



# **IPOB'S LOST CHANCE**

**WHAT THE SEPARATIST MOVEMENT COULD HAVE DONE DIFFERENTLY**

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Our researchers employed methods such as one-on-one interviews and desk research, to collate the available data. Our editors prepared the report, using various proprietary tools to fact-check and copy edit the information gathered.



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After some two years in detention by the Federal Government, the leader of the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), Nnamdi Kanu, was released on stringent bail conditions by the Federal High Court in Abuja. Two of the bail conditions were that he was not to be seen in public gatherings of more than 10 people; and he was not to grant media interviews. However, as soon as Kanu got to his home in Umuahia, Abia state, he began to grant interviews to foreign and local media, and also hosted large gatherings of IPOB members who came calling at his home. His house became a sort of Mecca to IPOB members who camped within and outside the compound walls. Mr. Kanu also embarked on tours of IPOB branches across communities in Anambra, Imo, Abia, Ebonyi, Enugu and Rivers states. He paid courtesy visits to selected Igbo leaders, and held several meetings with his supporters and followers, violating all the bail conditions that he agreed to.

From a government viewpoint, the situation became worrisome when videos and pictures of a group called the Biafran Security Service began to circulate online, with Mr. Kanu inspecting a guard of honour and taking salutes from the said police. Initially laughable, reports eventually emerged of this 'security service' collecting tolls and taxes in some communities. Emboldened by the state's perceived inability to try him in court and remand him for violating his bail conditions, Mr. Kanu decided to up the ante. Following the perceived success of a work boycott on May 30 – Biafra Heroes Day commemorating those who died on the Biafran side during the Nigerian civil war, Mr. Kanu and his group declared that there would be no elections in Anambra state, on November 18. That is this Saturday. The call for an election boycott was the one the political leadership in South East Nigeria was not going to take lightly, and at first they began consultations with IPOB, urging Kanu to change his position. There were some backchannel discussions for him to adopt a political party and use same to air the grievances of IPOB in particular, and the Igbo people in general. Governors, Senators, traditional rulers, Igbo statesmen and other stakeholders held meetings with Kanu on the need to moderate his agitation, and also to use the legitimate governmental structures and the political process for his struggle.

Kanu however demurred and continued with his explosive rhetoric. He also pointed to the “quit notice” issued by some northern youth groups to Igbo people resident in Northern Nigeria as another reason why his continuing belligerence was necessary. This was the state of things until President Buhari returned to the country after his long medical absence.

With the president’s return, the federal position changed, and the army was deployed to the South East. In short order, Kanu’s home was invaded, and he has not been seen in public since September. The federal government has since proscribed the IPOB, controversially calling it a terrorist group, and there has been some calm.

After a long silence, last Friday, 10 November, some members of IPOB emerged in Onitsha, the commercial capital of Anambra state, clearly targeting this Saturday’s elections.



From a purely strategic viewpoint, Nnamdi Kanu and the IPOB missed a huge opportunity,

one that would have brought him and his followers into the political process. Had IPOB changed tact and gone the road of the adoption and promotion of a political party, and of canvassing from such a platform for the realisation of their objective of a Biafran state, things would have gone differently.

Participating in the process would have given them the opportunity to elect candidates across the political spectrum in the South-East, and indeed in the South-South in the long run. These candidates would have gone on to articulate their demands via legislative bills, executive action, and other legal processes. Such a move would have mirrored the integration of the separatist Sinn Fein in the Northern Irish political process, or that of the Parti Québécois in Canada, which went on to have two referenda on secession from Canada.

Some IPOB members claim it would not have been possible due to the fact that the political process is corrupt in Nigeria, but genuine admirers of the group on multiple occasions advised them to embrace Nigerian electoral politics, and take from the play book of advanced separatist groups in seeking gradual concessions from the Nigerian State, with the ultimate objective of an independent state.

Intellectual supporters of IPOB's separatist agenda have cited the ongoing push by independence leaning political parties in

Catalonia to revive a centuries long aspiration for sovereignty for Spain's largest region, to

the consternation of the central government in Madrid. Kurdistan in Iraq also gets routinely mentioned as a model for the makings of the autonomous foundations of an eventual sovereign Biafran state. The comparisons with Catalonia and Kurdistan fail to take into account a few distinguishing factors. Spain and Iraq, like Nigeria, are centralised federations, with the centre bequeathing power to the constituent units. As an illustration, Catalonia has had a centuries-long history of antipathy toward the Spanish monarchy, but in 1931, was granted broad autonomy as Spain became a republic. With the 1936-1939



Spanish Civil War, which saw much of the fighting centred on the region, a Republican stronghold, General Francisco Franco's victory ensured that Catalonia's official autonomy was squelched. Franco's death in 1975 saw the advent of Spain's current constitutional monarchy, in which a 1978 constitution granted the central government the power to bequeath autonomy on regions with significant cultural divergence from the Castilian-Aragonese centre in Madrid. Catalonia was named one of the autonomous regions.

In essence, Catalan autonomy is not a constitutional outflow, like Quebec in Canada, but a product of Spanish parliamentary legislation, a situation which explains the actions first, of that country's Constitutional Court in invalidating acts, including a controversial referendum of the region's parliament in 2010 and 2017 and later, the central parliament's crackdown on regional politicians.

Iraq's constitutional setting is organised on broadly similar lines, thus empowering Baghdad to orchestrate a curtailment on the autonomy of the regional Kurdistan government in the wake of an equally contested referendum earlier this year.

Abuja, on its part, has expressed its commitment to the indivisibility of the Nigerian state and IPOB stands as arguably the clearest threat to this objective. What the still unfolding situations in Catalonia, Kurdistan and South-East Nigeria seem to suggest is less the flowering of secessionist agitations than the increased willingness of nation states in the

21st Century to resort to almost any means – legal and diplomatic as in Spain, or as in Iraq and Nigeria, a combination of diplomatic and military means in order to preserve their sovereignty. The option of force is much harder to deploy, when the secessionist group is patient and strategic.

Abuja's stance, makes the only path open to IPOB, or any other separatist group, to be the path taken by the Parti Québécois in Canada. 1774's Quebec Act did not give the region



the right to secede from Canada, but tensions between Quebec and the English speaking part of Canada remained. The PQ was formed in 1968, in reaction to the bombing campaign by the militant Front de libération du Québec (FLQ), which also wanted independence for Quebec. It is important to note that where the violent means pursued by the FLQ failed, and the FLQ ceased to exist in 1970, the PQ was able to peacefully, and through participation in the political process, get its referendum on the table twice, in 1980 and in 1995.

Deft diplomatic and political moves would have been IPOB's best chance of, in the long run, achieving its aims. By letting the situation escalate, then getting branded as a terrorist organisation, IPOB has inadvertently handed an implacable federal government the legal right to go after the group, and their members, if they violate national security order like they did in Onitsha a few days

ago. The IPOB and its leadership threw away a potential avenue through which they would have started a silent revolution in the South East and South South geopolitical zones, by associating with a political party such as the UPP, which incorporated all IPOB's demands in its manifesto and then being able to upset the status quo and have members they could send to Abuja as legislators and also elect Governors who would champion said demands.

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