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Igbophobia and the Quest for National Cohesion in Nigeria: The 2023 General Elections in Perspective

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Abstract

The much anticipated 2023 general elections had come and gone but its effects toward nation building and national cohesion is sacrosanct. The emergence of the formal Governor of Anambra state, Peter Obi as the labour party presidential candidate, his popularity and acceptance among the youth in the country (Obedient movement) re-awakened an Igbophobic sentiment and hatred against Igbo people by the other ethnic groups. There were phobic comments that Igbos are trying to take over Nigeria and divide the country in order to create Biafra. The study examined Igbophobic sentiment during the 2023 general elections and its implications on the national cohesion. The data for the study were derived from the secondary source, while descriptive method of data analysis was used to analysed the data generated. The was study anchored on the Realist Group Conflict Theory (RGCT) which states that competition between groups for finite resources, power and fair of domination leads to inter group stereotype, antagonism and conflict. Findings reveal that, the fear of Igbo domination created the stereotype and Igbophobic attitudes among other ethnic groups. The study therefore recommends among other things; the rotation of the seat of presidency among the six geopolitical zones as this will give sense of belonging to other minority ethnic groups.

Keyword: Igbophobia; Domination; General Elections and National Cohesion.

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Introduction

Anti-Igbo sentiment (also known as **Igbophobia**) encompasses a range of negative attitudes and feelings toward the Igbo people. The Igbo people make up all of south-eastern Nigeria and a part of south-south Nigeria geopolitical zones. Igbophobia (Iruke, 2023) is observable in critical and hostile behaviour such as political and religious discrimination and violence towards Igbos, Ekwe-Ekwe (2022).

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During the beginning years of Nigeria's colonial independence, the Igbo people increasingly came to be perceived as a disproportionately-favoured ethnic group with affluence and multiregionalist opportunity due to the Igbo being employed within colonial Nigeria by the colonial authorities and in the public sector in regions throughout the country. This aroused the ire of others toward the Igbo (BBC News, 2008).

This was exacerbated by the short-lived government of General Johnson Aguiyi-Ironsi, whose military junta consisted mostly of Igbo and who abolished the federated regions; this led to his assassination in a counter-coup led primarily by Northern participants. It was followed by the massacre of thousands of Igbos in pogroms in the Northern region, which drove millions of Igbos back to their homeland in Eastern Nigeria; ethnic relations deteriorated rapidly, and a separate republic of Biafra was declared in 1967, leading to the Biafran War (Nkwede, Udeuhele, Nurul, & Nwodom, 2021).

According to Abbot, Anthony and Dogulas (2003), the 1966 anti-Igbo pogrom was a series of massacres directed at Igbo and other people of southern Nigerian origin living in northern Nigeria starting in May 1966 and reaching a peak after 29 September 1966. During this period, about 30,000-50,000 Igbo civilians were murdered throughout northern Nigeria by Hausa–Fulani soldiers and civilians who sought revenge for the 1966 Nigerian coup d'état, carried out by six Majors and three Captains of Southern Nigerian extraction, and resulted in the deaths of 11 Nigerian politicians and army officers of Hausa, Fulani, Itsekiri and Yoruba origin (Van-Den 2011). These events led to the Nigerian counter coup and eventually the secession of the eastern Nigerian region and the declaration of the Republic of Biafra, which ultimately led to the Nigeria-Biafra war. The 1966 massacres of southern Nigerians have been described as a holocaust by some authors and have variously been described as riots, pogroms or genocide (Kerk, 1975).

The Republic of Biafra was a secessionist state in eastern Nigeria that existed from 6th July 1967 to January 1970. It took its name from the Bight of Biafra, the Atlantic bay to its south. The inhabitants were mostly the Igbo people who led the secession due to economic, ethnic, cultural and religious tensions among the various peoples of Nigeria. According to Vocabulary.com (2022),other ethnic groups that constituted the republic were the Efik, Ibibio, Annang, Ejagham, Eket, Ibeno and the Ijaw, among others.

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The Ibos are the wandering Jews of West Africa - gifted, aggressive, Westernized; at best envied and resented, but mostly despised by the mass of their neighbours in the Federation (Van-Den, 2001).

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According to Chileuwa and Chileuwa (2020), On August 2019, a Yoruba supremacist who immigrated to the United Kingdom from Nigeria was arrested by British police for making YouTube videos that contained violent hate speech towards the Igbo people, and he was later sentenced to prison in April 2022. In the US, recent tensions between Native Black Americans and Southern Nigerian immigrants have contributed the stereotype of a general distaste by Africans of African-Americans. Igbo Americans tend to concentrate in areas controlled by English Americans, (the minority responsible for the enslavement and oppression of African-Americans), like Northern Virginia and Washington state and tend to work in fields like the medical field, military and in prisons, where they generally work alongside conservative Whites. As a result, African-Americans in Northern Virginia do not generally regard Igbos as a brotherly tribe in the way that they have historically looked at every other Black, North African, or Caribbean ethnic group for centuries. This is in spite of the fact that African-Americans in these regions are disproportionately of Southern Nigerian descent and Igbo immigrants, due to high admixture with White slavers, are often harder to distinguish from African-Americans than other Black ethnic groups.

Against this background, this study has its core objective of unveiling the circumstances that led to Igbophobic attitudes among other ethnic nationalities, its implications towards nation building, unity and national cohesion.

Specifically, the study is structured into segments. The first section deals with the general introduction, while the second part conceptualizes the key concepts of the study, the third phrase captures the theoretical anchorage and the methodology. The fourth step dwells on the findings whereas the fifth segment consist of the conclusion and recommendations of the study.

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Conceptual Clarifications

Igbophobia

Anti-Igbo sentiment (also known as Igbophobia) encompasses a range of negative attitudes and feelings toward the Igbo people. The Igbo people make up all of south-eastern Nigeria and a part of south-south Nigeria geopolitical zones. Igbophobia in this context simply means, the fair of the Igbo dominance or subdue others. According to Ndunesokwu (2023), the fair of Igbos in Nigeria stems from various attributes of Igbos. Analytically, the top in the list is the known fact that the Igbos are very hard-working, industrious and higher achievers, in whatever field of endeavour they find themselves. With these qualities, they would likely succeed better than the indigenes of whatever community they settle in. Consequently, the common aphorism that is peculiar with human nature, success breeds envy. Significantly, in the Nigerian stand, the Igbo man's success is an attempt to dominate or subdue other tribes, hence the barbaric, stereotype and unending phobic attitudes towards the Igbos.

2023 General Elections

A general election is a political voting election where generally all or most members of a given political body are chosen. These are usually held for a nation, state, or territory's primary legislative body, and are different from by-elections (only one electorate goes to election). In most systems, a general election is a regularly scheduled election where both a head of government (such as president or prime minister), and either "a class" or all members of a legislature are elected at the same time. Occasionally, dates for general elections may align with dates of elections within different administrative divisions, such as a local election (Wikipedia, 2023). 2023 General elections in Nigeria were held on 25 February 2023 to elect the president and vice president and members of the Senate and House of Representatives. Incumbent President Muhammadu Buhari is term-limited and could not seek re-election for a third term. This election was seen as the tightest race since the end of military rule in 1999 between the political parties, the All Progressive Congress (APC) with Bola Tinubu as its presidential candidate, the People Democratic Party (PDP) with Atiku Abubaka as its presidential candidate while Labour Party (LP) had Peter Obi as its presidential candidate. Eighteen political parties presented candidates for the presidential elections. Of the 18, three were the major contenders: Bola Ahmed Tinubu, the candidate of All Progressives Congress

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(APC), who scored 8,794,726 votes and won 12 states; Atiku Abubakar, candidate of the People's Democratic Party (PDP), who scored 6,984,520 votes and won 12 states; and Peter Gregory Obi, candidate of the Labour Party (LP), who scored 6,101,533 votes and won 11 states plus the Federal Capital Territory (FCT). Opposition parties have disputed the results since INEC announced the winner. An upsurge of Obi supporters called the "Obidients' and Atiku Abubakar's supporters known as the "Atikulants" have challenged the results in court. Some Nigerians have lost confidence in the leadership of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), arguing that its words and promises mean nothing to Nigerians. They emphasized that Prof. Mahmood Yakubu has shown himself to be a disgrace to Nigeria and has brought shame, disgrace, and embarrassment to Nigerians in the global community. They accused the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) chairman and his team of National Commissioners of compromising the results of the February 25 presidential election by deliberately refusing to upload the results at the Polling Units from the BVAS to the IREV (Iruke, 2023).

National Cohesion or National Identity

Social cohesion refers to the peaceful co-existence of members of a society that is, a people. In other words, it refers to a society that is united. To cohere means "to bring different parts having logical connection so that together they make a whole" (Webster: 190). For the purpose of this paper, social cohesion will be defined as the state of achieving national integration and unity. The state of achieving peaceful co-existence, solidarity in action and purpose amongst the hundreds of ethnic nationalities that makes up the Nigerian polity. A recourse to history shows that Nigeria has had many cases of social upheavals that have threatened the very existence of the Nigerian nation. Earliest of these conflicts are the circumstances that led to the Nigerian civil war. The Igbos who lived in the North were massacred by northerners in retaliation to the killing of Northern political and military leaders, in a bloody coup staged by Major Kaduna Nzeogwu. This resulted in a full scale civil war that lasted for 3 years. The Igbo had to flee back to their traditional homeland to declare a state of Biafra.

Theoretical Anchorage

Realistic Group Conflict Theory (RGCT) was termed by Donald Campbell (1965), which states that competition between groups for finite resources, power and fair of domination

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leads to inter group stereotype, antagonism and conflict. Realistic Group Conflict Theory was formulated as Social Conflict theory is a socio-political theory that originated from Karl Marx. It seeks to explain political and economic events in terms of an ongoing struggle over finite resources. Marx, holds that society is perpetually in conflict due to struggle for limited resources. Scholars such as Scaler, Robin and Brown, (2007), Lewis, (1956); Burke 1936 all gave credence to this theory.

According to Social Group conflict theory, domination and power, rather than consensus and compliance, preserve social order. Burke (1936) asserts that in social conflict theory, those with wealth and power want to keep it by any means necessary, most notably through oppression in the society. Individuals and groups within society will attempt to maximize their own money and power, according to a core principle of conflict theory.

Scaler, Robin and Brown (2007) noted that war, revolution, poverty, discrimination, and domestic violence are all examples of social processes that conflict theory has attempted to explain. It attributes much of human history's essential developments, such as democracy and civil rights, in an attempt to manage the people (as opposed to a desire for social order). The principles of social inequality, resource division, and conflicts that exist among different socioeconomic classes are central aspects of conflict theory. Arising from these therefore, the basic assumptions of the social conflict theory are;

- The existence of competition among groups for state power in a society
- Conflict always ensues among various social, religious, ethnic and other types of groups
- The theory sees political, social and economic institution as tools of the struggle among groups or classes in the society
- The conflict that ensues has an impact on the development strides in the society.

Theoretical application

The social conflict theory can be linked to the ongoing agitation in the southeast, it can be observed that the phobic words towards the Igbos in Nigeria was precipitated by the competition over perceived structural inequality. While it is understood that the Biafran

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agitation had existed predominantly within a decade of attainment of independence and has continued until now, within the ambit of the social conflict theory, this agitation arose out of the necessity to compete and control state power. The renewed and intensified stereotype, prejudiced and phobic attitudes towards the Igbos by the other ethnic groups in Nigeria is as the result of jealousy, envy, invidiousness and resentments against the Igbos as the result of their perceived hardworking, industrious and ability to survive in any place they find themselves even more than the indigenes of the place. With these qualities and extra ordinary characters of every average Igbo man, it is wrongly conceived that if an Igbo man is allowed to rule the country, the Igbos will covertly take control of every aspect of the Nigerian politics and economy thereby using every elements of national power to suppress the Igbos in politics and the economy of the country, so they can perpetually remain at helm of affairs.

Methodology

Documentary research design was employed in the study. Data were gathered from the documentary instruments especially from the secondary sources, through the review of relevant text, journals, official documents, newspaper, direct observations, media commentaries and scholarly writings on the issues of Igbophobia, 2023 general elections and national cohesion. The study employed content analytical method wherein data collected were analysed. This approach was germane because it helped the researchers to gain insight from the analysis of the subject matter. For clarity purposes, content analysis is the type of research technique that is adopted primarily for objectivity, systematization and qualitative analysis and interpretation of data.

Data Presentation and Analysis

Pogrom and Massacre of Igbos from 1945 till Date

It is very easy for an average non-Igbo Nigerian to say that Igbos are not hated in Nigeria and that their cry of marginalization and suppression is simply a 'victimization mentality'. The truth is that whoever of that opinion is outright dubious and hates to hear the truth (Ndunesokwu, 2023). There are hundreds of evidences abound to prove that Igbos are hated and stereotyped by other ethnic groups in Nigeria. A typical example is the number of times the Igbos have been attacked, killed and their properties destroyed in various unprovoked



uprising by the mobs of other ethnic nationalities (often called riots) in Nigeria. To buttress these facts, below are the list of chorological number of times Igbos have targeted, maimed, massacred and properties destroyed in the annals of the Nigerian history. Table 1 below shows the chronological events that confirmed the phobic attitudes toward the Igbos from 1945 till date

Table 1: Chronological Events of Phobic Attitudes towards Igbos from 1945 till date.

S/N	Years		Place of Events	Number of Victims Killed	Number Injured	Properties Damaged
1.	1945		Jos	2	8	Not Quantified
2.	1953		Kano	46	52	NQ
3.	1966		Northern	8,000	Not Specified	NQ
4.	1967-70		Civil War	About 2 million	More than 6 million	More than 6 TR
5.	1980		Kano	45,000	NS	NQ
6.	1982		Maiduguri	3,000	NS	NQ
7.	1984		Jimeta	718	527	NQ
8.	1985		Gombe	3,000	6,000	NQ
9.	1987		Zaria	15	20	NQ
10.	1991		Kano	Not Available	NS	NQ
11.	1992		Kango-kafa	556	NS	NQ
12.	1993		Funta	NA	NS	NQ
13.	1994		Kano	25	NS	NQ
14.	1995		Kano	1	NS	NQ
15.	1999		Kano	30	50	NQ
16.	2000		Kaduna	About 1000	NS	NQ
17.	2001		Kaduna	NA	NS	NQ
18.	2001		Maiduguri	NA	NS	NQ
19.	2001		Jos	1,000	NS	NQ
20.	2002		Kaduna	NA	NS	NQ
21.	2008		Jos	761	457	NQ
22.	2010		Jos	2,992	NS	NQ
23.	2011		Northern state	800	NS	NQ
24.	2011		Mandalla	41	57	NQ
25.	2012		Mubi	25	15	NQ
26.	2012-Date		Northeast	More than 50,000	NS	NQ
27.	12 th 2022	May	Sokoto	NA	NS	500 Shops
28.	18 th 2022	May	Jakande SLekki	5	NS	1 Billion N

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Source: Compiled the researcher.

From the glimpse of what the Igbos have suffered in Nigeria, it can be easily deduced that from 1945 till date, there has never been a year beyond that Igbos have never been attacked, maimed, killed and their properties destroyed and when they speak up against these injustice, human rights abuse, genocide, pogrom, ethnic cleansing and marginalization, their tormentors (the Hausa and the Youba) will accuse them of playing the victim card. With these atrocities against the Igbos, one would be tempted to ask 'what crime has the Igbos committed that has called for continuous letting of their blood, from way before independence, and the supposed coup of 1966 till date.

Anti-Igbo Sentiments in the Contemporary Nigeria

The Endsars movement while mainly being a movement to call to end of police brutality in Nigeria was also used as an opportunity by people who showed negative attitudes and feelings against Igbo people to spread anti-Igbo sentiments. After it came out that there were some Igbos amongst the hoodlums that partook in the violence that occurred after the Lekki massacre, coupled with an inciteful broadcast by the IPOB which is a separatist organization strongly associated with Igbos were quickly blamed for the violence that occurred during Endsars. Netizens who spread this theory often did not differentiate between IPOB as an organization and Igbo people.

Anti-Igbo Sentiments in the 2023 General Elections

During the lead up to the gubernatorial elections of the year 2015 the Oba of Lagos stated that if Igbos do not vote for Akinwunmi Ambode, they will perish in the river within seven days.

The 2019 gubernatorial elections also presented another opportunity for the usage of anti-Igbo sentiment as a campaign strategy, Senator Oluremi Tinubu, wife of Asiwaju Bola Ahmed Tinubu said, "We will invoke all the deities of Lagos to chase Igbo people out. Igbos who refused to learn our language. Igbos who didn't marry Yoruba, we will inherit them." During this same election cycle having an Igbo identity was almost a political suicide, for example Jimi Agbaje who had no relations to Igbo people and doesn't speak Igbo was accused of being Igbo and correspondingly anti Igbo sentiments was used against him during the election cycle. The most prominent word used against him was Jimichukwu which is a

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name blending of Jimi's name and an Igbo word Chukwu, which is a very common Igbo word often used in Igbo names This specific word which was used against him meant that he was not a true Yoruba but a foreigner from the east and as such shouldn't be a governor in the west.

Peter Obi's emergence as the Labour party candidate prompted Igbo-phobic sentiments and hatred against the Igbo people. During his campaign in 2022, there were discriminatory comments made implying that Igbos are trying to take over Nigeria and divide the country in order to create Biafra. Even after his multiple interviews/debates, which was uncommon for very popular presidential candidates in recent times within Nigerian politics, his candidacy was at times dismissed as Igbo people yearning for Igbo presidency (Nseysen, 2023). During this election the singer, Brymo made hateful comments against the Igbo people, at first he insinuated that Igbo people are not ready for the presidency and that Peter Obi should stick to organizing the eastern region from which he hails. A few days after this hateful comment he released another Igbophobic comment while replying to a now-deleted tweet saying "Fuck the Ndi Igbo!! To Hell with It!!" this prompted an online petition on change.org to the (All Africa Music Awards) against his nomination for Song Writer of the Year. He released an apology but then left the same hateful comments on his social media account. These hateful comments by Brymo got a lot of support from ethnic nationalists who were often APC supporters. Anti-Igbo sentiments during the 2023 Nigerian elections were common from the disenfranchisement of Igbo people during the PVC collections to an alleged bigoted statement against Igbo people in Lagos by the State Resident Electoral Commissioner, Olusegun Agbaje. These sentiments became violent and resulted in blockades and threats against Igbo people from accessing the businesses they owned (Nseysen, 2023). The violence stretched into the reoccurring burning and attacks of Igbo businesses in Lagos during elections. The sentiments peaked during the gubernatorial elections within the state of Lagos. Anti-Igbo sentiments in the 2023 elections reached to such an extent that there was a belief which often came from election discourse that to marry an Igbo person would result in a tainted bloodline. Weeks leading up to the 2023 gubernatorial elections a candidate by the name of Gbadebo Rhodes-Vivour who is part Yoruba (from his father's side) and part Igbo (from his mother's side) had anti-Igbo attacks directed at him. His identity came into question and these attacks weren't just personal in terms of the fact that he was part Igbo and has an Igbo wife. These attacks were directed at the broader Igbo ethnicity within Lagos and ethnic

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nationalists questioned why anybody who is Igbo should become a governor within the western states in Nigeria. On the day of the election, Igbo people were threatened and beaten in order to prevent them from voting. These attacks weren't just relegated to Igbo people but to anyone presumed to look like an Igbo person. As a result Igbo people and anybody presumed to look like an Igbo person were being pointed at by people who knew them in order for them to be attacked. Ayomide (2023) Anti-Igbo sentiments in comments, and adverts flooded different social media platforms during this gubernatorial election. These sentiments lasted right into the next day (Sunday) which was also the day Igbos were attacked at Abule ado in Lagos state.

Conclusion

The Igbos are hardworking, talented and prosperous tribe, famous for turning clay to gold, everywhere they are found. They economically dominate any city or country they go to and they are also very loud about their success, and bow to no one but God. They have been called the black Jews by many sources. If you are able to figure out why the Jews of Israel have been and are still hated, you may be close to understanding why the Igbo are a hated tribe. Every Igbo person and any objective observer know that the Igbo are a threatened, wounded, handicapped and dissatisfied race within Nigeria today. For instance, the Igbo have been technically depopulated. The recent census shows that Igbo land was systematically undercounted and the population deliberately suppressed. Afraid of exposing their bogus figures and claims of numerical superiority in ethnicity and religion, the ruling Hausa-Fulani oligarchy expunged both ethnic and religious data from the census questionnaire. Ironically, the Igbo Christians insisted on determining an accurate population of the various groups in Nigeria as well as knowing exactly which religion has the most adherents in the country. It was not surprising that the anti-Igbo federal government, afraid of what it might discover, vehemently refused to allow the data during the last census to expose the true figures on ethnicity and religion. The government continued to make bogus and unsubstantiated claims in these regards. The central government of Nigeria has been chasing its tail and afraid of its own facts because a lot falsehood has be hoisted on the country to justify the marginalization of what is obviously a dominant ethnic group. As stated earlier, when the civil war ended, a vindictive federal government, in a concerted effort to massively impoverish the Igbo, confiscated all their bank deposits, leaving depositors a paltry 20 Nigerian pounds each,

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irrespective of what they had in their accounts. According to Ihejrika (2011), Igbo are religiously targeted and routinely butchered by Muslims across Northern Nigeria. The fact is that Igbo land is infra-structurally denied, and the Igbo are politically excluded in Nigeria. Hence, they need not be told that they have to articulate and carefully execute a plan(s) for their survival either as an independent nation-state or an autonomous prosperous entity within Nigeria, because Onye ajuru anaghi aju onwe ya. That is, if you are abandoned, you do not abandon yourself.

Recommendations

- 1. The five Igbo governors should be at the forefront of those demanding for a National Conference in Nigeria to deal with the plethora of inhumanity the Igbo are made to endure in Nigeria. This will help the Ndi Igbo to find their-foots again in the main stream of Nigerian politics.
- 2. Igbo leaders should be encouraging their people to relocate their vital businesses to Igbo land as they provide the critical infrastructure and security for such investments. This will prevent frequent attacks and destruction of their properties by other ethnic groups at slightest provocation.
- **3.** The federal government of Nigeria should as a matter of public important set an independent committee to investigate the alleged abuse of the fundamental human rights of Igbos in 2023 general elections in Nigeria especially as it concerns the incidence of Lagos state as this will help to reinstate the national cohesion and peace building in Nigeria.

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