Politics of Defection and its Implications on Nigeria’s Democracy

By Lawrence I. Edet
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Abstract- This study examines the politics of defection and its implications on Nigeria’s democracy. Nigeria’s return to democracy in 1999 ushered in a great hope of democratic dividend and heralded a rare opportunity for the country to launch a new democratic strategy, after years of military dictatorship. The emergence of multiparty democracy in Nigeria since 1999 has been seen as a major breakthrough in the democratic process. However, the way and manner politicians in Nigeria defect from one party to the other has not only constituted democratic nuisance, but has continued to raise serious concern among political observers and participants in Nigeria. This have lend credence to lack of clear ideology and manifesto among political parties in Nigeria. The issue of defection has been one of the major bane of democratic process in Nigeria.

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I. Introduction

The practice of defection from one party to the other appears to have become a necessary attribute of party politics in Nigeria. Politics of defection in Nigeria can be traced to 1951, when several members of NationalCouncil of Nigeria and Cameroon (NCNC) defect to the Action Group (AG) just to deny Dr. NnamdiAzikiwe and his party (NCNC) the majority in the Western Regional House of Assembly, which the party required to form the government in the Western Region (Adejuwon, 2013). Within the Action Group (AG), LadokeAkintola, a deputy leader of AG, left the party in a crisis of personality and ideology between him and the party leader, Obafemi Awolowo, to form United Democratic Party (UNDP). UNDP then entered into alliance with Northern People’s Congress (NPC) to frustrate AG dominance of the Western Region.

Lending credence to the above, Mbah (2011) argued that defection has become not only a norm but an increasingly permanent feature in the Nigerians democratic culture. Party defections and political instability are the greatest challenges confronting Nigeria’s democracy (Nwanegboet al., 2014). The usual practice is politicians defecting to other political parties if they fail to secure party nominations during own party’s primaries, while some who felt disillusioned, cheated or denied free and fair primaries, defect to other parties so as to participate in the elections, with the intention of returning to their original parties after such elections. This has been the practice during election periods in Nigeria since democratic resurrection in Nigeria in 1999.

One of the issues that has contributed to party defections in Nigeria is lack of internal democracy within political parties. In Nigeria, recognition of candidates for nomination and selection for primary elections depends on the strength of the candidate in area of economic and political power, without any due consideration of the integrity and capability/capacity of the candidate involved (Jinadu, 2014). These acts have led to political crises leading to individuals defecting to other parties and/or forming new parties as a result of dissatisfaction with party operation and general voter’s apathy in the democratic process. (Badejo et al., 2015). For instance, the unhealthy power contest and intra-party crises prompted incessant defections of prominent members of People’s Democratic Party (PDP) between 2013-2015 to the opposition party-the All Progressive Congress (APC). In Nigeria, no political party has clear ideology and this has accounted for incessant internal party crises which usually leads to defections. But in some cases, politicians still defect to another party even when there is no crisis within their political parties. As a result of the above scenario, it is necessary to note that party defections in Nigeria are not restricted to one party, but has become a political norm in Nigeria’s democracy. Therefore, the spate of defections and its implications on Nigeria’s democracy has raised a fundamental question on the sustainability of democracy in Nigeria.

However, the study intends to answer the following questions:

i. What are the factors responsible for party defections in Nigeria?

ii. What are the implications of party defections on Nigeria’s democracy?
II. Conceptual Exploration of Defection and Democracy

Conceptual exploration of defection and democracy is necessary in this study to give clear understanding of the terms and their impact on each other. Defection is an act of swapping political parties. It is an act of changing party allegiance or moving from one party to another. This particular term is known by different nomenclatures—“decamping,” “cross-carpeting”, “party hopping,” “party switching,” “party crossover” and canoe-jumping” (Malhotra, 2005). Some scholars have argued party defection is caused by political events involving political institutions while others concluded that it is as a result of ideological pressure (Nokken and Poole, 2002).

However, Malhotra (2005) observed that in some nations, party defection are not taken seriously whereas, in some countries, such actions are seen as threat to democratic stability. This threat prompted the enactment of laws against defection in some countries. For instance, India enacted laws against defection in 1973, 1985 and 2003. The law provides that a person can be disqualified from serving in parliament for withdrawing membership of his original political party (Janada, 2009). The law reduce cases of party defection in the Indian polity since it was difficult for Indian public office holders to forfeit their position. In Nigeria, there exist also allow aim at checkmating the rate of defection in sections 68 and 109 of the 1999 Nigerian constitution (as amended). However, inherent deficiencies in the law have frustrated the achievements of the purpose of the law. For instance, section 68 (1g) states thus:

A member of the senate or the 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 the 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 (Constitution of Federal of Nigeria, 1999, p.34)

However, Winston Churchill remained one of the foremost political defector. He first joined the British parliament as a Conservative in 1901, defected to the Liberal in 1904, and defected back to the Conservative in 1925 (Wikipedia-The Free Encyclopedia, 2014). In Nigeria, the former Vice President, Alhaji Atiku Abubakar seems to be the most defected PDP politician in recent times, he defected to Action Congress of Nigeria (ACN) from Peoples’ Democratic Party (PDP), then moved back to PDP and then moved back to APC Progressive Congress (APC). On the other hand, democracy is a system of government that encapsulates three vital components: meaningful competition among individuals for public office using political parties at periodic intervals, inclusive participation of the citizens in the selection of leaders and policies formation/implementation and considerable level of civil and political liberties (Diamond et al., 1989).

Nnoli (2003) see democracy as a system of government involving freedom of individuals’ political life, equality of citizens before the law, social justice in the relations between the people and government as well as free choice of individuals in deciding political leaders. Schumpeter (1990) conceptualize democracy as an institutional arrangement for reaching political decisions through which individuals acquire the power to decide, by means of a free and competitive struggle for the people’s votes. Democracy cannot function effectively and efficiently without political parties and individual belonging to political parties can retard democratic process through their actions within the political parties. Democratic success is measured on the extent to which people have unrestrained access to participation in the policy processes (Unah, 1993).

What really gives democracy meaning is the right of citizens to freely participate and choose their leaders. The extent of citizens’ involvement in decision-making relates directly to the type of policies government make. The absence of the above elements retards any democratic efforts.

III. Ideological Confusion and the Challenges of Democracy in Nigeria

The alarming rate of defection of politicians and instability within political parties occasioned by lack of internal democracy tends to obstruct democratic sustenance in Nigeria. Political party is one of the major institutions prerequisite for democratization and democratic sustenance. In advance democracies such as U.S.A., Britain, Germany, etc. parties have been known to exist on sustained ideological base, not just platform for ascending to political power. Ideology, according to Christenson (1981) is seen as a belief system that justifies chosen political order for the society. It is a set of shared beliefs regarding the proper order of a society (Omotola, 2009). Omotola (2009) avers that ideology constitute the hallmark of social political identification as well as mobilization and unifying factor. Ideology as a set of beliefs has the potency of unifying people of different cultures, ethnic groups, religion, gender and orientation.
Galvanizing the concept of political ideology in Nigerian politics will prove clearly that Nigerian political parties lacks clear ideology and in fact, suffering from ideological confusion. Since Nigeria’s independence in 1960, Nigerian parties have been established on baseless foundations. This has accounted for unnecessary defections of Nigerian politicians because these parties lack clear ideology. While Omotola (2009) argued that this baseless foundation of Nigerian political parties is responsible for party’s ideological barrenness, we conclude that complete absence of ideology in Nigerian political parties has accounted for the prevailing party crossover and party switching in Nigeria.

For instance, all political parties in Nigeria have one internal crisis or the other. Often, these crises led to conflict, division, factionalization and killing of party members. Example, the killing of former Justice Minister, Bola Ige after he indicated his interest to resign his position in PDP-led government and return to help his party, Alliance for Democracy (AD) for the 2003 elections, the killing of PDP South-South leader, Harry Marshall after he cross-carpeted to All Nigeria Peoples’ Party (ANPP), the killing of former Deputy Speaker, Akwa Ibom State House of Assembly after he defected from PDP to All Progressive Congress (APC) to contest 2015 general elections for the State House of Assembly, etc. are all clear instances that party politics in Nigeria is not rooted on ideological democratic principles.

In Nigeria, issues such as ethnicity, religion, language, culture, money, etc. have considerable role in the formation and management of political parties and thus, it is pertinent to note that democratic sustenance in Nigeria has remained a “tall dream” that may not be achieved. Nigerian political parties are riddled with ideological confusion, internal crisis and lack of capacity to sustain itself. This has accounted for parties charging names, merging with other parties and sometimes form alliance but still face peculiar problems. Ideological principles is necessary in party formation, structure and management. This is why Seliger (1976) averred that politics interconnect with ideology. Fundamental in party ideology is the entrenchment of internal party democracy to guarantee equal opportunity for participation and protest.

Table 1: Major Catalogues of Political Cross-carpeting in Nigeria

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Names</th>
<th>Old Party</th>
<th>New Party</th>
<th>Names</th>
<th>Old Party</th>
<th>New Party</th>
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<td>Alhaji Kwatalo (Dep. Gov.)</td>
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<td>PDP</td>
<td>Chuba Okadigbo (Senator)</td>
<td>PDP</td>
<td>ANPP</td>
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<td>ANPP</td>
<td>PDP</td>
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<td>PDP</td>
<td>NDP</td>
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<tr>
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<td>PDP</td>
<td>ANPP</td>
<td>Jim Nwobodo (Senator)</td>
<td>PDP</td>
<td>UNDP</td>
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<tr>
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<td>ANPP</td>
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<td>AD</td>
<td>UNPP</td>
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<td>PDP</td>
<td>ANPP</td>
<td>Obinna Uzor (Gov. Aspirant)</td>
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<td>Jonan Jang</td>
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<td>Chief Ade Akiayi</td>
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<td>AD</td>
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<td>AD</td>
<td>Gbolahan Okuneye (HOR)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

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The above is just an abridged version of catalogues of political cross-carpeting in Nigeria. However, it could be noted that the “political prostitution” in Nigeria is permitted in the executive the arm of government under the 1999 constitution. The provisions of section 68 (1g) only affects the legislature and to some extent, ambiguous. This is so because the issue of division in political party or factions within a political party is a relative term that can be interpreted different. Someone might defects from his original party to another as a result of minor disagreement and claim the party was factionalized or divided. Section 68 and 109 of the 199 constitution (as amended) have not empower any agency to determine when a political party is factionalized or divided and this has reduce these constitutional provisions to a fallacy and ambiguity. This has further created unnecessary confrontation in the political system. This is so, because the processes of conducting party affairs and regulating the behaviour of party members have remained largely irreconcilable.

Therefore, the major source of confusion, conflict and lack of focus in both ruling and opposition...
IV. **Defection and its Implication on Sustenance of Democracy in Nigeria**

The act of defection in Nigeria is traceable to the emphasis on the primacy of political power. Easton (1965) see politics as an avenue for authoritative allocation of values for the society. People struggle for political power so as to be able to preside over the allocation of resources for the society. This is because the possession of state power directly gives access to economic power. By implication, those who hold political positions determine the allocation and distribution of economic resources and political rewards. The alarming rate of political defection in Nigeria and the increasing number of party defectors remains a serious source of concern. This concern, according to Ogundiya (2011) revolves around the role of political parties in the collapse of first, second and third republics.

Mbah (2011) averred that desperation to hold public office as means of accumulating wealth makes Nigerian politicians to cross-carpet without justifications. In advance democracies such as U.S.A, Britain, Germany, Australia, etc. cross-carpeting is done on ideological principles, rather than on selfish and personal interest. For instance, a member of Republic Party in the USA can express support for Democratic Party member or aspirant without necessarily defecting to Democratic Party. In 2008, Collin Powell, a former US secretary of Defence publicly supported Democratic Party candidate, Barrack Obama for the US presidential elections without defecting to Democratic Party. Why political defection in Nigeria is almost becoming a culture is that there is paucity of ideas, collapse of political values and norm, lack of principles based on shared beliefs and the selfish interest of Nigerian politicians. Under this circumstance, democracy as built on faulty and false foundation. Issues such as ethnicity, religion, individual personality and language influence the formation of political parties and movement of politicians to a particular party.

Momoh (2010) noted that political parties in Nigeria have manifestoes that are all virtually the same. These manifestoes are formulated by consultants, not party members or activists. This may have been the reason why Nigerian political parties always look up to electoral commissions to help in educating the voters. Oyebode (2012) submits that it is difficult to have democracy without genuine and committed political parties. Political parties operating in Nigeria are nothing but an organization managed by opportunists. In Nigerian democracy, there is lack of internal democracy within political parties as a result of frequent conflicts, crises and imposition of candidates for elections. While Aina (2002) doubt the integrity of political participation and competitions in Nigeria of which parties are the basis, Mbah (2011) portend Nigerian political party as strip of ideological foundation, deficit in ideas and principles. This ideological bankruptcy has reduced Nigerian political parties to a mere organization that survive on monetization as the basis for loyalty and support. This act erodes the efficacy of democratic sustenance through party processes. In Nigeria, politicians only defect from one party to another to contest elections or get favour not on the basis of party ideological differences.

V. **Conclusion and Recommendations**

This paper examines the politics of defection and its implications on Nigeria’s democracy. From the analysis, it could be stated party defection arising from internal party conflict remained a serious challenge to Nigeria’s democracy. Party defection and ideological confusion in the present republic constitute a major problem to democratic stability. Politicians defect from one party to another not on the basis of ideological disagreement, but on selfish interest. Mbah (2011) submitted that party defection has serious negative impact on democratic stability and consolidation. The trend of baseless defections among Nigerian politicians makes mockery of Nigerian democracy, negates the values of opposition parties in democratic system, invalidate opposing views and reduce the efficacy of alternative democratic choices.

Party defection if not checked, could move Nigeria into a system without viable opposition to serve as watchdog to the ruling party. Momoh (2010) linked party defection to political culture and suggest the emergence of new political culture to build on new values and virtues, to reinforce the democratic practice in Nigeria. It is also worthy to note that the nature and character of political parties can frustrate members seeking to defect. Democracy is built on ideologically sustained political parties and the extent to which this is derailed can exert negative influence on democratic stability and consolidation.

However, this paper acknowledge the critical role of civil society groups, non-governmental organizations and pro-democracy groups in reversing...
this “democratic confusion”. The study recommended the strengthening and amendment of the constitution and electoral laws to regulate the alarming rate of defection of politicians in Nigeria. Strengthening and sustaining Nigeria’s democracy requires a social re-orientation, consistent political education and mobilization based on democratic culture directed towards inculcation of new values in the political system.

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