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IDENTITY ISSUES IN THE NIGERIAN CIVIL WAR: THE MIDWEST EPISODE

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Abstract

The Nigerian civil war fought between July 1967 and January 1970 has been significantly investigated by scholars. However, in its historiography, due emphasis has not been given to inherent identity issues in the war. Historical evidence abounds that in the war, there were problems of group's interests and identity. Consequent upon the Biafran invasion of the Midwest on August 9, 1967, the difficulty in identifying groups that were strongly opposed and as well loyal to the Biafran and the Nigerian government began to brew. This paper is a curious attempt to unravel identity problems in the Midwest following the Biafran invasion of the region. Gleaning on primary and secondary evidences, the paper contends that the Biafran

invasion of the Midwest triggered tension between the loyalists and the antagonists of Biafra and the federal forces respectively. It finds and argued that the tension invariably created identity issues as the Biafran and Federal forces were caught in-between the challenges of identifying and isolating the loyalists from the rival groups. Against the background of this diffused problem of identity, the paper concludes that while some group elements were rightly identified, others were identified wrongly and subjected to inhuman treatment and others still, were summarily killed.

KEYWORDS: Federal, Identity, War, Group, Inhuman, Treatment

Introduction

Scholars have been unanimous that the first military coup of January 15, 1967 and the counter coup of July 1967 with the attendant conflicts were responsible for the Nigerian civil war. The coup led to the series of events which finally ended in civil unrest. The news of the January 15, 1967 coup was initially received with nationwide celebration. People were happy in the hope that the military intervention would end the high rate of corruption and ethnic tension in the country. However, when the pattern of killing in the coup was revealed, the Northerners felt that they have been short changed.¹ This resulted to riots in the Northern part of the

country where Igbo and other southerners were killed. The killing of Igbo in the North was a revenge over the death of Northern politicians in the January coup. The Northerners went further to stage a counter coup in July, 1967 in which the Head of State, Major General Aguiyi Ironsi, an Igbo and other southerners were killed. The Igbo also carried out reprisal attack on Northerners living in the Eastern region in which Northerners were killed.²

Pongri notes that:

From January to July 1966 tension increased rather than subside. The July counter coup, in which the Head of state, Major General JTG Aguiyi Ironsi and many other Igbo army officers and civilians were killed, things got out of control as law and order nearly broke down completely.³

After all the efforts to resolve the conflict failed, at the initiative of the Ghanaian Head of State, General A. A. Afrifa⁴ the parties in the conflict gathered at Aburi in January, 1967 for a meeting to resolve the conflict. It appeared at first that the Aburi meeting had introduced a solution to the conflict but the issue of interpretation deepened the prevailing tension in the country.⁵

As the various peace talks could not end the conflict, Lt. Col. Yakubu Gowon created ten states on May 27, 1967.⁶ Gowon had hoped to address the crisis with the states creation. It was meant to separate the oil producing Niger Delta from the Eastern region. The thinking was to destroy the economic strength of the region with the hope that it will make Ojukwu to soft pedal.⁷ The creation of the state was significant in pushing Ojukwu to proclaim the Republic of Biafra on May 30, 1967.⁸ Gowon regarded Ojukwu's action as "rebellion which must be crushed"⁹ declaring that he had the duty to preserve and protect the oneness of the country. In attempt to stop the disintegration of the country, the civil war started in July, 1967.¹⁰

The Midwest was created on August 9, 1967 and it became the fourth region in Nigeria. Following the creation of twelve states on May 27, 1967 by Gowon, the region was constituted as Midwestern State.... Before the creation of Midwest, the area was part of the western region with Ibadan as the capital. The area comprised of Urhobo, Itsekiri, Ijaw, Etsako, Igbo, Edo, Esan and Owan.¹¹

When the war broke out, Brigadier David Ejoor, the military administrator of the Midwestern region made his position known that the Midwest will not be used as launching ground by the federal forces against Biafra.¹² This invariably means that until the Biafran incursion into Midwest on August 9, 1967, the area did not experience military confrontation occasioned by the war.¹³ Following the Biafran invasion of Midwest, there were issues of groups interests and the difficulty in identifying the protagonist and antagonist of the Biafran and the Nigerian government. This paper therefore examines the problems of identity in the Nigerian civil war using the Midwest as a case study.

Conceptualizing Identity

Identity is "who a person is, or the qualities of a person or group that makes them different from others."¹⁴ Information like name, date of birth, state and local government of origin, nationality can prove who a person is. As a result of the Biafran invasion of Midwest on August 9, 1967, the federal and Biafran forces faced the challenge of identifying those who were loyal or opposed to them.

Identity Issues in Biafran Occupation of Midwest

The invasion of Midwest on August 9, 1967 created hostility between the Midwestern Igbo groups like Ika, Oshimili, Aniocha, Ukwuani and the non-Igbo groups like Benin, Isoko, Itshekiri, Ijaw, Etsako, Owan and Esan. However, the Western Igbo and the non-Igbo groups initially had sympathy for the Biafrans due to the persecution they went through in the hands of the Northerners. Another factor that initially attracted them to the plight of Biafrans was that in all the various crisis like the 1966 pogrom, some of them almost suffered the same fate as the Igbo. At the height of the killings in the North, every Southerner was a target. A lot of people from the Midwest were forced to come back home. On this Ejemheare writes:

In 1966, the Midwest rehabilitation committee registered 50,000 indigenes who had returned home. Some of them had lost their parents, property and means of livelihood. Midwesterners returning from the North were transported to Benin to their respective homes at a cost of £12,000 to the Midwestern government. Nonetheless, Midwesterners were among the

groups in Nigeria who suffered from both sides in the war. At the height of the crisis in 1966, Ojukwu made a proclamation ordering all non-Eastern region elements out of the East. More than 15,000 Midwesterners were affected by Ojukwu's decision. The Midwesterners were now faced with the situation of running back home from both the North and East.¹⁵

The Biafran invasion of Midwest turned indecision to anger at what the people called unprovoked attack. The Midwesterners had expected Biafrans to direct their forces towards their enemy (the Hausa/Fulani). The Midwesterners before the invasion were sympathetic toward the Biafran cause. Their position before the Midwest invasion was affirmed by Obasanjo:

This was the turning point of the civil war. Ojukwu had made a very costly mistake by subverting the neutral if not sympathetic government of Midwest states and by invading the West. He compounded the mistake by his air raids on, and attempts through their agents to blow up installations in Lagos. The non-Igbo Midwesterners and the Yorubas suddenly became fully aware of the dangers of Igbo domination," oppression and maladministration that would be their

lot if their land should be conquered and occupied. The war had been ruthlessly brought to the homes of non-Igbo speaking people of the Midwest and dangerously close to the doors of the Yoruba speaking people of the West and Lagos. This in a way rallied these different groups solidly behind the federal military government in its effort to crush the rebellion and as a result of that gamble and miscalculation by Ojukwu, many young men from this area reported for recruitment.¹⁶

The invasion destroyed the attention the Biafrans had achieved from the Midwestern people, with their propaganda. The Midwesterners, especially the non-Igbo groups saw Biafrans in their domain without their consent and so there was apprehension on the part of the people over the role they would play under Biafra.

Ejemheare notes:

With the violation of their territorial integrity, the desire of the youth of the area was strengthened to join the federal army to defend the area. Thus, when Anthony Enahoro called on the youth of the Midwest in Lagos to join the federal forces to liberate the area, the youth happily turned out.¹⁷

In most cases, the Midwesterners that fought on the side of

the Biafrans were either conscripted or were in the Eastern region when the war started. Most people from the region joined the federal army and there must have been some reason for that. In the first place, the people were comfortable with the newly created Midwestern region and they were a major player in the political composition of the country. The people believed that they would be highly subjugated under the Biafrans. They were opposed to domination by the Igbo as the Igbo were opposed to domination by the Hausa-Fulani.

At the height of the crisis, the hope of everyone was their region. They included the Igbo, Hausa-Fulani and the people of the Midwest. This made everyone to realize the importance of their place of origin. Midwesterners in the Northern region ran back home as a result of the pogrom in the North and in the East where they were expelled by a state edict. It must be emphasized that Ojukwu declared that non-Easterners should vacate the East at the height of the crisis. This made everyone to realize the importance of their place of origin.¹⁸

As stated earlier, when the war broke out, the Midwestern

region was initially not affected by the war. The area was filled up with displaced returnees from the Northern and the Eastern region with economic and social activities going on: schools, hospitals, and markets were operating; farmers were going to their farms. The Biafran invasion of the Midwest "gave non-Eastern Nigerians the impression that the Biafran's objectives were not limited to self-defense, but that it also had ambition for territorial expansion"¹⁹ Frederick Forsyth declares that; "Ojukwu was at pains to placate the non-Igbo majority of the Midwest and to assure them that he bore them no harm."²⁰ The non-Igbo groups in the Midwest regarded the Biafran invasion of its territory as an army of occupation meant to bring about the domination of the state by the Igbo element of the state. Ogbemudia declared that the Biafra forces invaded the Midwest with the collaboration of Western Igbo officers in the 4th Area Command in Benin.²¹ Ejemheare affirms:

The infiltration into the Midwest by Biafran troops took the state by surprise as there was no resistance from the federal army in the 4th Area Command dominated by Western Igbo officers. The Non-Igbo groups like Benin,

Itshekiri, Urhobo, Esan and Ijaw regarded it as a deliberate plan by the Western Igbo to dominate the state. They regarded the early statement made by Col. C. D. Nwawo, the commander of the 4th Area Command as a political statement intended to give the people a false sense of security.²²

The Biafrans had expected cooperation from the 4th Area command dominated by the Western Igbo. Weapons were withdrawn from non-Igbo soldiers at check point in the 4th Area command. This is an indication that this group would have resisted the Biafran incursion into the state if there were no underlying agenda. The suspicion that the non-Igbo groups would resist the Biafrans in Midwest had earlier been entertained by Ojukwu.²³ Some Midwestern Igbos had wanted the Igbo speaking parts of the Midwest to be merged with the Biafran State. One of them was Major Albert Okonkwo who was appointed as Military Administrator of the Midwest by Ojukwu. Ogbemudia affirms thus:

Major Albert Oknonkwo was no doubt, one of those who had worked and hoped for an Igbo 'resorgimento' in the

Midwest. This is the group that favoured the merger of the Igbo speaking area of the Midwest with their kith and kin in the East. In fact a number of notable traditional rulers in the Igbo speaking area confessed to me later when I became the military governor that they had subscribed to a petition calling for such a merger out of fear and persuasion by some army officers who felt that a merger was the only logical arrangement.²⁴

This became an area of contention as the non-Igbo groups rejected such a merger. "The non-Igbo groups wanted the state to remain as it was from the time it was carved out from the Western region."²⁵ However, there were some Midwestern Igbos who were against the merger and the Biafran invasion of Midwest but were afraid to openly make their position known for fear of persecution. The new Biafran dispensation favoured the Western Igbos, while the non-Igbo groups lived in anxiety as torture, abduction and death of non-Igbo group increased within the period. The Biafran onslaught on the non-Igbo groups pushed them to form underground local resistant groups.²⁶ The non-Igbo groups voluntarily supported all attempt to resist the Biafran despite their early attempt to win the

heart and minds of the these groups.

The Biafrans became hostile towards the non-Igbo groups as a result of their resistance toward them. On September 25, 1967 a plan to kill non-Igbo groups in the Mid-West was uncovered in Benin:

A plot by the rebels to kill all non-Igbo speaking people in the Midwestern state has been uncovered by military authorities in Benin, following the recapture of important towns in the state. According to the plan, the rebels were to kill non-Igbos in the state today, September 25, and identity cards had been issued to Igbos in the state which they would produce when asked to do so by the rebel soldiers. The plan to kill the non-Igbo groups was due to their resistance and mass disobedience against the Biafran occupation. Other Midwesterners outside the state also joined in rejecting Biafran occupation of the state. The leader of the Midwesterners in Kaduna, Mr. J. A. Ameh, denounced and condemned the Biafran regime in the Midwest. The leader maintained that Midwesterners have not mandated Biafrans to pull the state out of the federation.

The non-Igbo Midwesterners in Lagos vehemently rejected and denounced the Biafran occupation. More than 20,000 Isoko and Urhobo people

resident in Lagos identified with other non-Igbo Midwesterners to pledge their support to the fight to liberate the state from Biafran occupation.²⁷

Okoedion Ehi notes that those that could not mention the name of their Onogie (King) or speak Esan language were suspected to be spies and killed by Biafrans. Ehi revealed that the Uromi people were not prepared to support Biafra being the place of Anthony Enahoro, the federal commissioner of information and labour.²⁸ The question could proof of origin be left to language and knowing one's king? At road blocks during the war, a man is expected to identify himself by speaking his language.²⁹ The use of language and knowing the name of one's king as means of identification was used by Biafrans in all parts of Midwest. There are people that could only speak the language of where they were born. The war resulted in the movement of people from where they were born to their places of origin. If the proof of origin is the test of language, it therefore means that the people born outside their place of origin are in serious trouble. It must be emphasized that after independence, most Job seekers' destination was the North and this

was as a result of the educational imbalance between North and South. This resulted in high rate of intermarriage. A lot of their offspring could only speak the language of their host community.

Chief Philips Ekeoba revealed that in Ewohimi, the Biafrans mounted a road block at Okaigben and anybody passing was arrested and taken to Ekpon. Chief Ekeoba said he was arrested on his way to the farm with Mr. Francis Omanda, Mr. Ekenfoh Osojehon, Mr. Okolo Omondiagbe. Their offence was that the Biafran forces mistook them as those reconnoitering the area ahead of the advance of federal troops. While Francis Omanda and Ekenfoh were killed immediately, Chief Ekeoba and Mr. Okolo were taken to Ekpon for detention. According to Ekeoba, the Biafrans would have killed all of them, but for the want of intelligence information from them. In Ekpon detention cell, they met 23 other people behind the bar for the same offence of wrong identification and the 23 were later killed and buried in a mass grave which the people were commanded to dig. The detention cell did not have secured door. Consequently, when the two Biafran guards were sleeping, they forced the door open and escaped.³⁰

Chief Ekeoba also revealed that Alade and Peter, both sons of the Onogie of Irrua and staff of Midwest Oil Palm Development Company, Ewohimi were killed on September 23, 1967 on suspicion of reconnoitering for the federal forces. One Ewossa, a carpenter was killed by Biafran troops because he identified himself as being Ewossa which Biafran troops mistook or understood as Hausa. In most parts of Midwest, Biafran troops killed a lot of mad people because they were seen by them as reconnoitering in preparation for the advancement of the federal forces. Monday Osagieahon said that the Biafrans occupied Ewohimi Modern Primary School (now Ewohimi Primary School). They molested young girls and because of this, the carrying of a baby became a qualification for women to pass Biafran's road block or else they would be captured by the Biafran soldiers. This therefore means that married women without children were in trouble.

The Biafrans were particular about those they perceived to be Hausa. Benin as the region's capital had a lot of Muslim population from the Midwest with Islamic names and dressing

culture. The Biafran forces killed a lot of them because they mistook them for Hausas. Shaba Bashiru Oaikhena revealed that in Ewu and other parts of Etsako, it was difficult for Biafran forces to separate the Hausas from the local people as they appeared Hausa- like. Most Etsako indigenes are Muslims and they bear Hausa and Muslim names. Consequently, if name and appearance were the yardstick of identity, a lot of Ewu and Etsako people would have been killed. The Biafrans knew this and they had no choice but to adopt a different approach of not being ruthless with the people.³¹ One Mr. Ejemheare Momodu from Ugboha in Esan was arrested by Biafran troops because Momodu was his name. The king of the place latter came to identify him and he was released.³² Stephen Ebozele disclosed that one Etsako man who appeared like Hausa was mistakenly killed by the Biafran troops in Ugbugum.³³ Mr. Shaibu from Auchi said that his brother Braimon was killed in Warri because the Biafran mistook him for Hausa.³⁴ After the discovery of oil, Warri became the destination of most job seekers in Midwest. A lot of Muslim population in the Midwest took the advantage. The Biafran forces would mistake them for

Hausas and many of them were killed.

Identity Issues in Federal Forces Occupation of Midwest

The second Division meant to liberate the Midwest, was hurriedly formed under the command of Col. Murtala Mohammed.³⁵ "On recapturing Benin-City, the state capital, Col. Murtala Mohammed made a broadcast to the people that the liberation of the Midwest state had been achieved..."³⁶ On September 20, 1967, the Midwest was cleared of Biafran forces just as Major Albert Okonkwo was proclaiming the independent and sovereign Republic of Benin. By the end of that day, the federal forces had completed the liberation of the city.³⁷ With the take-over of Midwest by the federal forces, the non-Igbo groups like Urhobo Esan, Etsako, Itshekiri, Ijaw, Benin and Owan started killing the Igbos in retaliation of what they had suffered in the hands of Igbo groups when the Biafran army invaded the state. In Benin, the non-Igbo groups were assisting the federal troops to identify the Igbos. Jorre revealed the mass killing of Igbos:

Similar massacres occurred in Benin and other Mid-Western towns, again perpetrated mainly by non-Igbo civilians though sometimes federal soldiers would join in when the victims

had been pointed out to them. Signs like; 'Urhobo man lives here 'Benin man's shop' or One Nigeria suddenly appeared on people's door and, inevitably, many old scores were settled before law and order returned.³⁸

The non-Igbo groups were unlike those that had given their allegiance to the Biafrans who were forced to flee to escape persecution when the federal troops arrived. Immediately after the federal take-over of the region, the non-Igbo groups stayed behind and were jubilating. Thus the people were not converted by the federal government. The position of being a strong protagonist to the federal cause tended to unite the non-Igbo groups together in the Midwest. This was despite the warning by Major Albert

Okonkwo against supporting the Federal Government:

If we search our hearts aright, we know that the Lagos Government does not represent the true aspiration of the people of the region.... It is to this end that I have been called upon to assume control of the Government of Midwest. I call upon every person in this territory to keep calm. It is in the interest of everyone to ensure that no one attempt to embarrass the Government in anyway.³⁹

The warning perhaps was a mere threat to convert the people to the Biafran cause. Major Okonkwo had earlier stressed the reluctance of the people to cooperate with his government. Okonkwo, "stated that although people were free, there is the sign of reluctance, irrespective of that, cooperation is necessary...."⁴⁰

Places like Warri, Sapele, Uromi, Illushi, Benin, Auchi, Agbor and Asaba had high population of Igbo people. Consequently, the arrival of the federal forces made them to go into hiding since their allegiance to the Biafra could not be doubted. The Massacre of Igbo civilians occurred in all major towns in Midwest. For example, in Uromi, Warri, Asaba, Benin, Auchi and Sapele the killing of Igbo was perpetrated by the federal forces in collaboration with civilians as they were responsible for identifying the Igbo civilians. As the federal troops attacked the Biafran troops in major towns, panic set in among them and they ran in all direction, some throwing away their Biafran uniforms and guns. Ojiefoh revealed that in Uromi:

The Biafrans were retreating, running and throwing their guns away. The fleeing Biafran soldiers pulled away their uniforms asking farmers in the bushes the way to Agbor. Few vehicles

have been commanded by the officers
in their flight to the Niger Bridge.⁴¹

As the Midwest was being liberated in September, the non-Igbo youths quickly showed the federal forces shops and houses of the Igbo. The youths and the federal forces looted the stores and Igbo's properties. After this, there was killing of the Igbo in major town like Warri, Ughelli, Benin, Uromi, Ubiaja, Auchi, Ehor, Sapele, and Ekpoma. The civilian youths were responsible for identifying the Igbo.

The role played by Midwesterners in identifying the Igbo before they were massacred by the federal troops is seen by many as an attempt to avoid the killing of Midwesterners in place of the Igbo. However, Midwesterners' dislike for Igbo predated the civil war. The Igbo were accused of taking over all aspects of the socio-economic sector of the region. Consequently, the war became an opportunity for the Midwesterners to address long held animosity with the Igbo. According to John Okhohere, the war became constructive for the Midwesterners as it gave them the opportunity to take over their economy that was hitherto in the hands of the Igbo.⁴²

Chinua Achebe revealed that; "Nigerians of all other ethnic groups will probably achieve consensus on no other matter than their common resentment of the Igbo."⁴³ Achebe further said that "the civil war gave Nigeria a perfect and legitimate excuse to cast the Igbo in the role of treasonable felony."⁴⁴ Igbo people are known to have contributed their quota to the advancement of wherever they found themselves in Nigeria. According to Chinua Achebe:

The origin of the national resentment of the Igbo is as old as Nigeria and quite as complicated. But it can be summarized thus: The Igbo culture being receptive to change, individualistic and highly competitive, gave the Igbo man an unquestioned advantage over his compatriots in securing credentials for advancement in Nigeria....⁴⁵

The commercial success and the economic prosperity of the Igbo gave them the control of the lucrative sector of the host community and some measure of economic strength that are also equal to political and economic power. This often relegates the host community to the background and is highly resented by the host community.⁴⁶

Notwithstanding, there are Midwesterners that protected the Igbo from the federal forces attack in the cause of the liberation of the Midwest. For example, chief Idogun Cletus revealed that some Igweben people hid their Igbo friends until they were able to escape. He revealed further that Igweben people demonstrated in front of the Army Recruitment Centre when some Midwestern Igbo were arrested by the federal forces. The demonstration led to the release of the people after they were tortured. This is unthinkable as the Western Igbo groups were believed to have collaborated with Biafran forces to take over Midwest⁴⁷ and this did not go well with other non-Igbo groups. This is a reflection that despite the fact that the Biafran invasion of Midwest resulted in a quarrel between the Midwestern Igbo groups and the non-Igbo groups, some non-Igbo groups still took them as brothers. This means that some non-Igbo groups had already reconciled with the Igbo groups in the Midwest before the end of the war.

The federal forces were more ferocious on the Western Igbo because of their suspected collaboration with the Biafran forces. Some non-Igbo communities that maintain boundary with

the Western Igbo were mistaken for Igbo communities. For example, the federal troops made up mainly of Northerner soldiers had thought that Igweben, Ewohimi, Ekpon and Uronigbe were Western Igbo. Consequently, they had started maltreating the local populace before they were educated that the people were not Western Igbo.⁴⁸ In Ekpon, Igbeta Smart said the federal forces were shelling massively as they advanced towards Ekpon despite the fact that Biafran forces had left the area. From Ebelle, they entered the area with massive shooting on October 1, 1967. The federal forces had expected formidable resistance from Ekpon since Biafran forces were attacking some parts of Esan from there and again, the federal forces erroneously took Ekpon to be one of the Western Igbo communities that collaborated with the Biafran forces. The reaction of the Ekpon people to the Biafran forces and the federal troops was dramatic. To the Biafran forces, when they were questioned, they answered with Ika Igbo language which Fredrick Forsyth described as ⁴⁹ "first cousin to the Igbo of Biafra."⁵⁰ To the federal forces, they responded with Esan language. Ekpon is an Esan community and is located in the boundary between Esan

and Ika. They speak both Esan and Ika language.

Notwithstanding, the commander of the federal forces that liberated Ekpon, Major Josai Agbe, a native of Epon was able to clear the air. The massive shooting by the federal forces as they were advancing had made the local populace to run to the bush but Major Agbe was able to convince them in their local language to come out. Thus, the people came out from hiding while jubilating and shouting "One Nigeria". The people happily demonstrated their support for the federal cause not minding the ethnic affiliation to the Western Igbo.⁵¹ Mr. Okuekhamen Sylvester revealed that Mr. Sunday Agholor hanged himself when he heard of the massive shooting of the federal troops when they were advancing to Ekpon. According to the informant, the man said he would rather kill himself instead of being killed by the troops. The federal forces sought the cooperation of the local people on how to locate Biafran troops and they complied by showing them the escape routes of the Biafran forces.⁵²

Conclusion

This study focused on the issue of identity in the Nigerian

civil war using the Midwest as case study. The Biafran incursion into Midwest created tension between the protagonists and antagonists of the Biafran and the Nigerian government. The challenges of identifying groups that were loyal and opposed to the Biafran and the federal government came to bear as a result of the tension. The Western Igbo groups like Oshimili, Aniocha, Ika and Ukuani were mostly loyal to the Biafran government and antagonist of the Nigerian government. The non-Igbo groups like Benin, Esan, Isoko, Itshekiri, and Ijaw were opposed to the Biafran government and loyal to the Nigerian government. While some groups were rightly identified, others were wrongly identified, maltreated and killed. The Biafran invasion of Midwest remained the greatest mistake made by the secessionist.⁵³ The Midwest is a region of its own. Their decision to secede from the republic of Nigeria should not be the obligation of outsiders.

Today, the civil war remains the most traumatic moment in Nigeria's journey to nationhood. The issues that led to the war like corruption, ethnic bigotry and unbridled desire to control the centre are still with us. While true federalism can make the centre

unattractive, strong institutions could go a long way to minimize corruption.

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