

IPOB Agitation and Its Implication for Anambra State Regional Economy and Security Since 2015

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Abstract

The agitation by the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) presents a multifaceted challenge to Anambra State, affecting both regional security and the economy. Anambra, known for its entrepreneurial vigour and significant commercial hubs has experienced substantial disruptions due to IPOB's activities. The persistent calls for secession, enforced through sit-at-home orders and periodic violence, have created an environment of fear and instability. This unrest threatens the state's economic growth, deters investment, and hampers the day-to-day operations of businesses. The paper seeks to examine the impact of IPOB's agitation on Anambra State regional security and economy such as sit-at-home orders, market disruptions, general instability on businesses, trade, and investment in the state. It will delve into the historical antecedents of the movement, the state's socio-economic landscape, and the responses from both the government and the populace. By examining the multifaceted effects of IPOB activities, this paper seeks to provide insights into understanding the economic and security challenges facing the state and making modest contributions on ways to navigate them while promoting peace, and fostering sustainable development in the state. In doing this assessment, the paper will adopt oral and documentary sources of data in analysing and evaluating relevant information aiding the writing of the paper.

Keywords: IPOB, Economy, Security, Challenges

Introduction

The Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) which was founded in 2012 is a separatist movement advocating for the independence of Biafra, a region that existed in southeastern Nigeria during the Nigerian-Biafra Civil War from 1967 to 1970. This movement, founded by Nnamdi Kanu, has gained a significant attention both domestically and internationally

due to its persistent agitation and demands for secession from Nigeria.¹ While the IPOB's goals resonate with a segment of the southeastern population, its activities have led to considerable controversy and have had a profound impact on regional security and the economy, particularly in Anambra State. The historical context of the IPOB agitation is rooted in the perceived marginalization and underdevelopment of the southeastern region of Nigeria. Post-civil war Nigeria witnessed the reconstruction and reintegration of the southeastern states into the federation, but many inhabitants of this region have long felt that they have been left out of the country's economic and political advancements. This sense of exclusion has fuelled sentiments of secession, with IPOB emerging as the most vocal and organized group advocating for the re-establishment of the Republic of Biafra.

Anambra State, often referred to as the "Light of the Nation," is one of Nigeria's most economically vibrant regions. It boasts a robust commercial sector, thriving markets, and an industrious populace known for their entrepreneurial spirit. However, the IPOB agitation has cast a shadow over this dynamic state, influencing various facets of its socio-economic landscape. Understanding the impact of IPOB's activities on Anambra State's regional security and economy necessitates a thorough exploration of the movement's origins, objectives, and methods, as well as the state's response to these challenges.

IPOB's methods of agitation have evolved over time, encompassing peaceful protests, civil disobedience, and more recently, violent confrontations.² The group has declared numerous sit-at-home orders, which have paralyzed economic activities and heightened tensions in Anambra State. These orders, often enforced through intimidation and violence, disrupt the daily lives of residents and create an atmosphere of fear and uncertainty. The resultant insecurity has had a ripple effect on businesses, schools, and overall economic activities in the state. The state's economy thrives on trade, manufacturing, and agriculture, with markets such as Onitsha Main Market, Nnewi market, Eke Awka market, serving as key commercial hubs not only for the state but for Nigeria as a whole.³ The recurring sit-at-home orders and violent clashes have disrupted these economic activities, leading to significant financial losses and stunting economic growth. Furthermore, the heightened security concerns deter investors and stifle the state's development prospects. The state's security apparatus has been stretched thin in its efforts to manage the IPOB agitation. Law enforcement agencies face the dual challenge of maintaining public order while avoiding actions that could further escalate tensions. The resultant strain on security forces has exposed vulnerabilities and highlighted the need for a comprehensive and strategic approach to addressing the underlying issues driving the agitation.

Aside the immediate economic and security impacts, the IPOB agitation has broader implications for the social fabric of Anambra State. The movement has fostered a climate of division, with varying degrees of support and opposition among the populace. This

division has implications for social cohesion, as communities and families find themselves at odds over the IPOB agenda. Addressing these divisions is crucial for fostering unity and ensuring long-term stability in the state.

The Economic Situation in Anambra State Before 2015

Anambra State is a region with a rich history of economic prosperity. Prior to the rise of the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) agitation in 2015, Anambra experienced substantial economic growth driven by its lively commercial activities, industrious population, and strategic location. Anambra State has historically been a major trade hub in Nigeria. The city of Onitsha, often referred to as the "commercial nerve centre" of Nigeria, is home to the Onitsha Main Market, one of the largest markets in West Africa. This market attracts traders from across Nigeria and neighbouring countries due to its extensive range of goods and services. The market's strategic location along the banks of the River Niger has facilitated trade and commerce, making Onitsha a centre of economic activities.⁴

Nnewi, another prominent city in Anambra, is known as the "Japan of Africa" due to its industrial prowess. The city is renowned for its production of automotive parts and vehicles. Indigenous companies, such as Innoson Vehicle Manufacturing Company (IVM), have played a crucial role in the local economy by producing high-quality automotive products that serve both domestic and international markets.

Agriculture

Agriculture has been the backbone of Anambra State's economy for decades. The state's fertile land and favourable climate have supported the cultivation of various crops such as rice, cassava, maize, yam, and vegetables.⁵ Agriculture has provided employment for a significant portion of the population, ensuring food security and contributing to the local economy.

Before 2015, the state government implemented several initiatives to boost agricultural productivity. Programs aimed at improving irrigation, providing access to modern farming tools, and offering agricultural loans were instrumental in enhancing crop yields and farmers' incomes.⁶ The state's involvement in fish farming and poultry production further diversified its agricultural base. These initiatives not only increased agricultural output but also improved the livelihoods of many rural households.

Industrial Growth

The industrial sector in Anambra State, particularly in cities like Nnewi and Awka, has been a key driver of economic growth. Nnewi's industrial complex includes manufacturers of automotive parts, machinery, and consumer goods. The establishment of indigenous companies and the presence of a skilled workforce have facilitated the production of high-

quality goods that provide to both domestic and international markets. In Awka, the capital city, the industrial sector has also seen significant developments. Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) have flourished, producing goods ranging from building materials to household items.⁷ The state government has encouraged industrial growth by providing incentives such as tax breaks and facilitating access to credit for entrepreneurs. This supportive environment has enabled many businesses to thrive, contributing to job creation and economic diversification.

Infrastructure Development

Infrastructure development has been crucial to Anambra State's economic success. The state has invested heavily in improving transportation networks, including roads, bridges, and waterways. The completion of the Onitsha River Port has enhanced trade by providing an efficient means of transporting goods to and from the state.

Electricity supply, though sometimes erratic, has seen improvements over the years, supporting industrial activities and enhancing the quality of life for residents. Investments in education and healthcare infrastructure have also contributed to the overall development of human capital, ensuring a skilled and healthy workforce. The development of schools, hospitals, and other social amenities has helped to create a conducive environment for economic activities.

Human Capital and Entrepreneurship

Anambra State is renowned for its entrepreneurial spirit, with a high concentration of self-made businessmen and women. The state's culture of entrepreneurship has been a significant factor in its economic resilience and growth. The Anambra people are known for their business acumen, which has led to the establishment of numerous small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) across various sectors.

The state government has supported this entrepreneurial culture by implementing policies that promote business development. Access to microfinance and small business loans has enabled many entrepreneurs to start and expand their businesses, contributing to job creation and economic diversification. This support has fostered a dynamic business environment, making Anambra one of the leading states in terms of economic development and innovation.

Before the onset of IPOB agitations in 2015, Anambra State enjoyed a period of robust economic growth and stability. The state's strategic focus on trade, agriculture, industry, and infrastructure development created a thriving economic environment. Cities like Onitsha and Nnewi emerged as key commercial and industrial hubs, while investments in agriculture and human capital ensured sustainable development. The entrepreneurial spirit of the Anambra people, supported by favourable government policies, further propelled the

state's economic success. Understanding this historical context is crucial for appreciating the economic challenges and opportunities that lie ahead for Anambra State. In 2014, Anambra's GDP was estimated at around \$13.5 billion. It was 3% of Nigeria's GDP, 3rd in Nigeria, and would be 24th in Africa out of 5, if the state were to be a country. Anambra state also has the 3rd largest bank deposit, after Lagos and Rivers. Today, it is now around 6th below Imo, Rivers, and Akwa Ibom states. It is simply unacceptable.⁸

Anambra State Security Situation Before 2015

Before the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) agitation gained significant momentum in 2015, Anambra State experienced a relatively stable security condition compared to the subsequent years.⁹ The security architecture of Anambra state before 2015 was structured around various law enforcement agencies, including the Nigerian Police Force, the Nigerian Army, Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS), Department of State Services (DSS) and local vigilante groups.¹⁰ These entities worked in collaboration to maintain law and order across the state. The Nigerian Police Force had multiple divisions and units stationed in major cities like Onitsha, Nnewi, and Awka, which played pivotal roles in crime prevention and response.

The state government, under various administrations, implemented several measures to strengthen security. One notable initiative was the establishment of the Anambra State Vigilante Service (AVS). The AVS worked alongside the police to combat crime at the community level, providing valuable intelligence and support. This collaboration significantly reduced the incidence of petty crimes and enhanced the overall sense of security among residents. The state also saw the creation Security Trust Fund before 2015.¹¹

Crime Rate and Common Offenses

Before 2015, Anambra State faced challenges typical of many Nigerian states, including armed robbery, kidnapping, and communal conflicts. However, the crime rates were relatively controlled due to proactive measures taken by the state government and law enforcement agencies. Armed robbery was a significant concern, particularly in urban areas like Onitsha, Nnewi and Awka. The state government responded by increasing police patrols, establishing more checkpoints, and investing in surveillance technologies.¹² These measures helped deter criminal activities and reassured the public of their safety. Anambra State, like many other regions in Nigeria, experienced occasional communal conflicts. These conflicts were often rooted in land disputes, political rivalries, or traditional leadership tussles. The state government played a mediating role in resolving these conflicts, working with traditional rulers and community leaders to foster peace and reconciliation.

Government Initiatives and Security Reforms

The government of Anambra State undertook several initiatives aimed at improving the security situation before the IPOB agitations. These initiatives included Community Policing, by which the state government championed community policing through vigilante groups as a strategy to enhance public safety. By involving local communities in the policing process, the government aimed to bridge the gap between law enforcement agencies and the public.¹³ This approach led to improved trust and cooperation, which were crucial for effective crime prevention and response. Youth Empowerment Programs, which recognized the link between unemployment and crime, the state government implemented various youth empowerment programs. These programs focused on skills acquisition, entrepreneurship training, and job creation. By providing youths with alternative means of livelihood, the government aimed to reduce their involvement in criminal activities.

The relatively stable security situation in Anambra State before 2015 had a positive impact on the socio-economic environment. The improved sense of security fostered economic activities, attracted investments, and enhanced the quality of life for residents. The stability provided a conducive environment for businesses to thrive. Markets in Onitsha and Nnewi flourished, attracting traders and investors from across Nigeria and beyond. The industrial sector, particularly in Nnewi, witnessed significant growth, contributing to job creation and economic development. The state's proactive security measures and reforms made it an attractive destination for investors. The government's commitment to maintaining law and order reassured potential investors of their safety and the security of their investments. This influx of investments further stimulated economic growth and development in the state. Thus, the improved security condition enhanced the overall quality of life for residents. People could go about their daily activities with minimal fear of crime. The presence of law enforcement agencies and community policing initiatives created a sense of safety and wellbeing.

IPOB Activities in Anambra State Since 2015

Before the rise of IPOB agitations in 2015, Anambra State enjoyed a relatively stable security condition. The state government's proactive measures, including the establishment of the Anambra state vigilante service, community policing, and youth empowerment programs, played a crucial role in maintaining law and order. The stable security environment fostered economic growth, attracted investments, and improved the quality of life for residents.

The Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) has been advocating for the secession of the South-eastern Region of Nigeria to form an independent Biafran state. Formed by Nnamdi Kanu

in 2012, IPOB has gained remarkable momentum, attention and support.¹⁴ IPOB emerged as a response to the enduring grievances of the South-easterners, positioning itself as the voice of the Igbo people and rekindling the quest for Biafran independence. In 2015, IPOB's presence in Anambra State became more pronounced. Nnamdi Kanu's broadcasts through Radio Biafra galvanized support, particularly among the youth. The group's activities during this period focused on peaceful protests, rallies, and mass mobilization. Notable events include the "Biafra Heroes Day" commemoration, which attracted large crowds and increased the group's visibility and in most of the cases caused clash between the Nigeria's security and the IPOB members.¹⁵ By 2016, IPOB's activities had escalated, marked by frequent protests and clashes with security forces. The Nigerian government's response was often heavy-handed, leading to several confrontations. A significant event was the 'Onitsha Killing' in 2016, where a peaceful protest turned violent, resulting in casualties among IPOB members and security personnel. This period also saw increased militarization in Anambra State, with numerous arrests and detentions of IPOB members.¹⁶ Nnamdi Kanu's arrest in October 2015 was undeniably an unforgettable moment for IPOB.¹⁷ His detention sparked widespread protests across Anambra State, including a massive rally in Onitsha in December 2015. Kanu's imprisonment became a rallying point for IPOB, intensifying their activities and drawing international attention to their cause. His eventual release on bail in April 2017 did little to quell the agitation, as IPOB continued to demand a referendum for Biafra's independence.¹⁸

In response to the growing influence of IPOB, the Nigerian Army launched "Operation Python Dance" (Egwu Eke) in the Southeast in September 2017.¹⁹ These operations aimed to curb the activities of IPOB and other perceived threats. Anambra State witnessed several military checkpoints and patrols, which led to heightened tensions. The operation culminated in the invasion of Nnamdi Kanu's residence in Abia State, resulting in deaths and his subsequent disappearance. IPOB was later proscribed as a terrorist organization by the Nigerian government.²⁰

Despite the proscription, IPOB continued its activities in Anambra State in a fierce manner, by mandating sit-at-home orders on Mondays and other Biafran recognized days. The group adapted by utilizing social media for mobilization and propaganda. The "Sit-at-Home" orders, which called for mass boycotts and shutdowns to commemorate significant Biafran dates, became a hallmark of IPOB's strategy.²¹ These orders were largely successful in Anambra, with major cities like Ekwulobia, Onitsha, Nnewi and Awka observing complete lockdowns on designated days. There have as well been clashes between the agitators and the security forces which have heightened insecurity and tension in the state. The masses who ignore to comply with these orders have been in most cases threatened, and sometimes, abused.

In recent years, IPOB has sought to exercise political influence by endorsing candidates sympathetic to their cause during elections. The 2021 Anambra gubernatorial election saw heightened IPOB activity, with the group allegedly calling for a boycott and threatening violence.²² However, the election proceeded with relative peace, indicating a complex relationship between IPOB's directives and the public's response. The Nigerian government's response to IPOB has been largely repressive, involving military operations, arrests, and proscription. Human rights organizations have criticized these measures, citing extrajudicial killings, torture, and unlawful detentions. Amnesty International reported several instances of excessive force used against IPOB members, calling for accountability and adherence to human rights standards.²³

Government and Community Responses

The agitations by the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) have significantly impacted Anambra State's economy, security, social living and political landscape. The government's response, along with community initiatives, has been very important in addressing these impacts. The Anambra State government has intensified security measures to counter IPOB's activities. This includes the deployment of additional police and military personnel to maintain law and order. The establishment of security checkpoints, increased patrols, and intelligence operations aim to curb violent incidents and protect lives and property.²⁴ While these measures have had some success in reducing the frequency of violent clashes, they have also led to allegations of human rights abuses by security forces. Extrajudicial killings, arbitrary arrests, and harassment of innocent civilians have undermined public trust in security agencies, creating a hostile environment that often exacerbates tensions rather than diffusing them.

In order to address the root causes of discontent, the government has implemented various socio-economic development programs. These initiatives focus on creating jobs, improving infrastructure, and enhancing public services such as education and healthcare. Programs aimed at youth empowerment, including vocational training and entrepreneurship support, are designed to provide alternatives to joining militant movements.²⁵ Furthermore, in response to the security vacuum created by IPOB agitations, many communities have formed vigilante groups to protect themselves from violence and criminal activities.²⁶ These groups work alongside formal security agencies to maintain order and provide a sense of security to residents. Community policing initiatives have been effective in deterring crime and providing immediate security responses.²⁷

Economic Impact of the IPOB Agitation on Anambra State

The instability caused by IPOB activities has led to a decline in investors' confidence.²⁸ Potential investors are wary of putting their money into a region where political unrest is prevalent. This decline in investment affects various sectors, including

manufacturing, agriculture, and services, leading to slower economic growth. International investors, in particular, prefer more stable environments, and by this, it negatively affects Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) inflows into Anambra State. Also, banks and some government offices that still remain closed or operate marginally, serves as a big reminder of sit-at-home to the people in Anambra, especially in Awka South.²⁹

One of the most glaring negative impacts of IPOB's agitations on Anambra State is the significant loss of business and investments. Anambra, known for its vibrant markets, industries, and trading activities, has seen a decline in economic activities due to frequent protests, sit-at-home orders, and violent clashes, as it is evident in the closure of some transport companies on Mondays and other sit-at-home days.³⁰ Many traders, investors, entrepreneurs, businesspersons, academia, and other skilled individuals, leave Anambra State for more stable regions within Nigeria or abroad.³¹ This brain drain depletes the state's human capital, making it challenging to maintain high standards in education, healthcare, and other critical sectors. The loss of skilled labour also affects innovation and productivity, further hampering economic growth. The state government has had to allocate substantial resources to manage security challenges posed by IPOB.³² This increased expenditure on security diverts funds that could have been used for developmental projects such as infrastructure, education, and healthcare. The opportunity cost of this reallocation is significant, as it delays the state's overall development and reduces the quality of life for its residents.

In the agriculture sector, farmers face difficulties in accessing markets due to road blockades and most times, the fear of attacks. This situation has led to post-harvest losses and reduced income for farmers. The instability also discourages investment in agricultural technology and innovation, which are crucial for improving productivity and ensuring food security. The economic impacts of IPOB agitations in Anambra State are multifaceted and far-reaching. From disrupting daily business activities to causing a decline in investor confidence and tourism.³³

The emergence of "unknown gunmen" in 2021 compounded the already dire security situation in Anambra. These gunmen, reportedly linked to IPOB, engage in violent attacks on police stations, government offices, and public infrastructure. Although their exact affiliations remain unclear, their activities make travelling unsafe and public facilities targets of destruction. These attacks cause widespread fear among residents, who become increasingly hesitant to engage in regular activities, especially at night or during periods of heightened tension.³⁴

In conclusion, the constant insecurity created by IPOB's agitation has taken a psychological toll on residents of Anambra state; the fear of violence breaking out at any moment,

particularly during protests or enforcement of sit-at-home orders, has led to widespread anxiety. However, the economic and security challenges posed by IPOB agitations in Anambra State are significant but not unconquerable. By adopting a multi-dimensional approach that includes economic diversification, infrastructure investment, strengthening security agencies, and promoting peacebuilding, the state can overcome these challenges and restore stability. With sustained efforts, Anambra State can rebuild its economy, ensure the safety of its residents, and create an environment where peace and prosperity can thrive.

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