

THE INDIGENOUS PEOPLE OF BIAFRA: ANOTHER STAB AT BIAFRAN INDEPENDENCE

By Dr. Ashley N. Bybee

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In this May 28, 2017, file photo, Uboha Damia, a 75-year-old Biafra veteran, holds a Biafra flag as members of the Biafran separatist movement gathered during an event in Umuahia, Nigeria. (Source: AP Photo/Lekan Oyekanmi, File.)

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By Sarah Graveline

Eritrea, one of the most isolated countries on Earth, is best known for its struggling economy, widespread human rights violations, and the large percentage of its population that has fled the country. The international community has provided a pressure relief valve for these tensions by granting asylum to many Eritrean refugees, who then support relatives through remittances back home. Recent trends, such as declining remittances and Europe’s growing desire to limit Eritrean migration, are challenging this system and may encourage increased domestic unrest. [more...](#)

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In this file photo dated Friday, September 23, 2011, President Isaias Afwerki of Eritrea addresses the 66th session of the United Nations General Assembly at U.N. headquarters. (Source: AP Photo/Jason DeCrow, FILE.)

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IDA’s Africa team focuses on issues related to political, economic, and social stability and security on the continent.

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A Long History of Biafran Secessionist Activity

The desire for Biafran independence is almost as old as Nigeria itself. Nigeria received its independence from Great Britain in 1960. States in the eastern region of Nigeria, led by the Igbo ethnic group, declared their independence from Nigeria in 1967. A civil war ensued in which at least 1 million people lost their lives, most due to starvation. The war ended in 1970 when Biafran forces surrendered. Since then a number of groups advocating for a separate country for the people of southeast Nigeria have emerged. The Movement for the Actualisation of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) rose to prominence in the early 2000s, followed by the Biafra Zionist Federation, which took over the separatist reins in 2012. These groups have continued the [narrative](#) initiated by their predecessors, which accuses the Nigerian state of marginalizing the region by depriving it of public investment and economic development and failing to recognize the religious and ethnic differences that warrant an independent state of Biafra.

The Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB)

In 2014, a new wave of Biafran activists emerged, led by the dual Nigerian-British citizen Nnamdi Kanu. Kanu created IPOB after gaining popularity through his broadcasts on [Radio Biafra](#) from London, which he began in 2009. Soon after IPOB’s creation, Muhammadu Buhari, a northerner who was a young officer in the Nigerian army during the civil war, was elected as Nigerian president in March 2015. The impact of his election on the Biafran separatist movement was swift. Kanu was arrested in October 2015 on six counts of [treason](#) and subsequently [detained](#) without trial for one-and-a-half years. While Kanu was imprisoned, [Amnesty International](#) reported on the deadly repression of pro-Biafra activists by Nigerian security forces, who killed 150 activists between August 2015 and August 2016. Kanu was finally [released](#) on bail in April 2017 on the condition that he not engage the public on the matter of Biafran independence.

Recent Events and the Government Crackdown

Since September 2017, there has been a [heightened](#) military presence in southeastern Nigeria as part of [Operation Python Dance](#), which has the mission of cracking down on rising insecurity in the southeast, including secessionist agitation. On September 14, Kanu’s home was targeted in an alleged army raid. According to Kanu’s family, he and many other IPOB members have not been seen since. The following day, a military spokesman [refuted](#) the assertion that the raid was led by the army, [referring](#) to IPOB as a “militant terrorist organization” (a declaration the government [recanted](#) days later, calling it a “pronouncement” instead). On September 20, a Federal

High Court in Abuja declared the IPOB's activities in [violation](#) of the provisions of the Terrorism Prevention Act of 2011. Since then social, print, and online media reports have [reported](#) the discovery of the corpses of 28 IPOB members apparently killed by Nigerian soldiers and placed in the bush near Kanu's home, fueling speculation that the Nigerian government was behind this attack in an effort to silence the Biafran separatist activists.

Looking Ahead

IPOB appears to appeal to the region's younger generation, but its support among the older generation is limited. It is the opinion of several influential elites, including former [President Obasanjo](#) (who was a senior Nigerian commander during the civil war) and Igwe Christopher Ejiofor (a [prominent Igbo King](#) who fought for Biafra), that IPOB represents legitimate grievances but that its goal of independence is unrealistic. Rather, they encourage the Nigerian government to engage the southeast in a meaningful dialogue that addresses economic development and prospects for a better future. In contrast, President Buhari's recent response to all security threats in Nigeria, including Biafran agitation, has been to [instruct](#) the Service chiefs to address those problems militarily. His public comments have been similarly [uncompromising](#): "Nigeria's unity is settled and not negotiable. We shall not allow irresponsible elements to start trouble, and when things get bad they run away and saddle others with the responsibility of bringing back order, if necessary with their blood."

Conclusion

At present, IPOB has neither the resources to pose a significant threat to the Nigerian government in the southeast nor the widespread support required to mobilize the population. Its main strength may turn out to be the unintended consequences of the government's oppressive response. [Preventing](#) freedom of assembly and [arresting](#) nonviolent protesters may reinforce IPOB's claims of marginalization and mistreatment. Moreover, if the Nigerian government or army is found to be complicit in the death of Nnamdi Kanu and many other IPOB members, the government may have succeeded in making him a martyr, potentially inspiring IPOB to adopt a more aggressive stance.

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Revolutionary Government Turned Sour

Eritrea, a small country bordering the Red Sea, has an estimated [population](#) of 5.9 million. It [broke](#) away from Ethiopia in 1991 after 30 years of civil war. Rebel leader Isaias Afwerki officially became President in 1993. Initially popular, Afwerki has grown increasingly authoritarian and unpopular. The 2016 [report](#) of a UN Commission of Inquiry described a system of government in which political elites are kept under control through arbitrary detention and torture.

Ethiopia and Eritrea enjoyed a brief period of good relations, but disagreement over their shared border led to conflict in 1998. While the countries signed a ceasefire in 2000, there have been occasional minor [clashes](#) along the border, and tensions remain high. In 2009, the UN sanctioned Eritrea for [supplying weapons](#) to al-Shabaab in an effort to undermine Ethiopian operations in Somalia.

Life in the Black Box

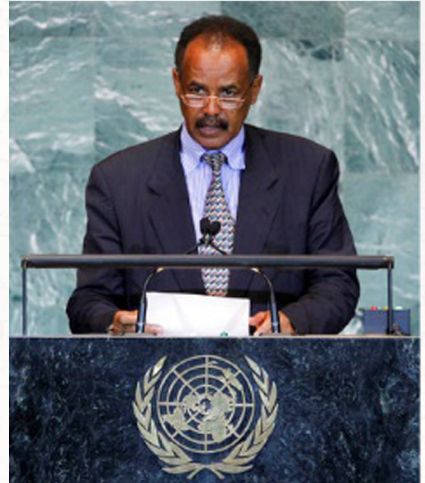
Today, Eritrea is one of the most closed-off countries in the world. It ranks second to last, ahead of only North Korea, in Reporters without Borders' [2017 World Press Freedom Index](#). The Eritrean government does not publish economic indicators and denies access to humanitarians, making it difficult to monitor domestic conditions. Most information comes from [dissidents](#) who report that conditions within the country remain dire.

Eritrea's government claims that its long-running conflict with Ethiopia is to blame for its most unpopular policy: indefinite conscription. Citizens between ages 18 and 40 are required to serve the state for an unspecified period, either in the military or through civilian service, in conditions activists [describe](#) as "forced labor."

Economic Challenges an Increasing Concern

Eritrea's economy has traditionally been limited, but self-reliant. Its government refused to accept most [foreign assistance](#) following its 1991 victory over Ethiopia. With little domestic infrastructure, a large portion of its income has come from remittances. Eritrea requires citizens living outside the country to pay a [2 percent tax](#) on income. In addition, individual Eritreans rely on money remitted directly from relatives abroad. In 2005, [remittances](#) were estimated to account for roughly 30 percent of Eritrea's GDP.

A 2016 Atlantic Council report estimates that remittances have [declined](#) significantly since 2005. A 2015 [BBC](#) report noted that the Eritrean government recognized the challenges posed by declining remittance income and quoted one



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Eritrean official, who attributed the decline to the diaspora, which now was “spending the money on helping people leave Eritrea instead of supporting relatives at home.”

This challenge of declining remittances was compounded by the government’s [2015 decision](#) to recall existing currency, which was to be replaced with new bills. To complete the transfer, Eritreans would have to declare the source of their earnings and pay heavy fines on currency earned outside Eritrea’s formal economy. The move effectively wiped out the savings of citizens who did not keep their money in Eritrean banks.

Financial hardship has driven Eritrea’s government to allow some foreign investment. In 2011, it opened a [gold mine](#) in a joint venture with the Canadian firm Nevsun Resources, and in 2016 it opened another mine through a joint partnership with a Chinese firm. Government officials say they intend to have four mines in production by 2018.

The new mines have been a [positive](#) for the government because they have brought a much-needed influx of foreign reserves. Their impact on Eritrean citizens is mixed. The mines have yet to create many [jobs](#) for Eritreans, and some former employees have [sued](#) for being forced to work in the mine as part of their national conscription service. Overall, it seems unlikely that the mines will provide the economic opportunity needed to ease domestic pressures.

Migration as a Form of Protest

Despite the lack of civic and economic opportunities in Eritrea, domestic opposition has been limited. According to opposition activists, on October 30 and 31, 2017, Eritrean security forces [allegedly killed](#) 28 protesters in the country’s capital, Asmara. The protests were limited in scope, aiming only to stop the government from closing an [Islamic school](#), not to oppose government policies more broadly.

Rather than publicly opposing the government, many Eritreans have chosen to flee. Large-scale emigration from Eritrea has become an indicator of poor domestic conditions. Between 2012 and 2016, the [UN estimated](#) that a total of 9 percent of Eritrea’s population fled the country. This includes high-profile cases. For example, members of Eritrea’s [football team defect](#) nearly every time the team plays abroad. Even President Afwerki’s son allegedly [attempted to defect](#) in 2015.

Recently, however, migration has become a more precarious option as European countries have taken steps to limit the number of Eritreans granted asylum. In 2015, the EU provided Eritrea a [grant of €200 million](#) to limit migration, and the [UK](#) and [Switzerland](#) have begun to debate whether their countries should accept fewer Eritrean asylum seekers.

Conclusion

Despite Eritrea’s longstanding challenges, there does not currently appear to be enough domestic pressure to force political change at home. As it becomes more difficult for Eritreans to claim asylum abroad, however, this calculus may change. Without revenue from remittances or hope of a viable path out of conscripted service and into financial self-sufficiency, Eritreans may become more willing to risk confronting the government over its seemingly unsustainable policies.

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