



International Journal of Advance Research Publication and Reviews

Vol 02, Issue 09, pp 530-537, September 2025

Political Defections in Nigerian Politics: Implications for Democratic Stability and Foreign Relations

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the wave of political party defections in Nigerian politics and its implications for political stability and Nigeria's diplomatic relations internationally. This is qualitative analysis that employs secondary sources of data collection which come from reliable archives, articles in the academic journals, textbooks and internet materials and relies on thematic content analysis. The article examines the causes of political party defections such as weak ideologies, internal party dysfunction, personal ambition, and institutional weakness. It exposes how frequent defections could disrupt democratic consolidation and erode public trust, while also impacting Nigeria's global image and foreign policy credibility. The paper concludes with recommendations for legal, institutional, and civic reforms to curb the spate of political party defections in Nigeria and enhance both domestic political stability and foreign policy efficacy.

Keywords: Political defection, Democracy, ideology, Diplomatic relations, Political stability, foreign policy.

Introduction

Political defections also known as cross carpeting or decamping has become highly a recurring decimal that is associated with Nigerian democracy. Political Party defections have become a characteristic feature of Nigeria's democratic landscape. Politicians especially the elected officials frequently, change their allegiances from one political party to the other. The reasons for their shifts are more of personal gains rather than ideology or policy differences. In recent years, the frequency occurrences of political defections have raised concerns about the stability of Nigeria's political system and her diplomatic relationship with the global community. This trend, often characterized by mass movements of political actors from one party to another, is usually motivated not by ideological differences or policy disagreements but by personal interests, political survival, or strategic positioning ahead of elections. According to Aniekwe, Ogbuka, & Udenta, (2025), the gale of defections has had significant implications for democratic consolidation in Nigeria and it undermines party ideology, weakens political institutions, and erodes public trust in the political process. The lack of legal and institutional deterrents to frequent defections has also contributed to a culture of political opportunism, where loyalty to the electorate is often sacrificed for personal gain. If the reasons behind political defections and its effects are well understood, it will be easy to realise stable and accountable democratic system. As Nigeria continues to grapple with governance challenges, electoral reforms, shifts in foreign policy and public disenchantment with political leadership, the issue of defections presents a severe test to the country's democratic future. This paper aims to examine the causes of political defections in Nigeria and examine their implications for the nation's democratic development, political stability and foreign policy dynamism. This interrogation will be guided by the following research questions:

What are the motivating factors for political party defection in Nigerian politics?

What are the effects of political party defection on democratic consolidation and political stability? What are the implications of political party defections on Nigeria's diplomatic relations? A good knowledge of these dynamics will help

political actors to reorder domestic political landscape and reshape Nigeria's foreign policy, as political instability at home undermine foreign engagements.

Political Defections

Political defection has been defined variously by different scholars from different perspectives. Jiddere (2015) defines political defection as leaving a political party to another by a politician as a result of discontent in his or her existing party. Eme et al. (2014) opined that political defection refers to one's abandonment of his/her previous position or association, offers to join an opposition or ruling group or party over the issue of political ideology, manifesto or programme and party management. Malthora (2005) uses different terms in reference to political defection including party defection, cross-carpeting, party switching, floor crossing, party hoping, canoe-jumping, party jumping, etc. Political defection, also known as party switching or cross-carpeting, refers to the act of a politician abandoning the political party under which they were elected and joining another party. However, Amadu (2019) defines political defection as a shift of active political support or membership either by politicians, ordinary party members, or voters from one political party to another in search of political power, public office or material gains without recourse to political ideology or principles. Amadu (2023) stated that change of political allegiance and the effects of such a change are the essential attributes of a political defection. Thus, for a political defection to occur there must be a change in political allegiance from one political party to another and that change must produce some effects on the parties involved. The definition of political defection includes defections by party members, voters, voting against party directives by the members of parliament etc. Furthermore, political defection includes mergers and political alliances because they involve a change and a shift of political allegiance to a new political party or between parties.

Theoretical Framework

This article applies Elite Theory, which posits that a small group of minority of the people holds most of the power in the society and makes decisions that serve their interests. According to the proponents of elite theory such as Mosca (1939) and Pareto (1968), the elite theory believes that the society is divided into small ruling elite and the larger masses that are passive in nature. These elites wield large power and influence over the political, economic and social institutions and often making decisions that serve their interests rather than the collective goods of every one. Political defection in Nigeria is mostly within the elite groups who lead their supporters to join them, and this is based on expected self-interest benefits. The elite theory explains how and why defections are carried out among the elites competing for access to power. The theory provides useful tools to analyse the wave of political defections in Nigeria political landscape. Elite Theory helps in the understanding of the reasons behind political defections and the implications for governance, accountability, democratic development and Nigeria's diplomatic engagements with the global world.

Brief Historical of Political Defections in Nigeria

The history of Political defections in Nigeria's political landscape started before she got her independence in 1960. The issues of defections began to gain recognition during the First Democratic Dispensation of 1960–1966. There was massive cross-carpeting of members of the Western House of Assembly in 1951 which resulted to the Action Group (AG) taking control of the regional government. The crises within the Action Group in the early 1960s led to widespread political defections. Chief Ladoke Akintola defected from Action Group to NPC (Northern People's Congress). The Second Democratic Dispensation of 1979–1983 experienced notable political defections on a large scale that affected the political survival of the federal entity. According to Olasupo (2020) the fluidity of political allegiance was evident in the formation and collapse of political alliances, such as the Nigerian People's Party (NPP) and the National Party of Nigeria (NPN) which quickly fell apart due to internal disagreements and power struggles. The third Democratic Dispensation of 1991–1993 with two political parties, the SDP (Social Democratic Party) and NRC (National Republican Convention) which was like a diarchy did not record political defections but the return to the fourth democratic Dispensation in 1999 to the present day heralded the trend of political defections which became the most pronounced era of political defections in Nigeria. According to Aniekwe, J. A., Ogbuka, I. M. & Udentia, C. N.(2025) the Fourth Democratic Dispensation of 1999

witnessed an upsurge in party-switching, often around election cycles or following changes in political leadership. In the build-up to the 2015 general elections, many political defections from amongst top political gladiators occurred especially from the then ruling People's Democratic Party (PDP) to the newly formed All Progressives Congress (APC). Some PDP Governors such as Rotimi Amaechi, Rabiu Kwankwaso, Aliyu Wamakko, Abdulfatah Ahmed and Murtala Nyako defected from PDP to APC. Since 2023 that APC gained the present power, political defections has increased in the build up for the general election coming up in 2027. The PDP governors, Senators as well as Federal and state law makers have been defecting to APC. The PDP governors of Delta, Akwa Ibom, and Cross River states have defected to APC. This wave of political defections was pivotal in APC's eventual victory and signified the growing strategic use of defection as a tool for gaining political advantage (Aleyomi, 2017). These historical trends indicate that political defections in Nigeria are deeply rooted in a political culture characterized by weak party ideologies and lack of internal party democracy.

Causes of Political Defections in Nigeria Democracy

Political defections have caused national debates concerning motivations behind it, their legality, morality, and impact on democratic consolidation and foreign relations. The Nigerian Constitution of 1999 as amended explicitly guaranteed Freedom of association which has become a cover for the frequency and motivations behind these defections. This has raised serious concerns regarding party discipline, ideology, political accountability, and the overall stability of the Nigerian political system. The cause of the constant occurrences of political defections in Nigeria can be attributed to several factors such as weakness of Political Ideology, lack of legal consequences or enforceable sanctions for defectors, Political instability and governance disruptions, and lack of Internal Democracy within Political Parties.

Weak party ideology

One of the causes of political defections in Nigeria is weakness of political ideology. Unlike in more ideologically grounded democracies, where parties are founded on clear philosophical principles, Nigerian political parties often function as platforms for political ambition rather than ideology. Consequently, politicians switch parties based on personal interests, such as securing a party ticket for elections, rather than due to genuine disagreement with party policies or direction (Omilusi, 2017). This trend dilutes the essence of party identity and hinders the development of a strong party system.

Lack of legal consequences or enforceable sanctions for defectors

Another pressing issue is the lack of legal consequences or enforceable sanctions for defectors, especially those elected on a particular party's platform. While Section 68(1) (g) of the Nigerian Constitution addresses defections in the National Assembly by stipulating the loss of seat for defectors, the provision is often circumvented or ignored. Ojukwu & Olaifa (2016) noted that Political actors and courts have interpreted the constitutional clause in ways that allow defectors to retain their seats, citing crises or factional divisions in their former parties as their reasons for defection as provided by law. This loophole undermines the electorate's mandate and allows for a culture of impunity in political behaviour. In Nigerian political landscape, there is no clear legal mechanism on ground to punish or sanction defectors who abandoned their political party and moved to another political party without following the legal due process. There is no law restraining elected political actors moving from one political party to the other and still retaining the seat he occupies. Political defectors therefore leans on this window to defect from one political party to the other without retrain.

Personal ambition

According to Ibrahim (2020) Political defections are often driven by personal interests, ideological disagreements, lack of internal democracy, and the pursuit of political survival. The political actors often forget that the electorate voted them into the seats they occupied and forgets all the promises they made on the vehicle of a particular ideology. They allow personal interests to overshadow the electorate's interests. Personal interests have remained a major cause of political defection in Nigeria's political landscape.

Political Instability and Governance Disruptions

Political instability and governance disruptions have become a good reason for high-profile political defections in Nigeria's political landscape. When elected officials switch allegiance, it can cause political realignments that destabilize existing power structures, leading to leadership tussles, legislative gridlocks, or delays in governance. Aleyomi (2017) observed that defections have been linked to the impeachment of governors, disruption of legislative activities, and heightened political tensions, especially during pre-election periods. This has caused political instability that undermines effective governance and diversion of attention away from developmental agendas.

Internal Democracy within Political Parties

The issue of internal democracy within political parties contributes to the massive political defections in Nigeria's political landscape. In most cases, aggrieved politicians cite lack of transparency, imposition of candidates, or marginalization in party affairs as reasons for leaving their parties. Lack of internal democracy within political parties contributes to the wave of political defections in Nigeria. Most politicians believed that their political parties lack internal democracy which amounts to imposition of candidates and marginalization in party affairs.

Effects of Political Defections on political stability and foreign policy

Political Defections may not be peculiar to Nigeria alone, especially within the African continent, but the Nigerian context is characterised by the absence of strong ideological base among political parties. According to Ajayi (2014) unlike in mature democracies where party allegiance is often ideologically motivated, defections in Nigeria are largely driven by personal ambition and short-term gains. The effects include erosion of voter trust, institutional instability, and the emergence of dominant party systems. Political defections contribute to credibility deficits, weakened bargaining power, and policy inconsistency in foreign relations.

Policy inconsistencies

Political defections breed inconsistencies in internal and external policy. Before the year 2015, the Nigerian PDP government in power laid emphasis on economic diplomacy as one of its major thrust. However, the period before the 2015 election, Nigeria's political landscape witnessed massive political defection from PDP to APC. The APC government that came on board emphasized on anti- corruption and counter terrorism diplomacy which was clearly different from the PDP government. This affected Nigeria's foreign policy as the change of government brings changes in both internal and external policies.

Damage to international image

Political defections has affected Nigeria's image abroad because most of the defectors believed to be having corrupt cases before the judiciary, changed their party so as to avoid prosecutions. This act has portrayed Nigeria before the external world as unreliable, unserious, and untrustworthy as well as a corrupt nation.

Reduces bargaining power

Political defections in Nigeria have resulted to domestic political crisis that has affected her bargaining power. Lack of unity at the domestic front as a result of political defections has diminished Nigeria's negotiating power at the international level; hence Nigeria continues to struggle in order to maintain her leadership roles in West Africa and Africa in general.

Shifts in foreign policy

As a result of political defections, Nigeria's foreign policy thrust witnessed sharp shift in ideological and strategic realignment because there were changes in international friendship and partners. It is true that Nigeria has been practicing

mixed economy but the change of government in 2015 as a result of massive political defection resulted to shift in her foreign policy outlook.

Erosion of electoral credibility

Political defection affects political support base as many supporters may lose confidence on the political parties. Political party defection has assumed a dangerous dimension since Nigeria returned to democratic governance in 1999. It could be argued that the spate of party defection has not only threatened the country's fledgling democracy, but has also rubbished its underlying mixed economy ideology and her image before the entire globe.

Weakness of the opposition

Political defection weakens the strength of the opposition which is supposed to give constructive and healthy criticism for the growth of the system. Lack of vibrant opposition could lead to a one party system which is not good for a multiparty system. According to Amadu (2023) as a result of dominance of the ruling party, the opposition political parties lack the capacity to actively oppose unpopular public policies and even to engage the incumbent party in important parliamentary debates. Presently, Nigeria is heading towards a one party state as there are massive political defections of high profile political gladiators across Nigeria.

Destabilize party systems

Political defections destabilize party structure and system which by extension leads to saturation of the party. Terwase, Abdul-Tlib, & Zengeni, (2015) noted that since 2015 when President Buhari continues to encourage and receive defectors from different political parties to APC, those defectors into the APC produced a saturation effect which affected the performance of the party during the second tenure of President Buhari. According to Khalid (2023) the political morality of Nigerian politics has, over the years, come under serious challenges on account of the activities of some political gladiators in the Nigerian political arena. Political defections weaken party institutions and create unstable government which could lead to inconsistencies in foreign policy. This could also make other nations having diplomatic relations with Nigeria to mistrust her and perceive Nigeria as an unreliable foreign partner.

Hinder democratic consolidation

Political defection hinders democratic consolidation and breeds instability in the party system due to fragmentations and factions within the parties. Defectors tend to move to their new political parties with the problems they had in their former political party. This has led to spill over of intra party problems as politicians from different political party background converge in one new political party with different interests. This has also led to creation of different factions which has weaken the internal party democracy that affect the smooth running of the ruling party in Nigeria. Amadu (2019) opined that defections of different political actors who only care for political power and their self interests to the ruling party, scarce public resources are expended on trivial issues rather than on important matters that can satisfy general needs of the people. According to Omotola (2010) while democracy allows freedom of association, the frequency and motivations behind defections have raised serious concerns regarding political integrity, ideology, and national interest.

Political instability

Frequent political defections, especially among elected officials, often result in the collapse of political alliances and shifting power dynamics, making it difficult to maintain coherent governance. Ojo (2019) noted that instability affects the execution of long-term policies and development programs. Moreover, it disrupts the mandate given to political parties by the electorate, thereby undermining democratic accountability.

Leadership distraction

Political defections could lead to the erosion of ideological commitment and political integrity. The management of political defection in a democracy takes a lot of time and resources which could lead to reduction of attentions accorded to external affairs matters. It could be argued that Nigeria's influence on ECOWAS and AU reduced because of domestic political crisis traceable to massive political defections. While defections are not unique to Nigeria, countries like Ghana and South Africa maintain stronger party institutions that mitigate such instability.

Recommendations

Based on the above findings of the causes and effects of political defections, the followings are recommended to limit the spate of political defections so as to ensure smooth running of government and maintain good image before the international community.

i. Constitutional Reforms should be put in place to effectively curb the growing trend of political defection in Nigeria. The Nigerian Constitution of 1999 as amended especially the sections that concerns electoral matters needs to be reviewed to give full power and legitimacy to the electoral laws. According to Okonkwo & Ibrahim (2021) the Electoral Act should be reviewed to impose clear and strict penalties on political defectors with flimsy excuses, especially elected officials. The law should specify that any elected official who defects without justifiable cause should automatically forfeit his seat. In other words, anti-defection clauses with clear sanctions such as automatic loss of seats should be enforced. Adeosun (2013) noted that internal weaknesses highlight the need for reform and democratization within political parties to reduce defections and promote cohesion.

ii. The internal working structures of political parties in Nigeria should be improved. According to Adele (2019) Political parties must institutionalize internal democratic practices to ensure fair and transparent party primaries, promote inclusivity, and accommodate divergent opinions. This will help to minimise the tensions that could lead to political defections in Nigerian politics.

iii. Political Education should be made an important part of electoral processes in order to promote awareness on the negative impacts of defections. Voters should be enlightened about the importance of political stability and the dangers of opportunistic defections. Through political education, the citizenry should be reoriented on political participation and the need to maintain healthy opposition. In the words of Nwosu (2020) the National Orientation Agency (NOA) and civil society organizations should intensify political education campaigns to sensitize politicians and the public on the dangers of political defections to democratic consolidation.

iv. The judiciary should play a more proactive role in interpreting and enforcing anti-defection laws. Amadu (2023) noted that the Nigerian Judicial system has been adjudged to be lagging in interpretation and enforcement of the law. Also, Khalid (2023) noted that the unusually delayed justice in defection related matters sometimes occasioned by the pile of cases before the scanty judicial umpire in the country is another block of stumbling over. They should play a more proactive role in interpreting and enforcing anti-defection provisions in line with democratic principles. Rational and sound judgments without delay will serve as deterrent to would-be defectors (Ibeanu, 2018).

v. Political parties should strengthen their Party Ideology and manifestos so as to achieve transparent intra-party elections. Political parties should be encouraged to develop distinct ideologies and manifestos which will discourage prospective defectors. They should strengthen Party Ideology and encourage transparent intra-party elections. Political parties should be ideologically driven rather than personality centred. A clear ideological base will reduce the fluidity of party affiliations and promote loyalty Chukwuma, & Adeyemi, 2022).

vi. Nigerian government should embark on Foreign Policy Reinforcement to help reshape the present domestic stability as part of Nigeria's diplomatic branding. Political defections has brought ridicule to Nigeria's image abroad which needs to be rebranded for Nigeria to occupy her rightful place at the international community.

Conclusion

Political defections in Nigerian politics impair democratic stability and undermine Nigeria's international credibility. Comprehensive reforms of legal, institutional, and political practices are necessary to curb defections, stabilize democracy, and strengthen Nigeria's standing in the global arena.

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