

POLITICAL PARTIES AND PARTY DEFECTION: THE ABSENCE OF POLITICAL IDEOLOGY

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Abstract

In democracies, political party defections have been a frequent happening, and several people link this to the dynamism of people and their societies controlled by self-interests. This is coming at the time democracy is becoming more and more acceptable around the world, but sustaining them is a cause of worries. This is a proof that politicians are guided more by their self-interests rather than by ideological principles. Party democracy over the years has been unstable in Nigeria giving room for political gladiators to prostitute/defect at any time with the intention to securing nominations. Since there is no party ideology, even those that were elected into office can defect either from the opposition party to the ruling party or from the ruling party to the opposition party. Such unwholesome practice has denigrated the Nigerian political system, especially during the fourth republic. This paper examined the implication of defections on democracy in Nigeria. We utilized the Elite Theory (a democratic theory). This paper examined the implications of defection on Nigeria's nascent democracy especially as it concerns the sustenance of a strong alternative government that is capable of checking the excesses of the party in government. The paper argued further that defections occur because political parties lack fundamental ideological basis. It also noted that defections are unhealthy for growing democracy. The paper relied on content analysis and adopted game theory. The paper recommended that INEC in collaboration with the National Assembly should revise the Electoral Act to insist that only political parties grounded in ideology should be registered to contest elections. In like manner indirect elections in primary elections should be completely abolished.

Keywords: Party, Political Party, Defection, Ideology, Democracy.

Introduction

In most democracies of the world, political parties have continued to be the conveyor belt of modern governance because of the traditional roles they play under a democratic system. These roles make them indispensable if democracy must be sustained. Political parties are the fulcrum for the achievement of all political processes that engender representative governance because they are the centre stage in which all political interactions happen. Such interactions are often characterized by fierce competition among political gladiators even within the same political party. The implication of these internal conflicts is that sometimes the party may split into factions, while at other times; party members who feel aggrieved abandon the party to romance a new one where they are convinced that grievances would be addressed. Certainly, the role of political parties in

established democracies is not in doubt, but the question is in their ability to perform these roles in contemporary times.

Political parties play several significant roles but key among them are: linking citizens and government, representativeness, interest aggregation, political leadership, recruitment and training. However, party politics in Nigeria has been so elusive and distractive in a manner that defections have taken toll on the party system. Party switching has formed an attribute of party politics in Nigeria. This practice has become so prevalent in the fourth republic, a situation where politicians are elected on a particular party platform but on getting there, they cross to another party. In some other cases, politicians defect to other parties when they failed to secure party nomination during their own party primaries; and yet others defect on the basis that there was no level playing ground. Some of these politicians would move from their parties to other parties and still come back when they believe their grievances have been addressed by the party stalwarts. With the return of democracy in 1999, splinter units of parties have emerged in major parties, especially the People's Democratic Party. There have several cases of in-fighting as a result of the poor management of internal party affairs.

The political scene has been marred with the near absence of internal party democracy and this has led to party prostitution in Nigeria. There have been numerous cases of intra-party conflicts that have manifested in unhealthy power rivalry. It has been argued that, such defections could have been motivated by dissatisfactions, for instance the defections that took place in PDP in 2013 where there was mass exit of members to opposition party. The level at which party defection and intensity occurs is quite disturbing, forcing us to raise the question of ideology. Party defection in Nigeria does not suggest that it does not happen elsewhere, but the magnitude at which it occurs in Nigeria impacts on the body polity quite negatively. This lives us with the issue of sustainability of Nigerian democracy considering the events that are trending in Francophone countries currently. Party defection is capable of either reinforcing opposition with the capacity to provide direction for democratic consolidation or derail completely Nigerian democracy, these are two sides of a coin that we must pay close attention to. It speaks volume about the quality of governance, sustainability, peace, stability and the entire democratic process.

Conceptual Issues on Political Party

A political party is an organised group of like-minded people who are determined to influence government policies by electing persons with common ideology with them. Political parties serve as a bridge between civil society and government for the purpose of meeting the demands of citizens (<https://www.aceproject.org>). Furthermore, a political party is an organization that coordinates candidates to compete in a particular country's election (Kroeger, 2018). According to Eke (1980), political parties are part of a structure that is called migrated social structures which were transplanted from Europe to Africa devoid of the moral content and ethics that sustained

them in Europe. This means that political parties in Africa are not operated based on their original moral and ethical content.

Conceptual Issues on Democracy and Defection

Generally speaking, the term democracy has gained acceptability of the fact that, it is the best form of government. Several scholars of repute have made enormous contributions in describing and defining the concept. Some of these scholars include Nnoli, 2003; Appadorai, 2004. In the words of George Orwell, “In the case of a word like democracy not only is there no agreed definition but the attempt to make one is resisted from all sides...The defenders of any kind of regime claim that it is a democracy and fear that they might have to stop using the word if it were tied down to any meaning.”What this means is that the word democracy has been used deceitfully to mean representative government while in practice, it does not represent the people. However, the beneficiaries of democracy in Nigeria believe it is democracy because they manipulate it to their advantage. Consider the position of Goebbles which hailed Hitler’s Third Reich is the “most ennobled form of modern democratic state.” As a matter of fact, ideas regarding what ought to be the coverage of governmental intervention in the lives of individuals have also changed and are perpetually changing. As ideas change, so the content of the word democracy changes in people’s minds.

On his part, Bessette (1980) defined democracy as central to decision-making which focuses on authentic deliberation over mere voting for the purpose of legitimacy. Citizens participate in political discussions on policies of government indirectly through their representatives. This of course means that, the representatives are accountable to the people in every decision of government – the people must be seen to have been truly represented. Schumpeter (1990) sees democracy as an institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide, by means of a competitive struggle for the people’s vote. It is a state with unlimited opportunities for adult participation in political life. On the other hand, defection could mean an act of swapping or switching. Hence, party defection is the act of switching from one party to another. Several people have referred to party defection, carpet-crossing, floor-crossing, party hopping, canoe-jumping (Malhotra, 2005 cited in Mbah, 2011). Party defection is simply political prostitution in search of what will satisfy one’s interest; this can happen in every political system especially in developing democracies.

According to Malhotra the anti-defection law stipulates that a person can be disqualified from serving in parliament for voluntarily giving up membership of his original party (cited in Janada, 2009). This law exists in Nigeria but its non-operation can be linked to the deficiencies in the 1999 constitution. This kind of law has the capacity to grow democratic practice in Nigeria, if enacted, but the lack of its applicability has stalled the attainment of the benefits that accrue from it. The

selfishness of Nigerian legislators has continually affected the required progress in the democratic project.

Research Questions:

- i) Do political parties in Nigeria have ideological grounding?
- ii) How have political parties handled internal democracy in Nigeria?
- iii) Why has party defection been persistent in democratic governance in Nigeria?

Aim and Objectives of the study: The main objective is to assess why major cases of party defection occurred in the Fourth Republic. The specific objectives are as follows:

- i) To determine whether political parties in Nigeria have ideological grounding.
- ii) To examine how political parties handle internal democracy in Nigeria.
- iii) To ascertain why party defections are persistent in democratic governance in Nigeria.

Methodology

The methodology is based on data derived from secondary sources. This implies that, most of the data was accessed through review of related texts, journals, personal observation, and internet which served as tangible sources of knowledge into the reasons for party defections in Nigeria especially in the Fourth Republic.

Literature Review

Political parties and party defections have had significant impact on the survival of democracy in Nigeria. Several politicians have severally defected from one party to another as a result of their desire to achieve self-interest. Politics is the struggle for the control of power based on ideology, although it is difficult to link ideology with political parties in Nigeria. Since there is virtually no ideology in Nigeria's political parties, defection is legally allowed to some extent because it is rooted in freedom of association. Thus, party defection is addressed both by the Nigerian Constitution and the Electoral ACT. Cross-carpeting is usually not done for the good of the party but because the person defecting does so for personal interest rather than his principles (<https://www.ajpasebsu.org.ng>). Every politician is first and foremost self-seeking and can as a result do anything to accomplish his goals or interests, including moving from one party to another until he finds succor. This is especially when they feel aggrieved or unfairly treated in their party. Weak political parties are victims of abandonment by their members who move to stronger ones (Wilensky, H. I. (2002).

Party defection in Nigeria is the normal practice by politicians for settling scores amongst them. Most researches on party defection globally have touted re-election, patronage, perks of office and ideological/policy issues as the major drivers to defection (Desposato, 2006; Fashagba, 2014; Klein, 2019). In other narratives, it has been suggested that broader formal institutional framework that could enhance or remove deterrents for party nomadism, such as weak party

institutionalization (Heller and Mershon, 2008a; Kreuzer and Pattai, 2008), non-existent of anti-defection laws (Janada, 2009; Okeke et al, 2009), and candidate-centred as opposed to party-centred electoral systems.

Party defection is likely when politicians in weak party institutionalization desire to hold onto power, patronage politics and a lack of clear ideological demarcation among parties have been responsible for the practice to persist (Okeke et al, 2019). As a matter of fact, party defections have created opportunities for parliamentarians that lose confidence in their re-election bids in their current party and/or who have ideological and policy disagreements with their present party to defect their allegiance. That is to say, party defections are encouraged by the dearth of ideological clarity among parties, weak enforcement of anti-defection laws but a contestable candidate-centred electoral system, coexisting with parliamentarians seeking for the best platform for re-election.

In Nigeria for instance, defectors do point accusing fingers at party leaders and lack of internal democracy within political parties. This however, has usually exposed certain basic issues which have not been adequately addressed in existing literature on party defections. Since party leaders in Nigeria have discretion to choose between direct and indirect primaries as well as the logistics of the primaries. The political leaders are able to influence party flag bearers to a large extent. It is likely that party primaries that are conducted in fairness have the capacity to reduce the rate of party defection. Once party members or contestants are satisfied with the whole process of the party primaries, internal disputes may reduce drastically.

Theoretical Discourse

Democratic theory is a multi-temporal and multi-spatial community of overlapping and contradictory concerns that breathes life into several democratic practices; provides opposition to anti-democracy wherever it is to be found; seeks the non-violence resolution of problems; envisages for open, recurring, challengeable decision-making; dreams about life that is somehow better for everyone. Indeed democratic theory emphasizes on participatory theater that is an established technique for helping communities think through how to better live together (Sloman, 2012). The strength of the theory emanates from its multidisciplinary and ability to connect across disciplines whether that is through normative theory and empirical political science (Fleuss and Schaal, 2019 cited in Rikki et al, 2019) or political theory and public policy (Paxton, 2019).

In this paper we adopted the Elitist theory which is basically concerned with the institutions of democracy and the realities of the Western liberal democratic political system. The major proponents of the theory are: Robert Michels, James Burnham, Joseph A. Schumpeter, Raymond Aron, Giovanni Sartori and Karl Mannheim. Mosca propounded the elitist theory of democracy in his famous book “The Ruling Class” (1939). Parvini Neeman (2022) asserts that the will of the people does not impact political decisions, emphasising that elite driven change best explains the realities of political power. Robert Michels also presented his own view in his book “Political

Parties”. Pareto and Mosca emphasised the irrational basis of politics stressing that, talent and intelligence is a monopoly of the few who form the elite. They introduced the law of the circulation of elites in history, but added that, no elite can go on ruling permanently (Mahajan, 2000).

The elite theory categorises every society into two classes of people. The two classes comprise of minority group who rule the majority. Indeed, Roberto Michel’s “iron law of oligarchy” dwells on element of organisation, which exists in every kind of human society that strives for the attainment of a definite end. He concluded that as a movement or party grows in size, more and more responsibilities are to be delegated to an inner circle of leaders (the elites). As time goes on, the members of the organisation are rendered less competent to direct and control them. Indeed, organization is a fundamental aspect of human societies as well (William, 2013). This submission is a clear replica of the state of Nigerian political society where the elites create the kind of politics which places in their hands the ultimate control of the political system, including the institutions; the political parties, electoral institutions and agencies, security agencies, judicial organs, etc. That is ‘machine politics’ (Ibeanu, 2007). The elite have by their political manipulation created a sustained contest among members of that class for the control of the machine as that also means control of the distributive power. The winner usually takes all and the loser loses everything.

The important theme of the Elitist theory suggests that there is in every society a minority of the population which takes the major decisions in the society. Since these decisions have political implications, the elites are at the advantage to exercise considerable political influence. We are convinced that the theory offers the best explanation of the reasons the Nigerian polity is faced with several cases of party defections. The major concern of the Elitist theory is the maintenance of stability and equilibrium in the capitalist liberal societies.

Political Defections in the Fourth Republic

The provision of the 1999 constitution in sections 68 (1) (g) and 109 (1) (g) comprises a clause that addresses defection. However, the former is specific to state legislative houses and the latter to federal legislative houses. This section 68 (g) provides that: If any of the following occurs: (g) a person whose election to the House was supported by a political party joins another political party before the end of the term for which that House was elected; (h) a member of the Senate or House of Representatives resigns from the body from which he or she was elected. Providing his affiliation with the latter political party is not the result of a split in the party he previously belonged to or a union of two or more political parties or functions by one of them (Nigeria’s Constitution, 1963).

A good example is the case of the 14 out of 24 members of the Plateau state House of Assembly, including the Speaker and his deputy who switched from the PDP to APC in 2010; they had their seats declared vacant by the court. It has been argued that Legislative Houses in Nigeria are the

only ones affected by the anti-defection law, where a defector loses his seat when he abandons the party that sponsored him and switches to another party in the Legislative House. The irony of this law is that those other elective positions including the president, vice president, governors and their deputies any legal implication are exempted. What this means is that the president and his vice, governors and their deputies can defect to other political parties without any legal implication of losing their position. This is the first lacuna in such law. One major reason for such practice is the lack of party ideology couple with the challenges of democratic sustenance in the country.

Nigeria's democracy in the fourth republic has been characterised by bad governance. The political elites have hijacked the entire economy of the country and for them to continue exploiting the system, they resort to vote buying and sometimes use force on the people. The stolen money is used in buying even judges to snatch the choice of the people by imposing those that never won elections on the people. So long as they belong to the ruling party, they must rule; their sins are always forgiven them as was once said, by a national chairman of a ruling party. One basic fact about such defections is to secure party nomination to contest elections. It is imperative to note that, most defectors from the ruling parties both at the national and state levels later return to their various parties. The political gladiators usually find it difficult to compromise, once their personality is hurt; they have the tendency of forming a faction or switching to another party. Below is few notable cases of defections that have overwhelmed the numbers in preceding republics:

Rochas Okorochoa as governor of Imo state moved from All Progressive Grand Alliance to All Progressive Congress although he started as a member of People's Democratic Party; Chibuike Amaechi of Rivers moved from PDP to APC; Murtala Nyako of Adamawa moved from PDP to APC; Rabiu Kwankwaso of Kano moved from PDP to APC; AliyuWamako of Sokoto moved from PDP to APC; Isa Yuguda of Bauchi moved from All Nigerian People's Party to PDP; George Akume of Benue moved from PDP to APC; Segun Mimiko of Ondo moved from PDP to Labour Party and returned to PDP; Orji Uzo Kalu of Abia moved from PDP to form PPA but now in APC; Atiku Abubakar of PDP moved to Action Congress of Nigeria, return to PDP and returned to PDP then moved to APC and now back to PDP; Aminu Tambwal Sokoto was in PDP but moved to APC and later returned to PDP (Vanguard, September 27, 2014).

The level at which party defections occur and the gross instability that accompanies the trend suggests that defection has become a major threat and destabilising factor in party politics in Nigeria. This means that, if democratic governance must be sustained political parties must brazen up in discharging their responsibilities as the only viable platforms representative government.

Ideology and the Challenge of Democracy in Nigeria

By way of definition, ideology is a set of shared beliefs concerning the proper order of a society and the means by which this could be achieved (Iyare, 2004; Omotola, 2009; Jost, Federico &

Napier, 2009). An ideology is the foundation of social representations shared by a social group (Van Dijk, 2009). It functions as a means of self-identification, as an instrument of conflict management as well as a prescriptive formula, mobilisational and unifying force (Omotola, 2009). Ideology as a concept is a vital factor that can create identity but it does not necessarily prevent conflict of interest from happening. However, any party that is well founded on ideology has the capacity to democratically manage conflicts of interest. Jost (2006 cited in Omotola, 2006) stated that different ideologies represent socially shared but competing philosophies of life and how it should be lived. He added that such ideologies should both elicit and express at least somewhat different social, cognitive and motivational styles or tendencies on the part of adherents. It is a fact that most if not all political parties in Nigeria and Africa at large lack ideologies but manifestos.

For political parties to succeed, ideology plays a significant role. The issue of ideology especially in African political party system requires a serious rethinking on how they were formed in the first place. Several political parties across Africa consider their programs of action otherwise called manifestos to be their ideology. As a belief, ideology is central to every political activity across time and space (Iyare, 2004). Ideology functions as planks, that is, single issue statements within the platform, the exact ideological orientation of which is often used as a bargaining chip in seeking party unity. The platform in this sense means a statement of the official party position on several of issues.

In his contribution, Nnoli (2003) asserts that ideology is a very crucial aspect of politics, not only serving as a cognitive structure for looking at society generally and providing a prescriptive formula, that is, a guide to individual action and judgment, but also as a powerful instrument of conflict management, self-identification, popular mobilisation and legitimisation. He summarised the functions of ideology to include:

- i) Cognitive structure for looking at society generally should serve as an explanatory and justificatory category for societal realities,
- ii) Prescriptive formula – a guide to individual action and judgment as a basis for the legitimisation of public polities when in conformity with popular belief,
- iii) Instrument of conflict management and the integration of society by limiting the basic values and issues over which societal members disagree,
- iv) Means of self-identification for the satisfaction of specific personality needs, a means of self-evaluation and social solidarity,
- v) Dynamic force in both individual and collective commitment action for or against the ruling class or decision. That is, it provides a powerful basis for mobilisation,
- vi) Enhancement of the political appeals of a political party, by differentiating one party from another Nnoli, 2003).

Basically, ideologies originate from seemingly irreconcilable antagonistic settings, which tend to be exclusive, absolute and universal in quality; and can be personalised and turned into a sacred

belief similar to religious beliefs. Although it is not permanent, it is however resistant to fundamental changes (Nnoli, 2003).

Discussion of Findings

We have discovered that party defection has become an integral part of politics in Nigeria's political space because of the near absence of ideology. We found out that most political parties operate the manifestos they use during campaigns as though they were their ideologies. Many political parties see these manifestos as road maps to the ideological stance of a party. Indeed, we can differentiate a party from another only by their program of action instead of ideology. The lack of ideology in Nigeria's political parties has reduced them to mere associations for achieving individual interests.

Party defection in Nigeria has significantly led to unstable oppositions, internal conflicts and non consolidation of the dividends of democracy. Politicians have not only cashed in on this practice to remain unaccountable to their constituencies but have also disregarded the mandate of the people. It appears that rather than improving on the structure of our political parties, they have continued to diminish in terms of philosophy, content and objectives.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The discourse on party defection in Nigeria has presented unpleasant scenario in party politics. Although party switching or defection is a practice that is widely accepted in all democracies, such practice is guided by law. Indeed, internal party democracy in Nigeria has been marred by frequent avoidable conflicts that occasionally lead to splinter groups (factions). Such practices have weakened opposition parties and have enabled the ruling party to engage in gross misconduct by promoting high level corruption. At this point, self-interest rather than the party interest plays out without considering that the party is the platform for collective responsibility. Basically, most political parties especially in Africa and specifically in Nigeria are not founded on ideology, although some of them claim they do.

We recommend therefore, that INEC should be fair in discharging its responsibilities by announcing only those who were elected by the people to limit post-elections litigations. The perpetual in and out of court following election petitions is a gradual erosion of the people's trust. The electoral umpire should be allowed to function independent of external influence. Elected representatives who defect should forfeit the positions they were occupying. Furthermore, the Independent Electoral Commission in collaboration with the National Assembly should revise the Electoral Act to insist that only political parties grounded in ideology be registered to contest elections. Finally, we strongly suggest that the idea of indirect elections in primary elections should be completely abolished to allow for the selection of true representatives of the people.

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