SEPARATIST GROUPS, POLITICAL INSTABILITY, AND DEMOCRACY IN NIGERIA

Kunle OLAWUNMI
Chrisland University Abeokuta,
Ogun State, Nigeria
myafricantour@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Separatist activities have been one of the most significant challenges confronting most developing countries, particularly Africa. Apart from the Boko Haram insurgency and banditry, the activities of separatist groups in Africa have contributed to political instability and human insecurity in Nigeria, despite a series of measures to curtail their excesses. Though activities of separatist groups are not a recent phenomenon in Nigeria, the country's return to democratic rule and the inability of successive governments to address the core grievances of ethnic groups in the southern region have led to the emergence of separatist groups like the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND), the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB), the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), the Movement for the Oduduwa Republic, or Yoruba Nation. Most worrisome is that these groups have introduced violence into their agitations, increasing the level of insecurity across the regions with no end in sight. Therefore, it is imperative to critically examine the nature of these groups' activities in the build-up to the 2023 general elections and their likely impact on the electoral process and the outcome of the polls. This study would be guided by group theory and secondary sources of data. Preliminary investigations suggest that while the activities of separatist groups greatly influenced the electioneering process, more was needed to affect the elections and their outcome. However, the core issues energizing their activities need to be adequately addressed. This might trigger an offshoot in armed violence induced by separatist groups if the government continues to pay lip service to those structural problems leading to propelling agitations.

Keywords: Separatist groups, Political Instability, Elections

1.0   INTRODUCTION

Within the vast geopolitical area that was later formed together to become Nigeria, it is worthy of note that different groups have existed separately prior to the incursion of the colonialists (Mimoko & Adeyemi, 2005 p. 57), it is with this regard, that the aforementioned scholars describe Nigeria as "a union of diverse largely autonomous ethnic nationalities that had existed under distinct political arrangements like empires, kingdoms, chiefdoms, city-states and caliphate". Without the consent of the various groups, the colonialists fused them into one entity which has become one of the problems of the multi ethnic African States that went through the shackles of colonial experience. The main factors that fuel the agitation for separation revolves around the inability to foster a common sense of identity and national consciousness among the different groups in the country which has yielded the continuous promotion of unhealthy rivalry, inter-ethnic hatred, and even bad governance rooted in division and corruption (Mbanefo, 2018).

These factors turn out to become mechanisms that affect the outcomes of election over time, and the 2023 general elections not left out. Separatist groups have sought for self-determination and autonomy in Nigeria over time which has led the country to witness an upsurge division (Ndukwe, Nwuzor. Nnaji, Ede, & Ejem, 2019). Studies reveal that one of the major concerns uncovered as regards the issue of agitation, is that it is not limited to one or two sections but virtually every geopolitical unit in Nigeria have witnessed such agitation from more than one separatist group (Ndukwe et al, 2019).

There are currently at least three active secessionist movements fighting for the establishment of the Biafra Republic in the South-East alone. The Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB), founded by Ralph Nwazuruike, the Biafra Zionist Federation (BZF), led by Benjamin Igwe Onwuka, and the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), led by Nnamdi Kanu, should be highlighted in this respect. The Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People, led by

the late Ken Saro Wiwa, agitated for the Ogoni Republic, and other militant groups in the South-South, such as the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND), Niger Delta People Volunteer Force (NDPFF), etc., had recently agitated for the Niger Delta Republic. The Niger Delta Avengers (NDA), who also called for the establishment of the Niger Delta Republic and threatened to declare the Niger Delta State on October 1st, 2016, have resumed militancy in the region. The Oodua People's Congress had also occasionally advocated for the Oduduwa Republic in the South-West. The Middle Belt Federation (MBF) has also included the Middle Belt in its call for autonomy.

The Boko Haram insurgency, which was running strong in the North-east, is well-known. This religious cult wanted to establish a distinct Islamic Caliphate there, among other things. The concept of self-determination has always been central to attempts to uphold the rights of secessionists (Ndukwe, et al., 2019). Nigeria is currently dealing with a number of insecurity and unrest-related issues, which have jeopardized the country's very identity (Uche, 2020). It is understandable that the guardians of state authority in Nigeria have not done enough to bring the diverse factions together and foster true unity in order to achieve Nigerian nationalism. One could argue that Nigeria's unity is supernatural insofar as the British colonialists did not obtain the consent of the native peoples before founding the Nigerian state and in light of the fact that the political figures who assumed power after independence did not give the various groups the chance to discuss the terms and conditions of the union. Therefore, it is not surprising that concerns about Nigeria's unity and her continued existence as an indivisible unit have arisen from various parts of the nation at various times. Reviewing the actions allegedly done by the administration to maintain national unity would show that they are insufficient to thwart separatist agitations (Mbanefo,2018).
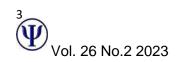
Separatist Groups, Political Instability and Elections in Nigeria: Literature Review
The review of extant literature was done thematically as follows:
In their article titled "Sense and Nonsense in Secessionist Agitation in Nigeria: Implication for National Integration," Ndukwe et al. (2019) made the case that the main causes of the separatist groups' actions and activities in Nigeria over time include intimidation, unfair access to justice, victimizations, unequal distribution of benefits from national resources, degradation of cultural and language rights, routine attacks on religious rights, low reputation, and victimization. The right to self-determination is protected under international law, but the desire to engage in activities that would lead to secession is not protected by either domestic or international law. The administration of national integration is a crucially practical mechanism to put an end to secessionist agitations in Nigeria, among other places.
Ikenna, Stephen, & Emeka (2019), also maintained that certain actions and inactions and policies of the Nigeria government are targeted against the Igbo (Biafra Separatist group). These actions, inactions and policies have therefore created the feelings of collective victimization of the people; thus, it has sustained and reinforced the separatist agitation (Ikenna et al, 2019). Olu (2017), also examined the relationship between some of the unresolved questions and the ongoing agitation for self-determination by some separatist groups, noting prospects of restructuring Nigeria politically as a remedy the challenges of secession. Abada, Omeh, & Okoye (2020), examined the link between separatist agitations by the indigenous people of Biafra (IPOB) and its implication on the Nigeria state, maintaining that efforts should be made to include all states in the scheme of things in order to reduce the feeling of marginalization, exclusion and victimization.

Similarly, Uwaifo (2019), emphasized that the problems of under development, inequality in resource sharing, high level of poverty and wealth control in the socio-political composition of

Nigeria states, creates political instability, insecurity, tension and countless agitation for fairness, justice, equity, restructuring and very recently the separatist group agitation.

Omololu (2019), in his work "Corruption and Political Instability in Nigeria: A Dysfunctional Conundrum" maintained that while the political gladiators constantly manipulated the people and the political processes to advance their own selfish agenda, the society remained pauperized, and the people wallowed in abject poverty. This invariably led to weak legitimacy, as the citizens lacked faith in their political leaders and by extension, the political system. The foregoing and few other reasons have become responsible for the country's recurrent political instability and the agitation of separatist groups (Omololu, 2019).

Tsuwa, Agaimgbe, & Shaibume (2021), also argued that since 1999 to date, it is the resultant effect of lack of free, fair and credible elections that has necessitated the uproar of political instability as well as agitations for secession by the separatist groups. Credible, free and fair elections can help in consolidating democratic values, promote human rights and security. But fraudulent elections promote political instability, secession movements, corruption and conflict in the polity. In view of the above, some of the activities engaged by the separatist groups that have consequences on the outcome of the general election will be accentuated.
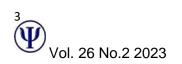
The Oodua People's Congress (OPC) and the Movement for the Actualization of Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB), among other organizations, were "manifestations of sub-nationalism that emanated from the unattended issues surrounding Nigeria's national question," according to Duruji's (2010) research. Citizenship, representation, resource control and allocation, as well as access to and use of power in Nigeria, are some of these concerns.

The research generally agrees that ethnic agitations have their roots in ethnicity and have existed in Nigeria before independence. The literature generally agrees that these groupings are based on youth in Nigeria. By referring to the existing literature on the topic as well, we can claim that the term "ethnic agitation" as it is commonly used in Nigerian slang refers to the arousal of public concern by organized groups with the potential for violent tendencies based in any region of Nigeria. These groups typically assert that they are fighting for and defending some shared ethnic or geopolitical interest, no matter how broad or specific it may be.

For Ogele (2022), "the partitioning of the country into three regions-east, north and west in 1945 led to the formation of ethnic based political parties- National Congress Nigeria and Cameroon (east), Northern People Congress (north), and Action Group (west), which gave rise to fierce ethnic competition among the political elite. The political elites fell back to the region to consolidate their power base. The contention for space-dominance became more pronounced. However, over decades, this politics of ethnic acrimony has continued and increased the degree of political instability to the extent that almost all the general elections conducted in the post-independence era have been bedeviled with electoral violence leading to destruction of lives and properties".

Rasheed & Elizabeth (2016), also put that one of the most common occurrences in the affairs of the Nigerian State is the issue of political instability. This has affected the unity and peaceful coexistence of the nation, and it has risen from the prevailing incidences of perceived social injustice and discrimination among the citizens and the inability of the government to address the challenges of the masses. The afore-mentioned equally has an impact on the outcomes of elections as witnessed over the years (Rasheed & Elizabeth, 2016).

As regards 'Threats to a credible election in 2023' CAPPA, 2023 identifies some factors that will threaten the credibility of the election such as the spread of misinformation and fake news So far, the electoral campaign has polarized society leading to deliberate disinformation, misinformation,

character assassination, insult and threats deployed on traditional and social media by political parties, candidates and their supporters. On social media in particular, supporters of major presidential candidates have engaged in extensive mudslinging, caricaturing of rival candidates, deliberate spread of falsehood etc. that suggest an elevated risk of violence before and on election day. Already, Nigeria's Department of State Services (DSS) has noted that the spread of fake news and hate speeches on social media poses the biggest threat to the 2023 general elections. Fake news, incitement and deliberate disinformation are some examples of the reckless use of the media by political parties, candidates and their supporters that can adversely impact voters' participation in the elections. As previous elections show, if voters are afraid that they could be attacked for their preference by supporters of rival candidates, they may as well stay at home (CAPPA, 2023).

Another factor highlighted is vote buying, fraud, voter suppression and manipulation. The aforementioned is also responsible for agitating separatist activities. Already the forthcoming election is looking set to be a "money game" rather than a "numbers game". This is due to the extent politicians and political parties are prepared to spend to woo voters. So bad was the spending in May 2022 during primaries of political parties that there was a dollar scarcity.

Apart from the impact of such reckless spending on the economy resulting in inflation, there is a risk that illicit financial flows will find their way into election spending. Illicit financial flows are proceeds of corruption, theft, bribery, criminal activities such as drug trafficking, smuggling and commercial activities such as tax evasion, and trade mis-invoicing. A recent report by the Global Financial Integrity think-thank ranks Nigeria as one of the 10 largest countries for illicit financial flows in the world and estimates that about US$15.7 billion of illicit funds go through Nigeria's banking system annually. Now as the campaign intensifies, there are many indicators that not only are politicians spending above campaign expenses limit through lavish campaign rallies, and adverts on billboards, radio and television but candidates and political parties are also engaged in voters' inducement through vote-buying, cash gifts, sharing of food items and others. Section 88 of the Electoral Act, 2022 sets limits for campaign expenses of political parties and candidates whilst Section 89 (3) mandates political parties to submit their election expenses to INEC in an audited return within six months after the election. However, historically, election campaign expenditure limits have always been observed in breach by political parties.

For instance, whereas according to news reports and investigation, nearly all the political parties that participated in the 2019 general elections have not filed their financial reports as required by law, INEC through tracking and monitoring established that some of the parties like the APC and PDP spent at least three times more than what the law permitted.

Yet there is no evidence that the Election and Party Monitoring (EPM), the arm of INEC responsible for monitoring the finance of political parties, has taken any concrete step to sanction any of these erring political parties to serve as deterrence. Without sanction, the impression is created that political parties and candidates can violate the electoral law with impunity.

As the 2023 general elections draw nearer, there is a need for INEC to be prepared to enforce the provisions of the electoral law in order to safeguard the election's integrity. Sections 88 (9), 89 (4), and 89 (7) of the Electoral Act, 2022, stipulate different sanctions for various offences relating to the contravention of financial reporting timeline, political parties that incur election expenses beyond the limit set and candidates that knowingly act in contravention of the Act. Some of the punishments include payment of a fine, imprisonment or both.

While urging INEC to enforce these provisions, it should be noted that the above-cited sanctions are a slap on the wrist compared to the gravity of the offence. In the real sense, offences such as

overshooting of campaign expenditure limits ought not to be treated with kid gloves or as minor misdemeanors (CAPPA, 2023).

Political instability and Elections

In order to analyze the many scholarly papers on this research, the group theory is advocated as the theoretical framework in this paper. Further explaining the dynamics of interpersonal relationships in society is group theory. According to Olomojobi (2015), "that what underscores every society is the organic interest that binds people together in groups and conditions," man's expressive nature makes it easier to understand how people interact in groups.

"The organic interests among group membership that act as the binding element of group relationship and thus provides the power of a group as deterministic social construct, either for good or evil," is what (Macridis, 1964:139) emphasizes. This further explains the desire of the various separatist groups in Nigeria to have a sense of inclusion and belonging in the overall structure of the Nigerian federation, leading to sentiments of exclusion and isolation among the dominant ethnic groupings in the Nigerian state.
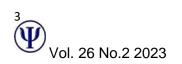
It is observed that members of groups believe they possess a "we" awareness and a sense of belonging. Olomojobi (2015) concurs once again with the statement that "Society is a pluralist social configuration oriented towards the achievement of diverse interest and concerns" (Smith, 1979).

1.2   Separatist Groups, Political Instability, and the 2023 General Elections in Nigeria

The history of separatist movements in Nigeria suggests that their goals frequently vary between the fight for increased regional autonomy and the open threat of independence, according to some. Perhaps with the exception of the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP), which while affirming the Ogoni's desire to "remain a part of the Federal Republic of Nigeria" explicitly advocated for political autonomy to participate in Nigerian affairs as a distinct and separate political unit, including the right to control their political affairs (Ogboni Bills O), most separatist groups have simultaneously pursued regional political autonomy and secession.

Although they may differ from one polity to another, a number of variables may be to blame for separatist agitations. The most prevalent of these variables, it would seem, may be a long-standing feeling of oppression and deprivation among members of a polity's culturally homogeneous group. The loyalty of a culturally distinct group to the state may erode if they believe their region is not receiving a fair share of the union's benefits from the central government or has been singled out for marginalization and neglect by the state, alienating their members from the state. Since Nigeria's early years as a British Colony and Protectorate, several opinions have been made on the immediate and indirect causes of separatist agitations. Tamuno (1970) claimed that the reasons for Nigeria's separatist tendencies were its "heterogeneous ethnic composition, cultural diversity, vast size... varied administrative practices, and controversial political and constitutional arrangements... as well as the absence of a strong ideological magnet."

Ethnocentrism is a significant, substantial cause of political instability. The roles of so-called ethnic entrepreneurs and political leaders are involved here, who communicate notions of family ties and shared destiny and inspire and organize groups to advance group agendas. Even before her formal independence, the ingredients were prevalent in Nigeria. They are renowned for their ethno-enterprise politics. The political class in Nigeria is viewed as either helpful "interest aggregators" who play a crucial representative role or as cunning and greedy power-seekers who use ethnic issues for their own advancement. The political elite uses ethnic framing to increase

the scope and intensity of intergroup conflict, which leads to political violence. In Nigeria, ethnic outbidding and widespread receptivity to "playing the ethnic card" are currently thought to be serious problems (Ogele, 2022).

The nation's political landscape is showing unpleasant trends due to the ongoing political turmoil. Therefore, political instability and violence would result from widespread dissatisfaction in society. For instance, political violence could appear as a result of the high percentage of unemployment among the populace, and money politics could also have a negative impact on the political system. Armed conflict during elections, which almost invariably results in political instability, is becoming more and more closely linked to the employment of guns, armaments, and ammunition. Politicians use touts to frighten their rivals and rival parties at every level of the political process (Rasheed & Elizabeth, 2016).
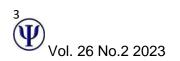
The stability of the Federal Republic of Nigeria has frequently been threatened by separatist agitations by its many ethnic groups, according to Zacchaeus (2017), which explored how Nigeria was formed from a jumble of ethnocultural groupings by her colonialists. The continuation of separatist is said to be caused by the ethnocultural diversity of Nigeria's peoples and their shared fear of dominance, which was exacerbated by divisive colonial policies.
The Biafra agitation undoubtedly has political and socioeconomic repercussions for Nigeria as a whole, as well as for the south east region. First and foremost, the IPOB's repeated marches and protests affect the local economies of the communities where they take place. In fact, during the recent IPOB leader Nnamdi Kanu ordered sit-at-home protest on May 30, 2017, all commercial and social activity in the south eastern states and certain south-south states came to a full halt. Given the number of man hours lost to the demonstration on that single day alone, this has a significant impact on the region's economic growth (Ikenna et al., 2017).

1.3   Factors Responsible for a Haunting Separatist Agitation

- **Political Instability**

Political instability has always been seen as a prompter to separatist agitations (Bouchat, 2013). This is not far from the case of Nigeria which has been fraught with political, economic, and ethnic clashes resulting from high-level corruption, bad governance leading to political instability (Fagbadebo, 2007). According to Kew (2006), one of the major factors responsible for political instability is the failure of the political class to sufficiently adhere to the basic tenets of democracy and constitutionalism. According to Ejiogu (2018) and Nwolise (2018), the root of political instability in today's Nigeria predates colonialism however, political instability took a different dimension at independence when the colonial government "handed" power to the North against the South. This they said happened through a rigged census in 1951/52 and the 1959 elections. This accordingly provoked the first military coup and subsequent coup that led to the first major crisis climaxing to the Nigerian Civil War between which afterwards, brought in different military regimes that destroyed the very core of political stability in Nigeria. Concluding on this, Ejiogu held that the Nigerian Civil War, the 1990 abortive coup attempt, the raging war in the Niger Delta and (this work includes) the present socio-political and economic situation including the demands by various peoples as well as the killings by herdsmen and "bandits" give glaring credence to separatist agitations in Nigeria as there is no trust of safety in the polity.

- **State Failure and Insecurity**

A single ethnic community may prefer to push for its own political unit if it believes it has no stake in the future of an established political unit. Particularly in cases where the political entity has struggled on the social, economic, and political fronts (Ekpenyong, 2011). Nigeria's government is incapable of stopping or responding to the frequent killing and destruction of lives and property, which serves as an example of state failure. This raises concerns about Nigeria's national security's capacity to act pro-actively. The inability of the Nigerian government to put an end to the unrest in "South South," "South East," the herdsmen and farmer conflicts, Boko Haram in the North East, kidnappings and abductions, among other things, serves as a good case study for examining the inefficiency and lack of trust that are the tenets of state failure (Ezemenaka & Prouza: 2016).

- **Perceived Ethnic Inequality**

Some ethnic groups think of themselves superior to others and even the constitution of the federal republic of Nigeria made some languages 'official' while others are 'irrelevant' giving the impression that some are more Nigerians that others. They even have the classification of major and minor ethnic groups and languages. This invariably led to the struggle witnessed among the various people and consequently gave rise to the cry of socio-political and economic marginalization (Anugwom, 1981).

Ethnic inequality and associated marginalization is the core of ethnic turbulence and violence worldwide hence, it would not be surprising should it spark off a separatist quest like we have witnessed in the recent times (Rindap & Auwal, 2014). In addition, where one group thinks that they are superior to others and tend to lord it over them, the inferior group tend to secede (Ezemenaka & Prouza, 2016). This is the situation Nigeria is experiencing even in recent times.

1.4   Emerging Challenges

In Nigeria, political instability continues to be the principal issue that the nation is now facing. Owing the majority of its causes to internal forces. One such issue is the political class's reluctance to adhere firmly to the fundamental principles of democracy and constitutionalism (Kew, 2006). Harriman (2006) made this claim, arguing that such circumstances have led to abuses of power, outright corruption, abuses of the democratic process, intolerance of political opposition, and the undermining of institutions. This goes against the fundamental principles of governance, which assume a social engagement process between the powerful and the powerless within a political society (Adejumobi, 2004). Because of the political unrest, leadership became localized, prioritizing personal survival over the advancement of the country. There are numerous examples of this happening, such as what is currently happening in the Dasuki Gate investigation into Col. Sambo Dasuki, the former NSA to former president Goodluck Jonathan, in which funds that should have been used to buy weapons to combat insurgencies were instead distributed among the political stooges of the previous administration (Rasheed et al., 2016).

Since January 15, 1966, the military has frequently intervened in domestic politics due to the political class's incapacity to maintain the nation's good administration. They became involved in politics instead of leaving it to the armed forces to protect the nation's territorial integrity, failing to do their job of keeping the peace and maintaining serenity. The unhealthy, fierce competition for political power that exists among the military hierarchy and the political class on the one hand, and between civilians and soldiers on the other, are signs that the country's political structure is unstable. According to Egbon (2001), military engagement in a state's political affairs causes instability in the political system, which in turn causes economic collapse as a result of the state's
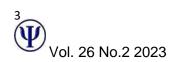
leadership issues. The problem of money politics is another element contributing to Nigeria's political unrest. In a civilized society, according to former American President Bill Clinton, money is not a factor in choosing candidates for electoral office. However, in Nigeria, political instability is frequently caused by politicians' hunger for cash since they view politics as a lucrative business. The "problem with Nigerians is that when they want money, they go into politics," he continued. Therefore, the money that could have been used for the country's development would be stolen by the self-centered politicians, as is currently being shown in the investigation of Col. Dasuki and others during the former administration of Goodluck Jonathan.

According to Adeyeri (2013), despite having abundant natural resources, significant human capital, and a sizable domestic market, the country has not been able to realize its potential as an African power. Another reason why conflict continues, keeps occurring, and ultimately contributes to political instability in the nation is that the individuals who incite, organize, sponsor, and even arm the rioters are permitted to escape justice. They never face charges or trials, and if found guilty, they receive lengthy prison sentences. Elites and influential individuals of society are among those that support violent conflicts (Rasheed et al., 2016).

The spate of corruption and the level of development in Nigeria is another issue that should be given close attention. A cohesive and enduring democratic society becomes utopian due to lack of good political will. Nigeria has become strongly characterized with nepotism, political exclusion and minority group alienation which has advanced vulnerability among people, suspicion, creating room for countless fear and also triggered unabated political agitation for self-expression, collective responsibility and sense of belonging in the polity. The problems of Nigeria in the recent time is a problem that will take the collective efforts and decisions of the people of Nigeria to solve (Uwaifo, 2019).

People have the impression that these individuals are infallible, and their supporters concur. Since they were never held accountable for their heinous crimes, many of these sponsors return to prepare new rounds of such conflicts and violence. Additionally, the police and other security forces lack the necessary crisis management training. Numerous times, while violence is erupting, the rioters are "too tough" for the inexperienced and unprepared cops to control. Surprisingly, the rioters frequently carry sophisticated weaponry and are well equipped. Furthermore, conflicts continue to occur in Nigeria because the government never adopted the suggestions made by the judicial and other panels of inquiry into civil disobedience and violence. This frequently causes political unrest in the nation. Additionally, because Nigeria is a multi-ethnic nation, political unrest and conflict will arise when the various ethnic groups think that their hopes or objectives cannot be met concurrently due to opposing viewpoints. Therefore, it makes sense that there would be unrest, opposition controversy, and political instability when there is inequality in access to the control of natural resources and political power. Examples include the ongoing Boko Haram insurgency, the Nigerian civil war, and militant uprisings in the Niger-Delta (Rasheed et al., 2016).

Expectations of a higher voter turnout that seems to have been unmet during the just finished elections are another rising concern. The fact that the voter list has not been updated frequently to remove those who have passed away or gone abroad, as well as the fact that 7% of permanent voter cards were still outstanding, may have contributed to this being somewhat biased. This may also be related to INEC's performance challenges and broader security risks that have been brought to light as a result of some of the separatist organizations' dishonest operations. Because of technical disenfranchisement and voter suppression, a sizable portion of Nigerians were unable to cast their ballots, which is cause for concern. It might worsen voter apathy in subsequent

elections and further erode faith in the electoral system's capacity to create a more democratic society. This suggests that if the separatist groups' dishonest behavior continues in the future, it will eventually have a negative impact on how many people vote in the country's gubernatorial and State houses of assembly elections (Centre for Democracy & Development, 2023).

Independent of the outcome of the presidential results, early indications point to a rising realignment of the political landscape. The Labour Party's candidates for the national assembly have done well in places where they were predicted to do well. As a result, a number of well-known parliamentarians have lost their reelection campaigns, including the departing governors of Abia, Benue, and Enugu, who are part of the PDP G5 group and who ran against Labour Party candidates for the senate. In Delta state and the FCT, respectively, the House Minority Leader and the Senate Minority Leader both lost their bids for reelection. APC senatorial candidates in Ebonyi state fared much better than their presidential candidate, which was a surprising occasion where House of Representatives and Senate candidates outperformed their presidential counterparts.

Voting trends in the presidential election imply that ethnic identification may have had a significant role in influencing voters' decisions. Prior to this election, the PDP had consistently won the majority of votes in states in the south east and south-south. However, significant support for the Labour Party's presidential candidate has upset traditional dynamics, with Peter Obi winning the entire south east zone as well as the states of Delta and Edo in the south-south. While the APC could only win Rivers state, the PDP could only win Bayelsa and Akwa Ibom. Similarly, Yobe, which had never supported a PDP candidate before, did so in 2023, with Atiku being the only candidate from the north among the top three. The outcome in Lagos, where Obi defeated Tinubu, offers some hope for a generational shift unhindered by the ethnic divisions that have long dominated Nigerian politics. In Nigeria, there will likely be another round of electoral litigation in the courts, which could potentially change some election results and, in the short term, have an impact on governance (Centre for Democracy & Development, 2023). The success of these challenges will likely depend on how much weight the judiciary accords to procedural irregularities.

Because of alleged manipulation by INEC, the opposition parties, particularly the Labour Party (LP) and the People's Democratic Party (PDP), have rejected the results of the presidential election. Some citizens are becoming more concerned about these issues and have a growing mistrust of the system, especially those who support Peter Obi. The Labour Party has already said that it will file a lawsuit to contest the results (CDD-EAC Analysts, 2023).

1.5   Conclusion

This study comes to the conclusion that the massive agitations of the separatist organizations continuously endanger the stability and unity of the nation of Nigeria. The activities of separatist groups, followed by the degree of political instability in the nation, the perception of inequity and injustice in the administrative, political, social, and economic configurations in the country's current federal structure in Nigeria, are the most notable driving factors that have come to determine the outcome of the general election in 2023. Following their course, secessionist movements have articulated pure intimidation with the perception of low representation in national administration, discriminatory access to justice, victimizations, and discriminatory share of benefits from natural resources, degradation of cultural and linguistic rights, and regular assault on religious rights, among others. For instance, the long-proposed second bridge across the River Niger to unleash the industrial potentials of the Onitsha-Nnewi-Aba axis has been "losing air" since it has stayed indefinitely on the drawing board, along with the dredging of the River Niger

and the development of an inland port. The same holds true for the opening, enlargement, and modernization of the ports at Bonny Opobo and Port Harcourt, which will help Ikwere, Obigbo, Ahoada, and Bonny, as well as Aba, Onitsha, and Nnewi, develop. Igbo traders are forced to travel to Lagos to clear their goods despite all the hassles, even though it is simple to do so at home (Ndukwe et al., 2019).

International law does not grant rights to secession, nor do local legislation. The topic of secession is generally neutral in international law. Although international law recognizes that everyone has the right to self-determination and that this right may effectively translate into restorative secession, international law only explicitly permits this outcome in the cases of decolonization and, maybe, territorial occupation. International law does not expressly permit organizations to seek independence, with the exception of these two very uncommon cases. There is no "breathing air" for secessionists in Nigeria under domestic law (The 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria As Amended, 2011), which expressly states in section 2(1) that "Nigeria is one indivisible and indissoluble sovereign state to be known by the name of the Federal Republic of Nigeria." The implied result of the aforementioned legal stance is that any attempt, desire, or demand for secession by any group or peoples of the state is void and without legal standing, regardless of the method (civil or violent) used. As a result, secessionists lack the legal standing to assert any claims about secession (Ndukwe et al., 2019).

1.6 Recommendations
The findings of this study therefore initiate the following recommendations accentuated below:

I. Intensification of efforts should be adopted towards promoting inter-tribal/ethnic cohesion through the medium of sponsoring transnational goal-oriented programmes and meetings like, ethnic/tribal marriage should be sponsored.

II. Minimizing control of political power at the centre dominated by one ethnic group so as to hinder it dominance over other groups.

III. The soaring degree of unemployment in the nation is also responsible for political instability as politicians take advantage of the youth for their own selfish interest. Thus, employment opportunities created for youths will hinder different ethnic sentiments that trigger violence during elections.

IV. Another trigger of the separatist activities includes ethnic sentiments during campaigns, the degree of corruption in Nigeria and the manipulations of electoral processes. All ethnic groups at various part of the nation should not be denied their national cake and heritage.

V. More penalizing rules should be implemented on the fight against separatist activities.

VI. Approaches and systems that will further minimizes political instability should be adopted, more emphasis should be placed on free and fair elections and governance of Nigeria should be employed without ethnic bias and sentiment.

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