail in April 2017, Nnamdi Kanu continued to advocate for the Biafran cause and the IPOB (Oduah, 2017). However, in September 2017, the Nigerian

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Government declared IPOB a terrorist organisation (Adebayo, 2017). In the same month of September, the Nigerian Military attacked Nnamdi Kanu's house at Afaraukwu Ibeku in Abia State, Nigeria. This attack killed five people, with scores injured (Daily Post, 2017). Nnamdi Kanu escaped this attack and went into hiding. He later resurfaced in Israel in October 2018 and continued to lead the IPOB from abroad (B.B.C. News, 2018). On June 27, 2021, the Nigerian Government announced that Nnamdi Kanu had been arrested again and extradited to Nigeria for trial (Akinwotu, 2021). The circumstances surrounding his arrest and extradition remain unclear, with allegations of an "Extraordinary Rendition", which is a violation of international law (Human Rights Watch, 2021). Kanu's lawyers claimed he was abducted in Kenya and forcibly returned to Nigeria without due process (Adeoye, 2021). The Court of Appeal in Abuja acquitted him in October 2022 (Osaji, 2022). However, the Nigerian government continued to hold him in detention, even with an ultimatum from The Working Group on arbitrary detention under the United Nations Commission on Human Rights (UNCHR), for his immediate release. It is noteworthy that on December 15, 2023, Nnamdi Kanu was brought before the Supreme Court of Nigeria. The Court ruled that Kanu should stay imprisoned pending the resolution of his hearing, overturning the Court of Appeal's 2022 decision ordering his release. Justice Lawal Garba deemed Kanu's extradition to be unlawful yet permitted the federal terrorism trial to proceed. According to Reuters, Garba determined the impropriety of extradition was insufficient grounds to dismiss the charges against Kanu outright (Africanews, 2023).

The U.N. is not taking preventive measures even after the experience of Sudan and South Sudan, which claimed millions of lives and property. The situation in Nigeria is volatile, and there is a real risk of an outbreak of uncontrolled violence. The U.N. has a responsibility to protect human rights, and it is failing to do so in this case. This is of grave

concern especially considering the lessons learnt from the conflict between Sudan and South Sudan, which resulted in the loss of millions of lives and extensive property damage. United Nations continues to act indifferently to the agitations of IPOB for a United Nations-supervised independence referendum, even in the face of the growing tensions in Nigeria resulting from this agitation and the Nigerian government's response to it. This indifference is confirmed by The Whistler (2021) in the following words; "checks by our correspondent on the UN official website revealed that "Biafra agitation" or "Biafra" has not been brought forward to the general assembly by any country. A search of those words on the UN website brings out only blank space - implying that no document, article or statement has mentioned the IPOB regional agitation at UN yet."

Thus, this research is done to ascertain the cause of the U.N.'s indifference towards the agitation for self-determination by IPOB, and to determine the effects of the U.N.'s indifference towards IPOB's agitation on the protection of the rights of indigenous people in Nigeria.

### **Method**

This research is primarily qualitative and adopts time series research design. The essence of the time-series design is the presence of a periodic measurement process on some group or individual and the introduction of an experimental change into this time series of measurements, the results of which are indicated by a discontinuity in the measurements recorded in the time series (Campbell & Stanley, 1963). This design is adopted because self-determination is still an ongoing phenomenon, and at the same time a dynamic phenomenon that changes its form, and effects from time to time, data on this variable has to be collected at regular intervals. Data for this study are based on a yearly periodic measurement from 2012 to 2023.

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The documentary method of data collection from credible secondary sources is adopted for this research. The research is based on a literature review of existing research into U.N.'s policies and activities on and around self-determination, discourse on international norm on self-determination, writings on the activities of IPOB, and documentary reports of international NGOs, which is supplemented by documentary reading of available correspondences, press release and internet sources. The factual contents of this research are derived from credible public sources and information provided by reputable human rights organizations. Sources for the factual assertions are provided in the accompanying references at the end of the work. Each source underwent a thorough evaluation to determine its credibility. Data collected for this research are analysed by the use of qualitative content analysis.

### **Social Constructivism as Theoretical Framework**

The term "constructivism" is often attributed to Nicholas Onuf, who is recognised as its originator in his seminal work titled "A World of Our Making," published in 1989. He used the term to elucidate views that emphasise the socially constructed nature of international relations. The origins of contemporary constructivist theory may be attributed to the influential contributions of not just Onuf, but also scholars like Richard K. Ashley, Friedrich Kratochwil, and John Ruggie. However, it is widely acknowledged that Alexander Wendt has a prominent position as a leading proponent of social constructivism within the discipline of International Relations. In his seminal 1992 publication titled "Anarchy is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics," Wendt established the foundational framework for critiquing a perceived deficiency in the perspectives of both neorealists and neoliberal institutionalists. Specifically, he identified their shared adherence to a simplistic form of materialism as a fundamental limitation. This article was published in the journal; International

Organisation. Wendt's endeavour to demonstrate the socially constructed nature of "power politics," a fundamental concept in realism, highlights its non-inherent status and potential for transformation through human agency. This groundbreaking perspective paved the way for subsequent generations of international relations scholars to explore a diverse array of issues from a constructivist standpoint. Wendt expanded upon these concepts in his seminal publication, "Social Theory of International Politics" (1999).

Since the latter part of the 1980s and the early part of the 1990s, constructivism has emerged as a prominent theoretical framework in the field of International Relations. John Ruggie, along with other scholars, has delineated many strands of constructivism. One perspective that has gained significant recognition and sparked scholarly debates among various schools of thought within the international relations (IR) community is constructivism. Scholars such as Martha Finnemore, Kathryn Sikkink, Peter Katzenstein, and Alexander Wendt have made notable contributions to this field, which have been widely acknowledged and embraced by the mainstream International Relations community. These contributions have stimulated lively academic discussions among proponents of realism. Conversely, there exists a faction of radical constructivists who place more emphasis on speech and linguistics.

The primary objective of constructivism is to illustrate how fundamental elements of international relations, in contrast to the assumptions made by Neorealism and Neoliberalism, are "socially constructed." This implies that these elements acquire their shape by continuous processes of social practice and interaction. According to Wendt (1992), there are two fundamental principles of Constructivism that are gaining more recognition. The first principle asserts that the structures of human association are primarily shaped by shared ideas rather than material forces. The second principle posits that the identities and interests of intentional actors

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are formed by these shared ideas rather than being inherent in nature.

Constructivist views provide a rational foundation for endeavouring to comprehend the potency or efficacy of any given norm. According to the constructivist perspective, the actions of states are influenced not just by material factors, but also by the dynamics of international social interactions, which play a significant role in shaping a state's conceptions of the global landscape and its position within it (Finnemore, 1996: 22). Although constructivism acknowledges the significance of material causes, it places equal emphasis on the impact of social forces such as normative concerns and ideas on state action (Klotz, 1995). The acts of states may be influenced by norms and ideas, particularly when these elements are integral to a state's character and contribute to the formation of its interests (Katzenstein, 1996). Norms may contribute to the construction of state identity via several avenues, including engagement with International Organisations or non-governmental organisations (NGOs). International organisations can establish norms inside states, use influence to encourage states to adopt these standards, and exert social pressure on states as a means to promote adherence to these norms (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998: 895). According to Finnemore and Sikkink (1998: 903), constructivist reasoning posits that the acceptance and adherence of states to norms may be attributed to reasons such as legitimation, conformity, and esteem. Hence, states would adhere to standards as a guiding principle in their conduct when they place importance on their perceived image.

The U.N., being an international organization composed of diverse member states, operates within a framework that reflects the prevailing norms and values of its member states. These norms and values shape the U.N.'s approach to self-determination and its response to specific cases.

Through a constructivist lens, we can explore how the Nigerian government's approach to

IPOB's agitation is shaped by its understanding of sovereignty, national identity, and territorial integrity. The government's response reflects its belief in maintaining its colonially established borders and its reluctance to entertain secessionist movements. These beliefs are influenced by historical, cultural, and political factors that have shaped the Nigerian state. The constructivist perspective highlights how the Nigerian government's response is not solely based on material interests or security concerns, but also on the socially constructed norms and values of the United Nations, which encourages the maintenance of territorial borders whether organically created or artificially created through colonialism.

Constructivism helps us understand why the U.N. may have an indifferent attitude towards IPOB's agitation for (external) self-determination. The U.N. operates within a framework that reflects the prevailing norms and values of its member states. Many member states prioritize territorial integrity and sovereignty, fearing that supporting secessionist movements could set a precedent and lead to instability or the disintegration of their own states. Therefore, the U.N.'s response may be influenced by the norms and values of its member states, which prioritize the preservation of existing state boundaries.

From a constructivist perspective, the U.N.'s indifference towards IPOB's agitation as well as the inconsistency in intervening in self-determination matters can have significant effects on the protection of the right to self-determination in Nigeria. The U.N., as an international organization, plays a crucial role in promoting and protecting human rights, including the right to self-determination. However, its indifference can undermine the legitimacy and effectiveness of its human rights mechanisms, as well as the normative framework for self-determination. The lack of attention or action from the U.N. may embolden the Nigerian government to take repressive measures against IPOB and limit the space for peaceful dialogue and negotiations. It may also contribute to a sense



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of frustration and disillusionment among IPOB supporters, potentially leading to further tensions and conflicts.

### **The Indifference of the U.N. towards the Agitation for Self Determination by IPOB**

The United Nations' reaction to the pursuit of self-determination by the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) seemingly demonstrates a disheartening level of indifference, portraying a significant lack of formal recognition. Despite their concerted advocacy efforts and strong endorsement from indigenous constituencies, the United Nations has not actively engaged with the legitimate aspirations of IPOB. Furthermore, very little has been done in the area of constructive conversations that actively respond to their grievances (Eboh, 2020), (Abada, Omeh and Okoye, 2020), (Gwom, 2019), (Olomjobi and Abiodun-Oni, 2023), (Ikeanyibe Ugwu, Nzekwe, and Obioji, 2021), (Kevin, 2020), (Aladekomo, 2021) (Urhoibibo & Imonitie, 2022), (Agbo, 2020).

Regarding IPOB, the U.N.'s position remains undefined, leading to different interpretation drives from member states towards a variety of self-determination drives globally. The United Nations has consistently failed to formally recognize the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) as an independent movement striving for self-determination. This void in acknowledgement has curbed the IPOB's global reach and strength to articulate their lingering issues. Despite these constraints, the IPOB remains dauntless in sensitizing the world about their plight, utilizing peaceful protests, social media and grassroots campaigns. Ultimately, these efforts are geared towards gaining international recognition and a platform to express the difficulties faced by the indigenous population of Biafra (Okibe, 2022), (Kanu and Iwuh, 2023), (Obi-Ani, Nzubechi and Obi-Ani, 2020), (Nduba, Nnamdi and Chukwuebuka, 2020), (Okeke et al., 2019), (Tuki, 2023), (Igwebuikwe & Akoh, 2022), (Osita, Anoke and Eze, 2022), (Eboh, 2020), (Obiegbunam and Abah, 2023).

The position of the United Nations on the self-determination quest of the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) is dictated by a multitude of complex dynamics. Among them are the underpinnings of international politics, and the vested economic interests of the globally powerful five permanent member states of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). These aspects, among others, incredibly mould the response strategy of the U.N. to IPOB's demands.

Political intricacies that underpin international relations indisputably have a profound influence on the perspective of the United Nations regarding IPOB's aspiration for sovereignty. As the U.N. is an organization weaved of many nations, it is continually tasked with the complex challenge of managing numerous sensitive diplomatic ties. It delicately balances a mosaic of divergent interests. It's plausible that the U.N.'s stance towards IPOB's agitation for self-determination has a significant influence from the intricate political dynamics of its member states, especially those with a strong interest in maintaining peace and stability in Nigeria. The U.N. often sidesteps potential international relations conflicts by carefully addressing IPOB's proposed reforms. The importance of upholding its principles while also being responsive to geopolitical complexities is ever-present. The dance between the constantly shifting political landscape and the U.N. decision-making process shapes the U.N.'s overall handling of IPOB's aspiration for sovereignty. A comprehensive understanding of these complex geopolitical dynamics allows for a better grasp of the U.N.'s stance on a highly sensitive and regionally impactful issue (Chukwudi, Gberevbie, Abasilim, and Imhonopi, 2019), (Shedrack, 2020), (Nimfel and Anijide, 2022), (Nwabueze and Ezebuenyi, 2019), (Alalade and Ayomola, 2019), (Kanu and Iwuh, 2023), (Aliyu, 2022), (Obiegbunam and Abah, 2023).

Economic interests of the powerful nations of the U.N. Security Council are critical influencers of the United Nations' stance

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regarding the Indigenous People of Biafra's push for self-determination. Concertedly, the economic interest of nations like the United Kingdom (UK), United States (US) and China doing significant trade with Nigeria often weighs on U.N.'s stance on IPOB. Nigeria is renowned in the economic world, boasting a robust economy and strong ties to other large economies like the UK, US and China, largely due to its status as Africa's largest economy and prominent oil producer. The UN, being an organization keen on the promotion of global and economic stability, takes into account these dynamics when forming its stance on such a multifaceted issue. When shaping its perspective, the UN considers the potential implications on world trade. These considerations are informed by the knowledge that periodic conflicts can affect the global economy. The potential ramifications on existing and prospective business interests also stand as significant considerations (Emeka, 2019), (Apikins, 2020), (Obiefule, Saibu, and Akerele, 2023), (Chukwudi et al., 2019), (Ikeanyibe et al., 2021), (Oketokun, Ayomola, and Adesiyun, 2022), (Eboh, 2020), (Okeke et al., 2019), (Nduba et al., 2020), (Abba, Ani, Ayatse, and Agullah, 2023).

### **The U.N.'s Indifference Towards IPOB's Agitation and the Right of Indigenous People in Nigeria.**

The Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) is a separatist group seeking independence for the Igbo people of southeastern Nigeria. IPOB claims that the Igbo continue to suffer marginalization and persecution in Nigeria since the Biafran civil war of 1967-1970, when several million Igbo civilians died, mostly from starvation (Smith, 2020). While initially committed to nonviolent struggle, IPOB argues that the Nigerian state's violent suppression of its protests and silencing of calls for a referendum on Biafran independence have left no choice but to use force (Adibe, 2017). The United Nations and wider international community have remained largely indifferent to IPOB's plight, failing to publicly condemn the Nigerian government's crackdown on the group. This

article argues that the U.N.'s indifference has enabled ongoing human rights violations against IPOB members as well as undermining the recognized right to self-determination.

IPOB represents the continued aspirations for Igbo self-determination stemming from the unresolved wounds of the 1967-1970 Nigerian Civil War. The Igbos lost this war for an independent Biafra amidst widespread starvation and civilian deaths (Garba, 2021). Scholars argue the failure to reconcile and rebuild the southeast after the war enabled ongoing Igbo marginalization (Chigozie, 2020). While the Igbos are one of Nigeria's three largest ethnic groups, Igbo leaders argue the community faces social, economic and political exclusion (Eme & Onyishi, 2014). IPOB claims that only an independent Biafran state can ensure Igbo security and economic prosperity.

Amidst IPOB's growing popularity between 2015-2017, the UN and international community remained largely silent. No UN agency or international civil society organization publicly criticized Nigeria's violent suppression of IPOB protests, or called for senior officials to be held accountable for human rights violations against the group (Amaechi, 2019). Scholars argue the international community's indifference emboldened the Nigerian government to intensify its crackdown on IPOB (Okoli & Uzuegbunam, 2018).

By late 2016, over 150 IPOB members had been killed and the group was effectively outlawed (Olamikan, 2016). In September 2017, the Nigerian government designated IPOB as a terrorist organization despite no evidence it had used violence (Felter, Renwick, and Cheatam, 2021). This designation was used to intensify the crackdown in the southeast. Security forces raided IPOB leaders' homes, arrested or killed suspected members, and used live ammunition on gatherings (Amnesty International, 2018).

Amidst this escalating crisis, the UN remained silent, failing to defend IPOB's right to peaceful

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self-determination or condemn state violence against the group. The UN's indifference has been linked to its long-standing support for Nigerian unity and fear of alienating a major power (Uzodike & Chibundu, 2021). However, scholars argue this has come at the cost of enabling human rights violations (Okoli & Uzuegbunam, 2018). The UN's silence has undermined its legitimacy in the eyes of Igbo and reinforced IPOB's claims that the international system does not care for Igbo rights (Chigozie, 2020).

The core issue at stake is the tension between IPOB's right to pursue self-determination versus Nigeria's territorial integrity. Self-determination is enshrined in the UN Charter as a fundamental right, built on the principles of equity and human rights (Lowe, 2021). However, it exists in tension with the principle of territorial integrity, which privileges state sovereignty (Scharf, 2021). Under international law, self-determination can be pursued through peaceful, democratic means. But the Nigerian government rejects any referendum on Biafran independence as unconstitutional (Adibe, 2017).

Scholars argue the UN has historically prioritized territorial integrity over self-determination claims in Africa (Okhonmina, 2009). During the Biafran war, the UN defended Nigerian unity while largely ignoring the humanitarian crisis unfolding in Biafra (Garba, 2021). In the 1990s, the UN similarly rejected self-determination for the Ogoni minority while remaining silent on state violence against them (Offiong, 2001).

By again failing to support IPOB's right to peaceful self-determination or condemn state repression, scholars argue the UN is enabling human rights violations and failing the Igbo people as it did during the Biafran war (Chigozie, 2020; Ojewale, 2021). Its indifference reinforces arguments that the UN privileges state sovereignty over human rights in Africa (Ezeani, 2018).

## **Conclusion**

The United Nations (UN) has shown a surprising indifference towards the agitation for self-determination by the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) in Nigeria. Despite IPOB's peaceful advocacy for a referendum on the independence of the Biafran region, the UN's response has been notably passive.

This indifference can be attributed to several factors. Firstly, the complex political dynamics and divergent interests of UN member states, particularly those with significant economic ties to Nigeria, have influenced the UN's stance. Secondly, the UN's prioritization of territorial integrity over self-determination claims, driven by concerns about potential instability and the disintegration of existing states, has further contributed to its indifference. Lastly, the economic interests of powerful nations on the UN Security Council, such as the United Kingdom, United States, and China, which have substantial trade and business interests in Nigeria, have also played a role in shaping the UN's response.

The lack of action and formal recognition of IPOB's agitation by the UN has had significant implications. It has undermined the protection of the rights of indigenous people in Nigeria, particularly the Igbo community. The Nigerian government's crackdown on IPOB, which has included the use of violence, arrests, and the designation of the group as a terrorist organization, has resulted in numerous human rights violations. The UN's failure to condemn or address these violations has further exacerbated the situation.

Moreover, the UN's indifference has reinforced the perception among the Igbo people that the international community is indifferent to their plight. This has not only led to a sense of alienation and disillusionment among the Igbo people but has also undermined the UN's legitimacy in upholding the principles of self-determination and human rights.

Finally, the UN's indifference towards the agitation for self-determination by IPOB has had far-reaching implications, affecting not

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just the indigenous people of Nigeria, but also the credibility of the UN itself. It is imperative for the UN to reassess its stance and take proactive measures to address these issues, in

order to truly uphold its commitment to promoting peace, justice, and human rights.

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