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Unheard Minority Opinions in the Nigeria-Biafra War, 1967–1970

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Abstract

The existing literature portrays the declaration of the independence of Biafra as a unanimous decision of the people of Biafra. While many leaders and personalities in Biafra supported the secession and some other decisions taken by the Biafran High Command, some others had reservations on that. Unfortunately, the existing literature in the Nigerian-Biafra war has not captured these silent voices. This paper intends therefore to capture these voices that have been neglected in the historiography of the war and situate them in proper historical perspective. The paper relies more on oral history of the war granted by some Biafran leaders who were actively involved in the war; it was complimented with books, monographs and other materials on the Nigerian-Biafran war. Available facts will be analysed using qualitative research methodology.

Keywords

secession – war – minority opinion – Nigeria – Biafra

1 Introduction

The Nigerian-Biafra war which lasted between July 6th, 1967 and January 15th, 1970¹ was highly unprecedented in the history of Nigeria. It was accompanied by horrible experiences especially in Biafra land – the war theatre.² The magnitude of horrors of the war cannot be fully grasped without a clear understanding of the divisions inherent of Nigeria at independence in 1960.

1 A. Madiebo, *Nigerian Revolution and the Civil War*, Enugu: Fourth Dimension Publication, 1982, p. 25.

2 This is a general view captured during my field research. A good number of people shared this idea.

Political instability had rocked the seven year old republic to its foundation. The seed of regionalism was sown in the country following the promulgation of Richard's constitution in 1946³ with its inherent defects. For instance neither Governor Bernard Bourdillion who initiated the draft of the constitution nor Governor Arthur Richards who enacted the 1946 constitution consulted the people for whom the constitution was meant to serve. Many Nigerians therefore, did not believe that the constitution was in any way designed to foster the unity of different peoples of Nigeria and as well ensure greater participation of Nigerians in the whole process of government and administration.⁴ The colonial government in defense of the constitution argued that since the unit of political consciousness was still in the Native Authority, the establishment of regional councils was to promote wider consciousness of a regional basis which will be a necessary prerequisite for the growth of national consciousness.⁵ This idea which was solidified by the subsequent constitutions in 1951, 1954 and 1957/1958 did not only strengthen regional autonomy, it also influenced the formation of regional based political parties.

At independence, these parties controlled the three major regions in Nigeria. The Ahmadu Bello led Northern People's Congress (NPC) controlled Northern Region; the Obefemi Awolowo led Action Group (AG) controlled Western Region and the Dr Nnamdi Azikiwe led National Council of Nigerian Citizens (NCNC) controlled Eastern Region. The struggle for the soul of the central government and minority agitations in different regions led to the Action Group crises of 1962, census crises of 1962–1964 and general election crises of 1964.⁶ The parochial politics that accompanied this period manifested itself in nepotism, corruption, avarice, bribery and ethnicity upon which Major Kaduna Chukwuma Nzeogwu and his comrades anchored their reason for the bloody overthrow of the First Republic.⁷

The coup was viewed by the Hausa/Fulani dominated Northern Nigeria as intended for Igbo ascendancy.⁸ This notion not only led to the bloody overthrow of the Gen Johnson T.U Ironsi administration 15/1/1966–29/7/1966, but also the massacre of majority of the Igbo ethnic group of Eastern Nigeria the Eastern

3 C. Achebe, *There was a Country: A Personal History of Biafra*, London: Penguin Books, 2012, pp. 133–134.

4 G. Olusanya, "Constitutional Developments in Nigeria, 1861–1960," in O. Ikime (ed) *Groundwork of Nigerian History*, Ibadan, Heinemann Education Books, 1980, pp. 524–526.

5 G. Olusanya, "Constitutional Developments in Nigeria, 1861–1960,"... p.527.

6 F. Forsyth, *The Making of a Biafran Legend: The Biafran Story*, London: Penguin Books, 1969, pp.30–33.

7 F. Forsyth, *The Making of a Biafran Legend* ... p. 42.

8 U.S Ani and F.I Ezeonwuka "Ironsi Regime and the Decree No 34, A Political Review," in *Renaissance University Journal of Management and Social Sciences*, Vol 2, No 1, p. 111.

Igbo in different parts of Northern and Western Nigeria by the Hausa/Fulani, Tiv and Jukun dominated northern soldiers.⁹ Some scholars put the number of casualties to about 30,000.¹⁰ The pogrom occasioned the mass exodus of the Igbo and other minority groups in Eastern Nigeria from Northern Nigeria, the eventual declaration of the state of Biafra and subsequent war of secession between Nigeria and Biafra.

This paper contends that from the inception of the clamor for secession of Biafra in mid-1966 to the outbreak of the war in mid-1967, the ideas, opinions and decisions of the Supreme Commander of the Biafra Armed Forces Gen. Chukwuemeka Odimegwu Ojukwu were imposed on the people; minority opinions were either not accepted or suppressed. Also, the propagators of such opinions were either sidelined or termed saboteurs and incarcerated; others held their opinions to themselves. Had these opinions been fully exploited, the crisis could have ended up with a more political solution to the benefit of the people other than war.

To do justice to the subject matter, an analysis of how the massacre and the pre-war propaganda affected the mood of the people will be made, it will be followed by an examination of "On Aburi we stand" to identify if the stand was a unanimous stand of the people or a personal stand of the Supreme Commander of Biafra Armed Forces. Lastly, the declaration of independence will be analysed to identify if it was the unanimous decision of the Consultative Assembly.

2 Massacres and Pre-War Propaganda

The events that led to the overthrow of General Ironsi regime which eventually led to the massacre of Easterners both military and civilians in different parts of Nigeria had its roots in January 15th, 1966 coup. The coup which was planned by majority of Igbo officer corps according to Adewale Ademoyega, but the execution of the coup was by officers of different ethnic groups across the regions of the country.¹¹ The casualties were both military personnel and civilian politicians. The military personnel included Lt. Col. Arthur Unegbe, Quartermaster-General of the Nigerian Army, Col. Kur Mohammed, Lt.

9 U.A Unidiyaundeye, "Issues and Causes of the Nigerian Civil war" in Armstrong Adejo (ed), *The Nigerian Civil War: Forty Years after, What Lessons?* Makrudi, Aboki Publishers, 2008, p.14.

10 U. S Ani and F.I Ezeonwuka, "Ironsi Regime and the Decree No 34 ... p. 114..

11 A. Ademoyega, *Why we Struck: The Story of the First Nigerian Coup*, Ibadan: Evans Brothers Nig. Ltd, 1981, p 117.

Col. Yakubu Pam, Brig. Zakari Maimalari, Lt. Col. Abogo Largema, and Brig. S.A. Ademuligun, Commander of 1st Brigade, Nigerian Army, Kaduna and Col. S.A. Shodeinde, Head of the Military Academy, Kaduna, among other military officers.¹² The civilian casualties included: Alh. Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, Prime Minister of Federal Republic of Nigeria, Chief Festus Okolie Eboh, Minister for Finance, Alh Ahmadu Bello, Premier of Northern Region and Chief S. Ladoke Akintola, Premier of Western Region, among others.¹³ The inability of the group assigned to arrest Gen Ironsi to complete their assignment signaled the beginning of the end of the coup.

While it is true that majority of the officer corps who planned the coup were of Igbo descent, it will be erroneous to conclude that the coup was executed by Igbo officers for Igbo domination over the other groups in Nigeria. Ademoyega noted that on the D-Day in Kaduna, the officers were summoned and briefed about the political situation in the country, they were told about the decision of the revolutionary officers to bring the situation under control by a prompt military action which had been planned to be nationwide. The officers who hailed from every part of the country were given option either to participate in the action or withdraw and all of them volunteered to participate.¹⁴

It was obvious in the period that the political situation in the country was not only deepening the divisions among different groups but drawing the country to brink of a major disaster. For instance, there was a general breakdown of law and order in different parts of the country as a result of the Western Regional crisis of 1962, census crisis of 1964 and the Tiv riots in the middle belt where the Tiv and other minority groups had long agitated for Middle Belt state as they no longer desired to be politically counted as northerners.¹⁵ There was general breakdown of law and order across the country. People were ruthlessly suppressed in different parts of the country by the ruling NPC. Units of the Nigerian army were deployed into different crisis infested areas and were used against the people. Destruction of lives and properties were reported from different areas but the leadership of the country did not do much about it.¹⁶ The revolutionary officers therefore awakened the consciousness of young

12 O. Balogun, *Nigeria in Crisis; 1965–1970*, Benin City: Ethiope Publishing Corporation, 1973, pp. 4 and 5.

13 O. Balogun, *Nigeria in Crisis; 1965–1970*, Benin City: Ethiope Publishing Corporation, 1973, pp. See also, B. Gbulie, *Nigeria's Five Majors: Coup D'Etat of 15th January 1966*, First Inside Account, Nigeria: Snaap Press 2001, pp. 84–88.

14 A. Ademoyega, *Why we Struck: The Story of the First Nigerian Coup*, Ibadan: Evans Brothers Nig. Ltd, 1981, p. 117. See also, B. Gbulie, *Nigeria's Five Majors ...* pp. 90–93.

15 F. Forsyth, *The Making of A Biafran Legend: The Biafran Story*, London: Penguin Books, 1969, p. 30.

16 P. Effiong, *Nigeria and Biafra: My Story*, New Jersey: A Sungai Book, 2004, p. 18.

officers especially in the Nigerian Military Training College (NMTc) to the political situations in the country and their desire to stage a revolution that would patriotically deal with the situations and as well put Nigeria on the path of greatness. A good number of young officers across the divide of Nigeria that was informed about the coup love their intention and supported the idea.¹⁷

As the revolution was truncated by Gen Ironsi, who in the period was the General Officer Commanding the Nigerian army, he was handed over power by the Acting President, Rt. Hon Nwafor Orizu. His emergence put an end to Western Regional crisis, minority agitation in Tiv and Niger Delta through a coordinated effort both from the military and civilians.¹⁸ It is pertinent to say here that despite his honesty, General Ironsi was not a politician and was totally devoid of cunning and showed little aptitude for the intricacies of diplomacy necessary inside a highly complex society. In his honesty, he surrounded himself with officers from different parts of the country and was unaware of the grand plan to overthrow his regime through a Northern officers planned coup.¹⁹ He was both tossed by the ill advice of his Igbo Kinsmen over the fate of the coup plotters and the desire to pacify the people from Northern region whose leaders were part of the major casualties of the January 15th, 1966 coup.

With the unification Decree No 34 of 1966 which intended to eliminate all forms of ethnicity and unify the peoples of Nigeria into a strong nation state; the whole idea of Nigerian unity as intended by the General was misunderstood and the grand plan was hatched which terminated his regime. The plot to overthrow his regime and subsequent massacre of the Eastern Igbo was carefully planned out and systematically executed by Northern Nigerian civil servants, politicians, and armed forces.²⁰ The first test of the mayhem against the southerners was on the 27th of May, 1966; riots by northerners systematically broke out against the southerners in Kaduna, Zaria, Kano and Jos. Northern mobs attacked unarmed and unprepared southerners with machetes, clubs and guns. Many people lost their lives, cars were smashed, houses and shops looted and burned down and legitimate activities were disrupted by the angry mob. It was surprising those police officers who were charged with the responsibility of maintaining law and order joined the angry mob in the execution of the mayhem.²¹ No effort was made by the Brigade commander in Kaduna to get the situation under control. Lt. Col. Hassan Kastina the military governor of Northern Region at the period, who had the

17 A. Ademoyega, *Why we Struck: ...* p 69.

18 F. Forsyth, *The Making of A Biafran Legend ...* p. 45.

19 F. Forsyth, *The Making of A Biafran Legend ...*

20 A. Madiebo, *The Nigerian Revolution and the Civil War ...* p. 29.

21 A. Madiebo, *The Nigerian Revolution and the Civil War ...* pp. 29–30.

responsibility of ordering the army to intervene, declined on the basis that the police (who was acting as accomplice in the riot) has the capacity to quell it.²² The atrocities were of very high magnitude. For instance it was reported that a family was locked up in their building and set ablaze, in Kano railway station, people of Igbo descent and other ethnic groups from Eastern Region who gathered to escape by train was also attacked by the mobs. Many were butchered and their properties looted. In Kastina, angry mob stormed Emirs palace where many southerners took refuge, the resistance put up by the Emir to dissuade them from attacking the refugees were to no avail. Most of them lost their lives, others escaped with heavy injuries.²³ In Sokoto, worshippers were locked up and burned inside the church, no step was taken to dispatch the army or put the situation under control, this of course gave the rioters free hand to operate until they were tired.²⁴ Daily Times of 6th May, 1966 recorded the death toll at 92 and 506 wounded.²⁵ This of course triggered the mass movement of Easterners out of the North and by the middle of June, 1966 about 7,500 people had left Northern Nigeria for the East.²⁶

Systematic attempts were not made to respond to the causes of the riot until June 11th, 1966 after the Federal Executive Council meeting, then Gen Ironsi defined the purpose of the Decree No 34 as not intended to impose a unitary system upon the federating units, but to meet the demands of the military government under a unified command that the riot temporarily stopped. No arrests were made either to bring the perpetrators to book or forestall the future occurrence of such act. Both planners and perpetrators were free and had ample time to plan the massacre of July 29th, 1966. The operation with code name “Araba” which means “divide” did not only see the assassination of the Head of State, Gen Ironsi and the Military Governor of Western Region, Col. Francis Adekunle Fajuyi, it also saw the assassination of Eastern army officers in military formations in Northern, Western and Mid-Western regions by northern officers. The massacre took place with speed, precision and uniformity of brutality, inhumanity and hatred.

At the railway station in Enugu, mutilated bodies of Easterners were loaded in coaches of train travelling from Northern Region.²⁷ Large numbers

22 A. Madiebo, *The Nigerian Revolution and the Civil War ...* pp. 34–35.

23 A. Madiebo, *The Nigerian Revolution and the Civil War ...* p. 41.

24 A. Madiebo, *The Nigerian Revolution and the Civil War ...* p. 43.

25 Daily Times, 6th June, 1966, p.7.

26 O. Balogun, *Nigeria in Crisis ...* p.27.

27 Notable personalities in Eastern Nigeria visited the railway station at Enugu and spitals within the environs where wounded people were treated. For instance, Chief Dr. Christian Chukwuma Onoh, the first Nigerian Chairman of the Nigerian Coal Corporation, 1959–1966.

of Easterners fled the North to the East. On the 12th of September, 1966, a conference of delegates from all the regions in the country assembled in Lagos for talks on the future and form of association to be adopted in Nigeria.²⁸ Between September 18th and 24th while the talks was on going, contrary to Lt. Col. Gowon's assurance of safety of lives and properties, violence against the Easterners broke out again in Markudi, Minna, Gboko and Kaduna. Men, women and children were massacred, shops looted and destroyed. It reached climax when Northern soldiers backed by civilians massacred in cold blood; Easterners living in Maiduguri, Jos, Kano and other parts of Northern Nigeria.²⁹ At this point, the leadership of Eastern Region led by Lt Col. Ojukwu considered the unity of Nigeria as a farce and emphasized the difficulty in continuing in the deception of keeping it owing to the massacres.

The next task of Eastern Regional government is to convey the message of the massacre and the plight of Easterners in a united Nigeria in such a way that would rouse their interest in pursuance of self-determination. Strong propaganda machinery was set up to research, articulate, develop and sell ideas and intentions of the Eastern Regional government to the people. Embodied in the functions of the propaganda machinery was to project an "assumed" other than the 'real' strength of Eastern region not only to the people of Eastern Region but to Nigeria at large. It was on the strength of the propaganda machinery that Lt. Col. Ojukwu declared that no black nation on the surface of the earth can defeat Biafra on land, air or sea.³⁰

The propaganda directorate was headed by Uche Chukwumerije – a graduate of University of Ibadan.³¹ The propaganda directorate manipulated support for Ojukwu's policies of secession by exploiting the ignorance of the people vis-a-vis the horror of the pogrom unleashed on the Easterners. They extensively painted the picture of the massacre without painting the picture of non-preparedness of the Eastern Nigerian government for the implications of the planned secession. The Eastern Nigeria Broadcasting Corporation which was later re-named Radio Biafra was one of the most powerful instruments of propaganda and war mobilisation. People especially in the remote parts of Eastern Region were driven to the point of believing that all the information coming from Radio Biafra was true. Information coming from the radio

28 NAE, Problems of Nigerian Unity: The Case of Eastern Region, Enugu: Ministry of Information, 1966, p. 24.

29 NAE, Problems of Nigerian Unity ... p. 25.

30 A. Madiebo, *The Nigerian Revolution and the Civil War* ... p. 94.

31 Dr. Innocent Uzoechi C. 78, retired Lecturer, worked with the Directorate of Propaganda in the defunct Eastern Region and The Republic of Biafra. Interviewed 3/10/2017.

heightened the tension in every quarter of the region, made the people believe that they are no longer safe in the hands of the Lagos government owing to the massacre of the Easterners in the North and non-implementation of the Aburi agreement. Madiebo noted that the Biafran leadership spent by far too much time and money on propaganda with little or nothing left for military preparation.³²

As a result of the propaganda activities, pressure from groups and individuals to the governor to secede from the federation because of the pogrom increased. But some army officers who understood the level of preparedness of the Eastern military in the event of the outbreak of war advised him not to secede. For instance, Col. C. C. Ude prevailed on Ojukwu not to declare the State of Biafra. He was of the opinion that Eastern Region had not exploited all the options before it with the Federal Government and advised Ojukwu that since in reality Eastern Region could not defend itself in the event of a war, he should commence the exploitation of the political options before him and also use that opportunity to procure military hardware and establish more military formations and train military personnel. All his opinions earned him was long period of incarceration; afterwards he was also branded a saboteur.³³ He was of the opinion that if not for the activities of the propaganda directorate that projected false picture of situations in Eastern Region, Lt Col Gowon would not have ventured into the creation of twelve states to destabilise Eastern Region.³⁴

Some notable personalities in Eastern region also noted that the region in the period had not developed the capacity to handle the strategic, political, economic and social realities that might arise in case of military action against it.³⁵ They advanced that though the pogrom was a horrible experience, entering an unprepared war would be more horrible than the pogrom – hence the needs to exploit other avenues of peace and as well prepare the region in

32 A. Madiebo, *The Nigerian Revolution and the Civil War ...* p. 94.

33 Col. C. C. Ude Rtd. c. 81, Retired army officer, trained at the Intercontinental Military Academy Teshie, Ghana and Royal Military Academy Sand Hurst, England. Served in different capacities in the Nigerian Army including Military attached to the Nigerian Embassy in United States of American before the outbreak of the Nigerian-Biafra War. Interviewed 9/7/2011. See also Mr. Ben Ozoani, Retired journalist, worked in the Biafran Directorate of Propaganda, former instructor Rangers Guerilla Group of the defunct Republic of Biafra, interviewed 14/06/2023.

34 Col. C. C. Ude, interview cited.

35 Chief Mbazulike Amechi, c. 84, Elder Statesman, Politician, Principal organizing Secretary, National Council of Nigerian Citizens, (NCNC) Member, Federal House of Representatives, 1959–1966, Interviewed, 5/06/2013. See also (i) Engr Raphael Ani, c. 92, A Cambridge University trained Mining Engineer and retired General Manager, Nigerian Coal Corporation, 1961–1975 (ii) C. C. Onoh, Interview cited.

case of an eventual war. All these opinions were not entertained by Lt Col. Ojukwu, yet he could not prove them wrong when the war started on the 6th of July, 1966.

3 On Aburi We Stand

Lt Col. Yakubu Gowon assumed office as head of Nigeria military government on 1st of August, 1966. He released most political prisoners detained under the defunct First Republic; notable among them were Chief Obafemi Awolowo and Chief Anthony Enahoro. The Decree No 34 of 1966 which was the reason for the pogrom against the Easterners was repealed. He constituted an Ad-Hoc Constitutional Review Assembly made up of the representatives of the regional governors. In the period, there were four Regions in the country, the Northern, Western, Eastern and Mid-Western Regions and Lagos Capital Territory. Each delegation has a leader, they included: Dr. Eni Njoku (leader of delegation), Mr. C. C. Mojekwu and Mr. E. D. Ndem for Eastern Region; Chief Anthony Enahoro (leader of delegation), Chief J. I. G. Onyia and Dr Mudiaga Odije for Mid-Western Region; Chief Obafemi Awolowo (leader of delegation), Prof Oluwasinmi and Chief Olu Akinfosile for Western Region; Alh. Sir Kasheem Ibrahim (leader of delegation), Mr. J. S. Tarka and Alh. Buba Ardo for Northern Region; Mr. Lafeef Jakande (leader of delegation) and Mr. T. O. Elias for Lagos Capital Territory.³⁶ In view of the prevailing circumstance in the country caused by the counter coup of July 29th, 1966; the mass killing of Easterners in Northern Region and the general tension in the country they were charged to work out a constitution that will represent the wishes of different groups that make up the country.

The Ad- Hoc committee which started deliberations was forced to a halt because between 18th and 29th September 1966 mass killings of Easterners continued unabated in northern parts of the country. The riots were suggested to have been instigated by the ultra-conservative northern groups who felt that Lt. Col. Gowon led government was making too many concessions to the East.³⁷ But the committee submitted a preliminary report to the federal military government based on two unanimous decisions. First, they recommended that all military personnel should be posted back to their regions of origin. This was against the backdrop that the trust which has been an integral part of military

³⁶ O. Balogun, *Nigeria in Crisis ...* pp. 53–54.

³⁷ O. Balogun, *Nigeria in Crisis ...* p. 55.

had been compromised by the nature of the execution of counter coup of July 29, 1966 and violent riots that claimed many lives and properties.

Lt Col. Ojukwu at this point having known that the lives and properties could no longer be guaranteed outside Eastern Region, called for the mass return of Easterners to their region of origin. Also, on the basis that he could guarantee the security of non-Easterners, he issued an Edict ordering Non-Easterners to vacate the region.³⁸ When on October 24th, 1966, the Ad-Hoc committee resumed deliberations in Lagos, Lt Col. Ojukwu did not send Eastern delegates on the grounds that he could guarantee their safety. Ever since, the Supreme Military Council had not completely met as Eastern Region isolated herself from the rest of the federation. There was increasing popular pressure that the Supreme Military Council should meet in a neutral location which would guarantee the safety of every participant and resolve the matters hindering the country.

Under the invitation of Gen Joseph Arthur Ankrah the President of Ghana in the period, the meeting was held at Ex-President Nkrumah's Luxurious holiday lodge at Aburi.³⁹ In attendance at the meeting were Lt Col. Gowon (Head of State), Lt Col. Ojukwu, Lt Col. David Ejoor, Lt Col. Hassan Kastina, Col. Robert Adebayo military governors of Eastern, Mid-Western, Northern and Western Regions, respectively and Major Mobolaji Johnson, military administrator of Lagos, capital of Nigeria.⁴⁰ Others included Mr. S.I.A Akenzua (Secretary to Federal Cabinet Office), P. Omodudu, N. U. Akpan, D. P. Lawani and Alh. Ali Akimi (Secretaries to Federal Military Governments, Western, Eastern, Mid-Western and Northern regions, respectively), Alh. Kam Salem and T. Omobare of Police force headquarters.⁴¹ Deliberations lasted between 4th and 5th of January, 1967 and the following resolutions were reached.

1. The army is to be governed by a Supreme Military Council, the Chairman will be known as Commander-in-Chief of the Federal Military Government;
2. There will be military headquarters on which the region, will be equally represented and which will be headed by a Chief of Staff;
3. At each region will be an Area Commander, corresponding with existing regions;

³⁸ O. Balogun, *Nigeria in Crisis* ... p. 56.

³⁹ F. Forsyth, *The Making of A Biafran Legend* ... p. 88.

⁴⁰ NAE/A.H.M. Kirik Green, *Crisis and Conflict in Nigeria: A Documentary Source Book*, Vol 1, 1966–1967, London: Oxford University Press, 1967, p. 360.

⁴¹ NAE/A.H.M. Kirik Green, *Crisis and Conflict in Nigeria* ... pp. 361–362.

4. The Military Governors of each region will have control over the Area Command under them;
5. All Military officers will be posted back to serve in their region of origin;
6. The following appointments must be made by the SMC;
 - i. Diplomatic and consular posts.
 - ii. Senior posts in the armed forces and police.
 - iii. Super scale civil service posts and federal corporation posts.
7. Any decision affecting the whole country must be determined by the SMC or a concurrence of the military governors where a meeting is not possible.⁴²

After the Aburi agreement, meetings were held to ratify the decisions and resolve differences in interpretations. Such meetings were held in Benin and Lagos. Ojukwu not only refused to attend the meetings, he insisted the agreement reached at Aburi be implemented as it were. A notable leader in Eastern region of the period noted that Ojukwu avoided top politicians in Eastern region who cannot only tell him the truth he might not want to hear, but also understood the complexities that influence decision making in Nigeria. He lamented the non- involvement of Dr Nnamdi Azikiwe, Dr Micheal Okpara, Dr Nwafor Orizu, Dr Aja Nwachukwu, Dr K. O. Mbadiwe among others in decision making in Eastern Region; he advanced that they would have advised him to participate and would also have assisted him in the negotiations to the favour of Eastern region.⁴³

While the Western, Northern and Mid-Western regional governors surrounded themselves with top class politicians who were part of the Independence struggle, Ojukwu was only interested in not being outshined, and so surrounded himself with people who took orders from him as the only source of knowledge. The young intellectuals and lawyers that surrounded him were more interested in the big positions they would occupy when sovereignty was realised, they were not interested in any other opinion except the secession that Ojukwu wanted to hear.⁴⁴

After series of deliberations by the Supreme Military Council and top civil servants that cut across different regions, excluding Eastern Region, Decree No 8 of 1967 (Constitution Suspension and Modification) Supplement of the official Gazette of the federation of Nigeria Vol 54, A91 – Z was promulgated.

42 NAE/A.H.M. Kirik Green, *Crisis and Conflict in Nigeria ...* p p. 314–315.

43 Mbazulike Amechi, Interview cited.

44 Mr. Micheal Ani c.81 retired lecturer, Universities of Ibadan and University of Nigeria, Activist, Social critic, Interviewed 19/09/2017.

The Decree contained all the stipulations of the Aburi Agreement but with slight variation. The main feature of the Decree was the vesting in the SMC both the executive and legislative powers of government. The Federal Executive Council which had hitherto exercised these powers was divested of them.⁴⁵ In the exercise of these powers, the conference of head of military government and military governors were made essential to certain matters which were set out in Section 69(6) of the constitution. They included but not limited to the Nigerian police, higher education, and territorial integrity of regions.⁴⁶ The major clause which differed from Aburi agreement is Section 86 which ensured that no region shall exercise its executive authority so as to impede or prejudice the executive authority of the federation or endanger the continuance of the federal government in Nigeria.⁴⁷ Section 70 gave powers to the SMC to take over the executive and legislative functions of the regional government during any period of emergency which would be declared in respect of the region by the SMC.⁴⁸

The Biafran propaganda directorate and radio station did not make this position known to the public. The Supreme Commander only proclaimed on “Aburi we stand” and nurtured it with the atrocities carried out against the Eastern Igbo and other groups in different parts of Northern Region. People like Chief Mbazulike Amechi was incarcerated and eventually put under house arrest for opining that secession was not necessary if Eastern Regional government will consider Decree No 8 which captured all the positions in Aburi Agreement except for emergency powers.⁴⁹ People were punished for reading conventional papers other than the one published by Eastern Regional government press; this denied people opportunity for balanced information on the true state of situations in Nigeria.⁵⁰ Amechi noted that if Ojukwu had involved the right people, Eastern Region would have participated in the negotiations with seasoned people and the outcome debated by a properly constituted Consultative Assembly and objective information conveyed to the public through the media, the war and its predicaments could have been avoided.⁵¹ On Aburi we stand cannot therefore be considered as a unanimous

45 NAE/A.H.M. Kirik Green, *Crisis and Conflict in Nigeria* ... pp. 401–402.

46 NAE/A.H.M. Kirik Green, *Crisis and Conflict in Nigeria* ... p. 408.

47 NAE/A.H.M. Kirik Green, *Crisis and Conflict in Nigeria* ... p. 412.

48 NAE/A.H.M. Kirik Green, *Crisis and Conflict in Nigeria* ...

49 Chief Mbazulike Amechi interview cited.

50 Chief Dr Christian Chukwuma Onoh interview cited.

51 Chief Mbazulike Amechi interview cited.

stand of the people of Eastern Region but a personal stand of the Supreme Commander, Lt Col. Ojukwu.

4 Declaration of Independence

As the face-off between Lagos government and Eastern Regional government continued, Ojukwu naturally rejected the Decree No 8 which was promulgated on the 17th of March, 1967. The high hopes reposed on the Aburi meeting in bringing lasting solution to the Nigeria – Eastern regional crisis was shattered. Nigeria in the period was hanging on the brink of a major catastrophe. Ojukwu had earlier threatened that if Aburi resolution was not fully implemented by the 31st of March, 1967 which marked the end of the fiscal year, he would feel free to implement it in Eastern Region.⁵²

On the 31st of March, 1967, Ojukwu promulgated his revenue collection Edict 11 of 1967 which stipulated that any revenue due from any source whatsoever in Eastern Nigeria and for and on behalf or payable to the Federal Government shall be paid to the government of Eastern Nigeria.⁵³ With this, Eastern region had gained financial liberation from Nigeria. Series of meetings and consultations were on going in different regions as war was looming. Col. Victor Banjo – an officer from Western Region who after his release from sentence in Eastern Nigeria stayed with Ojukwu at the government house discouraged him (Ojukwu) from declaring Eastern Nigeria a sovereign nation⁵⁴ and encouraged Ojukwu to apply caution so as to avert the horror that might befall the people. On the 19th March, 1967, the Federal Government in view of Ojukwu's revenue collection Edict 11 imposed economic sanctions on Eastern Region. Ojukwu in response ordered the confiscation of all the Federal institutions in Eastern Nigeria. A four man delegation which included Chief Obafemi Awolowo, Chief J. I. G. Onyia, Chief Jereton Mariere and Prof S. A. Aluko met Ojukwu in Enugu to broker peace between his government and Lt Col. Gowon led Federal Government. They recommended that the federal government should lift the economic sanctions against Eastern Region in exchange for the repeal of the anti-federal decrees and edicts passed by the region. Lt Col. Gowon accepted the position but Ojukwu stood his ground.

On the 27th of May, he convened the meeting of Eastern Consultative Assembly at Enugu to review the political situation in the country vis-a-vis the

⁵² A. Ademoyega, *Why we Struck ...* p 187.

⁵³ A. Ademoyega, *Why we Struck ...*

⁵⁴ A. Ademoyega, *Why we Struck ...* p 212.

plight of the Easterners and the condition of their continued existence in the larger Nigerian state. Members were not elected; they were rather drawn from an invitation sent by Mr. C. C. Mojekwu.⁵⁵ Delegates were not accredited to identify the caliber of people and see also if they cut across different groups that made up Eastern Region. No formal rules were adopted to serve as a guide to listen and address businesses brought before it. CC Onoh for instance expressed disappointment in the way in which the meeting was conducted and the decision for the declaration of the state of Biafra was reached. He noted that the meeting started at about 4pm in the afternoon; with the reading of an address drafted by Mr. CC Mojekwu (Ojukwu's Kinsman who was later appointed Minister of Home Affairs in the new state of Biafra) mandating Ojukwu to declare Eastern Region a sovereign state with the name Republic of Biafra was read.⁵⁶ There was no debate either to support or reject the proposal; the meeting lasted only for 15 minutes.⁵⁷ Mbazulike Amechi, CC Onoh, Elechi Onyia and Raphael Ani was part of the notable Easterners that advised Ojukwu after the meeting to put on hold the declaration of the State of Biafra and exploit political positions opened, to avoid the outbreak of war.⁵⁸

In total disregard to those opinions on the 30th May, 1967, he (Ojukwu) went ahead in a 2 hour long address, to declare the State of Biafra. Most well-meaning Easterners who participated in the Consultative Assembly meeting were amazed at the condition that shrouded the whole exercise. The assembly was convened just to make the secession look both as legal and legitimate as possible. The decision to declare the State of Biafra was therefore not the unanimous decision of the Eastern Consultative Assembly, but a personal decision of Lt. Col. Ojukwu.

5 Conclusion

Eastern Region played a very vital role in the struggle for independence in Nigeria.⁵⁹ Their leaders shared their opinions and ideas about the kind of

55 Chief Dr. C. C. Onoh interview cited.

56 C. C. Onoh, *A View into History: Ojukwu and the Igbo Cause*, Enugu: Frontline Publishers, 1997, pp. 5–7.

57 C. C. Onoh, *A View into History ...*

58 C. C. Onoh, interview cited. See also (i) Raphael Ani, Interview cited and (ii) Elechi Onyia c. 75, lawyer, activist, elder statesman, interviewed 14/7/2017.

59 The role of Eastern Region in the political development of Nigeria is not hidden, Mbazulike Amechi, interview cited see also Elechi Onyia interview cited.

Nigeria they desire through the dominant political party in their region, the National Council of Nigerian Citizens (NCNC) led by Chief Dr Nnamdi Azikwe and other notable leaders like Chief Dr M. I. Okpara, Chief K. O. Mbadiwe, Chief Mbazulike Amechi, Dr Aja Ajawachukwu, Dr Nwafor Orizu, to mention a few. The Party (NCNC) formed by Herbert Macaulay and Dr Nnamdi Azikwe in 1944 in scope came closest to becoming a National Party as against the Action Group (AG) and the Northern People's Congress (NPC) formed in 1951 and 1952 respectively which were strong regional political parties.⁶⁰ The military coup of January 15th 1966 according to Major Chukwuma Kaduna Nzogwu was to establish a strong, united and prosperous nation, free from corruption and internal strife.⁶¹ As the coup was aborted, the General Johnson TU Ironsi administration that followed promulgated Decree No 34 to strengthen the unity of Nigeria though it was misunderstood by some sections of the country and it formed the basis for pogrom unleashed against the people of Eastern Region residing in different parts of Northern Region.

As events heated and gradually drew close to a conflagration, the governor of Eastern Region Lt. Col Ojukwu, owing partly to the political and security situation in the country, could not involve the political founding fathers of Eastern Region in the deliberations and negotiations that followed. As against other regions, their notable leaders were not allowed close to the government to offer advice or represent the region in the negotiations that followed Aburi Accord. The Governor counted Eastern region out when close and continuous consultation was carried out to find permanent and satisfactory solutions to Nigerian's problems. With that, Eastern region lost what could have been an opportunity to ending the crisis without recourse to war. The media was used, not only to give the people false hope, but to misinform them about the preparedness of the government to protect them in war situation. They told the people what they wanted them to hear and not what they were meant to hear. Biafra was eventually declared as against the opinion of a section of the people. The result of the unheard minority opinion in the Biafran leadership was a 30-month war that unleashed quantum atrocities to uninformed and innocent citizen of Eastern region of Nigeria.

60 G. O.Olusanya, "Nationalist Movements in Nigeria" in O. Ikime (ed) *Groundwork of Nigerian History*, Ibadan, Heinemann Education Books, 1980, pp.566–567.

61 Ademoyega *Why we Struck ...* p.123.
p.31.