

Political ‘Harlotry’: Interrogating the Implications of Party Defection in Consolidating Democracy in Nigeria

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Abstract. Nigeria’s democracy, especially in the fourth Republic has been characterized by party defections and decamping of political gladiators to other parties. It has become a seasonal fad that peaks at election period. It is a habitual search for the ‘right clime’ to realize their dreams and ambitions. This paper examines the implications of this, on the sustainability of democracy in Nigeria. The elite theory is engaged in this discourse, while both primary and secondary sources of data are used. The study demonstrates that while party defections are an integral part of democratic processes, lack of party ideologies and internal party democracy, are the major factors responsible for the prevailing scenario in Nigeria’s political system. The paper also observes that, since party defections are not driven by fundamental ideological considerations, the outcome is an unstable opposition which is unable to sustain and consolidate the gains of democracy. The paper recommends that party manifestoes be supreme with laws made to limit defections. Elected representatives should also lose their seats if they defect outside the procedure to be provided for in the electoral act,

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1. Introduction

The emergence of multi-party democracy in Nigeria since the return to democracy in 1999 has been regarded as a major breakthrough in the democratic process. However, the increasing wave of defections by political gladiators both at the national and state levels cannot be unnoticed and has become a major concern and challenge to the nation’s nascent democracy. What democracy depicts in Nigeria

continues to manifest clearly in individuals’ quests for recognition and self-preservation rather than the greater purpose of nationalism and service to the people. This systemic behaviour by politicians in Nigeria has adversely affected the quality of opposition which is key in any democratic setting (Smith, 2012).

Nigerian democracy has witnessed series of Party defection which dates back to the First Republic, specifically in 1951 Udeuhele, (2015). He opines that the first celebrated cross-carpeting episode occurred in Nigeria in 1951. A scenario which robbed Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe the opportunity to lead the government of the western Nigeria. Mbah, (2011), opines that, the NCNC won 42 seats out of 80, but within 24 hours, 20 of them had cross- carpeted to AG, following the pressure that was exerted on them by Chief Awolowo – leader of the AG, a Yoruba man. In the same First Republic, another Premier in the same Western Region, Ladoke Akintola, left the AG in a crisis, rooted more in a personality clash but explained it as personal principles and his conviction to advance the Yoruba race into alliance with Northern People’s Congress Nwanegbo, Odigbo, Nnorom, (2014). The subsequent republics were not exempted from party defections and cross-carpeting. This development which is generally referred to as cross-carpeting, party-switching, floor-crossing, canoe-jumping etc are employed to mean the same thing as party defection (Malthora, 2005; Mbah, 2011). This, Aziken (2009) refers to as ‘political prostitution or harlotry.’ This has become a permanent feature of Nigeria’s democracy. The spate of defections and its implications on Nigeria’s democracy therefore, raises a fundamental question of sustainability of democracy in Nigeria given this

experience. Consolidation of democracy has become the pride of all nations' even dictatorial regimes because of the legitimacy the system drives home. Thus, even the pursuit of individual or small elite group interest is hidden under the garment of democracy. These elite interest are often what leads to defections or harlotry. This study therefore, attempts to identify the factors that have accounted for the endless party defections in Nigeria in general and Benue State in particular, as well as to examine the implications of these defections on the sustainability of democracy in Nigeria.

Since Nigeria's return to democratic rule in 1999, party defections have continued to be a recurring decimal. The result of these defections at federal, State and Local Government levels have been variously discussed and documented in literature. As such the paper is a survey of past party defections. It makes use of secondary sources of date and key informant interviews which are analysed and conclusions drawn.

The study demonstrates that while party defections are an integral part of democratic processes, lack of party ideologies and internal party democracy, are the major factors responsible for the prevailing scenario in Nigeria's political system. The paper also observes that, since party defections are not driven by fundamental ideological considerations, the outcome is an unstable opposition which is unable to sustain and consolidate the gains of democracy.

This paper has six parts. The first part being the introduction/ background, also take care of the objectives and the methodology of the study. The second part looks at the conceptual and theoretical considerations of the paper; the third part is an overview of party defections in Benue State since 1999. The fourth part identifies the factors that account for party defections in Nigeria; the fifth part is on the implications of defections and defections on democratic consolidation in Benue state while the sixth part is conclusion and recommendations.

2. Conceptual and theoretical Considerations

2.1 Political Harlotry

Political harlotry describes the wanton, unprincipled and uncommitted movement of political actors from one political party to another usually to achieve their selfish ambitions. It also describes the switching of loyalty between different political parties. According to Awanen (2007), political defectors are usually regarded as 'political prostitutes' without political

principle, morality, conscience and lacking ideology to champion the cause of leadership for the well-being of society and political development of any nation. Political harlotry is also synonymous with party defection, party switching, decamping and cross carpeting. Interparty defections or cross-carpeting according to Hoeane (2008) is believed to have taken place when an elected party representative within a legislative structure such as the parliament, embraces a different political or policy perspective that is incompatible with that of the party represented.

2.2 Party Defection

Defection could be referred to as an act of swapping. Party defection is thus, an act of switching from one party to another. According to Malhotra (2005), party defection is known by different nomenclatures such as "floor-crossing", "carpet-crossing", "party-hopping", "dispute" "canoe-jumping" and it is any change in political party affiliation of a partisan public figure, usually holding an elected office (cited in Mbah, 2011). Janada (2009), notes that defections usually occur in two ways; first, there is great movement of politicians from different political parties into the ruling party towards the time of the general elections with the idea of participating in party primaries of the ruling party. The second movement starts after the party primaries by those who lost in the party primaries. They move to other parties or form new ones under which they intend to contest the coming elections.

It is important to note that, indeed, party defection occurs in every political system. It is a global reality and an integral part of a political process (Nwanegbo, Odigbo and Nnorom, 2014). Malhotra (2005) however, notes that in some countries, party defections 'are a non-issue and not perceived as a problem', whereas in others, the practice threaten government stability and is taken as very seriously.

The increasing wave of incessant defections as well as the threat of instability arising from defections especially in emerging democracies, prompted enactment of anti-defection laws in some societies. For instance, India enacted various anti-defection laws in 1973, 1985 and most recently, the 2003 anti-defection law. The 2003 law according to Malhotra (2005) provides that a person can be disqualified from serving in parliament for voluntarily giving up the membership of his original party. Nwanegbo et al (2014) opine that, this legal provision appears to have reduced drastically, cases of defection in the polity

since one finds it difficult to forfeit their position or face parliamentary expulsion.

A similar anti-defection law exists in Nigeria. However, it is marred with deficiencies and incongruence, especially in section 68 1(g) and 109(1). Although Section 68 (1(a)) states:

A member of the Senate or House of Representatives shall vacate his seat in the House of which he is a member if being a person whose election to the House was sponsored by a political party, he becomes a member of another political party before expiration of the period for which that House was elected. Provided that his membership of the latter political party is not as a result of a division in the political party of which he was previously a member or of a merger of two or more political parties or factions by one of which he was previously sponsored (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999:34).

The last part of the foregoing section has provided an escape route for politicians to cross-carpet since there are always divisions within the political parties. It provided the platform for several legislators and governors who defected to justify on grounds of division or crisis within their political parties since the 1999 constitution is not definitive of crisis or division that could cause defection. In 1999, three Alliance for Democracy (AD) Senators, Wahab Dosunmu, Yemi Brimoh and Fidelis Okoro who defected to the People's Democratic Party (PDP), exploited the constitutional provision which grants an elected member of parliament the right to defect if there is a division in his party.

Again, the fluidity in formations, mergers and demergers including the orchestrations of internal party crisis, according to Nwanegbo et al (2014), has made that section difficult in application as the boundaries between mergers and demergers in Nigeria party politics appear too thin, thereby creating justification for parliamentary defections.

2.3 Democracy

Democracy on the other hand, though accepted as an appropriate form of governance, is one concept that lacks a universally accepted definition. Nnoli, (2003), defines democracy as a system of government usually involving freedom of individuals in various aspects of political life, equality among citizens and justice in the relations between the people and the government and the participation of the people in choosing those in government. According to Schumpeter (1990), democracy is 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.

Dudley (1982), has defined democracy as a limited government which involves the process of electing leaders who will form a government of the people with the view to representing the interest of the generality of members of the society. It is aimed at realizing "the organization of people, by the people themselves, to attain the collectively self-denied, and ever improving, higher levels of civilization" (Asobie, 2007: 86). He also viewed democracy as a system of government where the people wield the governing power either directly or indirectly through representatives elected by the people from time to time. This view suggests that a state may be classified as democratic if it provides institutions for channeling the supremacy of the popular will through representatives. It is concerned with the generality of the people rather than the elite or few on basic questions of social direction and policy formulation.

Democracy does not function in isolation; it is about the people. And its success is dependent on the extent it has empowered people to surmount their basic needs and enjoy unrestrained participation in the policy process (Unah, 1993). In fact, what gives democracy meaning and substance, according to Nwanegbo et al (2015), is participation and authority of the people to determine who rules. The extent of involvement encompasses the power to decide who rules, what policy to support and decision which would benefit the greatest number of people.

2.4 Democratic Consolidation

Democratic consolidation is not just about how democratic structures, institutions and procedures are established. It is, as well, and more importantly, about how these democratic values and processes get embedded in the psyche of individuals and groups in society. This is so because, in the long run, whether or not democracy gets consolidated is reducible to the kind of attitude or behavior the political elite project and nurture (Schedler, 2001).

As a concept, democratic consolidation is essentially about regime maintenance, preventing its potential breakdown (Jega et.al, 2002)). Insight from these and other works all tend to associate the phenomenon with regime legitimation and absence of attitudinal and behavioral challenges capable of ruining the life of democratic regime. It is about regarding the "key political institutions as the only legitimate framework for political contestation, and adherence to the

democratic rules of the game” (King and Benjamin, 1996). From the above, it then becomes clear that the bottlenecks to continuous democratization are varied and will be discussed in the later part of this paper.

3. Theoretical Framework

This paper adopts the Elite Theory in analyzing the interplay of party politics and defections. Elite Theory as developed by Vilfredo Pareto, Roberto Michels, Gaetano Mosca and Jose Gassast, hinges on the fact that every society is composed of two classes of people (Varma 1975). The two classes of people are made of the minority group who rule and the majority who are ruled. More specifically, Roberto Michel’s iron law of oligarchy dwells on element of organization, which exists in every kind of human society that strives for the attainment of a definite end (Varma 1975). In fact, Michels concluded that as a movement or party grows in size, more and more functions are to be delegated to an inner circle of leaders (elites), and in course of time, the members of the organization are rendered less competent to direct and control them.

The above postulations mirror clearly the state of the Nigerian political system. Arguably, the Nigerian elites appeared to have succeeded in rendering the majority incapable of controlling them through their perfected process of managing electoral frauds and heinous manipulation of state institutions. This is manifest in the total delusion of the basic electoral principles syntomic of the market democracy. Instead of opening up the democratic space genuinely for people to participate, they create the kind of politics which places in the hands of the minority elite the ultimate control of the political system, including institutions, political parties, electoral institutions and agencies, security agencies, judiciary etc. This, Ibeanu (2007), refers to as ‘machine politics’. Control of these institutions by the members of the

ruling class creates a lot of fierce contests, and crisis in the political system. Associated with machine politics is the control of the state economy by this minority group (elites) and indulgence in the act of buying support when corrupt mobilization becomes difficult. Fundamentally, such movements are prompted by feelings of dissatisfaction and discontent with former parties from where he/she decamps without the defection reflecting the ideological leaning.

4. Overview of Party Defections in Benue State Since 1999

Since Nigeria’s return to democracy in 1999, the gale of defections in Benue state by political leaders has been on the increase. The 1999 elections brought Dr. George Akume to seat as governor of the state under the PDP with Prof. Daniel Saror, Joseph Waku and David Mark as Senators of the three Senatorial districts, all on the PDP platform. In the elections that followed thereafter, especially in 2007, political leaders who lost elections began to defect to other parties. For instance, Senator Daniel Saror who had served two terms as Senator, defected from PDP to UNPP and then to ANPP in order to run for governorship since he did not stand a chance of winning the ticket for the PDP in the primary elections. Gabriel Suswam, a protégé of George Akume became governor under the PDP. Dr. George Akumeon the other hand, won the Senatorial seat for Benue North West, also under the PDP, with Colonel Joseph Akaagerger (Rtd.) for Benue North East Senatorial district and David Mark was reelected for Benue South Senatorial district (Adom, 2017). By 2011, however, Senator Akume lost grounds in the PDP to contest for a second term in the senate. He therefore, defected to the ACN and later to the APC by 2015. Below is a catalogue of major political defections in Benue state since the 1999 General Elections.

Figure 1: Major Political Defections in Benue state since 1999 General Elections

Name of Political leader	Initial Party	Party Defected to	Present Party affiliation
George Akume (Former governor and Senator)	Peoples Democratic Party (PDP)	Action Congress of Nigeria (ACN)	All Progressive Congress (APC)
Barnabas Gemade(Former National Chairman of PDP and Senator)	Peoples Democratic Party (PDP)	All Progressive Congress (APC) and back to PDP	Social Democratic Party (SDP) after 8weeks of going back to PDP
Daniel Saror (Former Senator)	Peoples Democratic Party (PDP)	United National People’s Party (UNPP), then to All Nigerian Peoples Party (ANPP)	People’s Redemption Party
Mike Mku (Gubernatorial aspirant since 1999)	Peoples Democratic Party (PDP)	United National People’s Party (UNPP)	Peoples Democratic Party (PDP)
Joseph Akaagerger (Former Senator)	Peoples Democratic Party (PDP)	All Progressive Congress (APC)	Social Democratic Party (SDP)
OrkerJev(serving Senator)	Peoples Democratic Party	All Progressive Congress (APC)	Back to Peoples Democratic Party

	(PDP)		(PDP)
Samuel Ortom (Governor, Benue state)	Peoples Democratic Party (PDP)	All Progressive Congress (APC)	Back to Peoples Democratic Party (PDP)
Emmanuel Udende (former member, House of Reps)	Peoples Democratic Party (PDP)	All Progressive Congress (APC)	All Progressive Grand Alliance (APGA)
Hassan Saleh (Member, house of Reps)	Peoples Democratic Party (PDP)	All Progressive Congress (APC)	Back to Peoples Democratic Party (PDP)
Mark Gbillah (Member, House of Reps)	All Progressive Congress (APC)	Peoples Democratic Party (PDP)	Peoples Democratic Party (PDP)
Dickson Tarkirgh (Former Member, House of Reps)	Peoples Democratic Party (PDP)	All Progressive Congress (APC)	Back to Peoples Democratic Party (PDP)

Source: Author's compilation from Adom, T. (2017) and www.dailytrust.com.ng

5. Factors accountable for Party Defections in Nigeria

A very significant factor accounting for defection and cross-carpeting is the idea of political ideology. An ideology according to Van Dijk (2006), is the foundation of the social representations shared by a social group. As Omotola (2009) noted, ideology functions as a means of self-identification, as an instrument of conflict management, as a prescriptive formula and as a mobilizational and unifying force. The import of the above definition is to the extent that since ideology is a shared belief, it has the potency of binding people together regardless of their background. Nwanegbo et al (2014), opine that ideology engenders peace and reduces internal bickering thereby, promoting decorum, growth and development which extends to the larger polity.

Political parties in Nigeria however, are generally seen to lack party ideology which is a major cause of the increasing wave of defection and cross-carpeting. According to Olarenwaju (2019), Nigerian political parties seem to be suffering from ideological bareness unlike what is obtainable in advanced democracies. Similarly, Hatamleh (2018) opines that, political parties in Nigeria and in other parts of the African continent tend to lack ideologies and explicit messages that separate them from each other. Because of the country's ethnic, religious and geographic divide, political parties are driven by personalities as opposed to ideologies. In the United States for instance, according to Hatamleh, political parties are defined by their platforms, manifestoes as they are called in Nigeria. So that if, a Republican candidate comes knocking at your door, you have a sense of where he or she stands on the current critical issues. That is however, not the case in Nigeria. The lack of party ideology is manifested in the level and method of accepting membership without critical considerations, no priority for the needs of the citizens and people desperate to achieve political objectives rather than pursue and achieve ideology. In Olarenwaju's view (2019), unless leaders of political parties form and maintain political

ideologies on their stand, cross-carpeting from one party to another will continue to be on the increase.

Closely related to the issue of ideology is lack of internal democracy of political parties. This has brought about the critical challenge of improving the governance mechanism of political parties in Nigeria and making a functional instrument for the development of country's nascent democracy. According to Mbah (2011), the basis of political parties and their activities as aspect of the guiding principle of political party organizational structure, democratic system and internal party democracy signifies the active participation of all-party members to contest any position both within the party and for public offices. Since 1999, when the 4th Republic was inaugurated, political parties have faced the problem of non-democratic practices. The expectation generally is that since the country has embraced democracy, its political parties must be democratic not only externally, in their goals but also democratic internally, in their organizational practices and behaviour.

As Mbah (2011:15) further argues that, "lack of internal democracy in Nigerian political parties has become a persistent threat to the country's nascent democracy. Party primaries throughout the country clearly show that Nigerian political parties are not operating within norms of democratic principles." This goes to say therefore that, virtually all political parties in Nigeria seem to have one internal crisis or the other including, lack of transparency, irregularities in primaries and imposition of candidates, impunity of leaders among others. Sometimes, these crisis snowball into full conflict leading to division, fractionalization and sometimes even murder of some members (Nwanegbo et'al, 2014). These internal party crises have also been responsible for the gale of defections. For instance, the defection of five (6) state governors (from Adamawa, Benue, Kano, Kwara, Rivers and Sokoto states) eleven (11) Senators, including Senator Barnabas Gemade of Benue state and thirty-seven (37) members of House of Representatives from the

PDP to APC in 2013, (www.punchng.com) was majorly as a result of the crisis within the PDP which went as far as fractionalizing the party.

Another factor that is accountable for party defection in Nigeria is political interest of politicians. Olarenwaju (2019), argues that defections in Nigerian politics are merely for selfish interests, not for common good. Otherwise, how do we explain the fact that these same politicians who were in the ruling PDP before the 2015 elections and merely decamped to APC at the last minute, seeing that APC will enable them win elections? This also explains why defections peak just at the period of elections. For instance, towards the 2019 general elections, there was another gale of defections owing primarily to the expectations of politicians that the PDP was going to return to power at the center. In a bid to win elections again in 2019, most of the same politicians who had defected from PDP to APC in 2013, defected again from APC back to PDP. There were 3 governors, 14 senators and 37 members of House of Representatives defected from APC back to PDP (punchng.com).

In 2014, when the present governor of Benue State, Dr. Samuel Ortom lost primaries under the PDP, he defected to APC and got the ticket to run on the platform of APC. He won the 2015 governorship elections in Benue State. Close to the period of primaries in 2018, Dr. Ortom defected again back to the PDP because he had a strong contender in the APC who had the support of the party. Olarenwaju (2019) argues that, as long as such defection is for self, it has no usefulness to Nigeria in the long run.

Another reason for party defections in Nigeria is to sustain the elite fight or struggle for the resources of the state. One of the key characteristics of elitism is to have control of the political and economic power of the state. This struggle does not recognize the interests of others in society, it is only the interest of the elite that is important. This is why they do not see any shame in defecting from a party they joined less than three years ago, as long as they achieve their goals. This desperation by political elite to win elections in order to control the resources of the state, is what Udeuhele (2015), refers to as political prostitution. Unfortunately, this elite fight is never for social interest, rather, it is for personal actualization.

6. Implications of party defections on Democratic Consolidation in Nigeria

Taking political development to be akin to democratic sustainability or consolidation is

apparently helpful for measurability. In that wise it is defined Wikipedia (2009) as “the process by which a new democracy matures in a way that means it is unlikely to revert to authoritarianism without an external shock”. Linz and Stepan (1996:20) opine that “democracies can be considered consolidated when democracy becomes institutionalized behaviourally, attitudinally and constitutionally”. Behaviourally, a democracy is consolidated when no significant national, social, economic, political or institutional actors spend significant resources attempting to achieve their objectives by creating a non-democratic regime or by seceding from the state. Attitudinally, a democracy is consolidated when a strong majority of public opinion, even in the midst of major economic problems and deep dissatisfaction with the incumbent, holds the belief that democratic procedures and institutions are the most appropriate way to govern collective life, and when support for anti-system alternatives is quite small or isolated from pro-democratic forces. Constitutionally, a democracy is consolidated when governmental and non-governmental forces alike become subject to, and habituated to the resolution of conflict within the bounds of the specific laws, and produces institutions sanctioned by the new democratic process. The above factors are synonymous to political development.

One of the greatest elements of democratic consolidation is free, fair and credible elections for transition from one administration to another. The above seems to be absent in Nigeria. This is because it has not internalized democratic ideals and does not exhibit them behaviourally and constitutionally. The nature and the character of the neo-colonial state exhibit inhibitive characteristics that do not allow competitive elections to ensure liberty, responsiveness and rule of law. Political nomadism therefore, has negative impact in the process of consolidating democracy under unwarranted situations of myriad defections among legislators, governors, deputy governors, and other party members to the ruling party. This trend tends to make caricature of our politics and particularly nascent democracy and belittles the spirit of opposition parties and democratic consolidation in Nigeria. This is because there is a great movement of members of the opposition to the ruling party. The case of Bauchi state becomes illustrative at this juncture. Isa Yaguda who as the current governor of Bauchi state was elected in 2007 under the platform of the ANPP, but he defected to the PDP with a large number of his supporters including the members of the State House of Assembly. But in a dramatic twist, his deputy governor, Garba Gadi who adamantly refused to go the way of his governor by joining the PDP was

impeached by the members of the State House of Assembly. Due to the unlawful impeachment, he went to court to contest his removal. The court eventually ruled in his favour, and he was reinstated as the deputy governor. The governor was a PDP member and his deputy an ANPP member. What a divided House? It is morally wrong for an aspirant to use one political platform to ascend power only to dump that platform at the least opportunity for another party.

Political defection could also lead to outright political instability if not checked. This is because in countries such as Bangladesh, Pakistan, Malawi and Zambia, political party defection is regarded as sufficient threat to the stability of the political systems. Hoeane (2008:71) concurs to the above when he argues that “in extreme cases of floor-crossing, where the number of public representatives who have defected has been significantly high, such shifts of allegiance have led to the collapse of democratically elected governments, such as in Lesotho in 1997”. Political harlotry or party defections of political office holders who do not resign the first platform for coming to political position do not add value to the process of democratic consolidation. In fact, these defections have hindered the evolution of virile political parties, both at the ruling level and the opposition which should serve as a check for the ruling party. This has also affected the institutionalization of democracy where elections are not free, fair and credible.

It must be acknowledged that existing literature and this paper has not considered the importance of interrogating the strengths and benefits of party defections to the growth and sustainability of democracy. However, we must acknowledge that though defections may not be based on ideological dissatisfaction but personal interests of the political elite, they may engender the quest for justice and fair play in the practice of democracy which will ultimately promote consolidation. This gap therefore calls for further research to focus on the merits of political harlotry in the practice of democracy in Nigeria.

Methodology:

This study is qualitative and exploratory, and it used textual analysis. Historical documented method of data collection with materials sourced from historical artifacts, journals, books and other public documents related to political history and development of political parties in Nigeria were used extensively while primary data derived from key informant interviews were also employed.

7. Conclusion and Recommendations

The paper makes bold reiterate that were the parties to be ideologically driven and the political class to be ideologically focused, the political process would have been better strengthened than it is presently, and our democratic governance would have been better for it, with ample evidence of democratic dividends for the people. Indeed, we are compelled, in this situation of lack of ideological focus of the political class, to call on the political parties to define their mission and vision, and to publicly present their ideology and manifestoes. This will to a large extent mitigate the unwholesome decamping, which, no doubt, is not helping our democracy. Based on the above, this paper also concludes that finding solution to the unending and persistent defection among party members would require adhering to the constitutional laws backing defection, the appropriate time for defection, and also preventing defectors from taking the office along with them when they defect to another party. Elected representatives should loose their seats if they defect outside the procedure provided for in the electoral act.

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