

Political Defections in Nigeria: Implications for Our Nascent Democracy

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Abstract: The Nigerian political turf is replete with a monstrous phenomenon which has emerged as a potent retrogressive factor with the capability of torpedoing our nascent democracy. This sinister offshoot of our democratic experience is the fanciful multi-nomenclated phenomenon called Political Defection. The prime focus of this discourse is to undertake a philosophical expository analysis of the conversational narratives bordering on the subject under investigation. In this essay, therefore, a historical exposition of particular cases of cross-carpeting as well as a corresponding analysis of the causes, legitimacy and implications of political porting will be surveyed. The essay will also discuss the possible ways of curbing incessant party switching so as to strengthen and foster the deepening of democracy in Nigeria.

Introduction

The Nigerian political landscape is laced with an insidious macabre egomaniacal phenomenon whose current burgeoning propensity has attracted widespread excoriation from dispassionate intellectual observers. Within the Nigerian political circus the active players are notorious for wantonly invoking the abracadabra provision availed them by virtue of the enshrinement and protection of this phenomenon in the constitution.

The phenomenon under discourse is known by various appellations ranging from *political defection*, *political Nomadism*, *cross – carpeting*, *decampment*, *party – switching*, *floor – crossing*, *party – hopping*, *canoe – jumping*, *party – jumping* and recently, the most trending epithet that has been employed to describe it is *political porting*. Porting is a term introduced by telecommunication companies to describe the situation of swapping from one network to the other.

History Of Political Porting In Nigeria

The remotest incident of political defection in pre-independent Nigeria that snowballed to the tirade of future cases, happened in 1941 when Ernest Ikoli, an Ijaw man emerged victorious over Samuel Akinsanya, a Yoruba, in the contest for the vacant seat in the Legislative Council. Samuel Akinsanya and other Ijebu Yoruba pulled out of the Nigerian Youth Movement in protest against Ernest's victory. The provoked Eastern and Southern components of the party who supported Ikoli were incensed by this act of ethnic chauvinism; which was against the cosmopolitan charter of the party and as a result persuaded Nnamdi Azikiwe to constitute a new political platform. The great Zik rose to the challenge by joining forces with Herbert Macauley to form the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons (NCNC) (Moses Ogbonna Agudiewu et al "Party Defections and Survival of Democracy in Nigeria" 103 – 112).

The most salient case of political porting in pre-independence Nigeria, which is notoriously christened as "the most celebrated" floor crossing escapade (Olaolu S. Opadere et al "Cross Carpeting in Nigerian Politics: Some Legal and Moral Issues Generated" 22 – 39) occurred in 1951. The theatre of porting in this event was the defunct Western Regional House of Assembly and the main protagonists were Nnamdi Azikiwe of NCNC and Obafemi Awolowo of Action Group (AG).

The NCNC had won 42 seats out of 80 seats in the house and it was evident that Azikiwe, who was the leader of the party following the death of Macauley; a Yoruba man, would emerge the premier of the Western Region. This was not to be as the mechanics of *political xenophobia* was devised against Azikiwe. It is reported that Chief Awolowo; who was the opposition leader, signaled the house that he had a matter of utmost urgency to raise which will avert the country of impending anarchy. At the submission of Awo's speech, one Yoruba parliamentarian rose up and said that he will not be a party in a case where Yoruba land will be incinerated and as such that he is crossing over from NCNC to the AG (Udeuhele Godwin Ikechukwu. "Political Nomadism and its Implications on Political Development in Nigeria: A critical Analysis". *International Journal of African and Asian Studies* Vol. 9, 2015). In a spasmodic

acquiescence to Awolowo's speech, 20 NCNC members ported to the AG within 24 hours and the possibility for the emergence of Dr. Azikiwe as the Western Premier was torpedoed. The gargantuan shock and inter ethnic animosity orchestrated by this act makes it to be reckoned as the turning point and the ontogenetic exemplum classicus of ethnic cum political xenophobia in Nigeria.

The gale of political porting; from this inceptual twilight, has progressed unabated with geometrical progression till date. Though it will be *ad nauseam* to recount the recorded cases of political defection in Nigeria, it is pertinent to mention some of the high profile instances of this phenomenon in Nigerian political history. The first republic of 1960 – 1966 witnessed the decamping of Chief Ladake Akintola, the former Premier of the defunct Western Region from the AG to form the United Progressive Party (UPP) which later allied with the NCNC of Zik to constitute the Nigerian National Democratic Party (NNDP). In the same vein, Zik and Dr. Kingsley Ozumba Mbadiwe clashed and Mbadiwe broke out from the NCNC to form the Democratic Party of Nigeria Citizens (DPNC). The Second Republic (1979 – 1983) recorded a tirade of political defections with the members of the rebranded offshoots of the major First Republic parties hobnobbing and shoveling between parties so as to pitch camp with a formidable political structure. This culminated in the high profile cases of Chief Akin Omobiorio; the Ondo State Governorship Candidate, who transited from Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN) to National party of Nigeria (NPN) and that of Alhaji Abubakar Rimi; a former Kano State Governor, who was elected on the platform the Peoples Redemption Party (PRP) but later transited to Nigeria Peoples Party (NNP).

The act of political defection reached a fever pitch and basest nadir in the fourth republic (1999 – now) after the ill-fate and controversial Third Republic which is called the “Abiola Republic”. Political decampment has become the norm rather than the anomie in contemporary Nigerian politics such that recounting the frequency of cases will result in almost an infinite rendition. The top profile cases of this phenomenon in the era include that of the incumbent President, Muhammadu Buhari, who has contested for the presidency three times under different political parties namely All Nigeria's Peoples Party (ANPP) in 2003 and 2007, Congress for Progressive Change (CPC) in 2011 and the All Progressive Congress (APC) in 2015. The case of Alhaji Atiku Abubakar is another one worth mentioning. He served as a Vice President under President Obasanjo from 1999 to 2007. In his aspiration to the presidency, he has trajected from PDP to AC, then came back to PDP, switched back to APC and currently he is with the PDP. The case of Rochas Okorocha is monumentally outlandish as he seems to have been a member of almost all the known political parties in Nigeria. Factually, there are scanty or hardly any top notch APC figure in the National Assembly or the Executive who is not a decampee.

Causes, Legitimacy And Implications Of Political Defection

Myriads of reasons could be gleaned and critical truths distilled from the confessions made by political defectors in accounting for the rationales upon which their acts are premised. The propelling factor behind most defections is the compulsive desire by politicians to pitch camp with the ruling party.

The catastrophic will of some politicians to secure political office through hook or crook constitutes the rationale for the most of the party switches observed after party primaries. At this juncture, losers during the primaries will seek for another platform to effectuate their ambition. Lack of internal democracy, absence of transparency, imposition of candidates, disregard of courts orders and the cult of hero-worshipping constitute most of the reasons upon which defection is predicated. It has to be stated that the egocentric desire of feathering one's nest stands as a predispositional rationale behind most cases of defection. Cross- carpeting is also utilized by political tacticians as a strategy to politically maneuver and infiltrate another party.

Political defection is not an obnoxious outlaw in the eyes of Nigerian laws. The Constitution of the Nigerian state gives warrant for political defection. The 1999 constitution of the Federal Republic bestows on all Nigerians the fundamental right to freedom of assembly and association. Specifically, section 68 1(a) allows a member of the National Assembly to become a member of another party other than the one from which he was elected on the grounds of division and or merger of his former party. Aside these grounds the legislator is supposed to vacate his seat if he defects. This same provision and the accompanying exceptions are replicated for the state assembly in section 109 (1)(g).

However, the term “division in the party” which constitutes one of the grounds for the defection of a legislator is shrouded in a Labyrinth of ambiguity as there is no litmus test measure for determining what counts as division in a political party. Thus, this provision is palpably and flagrantly exploited to suit the whims of defectors.

Whereas the constitution is explicit on the provision for the defection of a legislator, it is notoriously and conspicuously silent on the provision for the defection of members of the executive. The silence of the constitution on sanction/restriction on members of the executive from cross – carpeting implies that they can defect at will and such action will not be viewed as illegal.

Though political defection may be viewed as legal but it portends a very bleak moral connotation because most defections are greed driven. Recurrent defection leads to the heightening of tension in the politic and multiplication of animosity and hence does not enhance consolidation of peace. Frequent defection does not allow for ideological stabilization among parties as the parties are always in deficit of the critical mass needed to build party ideologies. Switching from party to party partially connotes that there is no ideological difference among the different parties hence the fluidity and the swiftness of assimilation of a member of one party by another. This implies that Nigerian political parties are driven by the power of self aggrandizement rather than by objective ideology.

Most political defections are orchestrated by the influence of hefty money bags in the party. This and other sundry allurements constitute the very corner stone of corruption and hence destructive of democracy which ought to be sustained by political party participation.

An analogy between cross – carpeting and adultery in religious parlance will highlight political defections as a form of infidelity, licentiousness, ungodliness and lack of love and longsuffering.

The Way Forward

Party defection or party porting has become a recurrent decimal in the Nigerian political scene. It possesses a kind of Jekyll and Hyde nature in that it can enhance or mar our nascent democracy. It is inhibitive of democracy when party porting is driven by reasons of self aggrandizement and promotive of democracy if premised on principles and ideological differences between parties. The different political parties should strengthen the internal democratic principles within parties as a measure of curbing incessant porting. Party primaries should be checked for compliance with the principles of transparency and consistency with the rules of the party and laws of the land. Government should set up machineries to curb corruption within parties and the influence of money bags. Another *sine qua non* for combating incessant party porting is to make political power less lucrative so that the fair-weather and opportunistic politicians who are prone to trajecting from party A to B and back to A can explore other means of livelihood.

Conclusion

The phenomenon of party defection is a healing balm for a politician who suffers unbearable grievances which have not been properly addressed by the party. It can however become a gruesome sore that is capable of bleeding any democracy to demise if left uncontrolled. Party defection will remain a positive phenomenon if it is exercised on the grounds of candour, objectivity and in pursuit of a sound and better political ideology. Otherwise it becomes a monstrous egocentric drive for self-aggrandizement.

Works Cited

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