

The Nigerian Civil War (1967-1970): New Theories, Old Problem, Fresh Crisis

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Theories of civil war onset are adjuncts to extant literature on the “correlates of war”. The theories are fresh efforts at explaining and examining the evolution of empirical research on the causes of internal conflict onset. These theories serve as frameworks to analyse the structural and psychological conditions responsible for the fragility of war within the state, particularly in respect of mobilization and strategic confrontation. This article reviews the theories in light of the Nigerian experience and contends that some of the underlying issues that precipitated the Nigerian Civil War (1967-1970) still exist and need to be de-established in order to attenuate their resurgent capability. The article makes a case for constructive and functional integration of the multiple nationalities that make up the Nigerian state as a way of preserving the corporate existence of the country. It also submits that perceived injustice is not just injurious to a system; it is capable of causing a dysfunction within the state because of its inflammatory war potential.

Keywords: civil war, internal conflict, resurgent, de-established, injustice, integration

Introduction

There is a psychology to civil war that needs to be interrogated if we are to understand the dynamic nature of domestic rivalries and politics of internal conflict. Social conflict theorists believe that tensions provoked by economic and social misplacements are largely responsible for disagreements and conflicts. This position is a derivative of Marxist-based social theory which attributes social tension to the contestation for material and non-material resources as well as scramble and competition for power within the political class. Material insufficiency engenders bitter struggle for control not only of the insufficient resources but of the power to allocate the resources or to appropriate the resources. Constrained and restricted by knowledge deficit, the dregs of the society have resorted to violent conducts to redress prevalent social inequalities and rampant oppression by the political class. This is why Giddens (1989) asserted that power and inequality tend to be closely linked. The powerful are able to accumulate valued resources, such as property or wealth; and possession of such resources is in turn a means of generating power. He stated that “inequalities exist in all types of human society. Even in the simplest cultures, where variations in wealth or property are virtually non-existent, there are inequalities between individuals, men and women, the young and old” (p. 212).

Marx who wrote extensively on social class was struck by the inequalities the capitalist system creates. Marx’s concept of class directs us toward objectively structured economic inequalities in society. Class does

not refer to the beliefs people hold about their position, but to objective conditions which reward than others (Giddens, 1989). In reinforcing this position, Agwu (2020) explains that social conflict theory sees society as a complex system characterized by inequalities and conflicts that generate social changes. This position needs a proper reconstruction in view of the controversy that attends Marx's works on class. There is the belief that Marx failed to provide a systematic analysis of the concept of class... Since the various passages where he discusses class are not always fully consistent, there have been many disputes between scholars about "what Marx really meant" (Giddens, 1989, p. 216).

However, using the social conflict theory to interpret the Nigerian Civil War in contemporary times seems anachronistic as different waves of empirical work on civil war onset had been done. In light of this development, it is possible now to appreciate the transition in social changes and change mechanisms. This does not in any way suggest that a conflation of appropriate theoretical paradigms is inconceivable. In theoretical explication, nothing is sacrosanct except there is a general agreement on the testability and maintainability of the models in use. This position is without prejudice to the various empirical studies undertaken for the purpose of enhancing the viability of research and empiricism. In this particular instance, there is no controversy on the complementary nature of both social conflict theory and the theories of civil war onset except in the interchange of the multiple variables that require interrogation.

Most writers of the Nigerian Civil War refrained from the theoretical underpinning that could help illuminate the discourse on the war. This theoretical shyness is responsible for the visible incoherence in the arguments analyses and logical processing in most of the literature. Agreed that theories on civil war onset are recent additions to the model pool, it is necessary to test their appropriateness and adequacy. For instance, most of the books focused their attention on the causes of the war without emphasizing the theoretical signification of the war. No doubt, lack of theoretical understanding was one of the reasons why we have a resurgence of insurgency in the South East as efforts and energy were channeled towards the history of the war rather than exerting energy on the conceptual fundamentals of the war. The resurgence of insurgency has not only created a distraction for the Nigerian government, but it has diverted its attention from serious work of governance.

Terrorists or Secessionists? When Six Is Not Half a Dozen

To prevent any further escalation of insurgency, the central authority has resorted to blackmail by labeling the groups terrorist organisations. This way the groups will not be able to access international good will as a result of this label. But truly, are insurgents' terrorists? Theoretically, what separates terrorism from civil war insurgency may be a thin line but the strategy and methodology for operationalizing the two are significantly the same. According to Kalyvas (2007), civil wars are conventionally viewed as instances of coordinated, sustained violence between political organisations that are subject to a common authority at the onset of hostilities. This description was reinforced by Levy and Thompson (2011) when they said civil war encompasses coordinated, sustained violence between a government, a rebel organization or between two or more insurgent groups. The level of havoc and devastation that characterizes civil war is unthinkable; hundreds, thousands, and even millions of people lose their lives; ethnic nationalities and communities become fragmented, disintegrated, fractured, and dismembered. In addition, physical infrastructure and human capital are also affected. It also slows down and hampers socio-economic development and leaves behind indelible marks on collective psyches (Thompson, 2018).

On the other hand, Webster's *New World Dictionary* defines terrorism as "the use of force or threats to demoralize, intimidate and subjugate especially such use as a political weapon or policy". A simpler definition views terrorism as "the deliberate attack on innocent civilians for political purposes". Another useful definition of terrorism considers four salient points that encapsulate the totality of the concept:

1. Terrorism is a method of combat or a strategy to achieve certain goals.
2. To achieve these goals, terrorism aims to reduce a state of fear in its potential victims and a proclivity toward repressive actions by the government.
3. Terrorism is by nature ruthless and does not conform to commonly accepted standards of decency or humanitarian norms.
4. Publicity is an essential factor in terrorist strategy (Magstadt, 1993).

This article is not aimed at discussing the appropriateness of the terrorism label that the Nigerian government has placed on IPOB and MASSOB. Rather, it is a contemporary effort at unraveling the exact point of discontent and an attempt at processing the grievances of the new agitators theoretically to see if this new understanding can help in unlocking the underlying issues of war. First, why do civil wars break out? There are two dominant approaches to internal conflict outbreak:

1. A correlational approach and,
2. A bargaining approach.

Olson (1965) explained that there are structural conditions that make countries more prone to experiencing civil war or, more precisely, factors that allow domestic opponents to overcome collective action problems and mobilize against internal rivals. Also, there are two broad classes of explanations: grievance-based explanations and greed-based explanations. Grievance-based accounts (Gurr, 1970) focused on background conditions or government actions such as repression, discrimination, poverty, income inequality, ethno-linguistic fractionalization that create grievances at the individual or group level and galvanize collective action. Greed-based framework concentrated on rebels' opportunity costs for engaging in violence (Collier & Hoeffler, 2004; Collier, Hoeffler, & Roehner, 2009; Fearon & Laitin, 2003).

In Nigeria, the level of repression of any group has not been substantiated or corroborated. Poverty, income equality, and ethno-linguistic fractionalization are some of the socio-economic challenges endemic in the nation. Thus, no single group can play the victim in this instance. The major grievance compelling protest from these two groups is discrimination. At least, this is one of the official reasons for the founding of the two separatist/secessionist groups. In a response to information request sent to the Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada on June 9, 2005, by the MASSOB leadership, this is what the group wrote:

MASSOB was founded in 1999. The Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) seeks to create an Independent State of Biafra in the Igbo-dominated southeastern region of Nigeria. MASSOB claims that since the failed Biafra Independence War (1967-1970), successive governments have continued to oppress and discriminate against the Igbo people, justifying a renewed call for the creation of a Biafran nation. Headed by founder Chief Ralph Uwazuruike, MASSOB is determined to bring about the state of Biafra through a non-violent 25-stage campaign culminating in a UN-supervised referendum.

In its own case, IPOB gives seven reasons why it will continue with the agitation for a Biafran State. These are:

1. We are fighting for Biafra because freedom is our God-given right, and the restoration of Biafra sovereignty which Fredrick Lugard, the British mercenary soldier abused and defiled is our utmost priority, which our fathers fought for in 1967 and 1970 that was surrendered with the slogan "no victor, no vanquished".

2. We are fighting for Biafra sovereignty to stop the raping of our mothers, sisters, and daughters in our homes and farms by striking nomads who disguise as cattle breeders and herdsmen. The actualization of Biafra will end all forms of politically motivated killings in South-East states.

3. We are fighting for Biafra to end the unprovoked killings of our people in every well intentioned religious crisis and bombings in faraway Demark of which the Biafrans are the targeted people in their place of worship because of their religion and faith.

4. Once we ascertain Biafran freedom, all forms of harassments from the military and other security agencies will end. We are fighting for Biafra where everyone will have the right and freedom of expression and peaceful assembly without being killed by the Armed Forces who cannot counter terrorism.

5. We are fighting for Biafra where the constitution will be sacred, and the law supreme, and the rights of every citizen and foreigner will be protected. We are fighting for a Biafra where every region or province or state will have total control of their people and resources.

6. We are fighting for Biafra where there will be no marginalization or special favour of/for any one because of their tribe and tongue or ethnicity.

7. We are fighting for Biafra (to) ensure that the coming generations will (not?) encounter the darkness brought upon Nigeria by the so-called colonial masters.

Without paying attention to some equivocations in the objectives of both groups, there is a corresponding conceptual weakness in applying the “Correlational Approach” to resolve the “riddle” of coherence. There is a general consensus that the correlational approach being part of the first wave of empirical studies on civil war onset provided an unclear perception as to how internal conflicts emerge because it “paid little attention to how rebel organisations coalesce and splinter, how they interact with the government, other insurgents, or third parties, or how this interaction unfolds to produce varying violent or non-violent outcomes” (Thompson, 2018, p. 222).

In discussing the bargaining approach, it should be considered as the second wave of empirically based theories of civil war onset dominated by rationalist accounts that regarded conflict as an outcome of bargaining failures. As a subset of rationalist accounts for war, bargaining approach envisioned conflict as a byproduct of three factors: information asymmetries, credible commitment, and issue indivisibilities (Fearon, 1995; Powell, 2002; Reiter, 2003).

Initially developed to explain international conflict, the bargaining logic was quickly applied to civil wars, especially to ethnic conflicts (Walter, 1997; 2002; 2009). Bargaining accounts for civil war onset start from the assumption that war is costly and that domestic opponents should prefer a settlement that offers them exactly what they would obtain at the end of hostilities. But this has always been very complicated to follow because the condition which should have made it possible has been very elusive. One such condition is information asymmetry—a situation in which actors hold private information about their military capability and determination to fight against their enemies. Information asymmetries occur because opponents have rational incentives to misrepresent information about capabilities and resolve. Walter (2009, p. 246) held that information asymmetries are particularly acute in civil war situations for at least two reasons: (a) Because rebels operate clandestinely, governments often have trouble monitoring capabilities and strategies; (b) because insurgents are generally weaker than the government, they have strong incentives to misrepresent their military prowess and determination to fight in order to bolster their bargaining leverage.

Even if the problem of information asymmetries is discountenanced, another likely challenge will be the actors abiding by agreements which they have pledged their commitment to. Commitment issues tend to be severe in internal conflicts because expected shifts in the power distribution in government's favour following negotiated settlements, which generally provide for insurgents' mobilization, offer incentives for these governments to renege on promises. As Walter (2009) pointed out, "governments can offer to reform the political process, share power, or transfer autonomy to competitors, but these weaker competitors will have little ability to penalize a government should it fail to follow through" (p. 246).

Finally, a third bargaining explanation for war onset relates to the type of issue under dispute. Certain issues such as control over territory may be indivisible in that they cannot be split among opponents. Issue indivisibilities may arise because of actors' inability to commit to a certain distribution of the disputed good (Goddard, 2009).

There is a stalemate here. Before there can be bargaining, there must be the willingness on the parties involved to engage themselves in roundtable dialogue. Keep negotiating! You must always negotiate further... From where does a given discourse draw its authority and legitimacy? Who is behind it, who is mediating it, by what means and to what ends? What and who will have been excluded from it? (Derrida, 2002)

In view of the details that will form the agenda of deliberations, the Nigerian government should have engaged the secessionists in intense discourse on the underlying issues of the war. Revisiting the fundamentals of the war is different from re-opening the wounds of the war. As Nwabueze (2018) explained, "the recent tragic experience of other federations in the world that ignored the needs and demands of equity and justice in the ordering of their affairs, particularly the assuring of equitable access to the presidency among the component groups, forewarns us of the danger of falling into the same error" (p. 91). His position is reinforced by Ike Okonta's submission: "Nigeria's power elite soldiers and civilians alike, are notorious for their disdain for the citizens and rarely bother to engage them in a public conversation on matters of policy and national politics". This same issue of absence of bargaining or negotiation received the attention of Abada, Omeh, and Okoye (2020) which claimed that since the demise of the 1967 civil war fundamental issues for which the Igbo went to war in the first place were not addressed. The imperativeness of a roundtable dialogue has been gingered by both historical and contemporary developments—issues relating to the past and the present—that are germane to the resolution of the Biafra debacle. The issue of marginalization has always been one of the historical elements of the civil war. This reason has been adduced for the lack of infrastructural development in Igboland. However, more fundamental and critical issues have evolved as part of the consequences of the war on the Igbo. The Igbo complained of "Under-representation" in the Armed Forces thus alleging bias and prejudice by the other ethnic groups against them (Osaghae, 1998). Some Igbo leaders also alleged that there was an official policy to limit the recruitment of Igbos into the army. For example, Arthur Nwankwo, one of the leaders of Eastern Mandate Union, referred to the patterns of intake into the Nigerian Defence Academy Regular Courses Nos. 29 and 31: Of 153 entrants for Course No. 29, 49 were Hausa/Fulani, 40 Yorubas and only 13 Igbo; similarly, of 172 entrants in Course No. 31 only 14 were Igbo, while Hausa/Fulani and Yorubas were 72 and 31 respectively (Osaghae, 1998).

Constrained by and conscious of the furore that will attend any formal conversation or discussion with the secessionist groups, the government shut its door on the groups by not inviting them for any dialogue. Worse still was the fact that the government is even asking the international community to tag the groups terrorist organisations.

Contentious Spell and Cycle of Contention: Managing a Brewing Conflict

In what appeared like a defence for the government, one “Temitope Ajayi”, one of the regular contributors on social media, wrote this piece to pooh-pooh the accusation of marginalization of the Igbos by both past and present governments. Ajayi argued:

For decades, many people, including the media, have perpetuated wrong narratives in this country because of the way falsehoods have been mainstreamed. There is no part of Nigerian history from 1958 when we had the first all Nigerian cabinet headed by a Nigerian elected Prime Minister, preparatory to independence in 1960, that supports the false narrative of marginalization of Igbos. For those who may not know, the first indigenous Federal Permanent Secretary even before independence was an Igbo man, Mr. Francis Nwokedi. Mr. Nwokedi and Dr. S. O. Wey, who later in 1961 became the first Secretary to the Government of the Federation, were the first two indigenous Federal Permanent Secretaries in the colonial government. The two men were the doyen of Nigerian civil service. Mr. Nwokedi was promoted as Permanent Secretary about two weeks ahead of Dr. Wey.

Discountenancing the report of Major-General Christopher Welby-Everard that Brigadier Aguiyi Ironsi was not capable of leading the Nigerian Army of a brand new country and the advice of his party (NPC), the Prime Minister Tafawa Balewa still went ahead to make Aguiyi Ironsi the General Officer Commanding of Nigerian Army being the most senior Nigerian Army Officer insinuating that both Aguiyi-Ironsi and Dr. S. C. Wey abused their positions; Ajayi claimed that the Igbo dominated the top echelon of the Army and Federal civil public service for many years from 1958. This same allegation was made against the Igbo by a popular Nigerian columnist with the Nation newspaper, Segun Ayobolu. He wrote that as a *de facto* Vice President to President Goodluck Jonathan, Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala who is a native of Ogwashi-Uku, an Igbo town in Delta State married to an Igbo man from Abia State, appointed Igbo as heads of virtually all agencies under her Ministry. These agencies included the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC), Federal Inland Revenue Service (FIRS), Asset Management Corporation of Nigeria (AMCON), Sovereign Wealth Fund (SWF), and National Pension Commission (PENCOM) among others. Ajayi was unsparing:

There is no strong argument to support the marginalization of Igbos in Nigeria beyond what exists in the imagination of those who constantly mine the Biafran franchise to amass private wealth from brainwashed people and politicians who use same for political bargain. I can conveniently say that Igbos have had the best of Nigeria more than any other tribe. Blackmailing the country with victim mentality is not a strategy... ..Igbos cannot continue to claim they are the only good people or tribe in Nigeria while others are evil people holding them down. Certainly, hate and insulting other tribes can't be a strategy for engagement in addressing any grievances if at all there are genuine ones.

Bargaining accounts of internal conflict have limited explanatory power in those circumstances where there is little, if any, strategic bargaining or interaction between rivals prior to the outbreak of violence (Thompson, 2018). Working on the attitude and psychological make-up of the government, all forms of interaction are not to be encouraged or established with the secessionists in order not to stimulate or escalate further tension within the polity. Already, a sub-unit of the Yoruba ethnic group had formed the Odua People's Congress (OPC) to agitate for a Yoruba Nation along the same line that the Igbos were treading. It should be noted that actor's preference for fighting a civil war poses an important challenge to the war inefficiency assumption that underpins bargaining explanations for warfare. The main theoretical premise underlying bargaining, and more generally rationalist accounts for conflict, is that war imposes large costs on all actors involved in the dispute relative to an alternative peaceful outcome (Thompson, 2018). For instance, the human cost of the civil war was huge, but unquantified and unquantifiable. Several authors suggest a wide range of

deaths between one and three million, with another three million displaced (Bourne, 2015). There was no doubt that the Nigerian crisis that climaxed in the war between Nigeria and Biafra between 6 July, 1967 and January 12, 1970 originated in the military coup *d'état* of January 1966, and the counter-coup of July, 1966, and the Massacre of Eastern Nigerians in Northern Nigeria in May and September 1966. These later events caused about two million Eastern Nigerians mainly Igbo, living in the North of Nigeria to move back to the Eastern Region as refugees (Thomas, 2018a). Obasanjo (1980) lamented

The war has come and gone. The story of the war and what led to it has been told, is being told and will continue to be told. And so will the story of what came after it. What seems to me a human tragedy all through the ages is the inability of man to learn a good lesson from the past so as to avoid the pitfalls of those who had gone before. There is also the innate and unconscious desire of man to remain oblivious of the lessons of the past. (p. 249)

This is what Thomas (2018b) called the “Vanity of History”. What does the society benefit from the recording and reading of the follies and vanities of past humanity when the world is still full of actors who are consciously rejecting the guide of history by indulging in similar follies and vanities? (Thomas, 2018b). Many rather than believe that if unity was at the centre of their struggle, the war could have been fought, and therefore the war has been seen as a mistake, and not a justifiable action. Agwu (2020) queried the rationale for a full blown war against a section of the country in order to unite Nigeria when there were many peaceful means to the so-called unity. He asserted that the 30-month war which was fought in Nigeria from 1967 to 1970 was not necessary at all because it was at most fought to promote selfish ambition of certain actors in the political landscape of Nigeria.

As a way of checking unnecessary internal conflict like the Nigerian Civil War, it has been suggested that the contentious cycle/spell can be used as our unit of analysis in order to generate the basic mechanisms that can nip it in the bud. If civil war is viewed as an emergent phenomenon situated within a complex process of political contention, then the processual, dynamic nature of internal conflict onset might be better captured if one adopts the “cycle of contention” or the “contentious spells” as the unit of analysis. Cycles of contention and/or contentious spells encapsulate the whole range of violent and non-violent forms of collective action that occur within a bounded time frame (Tarrow, 2011; 2012; Tilly, 2001). A cycle of contention can be operationalized as a succession of “interrelated collective actions and reactions to them whose aggregate frequency, intensity and forms increase and then decline in rough chronological proximity” (Tarrow, 2012, p. 134). The advantage of using contentious cycles as our unit of analysis is that it implies that civil war onset is a process rather than a one-shot event that occurs in isolation from the broader context in which actors interact. It is through this process that mechanism evolves (Tilly, 1978). Della Porta (2013, p. 24) explained that “Mechanisms refer to intermediary steps between conditions and outcomes”. A mechanism is the connective fabric between variables of interest (Tarrow, 2011, p. 186), the pathway or process by which an outcome is reduced (Gerring, 2010, p. 1501). According to Tilly (2001), mechanisms “form a delimited class of events that change relations among specified sets of elements in identical or closely similar ways over a variety of situations” (p. 25). A mechanism is ontologically distinct from a variable-unlike variables; mechanisms are not properties of the units of analysis, rather, “they reside above and outside the units in question and describe the relationship between the units of analysis” (Falletti & Lynch, 2009, p. 147).

How Will This End?

Since 1990, the Nigerian State has been managing the fragility of its polity but it is obvious that all is not well with the nation. At best, what we have since the end of the civil war can best be described as political

charade. We have a complex challenge at hand. It looks simple to our leaders because everything to them is drama. But the “Vanquished” are not in the mood for any drama. They feel suffocated by what they consider “conspiratorial persecution” by the North and the South West. The structure of the nation humours them as one of the three dominant tribes in Nigeria but in reality; they see themselves as a persecuted tribe that needs an elbow room. The war of 1967-1970 was their own way of calling the attention of the nation to the trauma they are going through as a result of the discomfort they are experiencing in the hands of the other two dominant tribes. So, when they declared war on the Nigerian State in 1967, it was to express their displeasure with an arrangement that tends to confer a status of outcast on them in a country that belongs to all the citizens of the nation.

Bewildered by the attempt of the Igbo to cause the disintegration of the country, the governments, past and present, have systematically been frustrating them by not entrusting them with sensitive and strategic positions, mostly in the forces—Army, Police, Navy, Air Force. It appears they have been sidelined when it comes to sharing the top positions in the various hierarchies of the Forces. Before the war, the Igbo were snubbed in federal appointments. After the war, things got worse for them. No Igbo has ever been appointed as Minister of Internal Affairs. In fact, the only southerner to have held that post since independence was Alex Ibru (1993-1995). J. M. Johnson who was the first southerner to head the Ministry did so before independence (1957-1959). No Igbo has ever been made Minister of defence since 1960. Only one Igbo, Ogbonnaya Onovo from Enugu, has been made the Inspector General of Police (2009-2010).

This kind of arrangement which sees the North and the South West rotating strategic and sensitive positions between the two of them is capable of generating bad blood in the various components of the populace. The Igbo question cannot be put in suspended animation forever. It must be discussed, debated, and decided once and for all. If for whatever reason, a part of the country feels its interest was not being protected adequately within the federation, a plebiscite to determine the popularity of their disenchantment and secession bid could be held. The war of 1967-1970 was fought under a military administration at a time when there was no proliferation of small and light arms. The situation has changed now; what we have today is a situation where small and light arms are being smuggled into the country by faceless merchants whose economic interest can only flourish when there is national instability. This time around, it is the politicians that are in power. I do not want to imagine the catastrophe that we are likely to witness; should there be an outbreak or escalation of hostilities? Must we then allow another outbreak of war and lose millions of lives disrupt social and economic activities displace innocent citizens and destabilize a system that is just being nurtured before we act on the wish of Igbo? Those who think the spirit of Biafra is dead and buried need to learn more about the world of the spirits. Spirits do not die. Therefore, the Biafran spirit is actively alive.

On the other hand, what does the country lose if it opens a dialogue channel with the Igbo as a way of commencing a process that is aimed at total and constructive integration of a large section of the country’s populace? Foreclosing dialogue with the Igbo does not augur well for the unity of the country. The Igbo should be integrated into the mainstream agenda, instead of being encouraged and motivated to pursue an agenda that can only lead to the disintegration of the nation. What the Igbo want is simple: a sense of belonging.

When Thompson (2018) contends that civil war is not an independent event that occurs in isolation but an outcome of a process of political contention that commonly displays various forms of violent and non-violent collective action, he probably has the Igbo in mind. When a government ignores silent clamour, it provokes violent clatter. Between 1970 and now, the Igbo have remained pensive, restive, sober, focused, meticulous,

and cooperative but they have never abandoned the Biafran cause. Ojukwu has stated that Biafra is not a name but a concept whose time is now.

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