UJJPS **University of Jos Journal of Political Science**

E-ISSN: 1595-4765 | Volume 3, Issue 3 | September 2026

The Politics of Survival, Party Defection and the Erosion of Ideological Consolidation in Nigerian Elections.

Abubakar Abdulrahman [1]* and Raheem Toyin Kazeem [2]

[1]Department of Political Science, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Ilorin, Nigeria; abubakar.ar@unilorin.edu.ng
[1]Department of Political Science and Public Administration, Faculty of Humanity and Social Sciences, Ilorin, Nigeria; ktraheem@alhikmanuniversity.edu.ng

* Correspondence: abubakar.ar@unilorin.edu.ng

Abstract

This study investigates the pervasive phenomenon of party defection in Nigeria's Fourth Republic, situating it within the framework of the "politics of survival." The data for this study were collected from secondary sources such as textbooks, journals and online sources, while content analysis was used to analyse the data collected. The study reveals that desperation for political relevance, access to state resources, and protection from judicial scrutiny have supplanted ideological commitment among the Nigerian political elite. The paper argues that defection is not a tool for ideological realignment, but a strategic, transactional maneuver. The research further reveals that this trend has precipitated the severe erosion of ideological consolidation, resulting in a political landscape where parties lack distinct identities, manifestos, or philosophical differences. Consequently, the electorate is often presented with choices between personalities rather than policies. The study further explores the legal ambiguities surrounding anti-defection clauses and the failure of internal party democracy to curb this trend. On the whole, the study concludes that the "politics of survival" undermines institutional stability, fosters a "winner-takes-all" mentality, and significantly hinders the development of a mature, issue-based democratic system in Nigeria. Therefore, the persistence of carpet-crossing signals a crisis of representation, where the survival of the politician consistently takes precedence over the welfare of the polity.

Key Words: Nigeria, Party Defection, Politics of Survival, Ideological Consolidation, Democratic Consolidation.

Introduction

The trajectory of party politics in Nigeria is historically characterized by a persistent fluidity of membership, a phenomenon that has significantly undermined the development of a robust, ideologically driven democratic system. Since the advent of modern party politics in the 1920s, through the colonial era and into the post-independence period, the Nigerian political landscape has been defined less by ideological commitment and more by the pursuit of power, often described as the "politics of survival" (Sklar, 1963). This historical background traces the evolution of party defection popularly known as "carpet-crossing" or "decamping" demonstrating how

it has eroded ideological consolidation and transformed political parties into mere vehicles for elite ambition.

The origins of party defection in Nigeria can be traced to the nationalist struggles of the 1940s and 1950s. During this period, political parties such as the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons (NCNC), the Action Group (AG), and the Northern People's Congress (NPC) were formed along ethno-regional lines rather than strict ideological left-right cleavages. While these parties exhibited distinct policy orientations. For instance, the AG's social welfarism and democratic socialism contrasted with the NPC's conservative elitism loyalty was often anchored in ethnic affiliations rather than ideological conviction (Coleman, 1958). However, the immediate post-independence period witnessed the first major waves of political realignment, often driven by the "politics of survival" where regional leaders sought to consolidate power by poaching opposition figures (Falola, 1999).

During the First Republic (1960–1966), the federal character of the country necessitated coalition building. This environment fostered a culture of bargaining where politicians switched allegiances not because of a shift in ideological principles, but to gain access to federal patronage or to escape political isolation within their regions (Dudley, 1973). The crisis that eventually culminated in the collapse of the First Republic was exacerbated by this lack of internal party discipline and the willingness of elites to defect to the highest bidder, setting a precedent for future republics.

The return to civilian rule in 1979 under the presidential constitution of the Second Republic attempted to correct the flaws of the past by mandating a federal character of political parties. However, this era saw the entrenchment of the "politics of survival" as a dominant strategy. The National Party of Nigeria (NPN), which controlled the federal government, employed state resources to induce opposition legislators from the Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN) and the Nigerian People's Party (NPP) to defect (Joseph, 1987). This period marked a shift from ethno-regional defections to transactional ones. The NPN's strategy of "zero-party" politics involved seeking a two-thirds majority in the National Assembly through induced defections, thereby blurring the distinctions between the ruling party and the opposition. As noted by Diamond (1988), the Second Republic demonstrated that Nigerian political parties were essentially "coalitions of interests" lacking a cohesive ideological core. The erosion of ideological consolidation became acute during this period, as politicians realized that survival in the political arena depended on proximity to the center of power, regardless of the party in control.

The long years of military rule (1984–1999) interrupted democratic processes but did not extinguish the habits of the political class (Falola, 1999). During the transition programs of Generals Ibrahim Babangida and Sani Abacha, the military elites manufactured political associations such as the Social Democratic Party (SDP) and the National

Republican Convention (NRC) during the Babangida transition which were described as "a little to the left" and "a little to the right," respectively (Omotola, 2010). This artificial bifurcation further trivialized ideology, as politicians were known to belong to both associations simultaneously, waiting to see which one the military would favor.

Since the inception of the Fourth Republic in 1999, party defection has metamorphosed into an industry, fundamentally altering the nation's democratic fabric. The early years of the republic were dominated by the People's Democratic Party (PDP), which utilized incumbency advantage to coerce opposition members into its fold (Agbiboa, 2015). However, the phenomenon became more pronounced with the rise of the All-Progressives Congress (APC) in 2013.

The historical analysis of the Fourth Republic reveals that political parties in Nigeria have ceased to be mass movements with distinct manifestos. Instead, they have become platforms for "godfatherism" and the personal ambitions of wealthy individuals (Albert, 2005). The legal framework, specifically Section 68(1)(g) of the 1999 Constitution (as amended), which mandates the forfeiture of a legislative seat upon defection, has proved ineffective. Courts have often exploited loopholes, allowing defectors to retain their seats by claiming "division" within the party which is a legal fiction that further entrenches the culture of impunity (Nwabueze, 2007).

On the whole, the history of Nigerian elections is a narrative of the gradual death of ideology (Omilusi, 2015). From the ethno-regional alignments of the First Republic to the transactional, money-driven politics of the Fourth Republic, the "politics of survival" has remained the constant variable. The willingness of the political elite to defect at will has created a paradox where parties exist in name only, and the electorate is often left to choose between the same set of individuals operating under different banners. This historical trajectory sets the imperative for the present study: to examine how this chronic nomadism has eroded the ideological consolidation necessary for democratic maturation in Nigeria.

Empirical Review

Joseph (2014) argues that the Nigerian political system is characterized by a fierce competition for state offices, which are viewed as prebends to be appropriated for the benefit of officeholders and their clients. In this context, loyalty to a political party is secondary to the primary objective of accessing state resources. When a political party loses its capacity to facilitate this access, perhaps due to being out of power or losing internal influence, the rational choice for the political elite is to defect. This dynamic has

evolved in recent scholarship into what is now termed the "politics of survival," a concept that expands the motivation beyond mere greed to include existential threats. Adejumobi (2020) contends that Nigerian politicians operate in a highly volatile environment where losing an election or falling out of favor with the ruling class can lead to political irrelevance, financial ruin, or even judicial persecution. Consequently, defection is reframed not as an act of treachery, but as a defensive strategy necessary for self-preservation.

Further elucidating this survival instinct, Nwankwo (2022) categorizes the drivers of defection into three interrelated dimensions: the survival of the individual politician, the survival of the political "godfather," and the survival of the party structure itself. Alabi (2021) supports this by noting that the Nigerian political landscape is hostile to ideological rigidity; standing on principle often leads to political isolation. Therefore, the "politics of survival" necessitates a nomadic approach to party membership, where politicians shift alliances to align with the prevailing power brokers who can guarantee their security and re-election. Ogundiya (2024) adds that the astronomical cost of securing party nominations in the 2023 general elections further entrenched this survivalist logic, as politicians defected not just for physical or political safety, but to ensure they could recoup massive financial investments through access to state coffers. This theoretical shift highlights that the erosion of ideological consolidation is not merely an accidental byproduct of weak parties, but a calculated outcome of a system where flexibility is rewarded and steadfastness is penalized.

The direct consequence of this survival-driven political behavior is the systematic erosion of ideological consolidation among political parties. Omotola (2018) observes that the distinction between the two dominant parties, the All-Progressives Congress (APC) and the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), has become increasingly blurred. As politicians move effortlessly between these two platforms, they carry with them the same patterns of behavior and patronage, effectively ensuring that both parties operate on similar neoliberal and clientelist logic. The emergence of the Labour Party (LP) as a 'third force' during the 2023 elections briefly threatened this duopoly; however, as Adebanjo and Oloruntoba (2023) observe, the subsequent elite realignment towards the LP was largely driven by opportunistic survival calculations rather than a genuine ideological shift, ultimately reinforcing the clientelist framework once the electoral moment passed. Suberu (2017) describes this overarching process as the "de-ideologization" of Nigerian politics, where parties have ceased to be vehicles for distinct socio-political agendas and have instead become mere flags of convenience for ambitious elites. The lack of a coherent ideological core means that voters are often unable to choose between parties based on policy differences or manifestos, as the parties are essentially interchangeable in composition and outlook.

Adebayo and Adediran (2019) reinforce this argument by pointing out that Nigerian elections have increasingly become contests of personalities rather than ideas. Because the "politics of survival" encourages politicians to defect whenever their personal ambitions are threatened, there is no incentive to build a strong party identity or invest in grassroots ideological mobilization. The politician takes the mandate given to them by the electorate under one party banner and subverts it by joining another party, often without any recourse to the voters. Ibrahim (2020) argues that this creates a severe crisis of representation, as the link between the party's platform and the electorate's interest is severed. Ibrahim and Egwuenu (2024) characterize this phenomenon as "mandate theft," arguing that the frequency of post-electoral defections in the 10th National Assembly has deepened the crisis of the social contract, as citizens increasingly view their votes as merely placeholders for elite bargaining rather than expressions of policy preference. When survival is the primary goal, the ideological manifestos of the party become irrelevant documents, useful only for campaigns but quickly discarded once power is secured.

The persistence of this trend is further enabled by a weak institutional and legal framework that has failed to impose significant consequences on defectors. The 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (as amended), specifically Section 68(1)(g), mandates that a lawmaker loses their seat if they defect to another party. However, Fagbadebo (2019) notes that the judiciary, through its often-contradictory interpretations of what constitutes a "division" in the original political party, has created loopholes that allow defectors to retain their seats. This legal permissiveness serves the "politics of survival" by removing the risks associated with changing parties. Yakubu (2023) adds that the courts have frequently ruled in favor of defectors who claim their original party was factionalized, effectively validating the actions of political nomads and rendering the constitutional provision toothless. Fagbadebo (2024) laments that recent appellate court decisions have further widened this "division" loophole, effectively codifying defection as a constitutional right rather than an aberration, thereby paralyzing the deterrent intent of the law.

Furthermore, Chukwuma (2022) highlights the role of internal party democracy, or the lack thereof, in facilitating this erosion of ideology. In many instances, candidates are imposed by powerful godfathers, and when these internal arrangements collapse, the politician resorts to defection as the only viable means of remaining relevant. The absence of robust internal disciplinary mechanisms means that parties are unable to enforce ideological conformity. Oke (2021) argues that until the anti-defection laws are strengthened and the judiciary adopts a stricter interpretation, the legal system will continue to serve as an enabler rather than a deterrent to the politics of survival.

The broader implication of these interconnected factors such as the politics of survival, rampant defection, and legal permissiveness is a profound threat to democratic

consolidation. Akinboye (2021) posits that a democracy without ideologically distinct parties is prone to populism and is ill-equipped to provide long-term stability. The constant movement of elites prevents the development of a vibrant opposition, which is essential for checking the excesses of the ruling party. When the opposition parties are populated by defectors who share the same survivalist mindset as the ruling party, they offer no alternative governance vision. Mohammed (2023) suggests that this stagnation creates a political cartel where the ruling party and the main opposition are effectively two sides of the same coin, rotating power among themselves without altering the status quo. Oloruntoba and Akinola (2024) warn that the normalization of defection as a governance strategy has pushed Nigeria from mere democratic stagnation into active democratic recession, as the institutional architecture meant to moderate power has been captured by survivalist elites.

While scholars like Mohammed (2023) advocate for reforms such as the stricter enforcement of anti-defection laws and the strengthening of internal party democracy, the literature suggests that these interventions face significant hurdles given the entrenched culture of prebendalism. The "politics of survival" is so deeply embedded in the Nigerian political psyche that ideological adherence is often viewed with suspicion. Consequently, the erosion of ideological consolidation is not a temporary glitch but a structural feature of the current democratic dispensation. The literature paints a picture of a political system in crisis, where the need for personal survival consistently trumps the collective good, and where political parties have been hollowed out, leaving behind empty shells devoid of the ideological content necessary for a mature democracy.

Theoretical framework

Rational Choice Theory (RCT) provides a potent analytical framework for deciphering the complex dynamics of political survival, party defection, and the persistent erosion of ideological consolidation in Nigerian elections. Pioneered in political science by scholars such as Anthony Downs (1957), William Riker (1962), and Mancur Olson (1965), RCT is anchored in the fundamental assumption that political actors whether elites or voters are rational, utility-maximizing individuals.

The theory posits that before taking any political action, actors conduct an implicit cost-benefit analysis, choosing the alternative that yields the highest expected net benefit. Furthermore, RCT assumes that actors possess sufficient information to make these calculations and that their preferences are transitive and consistent. When applied to the Nigerian political landscape, RCT shifts the analytical gaze from cultural or historical fatalism to the strategic, calculated behaviors of politicians and voters operating within a specific institutional incentive structure. The relevance of RCT to this study lies in its capacity to demonstrate that the seemingly chaotic phenomenon of party defection is not an aberration of irrationality, but a highly rational response to a political environment

where the rewards of ideological flexibility vastly outweigh the costs of ideological fidelity.

In the context of Nigeria's neo-patrimonial political economy, the utility calculus of the political elite is fundamentally shaped by the prebendal nature of the state, where access to government office is the primary mechanism for personal accumulation and distribution (Bratton & Van de Walle, 1997; Joseph, 2014). Downs (1957) theorized that political parties seek office purely to gain the benefits of controlling the state apparatus, rather than to implement specific policies. In Nigeria, this model is hyper-activated. For a politician, the benefits of ideological loyalty such as internal party prestige or policy influence are minuscule compared to the benefits of accessing state resources.

Consequently, when a politician calculates that their current party has lost the capacity to deliver electoral victory or patronage, the cost of remaining political isolation, financial starvation, and vulnerability to judicial or anti-corruption persecution becomes intolerably high. Riker (1962), in his theory of political coalitions, demonstrated that coalitions are formed to win, and once victory is achieved, members will defect if it maximizes their individual utility. Thus, party defection in Nigeria, popularly termed "carpet-crossing," is a rational survival mechanism (Mbah & Nwangwu, 2014). Politicians defect to the ruling party or a more viable platform because the expected utility of aligning with the center of power securing appointment, protection, and campaign funding far exceeds the expected utility of remaining in an impotent opposition.

The rationality of the electorate similarly reinforces the politics of survival and the erosion of ideology. According to RCT, voters are also utility-maximizers. In advanced democracies, voters derive utility from policy outcomes that align with their ideological preferences. However, as Wantchekon (2003) empirically demonstrated in the West African context, voters in patronage-driven systems rationally prioritize immediate, excludable material benefits over abstract public goods. A voter living in poverty will rationally accept cash, food, or localized infrastructure from a defecting politician rather than support an ideologically consistent but resource-poor candidate who cannot deliver immediate survival needs. This clientelistic rationality creates a self-reinforcing cycle of neo-patrimonial exchange (Bratton & Van de Walle, 1997): politicians use state resources to "buy" survival, and voters sell their support to secure survival, rendering ideological manifestos irrelevant to the electoral calculus.

The systemic consequence of these micro-level rational calculations is the macro-level erosion of ideological consolidation. Olson (1965) highlighted the paradox of collective action, where the rational pursuit of individual interest leads to suboptimal outcomes for the group. In Nigeria, while individual defection is rational for the politician's survival, the aggregate effect is the systematic destruction of party institutionalization (Huntington, 1968).

When the dominant strategy for political survival is opportunistic defection, ideology becomes an irrational constraint. Parties cease to be vehicles for distinct socio-political visions and transform into "empty vessels" interchangeable platforms for elite ambition (Omilusi, 2015). Because the institutional framework specifically the judiciary's lax interpretation of Section 68(1)(g) of the Constitution imposes no significant costs on defectors, the incentive structure continuously rewards nomadism over steadfastness (Fagbadebo, 2019). Therefore, RCT elucidates the core tragedy of Nigerian democracy: the erosion of ideological consolidation is not an accidental byproduct of weak civic culture, but the calculated, rational outcome of a political system that structurally incentivizes personal survival over the collective good of democratic maturation.

The Politics of Survival, Party Defection and the Erosion of Ideological Consolidation in Nigerian Elections

The Nigerian political landscape in the Fourth Republic is fundamentally characterized by a fierce and often volatile struggle for power, where the drive for political relevance frequently supersedes commitment to ideological principles. The political history of Nigeria since 1999 offers a vivid tapestry of this phenomenon, illustrating the intricate relationship between the desperate need for political survival by the elite and the consequent weakening of political parties as vehicles for ideological expression. The persistence of this practice has systematically eroded ideological consolidation, leaving the Nigerian electorate with choices that are often indistinguishable in terms of policy, governance philosophy, or development agenda. To understand the depth of this erosion, one must examine specific instances of party defection that have defined the republic, using them as empirical evidence of the "politics of survival" in action.

The foundation of the "politics of survival" in Nigeria is firmly rooted in the political economy of the state, specifically the practice of prebendalism, a concept rigorously defined by Joseph (2014) in his seminal text. In this system, political offices are treated as spoils to be captured and used for the accumulation of wealth. This dynamic became starkly evident during the formative years of the Fourth Republic, particularly as the ruling Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) began to exert dominance. However, the most dramatic display of survivalist defection occurred in the lead-up to the 2015 general elections. In 2013 and 2014, a massive wave of defections saw 37 PDP senators move to the opposition All Progressives Congress (APC). This was not an ideological shift from a conservative platform to a progressive one; rather, it was a strategic realignment driven by the realization that the PDP was losing its grip on power. As reported by *Premium Times* (2013), these governors and legislators formed a faction known as the "New PDP" (nPDP) under the leadership of Kawu Baraje and eventually merged with the APC to wrest power from the incumbent President Goodluck Jonathan. This movement underscores the fact that in Nigeria, party membership is often transactional rather than transformational. The defectors were driven by the survival instinct to remain relevant in

a shifting political tectonic plate, abandoning the party that made them to join the one they believed would win.

The "politics of survival" is further exacerbated by the instrumentalization of state institutions by the ruling class to persecute political opponents. In recent years, the use of anti-corruption agencies such as the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) has been a subject of intense debate. In this context, defection becomes a shield. A prominent example is the defection of Senator Bukola Saraki from the APC to the PDP in 2018. Saraki, who was the President of the Senate, defected after a prolonged legal battle with the Code of Conduct Tribunal (CCT) regarding alleged false asset declaration. While the APC maintained that his defection was morally bankrupt, Saraki and his allies argued that the party leadership had abandoned him and was using state machinery to persecute him (The Punch, 2018). By defecting to the PDP, Saraki sought not only to secure his political future in Kwara State but also to find political allies who could shield him from federal prosecution. This pattern of survival-driven defection signals to the public that the ruling party serves as a sanctuary for the corrupt, provided they align themselves with the center of power. The implication for ideological consolidation is devastating; it suggests that parties are defined not by what they stand for, but by who currently holds the coercive apparatus of the state.

Furthermore, the culture of "godfatherism" plays a pivotal role in enforcing the politics of survival. When a politician falls out of favor with their godfather or realizes that their political godfather can no longer guarantee their ticket due to shifting alliances, their survival instinct kicks in. The case of Governor Godwin Obaseki of Edo State serves as a textbook example of this dynamic. In 2020, Obaseki was disqualified from seeking re-election on the platform of the APC by his erstwhile political godfather, Adams Oshiomhole, who was then the National Chairman of the party. Facing political extinction, Obaseki defecting to the PDP, where he was immediately handed the governorship ticket. As noted by Vanguard (2020), this move was purely for survival; Obaseki had spent his first term in office implementing APC policies and was considered a technocrat within that ideological fold. His sudden switch to the PDP did not come with a change in governance philosophy or policy direction; he simply swapped vehicles to reach his destination. The voters of Edo State, recognizing the power dynamics at play, followed him to the PDP, validating the politics of survival over party loyalty. This incident vividly demonstrates that parties are merely shells, and the survival of the individual politician is the only constant.

The legal and constitutional frameworks supposed to regulate party defection have ironically served to entrench it by providing loopholes that survivalist politicians exploit. Section 68(1)(g) of the 1999 Constitution stipulates that a lawmaker shall vacate their seat if they defect to another party, unless there is a division in the party or a merger. Politicians have consistently exploited the "division" clause. A glaring example is the

2018 defection of the Senate President and House of Representatives Speaker, alongside 15 senators and 37 House members. Fagbadebo (2019) argues that these legislators defected without their seats being declared vacant because they claimed, somewhat disingenuously, that the APC was factionalized. The judiciary, in many instances, has been reluctant to adjudicate on these matters swiftly, creating a climate of impunity. As reported by Daily Trust (2018), the then-Senate President, Bukola Saraki, cited the "reckless divergence" and "division" within the APC as his reason for decamping. By allowing legislators to retain their seats after defecting, the system incentivizes treachery. The cost of defecting is perceived to be low compared to the political death that staying in a losing faction entails.

The cyclic nature of defection further entrenches the erosion of ideological consolidation. The APC, which benefited immensely from the 2014/2015 mass defections, found itself on the receiving end of the same phenomenon in 2018 and 2022. Governors such as Ben Ayade of Cross River State and Bello Matawalle of Zamfara State defected from the PDP to the APC while still in office. Their reasons were steeped in the rhetoric of "bringing dividends of democracy to their people" through the center. However, an analysis of their governance shows that there was little ideological difference between the PDP and the APC in these states. *The Guardian* (2021) noted that Governor Matawalle's defection was largely driven by the need to secure federal support to combat the security challenges in Zamfara, a survival move for his administration. Similarly, Senator Aisha Dahiru Binani of Adamawa State, a former PDP member who joined the APC and later ran for governor, exemplifies the "shifting loyalty" trend where ideology is secondary to the ambition to rule. These shifts prevent parties from institutionalizing their ideologies; they are perpetually in campaign mode, focused on recruitment rather than consolidation.

The erosion of ideological consolidation is also evident in the behavior of politicians who move back and forth between the two dominant parties. Femi Fani-Kayode, a former Minister of Aviation, is a quintessential example of this political nomadism. He has defected multiple times from the PDP to the APC in 2013, back to the PDP in 2014, to the APC again in 2019, and back to the PDP in 2023 and now with APC. As documented by ThisDay (2023), each defection is accompanied by a verbose press release justifying the move, often citing the need to align with the "progressives" or the "redeemers," yet the substance of his political engagement remains largely consistent with his personal brand of rhetoric rather than party ideology. Such behavior treats political parties as football clubs, where players transfer based on who offers the better signing bonus, rather than organizations with distinct manifestos. This frivolous treatment of party membership trivializes the concept of ideology in the eyes of the electorate.

The impact of this erosion on legislative behavior is profound. The National Assembly, which should be a bastion of law-making and oversight, has often been weakened by defections. A specific instance is the 2018 attempt by the PDP to impeach President

Muhammadu Buhari. When the APC lost its majority in the Senate due to the defection of Saraki and others, the Senate became a battleground for the survival of the legislature rather than a house for law-making. As analyzed by Omotola (2018), the legislature was paralyzed for months because the leadership was more focused on managing the fallout of defections and the threat of impeachment than on passing the budget or crucial reforms. The survival instinct of individual lawmakers dictated the legislative agenda. When it appeared the PDP might seize the majority, APC lawmakers frantically lobbied to induce defectors back, turning the parliament into a marketplace for political survival. This instability prevents the legislature from developing a coherent ideological stance on national issues; laws are passed based on the whims of the ruling majority at any given time.

The financialization of politics in Nigeria is a critical driver of this phenomenon, visible in the sponsorship of political conventions. The cost of purchasing party nomination forms is astronomically high. For instance, the expression of interest and nomination forms for the presidential seat of the APC in the 2022 primary election were pegged at N100 million. This exorbitant cost filters out anyone without access to state funds or billionaire backers. Consequently, politicians who cannot secure their party's nomination often defect to another party where the form is cheaper or where they are guaranteed the ticket. Rotimi Amaechi, a former Minister of Transportation and a stalwart of the APC, lost the presidential primary in 2022. There were widespread speculations, as reported in Daily Trust (2022), regarding his potential move to another party if his internal wrangling within the APC was not resolved. While he remained in the APC, the speculation highlights the transactional nature of party affiliation: when the investment (nomination form) does not yield the return (ticket), the investor considers moving their capital elsewhere. This commercialization of politics turns parties into investment vehicles, stripping them of ideological content.

The role of the electorate in this equation is also complex, often encouraging defection based on ethnic and primordial sentiments. In the South-East and South-South regions, for example, the electorate often gravitates towards parties that appear to accommodate their regional interests. When a prominent politician defects, the voters often follow them, validating the politician's survival strategy. As noted by Egwu (1998), the ethnicization of politics means that ideological debates are submerged by ethnic considerations. A case in point is the movement of Senator Enyinnaya Abaribe, who left the PDP for the All Progressives Grand Alliance (APGA) and later moved to the Labour Party (LP) during the 2023 election cycle. While APGA and the LP claim to be ideologically distinct from the PDP (with APGA leaning towards Igbo nationalism), the movement of high-profile figures like Abaribe is often viewed as a strategic realignment to remain the political "godfather" of his Abia South constituency rather than a purely ideological conversion.

The voters followed him, suggesting that the politician's influence outweighs the party's ideology.

Furthermore, the international dimension of this phenomenon is reflected in how Western diplomatic cables and reports assess Nigerian democracy. Cables released by WikiLeaks over the years have described Nigerian politicians as "hopping from one party to another in search of greener pastures." This observation was corroborated by the 2019 election observation report of the European Union (EU), which noted that the lack of ideological distinction between the APC and PDP made it difficult for voters to make informed choices based on policy (EU Election Observation Mission, 2019). The report specifically highlighted the ease with which candidates switched parties without any significant outcry from their supporters, indicating that the electorate has become desensitized to the erosion of ideology. The "politics of survival" has become the accepted norm, and any deviation from it, such as sticking to a sinking ship out of principle is viewed as political naivety.

The judiciary's role in these examples is pivotal. In the case of Attorney General of the Federation v. Abubakar (2007), the Supreme Court ruled that the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) lacked the power to monitor the internal affairs of political parties, effectively decriminalizing intra-party disputes and by extension, making it difficult to sanction defectors. This legal precedent has been invoked countless times to justify defections. When Governor Ayodele Fayose of Ekiti State decamped from the Labour Party to the PDP in 2014, following his impeachment (which was later overturned), the legal battles that ensued focused on the legitimacy of his impeachment rather than the morality or legality of his defection. This judicial focus on technicalities over the spirit of the law has provided a safety net for survivalist politicians. Yakubu (2023) argues that the judiciary's interpretation of what constitutes a "division" in a party has been so liberal that it essentially grants legislators the right to defect at will, provided they can claim a faction exists.

The "politics of survival" also manifests in the behavior of appointed officials. It is not uncommon for ministers, ambassadors, or special advisers to decamp to the ruling party to retain their positions. For example, when Senator Orji Uzor Kalu moved from the Progressive Peoples Alliance (PPA) to the PDP and later to the APC, his influence within the federal structure waxed and waned accordingly. The most recent example is the decamping of Governor Nyesom Wike of Rivers State and his allies (the G5 governors) to the APC after the 2023 elections. Although they did not formally decamp before the election due to the "loyalty" narrative, their subsequent alignment with the APC government post-election, by accepting ministerial appointments was a survival move to reintegrate themselves into the federal centre after falling out with the PDP leadership. As reported by The Nation (2023), Wike's eventual appointment as Minister of the FCT was a classic case of political survival; having lost the presidential primary of the PDP and

refusing to support the party's candidate, his political relevance was hanging by a thread until he crossed the aisle to the APC. This move underscores that the ruling party serves as a massive umbrella, absorbing critics and opponents to ensure their survival, thereby blurring the lines between government and opposition to the point of non-existence.

In the final analysis, the trajectory of the Fourth Republic provides undeniable evidence that the "politics of survival" is the engine driving the erosion of ideological consolidation in Nigeria. From the massive merger that formed the APC in 2013 to the individual survivalist moves of governors like Obaseki and Matawalle, and the legislative gymnastics of Senate Presidents like Saraki, the pattern is consistent. Politicians engage in carpet-crossing not because of a sudden epiphany regarding the socio-economic direction of the country, but to stay afloat in a treacherous political sea. The legal framework, rather than acting as a dam, acts as a conduit for these movements. The electorate, shackled by ethnic loyalties and a lack of viable alternatives, often acts as enablers. The result is a hollowed-out party system where the APC and PDP are indistinguishable in policy, and ideology is a relic of a bygone era. Until the underlying drivers of the "politics of survival" are dismantled, through a depersonalization of the state, enforcement of anti-defection laws, and the rise of issue-based politics. Nigerian elections will continue to be a carousel of survivalist elites, lacking the ideological substance necessary for true democratic consolidation.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that the "politics of survival" is the definitive driver of party defection and the consequent erosion of ideological consolidation in Nigeria's Fourth Republic. The relentless pursuit of power, economic security, and protection from state persecution has compelled political elites to view party membership as a transactional convenience rather than an ideological covenant. As evidenced by the fluid movement of high-profile figures between the APC and PDP, the distinction between Nigeria's dominant parties is virtually non-existent, resulting in a "partyless" democracy where elections are merely contests of personalities and patronage. While legal frameworks exist to curb this trend, their weak enforcement and the judiciary's inconsistent interpretations have effectively normalized political nomadism. Ultimately, the entrenchment of survival-driven politics stifles issue-based governance, deepens voter apathy, and undermines the very foundations of democratic representation. For Nigeria to achieve true democratic consolidation, the political culture must shift from the survival of the politician to the consolidation of ideas and the welfare of the polity.

Recommendation

1. The National Assembly should urgently amend Section 68(1)(g) of the 1999 Constitution to remove the vague "division" loophole, thereby mandating the automatic forfeiture of legislative seats upon defection.

2. Political parties must strengthen internal democratic mechanisms to conduct free and fair primaries, thereby reducing the desperation that drives members to defect when they are denied tickets by godfathers.

3. The judiciary should adopt a strict, literal interpretation of anti-defection laws, prioritizing the sanctity of the electoral mandate over technical political maneuvering.

4. Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) and regulatory agencies should enforce stricter regulations on campaign finance and party funding to reduce the financial desperation that fuels the "politics of survival."

5. Civil society organizations and the media must intensify voter education efforts to prioritize party ideology and policy manifestos over individual personality cults in electoral choices.

References

Adebanjo, A., & Oloruntoba, S. O. (2023). The third force and the 2023 general elections in Nigeria: A critical appraisal. *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, 41(3), 415-432.

Adebayo, A., & Adediran, S. (2019). Party politics and the challenge of ideological development in Nigeria. *Journal of African Development*, 21(2), 45-62.

Adejumobi, S. (2020). The state and the struggle for democracy in Nigeria. *Africa Development*, 45(1), 15-34.

Agbiboa, D. E. (2015). The politics of cross-carpeting in Nigeria: The 4th Republic in perspective. *African Spectrum*, 50(1), 43-68.

Ake, C. (1985). *The political economy of crisis and underdevelopment in Africa*. Lund University Press.

Akinboye, O. (2021). Democratic consolidation and the crisis of opposition in Nigeria. *Democratization*, 28(4), 678-694.

Alabi, J. O. (2021). The hostility of the Nigerian political landscape to ideological rigidity. *Journal of Social and Political Studies*, 16(2), 78-95.

Albert, I. O. (2005). Explaining 'godfatherism' in Nigerian politics. *African Sociological Review*, 9(2), 1-20.

Bratton, M., & Van de Walle, N. (1997). *Democratic experiments in Africa: Regime transitions in comparative perspective*. Cambridge University Press.

Chukwuma, I. (2022). Internal party democracy and the crisis of defection in Nigeria. *African Political Science Review*, 14(1), 55-72.

Chukwuma, O. (2022). Legal frameworks and judicial interpretation of anti-defection laws in Nigeria. *Ife Juris Review*, 10(3), 301-318.

Coleman, J. S. (1958). *Nigeria: Background to nationalism*. University of California Press.

Diamond, L. (1988). *Class, ethnicity and democracy in Nigeria: The rise and fall of the Second Republic*. Cambridge University Press.

Downs, A. (1957). *An economic theory of democracy*. Harper & Row.

Dudley, B. J. (1973). *Parties and politics in Northern Nigeria*. Praeger.

Dudley, B. J. (1982). *An introduction to Nigerian government and politics*. Macmillan.

Egwu, S. G. (1998). Ethnicity and citizenship in the Nigerian transition to democracy. *Review of African Political Economy*, 25(77), 499-517.

EU Election Observation Mission, (2019). *Nigeria: Final Report on the 2019 General Elections*. European Union.

Fagbadebo, M. (2019). The judiciary and the constitutional conundrum of party defection in Nigeria. *African Journal of Legal Studies*, 12(1), 33-50.

Fagbadebo, M. (2024). Legal permissiveness and the codification of defection in Nigeria's appellate courts. *Journal of African Law*, 68(1), 112-131.

Fagbadebo, O. (2019). The legislature and the crisis of representation in Nigeria. *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, 54(5), 672-688.

Falola, T. (1999). *The history of Nigeria*. Greenwood Press.

Huntington, S. P. (1968). *Political order in changing societies*. Yale University Press.

Ibrahim, J. (2020). The politics of exclusion and the crisis of representation in Nigeria. *Review of African Political Economy*, 47(162), 567-582.

Ibrahim, J., & Egwuenu, A. (2024). Mandate theft and the social contract crisis in the 10th National Assembly. *Nigerian Journal of Legislative Studies*, 12(1), 22-39.

Joseph, R. A. (1987). *Democracy and prebendal politics in Nigeria: The rise and fall of the Second Republic*. Cambridge University Press.

Joseph, R. A. (2014). *Democracy and prebendal politics in Nigeria: The rise and fall of the Second Republic* (Updated ed.). Cambridge University Press.

Mbah, P. O., & Nwangwu, J. C. (2014). Party defection and democratic consolidation in Nigeria's fourth republic: A critical appraisal. *Global Journal of Political Science and Administration*, 2(1), 15-28.

Mohammed, A. (2023). Rethinking party regulation in Nigeria: A comparative perspective. *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 61(2), 234-251.

Nwabueze, B. O. (2007). *The presidential constitution of Nigeria: An examination of the constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999*. Spectrum Books.

Nwankwo, A. (2022). The dimensions of survival in Nigerian party politics. *African Quarterly*, 62(4), 144-162.

Nwankwo, C. (2022). Political nomadism and the crisis of governance in Nigeria. *African Governance Review*, 7(1), 88-105.

Ogundiya, I. S. (2024). The political economy of elections in Nigeria: The 2023 general elections in perspective. *Journal of African Elections*, 23(1), 1-25.

Oke, O. (2021). Constitutional loopholes and the inducement of floor-crossing in Nigeria. *Commonwealth Law Bulletin*, 47(3), 412-429.

Oloruntoba, S. O., & Akinola, O. (2024). Democratic recession and the crisis of party systems in Africa: The Nigerian experience. *Democratization*, 31(4), 650-668.

Olson, M. (1965). *The logic of collective action: Public goods and the theory of groups*. Harvard University Press.

Omilusi, M. (2015). Decamping/defection and the ideological bankruptcy of political parties in Nigeria's fourth republic. *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, 20(3), 56-64.

Omotola, J. S. (2009). Nigerian parties and political ideology: A contextual discourse. *Journal of Social Sciences*, 19(2), 115-124.

Omotola, J. S. (2010). Political parties and the crisis of democracy in Nigeria. *Taiwan Journal of Democracy*, 6(1), 143-173.

Omotola, J. S. (2018). De-ideologization and the blur of party distinctions in Nigeria. *African Journal of Political Economy*, 5(2), 115-130.

Omotola, J. S. (2018). Elections and democratic consolidation in Nigeria: The fourth republic in perspective. *African Spectrum*, 53(2), 21-44.

Premium Times. (2013, November 25). 37 Reps dump PDP for APC. *Premium Times*.

Riker, W. H. (1962). *The theory of political coalitions*. Yale University Press.

Sklar, R. L. (1963). *Nigerian political parties: Power in an emergent African nation*. Princeton University Press.

Suberu, O. (2017). The de-ideologization of Nigerian politics. *Journal of Democracy*, 28(3), 75-89.

Suberu, R. T. (2017). Federalism and ethnic conflict in Nigeria. *United States Institute of Peace Press*.

The Guardian. (2021, June 1). Matawalle defects to APC, says it's for Zamfara's survival. *The Guardian Nigeria*.

The Nation. (2023, August 15). Wike's survival strategy: From G5 to Minister. *The Nation*.

The Punch. (2018, July 24). Saraki, Dogara dump APC. *Punch Newspaper*.

ThisDay. (2023, June 25). Fani-Kayode returns to PDP. *ThisDay Live*.

Vanguard. (2020, June 20). Obaseki defects to PDP, submits resignation. *Vanguard News*.

Wantchekon, L. (2003). Clientelism and voting behavior: Evidence from a field experiment in Benin. *World Politics*, 55(3), 399-422.

Yakubu, A. (2023). The judiciary and the politics of defection in Nigeria's Fourth Republic. *Benin Journal of Public Law and Policy*, 9(1), 55-73.