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DECAYING DEMOCRACY AND THE SADDENING EFFECTS OF POLITICAL DEFECTION IN NIGERIA: A PRAGMA-SOCIOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF THE DANGERS OF ONE-PARTY SYSTEM AND THE NEED FOR DISCURSIVE AND PROACTIVE DEMOCRATIC REDIRECTION

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Abstract

Political defections have become a recurring feature of Nigeria's democratic landscape, particularly since the Fourth Republic. While party switching is not uncommon in democratic systems, the increasing scale and frequency of defections from opposition parties to the ruling party raise concerns about the sustainability of democratic governance in Nigeria. This article examines the phenomenon of political defection through a pragma-sociological framework, combining insights from pragmatics, political sociology, and critical discourse studies to interrogate how political actors justify defections and how such practices affect democratic accountability. Drawing on contemporary political developments and discursive representations in political commentary, the study argues that political defections in Nigeria are not merely strategic acts but discursive performances that legitimize power consolidation and weaken opposition structures. The analysis reveals that the normalization of defections contributes to the erosion of democratic competition, the weakening of institutional checks and balances, and the potential emergence of a de facto one-party system. The article concludes by calling for discursive accountability, institutional reforms, and proactive civic engagement aimed at strengthening democratic pluralism in Nigeria.

Keywords: political defection, democracy, one-party system, pragma-sociology, political discourse, Nigeria

Introduction

Multiparty democracy is sustained by political competition, ideological diversity, and institutional accountability. However, the persistence of political defections in Nigeria has raised significant concerns regarding the health of democratic governance. Political defections—the movement of elected officials from one political party to another—have become increasingly widespread, often involving prominent governors, legislators, and party elites. Recent

developments in Nigeria suggest a growing concentration of political power within the ruling party. Several governors and lawmakers elected under opposition platforms have defected to the ruling party, strengthening its dominance in both federal and state institutions. There has been a somewhat observation and reports that such defections are frequently motivated by political survival, patronage networks, and access to state resources rather than

ideological alignment. Similarly, political analysts warn that this trend could lead to the gradual erosion of multiparty competition and the emergence of a de facto one-party state.

The phenomenon raises fundamental questions about democratic governance in Nigeria:

1. What discursive strategies are used to legitimize political defections?
2. How do these defections affect democratic accountability and institutional balance?
3. What socio-political implications arise from the potential drift toward a one-party system?

This article addresses these questions by adopting a pragma-sociological approach, which examines the interaction between political discourse, social structures, and institutional power. The study argues that political defections function not only as political acts but also as discursive constructions that normalize elite opportunism and weaken democratic competition.

Conceptual Clarifications

Political Defection

Political defection refers to the act of an elected political actor abandoning the political party under which they were elected in favour of another party. In many democratic systems, party switching may occur due to ideological realignment or policy disagreements. However, in Nigeria, defections are often driven by personal interests, internal party conflicts, or strategic alignment with the ruling party (Omotola, 2010). Political defection, also referred to as party switching, cross-carpeting, or floor crossing, is the act whereby an elected political office holder abandons the political party under whose platform they were elected and joins another political party during their tenure in office. In democratic systems, political parties serve as critical institutions for organizing political competition, articulating policy preferences, and representing citizens' interests. Consequently, the act of political defection raises fundamental questions regarding political accountability, representation, and the sanctity of electoral mandates (Aldrich, 2011).

According to Aldrich (2011), political parties are essential democratic institutions that structure electoral competition and facilitate collective political action. When elected officials defect from the parties that sponsored their election, the relationship between voters, parties, and representatives becomes distorted, potentially undermining democratic accountability. Political defection is a common phenomenon across many democratic systems, although its prevalence varies depending on the strength of party institutions and ideological commitments. In mature democracies where parties possess strong ideological foundations and institutional cohesion, defections occur relatively infrequently. However, in emerging democracies characterized by weak party institutionalization and patronage-based politics, defections are more widespread (Mainwaring & Scully, 1995).

Scholars often argue that political defections in developing democracies are primarily driven by opportunism rather than ideology. Politicians frequently switch parties to gain access to state resources, secure electoral advantages, or align themselves with politically dominant actors. In such contexts, political parties are often treated as vehicles for personal political advancement rather than as ideological platforms (Omotola, 2010). In Nigeria, political defection has become a recurring feature of the Fourth Republic.

Since the restoration of democratic governance in 1999, politicians have repeatedly switched party affiliations due to internal party crises, electoral calculations, and strategic alliances with ruling parties. Observers have noted that many defections are motivated by political survival, patronage networks, and access to governmental resources rather than ideological differences.

The frequent movement of politicians from opposition parties to ruling parties has significant implications for democratic governance. Analysts warn that excessive defections can weaken opposition parties, reduce political competition, and potentially lead to the emergence of a dominant party system. Such developments may undermine democratic checks and balances and limit citizens' electoral choices. From a democratic governance perspective, political defection also raises questions about the legitimacy of electoral mandates. Voters typically elect candidates based not only on personal attributes but also on party ideology, manifesto, and political alignment. When politicians abandon the parties under whose platforms they were elected, citizens may perceive such actions as a betrayal of the electorate's mandate (Ojukwu & Olaifa, 2011). Nevertheless, some scholars argue that political defection can occasionally serve legitimate democratic purposes. For example, politicians may defect in response to severe internal party crises, ideological realignment, or the erosion of internal party democracy. However, when defections are primarily motivated by personal gain or opportunistic calculations, they can weaken democratic institutions and undermine public trust in the political system (Aldrich, 2011; Omotola, 2010).

In sum, political defection remains a complex political phenomenon with significant implications for democratic stability, party institutionalization, and electoral accountability. While party switching may sometimes reflect legitimate political realignment, its excessive occurrence—particularly when driven by opportunism—can weaken democratic governance and distort the will of the electorate.

Democratic Governance

Democratic governance involves institutional arrangements that ensure accountability, political participation, transparency, and rule of law (Diamond, 1999). A functioning democracy requires a competitive party system in which opposition parties can effectively challenge the ruling government. Democratic governance refers to a system of governance in which political authority is exercised through institutions and processes that promote citizen participation, accountability, transparency, rule of law, and respect for human rights. It reflects a governance structure where the legitimacy of government is derived from the consent of the governed and where public officials are held accountable for their actions through democratic mechanisms such as elections, legislative oversight, and judicial review (Diamond, 1999).

Democratic governance extends beyond the mere conduct of elections to include the effective functioning of political institutions and the protection of civil liberties. According to Diamond (1999), democracy requires not only free and fair elections but also the presence of strong institutions that ensure accountability, transparency, and the rule of law. In this sense, democratic governance involves the interaction of multiple institutions, such as the legislature, judiciary, political parties, civil society organizations, and the media, that collectively ensure that political power is exercised in the interest of the public (Diamond, 1999). Similarly, Dahl (1989) conceptualizes democratic governance through the framework of *polyarchy*, which emphasizes inclusive

participation and public contestation. Dahl (1989) argues that democratic systems must guarantee political rights such as freedom of expression, access to alternative information, and the right to compete for public office. These conditions enable citizens to participate meaningfully in governance and ensure that governments remain responsive to public needs. A fundamental component of democratic governance is accountability, which requires that public officials justify their decisions and actions to citizens. Accountability mechanisms may take various forms, including elections, legislative scrutiny, judicial oversight, and independent media. These mechanisms ensure that political leaders remain answerable to the electorate and help prevent abuses of power (Beetham, 1999).

Transparency is another critical element of democratic governance. Transparency refers to the openness of governmental processes and the availability of information to citizens, allowing them to monitor government activities and evaluate policy decisions. Open governance promotes public trust and helps reduce corruption by making government actions subject to public scrutiny (Hyden, Court, & Mease, 2004). The rule of law also forms a cornerstone of democratic governance. The rule of law requires that all individuals and institutions, including government authorities, operate within the framework of established laws and constitutional provisions. It ensures equality before the law and protects citizens against arbitrary or abusive use of political power (Fukuyama, 2013). In many emerging democracies, however, democratic governance faces significant challenges, including weak institutions, political corruption, electoral irregularities, and the erosion of opposition politics. In Nigeria, for example, the increasing frequency of political defections has raised concerns about the weakening of democratic institutions and the possible emergence of a dominant party system. Such developments may undermine democratic competition and weaken mechanisms of accountability within the political system. Therefore, the consolidation of democratic governance requires strong institutions, active civic engagement, respect for constitutional norms, and a vibrant multiparty system that allows for meaningful political competition. Without these elements, democratic governance may deteriorate into authoritarianism or one-party dominance.

One-Party Dominance

A one-party dominant system occurs when a single political party consistently controls political institutions to the extent that opposition parties become weak or irrelevant (Sartori, 2005). Such systems often emerge through institutional manipulation, patronage networks, or elite co-optation. One-party dominance refers to a political condition in which a single political party repeatedly wins elections and maintains control over key institutions of government for a prolonged period, thereby limiting meaningful political competition from opposition parties. Unlike a one-party state—where only one political party is legally permitted to operate—one-party dominance exists within a formal multiparty system in which opposition parties are legally allowed but remain structurally weak or electorally ineffective (Sartori, 2005).

According to Sartori, a dominant party system occurs when one political party consistently outperforms others in elections and occupies government positions for extended periods. In such systems, although opposition parties exist, they lack the capacity to challenge the ruling party effectively. Sartori (2005) explains that dominant party systems often emerge when a ruling party consolidates electoral advantages through organizational strength, incumbency benefits, patronage networks, and fragmented

opposition. Similarly, Duverger (1954) emphasizes that the structure of party systems significantly influences political competition. Duverger (1954) argues that electoral systems and institutional arrangements can produce political environments in which one party gains consistent advantages over others. When opposition parties are weak or divided, the ruling party can gradually consolidate power and create a dominant position within the political system.

One-party dominance has significant implications for democratic governance. Competitive democracy relies on strong opposition parties to provide checks and balances, scrutinize government policies, and present alternative policy options to voters. When one party becomes overwhelmingly dominant, the capacity of opposition parties to perform these democratic functions is reduced, thereby weakening democratic accountability (Diamond, 1999). Another major factor contributing to one-party dominance is the advantage enjoyed by incumbents in power. Incumbent governments often control access to state resources, patronage networks, and institutional structures that may indirectly influence electoral outcomes. These advantages can encourage politicians from opposition parties to defect to the ruling party in order to secure political survival, access resources, or avoid political marginalization.

In many developing democracies, frequent political defections have reinforced dominant party systems. When politicians defect from opposition parties to ruling parties, the numerical and institutional strength of opposition parties declines, making it increasingly difficult for them to compete effectively in future elections. Political analysts warn that this pattern can gradually transform a competitive multiparty system into a de facto one-party dominant system. Scholars also note that prolonged one-party dominance may produce several negative consequences, including reduced political competition, increased corruption, weakened institutional oversight, and the erosion of democratic norms. Without strong opposition, governments may face fewer constraints on their authority, potentially encouraging authoritarian tendencies even within formally democratic systems (Levitsky & Way, 2010).

However, some political scientists argue that one-party dominance does not automatically imply authoritarian rule. In certain cases, dominant party systems may coexist with democratic institutions if elections remain competitive, civil liberties are protected, and opposition parties retain the freedom to organize and contest elections (Sartori, 2005). Nevertheless, the persistence of one-party dominance often raises concerns about the fairness of political competition and the long-term sustainability of democratic governance. In the context of Nigeria's democratic development, increasing concerns have emerged regarding the potential drift toward one-party dominance as a result of persistent political defections and weakening opposition structures. Such developments highlight the need for stronger party institutionalization, electoral integrity, and democratic accountability in order to preserve pluralism and political competition within the political system.

Pragma-Sociology

Pragma-sociology combines the linguistic analysis of discourse with sociological inquiry into power relations and social structures (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006). In political communication, this framework examines how political actors construct meanings, justify actions, and negotiate legitimacy within public discourse. Pragma-sociology is a sociological approach that examines how social actors justify, negotiate, and legitimize their actions in everyday interactions and public debates. The approach focuses on

the ways individuals use language, arguments, and moral reasoning to defend their decisions within specific social contexts. Rather than assuming that social behavior is determined solely by fixed structures or institutions, pragma-sociology emphasizes the role of discourse, justification, and situational reasoning in shaping social and political actions.

The foundations of pragma-sociology were developed by Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot. In their influential book *On Justification: Economies of Worth* (1991), they argue that actors rely on different moral frameworks, or “orders of worth,” when justifying their actions in public situations. These orders of worth represent shared principles—such as civic values, market competition, industrial efficiency, or loyalty—that individuals invoke to legitimize their behavior or criticize others. According to Boltanski and Thévenot (1991), social disputes are often resolved through argumentative processes in which actors attempt to justify their positions using widely recognized norms and values.

Pragma-sociology therefore pays particular attention to the role of justification in social life. Actors are viewed as competent individuals who are capable of explaining and defending their actions when challenged. In political contexts, this means that politicians, parties, and public officials often provide narratives or justifications to legitimize controversial decisions, such as policy changes, alliances, or political defections. Another important contribution to pragma-sociology is the work of Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello, who further explored how actors construct legitimacy in contemporary capitalist societies. Their work highlights how discourse and moral justification play a central role in shaping public perceptions of political and economic practices.

In political analysis, pragma-sociology provides a useful framework for examining how political actors justify their actions in the public sphere. For example, when politicians defect from one political party to another, they often present justifications such as ideological disagreement, national interest, political marginalization, or the need to serve their constituents more effectively. From a pragma-sociological perspective, these explanations are not merely rhetorical statements but strategic attempts to legitimize actions before the public and maintain political credibility. Furthermore, pragma-sociology emphasizes that legitimacy is not automatically granted; it must be constructed through persuasive argumentation and accepted by relevant audiences. Public debates, media discourse, and political narratives therefore become key arenas where competing justifications are evaluated and contested. Overall, pragma-sociology provides valuable insights into the relationship between discourse, justification, and legitimacy in political life. By focusing on how actors defend their decisions and appeal to shared values, the approach helps scholars understand how political actions are rationalized and how public support or criticism is generated.

Theoretical Framework

This study draws on three complementary theoretical perspectives:

Habermas' Theory of Communicative Action

Habermas (1984) argues that democratic legitimacy depends on rational public discourse where actors justify their claims through communicative rationality. Political defections challenge this principle when political actors justify personal ambitions using rhetorical appeals to national interest or stability. Habermas also emphasizes the role of the public sphere in evaluating political actions. The public sphere consists of arenas such as media debates, civil society discussions, and parliamentary deliberations where

citizens critically examine political decisions. When politicians defect, these actions are typically scrutinized by the public, opposition parties, and the media. Through this process of public debate, citizens assess whether the justifications provided by the political actor meet acceptable standards of democratic accountability.

In cases where political defections are widespread and poorly justified, the communicative foundations of democracy may weaken. Frequent defections can undermine party ideology, weaken opposition parties, and reduce voter trust in political institutions. When political actors prioritize strategic advantage over communicative justification, the democratic process may gradually shift from deliberative engagement to opportunistic political competition. Nevertheless, Habermas' theory also suggests that democratic institutions can mitigate these problems by strengthening mechanisms of accountability. Transparent political communication, independent media, strong opposition parties, and active civil society organizations help ensure that political actors are compelled to justify their decisions publicly. These mechanisms reinforce communicative action by encouraging political actors to provide rational explanations that can withstand public scrutiny.

Therefore, applying Habermas' Theory of Communicative Action to the study of political defection helps scholars analyze whether the justifications offered by defecting politicians align with democratic principles of rational discourse and accountability. It also highlights how political communication, public debate, and institutional oversight contribute to maintaining democratic legitimacy in the face of controversial political actions.

Van Leeuwen's Legitimation Theory

Van Leeuwen (2007) identifies discursive strategies used to legitimize political actions, including:

- **Authorization:** citing authority figures or institutions
- **Moral evaluation:** presenting actions as morally justified
- **Rationalization:** framing actions as logical or necessary
- **Mythopoesis:** narrating stories that justify political decisions

These strategies often appear in political statements explaining defections.

Habermas argues that in a functioning democratic system, political actors must satisfy what he calls validity claims in communication: truth, sincerity, and normative rightness. These claims are necessary for meaningful democratic dialogue. When politicians justify political defection, they typically present arguments such as ideological disagreement with their former party, internal party injustice, or the need to better represent their constituents. For these justifications to be legitimate within a communicative framework, they must be truthful, sincere, and consistent with democratic norms.

However, in many political systems, including emerging democracies, political defections often reflect strategic action rather than communicative action. Politicians may change parties primarily for personal political advantage, such as gaining access to power, securing political appointments, or aligning with dominant parties. In such cases, the public explanations offered by defecting politicians may function as rhetorical strategies rather than genuine attempts at democratic justification. Habermas also emphasizes the role of the public sphere in evaluating political actions. The public sphere consists of arenas such as media debates, civil society

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Political Sociology of Party Systems

Scholars of political sociology emphasize that stable democracies require strong party institutions and ideological competition (Lipset & Rokkan, 1967). Weak party institutionalization encourages opportunistic defections and undermines democratic stability. The political sociology of party systems examines the relationship between social structures, political institutions, and the organization of political parties within a society. It focuses on how social divisions, historical experiences, and institutional arrangements shape the development, competition, and stability of political parties. Political sociology therefore seeks to understand how parties represent social interests, mobilize voters, and structure political competition within democratic systems.

One of the most influential contributions to the study of party systems comes from Seymour Martin Lipset and Stein Rokkan. In their seminal work on cleavage theory, Lipset and Rokkan (1967) argue that party systems in democratic societies emerge from major social cleavages such as class divisions, religious differences, and conflicts between rural and urban populations. These cleavages shape political alignments and give rise to political parties that represent the interests of different social groups. According to their analysis, the structure of party competition often reflects these historical social conflicts. Another important theoretical perspective on party systems was developed by Giovanni Sartori. Sartori (2005) emphasizes that party systems should be analyzed not only by the number of parties that exist but also by the nature of competition among them. He distinguishes several types of party systems, including one-party systems, dominant-party systems, two-party systems, and multiparty systems. Sartori argues that the level of ideological distance between parties and the capacity of opposition parties to influence political outcomes are key factors in determining the functioning of a party system.

Political sociologists also highlight the importance of social representation in party systems. Political parties serve as mediating institutions between society and the state by aggregating interests, articulating policy preferences, and organizing political participation. Through these functions, parties connect citizens to the political process and help maintain democratic governance. When party systems are stable and institutionalized, they contribute to political accountability, policy continuity, and democratic legitimacy (Mainwaring & Scully, 1995). However, party systems may become weak or unstable when political parties lack strong ideological foundations or organizational structures. In many emerging democracies, parties often revolve around personalities, ethnic alliances, or short-term political interests rather than clear ideological commitments. This situation can lead to fluid party alignments, frequent political defections, and weak opposition structures.

Political defections can significantly affect the sociology of party systems. When politicians frequently move from one party to another, the institutional stability of parties is weakened. Defections may also distort electoral competition by strengthening ruling parties while weakening opposition parties. Over time, such patterns can contribute to the emergence of dominant-party systems in which one political party maintains prolonged control of government despite the formal existence of multiple parties. Furthermore, political sociologists argue that party system stability depends on the level of party institutionalization, which includes stable party identities, strong organizational structures, and consistent voter loyalties. Where party institutionalization is weak, politicians may treat parties primarily as vehicles for personal political advancement rather than as ideological organizations representing long-term social interests (Mainwaring & Scully, 1995).

The political sociology of party systems therefore provides a valuable framework for understanding how social forces, institutional arrangements, and political behavior interact to shape democratic competition. By examining the relationship between society and party organizations, this perspective helps explain why some democracies develop stable, competitive party systems while others experience party fragmentation, defections, and dominant-party tendencies. In contemporary political analysis, the political sociology of party systems is particularly useful for studying emerging democracies where party institutions are still evolving. It highlights how social cleavages, political culture, and institutional rules influence party development and how patterns such as political defections may reshape the balance of power within the political system.

Conclusion

Political defections represent one of the most significant challenges to democratic consolidation in Nigeria. Through a pragma-sociological lens, this article has demonstrated that defections are not merely political manoeuvres but discursive practices that legitimize elite opportunism and weaken democratic institutions. The normalization of defections threatens the balance of power necessary for multiparty democracy and raises the possibility of a gradual drift toward a one-party dominant system.

To safeguard Nigeria's democratic future, political actors, institutions, and citizens must collectively promote accountability, strengthen party systems, and resist discursive narratives that undermine democratic pluralism.

Democracy survives not merely through elections but through sustained commitment to political competition, institutional integrity, and public accountability.

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