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POLITICAL DEFECTIONS AND DEMOCRATIC STABILITY IN NIGERIA

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Abstract
Political defections are a recurring feature in sundry democratic systems, especially in developing societies where party systems are fundamentally weak. Though political defections are justified as part of legitimate expression of individual freedom of association, the opportunistic nature and frequency raise vital concerns about stability and consolidation of democracy. This article interrogates the nexus between political defections and democratic stability, with emphasis on the causes, implications, and likely solutions. The paper draws literature and theoretical perspectives to explain how defections impact governance, institutional growth, party cohesion, and public trust. Findings reveal that political defections destabilise democracy, especially personal ambition and quest for material gains instead of ideological alignment. The paper concludes by recommending stronger civic education, internal party democratization, and institutional reforms, as methods to mitigate the destructive effects of defections.

Keywords: political defections, democratic stability, governance, institutionalization

Introduction
After experiencing more than a fair share of military excesses, traumatised Nigerians poured into the streets in May 1999 to bask in the euphoria of the ouster of the last authoritarian regime that had held her by the jugular. So, it was with considerable optimism that Nigerians looked forward to the dawn of a new era under the Obasanjo-led civilian rule. In those halcyon days, the masses who were largely at the receiving end of the monumental atrocities perpetrated by the vile military regimes widely believed that democracy holds the ace to ending the decades of misgovernance, maladministration and failed leadership (Umoru, 2025).

Democracy is acknowledged as the best governance organising framework due to its emphasis on accountability, freedom of choice, participation, and stability. Pivotal to the efficient functioning of democracy are political parties, which aggregate citizens' interests, provide legitimate platforms for recruiting leaders, and formulation of policies. Unfortunately, political parties in emerging democracies like Nigeria face considerable challenges that undermine their capability to stabilize democracy. One of these troubling challenges is the increasing incidence of political defections, also known as party switching or cross carpeting.

Political defections arise when elected politicians abandon the party platform through which they won their election for another, without relinquishing the mandate to the voters. This phenomenon, though pervasive in both matured and emerging democracies, have particularly destabilizing effects in jurisdictions with fragile institutions. For instance, rather than been motivated by ideological

commitments, defections in Africa, Latin America and Asia, are mostly motivated by selfish and inordinate ambition, alignment with the government in power to secure unfettered access to patronage, and material gains.

This paper investigated the link between political defections and democratic stability. Specifically, it aims to find answer to the following questions:

1. What factors fuel political defections?

2. In what ways do defections affect governance and democratic stability?

3. What legal and institutional mechanisms can mitigate the effects of defections?

The paper has seven sections. After the introduction, the literature review examines the empirical and theoretical debates on defections. While the third section discusses theoretical frameworks, the fourth analyses the causes of defections. The fifth section discusses the dire implications of defections for democratic stability. Section six offers' recommendations, and the seventh section concludes the articles.

Literature Review

Unsurprisingly, the recurring manifestation of the phenomenon of political defections in various democracies has attracted considerable attention from sociologists and political scientists (Kura, 2019; Omotola, 2020; Egbu, 2025; Uthman, 2025; Amaize, et.al, 2025). Consequently, scholars evaluated the subject matter from different angles. While some view defections as posing threats to democracy, others contend it is a corrective mechanism.

Kura (2019) and Egbu (2025) view defection as constituting a threat to democracy. In fact, they perceived the rampant defections among the political class as the bane of constitutional democracy in Nigeria. In addition, they criticized the political class for playing opportunistic politics, arguing that it is the lack of ideological contents that is partly responsible for the underdevelopment of the country. To the duo, party switching not only weakens political party cohesion, disorganise governance structures, but also undermines the sanctity and inviolability of electoral mandates.

The frequent switching of political parties sends a message to the voters that manifesto commitments and ideological fidelity are irrelevant, thus eroding trust in the democratic enterprise. In the same vein, Omotola (2020) averred that defections are a major trigger of instability given that they subvert the consolidation and growth of strong political parties, vital for democratic growth.

Defections as a Corrective Mechanism

Contrarily, Ibrahim (2021) contended that defections can in some cases strengthen democratic practices by providing politicians and citizens a leeway from authoritarian, repressive or undemocratic parties. In instances where party apparatchik represses internal dissent or stifle democratic ideals, defections become an attractive option for political realignment.

Gaps in the Literature

Despite the contending perspectives, gaps persist in the understanding of the long-term implications of political defections. Though short-term benefits such as promotion of political freedom do emerge with

switching parties, however, the consequences of opportunistic and frequent defections tends to stifle democratic stability, especially in emerging democracies. The aim of this paper is to contribute to filling this gap by focusing on the disruptive effects in nascent democracies.

Theoretical Framework

Two theoretical perspectives anchored this paper, and they are: rational choice theory and institutionalism.

Rational Choice Theory

The rational choice theorists view political defections as rational actions undertaken by self-interested political players preoccupied with exploiting and maximizing personal gains such as escaping consequences of corruption, accessing state resources, brightening re-election chances, or taking part in the sharing of the spoils of office through political appointments. This perspective offers insights into why defections permeate in jurisdictions where political survival relies on alignment with governing parties. This is true of the Nigerian politicians who switch parties at the drop of a pin. It is incontestable that Nigerian politicians have no moral scruples when it comes to shopping for political platforms to actualise their aspirations, and other benefits. Some of them having corruptly enriched themselves at public expense jump to ruling parties that they believe would offer them protection from criminal prosecution for their infractions. Besides, politicians hop on political parties that offer them patronage in appointment, contracts and other benefits.

Institutionalism

Institutionalism focuses on the role of political institutions in shaping attitudes and behaviour. Therefore, weak party institutions breed defections due to their lack of internal democratic mechanisms and viable ideological roots. Whereas, in systems with strong institutions, defections are infrequent as parties have better grip on discipline and loyalty. Undoubtedly, Nigeria's political institutions are not only weak and stunted as a result of the manipulations of the elites; they have been completely captured by the same elites.

Factors Fuelling Political Defections

An array of factors accounts for the persistence of political defections in emerging democracies like Nigeria.

First, despite their pretence and serial grandstanding, most Nigerian political parties have no distinct ideological identities. That explains why one sees politicians joining the same party they have denigrated. The conclusion to draw is that they only see parties as Special Purpose Vehicle to assist them in actualising their political ambitions. Apparently, in the absence of distinct ideological differences, political players, like nomads, roam freely between parties.

Second, another motivating factor is personal ambition and political survival. As earlier adumbrated, politicians switch parties to advance individual careers, go for re-election, or secure lucrative appointments in governing parties. They give no hoot as they make no recourse to the electorate that voted them.

Third is internal party crisis. Politicians exploit the lacuna in the constitution to instigate crisis within their party to justify their plan to defect. This is observable in many of the defections in Nigeria. Besides, marginalization from the decision-making processes, authoritarian leadership styles, and lack of internal democracy force party members to seek harbour in alternative platforms.

Fourth are electoral calculations. In situations where the governing parties wield considerable influence over electoral outcomes, defections become attractive.

Fifth motivation is patronage and unfettered access to public resources. As long as aligning with the ruling party would provide a leeway to share in the resources, most Nigerian politicians would not bat an eyelid before jumping ship. In essence, the character of the Nigerian state with her rent-seeking political elites has ensured that if you do not align, being a beneficiary would be a tall order.

Implications for Democratic Stability

One, the progressive weakening of the party systems has been a destabilizing effect of the frequent defections, thus stifling party cohesion, undermining the institutionalization of viable, ideology-driven political parties. Today, the dominant narrative is that liberal democracy has been in reversal. From all indications, the current administration appears to have captured the entire state institutions. The jury is out that the judiciary, the law interpreting behemoth that classically is the last bastion and hope of the common man, is no longer that refuge. The courts, to many critical pundits, is for the highest bidder. Another critical institution that ought to serve as a check on the executive arm of the government has become at best a lapdog to the executive. To most analysts, the law-making body has been reduced to an appendage that rubber stamps almost all executive policies without scrutiny. Aside the worrisome capitulation of the legislature to the whim and caprices of the executive, the legislature has been perpetrating unbelievable financial heists in the name of constituency projects. This legalised looting of the common patrimony reached a crescendo when it was revealed that over 6.9 trillion Naira has been concealed in 2025 appropriation.

Despite the outrage over the scandalous revelation, mum was the word from the federal legislature. Budget padding and wasteful expenditure reigns supreme at the apex law making body. As if the stench oozing at the federal legislative house is not outrageous enough, the 36 states legislative houses are not any better. They have equally become the appendages of the imperial governors. While liberal democracy envisaged the legislative houses acting as checks, the governors have usurped the functions.

Consequently, there is the continuous erosion of public trust. The serial abandonments of party platforms that earn politicians electoral triumph have ensured that citizens' confidence in the democratic process wane. By the time the fourth Republic got underway, it did not take long before the new administration began a narrative of hope and patience held sway. While Nigerians showed tremendous understanding and lashed on the message of hope as propagated by the Olusegun Obasanjo administration, the failure of the government to substantially impact the lives of the teeming masses occasioned the pervasive discontent that ensued.

Instead of offering sacrifices to transform the resource rich country, the political elite's resort to offering platitudes and unending blame. It is either they are accusing previous governments of wanton looting or engaging in profligacy and reckless mismanagement of the economy or refusing to take the tough paths that will leapfrog the country to reach her full potentials. Unfortunately, while the masses believed them despite the decades of failed promises, they continue to wallow in naked opulence. Having plundered the vast resources of the country and shared it among their cronies, they embarked on medical tourism having allowed the hospital to lay prostrate. Besides, they send their children to highbrow educational institutions in the West. Beyond that, they stashed the fortunes of the country in foreign capitals while they continue to preach austerity measures on the home front. The repeated rape and primitive accumulations have left the country in dire straits. Compounding the woes of the beleaguered country is the entrenched culture of electoral malfeasance rampant in the flawed democracy.

Next is governance instability. Party switching often precipitate policy reversals, shift in legislative majorities, and general instability pervades in governance. Even when government give the public the impression that they are out to promote the doctrinal tenets of good governance such as probity, accountability, transparency, inclusion, efficiency and effectiveness, the haphazard manner they approach governance only indicates it is all lip service.

In addition, judicial and legal burdens come to the fore as courts are often invited to resolve disputes ensuing in the aftermath of defections, thus straining the resources of the court and politicizing legal system. In the final analysis, democratic backsliding is the ultimate implication of the frequent defections, as the opportunism and weak institutions hamper democratic consolidation

Conclusion

Frequent political defections present a pressing challenge to democratic stability, especially in emerging democracies where parties remain fragile and weak. Though defections may sometimes serve corrective purposes, frequent and opportunistic occurrence stifle public trust, governance stability, and party cohesion. By strengthening legal and judicial frameworks, enthroning party democracy, and promoting a culture of accountability are critical toward stabilizing democracy in jurisdictions hobbled by defections.

Recommendations

To curb the destabilising effects of political defections, this paper advocates the following:

1. The need to strengthen legal frameworks.
   Anti-defection laws must be enacted and effectively enforced to halt opportunistic defections.

2. Promotion of internal party democracy
   Political parties should mainstream democratic decision-making, minimize authoritarian leadership, and encourage inclusivity.

3. Enhanced civic and political education
   Citizens must be educated and enlightened to demand accountability from elected office holders, and resist opportunistic and selfish politicians.

4. Judicial oversight
   Courts must adopt the strict interpretations of anti-defection laws to demotivate abuse of political freedom of association.

5. Institutional reforms
   Building vibrant and strong institutions that gives utmost priority to ideology and long-term party maturity must be the article of faith.

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