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## STATE RESPONSE TO IPOB SEPARATIST PROTESTS IN SOUTH EAST, NIGERIA: THE PLACE OF HUMAN RIGHTS, DEMOCRACY AND DEVELOPMENT

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### **Abstract**

*The study explored Nigerian state approach in addressing the IPOB separatist protests and how the government has been implicated as being repressive through the military, and the implications on human rights, democracy and development. The article combined secondary and primary data to gather evidence of repressive acts by the government. The study used a combination of quantitative and qualitative data sources, comprising 16 in-depth interviews and 996 copies of correctly filled and completed structured questionnaire, which were complemented with earlier sourced secondary data. From the data analyses, it is found among others that the Nigerian state adopts repressive acts such as arrest and intimidation of protesters, shooting of live ammunition, declaration of dusk to dawn curfew and unnecessary show of force. The study equally found that the state actions have increased public distrust of government and law enforcement agents and shrunk the civic space which has impacted on human rights. Again the action of the state undermines democratic consolidation and erodes good governance, and also undermines constitutionalism, the rule of law and due process leading to low democratic rating of Nigeria. Lastly it was found that the state response impinged on economic opportunities leading to debilitating livelihood. The study recommends among others the adoption of discursive approach instead of brutal force. Democracies survive through checks and balances; the legislature must checkmate the excessive activities as it relates to the deployment of military.*

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**Keywords:** Separatism, Government, Human Rights, Repression, Development

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### **Introduction**

Historically, the trajectory of African nations towards statehood has been characterized by diverse forms of instability, uncertainty and different forms of quest for emancipation. Even after the colonial experience on the African continent, the independent sovereign states of Africa have continuously been bothered by the right to self-determination and separatist movements (Matsumoto, 2019). However, successful secession has been rare, after Eritrea's independence from Ethiopia in 1993, the only second case of successful secession in postcolonial Africa is South Sudan (Tull, 2011). Furthermore, notwithstanding the limited success rate of separatist movements recorded in the continent, there are still numerous regions, ethnic groups, religious groups, and clans that are still wrangling to separate due to perceived or absolute disenfranchisement by state distribution of economic resources, regional exclusivity relating to the control of power, and provision of public services etc., (Kaplan, 2012). A typical example of such states with persistent agitation, attempting to do what Eritrea and South Sudan did are regions, such as Biafra in Nigeria, Azawad in Mali and Katanga in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) (Bamfo, 2012).

Although there have been multiple scholarly discourses on the political crisis in Nigeria since the post-civil-war era (Williams 1983; Omeje 2005; Igwe and Amadi 2021), this paper investigates the complex interplay between separatist protest, human rights, and state responses, focusing specifically on the case of the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) agitation and protest in the South-Eastern region of Nigeria. The IPOB, a group advocating for the secession of the South-East region from Nigeria, has sparked intense debate and heightened tensions, prompting a robust governmental response (Owoeye et al., 2022). This response has raised serious concerns regarding the government's adherence to human rights principles in its efforts to quell the separatist protest. The spread of human rights violations across post-

colonial African nations has been attributed to factors such as - the colonial experience and military incursion two epochs before the dawn of democratic governance (Mrisho and Norah, 2024). With Nigeria's return to democracy in 1999, there seems to be a resurgence of separatist protests against post-civil-war economic marginalization of the Igbo that have persisted. This is basically because democracy opens up the social space for civic engagement (Achebe 1983, 2012 and Amadi 2021). Therefore, exploring civil agitation and state response aids in understanding the nature of Nigerian democracy (Onuoha, 2011; Ukiwo and Chukwuma 2012; ICG 2015; Ibeanu, Orji, and Iwuamadi 2016).

For instance, in Nigeria, Ayobola and Ayomola (2020), asserted that the history of the Nigerian state response to protest shows the adoption of force, starting from the adoption of Police action by Gowon which metamorphosed into full-blown military engagement in 1967, the arrest of Ralph Uwazuruike and incarceration of many MASSOB members and other acts of violence by Obasanjo (Duruji, 2012) to the continuous arrest and detention of Nnamdi Kanu; launching of "Operation Python Dance" and its attacks on civilian protesters culminating with the proscription of IPOB by Buhari. Similarly, Adibe (2017) asserted that the Nigerian government has always branded separatist protesters as "troublemakers" and sent law enforcement agencies to use force to quell their agitations. Again, it has been argued that the use of the military and the unleashing of violence in civil-related conflicts in Nigeria has caused more damage than resolve the problems that warranted the operations (Opara, 2019). Similarly, Iwuoha and Aniche (2022) found that during the #EndSARS protest in Nigeria, the state deployed the military with heavy firearms against unarmed protesters which escalated the conflict from civil disobedience against a police unit known as Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) to a demand for a change of government.

The Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) is a separatist group advocating for the secession of the South Eastern region from the Nigerian State, seeking to establish an independent state of Biafra (Ekechukwu et al 2022). The group's origins can be traced back to the Biafran War (1967-1970), a period of intense ethnic and political conflict that resulted in the death of millions. The sentiments of marginalization and discrimination experienced by the Igbo people during the war remains a potent force driving IPOB's activism. The IPOB agitators are of the opinion that the present Nigerian state does not recognize the interest of the South-Eastern region virtually in every sector of the society. Again, while IPOB's activities have fluctuated in intensity over the years, recent years have witnessed a resurgence of the group's influence, particularly within the South-Eastern region (Jacob et al, 2020). This resurgence has been fuelled by a number of factors, including; perceived marginalization - the Igbo people, who predominantly reside in the South East, have long felt marginalized in the Nigerian political and economic spheres. This perception of systemic discrimination has fuelled a sense of alienation and dissatisfaction with the current federal structure of Nigeria (Owoeye et al, 2022). IPOB accused the Nigerian state of economic disparities and political repression against the South-East region (Obichili, et al, 2023), South-Eastern region suffers from significant economic disparities compared to other parts of the country. IPOB often cites these inequalities as further evidence of the region's marginalization. IPOB has frequently accused the Nigerian government of suppressing its activities and violating the human rights of its members. These accusations have contributed to a sense of persecution and strengthened the group's resolve (Ekechukwu et al, 2022). Consequently, IPOB protest and state response have impacted on economic activities within the region disruptively, leading to revenue and job losses. IPOB's agitations have also led to frequent clashes with security forces, resulting in loss of lives and destruction of property. This has heightened tension and instability in the region. Similarly, IPOB's activities have exacerbated ethnic divisions within the region, fuelling animosity between the Igbo people and other ethnic groups (Elem, 2023).

The IPOB issue has elicited scholars interest in recent times due to the persistent chaos associated with IPOB struggle in South-East Nigeria. For instance, Okaisabor (2023) examined the actions of the Indigenous People Biafra (IPOB) separatist movement in South East Nigeria and altruistic political solutions to its quest for self-determination. IPOB grievances, strategies, and approaches and how the struggle had been sustained were explored and it found among others that the Igbo ethnic group is still politically alienated several years after the civil war, fuelling sustained IPOB agitation. Elem's (2023)

study titled “Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) and Sit at Home Order: Its Socio-Economic Implications on Ebonyi State, Nigeria”. The study found that IPOB sit-at-home order has impoverished the people of Ebonyi state due to lack of commercial activities it brought to the people. Again, Henry et al (2020) work “The Biafran State & the Rise of IPOB: A Crack on Nigeria’s National Integration”. The study equally associated poor government performance led to the rise and persistence of IPOB in South-East. The study by Obiukwu and Njoku (2024) “Social Movements And National Security in Nigeria: A Study Of The Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB)”, using secondary data the study found that although the IPOB movement is fueled by a feeling of victimization and marginalization among the Igbos, the movement constitutes a threat to national security. However, none of these studies examined government response to IPOB related issues using the secondary and primary data. This is despite the Nigerian state proscription of IPOB as a terrorist organization and the continuous altercation between the state and IPOB. Therefore this study aims to contribute to knowledge on IPOB struggle by examining state response focusing specifically on human rights, democracy and development.

**Table 1: Nigerian State Response to IPOB Unarmed Protesters in South East Nigeria**

Incident/Location/Year	State Response	State Perpetrators	Location	Year
IPOB members Protest over the Arrest of Mazi Nnamdi Kanu. (The Nation, 2 <sup>nd</sup> December 2015)	Sporadic shooting of live ammunition Arrest and detention. Arrest and forced to swim in muddy waters. Extra Judicial Killing and mass burial.	The Nigerian Military	Aba (Abia State) Onitsha (Anambra State) Owerri (Imo State)	(2015).
Commemoration of Biafra Day Protest. (Amnesty International, 2016)	Destruction of private properties. Breaking into the homes of young people in the wee hours. Stopping commercial vehicles and forcing all passengers to walk long distances with their hands raised up	The Nigerian Military	Aba (Abia State) Onitsha (Anambra State) Owerri (Imo State)	2016
Operation Python Dance (Deployment of Military to clamp down on protesters). (Vanguard News, 17 September, 2016)	Forceful closure of markets (24-hour curfew on movement) later reduced to dusk to dawn curfew.	The Nigerian Military	Umuahia and Aba (Abia State); Onitsha (Anambra State); Owerri (Imo State)	2016/2017
Commemoration of Biafra Day. (Amnesty International, 2017)	Clam down of protesters with tear gas. Arrest and detention of protesters Shooting life ammunition on protesters. Several persons were injured and a few dead	The Nigerian Military	Aba (Abia State); Onitsha (Anambra State); Owerri (Imo State)	2017

IPOB women on a Peaceful protest on the whereabouts of their leader Mazi Nnamdi Kanu and his parents. (The Biafran Digest, 2018)	The majority of the women were arrested and malhandled. Dozens detained in police station for more than six days	The Nigerian Police	Aba (Abia State); Owerri (Imo State). (2018)	2018
IPOB peaceful gathering. (Daily Post, 2019)	Shot at IPOB members, more than 70 persons allegedly died.	The Nigerian Military and Police	Aba (Abia State) Owerri (Imo State)	2019

**Source:** Authors Compilation 2023.

Table 1 shows that between 2015 and 2019, protesting IPOB members were reportedly intimidated, arrested, detained, harassed and killed. The IPOB practically desisted from public protest and gatherings after the group was proscribed as a terrorist organization by the Nigerian government (Adangor, 2018). The table shows that the Nigerian state response to IPOB members violates human rights and contradicts democratic tenets of freedom; the state action no doubt impacted on the socio-economic development of South east. From the data compiled above it seems the military has greatly deviated from its primary role of defending citizens to repressing citizens of Nigeria.

This article aims to critically examine Nigerian government's response to IPOB's agitation, scrutinizing its adherence to human rights principles. By analyzing government's actions, the paper aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the complexities surrounding separatism, human rights, and state responses in a democratic context. Ultimately, this paper seeks to highlight the importance of exploring non-kinetic strategies, including dialogue, negotiations, and the protection of human rights, as more effective and sustainable solutions to address the challenges posed by separatist movements. The study's findings will provide valuable insights for policymakers, civil society organizations, and international actors seeking to promote human rights, democracy, and sustainable peace in Nigeria.

## Literature Review

### Conceptualizing Human Right violation in Africa

Human rights are moral principles or norms meant to protect every person from severe political, legal, and social abuse of their inalienable rights (Mrisho & Norah, 2024). Such rights are regularly considered inalienable fundamental rights to which all human beings are inherently ordained or certified at birth regardless of skin color, sex, religion, kin, ethnic orientation, nationality, or any other status (Msuya, 2017). Human rights are not considered to be selective with country or regions, rather they are seen as universal rights applicable to every person all over the world (Mrisho & Norah, 2024). Human rights violation constitutes acts which deny individual or group the liberty to vote in an election, participate in protest, and associate in interest groups perceived to promote the livelihood and well-being of the person or group. It is expected of democratic states to protect civil liberties such as human rights as it constitutes core principle of democratization (Lassen, 2017). While considerable success has been achieved with regard to democratization and human rights protection in Western societies not much could be said in African states (Dakuku, 2021). For Ihonvbere (2003) the post-independence states in Africa instead of serving as agents for the protection of citizens have rather served as weapons of police brutality, intimidation, murder, and all forms of crime against humanity, repression and excessive use of kinetic force. Similarly, Abati (2020) maintains that the prevalence of police brutality in Africa is as a result of political leadership and less of colonial legacy. For instance Ake (1981) argued that the state is specifically a modality of class domination, in some cases the institutions of domination are autotomized, becoming largely distinct from the ruling classes.

Again, for Buyse (2018), in order to protect the interest of the dominant ruling class the state is increasingly reducing the civic spaces for the masses. In order to achieve this, the state apparatus for

repression such as the police and the military are emboldened to crassly violate human rights and commit crimes against humanity (Buyse, 2018; Margulies, 2018; Iwuoha, 2020). Consequently, public distrust and resentment against the state fuelling separatist agitation has become a reoccurring decimal (Malena, 2015; Clark, 2016). Human rights violation abound in West Africa, and this has increased violent conflicts and civil strife within the region (Annan, 2014). According to Human Rights Watch (2003) report, West African nations have become a vast plane of sundry abuses such as sexual and gender-based violence, reprisal killings, extra-judicial beating and killings, high social injustices, repressive and brutal leadership, illegal arrest and detention, violation of court order, unequal distribution of state resources, and impunity by state officials and their apparatus.

Iwuoha and Aniche (2022), asserted that following political independence, postcolonial institutions such as the police did not change the colonial attributes as agents of the state against unionists, students and political opposition, protest and social movement. To the desperate power elite that mostly rely on corruption and repression to retain their grip on power, universal human rights meant little or nothing to them (Ihonvbere, 2001). This is why Ejibunu (2007) stated that the Nigerian state has not fared better regarding human rights abuse and violations. He further identified the violation of the human rights of local citizens as one of the major factors leading to Niger Delta militancy. Moreover, the Nigerian state deploys legal and regulatory tools to legitimize their tyranny, repression, formal violation and the restriction of human rights (Iwuoha and Aniche, 2022). For example, section 45 (1) of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (as amended) provides, inter alia, that “Nothing in Sects. 37, 38, 39, 40 and 41 of this Constitution shall invalidate any law that is reasonably justifiable in a democratic society; in the interest of defense, public safety, public order, public morality or public health; or; for the purpose of protecting the rights and freedom or other persons”. These regulatory instruments justified excessive restrictions on human rights, as it; required law enforcement officers to subjectively arrest without warrant, confiscate and demolish properties, and obtain information from any person or organization without any restraint. Nigerians preferred democracy rather than military rule with the optimism that democracy would enhance human rights protection and stimulate development (Omotola, 2007) this is mainly why Nigerians enthusiastically welcomed the return of democracy in 1999. However, little or no study has been done to systematically investigate Nigerian State response to separatist protesters and the implications of State response to separatist protesters on human rights, democracy and national development. This is the main thrust of this article.

## **Material and Methods**

The data was collected in South East Nigeria. The South East is one of Nigeria's six geo-political zones, comprising five States: Abia, Anambra, Enugu, Imo, and Ebonyi. The South-East states are seeking for the Biafran State. These States were the core region that fought the Nigerian Civil War following perceived political exclusion by Nigeria. This region is predominantly inhabited by the Igbo people, who have historically advocated for greater autonomy or independence. The call for a Biafran state is rooted in a desire for self-determination, cultural preservation, and economic development. The modern Biafran movement has its root in the 1967-1970 Biafran War, which was sparked by tensions between the Igbo people and the Nigerian government. Today, groups like the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) continue to advocate for an independent Biafran state. The Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), currently seeking to secede from this region from the rest of Nigeria, belong to this geo-political zone. We adopted the mixed research design for the purpose of data collection (Krol and Neri, 2009). This research design was considered appropriate based on the fact that it incorporates the quantitative and qualitative methods of data collection for the study. The study also used primary sources for data collection comprising the questionnaire and semi-structured interview guide. The quantitative data was collected using the questionnaire which was highly structured. The questionnaire interrogated state response to separatist protesters and its implications on human rights, democracy and development. The semi-structured in-depth phenomenological interviews (IDI) guide was used for qualitative data. The phenomenological approach was chosen because it emphasizes what matters to or is at stake for specific individuals around shared

events (Mattingly, 2010). This was deployed to gather qualitative data to complement the quantitative data in the study. The IDI guide was completely semi-structured questions with necessary probes.

Based on the estimated population, Abia - has 4,265,920, Anambra - has 6,358,311, and Imo - has 6,347,078 inhabitants (Igwenagu, (2021). A sample size of 400 was generated using the Taro Yamani formula. The selection of the three states is based on the fact that most IPOB related state attacks occurred in these states. For instance, the first Operation Python Dance was launched in Abia state - Aba, and Umuahia the home city of Mazi Nnamdi Kanu the IPOB leader. Also most IPOB protesters have always been attacked in Onitsha the commercial nerve center of Anambra state and the IPOB is alleged to have erected a camp in the Okigwe axis of Imo State leading to perpetual military occupation of the area. The quantitative data was collected using the questionnaire which was highly structured. The questionnaire interrogated state response to separatist protesters and its implications on human rights, democracy and development. The semi-structured in-depth phenomenological interviews (IDI) guide was used for qualitative data. This was deployed to gather qualitative data to complement the quantitative data in the study. The IDI guide was completely semi-structured questions with necessary probes. The data was analyzed thematically using deductive and inductive methods to identify rich and detailed patterns of meaning in the data set (Braun & Clarke, 2019). The audio recordings were transcribed verbatim, read many times, and cross-checked for accuracy. The authors coded ten transcripts using participants' own words and phrases (Linneberg and Korsgaard, 2019), and then generated the framework codes that guided the analysis; the essence of this procedure was to ensure transparency, trustworthiness, and analytical rigour (Gioia, Corley, and Hamilton, 2013). The quantitative data were manually sorted and coded into the SPSS version 20.0. The following section presents the findings drawn from the analysis.

## Results

The data generated from the qualitative and quantitative instrument are presented. The names used to present the data are pseudo names and not real names of the respondents. The qualitative data are thus presented thematically.

### Freedom of protest and government response

The respondents' recognized the military as state agency mostly deployed against IPOB protesters; although in trying to quench the #EndSars protest, a nationwide protest in Nigeria, the police were also involved. The government reportedly used tear gas, water cannons, live bullets, and other forms of brutality by the police on the protesters (George, 2020). The deployment of the military to muscle IPOB protesters is further captured by Adebayor (2023) who, while presenting the report of the Centre for Democracy and Development in West (CDD) said that "military action by the government in 2016 worsened the IPOB crisis". The report equally suggests that since the launch of "Operation Python Dance" in 2016, the South-Eastern region has witnessed an intensification of confrontations between IPOB and the Nigerian security forces, especially the police, the Department of State Services (DSS), and the military. The respondents stated thus: *The Nigerian authorities have not accorded IPOB or anyone at that, freedom of protest as the right of citizens, instead of letting people protest and let the government know their displeasure; the government will unleash the military and other security forces against dissent protesters (Godson, Male, aged 70 – 75 years; Reverend, Imo).*

Another participant **Okechukwu** shared a similar opinion stating that; *the right to protest has been denied IPOB members. There is a standing government order to the police and Nigerian Military to arrest and detain IPOB members who organize any form of protests or rallies (Male; aged 30 – 35 years; Private Business owner).* When the same question was posed to a female University lecturer she affirmed thus: *no, there is no freedom of protest at all... No such right has been accorded to IPOB members. A visit to some of the police stations might reveal IPOB members arrested and detained by the police (Sandra; Female; aged 40 – 45 years; University lecturer)"*

*Another respondent stated that...*

*For me, I am confused with the role of the military. This is because, during the time of Operation Python Dance here in Aba, it felt like the second Civil War started. The entire city was completely militarized. For instance, fighter jets were hovering in the air, and military tanks, machine guns, etc. were deployed. The City felt like a war zone and even now the military is more present on the South-East roads than in the rest of Nigeria (Emeka; Male; age 70 – 75 years; retired civil servant).*

Similarly, **Emeke** questioned why the government always deploys the military against civilians yet unable to use the same military might against criminal elements causing insecurity in other regions of Nigeria. *It has always been the military that is used by the government, against any form of protest in Nigeria. They used the military against #EndSars protesters and shot people at the Lekki toll gate. They have consistently used the military against IPOB and several other groups like the Shiites in the North. I wonder why such military might is not deployed against the bandits, kidnappers and other known terrorist organizations causing insecurity in Nigeria, every day it's either farmers and herders are clashing, kidnapping school children and even transporters, did you hear about the Abuja-Kaduna rail kidnapping and several others? What exactly has our military become... a stooge of the executive. This is impunity (Ikenna, Male; Age 20 – 35 years; Postgraduate student).*

### **Nature of State actions against IPOB members**

The respondents' narratives suggest multi-dimensional human rights abuses by the Nigerian government on Biafran protesters; although the government argues that it has always acted in the interest of national security from South-Eastern region of Nigeria (Opara, 2019). However, other reports suggest differently. For instance, Amnesty International (2016) stated that the Nigerian security forces, spear-headed by the military, campaign against IPOB, has executed at least 150 peaceful pro-Biafra protesters in the South-East of Nigeria. The report further narrated the account of a victim Ngozi (not real name) whose husband said he was in a military vehicle having been shot on his abdomen alongside six others who were already dead. She narrated thus:

*"He started whispering and said they just stopped [the vehicle]. He was scared they would kill the remaining three of them that were alive...He paused and told me they were coming closer. I heard gunshots and I did not hear a word from him after that"* (Ngozi, a 28-year-old mother of one whose husband was killed). The following day Ngozi found the body of her husband in a nearby mortuary. Amnesty International equally reviewed videos of IPOB members gathered in Aba National High School that were surrounded by military and fired ammunition at them without any prior response. Yet, another report from Iwuoha and Aniche (2022) found that 29 protesters were killed by Nigerian Army and the Nigerian Police while containing the rapidly growing #EndSARs protests. This shows that the Nigerian government has a consistent pattern of responding to agitations and protesters repressively. Some of the participants narrated thus... *The IPOB group has been denied freedom of protest, if they try it the military will 'kpai' them as usual. That fear has forced them not to protest (Bright, Male; aged 35 – 40 years; University lecturer).* The word Kpai is (to be killed in Nigerian parlance). The respondents suggest that if the group members embark on protest they might likely be killed.

Another respondent said: *Let's be very specific on this, during the Operation Python Dance the government unleashed massive military in Aba, Umuahia and some other places, I am not sure of what the military were ordered to do, but we saw them arrest young people, people died during stampede in Ahia Ohuru market. Some were shot, we saw video of youths forced to lay down in muddy water bodies. Unfortunately some of these persons were not even IPOB member (Joy, Female; age 40 – 45 years; University lecturer).*

Another respondent aligned his view with the above: *the military adopts intimidation as a modus operandi, they will arrest, detain and flog the person. You heard when Chiwentalugo (a popular Nollywood) actor was arrested... What was his offense? They said he wore a dress made with IPOB flag. Then Nnamdi Kanu himself, despite countless court orders to release him, has he been released?... the government violates*

court order... You see I can go on and on. It is just intimidation, you know the South-East was defeated in the Civil War, as such we are still being treated as weak zone (Fred, Male; age 70 -75 years; Retiree).

**Table 2: Implications of State response to unarmed IPOB protesters on human rights, democracy and development**

Category	Remarks	Frequency
<b>Human rights</b>	Shrinking the Civic Space	22.9
	Increase public distrust of government and law enforcement agencies.	45.1
	This leads to the emergence of armed groups	13.9
	Radicalization of some IPOB protesters	18.1
<b>Democracy</b>	It undermines democratic consolidation and erodes good governance	19.5
	It undermines constitutionalism, the rule of law and due process	55.0
	Creation of a wide divide between the political elites and the mass	8.2
	Erodes public trust in state institutions	16.3
<b>Development</b>	State response Shrinks economic opportunities	39.7
	Forced businesses to close down in the South-East	22.3
	Destroyed public and private properties	11.7
	This leads to debilitating livelihood	26.3

**Source: Fieldwork (2023)**

Table 2 indicates that the majority of the respondents affirmed that state response on IPOB protesters impacted negatively on the human rights of the protesters. About 449 respondents representing 45.1 percent of the respondents confirmed that the repressive nature of state response to IPOB members increase the rate of public distrust of government and law enforcement agencies 229 respondents representing 22.9 percent said it perhaps led to emergence of armed; 180 respondents representing 18.1 percent noted that it radicalized some IPOB members; 138 respondents representing 13.9 percent maintained that government response shrinks the civic space for engagement.

In addition, 558 respondents representing 56.0 percent agreed that state response to IPOB protesters undermines constitutionalism, the rule of law and due process; 194 respondents representing 19.5 percent insisted that state response to IPOB protesters undermines democratic consolidation and erodes good governance; while 162 respondents representing 16.3 percent affirmed that state response erodes public trust in state institutions. On democratic consolidation the table shows that 82 respondents representing 8.2 percent conclude by stating that state response to IPOB creates a wide divide between the political elites and the masses.

Lastly, on the issue of national development, the study found that 395 respondents representing 39.7 percent affirmed that state response shrinks economic opportunities. This is followed by 262 respondents representing 26.3 percent who maintained that state response to IPOB protesters leads to debilitating livelihood. 222 respondents representing 22.3 percent agreed that state response to IPOB protesters forced businesses to close down in the South-East; while 117 respondents representing 11.7 percent insisted that the state response to the group destroyed public and private properties.

## Discussion

The repressive approach of the government violating the human rights of protesting IPOB members has failed to eliminate the IPOB ideology. Instead, it has led to the emergence of other forms of challenges amidst deleterious socio-economic outcomes and political alienation. From the findings, the Nigerian military has been implicitly involved in perpetuating repressive acts against IPOB members, although, the primary responsibility of the military is to defend a nation's territorial integrity against external aggression (Adesina, 1999). However, the IPOB is not an external aggressor, as such, the force the military deploys



against them becomes questionable in intent and purpose. According to the Nigerian Police Act (2020) part II sub-section 4, it is the primary responsibility of the police to maintain public safety, law and order within the nation. However, the activities of the military in civil matters within the nation emanate from a constitutional provision. The current Nigerian Constitution was written by the military regime before the current democratic dispensation began, as such many have perceived the constitution as not representing a democratic instrument of governance but rather a resemblance to the military dictatorial manual. The deficiencies in the Nigerian 1999 constitution have led civil society organizations, rights advocacy groups and other concerned citizens to demand constitutional amendments and possible changes to the constitution (Policy and Legal Advocacy Centre (PLAC, 2014; Abiodun, 2022).

The 1999 Nigerian constitution section 217(2) (c) which gives the military locus standee to be involved in internal security operations in Nigeria provides thus, in relations to the roles the military in Nigeria, “suppressing insurrection and acting in civil authorities to restore order when called upon to do so by the president but subject to such conditions as may be prescribed by Act of the National Assembly” (1999, CFRN). In a similar vein section 217(2) (c) of the 1999 CFRN was reinforced by section (8)(1) and (3) of the Armed Forces Acts, Laws of the Federation of Nigeria (LFN) 2004. It stressed that the troops should use necessary force to quell crisis resulting in deaths, injuries and damage of properties. This section is silent on what exactly constitutes “necessary force” for instance, water cannon, rubber bullets or deployment of armoured tanks, shooting of live ammunition, arrest and detention for several weeks.

On the nature of government actions against the secessionist group, data from this study heavily indict the military of using repressive measures against the IPOB protesters. There is no gain in reiterating that shooting live ammunition on protesters as narrated by the respondents does not translate to necessary force stipulated in the Armed Forces Act (2004). This is why Afeno S (2014) vehemently condemned the deployment of the military in peace maintenance in Nigeria, stating that the use of military force mostly results in the loss of lives, properties destroyed, fear and anxiety, and destroying mutual trust and confidence between the populace and the institution. The argument supports findings from this study as the respondents alluded that the military created anxiety through the deployment of heavy fighter jets, and the dusk-to-dawn curfew in Aba that led to massive economic losses, yet these measures have not adequately addressed the IPOB ideological quest; instead it has cast aspersions on the Nigerian government capacity to handle protest and protesters. Azinge (2013) expressed a similar condemnation of the military approach within the Nigerian populace. He argued that the military is not without its challenges. For instance, since the military is not usually trained for internal security-keeping operations, unlike other civil authorities like the police, as a result, the military consistently engages in acts that violate human rights.

Notwithstanding, it is pertinent to state that the military plays an essential role in the body polity as it provides the needed security networks to safeguard National boundaries against external aggression and also, in aid with other civil authorities, ensure peaceful coexistence and sovereignty. The Nigerian military has also done excellently well in peace keeping operation in aid to other troubled African nations (United Nations, 2023). Why is the military seemingly failing in its core responsibility within the Nigerian state? Perhaps the answers could be inferred from the demeanour of the executive arm of government which deploys the military through its rank and file. For instance, before 2015, when there was a change in government, the IPOB had always been protesting. There were no casualties because the previous government approached the separatist group pragmatically without deploying military forces. The new administration deployed the military to crush protesting.

On sustained social development of the South-East, the study found that the declaration of ‘Operation Python Dance’ and the deployment of soldiers across all the streets in South-East Nigeria not only caused terrible socio-economic losses but led to loss of lives and other casualties thereby degenerating the IPOB situation, this finding is in tandem with those of (Ibeanu, Orji, and Iwuamadi 2016). The excessive use of military force could be linked to several years of military regimes in Nigeria and despite having adopted democratic rule since 1999, military culture persists.

The government's repressive acts are to be associated with Nigeria's regrettably lagging in the global Democracy Index ranking. According to the Economist Intelligence Unit's (2023) report on democracy index, Nigeria is described as a "hybrid regime" and globally ranked 104 out of 166 countries in the 2023 Democratic Index. Nigeria also scored very low on other indicators such as: functioning of government (3.93 points), electoral process / pluralism (5.17 points), political participation (3.89 points), political culture (3.75 points) and civil liberties (4.41 points). It is argued that this poor democratic environment inhibits good governance and the emergence of full democracy (Iwuoha and Aniche, 2022). It also reduces public trust and confidence in the state and its leadership. The study found that the government's repressive act involves violation of human rights typified by increased public distrust of government and law enforcement agencies, and shrinking of public space. Similarly, in July 2022, an agency of UN the United Nations Human Rights Council Working Group on Arbitrary Detention indicted both the Nigerian and Kenyan governments for the arrest and extraordinary detention, torture and continued detention of Nnamdi Kanu, without due process (Oko, 2022). The Council also urged the Nigerian government to ensure 'immediate release of Nnamdi Kanu unconditionally' and pay him adequate compensation for arbitrary violation of his fundamental human rights (Oko, 2022), despite this recommendation, Nnamdi Kanu is still under arrest. Nigeria ranks among the top seven countries with the highest level of citizen distrust of government institutions (World Economic Forum, 2018).

There are far-reaching consequences associated with state repression and clampdown on protesters for democracies, development and human rights in Nigeria. This study thus found that state repression of IPOB protesters impacted deleteriously on the economy and livelihood of South-East Nigerian citizens. It contracts the civic spaces, endangers democracy and the rule of law, jeopardizes national security, erodes constitutionalism, and disrupts peace and people's well-being. It also frightens foreign investors, dwindles economic opportunities, and worsens hardship and poverty among citizens. Consequently, it triggers the emergence of armed groups and proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW), looting and criminality, and the emergence of Unknown Gunmen raking havoc in the region (Nwangwu, 2023). Generally, the brutal and coercive use of force to crack down on unarmed protesters results in public distrust of the state and its institutions. This finding supports Ake's (1981) and Althusser's (1970) argument that African states are dominantly repressive states regardless of their democratic status. The repressive responses of Nigerian forces against the IPOB protesters have eroded the confidence of the Nigerian people, including those in the diaspora leading to the formation of IPOB branches across the globe (Busari, 2019).

## Conclusion

With the return of democracy in Nigeria and several other African countries came other unanticipated challenges that leaders grapple to resolve. Democracy opened the civic space for groups to express their disenchantment and grievances hitherto bottled up during the military era. Hence democracy ushered in the proliferation of rights groups demanding divergent forms of equity and social justice ranging from political inclusivity, religious freedom and supremacy, economic inclusivity, gender equity, the extreme separatist groups etc. The study focused on separatism and human rights because these are central issues for state continuity. Also, the effective functionality of the state largely depends on its capacity to address these multi-dynamic challenges. There is, therefore, an urgent need for institutional strengthening, adherence to separation of power and stringent application of checks and balances to curtail the excessive deployment of military on civilian protesters in Nigeria. Perhaps instead of adopting the repressive strategy which is anti-democracy and has equally proved abortive in several attempts, the state could focus more on reintegrating its separatist and other rights groups through multi-level dialogue and discursive engagements with sincere attention towards addressing the core issues motivating the separatist groups instead of the deployment of the military which only escalates the already fragile situation retarding state trust, hampering socio-economic development. Leveraging on dialogue would be more cost effective and result oriented, thereby enhancing Nigeria's rating from a hybrid regime to a true democracy.

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