

Militarised democracy and its security challenges in South East Nigeria, 1999-2023

**N.O. Anyadike, M.I. Eze, E.C. Alaku, O.C. Eze, S.N. Asogwa and
K.C. Asogwa***

Abstract: Since the onset of the current democratic experimentation in Nigeria in 1999, the authorities have continued to deploy the military on routine internal security duties. This is evident in the various internal military operations (IMOs) and preponderance of military checkpoints, especially in the Southeast geopolitical zone of the country comprising Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu, and Imo states. The practice has served as an enabler of undemocratic tendencies in the southeast, provoking insecurity. Meanwhile, extant explanations of the security conundrum in the southeast have revolved around securitisation analysis, frustration-aggression thesis, elite politics, and leadership failure. In the process, scant attention has been paid to the phenomenon of militarised democracy and its implications for insecurity in the zone. Using a documentary approach and anchoring analysis on the theoretical frame of authoritarianism, this study argues that the militarisation of the democratic space in the southeast, which is home to the Igbo ethnic group, springs from the overall nature and character of politics in Nigeria, which has tended to privilege militarising tendencies over democratic ethos such as negotiation, compromise, and accommodation. It further argues that this proclivity is due in part to vestiges of dictatorship inherited from colonialism, but is also partly a result of embedded ethnic animosities arising from Nigeria's immediate post-independence history. It concludes that until the political class purges itself of militaristic tendencies and imbibes cherished democratic values of tolerance and pluralism, insecurity in the southeast shall continue to fester as an inevitable consequence of the militarisation of the zone.

Keywords: militarisation, democracy, authoritarianism, insecurity

* N.O. Anyadike; M.I. Eze; E.C. Alaku; O.C. Eze; S.N. Asogwa;

K.C. Asogwa (✉)

Institute of African Studies, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Nigeria

e-mail: kenneth.asogwa@unn.edu.ng (corresponding author)

Background to the study

Although Nigeria returned to democratisation in 1999, the persistence of the dominant class to resolve political conflict through the coercive apparatus of the state rather than discussion and compromise, as the ethos that underpins democratic practice around the world has given rise to the phenomenon of militarised democracy, which has, in turn, fostered insecurity, especially in the southeastern zone of the country. Militarised democracy refers to the undue involvement of the military apparatus in resolving or suppressing disputes arising from differences among political actors on the appropriate manner of conducting democratic business. It denotes the culture of authoritarianism in politics (Adewumi 2022). It also connotes the state's public policy reception to “war-prone policies” such as in Nigeria, where the military’s influence in civil matters is constitutionalised (Ibid.). Militarised democracy, therefore, conjures the image of using the military to sabotage the democratic process rather than its constitutional role of guaranteeing the process (Nacla Editor 2023). As a result of this inclination, civil activism, such as citizens’ protests to ventilate their views on the manner the state handles its public affairs, is always criminalized (Asogwa et al. 2024). Criminalization refers to the process by which behaviours and individuals are transformed into crimes and criminals (Michalowski 2010) through legislation or the pronouncements of courts, which label as crimes previously legitimate actions. Against this background, Aaronson and Shaffer (2021, 4) define criminalisation as a set of processes through which actors construct legal norms that label certain activities as crimes.

Security, on the other hand, can be comprehended from a multidimensional approach, connoting a stable and “relatively predictable environment in which an individual or group may pursue its ends without disruption or harm and fear of such disturbances or injury” (Fischer and Green 2004, 21). It has therefore come to represent public security, which includes the security of private individuals and their property as well as the safety of communal livelihood (Brooks 2009). The absence of the aforementioned metrics constitutes insecurity. Before the return of democratic practice in Nigeria, the dominant manifestations of insecurity in southeastern Nigeria were cultism-related disturbances, daredevil armed robbery by the unemployed category of the youth, inter-communal clashes, and contestations over land ownership. In all these scenarios, the military

played a strategic role in countering and maintaining public order in the polity (EASO, 2018).

Presently the security challenges across the country revolve around political conflicts, the activities of violent non-state actors such as the Islamic insurgency in the northeast, armed banditry in the northwest, and the separatist movement in the southeast, southwest, and south-south Nigeria as well as the menace of kidnappings, armed robbery, cultism, and human trafficking (Alumona 2019; EASO 2022). This is in addition to systematic violence against civilians. Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED) conceptualise “violence against civilians” as “deliberate violent acts perpetrated by an organized political group such as a rebel, militia, or government force against unarmed non-combatants.... these conflict events harm or kill civilians, and include bombing, shooting, torture, rape, mutilation, etc (EASO 2018, 12). Based on the aggregate activities of these non-state actors, the Global Terrorism Index (GTI) 2019 placed Nigeria in the third spot around the world, taking into cognizance the number of deaths related to terrorism. Although the number has witnessed a drastic reduction in 2020, moving from 89 % in 2019 to 31% in 2020, the reduction suffers from sustainability challenges as Nigeria climbed to 8th spot out of the top nations with the most severe terrorism issues across the globe in 2020 (EASO 2022; GTI, 2023).

In fact, both the Fragile State Index (2019 and the Global Peace Index 2020 ranked Nigeria in a state of alert due to the intensity of insecurity and violence. Amid these growing threats to Nigeria’s internal safety, the Nigerian police, constitutionally empowered with the duty of providing security, have been deemed inadequate (Alumona 2019).

In the face of mounting insecurity across the country, the political leaders have invoked an innocuous provision in the 1999 Nigerian constitution, which empowers the military to intervene and “suppress insurrection and act in aid of civil authorities to restore order when called upon to do so” (*The Republic* 2019, 1) and have continued to deploy the military even where more democratic tools would have been more appropriate. Between 1999 and 2023, more than 18 military operations were authorized across the Nigerian federation, including Operation Iron Fence and Operation Python Dance in southeastern Nigeria ostensibly to quell the activities of “armed robbers, hooligans, kidnappers and violent secessionist agitations” (Momodu 2018, 431) but also to suppress non-violent protests against marginalization and

agitations for self-determination. In the process, the soldiers have also served as shields to the electoral infrastructure and election management in the entire Nigerian federation. In Anambra state, where an off-season gubernatorial election took place in 2021, a total of 50,000 troops that included the army, police, and para-military police were deployed, while in the 2023 off-season governorship election in Imo state, 2,300 military personnel were deployed (Omeihe 2021; Ugwu 2023). Such a massive deployment of the military in civil elections sent ominous signals to prospective voters and so negatively impacted popular participation in the elections.

The military has also been involved in resolving inter-communal clashes, such as the land ownership contestations between Aguleri and Umuleri in southeastern Nigeria (Momodu 2018). In the course of these interventions, numerous allegations of human rights abuses, including the extra-judicial disappearance of those they are meant to protect, have been levelled against the military. This has sometimes elicited uncivil responses from members of the public to counter military suppression (Animaswun 2013). Against this background, Nigeria's democracy has been described as a sham, reckless, hybrid, and "a trapped democratic process" (Owolabi and Ajala 2019). Given the seeming proclivity of the elite towards appropriating electoral victory through the bullets rather than the ballots and the prioritizing of the security of the state actors above that of the citizenry, thereby abandoning its primary responsibility to its citizens, it is not out of the place that the militarised democratic polity might have tended to engender insecurity in parts of the country (Ariye 2021, 32).

A plethora of explanations have been provided by scholars of civil-military relationships (Huntington 1957; Janowitz 1960) on the right mix of military presence that is tolerable in a democratic polity. The Huntington civil-military scholarship drew inspiration from the liberal theory and the civic republican theory of the role of the military in ensuring that sovereign states provide security for the citizens in a liberal state (Ibid.). These scholars contend that the military is part and parcel of society and that a stable society cannot be guaranteed without the support of the army, but with a caveat that a proper distinction should be made as to areas that constitute the military sphere (Ibid.). Others saw military intervention in third-world politics as "a potential ally" in the ideological warfare against communist expansionism across the satellite states (Lukham 1994). After questioning the impracticality of delineating the military sphere from "the social and

political sphere” and Janowitz's “citizen-soldier ideal”, Burk (2002, 15) goes ahead to show that there are still gaps in measuring the civilian-military relationship. Some neo-Marxian scholars have looked in the direction of the character of the postcolonial state and securitization analyses in the explication of the dominance of the military in the third-world democracy (Masunungure 2011; Eriksson and Verweijen 2018). In respect of the current spate of insecurity in Southeastern Nigeria, analysts such as Onu et al. (2022), Nwangwu et al. (2020), and Nwangwu (2023) have all made attempts to link the security crisis in Southeastern Nigeria with the government's repressive character of opposing voices. Nevertheless, extant analyses have failed to identify the concrete manner in which the state has militarised the democratic space in southeastern Nigeria and how this phenomenon has enabled the environment of insecurity.

Taking this as our point of departure, this study sets out to interrogate the impact of militarizing the democratic space on the security situation in southeastern Nigeria. This work is partitioned into six segments. Following the introduction is the second segment that deals with the methodology, while the third part will focus attention on the theoretical framework adopted in the study. Both the fourth and fifth parts will focus on the empirical presentations of the militarization of the democratic space and the concluding remarks, respectively.

Methodology

The study adopted a documentary approach for data collection. A documentary method of data collection enabled the researchers to access much of the secondary data relevant to the study through the desk review and analysis of relevant scholarly materials, journal papers, institutional reports, and policy briefs such as the Institute for Peace and Security Studies Policy briefs on managing security threats in Africa, Reports of UNO Special Rapporteurs on the promotion of human rights, Nextier SPD conflict Trends report on Nigeria, Multi-Stakeholder Consultative reports as well as a synthesis of Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED) and European Asylum Support Office (EASO) data set on insecurity situation in southeastern Nigeria. The choice of this methodology is a result of the permanent nature of the data, which can be subjected to re-analysis and is also less expensive. A qualitative descriptive method was applied in describing and analysing all the information and data generated in the

study, alongside the use of charts, tables, figures, and graphs to depict the patterns regarding the effects of the militarization of the political environment on insecurity in southeastern Nigeria.

Theorising militarising democracy and spiralling security challenges in Southeastern Nigeria: A theoretical analysis

Scholars have deployed various theories to explain the security challenges in southeastern Nigeria. Some of these theories have revolved around the frustration-aggression thesis, elite explanation, postcolonial state, and securitisation analyses (Igbini 2020; Adeosun 2021). As informative as these theories are, they are unable to provide satisfactory insight into the state militarization of southern Nigeria in a supposedly democratic environment. The authoritarianism framework, therefore, has a utilitarian value in providing enlightenment in that regard. The genealogy of the authoritarian thesis is associated with the scholarly works of Juan Linz (1964, 1973), Davenport (1995, 2000), Glasius (2000), Svobik (2012), and Przeworski (2023).

In the pioneering scholarly work of Linz (1964), an authoritarian political system is deemed to thrive in the constraining of political pluralism and the promotion of minimal political engagement. It is also a system that privileges the flourishing of political cliques and the undue privileges assigned to the apparatus of the military. Linz therefore defines an authoritarian system as “a political system with limited, not responsible, political pluralism, without elaborate and guiding ideology, but with distinctive mentalities, without extensive nor intensive political mobilisation except at some points in their development, and in which a leader or occasionally a small group exercises power within formally ill-defined but.... quite predictable ones” (Linz 2000, 159). O'Donnell (1973) shows that these cliques try as much as they can to exclude almost the majority of the people from political decision-making. More fundamentally, while its presence is magnified in military regimes, it is also found in multiparty democracies. In such a scenario, pro-government political parties are allowed to flourish while opposition political parties are repressed in electoral contests and are therefore branded as anti-regime organizations (Przeworski et al. 2000; Svobik 2012).

Davenport (2007) posits that as time goes on, the suppression of anti-regime activities gets to the level of state repression, manifesting in torture, mass killing, and restrictions of civil liberties of people, such as arrests, bans, curfew, and limitations of expressions, assembly,

associations, and beliefs. Given the non-autonomy of the state institutions in postcolonial Africa (Ake 1985), it is not surprising that all the institutions that approximate the existence of the state, such as the army, Nigerian police, and other uniform professional managers of violence, are mobilised to pursue the goals of the state (Nwangwu 2023). As the democratic state relies more and more upon suppression and the resolution of political conflicts, cultures associated with democracy, such as discussion and compromise, are abandoned, thus giving way to a militarised polity. It is therefore not surprising that Nigeria ranks high in human rights abuse from 1999 to the present period, especially in southeastern Nigeria (Ibeanu et al. 2016; Nwangwu 2023). As the Nigerian state continued on the path of repressing the democratic rights of the people of southeastern Nigeria, there was a deployment of soldiers in an internal security matter of the state.

The deployment of Operation Python Dance in the southeastern no doubt, appeared to have provided the impetus for the emergence of the Eastern Security Network (ESN), which is alleged to serve as the armed branch of the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB). As the state increased its highhandedness in attacking legitimate organizations such as IPOB, the organization's tactics immediately transitioned from aggressive and confrontational rhetoric to targeting government facilities like police stations, officers, and the assets of the Independent National Electoral Commission, as well as other emblems of Nigeria's sovereignty such as military and police outposts (Asogwa et al. 2024). Between 2021 and 2023, Nigeria witnessed the death of 965 military and police officers in southeastern Nigeria, with IPOB and the Unknown Gunmen being implicated in the deaths of 344 officers in southeastern Nigeria (Asogwa et al. 2024). Many high-profile individuals also lost their lives in southeastern Nigeria as a result of the deteriorating security situation in southeastern Nigeria (Akinyetun et al. 2023).

Historisation of militarisation of the South in Nigeria's Fourth Republic: The Olusegun Obasanjo administration and militarisation of Southeastern Nigeria

Claude Ake (1996) noted that the fundamental rationale undergirding Nigeria's agenda of development, in which security occupies a strategic place, is the high premium placed on politics and the culture of authoritarianism by the political actors. Authoritarianism thrives

within a particular setting: the alliance between the autocrat and his governing collaborators (Slovik 2012). Their *modus Operandi* is the trampling of the laid-down rules (Davenport 2007). As a game that flourishes in the rule of law (O'Donnell 2004), attackers of the democratic edifice surreptitiously uproot the referees of these democratic games. During the period that Olusegun Obasanjo piloted the affairs of Nigeria, he manifested a disdainful attitude toward the rule of the democratic game (Ariye et al. 2012), by declaring that the democratic contestation would be a "do or die affair" (Wuam and Vaaseh 2012, 186). As a political battle, the 2003 election that he supervised witnessed the overwhelming deployment of security personnel and armed thugs to 'safeguard' votes in the states of South-East Nigeria. It was warfare politics as the president promised (Ibid, 186-204). In one of the subaltern communities in the Igbo-Eze North Local Government Area of Enugu state, the All-Nigerian Peoples Party (ANPP) flagbearer, Fidel Ayogu, lost his Mopol Escort Commander, among others, due to the seemingly compromised security personnel who superintend the election in favour of the reigning political power (Ugwuja 2015). The invasion of Enugu Ezike by the Enugu State Government agents was not only outlandish but also preposterous and against democratic ethos as well as their oath of office. (Okoye 2012). Another part of southeastern Nigeria in which the administration of Olusegun Obasanjo appeared to have supervised the undermining of the democratic principles in coalition with his coalition was in Anambra state, in a case involving the executive Governor, Chris Ngige. Governor Chris Ngige was kidnapped by the coalitions in Anambra who alleged that he had reneged on the vow he made in front of his political sponsors, who perceived political support as an investment to be recouped after the election (Ariye et al. 2012). The major spectators in the Anambra debacle, Andy Uba, Chuma Nzeribe, and Oke Udeh, relied heavily on the instruments of the state, such as the police, to actualise their nefarious activities (Emordi et al. 2007). The Assistant Inspector General of Police (AIG), Raphael Ige, maintained that he was only obeying orders from above, evidently referring to the high authorities in the police echelon who were the appointees of the president of the country (Ariye et al. 2012). The presidency under Obasanjo trivialised the matter by branding it as a family affair and once referred to Uba, the major instigator of the crisis, as a young man who helped us to win the election in Anambra state". He also reportedly ordered the Governor to negotiate with his

tormentors, thus prompting the former Governor of Anambra state, Chukwu Emeka Ezeife, to observe that the “orders to destroy Anambra state must have been approved from the highest level in Nigeria” (Emordi et al. 2007). A more worrisome correlation between the presidency and the debacle was that the Governor was stripped of his security details for one full year, making him rely on the services of local militia (Ariye et al. 2012).

These developments had far-reaching security implications in Anambra state. Apart from terrorising the office of the Governor, public infrastructure, such as the State Independent Electoral Commission (SIEC) complex in Awka, was damaged. Some sections of the governor's residence and office were also bombed with explosives. There were also civilian casualties and theft of belongings, aimed at falsely suggesting Ngige's failure as a leader (Emordi et al. 2007; Popoola 2014). Given this backdrop, Ibeanu (2005) noted that ‘the spate of violence has increased since the 2003 general elections because many politicians are believed to have recruited young gangs and armed them to attack political opponents’ (Ibid, 36-56). Sadly enough, the 2003 general elections, the second in the process of consolidating Nigeria's tenuous democracy after many years of military dictatorship, turned out to lay the foundation for unending electoral violence and security challenges in the South East. The refusal to follow the democratic path subsequently enthroned a climate of violence, specifically in Anambra state. Between January and September 2021 alone, 66 different kinds of violent events occurred in Anambra state, resulting in 170 casualties (KDI, 2021).

The excessive power approach by the political class has dovetailed into unprecedented communal clashes between and among hitherto friendly neighbours in the South East. It is not unlikely that the Umuleri-Aguleri crises in Anambra State, as well as those of Ezza-Ezillo in Ebonyi State, were the direct outcomes of the proliferation of SALW and the militarisation of elections in Nigeria. Weapons of violence have become glamorised as armed youths exploit every opportunity to unleash waves of mayhem, killings, robbery, and kidnappings for ransom on hapless and helpless citizens. For Nigeria, and indeed Igboland in particular, therefore, the recent increase in security issues is part of a broader history of political turmoil in its postcolonial kleptocracy, a political system that is unable to provide essential services, let alone hope for its people (Heerten & Moses 2014).

Military engagement in internal security operations and the Escalation of insecurity in southeastern Nigeria

Internal security is sometimes referred to as homeland security. It is conceptualised as the summation of security services carried out by interior security agents which includes all the organigrams of Police and other para-military organisations such as Immigration, Custom, Civil Defence Corps services, and others involved in the management of acts capable of eroding internal order such as “riots, demonstrations, strikes, communal clashes and terrorism” (Peterside 2014, 1302). The power of the Police and other para-military organisations is derived from Sections 215 (3) and (4) respectively of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, which mandates them to provide security and order for the generality of the Nigerian population (1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria).

Nevertheless, the Nigerian military organisation, whose primary responsibility entails the territorial protection of the state against external aggressors, has been immensely drafted by the Nigerian state into internal security issues since Nigeria’s return to the democratic experiment in 1999 (Okoli and Orinya 2013). Scholars have implicated the post-terrorism security re-engineering attacks on New York, Istanbul, and Madrid in the contemporary period as the external context that provided the impetus for the heightened intervention of the Army in the internal security of many countries across the world (Alumona et al. 2019). While Nigeria is not insulated from the vagaries of the effects of international terrorism, it thrives in authoritarianism, which negates following the path of constitutionalism. There have been various instances of riots and disorderliness that emanated from the public, which would have naturally demanded the deployment of the institution of internal security agents in its management, but rather than doing so, the Nigerian state has unleashed the full forces of the state on the ordinary people of southeastern Nigeria (See Table 1)

Table 1. Trends of military/other states’ institutions’ engagement in internal security operations in Southeastern Nigeria and its fostering of insecurity 2005-2023

Year	State Institution	Indicting Statement	Violation of IPOB Members' Human Rights	IPOB reaction	Source
November 8, 2005	Federal High Court	MASSOB was given an illegal status	The trial of the leaders of MASSOB	Clashes with police over the detention of the	2005, Law Global Hub, 2005

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			without justice	leaders	
2014	The FGN	Non-dissolubility policy contravened	Civil rights	The Zionist movement was born	Ibeanu et al. 2016
September 15, 2017	Nigerian Army	IPOB was labelled a militant organisation	Operation Python Dance began with the arrest of IPOB members	IPOB members resisted the arrest of Kanu	UNO Rapporteur report
September 18	Southeast Governors renounced IPOB	Declared IPOB a terrorist organisation	Increased suppression of civil rights	Confrontation b/w IPOB & security men	UNO Rapporteur report
October, 17	Nigerian Army	Arrest of Nnamdi Kanu for terrorism related charges	Incarceration without trial	Civil disobedience & community evangelism	Nwangwu, 2023
18th January 2018	Federal High Court	security IPOB protest movements IPOB in Aba and Onitsha	Breaches of fundamental human rights	IPOB is resisting the persecution of the state	UNO Rapporteur report
January, 2019	Federal High Court revocation of Kanu's bail	The court proclaimed Kanu's absence criminal	Operation Python Dance II continues operation in Abia state.	IPOB members shielded the palace of Kanu's father	Daily Sun, 3 rd November 2019
January 2021	The presidency	The Nigerian Army's declaration of ESN as an illegal security outfit		ESN is alleged attacked police stations	Nextier SPD Conflict Trends report on Nigeria, 2021-2023

Source: Adapted from Asogwa et al. 2024

As reflected in Table 1 above, during the early years of the Fourth Republic in Nigeria, certain groups of individuals in southeastern Nigeria became dissatisfied with the central government of Nigeria due to their exclusion from the country's security apparatus (Nwangwu et al., 2020). This crop of dissatisfied groups responded to the exclusion from the security infrastructure of the Federal Republic of Nigeria by increasing their demands for exiting the Nigerian state as a separate entity (Nwosu 2021). It began with the formation of the Movement for the Actualisation of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB). With MASSOB's Bill of Rights submitted to the United Nations Organisation (UNO) in 1999, and declarations of an attempt to usurp the social responsibilities of the federal government (Okonta 2012).

After these declarations, many young men and women, both at home and abroad, enthusiastically identified with the dream of breaking away from Nigeria and began manifesting their loyalties to those at the helm of affairs of MASSOB. On August 26, 2004, the MASSOB called on all Igbo people in Nigeria, regardless of where they lived, to observe August 26 as Biafra Day. Business owners, artisanal and artisanal traders were ordered to stay indoors. Public service employees were ordered to observe a “quiet moment” in their offices to honour the Biafran people who died during the war. According to Okonta (2012), Biafra Day’s observation was “an outstanding success”.

The federal government reacted negatively to the sit-at-home protests of MASSOB. The government described the activities of MASSOB as a betrayal of the Nigerian state. The government also accused MASSOB of plotting to disintegrate the country. According to the government, MASSOB was leading an insurrection. The then Attorney-General of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, Mr. Akintola Olajuku (SAN), stated that MASSOB was pursuing a course of action that may lead to the disintegration of Nigeria (Aro and Ani 2017). Nigeria’s government quickly observed that both the contents of the MASSOB declaration and its six points demand, as well as the Sit-at-Home order, questioned Section 2(1) of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, as amended, which specifically described Nigeria as one indivisible and indissoluble sovereign state that is called the Federal Republic of Nigeria.

Following this, the Federal Government of Nigeria declared MASSOB an unlawful organisation and began the persecution of MASSOB members by arrest and detention without charge. In the end, the leader of MASSOB was arrested and brought before the Federal High Court in Abuja along with other MASSOB supporters. On November 8, 2005, the Federal High Court found them guilty of being members of an unlawful organisation known as MASSOB Army and charged them with treasonable felonies (Human Rights Watch, 2005; The New Humanitarian, 2005; Law Global Hub, 2005; UK Department of Justice, 2020).

While Uwuzurike and his supporters were in prison, those who inherited the leadership vacuum created began toying with the idea of disrupting the government revenue-generating process. For instance, in May 2006, MASSOB leaders attempted to mobilise women and men on the streets of Onitsha, Anambra state, to protest against punitive

taxes imposed by the state government. This sparked a violent reprisal by the federal government, acting at the request of the governor, who sent troops to the city to kill several MASSOB protesters (Okonta 2012). This development, even though latent, laid the foundation for the separatist movements to drift from non-violence to radicalism with dire consequences for the Nigerian state. By declaring MASSOB an illegal entity, the federal government set in motion all the activities leading to the persecution of its members.

When MASSOB members demonstrated in solidarity with the imprisoned members, they clashed with police in Onitsha, resulting in the burning of the residence of Nigeria's first indigenous ceremonial president (Law Global Hub 2005; UK Department of Justice 2020; and New Humanitarian 2005). According to a report by EASO (2018), members of MASSOB were routinely described as "violent criminals". Nigerian officials were also observed as saying that "although there is no explicit law prohibiting MASSOB activities, its modus operandi runs counter to the principles of the unity of Nigeria." This is not surprising, as an authoritarian regime is always inclined to use force and violence to settle political disputes. By early 2014, when an effort was made to document the recorded murders of Igbos between August 22, 1945, and September 28, 2013, there was no mention of the Biafrans killed by their compatriots in a neo-separatist struggle. It is also notable that by this early period of MASSOB incubation, the only violence associated with Southeastern Nigeria was the issue of cultism, armed robbery attacks, and inter-communal land disputes, of which unemployment was ascribed as the main driver (European Asylum Support Office / EASO 2017).

Yar'adua/Jonathan administration and militarisation of Southeastern Nigeria

In line with the Umaru Yar'adua administration's disposition to dialogue with the disaffected groups in Nigeria after his inauguration in 2007, Ralph Uwazurike was released from prison in October 2007. His successor, Goodluck Jonathan, continued with such a disposition, although he once lumped IPOB, OPC, and Boko Haram together as extremist organisations. More so, most Igbo and South-South geopolitical zones welcomed his occupation of the top political position in Nigeria at that time. They regarded him as one of their own, and this had an impact on the struggle of MASSOB. While the struggle continued under the Jonathan regime, unlike the firebrand nature of

President Olusegun Obasanjo's (1999-2007) and President Musa Yar'Adua's (2007-10) regimes, the organisation took a more moderate approach to the dreams of the Biafran people. This led to President Goodluck Jonathan's directive in 2011 that all members of MASSOB detained across the nation, estimated at 1000, be released (Chiluwa 2018). The Special Council to Nnamdi Kanu, Aloy Ejimakor, corroborated this claim by noting that "Nnamdi Kanu was not arrested between 2012 and 2015 because the government then understood that self-determination was not a crime, but the government that came into power in May 2015 decided to treat self-determination as a criminal activity" (Opejiobi 2023,1). Despite the government's magnanimous spirit towards IPOB, they still regarded the organisation as an unlawful organization (Ibeanu et al. 2016). Ben Onwuka led IPOB's attempt to seize the Government House and the Broadcasting Corporation in Enugu no doubt could be attributed to this unlawful status accorded to the separatist movement. This climate of violence exacerbated the already existing security challenges on the ground, as "an estimated 1,000 IPOB members," according to official records, although IPOB alleged 2,000 individuals were extrajudicially murdered by the security forces on the 30th of May, 2016, during the Biafra Memorial Day at Onitsha (EASO 2017).

Muhammed Buhari administration and the militarisation of Southeastern Nigeria

The moment the administration of Muhammadu Buhari kicked off, there was an increased militarisation of southeastern Nigeria. After making controversial remarks critical of the Nigerian President's Office, Nnamdi Kanu was detained by the Nigerian Army in 2015 on accusations related to terrorism, treason, and running an unlawful group. Later, the Director of Information for the Nigerian Army classified IPOB as a terrorist militant group. To dismantle the operations of the banned group, the federal government, via the Nigerian Army, executed a strategy named "Operation Python Dance". Lt General Tukur Burutai, who served as the Chief of Army Staff at the time, described the operation as including infiltrations, encirclements, and searches aimed at combating child kidnappings, setting up roadblocks, checkpoints, and ultimately, showcasing military power to quell the escalating danger in the southeastern regions of the nation (Sahara Reporters 2017). Additionally, this was the period when the president publicly criticised IPOB as a terrorist

entity. To legitimise its actions, the Office of the Attorney General of the Federation initiated legal proceedings by filing a lawsuit in the Federal High Court. Following the submission of arguments, the court thereafter issued a ban (Nwangwu 2023).

After declaring IPOB an illegal organisation, other legal entities in Nigeria were also requested to recognise IPOB as a terrorist group. Considering this information, it's not unexpected that the South East Governors Forum (SERF) sanctioned the proscription of IPOB in the southeast region of Nigeria on January 18, 2018. This series of occurrences resulted in several notable developments. This resulted in the widespread oppression of IPOB. The ridiculousness of the army's reason for calling IPOB a terrorist group, along with the legal support the government obtained, becomes clearer when contrasted with the government's leniency in addressing armed wandering herdsmen, outlaws, and individuals who have supposedly renounced Boko Haram, which is accountable for the significant loss of human life and job prospects in northern Nigeria and other parts of the nation since 2015. Since 2015, the number of armed attacks by Fulani-led groups has increased in both frequency and complexity, with little to no intervention from the government (Nwangwu 2023).

Fuelled by this trend, the government has tended to step up its efforts to target IPOB activists through unlawful arrests, secret detentions, extrajudicial murders, and unexplained disappearances. A report from Amnesty International (2018) states that at least 10 IPOB members have been killed and 12 others wounded by soldiers on September 14, 2018. The armed forces claimed that the IPOB activists perished while opposing the capture of their leader at his residence in Umuahia, Abia state. Beyond the initial 10 IPOB members who lost their lives, reports indicate that at least another 10 were shot and removed by the military. The Igbo Civil Society Coalition (ICSCO), a group comprising various organisations, activists, human rights entities, and scholars from Igboland, accused the Nigerian military of causing the deaths of at least 100 individuals and injuring 200 more during the 'Python Dance' military operation in the South-East in 2017 (Sahara Reporters 2018). Operation Python Dance also led to the extra militarisation of the southeastern polity as all manner of security infrastructures, such as different kinds of Personnel Armoured Carrier (APC) and intimidating checkpoints, an excessive manifestation of repression, wanton destruction of public properties, and total disregard for constitutionalism were witnessed in this part of the country

(Godspower 2018, 68). Apart from Operation Python Dance, the federal government of Nigeria has also unleashed various operations in southeastern Nigeria, such as Operation Iron Fence, to decisively deal with the menace of kidnapping, armed robbery, and cult-related crimes (Momodu 2019). The failure of both the federal and state governments to curb the growing spate of extrajudicial killings and other criminal activities in Igboland increasingly calls into question the legitimacy of the state. The lukewarm attitude, coupled with the application of the siege mentality of the coercive agencies, encouraged the motivation for effective recruitment, indoctrination, and mobilisation of the unemployed youths in South East Nigeria to challenge the government's lackadaisical behaviour. The immediate impact was the formation of a counter-security organisation by the dissatisfied youth.

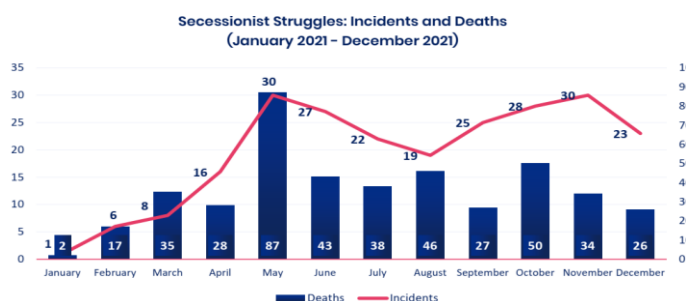
The rise of the Eastern Security Network (ESN) as a counter-response to the militarisation of Southeastern Nigeria

Regional state leaders in the South-East, following the dictatorial tendencies at the national level, as previously stated, began employing private military factions to carry out violence against unsuspecting individuals and political rivals, aiming to address actual and perceived wrongdoings (Abolurin 2015). The Eastern Security Network (ESN) came into existence on December 20th, following a series of complaints and violent attacks by herdsmen in the Southeast, coupled with a lacklustre response from both federal and state governments. During the launch of the security group, Nnamdi Kanu mentioned that "ESN is our solution to the ongoing insecurity in southeastern Nigeria...the current generation of IPOB will not surrender to allow their community to be devastated by Fulani terrorists to comply with the federal government's ban on their activities, which they view as illegal" (Sahara Reporters 2020, 2). The government labelled ESN's actions as security threats and, as a result, launched military operations in the Southeast, particularly in Orlu, Imo State (The Ripple Nigeria 2022).

By the end of 2021, the assaults on public buildings by the UGM had grown more severe. A study from the Nextier Violent Conflict Database revealed that from January to December 2021, there were 186 incidents linked to separatist groups, resulting in 399 fatalities. The regions of southern Nigeria and southeastern Nigeria accounted for the highest number of these incidents, as shown in Table 2 and Chart 1.

Table 2. States with the highest secessionist struggles, Jan-December 2021

YEAR	STATES	INCIDENTS	DEATHS
2021	IMO	53	111
2021	ANAMBRA	29	68
2021	EBONYI	11	25
2021	ENUGU	19	40
2021	ABIA	16	50
2021	DELTA	17	25
2021	RIVERS	11	22
2021	OSUN	11	18
2021	OYO	20	26
2021	LAGOS	10	14
2021	TOTAL	186	399



Source: Nextier Violent Conflict Database. 2021

Table 2 and Chart 1, presented above, reveal that when the overall tally of incidents across the southern region of Nigeria is summed, it's clear that the situation escalated dramatically in May 2021, with a peak of 30 incidents and 87 fatalities. The incident count gradually decreased to 28 in October and 23 in December, yet the fatalities from these incidents continued to be substantial, standing at 50 and 26, respectively. Further analysis indicates that the southeastern area alone experienced 128 incidents and 294 deaths, marking a stark contrast with other areas. Comparing this data with the separatist-related violence in Southeast Nigeria from 2015 to 2020, it's evident that the government's labelling of ESN's actions as 'illegitimate' spurred an uptick in IPOB assaults on government facilities. The 2018 report by EASO (2018) highlights that in 2017 and 2018, Southeast saw 140 incidents and 110 deaths, with 37 attacks on civilians resulting in 54 fatalities. The EASO noted that:

Between August 2015 and August 2016, Nigerian security forces led by the army conducted a repressive campaign, extra-judicially killing at least 150 pro-Biafra agitators. In September 2017, security forces cracked on and

arrested over 100 IPOB members.... After the action, the military declared IPOB a terrorist organisation. This decision was endorsed by the Nigerian government and was given legal backing by the Federal High Court in Abuja (European Asylum Support Office 2018, 55).

Table 3 below provides additional details on incidents of IPOB's alleged assaults on government facilities.

Table 3. Empirical indicators of UGM assaults on the state facilities in southeast Nigeria

Month/Year	States	Government Infrastructure	Civilians	Source
Jan-May, 2021	Imo	25	35	EASO 2021
Jan-May, 2021	Enugu	6	17	EASO 2021
Jan-May, 2021	Ebonyi	9	92	EASO 2021
Jan-May, 2021	Anambra	12	25	EASO 2021
Jan-May, 2021	Abia	14	19	EASO 2021

Source: EASO. 2021

Table 3 reveals that a number of these infrastructures included various police stations, police personnel, and the offices of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) spread throughout the Southeast. This was compounded by the increased actions of IPOB, including the arrest and imprisonment of Nnamdi Kanu. Consequently, following the Kenyan arrest and subsequent jailing of Nnamdi Kanu, IPOB took a more extreme stance, resorting to a sit-at-home order to pressure the government to release him. The stance of the Southeast governors was that IPOB's interference with governance in their areas of authority questioned their capacities as the chief law officers of the state. Governor of Imo State, Hope Uzodinma, stated, "If our goal is to ensure the Igbos are not marginalised, we must be proactive in achieving that. Therefore, we must respect the country's sovereignty" (The Cable Online News, Nigeria, October 17th, 2021). Similarly, Governor Charles Soludo adopted a similar approach by enacting an executive order making it illegal to comply with IPOB's sit-at-home order. He emphasised, "A few days ago, a man from Finland claimed to be declaring a sit-at-home. We must reclaim Anambra from these criminals". (Ripples Nigeria, December 24th, 2022). The faction led by Simon Ekpa in IPOB responded with resistance, stating, "The Biafra movement is more significant than Soludo and all the South-East governors. Soludo cannot halt the sit-at-home. The Biafra movement is more powerful than any sit-at-home. This movement will dismantle Nigeria into pieces" (Ibid.). Table 4 below captures the debilitating

security challenges resulting from Anambra state's confrontation with the men of UGM striving to implement the Sit-at-Home order.

Table 4. Incidents of insecurity as a result of the non-resolution of political matters through discussion

Date	Incidents of attack	Source	Venue	Nature of violence	Victims	Perpetrators	Impact
09-8-2021	UGM attacked Nnewi Police Command and made away with weapons.	KDI, 2021	Nnewi Police Command	Heavy gunfire exchange	No death documented	UGM	Disorder/fear
09-08-2021	3 buses burnt/2 persons killed in Nnewi	KDI, 2021	Izuchukwu Joint, Nnewi	murder	2 persons died	army	Death
09-8-2021	Navy confronts UGM during the sit-at-home	KDI, 2021	Anambra	Murder	6 persons died	Nig Navy	Death
09-8-2021	UGM harassed the vendor and slapped her at his shop	KDI, 2021	Obosi Idemili	wares destroyed	Ozioma Cecilia	UGM	Fear/Profit loss
09-8-2021	A man was killed in Awada	KDI, 2021	Awada region	Murder	A young man	UGM	Death
09-8-2021	Police and 2 men were killed by UGM	KDI, 2021	Awada Obosi	Murder	Police/2 men	UGM	Death

The above table four shows multiple civilians and state actors who lost their lives, as well as the state facilities that were attacked in Anambra state alone as a result of the militarization of southeastern Nigeria due to the exit quest of IPOB. Notably, these attacks occurred at a time when Anambra State was preparing for a gubernatorial election. Rather than toeing the democratic path in resolving these security challenges, the federal government consolidated its authoritarian tendencies by

drafting not less than 50,000 troops in the Anambra gubernatorial election (Omeihe 2021). Similar security challenges were no doubt reported in other parts of southeastern Nigeria. It is therefore not surprising that EASO analysis of the security situation in Southeastern in 2023 implicated UGM as the major driver of tension within the years studied. Arising from the seeming IPOB resistance to the constituted authority in the southeast, it is described as the personification of law “having taken over the power of the government officials and traditional rulers in the area” (EASO 2024, 45). Rather than attempting to discuss the security challenges with those involved. the central government has fortified itself by enabling different security structures, such as the Joint Task Force of Operations tagged Udoka, which comprises troops from the Nigerian Army, Nigerian Air Force, Nigerian Navy, Nigerian Police, and other para-military organisations (EASO, 2024). Corroborating these incidents, ACLED analysis of security activities between 2023 and early 2024 indicates that not less than 458 security breaches occurred in southeastern Nigeria; while 172 of the events were regarded as ‘battle’, 8 as “explosions, 249 as “violence against civilians”, and finally 29 as ‘riots’ (EASO 2024, 47). For sure, there is a correlation between the militarisation of a democratic polity with the exacerbation of insecurity. An authoritarian imprint indeed!

Conclusion

The paper has interrogated militarised democracy and its security challenges in South East Nigeria from 1999-2023. It has brought to prominence the growing frustration among the people of the South-East arising from the militarised democratic disposition of political leaders and its security implications on the region. The emergence and sustenance of organised militarism, as discussed in the paper, is a direct consequence of the authoritarian heritage of colonial politics (Asogwa et al. 2021). The return of civil rule in 1999 brought a ray of hope for quality leadership following the dismantling of the military regime, but the democratic government has not yielded any meaningful impact on the lives and property of the citizens due to the authoritarian character that is entrenched in the fabric of the political actors. The current waves of insecurity arising from banditry, UGM, kidnapping, and other criminal activities of the Fulani herdsmen in Igboland are clear signs of the state’s lack of leadership acumen to engage the affected communities in solving the problems. Until the state actors

come down from their loft abodes and engage the disaffected community in a public security matter, rather than the kinetic approach they have adopted in southeastern Nigeria, sustainable security in southeastern Nigeria may, after all, be a mirage.

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