

DISCUSSION PAPER 73

**BIAFRAN GHOSTS**  
The MASSOB Ethnic Militia  
and Nigeria's Democratisation Process

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NORDISKA AFRIKAINSTITUTET, UPPSALA 2012

*Indexing terms:*

Nigeria

Biafra

Democratization

Political development

Ethnicity

Ethnic groups

Interethnic relations

Social movements

Nationalism

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Language checking: Peter Colenbrander

ISSN 1104-8417

ISBN 978-91-7106-716-6

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Production: Byrå4

Print on demand, Lightning Source UK Ltd.

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## Acknowledgement

A generous grant from the Open Society Institute, New York (OSI), made possible this paper. I am indebted to OSI and its fellowship programme staff. Thanks are due the Institute of African Studies, Columbia University, which offered me a visiting scholar position (December 2010-June 2011). Thanks are also due Colin Igwebuike Okolo, my research assistant during my field trips in eastern Nigeria in 2010; and Iruka Okeke, who provided me with comfortable accommodation and a stimulating intellectual atmosphere in Haverford, Pennsylvania in the course of my writing this monograph.



## Introduction

Perhaps you will rebel as you did in the days of authoritarian rule, as you did in the grim days of dictatorship, but do not delude yourself, you will be put down with equal violence, and you will not be called upon to vote because there will be no elections, or if there are, they will not be free, open and honest ...

José Saramago: *Seeing*, a novel

Atiku Abubakar, a leading member of the People's Democratic Party (PDP), Nigeria's ruling party, and a former vice president, paid a visit to Enugu, capital of Enugu State in the Igbo-speaking eastern part of the country, on 2 September 2010. The race for the presidential ticket of the party was in full swing and Abubakar was in town to solicit the bloc vote of party members from one of the three largest ethnic groups in the country for the party primary, scheduled for January 2011, only four months away. He had planned a speech he would deliver when he formally presented his request.

Atiku's handlers had carefully chosen the timing and venue of the speech. The event took place at the historic Enugu Sports Club (ESP) in the course of the anniversary lectures in the city to mark the country's 50 years of independence. ESP is the watering hole of the Igbo political and business elite. It was here they usually repaired in the evenings in the last half of 1967. These were the turbulent early days of the Nigeria-Biafra war, when the city served for a tantalisingly brief period as the capital of Biafra, the eastern portion of Nigeria they had just declared an independent republic and were fighting a bloody civil war to protect. ESP has since lost a good deal of its shine and allure, and now, 40 years after the end of the war that resulted in Biafra's defeat and forced re-incorporation into the Nigerian federation, wears a dowdy and beaten look. It still serves as the watering hole of the Igbo intelligentsia, businessmen and now rapidly ageing former Biafran army officers resident in the city, nevertheless.

The hall opposite the bar and restaurant area was packed that evening. The advertised title of the former vice president's speech was 'A Tale of Two Cities: The Enugu Sports Club and Nigeria.' Atiku Abubakar stepped up to the podium clad in his trademark flowing northern robes and, dispensing with the usual preliminary niceties, dramatically called on the Igbo to begin to warm up to present the president of Nigeria in 2015 under the 'zoning' arrangement of the PDP that, according to him, was designed to ensure that every part of the country's population, majority and minority ethnic groups alike, had equal access to the prized position. President Umaru Yar'Adua, a Hausa-Fulani northerner like the former vice president himself, had died in office the previous May and had been succeeded by Vice President Dr Goodluck Jonathan, a zoologist

turned politician from Ijawland, home to one of the small ethnic groups in the oil-bearing Niger Delta region. Jonathan, like Abubakar, was also running for the party's ticket.

Abubakar continued:

Some 40 years after the civil war, it is about time that someone who is Igbo, one of Nigeria's three largest ethnic groups, becomes President of Nigeria. This will be the boldest way to put the civil war behind us. That is why I fully support the agreement recently signed between the northern leaders and the leaders of the South east. As agreed, the south east will support the North in 2011 to complete the remaining four years of its 8-year tenure, while in turn, the North will support the south East to produce the president of Nigeria in 2015. This is the first time such an agreement for power rotation has been written and signed and made public ... I support this agreement. It is in writing, it was widely publicized, and I want to be held to it.<sup>1</sup>

Then the former vice president turned to the matter he knew was uppermost in the minds of the Igbo elite, who were now listening to his every word with rapt attention. Their loud and consistent complaint since military rule ended in 1999 and Olusegun Obasanjo, a former military head of state and Nigerian war commander during the 30-month civil war, was elected president on the platform of the PDP was that their part of the country had been neglected in the provision of infrastructure, social amenities and lucrative opportunities in the federal government; that the Igbo had been marginalised in the country's economic and political life; and that indeed this 'marginalisation' was a continuation of the 'war against the Igbo' by other means. Although Abubakar had served as vice president under Obasanjo for eight years, from 1999 to 2007, they had fallen out in the last year of their second term when it became clear that Obasanjo preferred Yar'Adua, younger brother of the late Shehu Yar'Adua, Abubakar's political mentor, to succeed him as president. The former vice president had run on the ticket of a new political party in the 2007 presidential election Obasanjo had presided over, an exercise adjudged by local and international groups as deeply flawed and marked by widespread rigging and resulting in his not being elected. He was therefore now keen to distance himself from that 'failed' government.

The new 'champion' of Igbo interests thundered from the podium:

There is no dispute that the South East has some of the most deplorable roads in Nigeria. Why is kidnapping of people becoming synonymous with the South East? Why should the South East not have the same number of states as the other zones? Why is the Onitsha seaport, commissioned by President Shehu Shagari in 1982, not being used? Why has it taken more than 11 years to build the Onitsha-

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1. Atiku Abubakar, 'A Tale of Two Cities: The Enugu Sports Club and Nigeria,' speech presented at the Enugu Sports Club, Enugu, Nigeria, 2 September 2010.

Owerri road, a distance of 100 kilometers? Why has the Second Niger Bridge remained on the drawing board for several years? Why has there not been a functional international airport in the South East, despite the huge demand? Why are the Igbo whom we appointed into high federal government positions being displaced? When will an Igbo man become the president of Nigeria?

## 1. 'Tribesmen,' Democrats and the Persistence of the Past

The former vice president's extraordinary speech, coming at a time of heightened political tension in a socially divided country still grappling with the challenges of democratisation after three decades of brutal military dictatorship, drew renewed attention to a concern scholars of ethnic nationalism and the way it interacts with the democratisation process have been grappling with since authoritarian regimes began to give way to elected governments in Africa from the late 1980s. Does ethnic politics or the politics of primary identity impede or facilitate democratic transitions on the continent and other regions where the 'third wave' of democratisation is still struggling to gain traction? Atiku Abubakar, drawing liberally on a rich but troubled past in his Enugu speech, graphically demonstrated the promises and perils of democratic government in Africa's most populous nation, whose 160 million citizens also identify themselves as members of any one of an estimated 400 ethnic groups.

Nigeria's power elite, soldiers and civilians alike, are notorious for their disdain of the citizens and rarely bother to engage them in a public conversation on matters of policy and national politics. In the rare instances when they do speak out, it is usually in defence of their particular ethnic group interest. Seldom do they criticise the policies of the government of the day, directly or obliquely, particularly if they themselves had occupied important positions in that government in the recent past. But Abubakar knew only too well that he had a formidable opponent in President Jonathan and needed all the forces he could marshal to do meaningful battle with him at the January 2011 party primary. Had it been a straightforward matter of for ethnic bloc votes, Abubakar, with the vast and populous north behind him, would easily have had Jonathan from the 'minority' Ijaw flailing in the dust. He knew though that other factors would come into play. He had played a central role in the process that threw up Obasanjo, a political lightweight, as the party's candidate in 1999. He knew that the office of president was not only constitutionally the most powerful in the country, it was also *de facto* akin to that of a maximum ruler, given the vast powers the occupant enjoys in a country where the state, the regime and the government are still an undifferentiated whole and have been used since colonial times against political opponents, real and perceived. Abubakar and his then principal Obasanjo had used this mailed fist and a full complement of crooked police officers, supine election officials, political thugs and unchecked access to the estimated \$20 billion that accrued to the central treasury annually as oil rent to rig elections and maintain the PDP in power since 1999. This formida-

ble anti-politics machine, he knew, would be deployed against him during the presidential primary.<sup>2</sup>

In his desperate bid to muster enough troops against this machine, the ultimate political insider represented himself as the political underdog and began to employ public speaking, opposition politics and policy debate – three vital props of democratic politics. But in order for his policy proposals for Igbo regeneration, couched in rhetorical questions, to find firm purchase with his audience, he had to invoke the still powerful ghost of Biafra and embed them in it. We thus have the paradox of a vote-seeking politician standing on an apparent civic platform and deliberately reinforcing the ethnic fault-lines that combined with mounting economic problems to put an end to Nigeria's First Republic a few years after the country gained independence from Great Britain in 1960. Enugu, where the former vice president gave this speech, also happens to be the stomping ground of the Movement for the Actualisation of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB), a powerful ethnic militia that emerged in the Igbo region in 1999, shortly after military rule ended and Olusegun Obasanjo took office as elected president. MASSOB's stated goal is the peaceful dissolution of Nigeria and the re-emergence of a new sovereign state in the eastern part of the country to be known as the 'United States of Biafra.'

This paper examines the circumstances of MASSOB's emergence in a period of political liberalisation and considerable uncertainty as the armed forces began to prepare to relinquish their grip on power, and the specific ways the actions of the promoters of this ethnic militia have shaped Nigeria's still unfolding democratisation process since 1999. I was drawn to the subject when, a few months after Obasanjo took office, Lagos, the country's commercial capital, was convulsed by bloody inter-ethnic clashes between Hausa-Fulani and Yoruba youth, triggered by the xenophobic utterances of the Oodua People's Congress (OPC), an ethnic militia led at the time by a young Yoruba carpenter. OPC's advertised mission was to mobilise the Yoruba, the dominant ethnic group in Lagos and the western part of the country, 'by any means necessary' to break away from Nigeria and establish a new state named after Oduduwa, the mythical primo-genitor of the ethnic group.<sup>3</sup> MASSOB emerged on the scene in November of

2. For details of Nigeria's rigged general elections from 1999 to 2003, see Human Rights Watch, 'Nigeria's 2003 Elections: The Unacknowledged Violence,' June 2004. See also International Crisis Group, 'Nigeria's Elections: Avoiding a Political Crisis,' Africa Report No. 123, 28 March 2007. Several local NGOs, including the respected Civil Liberties Organisation and Transition Monitoring Group, also published reports throughout the period providing evidence of the ruling party's activities as its officials and thugs in its employ stuffed ballot boxes, intimidated opponents and employed other illegal methods to retain power.
3. An early study of the Oodua People's Congress (OPC) is Wale Adebaniwi, 'The Carpenter's Revolt: Youth, Violence and the reinvention of culture in Nigeria,' *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 43, 3 (2005), pp. 339–65.

the same year even as the Obasanjo government was still battling to cage OPC leaders and disperse their followers.

This ethnic 'flowering' at the same time as the democratic transition was struggling to get a foothold tended to confirm the argument in influential circles in African studies particularly and democratisation studies more broadly that the liberalisation moment in plural societies is also a timely opportunity for political entrepreneurs to mobilise along ethnic lines.<sup>4</sup> From mobilisation to bloody inter-ethnic conflict, sundering or complicating the democratisation process, is but one step away, they argue. The ethnic violence in the wake of political transitions in several African countries, the Balkans, Indonesia and Russia and several other multiethnic countries in the closing decades of the 20th century and the first years of the 21st all served as a stern warning to those normative theorists who would uncritically proffer rapid democratisation as the cure-all for the troubles of regions weighed down by authoritarian rule and unrelenting poverty.

But as Nigeria's Fourth Republic proceeded and the democratic transition appeared to approach the crucial consolidation stage with fresh elections in 2003, it struck me that MASSOB was still growing in membership and influence in the Igbo region, but that this development had not generated significant bloody clashes between Igbo youth and members of other ethnic groups in the Igbo area or other parts of the country where the Igbo are resident in considerable numbers. MASSOB's self-proclaimed strategy of non-violence could not have been responsible for this outcome, because the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP), another peaceful self-determination social movement that had emerged in the Niger Delta in 1990, had been visited with violence from neighbouring ethnic groups and the Nigerian state. Nor had MASSOB's fiery ethnic rhetoric led ordinary Igbo to turn their backs on the Nigeria-wide democratisation process, rally behind the militia's tricolour of red, black and green with a yellow rising sun in the middle (a direct copy of the flag of its defunct predecessor) and demand that Igbo politicians back the resurrected secession project. In short, MASSOB's advertised political project was gasping for air even as its social influence continued to deepen. Even more intriguing, MASSOB has not taken the logical next step, like the Northern League in Italy, to lead the process of establishing an Igbo party and test its popularity at the polls, given its call on the Nigerian government to convoke a referendum in the eastern part of the country to determine whether the people want secession or not.

A related development also struck me as odd, requiring closer examination. The Igbo elite, represented in numbers in Ohaneze Ndigbo, a sociocultural or-

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4. An influential statement on this troubling link is Bruce Berman, 'Ethnicity, Patronage and the African State: the Politics of Uncivil Nationalism,' *African Affairs*, 97, 388 (1998), pp. 305-41.

ganisation they had established on the eve of the military's initial disengagement from government in the late 1970s, and also the governors of the five Igbo states and their coterie, were openly hostile to MASSOB's project even as they made ambiguous noises about a renascent 'Ndigbo' as a perfunctory nod to the large swathe of poor urban youth they knew were sympathetic to the militia's separatist message. Some of this elite had played a role in the behind-the-scenes manoeuvring that saw the armed forces hand over power to their preferred successors in 1999 in the federal centre and the states and 40 years after the end of the civil war they still looked to Abuja, the federal capital, for protection and career advancement.<sup>5</sup>

### Explaining Democratisation in 'Deeply-divided' Societies

The political order is usually unsettled during periods of democratic transition. Political elites scramble to find new sources of power while ordinary citizens, still unused to the new regime of civil liberties, look to their leaders for direction on which way to go. The conventional view is that in multiethnic states, these leaders usually turn to ethnic mobilisation. Politicised, the ethnic group is thus primed for confrontation with rival groups whose elites are doing the same thing. Inter-ethnic violence is usually the result. Columbia University Professor Jack Snyder is perhaps the leading theorist of this school. Snyder's *From Voting to Violence: Democratisation and Nationalist Violence*, published in 2000, examined the troubling link between democratisation and ethnic violence, and argues that openings engendered by political transitions trigger ethnic nationalism when influential elites seek to mobilise citizens for a new political project, but go about it in such a way as not to lose their grip on the political order and cede power to these citizens.<sup>6</sup> The impending end of authoritarian rule and its regime of unaccountable power temporarily shifts the balance to the advantage of citizens. Recognising this reality, canny elites tap ethnic symbols that are ready-made, bounded and do not invite close scrutiny of the means and ends of authority and ride on them to power yet again. Ethnic nationalism, in Snyder's scheme, is just another convenient instrument that calculating elites employ in the political arena, a process that once unleashed, moves unrelentingly from group mobilisation to conflict.

Donald Horowitz had articulated an earlier version of this position in his 1994 essay, 'Democracy in Divided Societies.' Horowitz has written: 'Democ-

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5. General Ishaya Bamaïyi, a former chief of army staff during the regime of the late General Sani Abacha, played a role in the political transition following his principal's death in 1998. He gave an insight into these closed-door negotiations in a speech to a theological college in central Nigeria in September 2010 (*The Punch*, 21 September 2010, p. 9).

6. Jack Snyder, *From Voting to Violence: Democratisation and Nationalist Violence*, New York: Norton, 2000.

racy is about inclusion and exclusion, about access to power, about the privileges that go with inclusion and the penalties that accompany exclusion. In severely-divided societies, ethnic identity provides clear lines to determine who will be included and who will be excluded. Since the lines appear unalterable, being in and being out may quickly come to look permanent.<sup>7</sup> He went on to argue that democracy has made rapid progress in East European countries such as Hungary, Poland and the Czech Republic that have relatively few serious ethnic cleavages and has progressed only fitfully or not at all in Slovakia, Bulgaria, Romania and the new states that emerged out of Yugoslavia, where society is deeply divided.

Other scholars look at the democratisation-ethnic nationalisation dynamic from a structural perspective, examining the behaviour of ethnic groups in the transition moment when such critical state institutions as the police and other security forces are undergoing a change of guard. In this situation, groups that fear that the new power arrangement might disadvantage them launch a pre-emptive strike against perceived ethnic enemies, creating a violent spiral that brings the democratisation process to a lurching stop. Yet others, borrowing from 1960s modernisation theory, see economic globalisation and its unregulated and unequal impact on competing social groups previously governed by well-established norms. Grievances thus generated exploit the democratisation vent to further complicate inter-ethnic relations. More nuanced studies in this field admit that cultural pluralism on its own need not lead to ethnic violence. Depending on the way political institutions are structured, the ethnic element can be made to become politically benign or violent.<sup>8</sup>

Alert to the fact that many of these studies assume the importance of the ethnic bond in democratic transitions without explaining why this is so, scholars such as Shaheen Mozaffar and James Scarrit point out that not all ethnic cleavages are important and that those that were previously politicised tend to have more salience than others.<sup>9</sup> However, as Jessica Piombo pointed out in her 2009 study of political institutions and how they shape ethnicity and political mobilisation in South Africa, these works 'begin with the fact of ethnopolitical

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7. Donald L. Horowitz, 'Democracy in divided societies,' in Larry Diamond and Marc F. Plattner (eds), *Nationalism, Ethnic Conflict, and Democracy*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1994, p. 35.
  8. The Berkeley scholar Beverly Crawford makes this argument in her essay 'The Causes of Cultural Conflict: An Institutional Approach,' in Beverly Crawford and Ronnie Lipschutz (eds), *The Myth of 'Ethnic' Conflict*, International and Area Research Series No. 98, University of California, Berkeley, 1998, pp. 3–43, 11.
  9. See James R. Scarrit and Shaheen Mozaffar, 'The Specifications of Ethnic Cleavages and Ethnopolitical Groups for the Analysis of Democratic Competition in Contemporary Africa,' *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics* 5, 1 (1999), pp. 82–117.

groups without discussing why some groups become politicized in the first place while others remain latent.<sup>10</sup>

The resurgence of popular opposition to authoritarian rule on the continent in the late 1980s also saw the rise of the politics of ethnicity, causing the civil society that was expected to drive the democratisation process towards consolidation to be riven along communal lines. Even so, successful elections in racially divided South Africa in 1994, a country that Horowitz had considered in a book-length study in 1991 as a prime candidate for post-transition ethnic violence, and other instances of relative post-election ethnic peace in Nigeria and Kenya a few years later began to lead another set of scholars to question the inevitability that characterised much of the work of the Snyder/Horowitz school.<sup>11</sup> Their fundamental contention is that democratic settings offer several channels and redress mechanisms for ethnic demands and that where these channels are blocked, as is usually the case in authoritarian systems, ethnic entrepreneurs pursue their projects through underground opposition movements, guerrilla activities or international campaigns, which usually build up into violent conflict.<sup>12</sup> The civil wars in such multiethnic states as Chad, Ethiopia and Sudan, reaching their genocidal denouement in Rwanda in 1994, they argue, can be attributed to the authoritarian character of political institutions in these countries, blood-soaked developments that could have been avoided had democratic institutions been in place.

The classic statement of this position was made by Claude Ake in 1991: 'The whole question of democracy implies precisely the assumption of differences to be negotiated, to be conciliated, to be moved into phases of higher synthesis. If democracy means anything at all, as a form of relationship, that is precisely what it means. If there is social pluralism, that is in fact an argument for a democratic form of governance.'<sup>13</sup> Harvey Glickman made broadly the same argument, pointing out that ethnic conflict is not incompatible with institutions of democratic government if it finds expression as a group interest among other interests.<sup>14</sup> In the influential volume, *Ethnicity and Democracy in Africa*, edited by Bruce Berman, Dickson Eyoh and Will Kymlicka and published in 2004, the

10. Jessica Piombo, *Institutions, Ethnicity, and Political Mobilisation in South Africa*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009, p. 6.

11. See Donald Horowitz, *A Democratic South Africa? Constitutional Engineering in a Divided Society*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991.

12. Eghosa Osaghae makes this point in his *Ethnicity and Its Management in Africa*, Ikeja: Malthouse Press, 1994.

13. Claude Ake, 'The Case for Democracy,' quoted in Oyeleye Oyediran and Adigun Agbaje, 'Two Partyism and Democratic Transition in Nigeria,' *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 29, 2 (1991), pp. 213–35. Ake further elaborated this thesis in *Democracy and Development in Africa*, Washington, DC: Brookings, 1996.

14. Harvey Glickman (ed.), *Ethnic Conflict and Democratization in Africa*, Atlanta: African Studies Association Press, 1995.

contributors agree that ethnic tensions tend to rise in periods of democratisation, but nevertheless go on to argue that many multiethnic states have proven remarkably successful at developing a sense of common citizenship and of loyalty to a common state, and that the pessimistic assumption that these states are incapable of democratisation has no basis.<sup>15</sup> Careful institutional design could reconcile ethnic diversity and common citizenship.

Piombo's study of successive elections in South Africa from 1994 provided powerful empirical evidence for the foregoing. The broad church of the African National Congress (ANC), dominated by the black majority, once in power, failed to splinter along ethnic lines and open up the political space to ethnic mobilisation and subsequent violence, as analysts had predicted. Instead, ethnic politics decreased in salience even as the country's young democracy passed through the crucial consolidation stage in the first years of the new millennium. This development in turn triggered a self-reinforcing virtuous cycle that led all the major political parties, white and black-dominated alike, to pursue political strategies giving primacy to civic and national issues instead of the narrow and ethnically charged. Why did events turn out this way? Piombo located the answer in the country's political institutions in the period of democratisation that concentrated power and strategic resources in the central state while at the same time providing little or no pay-offs for political elites who chose to mobilise a bounded ethnic constituency. 'Ethnic violence,' wrote Piombo

is not inherent in political transition. Ethnic groups become sources of large-scale violence only when organized, and they are less likely to be organized into enduring political cleavages when political institutions structure strategic actions away from the ethnic prism ... Democracy and conflict are neither entwined nor pre-ordained; democracy provokes ethnic conflict only when its institutions encourage the mobilization of exclusive and zero-sum competition between ethnic groups.<sup>16</sup>

#### 'Tribesmen' and Generals: 'Shadow' Democratisation and its Ethnic Double

But what happens to ethnicity in a multiethnic country when, instead of adopting impartial rules in the period of democratisation, authoritarian incumbents deliberately incentivise ethnic politics, limit civil liberties and adopt other measures to exclude certain significant political actors in their attempts to retain some power after elections? This is the case with Nigeria when the military junta, after nearly three decades in power, handed over to a retired general in May

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15. See Bruce Berman, Dickson Eyoh and William Kymlicka, 'Ethnicity and Democracy in Historical and Comparative Perspective' in Bruce Berman, Dickson Eyoh and William Kymlicka (eds), *Ethnicity and Democracy in Africa*, Oxford: James Currey, 2004, p. 13.

16. Jessica Piombo, *Institutions, Ethnicity and Political Mobilisation in South Africa*, p. 181.

1999 through a process described in another context as ‘pacted democracy.’<sup>17</sup> MASSOB emerged shortly after the controversial election and, true to the conventional wisdom, heightened political tensions in the country when its leaders began to appeal to fellow Igbo to turn their backs on this ‘fake democracy’ that denied them their fair share of the national cake and re-embrace the Biafra option. But rather than mobilisation rapidly progressing to the predicted second stage of ethnic violence, the leaders were sucked into a furious debate with entrepreneurs from the other ethnic minority groups that constituted part of ‘old’ Biafra in 1967, on one side, and fellow young Igbo on the other over what ‘Biafra’ really meant. Influential elderly Igbo, chastened by still-fresh memories of that bloody conflict and knowing, like Vice President Abubakar, that the central state, rid of the democratisation pretence, was still all-powerful and unrestrained, preached caution and indeed sought to redefine what it means to be ‘Igbo’ to accord with the still dangerous times. This Leviathan was also manifested in the local state in the form of the PDP governors and local government heads in the five Igbo states (the number of governors was subsequently reduced to four when elections were voided in Anambra State in 2005 and a non-PDP governor took office), who had also taken power in a process Ugandan scholar Mahmood Mamdani has described in a different but uncannily similar context as ‘decentralised despotism.’<sup>18</sup> The latter looked to Abuja and not their ethnic kin for succour and political ‘muscle’ in spite of MASSOB’s exhortations.

Political institutions, therefore, not only shape the choices of political elites, they also shape the ethnic terrain on which the political game is played. When they hug and centralise power and strategic resources and at the same time give salience to political ethnicity for personal and interest group reasons, elites may also pursue a dual strategy of politicising ethnicity and making overtures to the centre. In the process, the latter expand or narrow the perimeters of the ‘ethnic’ or even redefine it altogether, depending on the likely pay-offs, as MASSOB has been doing since 1999. Indeed, the debate between the two broad schools of politics in ethnically divided states turns on conflicting conceptions of the ethnic bond, replicated in the long-running disagreement between primordial-

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17. See Terry Lynn Karl, ‘Dilemmas of Democratization in Latin America,’ *Comparative Politics*, 23, 1, (October 1990), pp. 1–21.

18. Mahmood Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of late Colonialism*, Princeton: Princeton University Press and London: James Currey, 1996. Mamdani argued in this book that British colonial rulers appointed political elites to govern the local people in the rural areas by marshalling authoritarian possibilities in the local culture, euphemistically styled ‘native custom.’ He called this process ‘decentralised despotism.’ Likewise, the departing generals in Nigeria also ensured that only PDP politicians at the central level ‘won’ a majority of the votes during the 1999 elections, also decentralising this process to the various states and local government areas.

ists, instrumentalists and the new school of social constructivists over ethnicity as idea and process.

Early primordialists saw ethnicity in terms of biological kinship and shared belief in common descent, even in the absence of verifiable blood relationship. Those like Horowitz who deploy new variants of this understanding in the political process either view ethnic politics as remnants of a primitive past hostile to modernism but nevertheless relatively permanent and immutable and thus to be combated in all its forms, or throw their hands up in despair and maintain that democratising these 'deeply divided' societies is a near-impossible task. Instrumentalist approaches, which considerably overlap with constructivist perspectives, blame the persistence of ethnic politics on machinations of the elite as they exploit dislocations generated by capitalist modernity and its discontents to create subservient ethnic coalitions and to maintain their hegemony. Ethnicity in Africa was a 20th century manifestation of 'false consciousness' that would wither away as ordinary people began to organise along civic lines and forcefully assert their rights as they build a just and participatory democratic future. Constructivists readily embrace the modernity and political legitimacy of ethnic identity, but problematise its markers and its seeming permanence and persistence.<sup>19</sup> They also draw attention to the vigorous internal debates that occurred within African ethnicities as elites and their followers shaped and reshaped their outer contours in response to colonial policies and institutions, the writings of missionaries and colonial anthropologists, and the strategies of other groups as all competed for power, wealth and other scarce resources of capitalist modernity. The contingency and malleability of the ethnic bond and the flexibility of elite behaviour as actors choose from a menu of actions in a relatively fluid politi-

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19. Jessica Piombo sums up this debate between the various schools of ethnicity in *Institutions, Ethnicity and Political Mobilisation*, pp. 7–8. An influential early treatment of the primordialist position is Donald Horowitz, *Ethnic Groups in Conflict*, Los Angeles and Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985. Studies that adopt the instrumentalist viewpoint include Robert Bates, 'Ethnic Competition and Modernisation in Contemporary Africa,' *Comparative Political Studies*, 6, 4 (January 1974), pp. 457–83; Nathan Glazer and Daniel Patrick Moynihan, 'Introduction,' in their *Ethnicity: Theory and Experience*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975; Okwudiba Nnoli, *Ethnic Politics in Nigeria*, Enugu: Fourth Dimension Press, 1980; Gavin Williams, *State and Society in Nigeria*, Idanre: Afrografika, 1980; and Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*, New York: Verso, 1983. Peter Ekeh's much-cited essay, published in 1990, first drew attention to the internal and external contours of the ethnic public and could therefore be considered an important precursor of the constructivist school. See Peter Ekeh, 'Social Anthropology and Two Contrasting Uses of Tribalism in Africa,' *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 32, 4 (1990). John Lonsdale further elaborated these distinctions (he termed them 'moral ethnicity' and 'political tribalism') in his essay, 'The Moral Economy of MauMau' in Bruce Berman and John Lonsdale (eds), *Unhappy Valley: Conflict in Kenya and Africa*, London: James Currey, 1997. Berman, Eyoh and Kymlicka (eds), *Ethnicity and Democracy in Africa*, 2004 assemble a number of Africa case studies from the constructivist perspective.

cal terrain could therefore be engineered through appropriate institutional devices to make politicised ethnicity and democratisation compatible. Successful institutional engineering is by no means easy, but it can be done, as the example of many democratic multicultural states attests.

This constructivist understanding of the complex ways in which history, institutions and political actors interact to generate dynamic outcomes in Africa today informs this study of MASSOB and its place in Nigeria's democratisation journey since 1999. But the task of the engineers is made all the more difficult if those charged with working these state institutions to supervise the political transition refuse to don the 'veil of ignorance' to ensure impartiality of outcome. The state institutions Nigeria's former vice president was shoring up his defences against have a deep history. In colonial times, this state was the chief repository of power and economic opportunities and was also an active participant in economic and political life. People on the make tapped its coercive institutions to make their fortunes. Following the end of the civil war in 1970, it had morphed into a powerful military government that began to supervise the disposal of the vast sums that accrued to the national treasury from the oil boom that the Middle East conflict of 1973 triggered. By the time popular protests had forced the generals to relinquish power, a process that took two and a half decades, the economy had collapsed, millions were without work and the social fabric had fragmented into several ethnic and religious laagers, all of them competing with the central state for citizens' allegiance. The grid of unaccountable power, embodied in state institutions, was not dismantled, even as elections were held in the early months of 1999. Again, as in colonial times, the state rewarded favoured ethnic groups with power and access to the oil rent and excluded the rest.

It was into this twilight world of widespread poverty, powerlessness, and a peculiar brand of modernity that had meshed with power since colonial times to speak the divisive language of 'tribe' that the men of MASSOB, claiming that the new political settlement did not address Igbo postwar grievances, emerged. Their fathers had confronted this grid 40 years previously, with bloody consequences. Their children were willing to confront the state again, but this time using the new weapons that openings during democratic transitions, no matter how fragile, usually afford. In the process, they began to redefine what it meant to be 'Biafran,' as there was no ready-made Biafran 'nation' 40 years after the civil war ended immediately available to be politically mobilised to back the secessionist project.

The Igbo, famous worldwide for their entrepreneurial skills and trading networks, were dispersed all over the country and beyond. A middle class-dominated civic public, fragile but nevertheless active, had developed in the region in the intervening 40 years. A new generation of politicians, aligned with a powerful and unaccountable central government, was firmly in power in the

Igbo states. Impatient and impoverished members opposed to the militia's non-violent stance had broken off and established new organisations. Youth leaders in the ethnic minority areas of the defunct Biafra, fearful of Igbo 'hegemony,' also kept their distance. MASSOB had to negotiate these barriers. The process has not been without considerable violence. The bulk of this violence has been generated by the state in its attempt to put down what it describes as 'resurgent secession,' thus bringing into question the legitimacy of the democratic transition and Nigeria's continued existence as a multiethnic state.

These and related concerns inform the questions that motivated this study. Why has MASSOB not been able to follow the rule book of the 'after democratisation, the deluge' theorists and taken its seemingly successful mobilisation to the next stage of ethnic violence and disruption of Nigeria's democratisation process? How do authoritarian political institutions, even as they are apparently being dismantled in a period of democratisation, continue to shape and constrain the choices and strategies of political actors in multiethnic societies?

The paper attempts to answer these questions that make problematic, in the face of emerging empirical evidence in the Nigerian case, the argument that 'deeply divided' societies should not be unduly pressured to embrace democratisation for fear they might come apart along their ethnic fault-lines, requiring costly intervention from the international community. Ethnic groups are not automatically politicised during periods of democratisation, but may become so if authoritarian political institutions constrain political actors and at the same time provide incentives for them to mobilise along ethnic lines, as opposed to the civic. These actors, finding obstacles in the way of their ethnic project, among them the powerful state and also divisions within, and unable to revert to civic strategies and build a winning electoral coalition because of the state's election-rigging strategies, may be forced underground into a simmering cauldron of insurgency that generates political instability. Thus, in addition to grappling with the obvious challenge of devising institutionally embedded incentives to lure putative ethnic entrepreneurs back into the civic public sphere where democratic politics can more easily prosper, political analysis must also, in this particular case, speak to the timeless dilemma of establishing government and ensuring that those charged with the task of governing the process do not bend the rules from the outset.

### **Methodology**

We began by asking why Nigeria's democratising process has not yet dissolved into ethnic violence, even when ethnic militias like MASSOB have since 1999 become powerful social movements openly advocating secession, drawing on the still powerful ghost of Biafra. We then surveyed the literature on this subject, one that academics and policymakers concerned with the fate of democrati-

sation in Africa and other 'third wave' regions find troubling. This literature invariably begins with politicised ethnic groups as a given but fails to ask why they became so in the first instance. Similarly, there is a rich literature on the role of institutions in shaping political outcomes, but these too leave unaddressed the specific ways in which political actors respond to strategies and incentives supplied by these institutions in the political arena. Even more troubling is the virtual absence in studies of democratisation in multiethnic states in Africa of the question of trust and bureaucratic impartiality on the part of state institutions in the period of liberalisation leading to crucial founding elections.<sup>20</sup> This lacuna is surprising, given that large swathes of Africa, where social pluralism is the norm, were in the grip of military or civilian authoritarians before re-democratisation began in the late 1980s. A detailed study of how these reluctant agents of political liberalisation went about the project, in cases like Nigeria blatantly resorting to the age-old trick of divide-and-rule by whipping up ethnic sentiments, therefore affords democratisation studies a front-row view of the forces at work in democratising multiethnic states as relatively dormant ethnic elements are deliberately charged. The obvious antidote to this regime would be impartial incumbents genuinely committed to relinquishing power entirely and damping the fires of politicised ethnicity in the process.

This study examines the calculations of authoritarian incumbents as they supply ethnic incentives and de-incentivise pan-ethnic civic coalition-building and how a group of political entrepreneurs, cobbling together an ethnic militia, responded to the process. I used the case-study approach as the unit of analysis to afford a detailed examination of this process, in particular to tease out the countervailing factors that work against the progression of the MASSOB project from successful mobilisation to outright secession and disruption of the Nigerian democratisation process. I chose MASSOB because this militia, unlike others in the country, explicitly links itself with the defunct Biafran state, affording us the benefit of the deep history that is vital to making meaning of the complex interaction between institutions and political agents. As Robert Putnam has argued, 'Individuals may "choose" their institutions but they do not choose them under circumstances of their own making, and their choices in turn influence the rules within which their successors choose.'<sup>21</sup> This study tracks MASSOB right from its inception in 1999, shortly after a civilian government took office following controversial elections, through the imprisonment of

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20. Bruce Berman also raises this concern in 'Ethnicity, Bureaucracy and Democracy: The Politics of Trust,' in Berman, Eyoh and Kymlicka (eds), *Ethnicity and Democracy in Africa*, 2004. Berman's essay is, however, theoretical, and is neither sufficiently detailed nor grounded in empirical findings.

21. Robert Putnam with Robert Leonardi and Raffaella Y. Nanneti, *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993, p. 7.

its founding leader Ralph Uwazurike in 2005, precisely when the government, under pressure, convened a national conference to address the grievances of the various ethnic groups, to the present, even as members reassess their strategies in the face of the apparent reluctance of a significant section of the Igbo political elite to buy into a new secession project. Primary data for the study were collected in field research from July-November 2010. MASSOB leaders and ordinary members in 10 Igbo cities and towns were interviewed, as were Igbo politicians and sundry elites, Igbo civic actors and other citizens resident in the Igbo part of the country. The militia's own reports and video recordings, and first-hand observation of MASSOB rallies, marches and burial and wedding ceremonies of members provided additional context. These data were supplemented with secondary material on the militia and the democratisation process collated from the print media.

I have laid out the theoretical framework and the explanatory strategy in the first section of this paper. In the second, I examine in detail the civic origins of the MASSOB militia and the ways in which history and elite calculations shaped its emergence. In the third section, I explore the historical background of the militia and its inner workings and organisation. Section four discusses the institutional factors and significant actors in the Igbo and Nigeria-wide political arena that wittingly or unwittingly serve as a countervailing agent to MASSOB's project, the strategies MASSOB deploys to negotiate these obstacles and the extent to which they have succeeded. In the concluding section, I attempt to generate middle-level theory about ethnic mobilisation in the context of incomplete democratisation.

## 2. MASSOB: The Civic Origins of an Ethnic Militia

On 1 November 1999, five months after Nigeria returned to civilian rule, a young lawyer in Lagos dispatched a document to the United Nations office in New York. Ralph Uwazurike, 39 at the time, titled the document 'Biafra Bill of Rights.' It stated:

We, the people of Biafra, namely: Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu, Imo, Cross River, Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa and Delta States numbering about 40 million and being one of the major tribes in Nigeria and two of the geo-political zones within the Federal Republic of Nigeria, hereby seek the actualisation of the Sovereign State of Biafra on the following grounds:

1. That Biafra (Igbo) before the advent of British colonialism was a distinct race east of the Niger.
2. That it was for the administrative convenience of the British colonial masters that Biafra (South-East and South-South) were merged with other provinces to give rise to the Federation of Nigeria, on January 1<sup>st</sup> 1914.
3. That the hostility of Nigeria towards Biafra brought about the civil war of 1967–1970, in which about 2000000 lives were lost.
4. That the death of Biafra (Igbo) in the said war brought the Igbo back to Nigeria against their will.
5. That consequent upon their defeat in the said war, the Igbo are regarded as enemies and treated as slaves among other nationalities in Nigeria.<sup>22</sup>

The document went on to cite instances of Nigerian citizens of Igbo extraction being killed, injured or generally maltreated by Hausa-Fulani Muslims, the dominant ethnic group in the northern part of the country, where Igbo merchants live in large numbers. The Biafra Bill of Rights also stated that Igbo university graduates were being discriminated against by the federal government in employment and that as a consequence 'Nigeria' was not conducive to the achievement by 'Biafrans' of their ideals and aspirations.

The bill went on to make a six-point demand on the 'government and people of Nigeria':

1. That instruments be put in motion for the self-determination of Biafra (Igbo), without violence.
2. That further lifting of oil be stopped in the Biafra areas of South East and South-South states.
3. That all the monies belonging to Biafrans (Igbos) in the banks immediately after the civil war be paid without any further delay.

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22. For details of the bill, see 'Biafra Bill of Rights', originally published in *Biafra News*, 1, 2 (1999).

4. That all the abandoned properties belonging to Biafrans (Igbos) before the war be released.
5. That the life and properties of Biafrans (Igbos) be protected during and after the period of their self-determination.
6. That all toll gates mounted on all erosion-devastated roads across Biafra (Igbo) land be dismantled without further delay.

The Biafra Bill of Rights, drafted by Uwazurike, was the culmination of several meetings of Igbo young men, drawn largely from the Lagos commercial class, he had convened in his Lagos home shortly after Olusegun Obasanjo took office as president in May 1999 on the platform of the PDP. These meetings subsequently gave birth to MASSOB, an ethnic militia advocating secession, with Uwazurike as its 'leader' in September of that year.<sup>23</sup>

Uwazurike, a lawyer and budding politician, had played a minor role in Obasanjo's emergence as president. Following the deaths in quick succession in mid-1998 of Nigeria's maximum ruler, General Sani Abacha, and of Moshood Abiola, presumed winner of the annulled 1993 presidential election, Abacha's successor, General Abdulsalaam Abubakar, announced that fresh general elections would be held in early 1999, after which the armed forces would relinquish power. Mass protest in the cities, triggered by worsening social and economic conditions and further strengthened by the 1993 annulment, had weakened General Abacha's grip on power and delegitimised the idea of continued military rule. The Yoruba area, where the late Abiola was from, was also in turmoil, and leading politicians and activists from the region, together with politicians from other parts of the country, had established the National Democratic Coalition (NADECO), a pressure group based in London campaigning for the 'actualisation of the mandate freely-given to President Abiola by the Nigerian people.'<sup>24</sup> NADECO had its blatantly ethnic counterpart in the OPC, a militia in Lagos advocating 'self-determination' for the Yoruba. Also ranged against the junta was the Group of 34 (G34), a loose coalition of the country's conservative political elite led by Dr Alex Ekwueme, an Igbo and Second Republic vice president. The G34 wanted General Abubakar to call elections as soon as was practically possible.

For the embattled junta, the chief dilemma was how to initiate the democratisation process while at the same time ensuring that its own interests were adequately protected by its civilian successor. This junta was dominated by northern generals, and the loud calls for 'self-determination' and 'true federalism' in the south, particularly in the Yoruba area and the oil-bearing Niger Delta region

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23. Interview with Chris Mocha, MASSOB deputy direction of information, Onitsha, 2 August 2010.

24. See *Nigerian Liberation*, organ of the National Democratic Coalition, Issue 1, September–December 1995.

where Ken Saro-Wiwa, a writer and minority rights activist, had led a powerful civic movement to confront the central government and the oil companies before he was hanged by Abacha in 1995, was also a source of concern.<sup>25</sup> A powerful authoritarian state, led by these generals, had emerged after the civil war in 1970, centralising administration and Nigeria's considerable oil revenues, estimated at \$50 billion per annum on sales of two million barrels of oil daily. The bulk of this revenue was distributed to the central government and the 36 states through a complex formula that emphasised population size, 'need' and 'even development,' thereby transferring the lion's share to the centre and the northern states to the disadvantage of the ethnic minority groups in the Niger Delta where the oil was extracted. The departing army officers were anxious to retain this arrangement, even as they also looked for a replacement who would not ask searching questions about an estimated \$600 billion that had been embezzled by successive governments since the end of the war.<sup>26</sup> Western governments that had considerable investments in Nigeria's oil industry, with the United States and the European Union in the lead, also worried that the political transition could result in anarchy and threaten their oil supplies.

What emerged in 1999 was an elite pact following closed-door negotiations between the generals and the conservative segment of Nigeria's political elite. Terry Lyn Karl, in her 1990 study of democratisation in Latin America, drew attention to 'foundational pacts' in these countries as they began to undergo political liberalisation in the 1980s, which she defined as 'explicit (though not always public) agreements between contending actors, which define the rules of governance on the basis of mutual guarantees for the "vital interests" of those involved.'<sup>27</sup> In Nigeria's case, the pact between the junta and its would-be successors was brokered by two retired generals – Yakubu Danjuma, former army chief staff and Ibrahim Babangida, a former military head of state. Working through influential retired northern senior civil servants like Ahmed Joda, Danjuma got northern leaders to agree that power would be ceded to the south, since the north had supplied the bulk of the country's military leaders following the end of the First Republic in 1966.<sup>28</sup> This suggestion was given further impetus

25. For details of Ken Saro-Wiwa and the Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP), see Ike Okonta, *When Citizens Revolt: Nigerian Elites, Big Oil and the Ogoni Struggle for Self-determination*, Trenton: Africa World Press, 2008.

26. Nuhu Ribadu, founding executive chairman of the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC), stated in numerous public forums in Nigeria and abroad that the bulk of the 'missing billions' was the handiwork of military governments in the country. Nuhu Ribadu, 'Addressing Corruption in Africa,' Lecture at Howard University, 3 March 2010.

27. Terry Lyn Karl, 'Dilemmas of Democratization in Latin America,' p. 9.

28. Sam Isaiah-Nda, a leading northern journalist, was privy to the backroom dealings that led northern politicians to agree to take a backseat during the 1999 presidential election. Isaiah-Nda chronicled this event thus in his popular newspaper column: 'Within a few

by the deafening call for a 'sovereign national conference' to address the basis of the future association between the country's various ethnic groups in the south, a veiled reference to the north's perceived hugging of power in the federal centre.

The northern political establishment backed Dr Ekwueme for the presidency. Ekwueme had served as President Shehu Shagari's vice president in the Second Republic, and was widely acknowledged in the north as a competent politician who could be relied on to protect the region's interests in the new civilian dispensation, even though he was Igbo. Babangida and Danjuma, however, preferred Olusegun Obasanjo, a fellow retired general. Danjuma had played a key role in Obasanjo's taking power as head of state in February 1976 following the assassination of General Murtala Muhammed in a bloody but botched coup d'état, and thought that he knew the former general well enough to entrust him with the leadership of the country. Another factor counted in Obasanjo's favour. He was Yoruba, home region of the late Moshood Abiola, whose political travails were interpreted on the Yoruba street as clearly indicating that powerful northern generals, including the incumbent head of state on whose watch Abiola had died in detention in 1998, were determined to keep their leaders out of power at the centre in perpetuity. Indeed, this was the rallying cry of the OPC. An Obasanjo presidency, Danjuma and Babangida decided, would soothe frayed political nerves in Yorubaland and also douse growing separatist sentiments in that volatile region. Powerful opponents to an Obasanjo presidency in the north, including General Ishaya Bamaïyi, chief of army staff under the late General Abacha, were persuaded to back down.<sup>29</sup>

The departing generals laid down stiff conditions. They would draw up a new constitution for the country without the participation of the political class. This constitution would retain the main features of the one Babangida had more or less unilaterally drafted in 1989, creating a powerful central government and an executive presidency in control of the oil revenues and the security apparatus required to uphold the arrangement in the event of possible challenge from insurgent forces from any aggrieved section of the country clamouring for a 'Sovereign National Conference' or outright secession.<sup>30</sup> This powerful

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days, General Danjuma placed a call to his friend, Ahmed Joda, a retired federal permanent secretary and broached the idea of the need to repackage Obasanjo for the presidency of the nation especially as talks of power shift to the south had filled the air.' See Sam Isaiah-Nda, 'Danjuma's Mea Culpa,' Gamji.com, accessed 2 February 2011.

29. General Bamaïyi told reporters in the northern city of Ilorin in September 2010 that he had opposed the suggestion that Obasanjo be supported in taking the presidency because General Abacha had put Obasanjo in prison in 1995 for alleged treason (*The Punch*; 21 September 2010).
30. The nearest mobilised civic and ethnic associations campaigning for a sovereign national conference during the military dictatorship came to realising this objective was in 1995 when the Abacha junta called a national dialogue and then proceeded to tele-guide its deliberations. See Eghosa Osaghae, *Crippled Giant: Nigeria since Independence*,

president would also control the police, judiciary and the bureaucracy virtually unchecked. The first-past-the-post electoral system, designed by the military regime when they initially handed over to civilians in 1979 before taking power again four years later, would be retained. IMF-sponsored economic reforms, anchored on a structural adjustment programme Babangida had introduced as head of state in the mid-1980s, were not to be rolled back. These reforms had savagely cut public expenditure on social services, liberalised imports, devalued the currency and triggered the sell-off of a swathe of public-owned enterprises, in the process throwing millions into the unemployment queue. They were still deeply unpopular some 15 years after their introduction. Most importantly, like their counterparts in such Latin American countries as Venezuela and Uruguay, the incoming government would give the generals an iron-clad guarantee they would not be prosecuted for financial, political and other crimes committed while they were in power. Babangida and Abacha after him had bruited the idea of a 'military party' before civil society opposition caused them to abandon the project. The generals saw their evolving alliance with Obasanjo and other leading conservative politicians as capable of giving rise to a variant of this stillborn party in which they would be important stakeholders.<sup>31</sup>

A key consequence of the economic slump, military dictatorship and Babangida's polarising policies in the 1980s and early 1990s was the retreat of Nigerians into ethnic, religious and other associations of primary identity. Lagos in particular witnessed feverish Pentecostal revivalism and the re-emergence of ethnic associations and sundry kinship-based self-help groups during this period. Uwazurike was chair of the Lagos branch of the Igbo Council of Chiefs, a country-wide network of diaspora Igbo merchants that emerged in the twilight of military rule and which sought to preserve 'traditional' culture in their new abodes.<sup>32</sup> This organisation was apolitical, and mainly concerned itself with such matters as the welfare of ethnic Igbo in large cities and towns outside their homeland, marriage and burial ceremonies of their members, and 'proper' observation of such landmark events in the Igbo cultural calendar as the new yam festival. The imminent end of military rule, however, caused some of these ethnic associations, including the Igbo Council of Chiefs, to begin to take an interest in politics, for long

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Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998. See in particular chapter 7, 'The Abacha Regime, 1993–1996.' A cause for worry for the northern generals was the declaration by Anthony Enahoro, a veteran politician from the south, in December 1998 following a meeting of the Conference of Nationalities, a political organisation campaigning for southern interests, that 'the Ethnic Nationalities shall be the building blocks of the Federation, with the right to self-determination.'

31. Kayode Fayemi drew attention to the 'military party' project even as the Nigerian armed forces were preparing to disengage in 1999. See Kayode Fayemi, 'Military Hegemony and the Transition Program,' *Issue*, 27, 1 (1999), pp. 69–72.
32. Interview with Uche Madu, MASSOB director of information, Onitsha, 2 August 2010.

considered the exclusive preserve of the armed forces. It was on this platform that Uwazurike sought to organise support for Dr Ekwueme's bid for the presidency as political parties began to emerge in the last months of 1998.

Three parties were approved by the junta as participants in the 1999 general elections. The PDP's founding core was Dr Ekwueme's G34, later expanded to include members of a political organisation established by educated, wealthy and conservative northerners of the younger generation led by Atiku Abubakar. General Danjuma, Babangida and several other wealthy and influential military officers, serving and retired, provided financial support. General Abubakar, head of the junta, also considered Babangida his mentor and quietly promoted the idea of the PDP as 'heir apparent' in military formations across the country. The All Peoples Party (later to be renamed All Nigerian Peoples Party, ANPP) represented the rump of the senior members of the armed forces from the north and their civilian friends who had worked closely with and benefited from Abacha's particularly repressive junta. The Alliance for Democracy (AD) openly flew the flag of Yoruba politicians who styled themselves 'progressives,' and initially declared that its primary concern was repairing the damage wrought on the Yoruba area by military dictators and was not interested in fielding a presidential candidate. Of the three, the PDP had a wider 'national' spread and was clearly structured with an eye to the electoral law, which stipulated that for a president to be validly elected, he or she had to poll a majority of the votes in 24 of the country's 36 states, including Abuja Federal Capital Territory. It also became obvious when preliminary elections for local government council seats were held in December 1998 and the PDP 'won' the majority of them that the party enjoyed the backing of the junta, election officials (who were directly appointed by the former), the police and enormously wealthy retired generals like Danjuma and Babangida.

The hidden hand of this web of generals was fully at play during the PDP's presidential primary a few weeks later. Obasanjo, although a former military head of state, had been in detention for most of General Abacha's rule and had neither the financial resources nor the political networks to give Ekwueme a credible fight for the PDP ticket. Danjuma, Babangida and several other generals rallied and made funds available to Obasanjo to not only make a handsome donation to the party but also to support his primary campaign. Emeka Odumegwu Ojukwu, the Biafran leader who had returned to the country in 1982 and joined Ekwueme's National Party of Nigeria (NPN), had in 1998 broached the idea of an Igbo-led political party to Ekwueme, whose presidential flag he would fly.<sup>33</sup> Ekwueme, however, declined the offer, saying he would

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33. Interview with Sonny Ugochukwu, political aide to Chukwuemeka Odumegwu-Ojukwu, Abuja, 7 October 2010.

rather help build up the PDP which, according to him, would be a ‘mass movement just like the African National Congress (ANC) in South Africa.’<sup>34</sup> It was, however, more likely that Ekwueme and other party leaders sought to replicate the NPN, which had used a countrywide network of conservative politicians, businessmen and community leaders to build a formidable election-rigging machine during Nigeria’s Second Republic. The party had seemed invincible and looked to dominate the country’s politics for the foreseeable future until it was overthrown in a coup led by northern generals in December 1983. The northern part of this network was still intact and had become absorbed into the new PDP. Ekwueme looked to it for support during the party primary. Younger Igbo elements, like Uwazurike, and the ‘cultural’ organisations they had skilfully recalibrated to take on political functions, also backed Ekwueme, hoping to ride on his success to fortune.

The generals successfully swung the PDP primary Obasanjo’s way. Ekwueme’s political friends in the north had been persuaded by the generals’ argument of a ‘power shift’ not only to favour the south but the Yoruba in particular, and Obasanjo was the obvious choice. Atiku Abubakar, a rising northern political star, had inherited the political machine Shehu Yar’Adua – another retired general, who had served as the number two man in Obasanjo’s military government in the late 1970s – had put together before his death in Abacha’s detention camp in 1995. He put the Yar’Adua machine to work on Obasanjo’s behalf, and was later, following the latter’s victory, to be rewarded with the position of running mate. Ekwueme graciously admitted defeat and called on his supporters to back Obasanjo’s campaign for president.

Obasanjo, as commander of the Third Amphibious Commando Division of the Nigerian army during the bloody 30-month Nigeria-Biafra war, had made history as the general who ‘ended the war’ by receiving the surrender instrument from the head of the Biafran army in January 1970.<sup>35</sup> The ANPP and AD had jointly fielded Olu Falae, a retired Yoruba civil servant, as their presidential candidate, hoping that Ekwueme’s failure to win the PDP ticket in addition to Obasanjo’s ‘negative’ war record in Igbo collective memory would galvanise ordinary Igbo and their political elites to rally to their flag. This did not happen. Conservative Igbo politicians in the PDP, including Uwazurike, heeded Ekwueme’s call and worked hard to ensure Obasanjo’s victory in the February 1999 poll. When the results came in, Obasanjo had won the bulk of his votes in the north and the Igbo heartland, while losing to Falae in Yorubaland, where both of them came from.

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34. *Thisday* (10 February 2006).

35. For details of General Obasanjo’s role during the war, see Olusegun Obasanjo, *My Command*, Ibadan: Heinemann, 1982. The general’s critics, however, claim this book is more hagiography than objective account.

Julius Ihonvbere, a Nigerian political scientist who was later to serve as one of Obasanjo's advisors during his second term, has written of the 1999 general election: 'One can say with certainty that all the contradictions that had bedeviled previous democratic experiments in Nigeria were present and magnified in the February 27, 1999 election: divided loyalties, manipulation of primordial identities and loyalties, corruption and other election malpractices, lack of political discipline and limited attention to serious structural questions.'<sup>36</sup> The consensus of local and international observers who had monitored the elections was that the military junta had rigged the outcome to favour Obasanjo and the PDP. The Carter Center and the National Democratic Institute had a joint team, led by President Jimmy Carter, to monitor the election. One of its members reported Carter's reaction to the blatant abuse of the election process thus:

Reporters from the major Nigerian newspapers avoided printing the abuses they saw, so as not to give the military the slightest excuse to reverse the transition process. Carter, however, felt otherwise. The morning after the presidential election, he decided he had seen enough, and grew more convinced as delegates trickled in with more evidence throughout the day. First in a private meeting with Abubakar (head of the junta) and then at a press conference, he declared that those in the Carter Centre had witnessed serious violations of the electoral process. Later, Chief Olu Falae, the vanquished AD/APP candidate, declared that the election was a farce and would not concede defeat.<sup>37</sup>

The election tribunal, constituted by the junta and still controlled by it, ruled against Falae. On 29 May, Olusegun Obasanjo was sworn in as president. Unlike other ethnic self-determination organisations such as the OPC and the Niger Delta-based Ijaw Youth Council, which emerged in the mid-1990s as a reaction to unaccountable military rule and its use by northern generals to secure sectional interests, MASSOB was the direct child of the elite pact that characterised Nigeria's founding elections in 1999 after a long period of military rule. As already stated, this pact sought to maintain the prevailing political and social order in a period of turbulence by disenfranchising the majority of voting citizens through the process of ballot-stuffing, putting a retired general in power to preside over a powerful and centralised oil rentier state, and stabilising the political order by incorporating into this powerful centre trusted elements from an aggrieved section of the country *perceived to be a potentially destabilising factor*. This exclusionary power politics necessarily created losers and winners, insiders and outsiders. The Yoruba, whose interest Obasanjo was now said to

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36. Julius Ihonvbere, 'The 1999 Presidential Elections in Nigeria: The Unresolved Issues,' *Issue*, XXVII, 1 (1999).

37. Darren Kew, "'Democracy: Dem Go Craze, O': Monitoring the 1999 Nigerian Elections,' *Issue*, XXVII, 1 (1999).

be representing in the new civilian regime, was the new winner-insider. Ralph Uwazurike, having backed Dr Ekwueme, a fellow Igbo, and lost, quickly defined this loss in ethnic rather than personal or civic terms. The Igbo, in his new scheme, were the loser-outsiders. Even so, the process of elaborating the personal and political into what would quickly become a powerful ethnic narrative, was fundamentally civic in character.

The military government that drew up the 1979 constitution, chastened by the experience of the bloody civil war, was anxious to weaken regional power blocs and strengthen the centre. It achieved this by discarding the 1960 independence constitution, which rested on three powerful federating regions and the Westminster parliamentary tradition, and introducing the American model with a powerful president, who nevertheless has to garner votes from all sections of the country to be elected. But the 1979 constitution also introduced an innovation. Addressing the opening session of the government-appointed constitution drafting committee in 1975, General Murtala Muhammed, the head of state, argued that 'we feel that there should be legal provisions that they [the president and vice president] are brought into office in such a manner as to reflect the Federal character of the country; and (b) the choice of the members of the Cabinet should also be such as would reflect the Federal character.'<sup>38</sup> The 1979 constitution not only specifically embodied 'federal character' provisions, but also stated that appointments to cabinet posts and other important public positions would be allocated using the 'indigene' principle. It defined an indigene of a state as an individual whose parents or grandparents hailed from any of the ethnic groups in that state. 'Indigenes' drawn from various ethnic groups would, through a balanced selection process, go to the centre to 'represent' their primordial constituency in the government. Thus you were a citizen and a potential recipient of government largesse not by right of long-term residence in a state but only insofar as you could trace your ancestral lineage to a particular 'ethnic' space in the country. The federal character principle was given practical expression by the NPN government when the Second Republic commenced in 1979 in the distribution of ministerial posts and other perks to powerful representatives of the various ethnic groups dispersed in the 19 states. The Abubakar-led junta had forced an exact replica of the 1979 constitution on its civilian successors, and the PDP had in turn sought to replicate the success of the NPN by incorporating the federal character provisions in its party constitution. There

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38. Murtala Muhammed, Head of State and Commander in Chief of the Nigerian Armed Forces, Speech at the Opening Session of the Constitution Drafting Committee, quoted in Jean Herskovits, '50 Years of Change in Nigeria,' Paper presented at the Coventry University African Studies Centre-Chatham House Africa Programme Conference, 'Nigeria: The Biggest and the Best? 50 Years of Independence', 20 November 2010.

were now 36 states in the country, and each would have to be represented in President Obasanjo's cabinet.

Ordinarily, Dr Ekwueme, one of the party leaders and a prominent politician in his own right, would have played an important role in the cabinet selection process. But Obasanjo, acutely aware that he was still doubly disadvantaged as a retired general and late joiner whose electoral mandate enjoyed tenuous legitimacy at best, moved from the outset to create his own power base within the PDP and also in the countrywide power game. Ekwueme was part of the 'old brigade' of politicians that had to be neutralised for the new political project Obasanjo had in mind to flower. Neither Ekwueme nor his Igbo supporters were consulted by the president when he appointed the Igbo members of his new 'federal character' cabinet. Ralph Uwazurike was passed over. Nor was he tapped for any of the many lucrative appointments to public corporations and agencies.

When Uwazurike decided in late 1998 to throw in his lot with Ekwueme, his action was informed by a clear-eyed understanding of Nigerian power politics of the time. From Babangida onwards, the military junta had openly expressed its interest in participating in 'democratic' politics in one form or other, and had not hesitated to deploy the might of the state to achieve this objective. Babangida, while he was in power, had written a new constitution for the country, decreed two political parties into existence and compelled politicians to register as members of either on pain of prevention from participating in politics. Then he had crowned these interventions with the annulment of the 1993 presidential election, whose result he judged hostile to his interest and that of the army. Abacha, Babangida's successor, had also created five parties, all of which in turn nominated him as presidential candidate. Clearly, the northern military establishment and the state that it dominated were potent factors. Ekwueme, a wealthy conservative Igbo politician who only nine years after the civil war had ended had made common cause with his northern ideological counterparts and helped bankroll the emergence of the NPN, was considered by Uwazurike as most likely to receive the backing of the state, powerful northern generals and the politicians with whom they were aligned for the post of president. After all, Ekwueme was widely seen as President Shehu Shagari's successor before yet another military coup ended the Second Republic in December 1983. Uwazurike's choice was astute and pragmatic – until northern fears of a possible Yoruba backlash, and with this, Obasanjo entered the picture. Losing out in this bruising winner-takes-all game refereed by partial authoritarians who blatantly incentivised ethno-regional calculations, Uwazurike responded by creating an Igbo equivalent of the Yoruba 'grievance' on which Obasanjo had successfully ridden to power.

The roots of the MASSOB leader's grievance were civic and political, while his response, shaped by the political terrain in which he operated, was ethnic.

### 3. Reimagining Biafra, Remobilising for Secession

Students of democratisation in plural societies are paying increasing attention to group size, the possible ways in which diverse elements of the group can be combined and the terrain on which political competition takes place as three important factors that shape strategic political action.<sup>39</sup>The Igbo, one of the country's three largest ethnic groups, could serve as a ready-made platform if Uwazurike could mobilise them to embrace his new political project. Although dispersed in sizeable numbers throughout the country, they still constitute the overwhelming majority in five states in their ancestral homeland east of the Niger River. There were also sizeable Igbo-speaking 'minorities' in the neighbouring Delta and Rivers states.

The PDP had tailored its strategies to fit the dominant political institutions at the time of the democratic transition: it brokered a pact with the generals and the powerful state they controlled; structured its constitution and top membership to reflect 'federal character'; and offered an umbrella broad enough to lure in potentially destabilising political actors. This political terrain, aggregating power at the centre, did not offer pay-offs to regional players, who insisted on spurning this powerful centre and mobilising political support along ethnic lines. The AD realised this too late, to its cost during the presidential election. Uwazurike and his co-travellers in the Igbo Council of Chiefs had played the 'centre' game and lost. Joining a rival party was neither realistic nor attractive. As insiders, they had witnessed the close collaboration between PDP leaders and state officials, the public face of the generals, to ensure the elections favoured their party. A rival party, no matter how appealing to voters, would always kiss the dust in the absence of free elections. Their plan from the outset was therefore to create a new extra-political winning coalition in the eastern part of the country, with the Igbo at its core, to force a settlement with the Nigerian 'centre' to their own benefit.

Unlike the other ethnic self-determination groups that had preceded them in the 1980s and 1990s, these young Igbo chose an already existing name for their new organisation. The identification with the name 'Biafra' was designed to achieve three main objectives: drive home the point that Igbo grievances have a deep history whose apogee was the concatenation of events that exploded in secession and civil war in July 1967; broaden the platform by drawing in the ethnic minority groups that had been part of the eastern region after independence in 1960 and who constituted part of the Republic of Biafra along with the Igbo when Lt Col Chukwuemeka Odumegwu-Ojukwu, military governor of the re-

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39. For example, see Jessica Piombo, *Institutions, Ethnicity, and Political Mobilisation in South Africa*, pp. 13–14.

gion, announced the new state in 1967; and signal to the Nigerian authorities that they were in earnest when they broke the unofficial ban on the use of the word 'Biafra' in political discourse after the secessionist attempt was smashed in 1970.<sup>40</sup> Significantly, neither Uwazurike nor any of his colleagues with whom he had the initial conversations in Lagos in late 1999 that led to the birth of MASSOB were old enough to have fought in the war when it broke out in 1967. They proudly described themselves as a new generation of Igbo unburdened by the scar of defeat.

It is not clear how deep their grasp of Nigerian history was and whether they intuited, rightly as it later turned out, that the social forces that shaped the bloody emergence of Biafra 32 years previously were at work in the country again. Uwazurike and the other men of MASSOB did not immediately realise it, but they had tapped a deep vein of discontent, just as the young intellectuals and political entrepreneurs around the 34-year old Colonel Ojukwu had when, with the latter as their spokesperson, they solemnly announced to the world one early morning in May 1967 that they had had enough of Nigeria. At independence in October 1960, Nigerian politics was dominated by three political parties, each with an ethno-regional support base. The Northern Peoples' Congress (NPC), led by Ahmadu Bello, a Fulani prince, governed the predominantly Hausa-Fulani northern region and also formed the government at the centre. Dr Nnamdi Azikiwe, leader of the National Council of Nigerian Citizens (NCNC), had his power base in the eastern region, where the Igbo formed the majority of the population, even as his party was also in a fragile coalition with the NPC. Chief Obafemi Awolowo governed the predominantly Yoruba western region through the Action Group (AG), a party he had founded in 1951. All three parties employed strong-arm tactics to repress ethnic minority politicians within their regions.<sup>41</sup>

Four key events led to the collapse of the First Republic, triggered the emergence of Biafra and plunged the country into civil war. These were the national census of 1962–63, the 1964 and 1965 federal elections and the 1965 Western Nigeria elections and the controversy they generated. A fourth powerful factor was rising unemployment and mass poverty, and the inability of the ruling elites to generate effective policies to address this blight. These events turned on a competition between political elites in the three regions to dominate economic resources within their own regions preparatory to using this as a base to dominate the federal centre and other regions perceived as rivals. The military was

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40. Interview with Chris Mocha, MASSOB deputy direction of information, Onitsha, 2 August 2010.

41. Kalu Ezera provides background on the constitutional developments in this period. See Kalu Ezera, *Constitutional Developments in Nigeria*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1960.

sucked into this contest, leading to a fragmentation of its own institutions into primordial parts. The NPC-controlled federal government, having successfully rigged itself back into power in 1964–65, sensed that it could take over the west after the AG dissolved in intra-party squabbles. NPC leaders, deploying federal power, propped up a proxy in the region and aided him to massively rig regional elections in 1965 and maintain himself in power. Outraged citizens took to the streets in western cities and towns. Anarchy enveloped the region. Young army officers staged a bloody coup in January 1966, effectively ending the First Republic.

Six of the seven main organisers of the coup were Igbo. The bulk of the senior politicians and military officers killed were from the north, creating the suspicion that the putsch was an Igbo attempt to take over the central government, even though the intention of the coup plotters was to hand over the leadership of the country to Obafemi Awolowo, a Yoruba. This perception of an ‘Igbo plot’ was further reinforced when General Johnson Aguiyi-Ironsi, the Igbo head of the army, took over as military head of state and began to pursue policies designed to do away with the powerful regions and strengthen the powers of the centre. Although Ironsi had played no part in the January coup and had stepped in and assumed control when the young coup makers bungled their project, northern politicians and their military counterparts accused him of complicity, staged a bloodier counter-coup six months later and retook power at the centre. Ironsi, killed by the northern coup plotters, had appointed military governors for the regions shortly after he became head of state in January 1966. Lt Col Ojukwu, Igbo military governor of the eastern region, demanded that Lt Col Gowon, Ironsi’s chief of staff and a northerner who had now made himself head of state, step down for the next most senior army officer, a Yoruba. Gowon and the band of young northern officers around him refused and dug in in Lagos, the capital.

Northern soldiers, supported by street gangs, spread out in their region and unleashed a series of pogroms against the Igbo and other easterners. This triggered a massive exodus of the latter back to the east. The ad hoc constitutional conference called by Gowon to enable regional political leaders to work out a new political direction for the federation collapsed as news of renewed killings of Igbo in the north reached Lagos, venue of the deliberations. A meeting between the two warring colonels to patch up their differences in Accra in January 1967 did not bear fruit. Nationalist hysteria was now at fever pitch in the east as refugees from the north flooded the region, bringing with them tales of pogrom, mass rape of women and loss of worldly possessions. On 27 May, in a pre-emptive strike to divide the east and presumably prevent its secession, Gowon unilaterally dissolved the four regions and created 12 new states, two for the minority groups in the eastern region. The Igbo were confined to only one,

cutting them off from access to the sea and Port Harcourt, the region's chief commercial city. Ojukwu declared Biafra and secession three days later.<sup>42</sup>

The lethal mix of mass poverty, powerlessness and self-serving central power that had given birth to Biafra was again on the ascendant when Uwazurike formally announced the establishment of MASSOB to the press at his Lagos residence on 13 September 1999. From this point to the dispatching of the Biafra Bill of Rights to UN headquarters in November of the same year, MASSOB underwent a drastic makeover. A good number of Uwazurike's colleagues who initially backed the new Biafra project had done so in the belief that MASSOB would serve only as a pressure group to forcefully articulate Igbo grievances in the nascent civilian dispensation, as their Yoruba counterparts had done in the wake of the annulment of the 1993 elections. On their reading, the Yoruba had only threatened secession, a project they had promptly abandoned once some of their leaders had been placated with political office and economic opportunities. They too would borrow from this book.

Uwazurike thought differently. Explained Uchenna Madu, MASSOB'S director of information:

Let me give you the details. Uwazurike was the founder, the initiator of MASSOB. When he initiated the idea, he started selling it to some friends, to people of like mind, telling them this is what I'd like to do to mobilize the Igbo and other easterners. Those that were interested began to come to his house in Lagos for regular meetings, saying, let's try this to see if it can work. But the majority of them came thinking not what Uwazurike had in mind. Uwazurike had in mind that he must actualize Biafra but others saw the new organization as some kind of new political pressure group that they can use to get one or two economic benefits from the Federal Government. But Uwazurike disagreed with them. At the end of the day, on the day MASSOB was officially inaugurated, about 68 new members were there. This was how MASSOB started. Uwazurike was the founder.<sup>43</sup>

Uwazurike drew on the example of Ken Saro-Wiwa, the writer and minority rights activist, who, on establishing an organisation in 1990 to press the Ogoni case for self-determination, named it 'Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People' (MOSOP). The name 'Movement for the Actualisation of the Sovereign State of Biafra' was influenced by the MOSOP example. So too was the decision to draw up a Biafra Bill of Rights and dispatch it to New York in November

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42. For details of the chain of events that culminated in Biafra and the civil war, see Gavin Williams, *The Origins of the Nigerian Civil War*, Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1983, Kenneth Post and Michael Vickers, *Structure and Conflict in Nigeria*, London: Heinemann, 1973, and Okwudiba Nnoli, *Ethnic Politics in Nigeria*, Enugu: Fourth Dimension Publishers, 1980.

43. Interview with Uchenna Madu, MASSOB director of Information, Onitsha, 2 August 2010.

1999, two months after MASSOB was established – much as Saro-Wiwa had done in the early 1990s. Unlike MOSOP, which began life with a collegial leadership, MASSOB was from its inception firmly under Uwazurike's sole control.

A formal organisational structure, mobilisation method and the rhetorical tools to undergird the latter slowly coalesced in the following three years through a method best described as 'trial and error.' MASSOB espoused two main principles from the outset: non-violence and 'non-exodus.' Biafra's secession attempt in the late 1960s, having been brutally crushed by the federal government, pointed to the need for new methods. Drawing on the rich tradition of non-violent subaltern resistance in the 20th century, Uwazurike aligned himself with the writings of Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, and stressed that his choice of India for his law degree in the early 1990s was informed by his admiration for the Indian nationalist and thinker since childhood. He had gone to India, he explained, not only to acquire a law degree but also to study first-hand the teachings and mobilisation strategies of the Mahatma. Said the MASSOB leader in a newspaper interview:

Revolution doesn't necessarily mean the use of guns. The independence of India came through revolution, a process of change. Gandhi did not use guns. The word 'revolution' is all-inclusive. You have peaceful and violent revolutions, and I am proceeding with a peaceful revolution ... So if I am non-violent, which is recognized all over the world as the most civilized way of protesting, and a military junta or an ex-head of state brings a gun or artillery to bomb me, he is primitive. He is showing his primitiveness to the whole world.<sup>44</sup>

Recognising that the Igbo had, following the end of the civil war, resettled in other parts of the country, including Lagos in large numbers, and that a call on them to return to their ancestral homeland would likely go unheeded, at least in the immediate term, Uwazurike also stressed that secession did not necessarily require fellow Igbo to relocate. With the establishment of a sovereign Biafran state, MASSOB would initiate discussions with the government of Nigeria and other countries where Igbo reside in sizeable numbers and ensure that the latter's residence rights were formalised in cases where they preferred to remain where they were.<sup>45</sup> The Igbo, Uwazurike also pointed out, were outstanding merchants, business entrepreneurs and intellectuals whose quest for knowledge, self-improvement and prosperity had taken them to the ends of the earth, and their presence in Nigeria and other countries should not be viewed as a stigma. Even so, they were required as 'true Biafrans' to propagate the creed of Igbo self-determination wherever they might choose to live in the world.

44. Ralph Uwazurike, interview, *The Week* (24 May 2004).

45. Interview with Nnamdi Agomo, MASSOB area administrator, Owerri, 20 July 2010.

Uche Madu, MASSOB's director of information, stated that it took three years of internal debate and repeated 'field tests' for the organisational structure to finally emerge. He said: 'We developed a structure that will help the leadership to maintain effective control of MASSOB and also for the members to interact freely among themselves and send feedback whenever the need arises. Also, if you look carefully, our administrative structure reflects that of the Nigerian government because MASSOB sees itself as a shadow government in the eastern part of the country, waiting to take over when the Nigerians leave.'<sup>46</sup> At the apex of this structure is Ralph Uwazurike, whose official title is 'The Leader.' Uwazurike's Nigerian counterpart is the president. Directly under the leader are the national directors, supervising such key departments (in Nigeria, ministries) as health, education, information, finance, women and youth, public works, foreign affairs, etc. Regional administrators are the equivalent of Nigerian state governors while area administrators are chairpersons of local government councils. Chief provincial administrators are district heads. Provincial administrators are ward chairmen and work with the district officers directly under them to mobilise grassroots members for protest marches, community projects and other activities specified by the top leadership. Membership is organised from the ward level upward. In August 2010, the leadership estimated its membership to be 'in the region of 7 to 8 million in Igbo land, the Niger Delta, and all over the country.'<sup>47</sup> While these figures are obviously exaggerated, the militia's true membership is difficult to verify because there is no central membership roll. That the organisation has a large membership is, however, beyond doubt. MASSOB is primarily financed through monthly dues voluntarily contributed by members.<sup>48</sup> As the organisation began to gain in popularity and public acceptance from 2004 onward, wealthy Igbo also began to make contributions in cash and kind. Reports in the newspapers of politicians seeking to use the organisation's region-wide network to further their political ambitions have been vigorously denied by the leadership.<sup>49</sup>

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46. Interview with Uchenna Madu, MASSOB director of Information, Onitsha, 2 August 2010.

47. Interview with Chris Mocha, MASSOB deputy direction of information, Onitsha, 2 August 2010.

48. Interview with Chris Mocha, MASSOB deputy direction of information, Onitsha, 2 August 2010.

49. Interestingly, the leadership's assertion that membership dues are the chief source of MASSOB's funding is a relatively new development. When questioned by a journalist on this issue in May 2004, Ralph Uwazurike had this to say: 'God raises money to run it [MASSOB] always. Whenever I need money, God gives me as much as I need' *The Week* (24 May 2004). Regarding obtaining funds from politicians, this has been a source of persistent speculation in Nigerian newspapers since 2000, but tangible proof has not been forthcoming. In June 2010, it was also reported in several dailies that some MASSOB members had raised questions about the source of the money Ralph Uwazurike used to build a one-storey building for his personal use in Owerri, the Imo State capital. Nnamdi Agomo, Owerri area administrator, told the writer during a conversation in the city in

Apart from the leader and a few other ranking officials, who are in their 50s, the bulk of the members are young men whose median educational qualification is the high school certificate. There are very few college graduates. Women are represented in the top administrative posts, particularly in the regional and area administrator categories, but their numbers sharply decrease at the base. The majority of MASSOB members are unemployed or only part-employed, and subsist below the UN poverty line as occasional artisans, seasonal subsistence farmers, motorcycle taxi operators (Okada) and casual labourers in the towns and cities. Lagos, where the organisation began life, has several chapters, whose members meet regularly. There are also chapters in such large northern cities as Kaduna, Jos and Kano. It is, however, in Igbo cities and towns that MASSOB's presence is most strongly felt. At its inception, MASSOB adopted as its official symbol the Biafran flag of green, red and black vertical stripes with half a yellow sun superimposed on the red middle, a flag first unfurled when Ojukwu addressed the international press in Enugu in May 1967 announcing the new state.<sup>50</sup> In such Igbo cities as Aba, Onitsha, Nnewi, Umuahia, Enugu, Asaba, Nsukka, Umuahia, Abakiliki, Owerri and Awka this flag flutters from utility poles, high rise buildings and the front of commercial buses.<sup>51</sup> Police contingents regularly raid these buildings to remove what they describe in their official logs as 'secessionist flags,' but these are replaced as soon as they depart. 'Freedom House,' MASSOB's international headquarters, is an imposing edifice in Okwe, a village near Okigwe, which is also Ralph Uwazurike's home town. He maintains another home in Lagos, where his wife and some of his children still live.

### 'Go Down, Moses'

The lyrics of the African-American spiritual, 'Go Down, Moses,' adapted to speak trenchantly to the Igbo social condition in the first years of the new millennium, has served as the background refrain to MASSOB's mobilisation strategy since inception:

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August 2010 that Uwazurike was a 'successful lawyer long before he founded MASSOB,' and that therefore he could easily afford to fund the construction of a new house from his own private resources.

50. The novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, an Igbo, gave her civil war novel the title *Half of a Yellow Sun* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006), an allusion to the symbol of the rising sun on the Biafran flag.

51. This writer visited these towns and cities from July through November 2010 and was struck by the ubiquity of these flags in public places and the confidence with which MASSOB officials and members went about their activities, even in the face of repeated police intimidation and brutality.

*When Israel was in Egypt's land  
Let my people go  
Oppressed so hard they could not stand  
Let my people go*<sup>52</sup>

Ralph Uwazurike's message to diverse Igbo audiences when he began to preach MASSOB's message in 1999 was that the Igbo were the new Israelites in Nigeria, here taken to mean Egypt. Theirs was a story of trials, tribulation and persecution at the hands of the Nigerian Pharaoh, a tale whose bloody dénouement was the anti-Igbo pogroms in the north in 1966 and the civil war shortly after, in which an estimated two million people, the bulk of them Igbo, lost their lives.<sup>53</sup> MASSOB leaders regularly recounted the gory events of this turbulent period to potential members, stressing that whatever personal social and economic hardships these individuals were experiencing 'in a cruel and uncaring Nigeria today' were merely a continuation of the policy of war and persecution of Ndigbo by the Nigerian government since 1966. In the words of MASSOB's deputy leader in this early period:

The events of the war are still fresh in our minds, like when you see the Kwashikor pictures. You hear stories of people who were driven out of their homes, as refugees. And then you hear stories of mass graves and bombs dropped at market places and church buildings. And you also remember that people like Chief Awolowo, one of the Nigerian leaders, publicly stated that starvation is a legitimate weapon of war. They starved about a million Biafran children to death, and this figure that I just gave you does not even include the dead soldiers and slaughtered civilians. Some of us believe that the war is the second largest holocaust in human history, coming behind that of the Jewish nation.<sup>54</sup>

Whereas such prominent Igbo organisations as Ohaneze Ndigbo were complaining that the Igbo had been marginalised in Nigeria and that the way to address Igbo grievances was for the new civilian government to appoint leading Igbo to strategic government offices, site industries and other social projects in the region, Uwazurike insisted that nothing short of peaceful separation would do. He had three specific complaints against Obasanjo and his government. First, although he and other Igbo had campaigned and voted massively for him

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52. For details of the lyrics of this spiritual, go to [www.music-lyrics-gospel.com](http://www.music-lyrics-gospel.com). In Owerri, the Imo State capital and a MASSOB stronghold, one of the militia leaders who invited me to his apartment for drinks in August 2010 played Louis Armstrong's version of 'Go Down, Moses' while he kept beat with a paper weight he'd improvised as a gong. When the song ended, he said to me, 'I have not been to America like you, but this music is Biafran music.'

53. The exact number of Biafran dead is still fiercely contested in Nigerian academic and journalistic circles, but there is a broad consensus that it is 'above one million.' The Igbo usually refer to their ethnic group and its members as 'Ndigbo,' meaning 'the Igbo people.'

54. Interview with Prince Orjiako, former deputy leader of MASSOB, Aba, 13 July 2010.

during the presidential election, he refused to appoint an Igbo to the National Security Council, one of the strategic arms of the state. Second, Obasanjo's Yoruba kin had spurned him during the election and voted massively for Olu Falae, but Obasanjo was now openly courting them while ignoring the Igbo. Third, Obasanjo was the Nigerian commander who received the instrument of surrender from the Biafran army leader and from then on, including the mid-1970s when he was military head of state, he had been one of the masterminds of the plot to keep the Igbo in perpetual bondage. This fact he himself had openly acknowledged in a statement credited to him to the effect that 'because the Igbo had lost the civil war, 'they are supposed to stay for about 200 years before ever talking again in Nigeria.'<sup>55</sup> These, according to Uwazurike, were clear signals that the Igbo were no longer wanted in Nigeria.

His choice of the phrase 'non-exodus,' with its biblical allusion to a pivotal moment in Jewish history, was not only designed to calm diaspora Igbo unwilling to face the chaos of relocation but also to link his project to a 'time out of mind' when the Igbo were masters of their own destiny and nation, land and state were one indivisible whole. He called on MASSOB members and other Igbo to turn their backs on Nigeria, refrain from participating in elections and consorting with Igbo politicians in the ruling PDP, and to resort to peaceful resistance when called upon to participate in such Nigeria-wide activities as census counts and court appearances. Declared Uwazurike:

Administration after administration, my people were humiliated, were excluded; my people were not accommodated in the scheme of things in Nigeria. Even if there was no marginalization, inasmuch as they have done things that affected my people, I would have resurrected Biafra because I believe in Nigeria the people were not consulted; there was no consensus as to the formation of Nigeria. So Nigeria is a deceit ... a price which the British government used to compensate the north.<sup>56</sup>

On 22 May 2000, eight days short of the 33rd anniversary of Ojukwu's speech announcing the birth of Biafra, Uwazurike presided over a 'flag-hoisting' ceremony in Aba, a sprawling city and the commercial heart of the Igbo region. This event, according to Prince Orjiako, MASSOB's head of mobilisation in the region at the time, 'was the first formal public declaration of our intention to be independent from Nigeria, and we considered it important that this be done on Igbo soil, in Igboland's leading city.'<sup>57</sup> The 'flag-hoisting' also served as the commencement of the 25 stages that would culminate in the 'actualisation of

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55. *Insider Weekly* (31 December 2001).

56. *Insider Weekly* (31 December 2001).

57. Interview with Prince Orjiako, MASSOB's former deputy leader and head of mobilisation in the Igbo heartland (1999-2002), Aba, 13 July 2010.

the sovereign state of Biafra.’ The early stages of this project, Uwazurike later explained, would involve mass mobilisation, establishment of the primary structures of a sovereign state and the calling of a referendum supervised by the UN in the eastern part of Nigeria to determine whether the people preferred to remain in Nigeria or desired to join him in resurrecting Biafra.<sup>58</sup> These projects, he stressed, would be accomplished through mass participation and non-violence. On 29 September 2001 MASSOB, working with the Biafra Foundation, a coalition of Igbos resident in the United States, performed the dedication of a building in Washington, DC they named ‘Biafra House.’ Biafra Radio, a short-wave broadcasting station modelled on Radio Biafra, which was deployed by the propaganda section of the Biafran government during the civil war to great effect, was also announced.

By pure chance, Ojukwu was in the US capital at the time receiving medical treatment. When MASSOB and the Biafra Foundation members learnt of this, they quickly mobilised and sent a delegation to Ojukwu. The former Biafran war leader was initially reluctant to lend his name to the house dedication. Ojukwu’s relationship with Nigeria since 1982, when he returned to the country after 12 years in exile in Abidjan, has been complex. While consistently maintaining that he has no apology to make for leading the secession bid in 1967, he has nevertheless stated that Biafra as a political reality was now in the past and that what had taken its place was ‘a Biafra of the mind,’ adhering faithfully to the tenets of justice, civil liberty and unbending opposition to genocide that had led him to declare an independent state for the Igbo and the other peoples of the then Eastern Region.<sup>59</sup> He participates in Nigeria-wide politics, but has also on several occasions threatened to lead a second secession if Nigeria’s leaders persisted in treating the Igbo with contempt.<sup>60</sup> Ojukwu, who in old age still enjoyed near-mythical adulation among Igbo worldwide, was persuaded to attend the ceremony, and indeed held the tape for Uwazurike to cut, formally declaring Biafra House open that afternoon.

This event, more than any other in MASSOB’s 12 year history, boosted the militia’s public image, galvanised Igbo youth to join in droves and confirmed

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58. *The Source* (15 December 2003).

59. A Lagos-based journalist alluded to Ojukwu’s ‘Biafra of the mind’ thesis when he was interviewing Ralph Uwazurike two months after the Washington, DC event (*Insider Weekly*, 31 December 2001).

60. At a conference in Enugu in December 2001, Ojukwu told reporters: ‘I have no fear that if what Nigeria comes out with from the National Conference is not exactly what we Ndigbo want we may talk about secession. We do not want to break up Nigeria but if you treat us like a goat, we will behave like a goat; even like a he-goat.’ *Insider Weekly* (31 December 2001). General Ojukwu died in November 2011 and was given a state funeral by the president and people of Nigeria.

Uwazurike in their eyes as Ojukwu's 'heir apparent.' A Lagos-based weekly reported Uwazurike's metamorphosis thus:

The event marked a watershed and did magic for Uwazurike's reputation. Igbo youths who saw pictures of Ojukwu, the venerable Ikemba Nnewi, holding a tape for the MASSOB leader to cut immediately understood that an anointing ceremony had taken place. Uwazurike was now the new dike (hero) of Ndigbo. They would mass behind him and raise new songs of resistance. Behold, another Moses had ... emerged to confront the Pharaohs of Nigeria.<sup>61</sup>

MASSOB's message that Nigeria was a failed project and that 'all true Igbo' should rally behind the new Biafran flag struck a chord with the swelling tribe of unemployed urban youth in Igbo cities, MASSOB leaders' prime target at this time. By September 2003, the militia, despite a continuing brutal security crackdown and the killing of many of its members by anti-riot police and soldiers, was sufficiently strong to convene an 'international conference on Biafra' in Maryland, United States and threatened in the conference communiqué 'to explore the possibilities of forming a government in exile, in six months, if the federal government fails to organize a conference of ethnic nationalities to decide how they want to associate with each other.'<sup>63</sup> MASSOB did not follow up on the threat. Nor did Uwazurike permit the 'young Turks' in the militia to retaliate in the face of mounting casualties from police bullets. One explanation for why Biafra lost the civil war, still popular among ordinary Igbo when MASSOB emerged 40 years later, was that the war effort had been sabotaged by 'enemies within.' 'Sabo', a short-hand for 'saboteur,' was the deadliest insult one could hurl at another during the war, and invariably resulted in the accused being carried off to be executed by army high command, which grew more paranoid as its fortunes declined on the war front after early 1969. Uwazurike felt that engaging the Nigerian security forces in a shooting war would open up his ranks to infiltration and sabotage, besmirch his non-violent credentials and abort the secession project. Argued the MASSOB leader: 'We agreed that we have to fight this issue once again on a different setting with non-violence as opposed to violence. In non-violence you don't have saboteurs. In the old Biafra you had saboteurs arising from greed and money and all that. Today nobody is fighting the Nigerians, so there is no need for sabotage.'<sup>62</sup>

Unlike OPC, which announced its emergence shortly after the annulment of the 1993 presidential election by attacking northerners in Lagos, MASSOB scrupulously refrained from molesting northerners in such Igbo cities as Aba, Onitsha and Umuahia, where sizeable numbers of them live and dominate the

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61. *The Source* (5 September 2005).

62. *Insider Weekly* (13 December 2001).

meat-processing trade. The militia's leader has also been particularly effective in avoiding clashes between his members and OPC and ordinary Yoruba in Lagos, even when Igbo merchants in the city began to complain, following the reelection of the Yoruba governor of Lagos state in 2003, that his incessant demands that they relocate their market stalls were discriminatory and reflected 'a hidden ethnic agenda.'<sup>63</sup> The first direct criticism Uwazurike received when he publicised the Biafra Bill of Rights of November 1999 was his repeated mention of the term 'Igbo-Biafra' in the bill. According to his critics, this was clear indication that the ethnic minority groups of the Niger Delta who had been part of old Biafra in 1967 were no longer part of his new republic. Yet others said he had a 'schizophrenic' attitude towards the eastern minorities, wanting them to belong but at the same time insisting in the Bill of Rights that the emotive issue of Igbo 'abandoned property' in Port Harcourt and other cities in the non-Igbo part of the east be revisited. The federal government had shortly after the war decreed that all Igbo-owned property in Port Harcourt and other cities in the newly created Rivers and South Eastern states be forfeited to the Ijaw and other ethnic minority groups who now controlled them. Igbo leaders still view this policy as a great injustice and argue that it is one of the key 'war wounds' that the Nigerian government must heal if the Igbo are to put the civil war fully behind them.<sup>64</sup> Ijaw and other Niger Delta ethnic leaders, for their part, see the 'abandoned property' as compensation for the discrimination in jobs and other

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63. Bola Tinubu was first elected governor of Lagos State on the platform of the Alliance for Democracy, a Yoruba-dominated party, in May 1999. He was reelected in 2003. One of the governor's advertised policies was to clean up the city, which he complained had been neglected by past military governments. Tinubu established an environmental sanitation agency that subsequently ordered traders in areas of the city where the Igbo were dominant to relocate to another part of the city because they were obstructing the smooth flow of traffic and 'polluting the environment.' This order generated considerable tension between Igbo and Yoruba residents until a joint panel of Yoruba and Igbo leaders intervened and amicably resolved the matter.

64. Two other major grievances of the Igbo are the postwar state creation exercise and nationalisation of foreign-owned enterprises embarked on by successive military governments. The Igbo still consider Port Harcourt part of their ethnic homeland and argue that it should not be the capital of Rivers State, controlled by the Ijaw. They also say that the number of states in Igboland is smaller than the ones controlled by the Hausa-Fulani and Yoruba, the two other large ethnic groups in the country they consider as rivals. Igbo business leaders also complain that the policy of indigenising foreign enterprises by the federal government between 1972 and 1977 was designed to displace their people from the commanding heights of the economy, because the government realised that Igbo entrepreneurs had been reduced to pauperdom during the war and so were in no position to bid for any of the auctioned firms. For details of Igbo postwar grievances, see Okwudia Nnoli, *Ethnicity and Development in Nigeria*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 1995. See in particular chapter five, 'Ethnicity, Development and the Civil War, 1967-1978.'

social amenities they claim they suffered when the Igbo controlled the government of the eastern region before the January 1966 coup.<sup>65</sup>

### Re-Narrating the Nation

'Master narratives,' Ashutosh Varshney reminds us, 'tell stories that make the critical issues in politics intelligible to the masses. They are ways of putting together popular social coalitions so that politics can be altered and political power won.'<sup>66</sup> There are two dominant narratives of the Biafra war regarding the role of the eastern ethnic minorities. One, promoted by the federal government and the intellectuals from the Niger Delta like Ken Saro-Wiwa who aligned with it during the war, is that of domination – the more populous Igbo, deploying the tyranny of the majority, compelled the smaller ethnic groups in the eastern region to back its secession project, even though their political interest would be better served in a united Nigeria where they would be one of several freely competing ethnic groups.<sup>67</sup> The other, argued by Igbo scholars, is the politics of consensus – that it was not coincidental that the Igbo and eastern minorities shared a common region at the dawn of colonial rule, that there were deep cultural and economic bonds between both groups going back to precolonial times, and that the Biafran nation was merely a modern manifestation of this self-evident fact.<sup>68</sup> As calls for a national conference to re-examine the fit between the Nigerian state and its various ethnic 'nations' resurged following the blatant rigging of the 2003 general elections by the ruling PDP, enabling Obasanjo to return to power, Uwazurike and MASSOB embraced the second master narrative and began to send deputations to communal, civic and youth leaders in the Niger Delta. MASSOB's message, in summary, was that they were all trapped in the belly of the Nigerian whale; that the post-civil war narrative that their people and the Igbo were mortal enemies was the classic divide-and-conquer tactic of the oppressor, and that their common salvation lay in resurrecting Biafra.<sup>69</sup>

65. The late Ken Saro-Wiwa, leader of the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP), forcefully made this point in books and newspaper articles throughout the 1980s and early 1990s. See Ken Saro-Wiwa, *On A Darkling Plain: An Account of the Nigerian Civil War*, Port Harcourt: Saros International, 1989.

66. Ashutosh Varshney, *Ethnic Conflict and Civic Life: Hindus and Muslims in India*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002, p. 55.

67. Ken Saro-Wiwa elaborated this position in *On A Darkling Plain*.

68. Throughout the 30-month long civil war, Chukwuemeka Odumegwu-Ojukwu was careful to articulate a 'Biafran,' as opposed to an Igbo political project in all his speeches and writings. The classic text of this national reimagining is C. Odumegwu Ojukwu, *Biafra: Selected Speeches and Random Thoughts*, New York: Harper & Row, 1969.

69. Several respected observer teams monitoring the election reported they had been marred by violence and sundry irregularities designed to return the PDP to power. For an example of these reports, see Human Rights Watch, *Nigeria's 2003 Elections: The Unacknowledged Violence*, New York: Human Rights Watch, June 2004. Lt Col Abubakar Umah, a retired

After earning an average of \$50 billion in oil rents annually since 1999, the Obasanjo government was still unable to diversify the economy away from near total oil dependence, generate paying jobs, invest in badly needed infrastructure, curb widespread corruption and address the demand of mobilised ethnic groups in the oil-bearing Niger Delta that the federal content of the 1999 constitution be given practical expression in a new revenue allocation formula favouring the derivation principle.<sup>70</sup> Indeed, Peter Lewis's vivid description of an early 1990s Nigerian political economy embodying 'the characteristics of such autocratic regimes as Mobutu Sese Seko's Zaire, Haiti under Jean-Claude Duvalier, or the Somoza dynasty's Nicaragua' was even truer of the Obasanjo presidency, where 'personalistic' and predatory control of the state was also rapidly being replicated in the PDP-controlled states and local government councils.<sup>71</sup> This framework of decentralised rentier despotism, fragile and fractious, was propped up by a Leviathan that did not hesitate to deploy violence against challenges to its hegemony, particularly from the increasingly restive Niger Delta. Obasanjo had, right from the moment he took power in May 1999, adopted a blitzkrieg policy towards the Delta peoples, in several instances ordering troops to level entire villages and murder their inhabitants.<sup>72</sup> Unable to replace their election-rigging local representatives and chafing at state-induced violence and deepening poverty, self-determination and civic groups began to proliferate in the region increasingly drawing on a complex mix of civic and primordial resources to mount a counter-politics of resistance. The more confrontational, like the Asari Dokubo-led Niger Delta Peoples Volunteer Force (NDPVF), took to fiery rhetoric and began to openly challenge the federal government's monopoly of the use of violence by arming its members and urging them to attack troops deployed to their area to suppress legitimate dissent. In May 2004, MASSOB, led by Uwazurike, signed a seven-point memorandum of understanding with 'the Great Commonwealth of Niger Delta,' a coalition of youth-led civic and ethnic organisations drawn from the various states comprising the region. The preamble to this agreement, whose object was the unification of MASSOB and

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army officer and noted democracy activist, also spoke out after the election results came in, accusing President Obasanjo and other PDP officials of colluding with election officials and security personnel to stuff ballot boxes on their party's behalf. *Insider Weekly* (2 February 2004).

70. I examine the politics of the demands of the Delta ethnic groups in Ike Okonta, *When Citizens Revolt: Nigerian Elites, Big Oil and the Ogoni Struggle for Self-determination*, Trenton: Africa World Press, 2008.
71. Peter Lewis, 'From Prebendalism to Predation: The Political Economy of Decline in Nigeria,' *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 34, 1 (March 1996), pp. 79–103.
72. In December 1998, President Obasanjo ordered Nigerian troops to storm the village of Odi in central Delta. All the houses in the village were burned. Only a handful of villagers escaped this genocidal attack. For details of the Odi massacre, see Environmental Rights Action/Friends of the Earth, Nigeria, *Odi: Blanket of Silence*, Benin City, 2000.

these groups in the common project of achieving secession, read in part: ‘Having come to terms with glaring realities of unmitigated internal colonization in the present-day Nigeria, we have decided to look the bull in the eye and take our destiny firmly in our hands ...Therefore the GREAT COMMONWEALTH OF NIGER DELTA (GCND) in concert and representing groups and peoples in the Niger Delta on one hand and the MOVEMENT FOR ACTUALISATION OF THE SOVEREIGN STATE OF BIAFRA (MASSOB) on the other hand entered into an ALLIANCE in pursuit of the non-violent actualisation of the Sovereign States of United Biafra (the New Biafra) ...’<sup>73</sup> The immediate outcome of this pact was that MASSOB changed the name of its future state from ‘Republic of Biafra’ to the ‘United States of Biafra,’ a federating umbrella capacious enough to accommodate the Igbo and their deltaic neighbours.

Political developments in the wider Nigerian arena in this period also swelled MASSOB’s ranks in the Igbo heartland and reinforced Uwazurike’s credentials as a political leader of ‘uncommon vision.’<sup>74</sup> Article 3 of the PDP’s constitution stipulates that key political offices would be periodically rotated between the various geo-ethnic sections of the country ‘in the spirit of true federalism in order to ensure a fair and equitable distribution of power and resources.’<sup>75</sup> Igbo leaders, shortly after Obasanjo was returned for a second and final term in 2003, took this provision to mean that it was their turn to present a presidential candidate after Obasanjo quit in 2007. Their northern counterparts thought differently. In their view, Obasanjo had run as the south’s candidate in 1999. The Igbo were in the south: therefore the presidency would be rotated back to the north in 2007. In the ensuing acrimony between the political leaders of both groups, Ohaneze Ndigbo asked President Obasanjo to clarify the party’s official position *on* the matter. Obasanjo affirmed that ‘power shift and power rotation must be maintained,’ but failed to specify to which part of the country it would be rotated when his term ended.<sup>76</sup> Igbo youth read Obasanjo’s ambiguous statement as confirmation of a plot to ‘cede’ the office to the north and raised a cry of protest. Uwazurike waded into the controversy and declared to journalists that ‘no Igbo man will be the president of Nigeria till thy kingdom come.’ Uwazurike also told journalists that he was privy to the details of a secret meeting Nigerian leaders held shortly after the end of the civil war in 1970 where they all agreed that no Igbo man would rule Nigeria or be allowed to ‘occupy any sensitive post

73. Great Commonwealth of the Niger Delta, Memorandum of Understanding, 8 May 2004, Port Harcourt, Nigeria. Some of these Delta groups are Niger Delta Independence Seekers, Ijaw Liberation Council and Niger Delta Youth Council. Several prominent Niger Delta youth leaders also signed the document in their personal capacity.

74. This phrase was used by Uchenna Madu, MASSOB director of Information, in the course of our interview in Onitsha, 2 August 2010.

75. Constitution of the People’s Democratic Party, Abuja, Nigeria, June 1998.

76. *The Week*, 24 May 2004.

in the country.<sup>77</sup> The result of this war of words, reported a magazine during that period, 'has been a massive increase in the number of people identifying with MASSOB.'<sup>78</sup>

Riding on its new popularity, MASSOB sent out a notice asking all Igbo wherever they lived in the country to observe 26 August 2004 as 'Biafra Day.' Business owners, artisans and petty traders were to stay at home that day. Public servants should observe a quiet moment in their offices in memory of the Biafran dead during the war. Despite massive federal government propaganda, in addition to public announcements by the Igbo governors of PDP-controlled states directing their kin to ignore the MASSOB order, 'Biafra Day' was an outstanding success. MASSOB also began to organise monthly 'sanitation' exercises in major cities and towns, pointing out that the central government had failed even in the elementary duty of keeping Igboland clean. The latter move won over the previously sceptical and they began to participate in these events, openly identifying with MASSOB. The 2003 general elections had yet again been widely rigged by the PDP.<sup>79</sup> The economy was still in the doldrums and youth, employed and unemployed alike in the Delta as well as in the Igbo heartland, were desperately casting about for an alternative to what they began to openly describe as a 'failed Nigeria.' This sentiment was forcefully articulated by the Pro-National Conference Organisation (PRONACO), a coalition of largely southern based ethnic self-determination groups led by Antony Enahoro, a veteran politician whose project was a loose Nigerian federation of 18 regions consisting of 12 mono-ethnic-nationalities and 6 multiethnic nationality federations.<sup>80</sup>

PRONACO was the third 'beneficiary' of the rigged polls. Babangida had, deploying deft political footwork, managed to fend off demands for this national conference the eight years he was in power, even as his iron grip on power and harsh IMF-inspired economic policies unleashed powerful centrifugal social forces, part civic and part ethnic, in the country. His successor, General Aba-

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77. *The Week*, 24 May 2004.

78. *The Week*, 24 May 2004.

79. The International Crisis Group (ICG) has tracked elections and broad political and economic developments in Nigeria and other countries. In a major report published in 2006 on Nigeria's transition from military rule since 1999, ICG quotes one of the monitors of the 2003 presidential polls thus: 'The problems were so numerous and the gap in credibility so vast that the victors writ large can hardly claim to hold the legitimate mandate of the Nigerian people.' See International Crisis Group, *Nigeria: Want in the Midst of Plenty*, Africa Report No. 113, 19 July 2006, p. 15. In the same report, the National Democratic Institute, the International Republican Institute and the European Union also described the elections as 'deeply flawed.'

80. Pro-National Conference Organisation, Draft Constitution for the Federal Republic of Nigeria Proposed by Peoples' National Conference, August 2006, Lagos: Movement for New Nigeria, August 2006.

cha, called a conference in 1994 but ensured that carefully selected henchmen dominated its proceedings and thus ensured the delegates' recommendations did not pose a challenge to his dictatorship. PRONACO is an outgrowth of the Movement for National Renewal (MNR) that Enahoro, the federal military government's chief propagandist during the war, had floated in 1992 to collate views in the south on ways and means of restructuring the country to ensure what he termed 'true power sharing' and an enduring federal republic. MNR's views and recommendations on a new constitution had been ignored as the generals and their political allies stitched together the 1999 pact. The impunity with which that election was rigged, and the growing perception that Obasanjo was just 'another stooge of the northern generals' led to the rechristening of MNR as PRONACO, bringing aboard other self-determination groups who felt left out by the new civilian regime. By early 2005, there were sufficient otherwise 'pan-Nigerian' politicians who felt sidelined by the PDP anti-politics machine to back PRONACO's call for a Sovereign National Conference. Separatist organisations like MASSOB also jumped aboard.

Giving the impression that the call for the immediate convening of a 'national conference' was now too loud to ignore, Obasanjo acceded to their request. The National Political Reform Conference (NPRC) was scheduled for February 2005 in Abuja, the capital. All 36 governors, grouped into the six geopolitical zones corresponding to the broad ethnic divisions of the country, were to send delegates drawn from the various senatorial districts of their states. The conference would not enjoy sovereign powers, however. Since the majority of the states were controlled by PDP governors, who in turn were controlled by Obasanjo and his inner circle, Igbo delegates were carefully vetted to ensure that none of them harboured pro-MASSOB and secessionist sympathies. Midway through the conference, it became obvious that Obasanjo had a different motive, and that indeed the gathering, advertised to 'redefine and redesign our political landscape in a direction that would strengthen the bonds of unity and enhance the process of democratic consolidation' as he stated in his opening speech on 21 February, was intended to rubber stamp his bid for tenure elongation.<sup>81</sup> Obasanjo's bid to rewrite the constitution and remain in office for a third term crashed in May 2005, even as the conference was still in session. In spite of substantial financial inducements to delegates and members of the National Assembly, the president was unable to secure the majority votes required to make his 'third term' bid a success. Four weeks later, the conference adjourned indefinitely when Niger Delta delegates staged a walkout following their northern counterparts'

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81. *Thisday* (17 April 2005).

refusal to back their demand that the 13 per cent derivation allocated to them from oil rents be doubled to 25.<sup>82</sup>

In the wake of the Abuja fiasco, PRONACO revved up its campaign for an alternative conference of the country's 'ethnic nationalities' with full sovereign powers. The central government responded with brutal repression. Members of the ethnic militias, particularly MASSOB and Asari Dokubo's NDPVF, were routinely attacked and killed by special security personnel. On 19 October 2005, Dokubo was arrested and taken into detention. Dr Frederick Faseun and Gani Adams, leaders of the OPC, followed three days later. On 25 October a team of federal police in disguise stormed Uwazurike's Okwe home and took him to Abuja. A few weeks later, the government charged him with treason. He was to spend the next two years in various prisons and detention centres.

Their leader's long absence was a severe resilience test for MASSOB, all the more so as Uwazurike had developed an authoritarian leadership style before he was detained. But the rump of the echelon quickly rallied, established a collegial governance structure and proved remarkably successful in converting their leader's trials at the hands of 'Nigeria' into a fresh mobilisation issue. A large number of Igbo in the east and other parts of the country stayed at home on 5 and 6 December of that year when MASSOB leaders urged them to do so as a mark of solidarity with Uwazurike, now styled 'the spirit of Biafra' in Nigeria's gulag.<sup>83</sup> They also appealed to ordinary Igbo to close ranks and refuse to participate in the mid-2006 countrywide census exercise. The boycott campaign was only partly successful. A new 'Voice of Biafra International' radio station was launched in Washington, DC by the Biafra Foundation. The foundation also led an initiative, with the support of MASSOB leaders, to establish a 'Biafran government in exile' to operate from the United States, and a 'shadow government' in Nigeria that MASSOB leaders themselves would superintend. The plan failed to get off the ground, however.

MASSOB leaders' attempts to mobilise market women and men in May 2006 in Onitsha to resist punitive taxes imposed on them by the Anambra state government triggered a bloody reprisal. The federal government, at the governor's request, dispatched soldiers to the city and they proceeded to murder several MASSOB members. An attempt by a 'national working committee' led by Nnamdi Ohiagu, a member of the collegial leadership, to replace Uwazurike with Ohiagu as 'acting leader' in February 2007 was crushed.<sup>84</sup> The leadership began to style the organisation the MASSOB/Biafra Liberation Front from this period, in an attempt to bring splinter groups who shared the same secession

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82. *Thisday* (17 April 2005).

83. Ken Saro-Wiwa was also given the name 'Spirit of Ogoni' shortly after he emerged from a short spell of detention in 1993, following a central government crackdown on MOSOP.

84. *The Guardian* (9 February 2007).

project under a common umbrella. It also announced that the eastern part of the country, including the Igbo heartland and the Niger Delta area, had been divided into 30 administrative regions to facilitate better coordination.

A federal high court, clearly working on the government's instruction, released the MASSOB leader on 26 October 2007, five months after Umaru Yar'Adua, Obasanjo's successor, took office. The judge was careful to describe the move as a 'temporary bail,' to enable Uwazurike to perform the burial rites for his mother who had died six months previously.<sup>85</sup> If the August 2004 'stay at home' event showed MASSOB as an ethnic militia at the zenith of its popularity, the colourful burial ceremony of Monica Uwazurike in Okwe on 25 January 2008 confirmed Uwazurike in the eyes of separatist and self-determination leaders from other parts of the country who attended as the *de facto* leader of the 'new Biafra.' 'Mama Biafra,' as the late Mrs Uwazurike was referred to in the leaflets MASSOB members handed out to all who attended the requiem mass before her interment, was transformed into the living embodiment of 'a suffering' and 'comatose' Biafra that her only son was now battling to revive.<sup>86</sup> Eulogies were presented by Ojukwu; Dozie Ikedife, president-general of Ohaneze; Asari Dokubo; Gani Adams, factional leader of the OPC; Antony Enahoro and Uche Chukwumerije, a senator who, during the Nigeria-Biafra war, had headed the Biafran propaganda directorate. Prominent politicians, including Oji Uzor Kalu, former governor of Abia state in the Igbo heartland, also came. The PDP had the previous April rigged the general elections at all levels yet again, and the widespread perception, tinged with outrage and despair, was that the country had returned to the dark days of dictatorship.<sup>87</sup> Ojukwu addressed the tumultuous crowd thus: 'Uwazurike is my beloved son with whom I am well pleased.' Then turning to the MASSOB leader he said, 'Don't be afraid to champion the cause that you believe in because fear itself does not entertain fear.'<sup>88</sup> Rumours that an announcement declaring the secession of the 'new Biafra' would be made shortly after the interment of 'Mama Biafra' that afternoon proved

85. *Saturday Champion* (26 October 2007).

86. *Daily Sun* (25 January 2008).

87. Local and foreign groups monitoring Nigeria's 2007 elections agreed that it was one of the worst in terms of egregious abuse of basic electoral rules since the country gained independence in 1960. Johnnie Carsons, the current US assistant secretary of state for Africa, has repeatedly stated this in various forums since 2009. Jean Herskovits, a longstanding student of Nigerian politics, reported thus of this controversial election, the first since Nigeria's independence in which a civilian leader would have over power to another civilian: 'The elections themselves were disastrous, with even more rigging and violence than during the previous presidential election, in 2003, when stolen ballot boxes and bogus vote counts marred the polling.' See Jean Herskovits, *Nigeria's Rigged Democracy*, *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2007.

88. *Daily Sun* (25 January, 2008).

groundless – to the disappointment of the thousands of unemployed youths who had converged on Okwe from all parts of the region for the ‘great declaration.’

The MASSOB leader has since his release from detention been careful to remind the impatient among his followers regularly of the ‘several stages’ through which the mobilisation of the ‘Biafran masses’ would pass before secession took place. His primary focus this past two years has been to rebuild the militia, discredit splinter groups in the eyes of the Igbo public and transform MASSOB from a ragtag organisation always on the receiving end of police/army brutality into a respectable ‘peoples movement’ looking out for the vulnerable in ‘Biafra.’ A building to house homeless civil war veterans was constructed in Okwe in 1999. The militia also sends aid, in cash and kind, to the inhabitants of the veteran’s settlement in Oji River, Anambra State. Uwazurike regularly puts out press releases drawing attention to the ‘immense suffering of my fellow Biafrans’ in the Niger Delta. A memorial tomb to honour ‘our fallen heroes’ during the civil war is under construction. Plans are under way to build a museum and archival centre. Architectural plans for an Ojukwu Multipurpose International Conference Centre in Okwe have also been drawn up.<sup>89</sup>

There is a profusion of ritual occasions – flag hoisting; festivities commemorating such landmarks of the civil war as the Ahiara Declaration, during which both the MASSOB and Biafran national anthems are recited; the launching of a ‘Biafran currency’ and a ‘Biafran international passport.’ Eric Hobsbawm has rightly observed that nationalism’s ‘very vagueness and lack of programmatic content gives it a potentially universal support within its own community.’<sup>90</sup> While Uwazurike and MASSOB continue to enjoy considerable support and goodwill in the Igbo heartland, retelling the Biafra story to include a Niger Delta whose youth had in January 2006 taken to the swamps in armed rebellion against the Nigerian state, they have not been able to take the crucial last step and bring their dream nation-state into being. Marooned in an in-between world where they are neither fully part of Nigeria nor citizens of their dream state, MASSOB and ‘Massobians,’ as the members call themselves, remain, like ‘New Biafra’ itself, a narrative in progress.

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89. Interview with Uchenna Madu, MASSOB director of Information, Onitsha, 2 August 2010.

90. Eric Hobsbawm, ‘Nationalism in the late 20th Century,’ in Omar Dabour and Madeline R. Ishay, (eds), *The Nationalism Reader*, Amherst: Humanity Books, 1995, p. 365.

## 4. Behemoth's Shadow, or Antimonies of a Nationalist Project

Nigeria's authoritarians, like the mythical Behemoth, have cast a long shadow over the political landscape since the 1964 general elections, when they routinised election-rigging. In the long years of military rule, during which the allocation of the oil rent was centralised, authoritarianism was elaborated and entrenched. Uwazurike and MASSOB's secessionist project therefore had to contend with this Behemoth, whose politics was centralising, hostile to opposition and amenable to the deployment of incumbent violence to suppress legitimate dissent. The post-military Nigerian state did not rely only on crude force, however. The 'federal character' principle, originally conceived by the authors of the 1979 constitution as a power and resource-sharing mechanism to include the various ethnic groups in a common national project had, from the NPN-led Second Republic on, been turned into an elaborate patronage network. The PDP inherited this network in 1999 and proceeded to transform it into decentralised ethnic hegemonic machines in the various states and local government areas on which it relied every election cycle to muscle its way back to power. This was the first formidable obstacle MASSOB had to contend with.

Oxford academic Raufu Mustapha has drawn our attention to the internal debates and dissension that wrack ostensibly monolithic nationalist projects in Nigeria as they reshape their outer contours in a struggle with rivals for scarce public goods. Wrote Mustapha, 'Instead of having distinct identity blocks intent on dismembering the country, what we have are overlapping claims and counter-claims. Disentangling these is virtually impossible.'<sup>91</sup> These debates have been particularly fierce in the Igbo east following the emergence of MASSOB in 1999. PDP politicians, who owe their power and wealth to the central government in Abuja, counter MASSOB leaders' accusation that they are saboteurs of the 'cause' by asserting that all 'true' Igbo are now 'one hundred percent' Nigerians who want to join hands with members of other ethnic groups to build a country where all will thrive and prosper. The Bakassi Boys, a youth-led vigilante organisation that emerged in Aba in 1998 to fight crime in the city, was also openly hostile to MASSOB's nationalist project and was apolitical until it was pressed into service a few years later by vote-rigging PDP politicians in the region.<sup>92</sup>

Leaders of Ohaneze, the pan-Igbo cultural organisation, also espouse pro-Nigeria sentiments, even as they insist that the ethnic group has been 'margin-

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91. A. Raufu Mustapha, 'Ethnicity and the Politics of Democratisation in Nigeria', in Berman, Eyoh and Kymlicka (eds), *Ethnicity and Democracy in Africa*, 2004, p. 273.

92. For details of the Bakassi Boys, see Human Rights Watch, *Nigeria: The Bakassi Boys: The Legitimization of Murder and Terror*, Human Rights Watch Report, 14, 5 (May 2002).

alised' by successive postwar governments. Raph Uwechue, current president-general of Ohaneze, articulated the group's position thus: 'The young men of MASSOB must have their say, but we their elders in Ohaneze speak the mind of Ndigbo when we say that Biafra is a thing of the past and all we want now is for Nigeria to work for the benefit of all.'<sup>93</sup> Ohaneze has demonstrated considerable political skill in cutting the ground from under MASSOB leaders even as it publicly praises them for their concern for Igbo welfare. Shortly after the unexpected success of the July 2004 'Biafra Day,' Ohaneze leaders announced a less-divisive 'Igbo National Day' to be marked annually in a chosen Igbo city. Igbo National Day has since 'absorbed' MASSOB's event and MASSOB members, including Uwazurike, now attend and use it as a platform to press their claims on the Nigerian state.

Even Uwazurike's repeated insistence that secession would not require Igbo residents in other parts of the country to return to a 'new Biafra' has not impressed the latter. Ndigbo Lagos, an association of leading Igbo businessmen and professionals in that city, dismissed MASSOB's December 2003 threat to establish a 'government in exile' as quixotic and has urged the militia's leaders to 'focus on impacting on the people the real independence which comes from the mind.'<sup>94</sup> Real independence, according to Ndigbo Lagos, was freedom from want, ignorance and disease.<sup>95</sup> Igbo have returned to cities and towns in the northern and western parts of the country in large numbers. The powerful centralising logic of the postwar rentier state also meant that ambitious Igbo who wanted to make their financial or political fortunes had to relocate to Lagos, and then Abuja, when the seat of the central government moved there in 1991. A reinvigorated civic platform in the region, comprised of human rights, pro-democracy and faith-based organisations has since 2010 offered a credible civic alternative to MASSOB's nationalist project. Olisa Agbakoba, a prominent lawyer and founder of the Lagos-based Civil Liberties Organisation, the country's premier rights NGO, convened a summit of these groups in Enugu in July 2010 and released a communiqué upbraiding Igbo politicians, who routinely rigged elections in the region and converted public funds to personal use. The summit also called for an end to the harassment of Uwazurike and other MASSOB members by the central government, and 'immediate initiation of the process to return Nigeria to a federal structure upon which it was founded, including im-

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93. Interview with Raph Uwechue, president-general of Ohaneze Ndigbo, Ogwashi-Ukwu, 1 September 2010.

94. *The Source* (15 December 2003).

95. For details of the return of Igbo businessmen to the northern city of Kano after the civil war, see Douglas A. Anthony, *Poison and Medicine: Ethnicity, Power and Violence in a Nigerian City, 1966 to 1986*, Portsmouth: Heinemann and Oxford: James Currey, 2002.

mediate restructuring of the Nigerian federation.<sup>96</sup> The Agbakoba-led initiative is firmly opposed to secession, even as it seeks remedies within a Nigerian framework for the grievances articulated by MASSOB and sundry separatist groups.

Ojukwu's decision to participate in the 2003 general election as the presidential candidate of the newly registered All Progressive Peoples Party (APGA), also presented Uwazurike and other MASSOB leaders, who regarded the former Biafran war leader as the 'life president of the new Biafra' with a dilemma. If they mobilised support for Ojukwu and APGA during the elections, they would be indicating they still believed in a Nigeria of which the Igbo were an integral part. On the other hand, if they refused to back Ojukwu, this would open MASSOB to the charge that it showed insufficient reverence for the man whose name was synonymous with the Igbo quest for self-determination. Uwazurike's decision in 2003 to support Ojukwu's presidential campaign led to a split in the organisation. Prince Orjiako, his deputy, broke away and established the Eastern Peoples' Congress, based in Aba. EPC and other Igbo self-determination groups, some of whose leaders were previously members of MASSOB, have since banded together to establish the umbrella Biafra Liberation Council. While these organisations ostensibly espouse a common project, they differ in their analysis of the Igbo predicament and the strategies to adopt as remedies. When Ojukwu, shortly after running for president again in the 2007 elections that were marred by widespread fraud, stated in a BBC interview that the Igbo had been denied the right to vote and that the alternative to continued electoral fraud was 'a separate existence' for the region, the member groups of the BLC could not agree on a practical course of action to follow to exploit the situation.<sup>97</sup>

Uwazurike and the MASSOB leadership have adopted three main strategies in response to these rancorous debates over what precisely 'Biafra' is and the appropriate course of political and civic action to be adopted by the people. They have sought to delegitimise the breakaway factions by labelling them 'agents of the Nigerian government.' In an attempt to browbeat prominent Igbo politicians and community leaders who have refused to support the militia, MASSOB has revived the term 'saboteur' in a double move to get the former to embrace the 'proper Igbo spirit' and also explain away the fact that the Igbo have yet to band together under the MASSOB flag and 'actualise' the Biafra nation. The militia has set up a 'Conflict and Resolution Committee,' whose remit is 'to sanitize Igboland and curtail the activities of those it identified as unpatriotic Igbo leaders ... that have continued to sabotage the cause of Ndigbo.'<sup>98</sup> Uwazurike has also publicly identified with the cause of the Movement for the Emancipation of the

96. Communiqué of the First Summit of the Eastern Human Rights and Pro-democracy Activists, Enugu, 10 July 2010.

97. BBC News (7 June 2007).

98. *Daily Sun* (16 October 2008).

Niger Delta (MEND), an armed organisation pressing for a greater share of the oil rent for the oil-producing communities of the region. MEND first emerged in 2006, while he was still in detention. The movement's audacious kidnapping of oil workers and targeted bombing of oil facilities has increasingly caught the attention of the international press and the Nigerian government, leading the region's unemployed youth, some of them previous MASSOB supporters, to rally to the former's fiery rhetoric. While MASSOB has not yet ditched its non-violent stance, Uwazurike, in an attempt to represent himself as a fearless revolutionary leader and win more converts in the Delta region, regularly threatens to join forces with MEND because, in his own words, 'the only language the Nigerian government understands is the use of force, just like the tactics of MEND in the Niger Delta.'<sup>99</sup>

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99. *Daily Sun* (23 January 2009).

## Conclusion: The Ethnic Logic of Electoral Authoritarianism

As the foregoing demonstrates, political institutions, in this case the authoritarian version of electoral politics deployed by the PDP in Nigeria since 1999, not only shape the actions of political actors but also the social terrain on which the game of politics is played. The elite pact and the ethnic calculations that shaped the outcome of the 1999 general elections may have provided the 'vent' for Ralph Uwazurike to establish MASSOB as an excluded ethnic group's counter-strategy. However, the reach of a powerful and still authoritarian state with awesome powers of patronage has made it difficult for the ethnic militia to proceed from apparently successful ethnic mobilisation to the critical next stages of violent disruption of the democratisation process and outright secession.

In Nigeria's authoritarian first-past-the-post, winner-takes-all political system, the richest pickings are reserved for those able to stitch together a coalition of ethnic hegemony and deploy this to seize power in the centre. Ethnic politics is tolerated, even cynically incentivised, but only to the extent it is a subordinate and pliant extension of the Behemoth. The leaders of Ohaneze, seasoned by age and experience, knew only too well as they quickly moved from 2005 on to substitute a tepid and less threatening 'Igbo Day' narrative for MASSOB's emotive 'Biafra Day' celebrations, that the authoritarian state's control of the legitimate means of violence was still very secure, even as its key actors began to go through the motions of 'democratising' governance from 1999 onwards.

Uwazurike and MASSOB too remain firmly in the Behemoth's shadow. Their two political narratives of choice – 'non exodus' and non-violence – are the ultimate in pragmatism. The putative citizens of their dream nation-state, even as they regularly ventilate legitimate grievances, are still firmly embedded in the interlocking webs of a centralising Nigerian state that has demonstrated, from the Biafran secession attempt in 1967 to the ongoing bloody battles to contain MEND, that it will brook no challenge to the 'corporate existence of Nigeria' from any of its ethnic constituents. Authoritarian political institutions, even as they are apparently being dismantled in a period of democratisation, continue to shape and constrain the choices and strategies of political actors in multiethnic societies like Nigeria.

Elsewhere in Africa, electoral authoritarian regimes, permitting multiparty elections but using state institutions to determine the outcome, have considerably disfigured the political landscape since the process of redemocratisation began in the late 1980s. As Andreas Schedler has written, 'What distinguishes EA [Electoral Authoritarian] regimes from electoral democracies are not the formal properties of political elections, but their authoritarian qualities. It is not on the surface of formal electoral institutions that electoral authoritarian regimes differ from electoral democracies, but in the surrounding conditions of

political freedom and legal security.<sup>100</sup> The deliberate and cynical politicisation of ethnicity is a major weapon in the arsenal of authoritarian incumbents and sundry political entrepreneurs as they scramble in the democratisation moment to retain power.

The 'ethnic' weapon, once primed and deployed in culturally plural societies in a period of charged political mobilisation, tends to introduce into the political arena its own terrifying logic. Bloody street riots, pogrom, civil war and genocide, as was the case in Africa's Great Lakes region when Congo (Kinshasa), Burundi and Rwanda began to slowly unravel from 1990 onwards, are some of the gruesome consequences.<sup>101</sup> Against the 'democratisation is impossible in deeply-divided societies' thesis, I have argued in this essay, drawing on constructivists' understanding of the ethnic dynamic and its malleability, that robust and impartial political institutions can play an important, even indispensable role, in shaping political arenas and the behaviour of political actors so that they embrace inclusive and civic strategies and avoid the malignant elements in ethnicity that impede democratisation. Given that the majority of African countries are multiethnic, are still making the journey from authoritarianism to multiparty elections and are hampered by weak political institutions, the surprise is that scholarly and policy attention has not sufficiently focused on electoral institutions in multiethnic states during founding elections as democratisation commences and on how best to insulate them from the machinations of self-serving authoritarian incumbents.

Laurence Whitehead has questioned, rightly in my view, the tendency in mainstream social science 'to be skeptical about explanations couched in terms of normative commitment.'<sup>102</sup> He has also argued for a conceptualisation of democratisation processes as 'long-term, open-ended undertakings, guided by ideas and values as well as calculations of self-interest.' Confronted with the task of discharging the burden of the historical memory of pogrom and its aftermath, the young men of MASSOB sought to mobilise history, ethnicity and

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100. Andreas Schedler, 'The Logic of Electoral Authoritarianism,' downloaded from Ethiomedia.com, 10 March 2011. Larry Diamond has also characterised these peculiar political formations as 'hybrid regimes.' See Larry Diamond, 'Thinking About Hybrid Regimes,' *Journal of Democracy*, 13 (April 2002), pp. 21–35.

101. Crawford Young offers a penetrating analysis of this bloody dynamic in a 2006 essay, 'The Heart of the African Conflict Zone: Democratization, Ethnicity, Civil Conflict, and the Great Lake Crisis,' *Annual Review of Political Science*, 9 (2006), pp. 301–28. The still simmering conflict in Senegal's Casamance region, Mamadou Diouf has also argued, was shaped by the perception in Casamance that the Senegalese democratic project had marginalised citizens in this region on account of their distinct ethnic origin, among other reasons. See Mamadou Diouf, 'Between Ethnic Memories and Colonial History in Senegal: The MFDC and the Struggle for Independence in Casamance,' in Berman, Eyoh and Kymlicka (eds), *Ethnicity and Democracy in Africa*, 2004.

102. Laurence Whitehead, *Democratization: Theory and Experience*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002, p. 267.

a parlous economic present to press their claims on an electoral authoritarian regime founded on an ethnic logic. In so doing, they threatened to derail Nigeria's democratisation process. Countervailing forces, not the least civic actors in the Igbo heartland itself, intervened, not only making difficult the progression of MASSOB's project to bloody inter-ethnic conflict and secession, but powerfully illustrating the case that democratisation is indeed a long-drawn out and open-ended process that, properly nurtured, could progress to the crucial consolidation stage in multiethnic states. Even so, the fact that MASSOB's project is presently struggling does not in any way detract from the validity of the grievances, past and present, that gave birth to the ethnic militia in the first place. As social scientists, we are only further challenged to come up with a normative political ordering in which victims of ethnic or racial injustice can demand and obtain redress while standing on a civic and inclusive platform.

Indeed, the story of the United Kingdom and the Scottish National Party (SNP) underlines the need for this normative project. The SNP was formed by Scottish nationalists in 1934 to press for independence from the United Kingdom, which they saw as being dominated by the more populous English across the border. The SNP became a serious political force in the 1960s, winning a significant victory when the Scottish parliament was established in 1999, with control of most of Scotland's public services. Devolution is London's answer to growing separatist sentiment in Scotland. Following the rise of right-wing politicians in the United Kingdom in the 1980s led by Margaret Thatcher, ordinary Scottish, who are mostly left of centre in political and economic outlook, began to rally to the SNP, which they felt best represented 'traditional' Scottish values. The SNP won the majority of the seats in the Scottish parliament in 2011 and on 25 January 2012, Alex Salmond, Scotland's first minister, and his SNP government announced plans for a historic referendum on independence to be held in 2014.

The primary animating force for resurgent Scottish nationalism is civic-political, following deepening ideological differences between Scottish voters and the dominant political parties controlled from London. However, it has been given practical political expression in ethnic terms because the SNP was able to blend party policies and programmes with ethnic nationalism to capture Scottish votes. Even so, it may well turn out that the Scottish people will vote to retain the present arrangement of devolution instead of full independence in 2014, given the longstanding economic, cultural and civic-democratic bonds that still tie them to the rest of the United Kingdom. Yugoslavia presents the opposite picture. In the absence of a civic-democratic space and the determination of the more dominant Serbia to grant independence to the Slovenes and Croatians as the USSR unravelled in the late 1980s, war broke out between these ethnic nationalities, leading to pogrom and genocide. Elsewhere in Af-

rica, the refusal of the authoritarian Muslim-dominated regime in the Sudan to include residents in the southern part of the country, the bulk of whom are Christians, in governance and state-controlled economic activities led the latter to agitate for a separate state, which was granted them following a UN-brokered referendum in 2011. Instructively, this was after a long-drawn out civil war in which millions died.

The manner in which the MASSOB project has evolved since 1999 against the background of Nigeria's stalling democratisation project, and the story of Scotland more broadly, offers an object lesson on how democratisation in 'deeply divided' societies can be successfully achieved. As I have already argued, political institutions and the way they are deployed during founding elections can make or mar the democratisation moment. Not only should these institutions be designed in such a way that they offer tangible pay-offs to political actors knitting together civic coalitions as opposed to the ethnic and parochial, the operators of these institutions should also be impartial, resisting the temptation to bend the rules to favour their ethnic kin. While pacts with outgoing authoritarian incumbents may sometimes be unavoidable, the incoming politicians must resolutely oppose agreements likely to inflame ethnic passions following elections.

Likewise, powerful entities like the United States and the European Union that send election observers to multiethnic countries in the process of democratisation must insist that the rules of the electoral game be scrupulously observed by all parties, and stand ready to withhold recognition of the resulting government if it becomes clear the election process was marked by fraud and sundry irregularities. It is precisely these irregularities that ethnic entrepreneurs eventually latch on to in mobilising their kin against the state, thereby imperilling progress towards democratic consolidation. In countries like Nigeria that are still struggling with the devastating legacies of bloody civil war, a federal constitution devolving considerable fiscal and administrative authority to regional and local governments – just enough to placate ethnic entrepreneurs even as the civic ties binding them to the central state are reinforced – should be adopted. A project of robust civic education, designed to focus the minds of the electorate on the policy platforms of the various political parties, and the specific programmes they have to address poverty and underdevelopment – usually the lot of most multiethnic states about to embark upon democratisation – should be pursued before the first votes are cast. Ultimately, the fate of democratisation in these complex states is usually decided by how well the new democrats are able to mobilise people and material to address the pressing economic and social needs of a now aroused and expectant citizenry. Italy's *Lega Nord* (Northern League) and Sinn Fein in Northern Ireland can be seen as broad ethno-political equivalents of MASSOB. The only difference is that while economic prosperity and strong

democratic institutions in Italy and the United Kingdom are powerful competing alternatives to secession, in Nigeria deepening poverty and the self-serving culture of electoral authoritarianism work as eager and efficient recruiting sergeants for MASSOB's project.

I began this narrative with the story of Atiku Abubakar, Nigeria's former vice president, and his journey to Enugu, Biafra's former capital, in September 2010 in search of votes during the PDP's presidential primary. Abubakar, flying the flag of the vast and populous northern region, true to his fears, lost to the incumbent, President Goodluck Jonathan, who had the entire machinery of the Nigerian state behind him. Following the presidential election itself in which Jonathan again defeated another northerner, vast swathes of the region exploded in bloody inter-ethnic and religious strife.<sup>103</sup> The political response to electoral defeat was ethnic, but because the fundamental animating forces were civic in character, they served as an effective check on the 'nativist' hotheads in the north who would put to an end the very idea of multiparty elections in the country. Behemoth endures, but the peaceful, civic challenge to its divisive, command-style politics is also finding a foothold.

The drama of Nigeria's democratisation, as indeed democratisation everywhere, continues.

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103. Jibrin Ibrahim has written of the post-election violence thus: 'Presidential elections in Nigeria in April 2011 were followed by rampant violence that forced about 40,000 people out of their homes across the country and especially in the Northern States of Kano, Kaduna, and Bauchi.' See Jibrin Ibrahim, 'World Refugee Day 2011: Democracy, Electoral Violence, and Population Displacements in West Africa – A Call to Action,' Centre for Democracy and Development, Abuja, Nigeria, press statement, 20 June 2011.

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