



## Nigeria at Crossroad of Secession or Restructuring: Dilemmas and Opportunities

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### Abstract

*Nigeria is at a crossroad. The resurgence of agitation since Nigeria returned to democracy in 1999, calls for urgent intervention. Ethnic nationalities have been largely divided along the lines of secession, restructuring, and those who want to maintain the status quo. The politics and friction generated by the discourse on restructuring is intrinsically connected to Nigeria's aspiration for better coexistence and prosperity. This paper analyses Nigeria's historical and contemporary challenges, dilemmas, and opportunities within the purview of national dialogue and consensus on true federalism. Methodologically, the paper reviewed secondary data from books, journals and online sources, which were analysed using thematic, content and narrative analyses. This paper underscores that inequalities and perceptions of marginalisation are deeply entrenched among the Igbos, which nurture incessant agitations and calls for secession. It however stressed that a call for restructuring would entrench true federalism, and a call for secession would not be necessary when national grievances are addressed through constitutional reforms.*

**Keywords:** Restructuring, Secession, Federalism, Geopolitical Zones, Consensus

### 1.0 Introduction

Since gaining independence in the 1960, Nigeria has faced numerous socioeconomic and political challenges, largely stemming from its colonial amalgamation in 1914. Deep-seated ethnic nationalism, represented by groups such as Oduduwa People's Congress (OPC), Arewa Consultative Forum (ACF), The Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), Middle Belt Forum (MBF) and Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) have hindered the development of a cohesive nation-state. Notably, the Igbo people's persistent demand for an independent Biafra nation has been a significant source of tension since the late 1960s, leading to a devastating civil war and ongoing secessionist movements (Gana, 2023).

Following prolonged periods of military rule, Nigeria's return to democracy in 1999 ushered in greater freedom of expression and renewed calls for addressing systemic inequalities. While contemporary Biafran agitations have gained support among educated Igbo youths, a growing number of moderate voices across various ethnicities advocate for restructuring Nigeria into a true federalist state. This approach seeks to implement comprehensive structural and institutional reforms addressing issues like resource control, devolution of powers, and equitable political representation, as

deliberated in the National Political Reform Conferences of 2005 and 2014 (Basiru, Salawu, & Arogundade, 2016). Despite these discussions, entrenched political elites often regard debates on secession and restructuring as settled matters, deeming them illegal and suppressing related discourse. This paper focuses on the resurgence of these agitations and explores the pursuit of holistic reforms as a means to resolve Nigeria's longstanding challenges (Naldi, 2020).

## **2.0 Literature Review**

### **2.1 Conceptual Clarifications**

The concept of separatist agitation has been used to demonstrate the idea of social group secession from a state. According to Horowitz, separatist agitation is associated with social movements that aim to express grievances and social discontent over practices, patterns and conduct within a sovereign political entity in which a section or a group in the country claims to be marginalised, excluded or experience inequality (Horowitz, 1985). Thus, the Nigerian experience aptly matched Horowitz's idea of separatist agitation.

Closely related to separatist agitation is the concept of cultural pluralism. Cultural pluralism recognizes the incorporation of unique societies (ethnic groups) characterised by distinct histories of origin, religion, values and aspirations into one state. Pluralism promotes diversity and the preservation of the rights of each group. However, it can create a natural divide that tends to induce agitation and the pursuit of ethnic rather than collective national interests. Pluralism, like a pendulum, when inclusivity thrives, it promotes positive outcomes such as mutual respect and tolerance. If otherwise, it generates discontent, strife, and incompatibility. Therefore, where exclusion is dominant, division follows the contour lines of religion, ideology, linguistics, culture, race ethnic differentiation (Eckstein, 2015). Thus, when cultural pluralism is not properly harnessed, it can usually generate conflict, political instability, economic deprivation, and cultural aggression. Morrison and Stephenson postulated that cultural pluralism has the potential to increase the intensity of communal conflict in African states (Chidozie & Orji, 2024).

Thus, the nexus between cultural pluralism and federalism becomes an important component of state building for a heterogeneous country like Nigeria. Therefore, an interlocking relationship between federalism and cultural pluralism. States tend to pursue federalism to strengthen their stability and national integration when pluralism is obvious (Chidozie & Orji, 2024). The quest for true federalism in Nigeria has been a challenge. Although Nigeria's diversity and plurality serves as its strength and also a potential source of discord. Despite efforts towards national cohesion is hampered by the absence of inclusive leadership.

On the other hand, self-determination has become closely associated with the struggle for secession across the globe. The concept gained prominence at the end of the second world war and exerted momentum during the 1960s decolonisation period. The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights views the concept and principle of self-determination as very controversial in its interpretation. Article one of the Covenant guarantees the right to self-determination and respect for the right of the people to freely own, trade and use their wealth and natural resources. Although it is not very specific on

the basis of secession, many scholars have asserted that when people fail to enjoy the rights of self-determination, this can instigate agitation for secession. Thus, self-determination is a right that guarantees national cohesion, without which secession becomes an alternative to self-determination (Ogunbanjo, 2022).

Therefore, the application of the principle of self-determination presumes the existence of self-determining people within a given territory, as reinforced in chapters 7 and 8 of the UN Charter. Chapter 9 limited the right to self-determination to only self-governing territories. In this case, the United Nations Charter did not explicitly recognise the right to self-determination in the context of secession. On the one hand, the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR) Article 20(2) acknowledges that colonised or oppressed peoples have the right to free themselves from the bond of domination within the confines of international law. However, Okojie(2013) stated the following:

Nothing in the foregoing paragraph shall be construed as authorizing or encouraging any action which would dismember or impair, totally or in part, the territorial integrity or political unity of sovereign and independent States conducting themselves in compliance with the principle of equal rights and self-determination of peoples . . . and thus possessed of a government representing the whole people belonging to the territory without distinction as to race, creed or color.

Note that from the foregoing, the justification for secession by the Biafran separatists might suffer many setbacks because the conditions for secession are exceptionally stringent. More so, the provisions of international law passively provide a clear-cut explanation of the legality of secession (Brotóns & Torroja, 2024). Thus, the Biafran struggle will continue to face national and international legal constraints.

The concept of separatist agitation, cultural pluralism, and self-determination argues that the multi-ethnic nature of Nigerian society coupled with its lopsided constitutional arrangement and lack of strong national ideology poses a threat to its national cohesion. Hence, restructuring becomes an alternative path because it is widely supported as the most pragmatic and peaceful means of self-determination in Nigeria. It offers peaceful constitutional change through national dialogue. Conversely, in agreement with the move for restructuring, Okereke cautioned that the experience of war during the 1967-70 civil war was not palatable. He maintained that most of the young people pursuing the current secession had never experienced war. He blamed the youth for their rashness and exuberance. However, he decried that many Igbos suffered immeasurable loss during the Biafran struggle that led to civil war (Omilusi, 2020). Although the Northern region benefits more from the overcentralisation of power, by far, restructuring will provide a beneficial solution to all sections of the country compared to secession.

## **2.2 Evolution of Nigerian Nationhood**

The annexation, colonisation, and eventual amalgamation of independent ethnic nationalities into the entity now known as Nigeria in 1914 by British colonialists laid the foundation for the country's problematic socioeconomic and political structure. This amalgamation, overseen by Sir Frederick Lugard, unified the southern and northern protectorates of Nigeria (Abejide, 2022). Precolonial Nigeria was originally composed of independent kingdoms and chiefdoms such as the Oyo Kingdom, Benin, Kwararafa, the Igbo Kingdom of Nri, Kanem-Bornu, the Hausa States, and the Sokoto Caliphate

(Tamuno, 1978). The country assumed the name Nigeria at the request of renowned British journalist Flora Shaw, who later married Sir Lugard. The name Nigeria first appeared in The Times magazine on the 8<sup>th</sup> January 1897, meaning Niger-Area. Since then, the entity has remained known as Nigeria. Thus, the amalgamation marked the evolution of the modern Nigerian state (Egbunu, 2022). The terms of the amalgamation were based on leasing the colony (Nigeria) to the Royal Niger Company for 100 years, spanning 1914 to 2014. By implication, the lease expired in 2014. Therefore, the Igbos believed as one of their reasons that by the expiration of the lease in 2014, the Nigerian Union automatically ceased to exist and gave them the right to secession (Ajayi, 2022). Nigeria's national question stems from the country's pluralistic and ethnically fragmented structure, leading to deep-seated incompatibility. Since gaining independence in 1960, Nigeria has struggled on a turbulent path toward true nationhood, marked by political tensions, minority struggles, fear of domination, and lack of national integration. The late Chief Obafemi Awolowo once described Nigeria as "a mere geographical expression" (Agbo, 2020) rather than a unified nation. These challenges are rooted in the flawed political structure imposed by the British, which disregarded the unique characteristics of different ethnic groups. This has resulted in poor national cohesion, widespread discontent, injustice, marginalization, civil war, ethnic and religious conflicts, corruption, and political instability.

The history of Nigerian federalism can be traced to the Richards Constitution of 1946, which established a quasi-federal structure. Afterwards, in 1951, Sir John Macpherson consulted widely and introduced what is called the Richards constitution. The provisions of the constitution stated that the lasting unity of the country was anchored in a federation which took cognizance of the uniqueness of the composition of the various ethnic groups within the country. Thereafter, federalism continued to be pursued under British colonial rule which was actualised by the promulgation of the 1951 and 1954 Constitutions. The constitutions created three regions: the Northern, Western and Eastern regions. The Mid-Western region was later created out of the Western region in 1963 to further advance the need for federalism (Okpevra, 2021).

The Republican constitution of 1963 was believed to be the only constitution promulgated by the Nigerian people since independence. The constitution provides fiscal and political autonomy for all regions. For instance, the 1963 constitution provided the following revenue allocation structure; regions retained 50% of the revenue generated, the regions remitted 20% to the centre while 30% was pooled together and shared among the federating units (regions). However, Nigerian federalism began to slide shortly after the disruptive military rule and the preponderance of extreme ethnic politics emerged in the mid-1960s. The first military *coup, d'état*, in 1966, returned Nigeria into a unitary system through the promulgation of Decree No. 34. The act resulted in the over-concentration of governmental powers and operations at the centre. The perpetual wrangling for power and resources by component units became the bane against the political stability, economic development, and national cohesion of Nigeria (Obinna & Ugorji, 2021).

The impact of protracted military rule led to the *de-federalisation* of the political structure of Nigeria. In this case, *de-federalisation* refers to the deliberate aberration of the federal system into a quasi-unitary structure in which the control of government institutions is

centralised. The military had tenacious grip on power. States and Local Government Councils were created and reduced to mere administrative units vulnerable to manipulation (Arize & Chukwu, 2023). Authoritarianism became the order of the day; despotic rule, the absence of the of public resources by military leaders were common rule of law, violations of human rights, corruption, and squander mania (misappropriation). Misrule by the military and repression pushed civil societies into the margin until 1999 (Zwanbin, 2017). Therefore, it is argued that this modified unitary structure conflicts with the 1963 constitution and aspirations of the founding fathers (Arowosegbe, 2022).

### 2.3 History of Secession in Nigeria

Secessionist movements in Nigeria have been largely linked to the post-independence era. The first recorded pre-independence attempts to secede was made in 1953 during the negotiation for independence. The Northern region threatened to secede because of a motion by delegates from the other regions that proposed independence to be granted in 1956. The Northern region claimed it would be disadvantaged when political and economic unification took place. Therefore, the boisterous motion was dropped, and compromise was reached in 1959, as the scheduled date for self-government of the regions and subsequent independence in 1960 (Onumonu & Oluebube, 2022).

Yet again, after the 1966 military coup, the northern region threatened another secession in response to the alleged mass murder of its senior military officers, politicians, and especially the Premier of the Northern Region, Sir Ahmadu Bello. The Northern people believed it was an Igbo coup orchestrated to weaken the North's control of political power. As a reprisal, northern elites instigated the secessionist attempt through the *Araba* riot of May 1966. *Araba* is a Hausa word literally translated as "to divide". This implied the call for the breaking up of Nigeria or secession. The events that followed were the violent anti-Igbo riots across northern Nigeria, which were popularly described by the Igbos as "pogrom". However, the riots subsided when the Northern military officers staged a counter-coup in July 1966, also known as the "July Rematch". The *coup d'état* organised by the north saw General Yakubu Gowon take over power. Subsequently, the secessionist agitations across the north died out spontaneously. These and other events prompted the Biafran secessionist movement to climax in the 1967-1970 civil war (Ogunbanjo, 2022).

### 2.4 Nigeria: The National Question

Since the birth of the Nigerian state, political turbulence engineered by toxic ethnicity has continued to raise the national question and endless search for lasting respite. Nigeria's

search for political stability and economic development has remained beclouded with the struggle for consensus among diverse peoples as well as the redefinition of the foundation upon which the national coexistence rest (Uche, Okonkwo, & Peter, 2020). Although the constitution provides a roadmap for the aggregation of the collective aspirations and values of Nigeria's people. Nonetheless, it has fallen below the threshold of a people's constitution. Constitutional experts argued that except for the 1963 republican constitution, all other constitutions were branded as products of "colonial" or "military" rule with limited or no input from the people. Critical issues such as the structure of the

state, access to power, distribution of power, allocation of revenue, and units and levels of government have not been properly addressed to reflect the collective will of the Nigerian people. Therefore, the controversies, doubts, anxiety, and manifestations of instability can be summed up as Nigeria's "National Question" (Raji, 2021).

The structure of Nigeria before the coup that brought about the first military rule in 1966 was a federation of four regions: the northern, southern, eastern, and mid-Western regions (Taiwo & Ariyo, 2020). It remained one of the ideal federal systems in the eyes of Nigerians until the Balkanisation of the country in 1967 by General Gowon. At the height of the civil war, the military government divided the region four regions into 12 administrative States (Dent, 2023). Later, in 1976, General Murtala Muhammed further created seven additional states, resulting in a total of 19 states. The trend continued when General Ibrahim Babangida and Sani Abacha added 11 and 6 states in 1987 and 1996, respectively. The incessant creation of states culminated in the 36-states, federal capital territory and 774 local government councils (Obi-Ani & Onu, 2022). The continued creation of states and local governments, in principle, decentralised the country, but Nigeria became more centralised in the management of resources and political governance, which has been described as a fake federal system. Military state creation has been blamed for structural imbalance and marginalisation of other ethnic nationalities. Thus, the call for restructuring is rooted in the argument that social, economic and political fairness is required for all peoples of Nigeria. Therefore, the call for restructuring is linked to the clamour for a return to a formation similar to the 1963 republican constitution. The neo-1963 constitution agitation sought a modified regional system that would reflect six regions to be created along the conventionally accepted geopolitical zones such as North-East, North-West, North-Central, South-West, South-South, and South-East (Anejionu & Ahiaramunnah, 2021).

## **2.5 End of the Civil War and the Adjoining Issues**

At the end of the civil war in 1970, the call for Biafran state substantially waned. However, the impact left behind unprecedented trauma and its memory still the victims of the war. More than two million people are alleged to have died from the war. Survivors of the war helped to remember how terrible war can affect a people. Thus, the painful memory of the conflict kept down the momentum of the agitation for about three (3) decades. In addition, the prolonged brutality of military regimes helped to suppress minority rights struggles. The civil war of 1967-70 left fear and mistrust between the Igbos and other Nigerian groups, as they are often stereotyped for rebellion (Onumonu & Keke, 2024).

The grievances that accompanied the end of the civil war still echo and influence the current Biafran secessionist agitation. As a matter of fact, After the end of the war, General Gowon declared that there was "no victor, no vanquish" (Eze, Ugbudian, & Alaku, 2024). Thereafter, the government formulated the policy of the three "Rs" (3Rs) to reconstruct, rehabilitate and reconcile the war-torn eastern region of the country. The failure of successive governments to deliberately implement post-conflict policies aimed at fostering reconstruction, rehabilitation, and national reconciliation—particularly in response to the war's impact on the injured, traumatised population and widespread property loss—has left a legacy of bitter memories and historical grievances. These

unresolved issues continue to fuel neo-Biafran sentiments. General Gowon, in the attempt to promote national integration after the war, introduced the National youth service Corps (NYSC). In 1973 the NYSC was founded by the promulgation of decree No. 24. The programme was targeted at the development of cultural ties and mutual understanding among young and educated Nigerians. The programme became an important policy stride since postwar era. Undoubtedly, the NYSC has been applauded as one of the most pragmatic attempts to promote national integration through the encouragement of intermarriage, cultural exchanges, and intra-national migration since Nigeria's independence (NYSC, 2024). Nonetheless, despite the huge success of the programme, the Igbos continued to be stereotyped and marginalised by political power due to the prevailing prejudice of suspicion. This argument is strongly evident because no Igbo person has assumed the position of president or has been elected since the end of the civil war (Ogbonna, 2024). Thus, with the grievances persisting, Nigeria's return to democratic rule in 1999 after the prolonged military rule opened the vintage of minority struggles and the fight against structural imbalances and institutional injustices.

## **2.6 Resurgence of Separatism in Nigeria**

The re-awakening of dormant secessionist aspirations emerged at the end of the cold war in the 1990s across the world. Despite this, secession is a subject governed by the prescription of international law, most states vehemently object to the idea and try to argue that within the provisions of their municipal laws (Ajisebiyawo & Agara, 2022). At the end of the repressive military regime in 1999, and from then onward, the period witnessed a resurgence and proliferation of separatist groups. The immense struggle for redressing Nigerian federalism began soon after the country returned to democratic rule. Afterwards, many agitators took advantage of democratic platforms to resurface, such as the O'dua People's Congress (OPC), the Niger Delta Volunteer Force (NDVF), the Movement for the Actualisation of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MOSSOB), Arewa Peoples' Congress (APC), Egbesu Boys of Africa (EBA), the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND), and a host of others (Nyekwere & Duson, 2020). All the agitations and many others were intended to push hard for the breakup of Nigeria. The grievances were based on domination, marginalisation, structural injustice and institutional discrimination allegedly perpetrated by one section of the country. Since the call for secession became broadened, with many ethnic actors involved in different forms, resulting in immense social and political tensions, the need for a Sovereign National Conference became imminent. Proponents of the conference believed it would help decide the fate of the federating units on whether to live together or secede peacefully. Thus, the Northern People envision the Arewa Republic. In the South-South the Niger Delta people also called for the Niger Delta Republic to guarantee the control of oil and gas resources, and of course, the Igbos of the south-east have been the most consistent in the demand for the Republic of Biafra. Lack of trust, marginalisation and poor governance seems to have incentivized separatist agitations across the country.

In southeastern Nigeria, several separatist groups emerged mostly from the Igbo ethnic group. Movement for Actualisation of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MOSSOB), the Biafra Zionist Movement (BZM), and the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB).

Significantly, the IPOB became one of the most organised and sophisticated Biafran separatist movements led by Nnamdi Kanu, a British citizen of Nigerian descent. Characteristically, MOSSOB and IPOB call for complete secession from Nigeria. Although very peaceful in their approach, both groups were often caught up in the brutality of the Nigerian security forces, resulting in several deaths and loss of property. Unlike the MASSOB, the IPOB group is strategic in its use of nonviolent methods to press forth their grievances. For instance, the use of Radio Biafra, based in London, a global network of membership support, financial and diplomatic affiliations in Europe and America, helped to mount pressure on the government of Muhammadu Buhari. The group receives significant financial support from its diaspora around the world (Nimfel & Anjide, 2022).

## **2.7 Political Ideologies and National Question in Nigeria**

The struggle for Nigeria's nationhood and its national question has divided the agitation into varying political ideologies and leanings; the Status quo, radical/revolutionary and the reformist. The actors in the status quo category believe that the present system of a quasi-unitary state with its governmental structure (federal, states and local governments) should be maintained, including the revenue sharing formula. The radical/revolutionary group consists of elements who are affected by the corporate existence of Nigeria. They see Nigeria as a fundamentally faulty colonial creation that thrives on injustice and is irredeemable. Thus, must be dismantled to allow constituents to pursue self-determination (secession). The reformist group, on the other hand, acknowledged that there exist many challenges with the nationhood of Nigeria, but dialogue and re-negotiation among the ethnic polities can resolve historical injustices and the structural imbalance decried by the radical/revolutionary group. Thus, the reformist group are the proponents of the idea of restructuring of Nigeria (Abdulyakeen, 2023).

## **2.8 Nigeria's Restructuring Dynamics**

Since Buhari assumed office as President of Nigeria in May 2015, there has been intensified agitation, especially by the IPOB group. Buhari's idiosyncratic leadership style was an impetus to the spread of Igbo sentiment against his government. His high-handedness, refusal to accept political solutions and contempt of court orders readily helped spread widespread sympathy for the IPOB. For instance, the leader of the IPOB, Nnamdi Kanu, was arrested and detained for almost two years on charges bordering on treason, the unauthorized running of the "Biafra Radio" and attempt to overthrow the government of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. He was arraigned and subsequently granted bail in several courts of jurisdiction, but Buhari's government refused to release him. The President was allegedly to have openly bragged during the Presidential Media Chat (a national broadcast TV interview) that Kanu could not be released despite being granted bail by the High Court. The government's punitive actions and prolonged detention turned Kanu into a celebrity.

Buhari's strategy of "crushing" all forms of agitations have portrayed his government in a bad light. Arguably, many observers viewed his actions as amounting to hatred against the Igbo people, coupled with his role as an active combatant during the 1967 civil war. Thus, the Igbos believed that his reaction stemmed from vindictiveness and ethnic bigotry. The brutality of the army and police against the group during several peaceful demonstrations across the nation has been described by Amnesty international as a crime



against humanity in its petition to the ICC and other international human rights organisations (Igwe & Ewuim, 2023).

Arguing for restructuring, one school of thought opined that successive military governments in Nigeria, mostly from the North, had managed to hold firm grip on the oil and gas sector. Oil and gas became a tool for political patronage. Oil blocks were mostly arbitrarily allocated to military ruling classes and their cronies without strict adherence to the rule of law. To consolidate power control by the North, states and local government councils were created in favour of one section of the country (Adunbi, 2020). Thus, many Nigerians believe that restructuring will correct the wrongdoing committed by past military rule in Nigeria.

Nigeria is currently grappling with the call for restructuring. The idea of restructuring is itself very confusing. Some proponents believed it was a legitimate call to address injustices in Nigeria without disintegrating the country. The others misconstrue it as another attempt to dismember the country. Although not the same, in response to the call for restructuring, Nigerian President Muhammadu Buhari during a 2017 independence broadcast warned that the impact of the civil war was very destructive and left severe human suffering. He argued that those who called for secession were not born during the war and therefore did not experience the horror of the war. He therefore recommends national debate and not undemocratic means of achieving illegality (BBC, 2021).

A counter-group believed to have been sponsored by some northern elements emerged. The Northern Youth Groups, in what was nicknamed “The Kaduna Declaration” gave the Igbos a three-month ultimatum to vacate northern Nigeria to their respective places of origin vis-à-vis Northerners and were directed to return back to the north. The group further warned the Igbos that all their properties would be confiscated. Given the magnitude of the threat to national security and the passive response of law enforcement agencies, it was believed that the diversionist elements had government support. The perpetrators were neither condemned nor arrested by the government. The president’s refusal to arrest the Arewa youth for the Kaduna declaration was considered partiality and a proxy of the government. The effect was the surging exodus of Igbos back to the South and the Hausa back to the north, vis-à-vis. It is recalled that similar threats and exodus occurred on the eve of the 1967 Biafran civil war (Nwakanma, 2017).

## **2.9 The All Progressives Congress (APC) and Restructuring Debates**

In a real sense, Nigeria has undergone different forms of structural and institutional change since its independence. Nigeria is not in a static state. Restructuring has taken place in many forms with nomenclatures such as regionalism, the creation of state and local governments, transition from a parliamentary to a presidential system of government, the adjustment of revenue allocation formula and the series of political and constitutional conferences held to address inherent structural challenges.

In pursuance of the various sectional interests, compelling pressure was exerted on the government to focus on addressing the “National Question” of restructuring the country. The demand for restructuring reached a peak during Buhari’s tenure. Pressure from different ethnic groups created a convergence of interest and became a monumental force that could not be resisted. In response to pressure from the government and its ruling party, the All Progressives Congress (APC) set up a Committee on True Federalism. The Committee was tasked with making findings on key issues in the restructuring debates.

After conducting public hearings and high-level consultations across the country, the APC committee on restructuring presented the following recommendations based on its terms of reference.

The report of the APC committee was widely acknowledged by political parties and ethnic groups as timely. However, in contradiction to the recommendation of the APC committee on restructuring, President Buhari, during his New Year's speech to the nation, rejected the idea of restructuring. He stated that the problem of Nigeria was more about process than the structure of the country (Ugbede, 2018).

## **2.10 Unpacking the Restructuring of Nigeria**

The term restructuring does not have any specific or precise definition. The term "restructuring" has gained its way into the jargon of Nigerian politics since the late 1990s and has become one of the most popular terms in the political dictionary of Nigeria. Lexical analysis of the word is key to understanding the context and its application in the political dynamics of Nigeria. Etymologically, restructuring is derived from root word "structure". Therefore, the restructuring comes from the addition of the prefix "re". A structure is a building or an object consisting of many parts. Restructure is the amendment of an existing structure due to deformity or inconsistencies. Hence, restructuring is aimed at enhancing or the need to enlarge the structure for inclusivity. Therefore, restructuring connotes a deliberate attempt to tamper with the pre-existing national structure of Nigeria due to its deformed institutional design to address the political realities and constitutional demands. Thus, restructuring has become a peaceful and constitutional approach to resolving Nigeria's national question labelled as true federalism (Harry, 2020).

Soyinka in 2017 defines "restructuring" as the deliberate overhaul of the entire fabric of the coexistence of the Nigerian polity to ensure an equitable, rational and decentralised model (Soyinka, 2017). He further points out that this makes governance responsive to deliver the dividend of democracy to the citizenry. Yet others have claimed that restructuring is nothing new. Since independence, the country has undergone different types of restructuring. This position has since been challenged, the so-called restructuring previously undertaken by the military ruling elite has been undemocratic and has lopsided in favour of the north. Thus, structuring is hinged on regional equity and social justice. The general lack of satisfaction among Nigerians on several issues of national importance has led to widespread calls across all segments of the country for constitutional changes that concern the need to reform the political and economic framework of the country. Several phrasal words have been used to describe the reform like restructuring, true federalism, fiscal federalism, resource control, devolution, regionalism others. Therefore, the restructuring calls for the postcolonial Nigerian state to be dismantled and reconfigured (restructured) to reflect the yearnings of its people (Abbas & Wakili, 2018).

The interpretation of restructuring has become a matter of public opinion held by sectional leaders. Nwanko opined that restructuring was the reinvention of the 1963 constitution and the reintroduction of regionalism through a new nomenclature called the six geopolitical zoning system. This allows the transfer of power from the central government to other components of the federation. The power of the central government will be limited to its influence on fiscal policies, military defence, foreign policy,

immigration, and national elections. Accordingly, the private sector argues that the structure of Nigeria needs to be altered to reduce the excessive power concentrated at the centre which comes with huge wastage of national resources (Agomuo & Akintunde, 2022).

On his part, Femi Falana (SAN), a highly respected Human Rights lawyer, upheld that the debate on the restructuring should not focus on the devolution of power to satisfy ethnic groups but should focus on economic restructuring. The economic aspect will address the superstructure of the challenges confronting Nigeria. Therefore, restructuring as conceptualized consists of two components: political and economic. The political dimension addresses the physical structure of how a country is constructed and constituted at the federal and local government levels. On the other hand, economic restructuring bears on fiscal issues such as revenue allocation, resource control, and the management of economic relations between the components of the federation. For instance, the economic imbalance can be illustrated by the current revenue formula, which allocates 52.68% of the total revenue generated in the country to the federal government, whereas the 36 States share 26.72%, and the remaining 20.60% goes to the 774 local governments (Falana, 2020).

The paucity of resources by states and local governments for infrastructure development is at the centre of the flawed revenue-sharing formula among the component units of the federation. The Southern Governors of Nigeria, for instance, unanimously condemned a situation where the productivity and revenue-generating capacities of most States are stifled by constitutional provisions that place considerable advantage at centre. Hence, turning states into begging from the central government to meet routine obligations, such as payment of worker's salaries and pensions. Thus, restructuring the country is the only way out of the political dependency on the federal government by the state governments, with plenty of state resources (Ogunbanjo, 2022).

Between 2002 and 2015, the country witnessed some form of economic restructuring, which saw reforms in banking, insurance, telecommunications, power, and rail transport. These reforms were intended to diversify the economy from oil and gas dependence. Later, the price of crude oil in the international market declined from a height of \$100 to below \$30. As an oil-dependent economy, reforms have become stunted. The resulting impact of the crash in oil prices left the country in an economic quagmire. The federal government and its component units cannot meet their financial obligations for recurring and capital project expenditure. Accordingly, the unemployment surge and the infrequent payment of salaries raised poverty and crime rates across the country. The economic meltdown caused frustration and political anger. The stage became ripe for inward looking for government reform on the one hand and the increasing demand for restructuring to allow states to generate and manage their resources. To this end, the federal government is called to resist unnecessary spending on centralised government institutions and devolve more power to states on issues such as the management of highways, waterways, Value Added Tax, lottery. In addition, to also liberalise the solid mineral sector, deregulate the downstream oil sector, and divest from power transmission. This will allow active private sector participation (Mitchell, 2016).

## **2.11 The Politics of Restructuring and General Elections in Nigeria**

Restructuring debate has always emerged at the eve of general elections in Nigeria especially during the 2015, 2019 and in 2023 general elections. In response to surging demands and the need to win elections, President Goodluck Jonathan, in 2014, convoked the National Political Conference. The conference gave Nigerian leaders, civil society members, ethnic nationalities and the organised labour had the opportunity to discuss the problems of Nigeria. The resolutions of the political conference were believed to have offered a consensus solution to the historical problems of Nigeria. Since then, the proponents of restructuring have driven hard their demands and pushed to canonise the conference report as the only roadmap for true federalism in Nigeria. As the 2019 general elections draw near, the call for restructuring is being trumpeted as a key political issue that will determine political interest across the country. Hence, restructuring dictates the political discourse, alignment and re-alignment of social and political forces to pursue national reforms. To underscore the importance of the restructuring impasse, Tunde Bakare argued that “Nigeria does not need an election come 2019 but needs renegotiation of its union”. Advising a return to the drawing board to redesign the structure of Nigerian federation.

Likewise, the Afenifere, the Yoruba socio-cultural organisation, insisted that restructuring would form the key issue for election in 2019 and would consequently determine who would become the next president. Hence, the 2019 election will be a binary choice between pro-restructuring and anti-restructuring presidential candidates. Additionally, the Ohanaeze Ndigbo (Umbrella Body for Igbo groups) vehemently insisted that the restructuring campaign was a ‘moving train’ that would destroy those on its track.

The ruling party led by has already shown internal factionalisation in the line of proponents and opponents of restructuring. Former Vice President Atiku Abubakar and the presidential flag bearer of the main opposition party, the People’s Democratic Party (PDP), have committed to country restructuring. This commitment will help the PDP return to power after the 2015 loss.

Thus, the 2019 and 2023 presidential elections both influenced political discourse on restructuring. More profound was the demand by the Southern governors for power rotation to the South to guarantee fairness and true federalism. During the 2023 general elections, the Southern hinged their political demand on restructuring and rotation of power to the south which saw the emergence of Ahmed Bola Tinubu as the president.

## **3.0 Methodology**

This paper used qualitative methodology to collect and analyse data on the complex issues surrounding Nigeria's political journey. The researchers relied on secondary sources of data to gather information for their study. These sources included books, journal articles, and online resources related to Nigeria's political landscape, historical context, and contemporary challenges. By using a variety of secondary sources, the researchers were able to gain a comprehensive understanding of the topic and access a wide range of perspectives on the issues of secession and restructuring in Nigeria. To analyse the collected data, the researchers used two main methods: thematic analysis and content analysis. Thematic analysis involved identifying recurring patterns and themes

within the gathered information. This approach allowed the researchers to organise the data into meaningful categories and draw connections between different aspects of the topic. Content analysis, on the other hand, focused on examining the specific details and context of the information found in the secondary sources. By combining these two analytical methods, the researcher was able to gain deep insights into the complexities of Nigeria's political situation and the potential outcomes of secession or restructuring.

#### **4.0 Discussion of Findings**

The need for a comprehensive constitutional change in Nigeria has been a long-standing issue, with various approaches proposed by governmental, civic, and ethno-regional groups. However, the lack of national consensus on the desirability and modality of such reforms has hindered the implementation of meaningful changes. The recurring debate on restructuring in Nigerian general elections reflects the deep-seated challenges facing the country's political system. Addressing these issues will require a comprehensive approach that considers the diverse interests and concerns of the nation's various stakeholders.

The overwhelming acceptance of restructuring across Nigeria means it can trigger unity or political crisis unless the central government finds the courage to devise a mechanism for restructuring the country. Obaze maintains that for the restructuring to take place, it must be collaborative and systematic in terms of redesigning Nigeria. However, he warned that if Nigeria does not restructure deliberately, it will be compelled by inherent political forces to do so, at the expense of violent conflict. Nigerians supporting restructuring across regions, religions, and ethnic groups shows the monumental impetus driving the idea. Thus, with highly influential social and political leaders as well as pan-sectional groups like Ohaneze Ndigbo, Afenifere, the Movement for National Reformation and the Patriots all backed the call for restructuring of Nigeria.

By and large, Nigeria has already been laid on the surgical table of regional politics. Will Nigeria be restructured? should the power of the central government will be devolved? These and many question beg for answers. If not, tensions and political conflicts will continue to persist and cause destabilisation of Nigeria.

#### **5.0 Conclusion and Recommendations**

The history of post-independence Nigeria can be pictured in its struggle for true federalism, which spans many decades. The intrigues and calls for restructuring continued to be intense. The democratic platform offered by the return to democratic rule since 1999 has been attributed to the desire for resource control and political power among elite and ethnic leaders. The idea that Nigeria is structurally over-centralised and that ignoring the call for restructuring poses a great threat to the corporate existence of the country has reached the peak. Various stakeholders across Nigeria support political and economic devolution as a viable solution for preventing violent national unrest. Early warnings have indicated that Nigeria is at the brink without a deliberate national dialogue to address its structural imbalance and institutional injustice created by colonialism through ethnic and religious jingoism. Therefore, restructuring is seen as a viable solution to Nigeria's prolonged socioeconomic and political challenges.

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