

Defection Politics and Its Implications for Democratic Consolidation: Assessing the Risks of One-Party Dominance in Nigeria

Frank Prince Diepreye

Department of Political Science, Federal University Otuoke
Bayelsa State
diepreyefrank@gmail.com

Oputa, Ben Pade

Department of Political Science, Federal University Otuoke
Bayelsa State
oputabenpade@gmail.com

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Abstract

With a case study of Nigeria's fourth republic, this paper undertakes a broader examination of the challenge of political defection and its implications for democratic consolidation, particularly the phenomenon of one-party dominance. In Nigeria's political ecosystem today, political defection, a situation whereby politicians hop from one party to another has become the order of the day. Such fragmentation prevents the establishment of a stable party system, undermines faith in democratic institutions, and represents a formidable challenge for the consolidation of democracy. Lack of cohesive ideologies among political parties and their insatiable appetites for self-interest instead of ideals cause this instability. Additionally, the consequence of this one-party monopoly is that political competition is suppressed, opposition parties are weakened, and key accountability mechanisms to a well-functioning democracy are undermined. These risks demand urgent electoral reforms to strengthen internal party democracy, regulate opportunistic defections and produce ideologically based political parties. These steps are also necessary to build a more competitive political space and for the entrenchment of democratic culture in Nigeria.

Keywords: Political defections, democratic consolidation, one-party dominance, Nigeria.

Introduction

Under the Fourth Republic particularly, cross-carpeting, also known as party flipping or political defection has been a key component in Nigerian politics. Sometimes leaders resign one party to join another for personal motivations, political survival, or strategic gains rather than ideological conflicts (Okocha, 2020). Although defection is not exceptional in multiparty democracies, its high frequency in Nigeria raises worries about political stability, democratic consolidation, and the risk of one-party rule (Nwanneka, 2019). In Nigeria, party defections have traditionally happened since the early 1950s. A important event that impacted the political landscape of the time was members of the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons (NCNC) defecting to the Action Group (AG) in 1951 (Edet, 2017). Defections' frequency and

techniques have altered lately; they generally peak immediately before or just after elections. For example, 27 Rivers State House of Assembly members who left the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) in December 2023 switched to the All Progressives Congress (APC). This mass defection caused in the Labour Party attempting to have the vacant seats of the departing MPs declared invalid due to constitutional limits forbidding such activities (Arise News, 2024). On statute-barred grounds, the Federal High Court in Abuja dismissed the complaint in September 2024 anyway (Punch, 2024). As several well-known Senate defections demonstrate, Nigerian party dynamics are notoriously unstable. In October 2023, Senator Ifeanyi Ubah, representing Anambra South, moved from the Young Progressives Party (YPP) to the ruling APC after a strategic engagement with Senate leaders (NASS, 2023). Similarly, Senator Ezenwa Francis Onyewuchi of Imo East defected in 2022, stating his intention to join the "New Nigeria" movement by combining with the Labour Party (NASS, 2022). These defections have radically shifted the political dynamics in the National Assembly, with the APC expanding its majority (Ojo, 2023). Another event that greatly altered the political environment was the defection of Yusuf Abba Kabir, a former PDP veteran and gubernatorial candidate, to the New Nigeria Peoples Party (NNPP). His defection and subsequent triumph in the 2023 Kano State gubernatorial election reflected increased disenchantment with established political parties and offered a fresh platform to confront entrenched power structures (Audu, 2024). However, his return to the PDP in 2024 throws into question the party's determination to build a dominant third force in Nigerian politics. These defections have wide-ranging ramifications. They hinder democratic accountability by making elections less competitive and undercutting alternative parties. When opposition politicians and leaders join the ruling party in sufficient numbers, the possibility of Nigeria becoming a de facto one-party state rises, establishing an unequal political climate (Nwanneka, 2019). Frequent defections worsen political instability and erode public trust in democratic institutions. This problem is compounded by the dearth of clear policy concepts and strong ideological commitments within Nigerian political parties, as defections are often driven by self-interest rather than differences in principles (Edet, 2017). Defections may also effect subnational politics. Just before the 2023 general elections, a substantial number of members of the Bayelsa and Zamfara State Houses of Assembly defected to the APC, further strengthening the ruling party's stronghold over local politics (Vanguard, 2023). Such patterns impact election outcomes and state-level leadership, establishing a climate where political loyalty is always shifting. In light of these issues, a detailed investigation of the causes for political defections in Nigeria and their larger consequences for democratic progress is necessary. Addressing these difficulties includes establishing proper laws, enhancing internal party democracy, and implementing mechanisms to minimise opportunistic defections while protecting the integrity of the multiparty system (Okocha, 2020). Recent suggestions to amend Section 68(1)(g) of the 1999 Constitution, which deals with defection, demonstrate the urgent necessity to safeguard Nigeria's democratic institutions. Additionally, it is necessary to foster the creation of ideologically grounded political parties to give voters with multiple policy choices and minimise the incentives for political opportunism (NASS, 2022).

Theoretical Framework: Institutional Theory

Institutional Theory, propounded by scholars such as Thorstein Veblen (1899) and later advanced by Douglas North (1990) and Paul DiMaggio and Walter Powell (1983), provides a solid framework for analysing **Defection Politics and Its Implications for Democratic Consolidation in Nigeria**. The theory highlights how political behaviour is shaped by formal

and informal institutions—such as laws, norms, party structures, and electoral processes. The strength or weakness of these institutions influences political actors' decisions, including defection, thereby affecting the stability of democratic governance.

Core Assumptions of Institutional Theory

Institutional Theory asserts that political actors behave according to the opportunities and constraints provided by institutional structures. Weak or poorly enforced institutions encourage opportunistic behaviour, leading to instability and the erosion of democratic norms. In the context of Nigeria, defection politics is linked to the fragility of institutional frameworks governing political parties and electoral processes. The absence of well-institutionalised parties and the lack of effective enforcement of defection laws allow politicians to prioritise personal ambitions over party loyalty and democratic principles.

Application of Institutional Theory to Defection Politics in Nigeria

1. Weak Internal Party Democracy

According to institutional theory, poorly institutionalised political parties are prone to internal warfare, factionalism, and leadership crises—all of which increase the chance of defections. In Nigeria, decision-making within political parties is generally governed by a small number of elites, while the parties themselves lack solid ideological basis (Ojo, 2022). Under such circumstances, politicians find it simpler to defect when differences emerge, or other chances present themselves.

For example, unresolved leadership disagreements within the People's Democratic Party (PDP) in 2014 generated large defections, diminishing its potential to oppose the governing party (Edet, 2017).

2. Legal Loopholes and Inadequate Enforcement Mechanisms

3. Institutional theory illustrates how inadequate legal systems foster opportunistic conduct. Section 68(1)(g) of the 1999 Nigerian Constitution puts constraints on defections for MPs, but governors and other high-ranking officials are excluded, leaving defections virtually unregulated (Audu et al., 2022). This loophole has led to political instability, since mass defections have gone unpunished. A significant example of this institutional breakdown happened after the 2015 general elections, when substantial numbers of opposition lawmakers defected to the governing All Progressives Congress (APC) (Nwankwo, 2021). 1. Institutional Incentives for Political Survival In poorly institutionalised democracies, access to state resources and political patronage is generally controlled by the governing party. To stay politically relevant and escape punishment, politicians regularly switch to the governing party (Oni & Joshua, 2020). Institutional theory helps explain how the political system in Nigeria incentivises defection as a survival strategy, with politicians making rational decisions based on these institutional benefits.

3. Weak Electoral Institutions and Lack of Accountability

The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) and other electoral agencies in Nigeria confront difficulty in implementing legislation designed at limiting political opportunism. Institutional shortcomings in inspection and enforcement contribute to

the loss of election legitimacy and weaken democratic consolidation. Without substantial deterrents, politicians are able to move parties without penalties, lowering political competition and restricting voter options (Audu, Aam, & Gana, 2022).

Implications for Democratic Consolidation

The regular surge of defections in Nigeria reveals inadequate institutions rather than just being a sign of political opportunism. Democracy suffers when political parties and election institutions fail to set clear norms and channels for accountability. The lack of institutionalised political practices undermines the opposition, diminishes electoral competitiveness, and supports one-party domination, ultimately undermining Nigeria's democratic consolidation. Douglas North's (1990) contention that "institutions are the rules of the game in a society" effectively characterises the Nigerian setting, where the loose enforcement of institutional standards leads to defections that endanger democratic norms.

Conceptual Review

Defection Politics: Meaning and Context

Political defection, sometimes referred to as party flipping, cross-carpeting, or floor-crossing, is a phenomenon when politicians quit the political parties under whose platform they were elected and join opposing parties. This practice, while legally permitted in some cases, is widely considered as a danger to democratic stability and political responsibility (Nwankwo, 2021). In democratic regimes, defection is considered a manifestation of political freedom. However, in nations like Nigeria, where the political landscape is mostly governed by elite negotiation rather than ideological commitment, defection has become a strategic weapon for political survival rather than a reflection of changes in political ideas (Oni & Joshua, 2020). The Nigerian Constitution accepts multiparty democracy but provides significant limits on desertion. According to Section 68(1)(g) of the 1999 Constitution, a politician may only move parties without losing their position if there is a split in their former party or if their party merges with another (Ojo, 2022). However, owing to insufficient institutional enforcement, defections continue to occur often, with parliamentarians and governors defecting to align with the governing party to seek political perks, protection, or reelection chances. Recent incidents of defection illustrate the degree to which party flipping has become established in Nigeria's political culture. A prominent example is the December 2023 defection of 27 members of the Rivers State House of Assembly from the People's Democratic Party (PDP) to the All Progressives Congress (APC) following a power struggle between Governor Siminalayi Fubara and his predecessor, Nyesom Wike (Arise News, 2024). Similarly, in April 2024, former Imo State Governor Emeka Ihedioha resigned from the PDP, citing unresolved internal party conflicts, further highlighting the importance of factionalism in pushing defections (Wikipedia, 2024).

Democratic Consolidation and the Risks of One-Party Dominance
Democratic consolidation is vital for guaranteeing the long-term stability and legitimacy of democratic rule. It requires developing democratic principles, encouraging respect for the rule of law, and establishing strong institutions that ensure free, fair, and competitive elections. A consolidated democracy creates a lively political environment where opposition parties may question incumbents, promote

accountability, and give viable alternatives to the voters (Diamond, 1999; Adebajo, 2022).

In Nigeria, however, the growing number of political defections, particularly toward the governing party, undermines the process of democratic consolidation. This pattern supports a perilous trajectory toward one-party dominance, a condition that stifles competition, decreases accountability, and inhibits the expansion of multiparty democracy.

The Nigerian Context

Since the restoration to democratic government in 1999, Nigeria's democracy has endured cycles of consolidation and crises. The People's Democratic Party (PDP) controlled the political scene for 16 years until 2015, when the All Progressives Congress (APC) emerged triumphant in a historic election. Since then, the APC has profited from a wave of defections that have severely weakened the opposition and reinforced its power (Ojo, 2022). The prelude to the 2023 general elections featured an extraordinary number of high-profile defections. Notable instances include governors, senators, and state lawmakers defecting to the APC, mostly to seek political safety and access to state resources (Ojo, 2022). In Rivers State, for instance, the defection of 27 PDP legislators to the APC virtually crippled the opposition's capacity to confront the incumbent party (Arise News, 2024). This tendency continues to undercut democratic competitiveness and diminish public faith in the political process.

Key Risks and Consequences

1. Weakening of Electoral Competition

Political defections impair the election process by creating an unequal playing field. The dominant party gets an unfair advantage via greater access to state resources, media dominance, and political patronage. Opposition parties, deprived of their best members, find it harder to rally support and present viable alternatives (Audu, Aam, & Gana, 2022). This restricts voters' options and prevents the development of a competitive multiparty system.

2. Erosion of Accountability

One-party dominance diminishes the efficacy of checks and balances, resulting to a lack of accountability. Without a strong opposition to scrutinise government policies and activities, the governing party is more prone to indulge in corruption, abuse of power, and authoritarian tendencies (Dode, 2018). This may have long-term ramifications for government, service delivery, and citizens' wellbeing.

3. Voter Apathy and Disillusionment

When politicians repeatedly switch parties for personal benefit rather than ideological ones, people get disillusioned. Many Nigerians regard the political elite as opportunistic and self-serving, resulting to decreased voter participation and widespread indifference toward elections (Audu et al., 2022). This tendency was obvious in the 2023 general elections, as voter participation declined dramatically compared to prior elections (INEC, 2023).

4. Monopolisation of State Resources

In a one-party dominating regime, public resources are generally monopolised for the advantage of the governing party and its followers. This tactic marginalises opposition

parties and hinders their capacity to campaign successfully, thus entrenching the power of the governing party (Ojo, 2022). Such monopolisation degrades democracy and generates political inequality.

5. Increased Risk of Authoritarianism

With diminished opposition, the governing party may be inclined to consolidate power further by limiting press freedom, curtailing civil society, and manipulating election procedures. Prolonged one-party dominance has historically led to democratic reversals in numerous African nations, such as Zimbabwe and Uganda, where governing parties have stayed in power for decades by coercion and election fraud (Nwankwo, 2021).

Factors Driving Defection Politics in Nigeria

A number of firmly ingrained institutional, cultural, and structural variables influence defection politics in Nigeria. These elements not only demonstrate how unstable the political environment of the nation is, but they also point to greater difficulties that imperil political stability and democratic consolidation.

1. Weak Ideological Commitment

Political parties in Nigeria differ from those in industrialised democracies in that they often lack strong ideological identities (Oni & Joshua, 2020; Omodia & Udo, 2022). Nigerian parties serve as huge coalitions of convenience targeted at winning political power and managing state resources, rather than being founded around specific policy ideas or ideological views. The historical background is that most political parties have consistently lacked clear manifestos or policy goals since 1999, when Nigeria restored to civilian administration. Because politicians join parties for political motives rather than because they share similar beliefs, this weakness makes it straightforward for people to transfer for opportunistic reasons. The public's faith in the political system is undermined as a result of politicians moving parties often without making substantial changes to their political beliefs or stances on issues.

2. Political Survival and Career Advancement

Personal aspirations and the desire to stay in politics are major reasons in defections, especially in a highly competitive political climate where power conflicts are frequent. For politicians, defection is a practical method to safeguard their political careers and access networks of sponsors.

Politicians frequently shift to the dominant party in order to increase their prospects of earning reelection, getting political offices, or escaping sanctions. To take advantage of the new power structure, opposition politicians, for example, switched in enormous numbers to the governing party after the APC's victory in 2015 (Edet, 2017; Yusuf & Eze, 2023). Some politicians flee in order to evade facing legal conflicts or being examined for misbehaviour. According to Ajayi (2021), political allegiance may change the results of judicial proceedings; hence, identifying with the prevailing party often offers protection.

3. Internal Party Conflicts and Leadership Crises

Defections are also commonly triggered by factionalism and leadership conflicts within political parties. Due to the poor internal democracy of many Nigerian parties, conflicts over leadership duties, candidate choices, and resource distribution are widespread (Ojo, 2022). The PDP is one example. The party has endured repeated waves of defections as a result of unresolved leadership conflicts. Several well-known MPs moved to other parties in 2022 as a result of disagreements over the party's zoning strategy and presidential candidate. The majority of parties do not have adequate conflict resolution systems, which makes it difficult to resolve internal disputes and encourages frustrated members to explore for alternative options.

4. Electoral Calculations and Strategic Positioning

Defections typically occur in conjunction with imminent elections, when politicians shift to parties thought to have a stronger chance of winning. Remaining relevant and increasing electoral chances are the aims underlying this purposeful activity.

Case Studies: As MPs looked for more suitable settings, several abandoned the APC and PDP before the 2019 national elections. During the 2023 elections, substantial defections were recorded as politicians shifted parties to secure parliamentary and gubernatorial tickets (Umar & Ibrahim, 2023). The electoral bandwagon effect promotes defections because politicians desire to be linked with the leading party, believing it has a stronger chance of winning and controlling resources.

5. Absence of Strong Legal and Institutional Restrictions

Particularly for executive positions like governors, Nigeria's legal framework gives minimal penalty to desertion. Although Section 68(1)(g) of the 1999 Constitution bans MPs from defecting until there is a split within their party, executives are free from this restriction, and it is seldom obeyed (Audu et al., 2022).

6. Patronage Politics and Resource Control

Defections are generally generated by patronage politics. Politicians in Nigeria regularly defect in order to secure or keep control of state resources, which are typically related to political power (Omodia, 2022; Uche & Okeke, 2022).

7. Ethno-Religious and Regional Considerations

Nigeria's political climate is greatly affected by ethnic, religious, and regional relations. Defections are often prompted by these concerns as politicians want to combine with parties that provide more support for their ethnic or regional interests (Abubakar, 2023).

8. Monetisation of Politics The monetisation of politics in Nigeria, where elections are distinguished by high levels of monetary inducement and vote-buying, contributes to

defections. Politicians defect to parties with bigger financial resources to assist their campaigns and sustain political control (Ajayi, 2021).

Implications of Political Defections for Nigeria's Democracy

The continuing flow of political defections in Nigeria creates grave hazards to the country's democratic consolidation and administration. Below are some of the significant implications:

1. Weakening of the Opposition and Democratic Accountability

Frequent defections severely weaken opposition parties, diminishing their capacity to operate as effective checks on the incumbent party. This diminishes the quality of democratic oversight and parliamentary scrutiny, therefore enabling the ruling party to entrench power unchecked. The absence of a powerful opposition undermines the democratic process and stifles different policy possibilities, constraining voters' choices (Oni & Joshua, 2020). For instance, in the aftermath of the 2023 general elections, the defection of prominent opposition leaders in states such as Rivers and Kano further destabilised opposition parties, diminishing their capacity to unite people and combat presidential overreach (Omodia, 2022).

2. Erosion of Public Confidence in Democracy and Electoral Processes

Defections without proper explanation or connection with constituents alienate voters, leading to broad public disillusionment with democratic management. When politicians put personal political survival above party devotion and campaign vows, people lose trust in both the election process and political institutions (Audu et al., 2022). This has contributed to decreased voter turnout in recent elections, as many Nigerians no longer believe that their votes can make a difference. According to the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), voter turnout in Nigeria has consistently declined, moving from 44% in 2015 to 29% in 2023 (INEC Report, 2024).

3. Encouragement of Authoritarian Tendencies and One-Party Dominance

When ruling parties obtain an overwhelming majority thanks to defections, it sets the route for authoritarian conduct. Prolonged single-party control may lead to the erosion of democratic norms, suppression of dissent, and manipulation of state institutions to serve the interests of the ruling class (Dode, 2018). Historical examples in African countries such as Zimbabwe and Uganda demonstrate how the absence of major opposition may support despotism and inhibit democratic consolidation. In Nigeria, the likelihood for one-party domination is growing, particularly at the state level, where opposition parties have been intentionally depleted by defections (Nwankwo, 2021).

4. Promotion of Political Instability and Governance Crises

Mass defections frequently produce political crises, intra-party friction, and factional warfare. These disputes usually escalate into long court conflicts, further destabilising government and hampering effective policy execution (Ojo, 2020).

In Bayelsa and Zamfara States, defections in state legislatures contributed to severe delays in adopting budgets and implementing developmental projects due to lengthy political infighting (Umar & Ibrahim, 2023). This form of volatility hinders service delivery and limits socio-economic growth at both state and national levels.

5. Undermining Internal Party Democracy

Defections are also symptoms of inadequate internal party democracy in Nigeria. Many politicians defect because they feel excluded or unfairly treated during party primaries or decision-making processes. According to Ajayi (2021), lack of transparency in candidate selection processes, imposition of candidates, and the absence of inclusive party structures cause members to seek greener pastures in other parties. Strengthening internal party democracy would lessen the incentives for defection, as MPs would have greater trust in fair competition and transparent processes within their parties.

6. Economic and Financial Cost of By-Elections

Defections may lead to the classification of seats as vacant and the demand for by-elections, which place an added financial pressure on Nigeria's electoral body and taxpayers. Organising by-elections for defected seats demands money that may be better spent on updating election infrastructure and civic education (INEC, 2024).

The Way Forward: Policy Recommendations

To preserve Nigeria's democracy against the hazards of one-party domination and improve democratic consolidation, a multi-faceted strategy is essential. These ideas concentrate on legal, institutional, and civic actions to address the fundamental reasons of political defections and establish a more stable political system.

1. Strengthening Internal Party Democracy

Internal party democracy is crucial for preventing factional tensions that frequently lead to defections. Political parties must adopt open leadership selection procedures and inclusive decision-making to ensure members feel represented and respected. Strengthening internal democracy would minimise disagreements and enhance long-term commitment to party beliefs (Adebanjo, 2022).

- Establishing independent internal arbitration bodies inside political parties might help address issues before they escalate.
- Electoral organisations, such as the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), shall offer monitoring and enforce party bylaws to guarantee conformity with democratic principles (INEC, 2023).

2. Constitutional and Electoral Reforms

The legal structure regulating defections requires urgent change. Section 68(1)(g) of the 1999 Constitution should be changed to impose stronger sanctions on defectors, notably governors and high-ranking officials, who move parties for personal benefit rather than genuine ideological disagreements (Ojo, 2022).

- Introducing recall measures for elected officials who defect without solid grounds will promote accountability and guarantee lawmakers stay responsive to their districts.
- Strengthening the function of anti-corruption institutions in monitoring political finance and limiting inducements associated to defections would diminish opportunistic conduct (Audu et al., 2022).

3. Building Ideologically Grounded Political Parties

One of the key sources of defections in Nigeria is the lack of strong ideological convictions across political parties. Political leaders must emphasise building clear, policy-driven platforms that represent the needs and ambitions of Nigerians. This will help differentiate parties and minimise the inclination for politicians to swap allegiances for personal profit (Edet, 2017).

- Party manifestos should be tightly tied with particular development objectives, and elected officials should be scrutinised for their adherence to these pledges.
- The development of ideological clarity will also help voters make educated choices and establish long-term allegiance to parties based on shared values and goals (Dode, 2018).

4. Enhancing Civic Education and Voter Sensitisation

Educating voters about their rights and the necessity of democratic competition is crucial for fighting voter apathy and developing active political involvement. Increased civic understanding will allow people to hold politicians responsible and limit the attraction of opportunistic political activity (INEC, 2023).

- Civil society groups and educational institutions should work to promote ongoing voter education and civic involvement, especially at the grassroots level.
- Media campaigns and town hall meetings may be utilised to inform people on how defections damage democratic norms and urge increased scrutiny of political activity (Oni & Joshua, 2020).

5. Fostering Collaboration Among Democratic Stakeholders

Effective coordination among political parties, civic society, electoral organisations, and the courts is vital for sustaining democratic resilience. Stakeholders must work together to defend democratic ideals and establish institutional capacity to avoid the inappropriate concentration of power (Nwankwo, 2021).

- International organisations and election observers should continue to promote democratic efforts and push for best practices in political governance (IDEA, 2023).

- Strengthening connections with regional and global democratic institutions would boost Nigeria's ability to undertake reforms and preserve democratic values.

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