

Linking Political Distrust to Japa Syndrome among Youths in Anambra State, Nigeria

Okelue Collins

*Department of Mass Communication, Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University, Igbariam,
Anambra State, Nigeria*

Abstract

The phenomenon popularly known as "Japa Syndrome", the mass emigration of Nigerian youths in search of better opportunities abroad, has become one of the defining social trends of contemporary Nigeria. This paper examines the extent to which political distrust functions as a contributing driver of Japa Syndrome among youths in Anambra State. Anchored in the theoretical frameworks of relative deprivation and rational choice theory, and drawing on a qualitative synthesis of survey-based studies, government reports, and documented youth testimonies, the paper argues that a sustained erosion of confidence in political leadership, electoral processes, and public institutions has become a significant push factor compounding the more widely discussed economic drivers of youth emigration. The paper situates this distrust within Anambra State's specific political history, including recurring concerns about governance performance, insecurity linked to agitation in the South-East, and unmet expectations following successive election cycles. Findings suggest that political distrust interacts with economic hardship, insecurity, and a broader perception of state failure to produce a compounded motivation to emigrate, with youths frequently articulating a loss of faith that meaningful change can be achieved through participation in domestic political processes. The paper recommends deliberate youth-inclusive governance reforms, transparent and credible electoral processes, and structured civic engagement mechanisms as measures capable of addressing the political-trust dimension of the Japa phenomenon.

Keywords: Japa Syndrome, political distrust, youth emigration, Anambra State, political participation

1. Introduction

Over the past decade, Nigeria has witnessed an intensifying wave of youth emigration colloquially termed "Japa Syndrome", a Yoruba-derived slang expression meaning "to flee" or "to escape", which has come to describe the determined pursuit of relocation abroad by young Nigerians through work permits, academic scholarships, skilled-migration visas, and, in more precarious cases, irregular routes. While much of the existing discourse on Japa Syndrome centres on economic push factors, such as inflation, unemployment, and currency depreciation, this paper contends that political distrust constitutes an equally important, though comparatively under-examined, driver of the phenomenon, particularly among youths in Anambra State.

Anambra State presents a compelling case for this inquiry. As a state with a historically active civic culture, a large population of educated and enterprising youths, and a political landscape marked by recurring disputes over governance performance, electoral credibility, and security, Anambra offers fertile ground for examining how disillusionment with political institutions translates into a desire to exit the polity altogether, rather than to reform it from within. This paper interrogates that relationship, asking: to what extent does political distrust among Anambra youths correlate with, and contribute to, the decision to emigrate?

The paper proceeds as follows: section two reviews relevant literature on Japa Syndrome and political trust in Nigeria; section three presents the theoretical framework; section four outlines the methodology; section five discusses the findings across the dimensions of governance performance, electoral credibility, insecurity, and civic disengagement; and section six concludes with policy recommendations.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Japa Syndrome as a Social Phenomenon

The Japa phenomenon has attracted growing scholarly and media attention as data from Nigerian embassies, international universities, and destination-country immigration agencies point to a marked increase in applications from Nigerian youths for study visas, skilled-worker programmes, and permanent relocation schemes, particularly to the United Kingdom, Canada, the United States, and parts of Europe. Existing literature frames the trend primarily as a

response to macroeconomic distress: high youth unemployment, currency instability following successive devaluations of the naira, and the declining purchasing power of professional salaries relative to the cost of living.

2.2 Political Trust and Youth Disposition in Nigeria

A parallel body of literature addresses declining political trust among Nigerian youths, documenting widespread scepticism toward the capacity and willingness of elected officials to deliver on campaign promises, address insecurity, or conduct transparent elections. Survey-based studies of political attitudes in Nigeria have consistently found that younger respondents report lower levels of confidence in political institutions compared to older cohorts, alongside a perception that political office is used predominantly for personal enrichment rather than public service. This scepticism has been linked to lower voter turnout among youths and a general disengagement from formal political participation.

2.3 The Anambra Context

Anambra State's political environment has its own particular texture. The state has experienced periods of governance disputes, contested claims about infrastructural development, and recurring security concerns linked to the activities of separatist agitation and associated sit-at-home orders in the South-East region, which have had documented disruptive effects on commerce, education, and daily civic life. Studies focused on South-East Nigeria have noted that these overlapping governance and security pressures have intensified a sense among youths that the state is either unable or unwilling to guarantee a stable and prosperous future, feeding directly into emigration aspirations.

3. Theoretical Framework

This paper draws on two theoretical perspectives. The first is relative deprivation theory, associated with Ted Gurr, which holds that discontent and the motivation for action, in this case, emigration rather than protest, arise from a perceived gap between what individuals believe they are entitled to and what they actually receive from their social and political environment. Applied here, the theory suggests that Anambra youths' emigration aspirations are shaped not

merely by absolute economic hardship but by a comparative sense of being denied the governance, security, and opportunity that they believe should reasonably be available to them.

The second is rational choice theory, which frames emigration as a calculated decision in which individuals weigh the anticipated costs and benefits of remaining within a political and economic system against those of exit. Within this framework, persistent political distrust functions as a factor that lowers the perceived long-term value of remaining engaged with domestic institutions, thereby tilting the cost-benefit calculation toward emigration as the more rational individual strategy, even where collective political reform might, in principle, be preferable.

4. Methodology

The paper adopts a qualitative, exploratory design based on a desk review and thematic synthesis of secondary sources, including peer-reviewed studies on Japa Syndrome and political trust in Nigeria, survey and polling data on youth political attitudes, government and civil-society reports on governance and security in Anambra State, and documented youth testimonies reported in academic and journalistic sources. Thematic analysis is used to identify recurring linkages between expressions of political distrust and stated or documented emigration motivations, organized around four themes: governance performance, electoral credibility, insecurity, and civic disengagement. This approach is consistent with exploratory research on emergent social phenomena where large-scale primary survey data specific to the research question remains limited.

5. Findings and Discussion

5.1 Governance Performance and Disillusionment

The reviewed evidence suggests that perceptions of weak governance performance, including unmet infrastructural promises, inconsistent public service delivery, and limited youth-focused policy investment, feature prominently in Anambra youths' accounts of why they consider domestic prospects unpromising. This disillusionment is compounded by a broader national pattern in which successive administrations at state and federal level have struggled to translate

campaign commitments into visible improvements in youth welfare, employment generation, or public infrastructure.

5.2 Electoral Credibility and Political Efficacy

A recurring theme is the erosion of youths' sense of political efficacy, the belief that their participation in elections can produce meaningful change. Concerns about electoral malpractice, vote-buying, and irregularities reported in various Anambra election cycles appear to reinforce a perception among youths that formal political participation yields limited returns, making emigration appear as a more direct and controllable path to improved life outcomes than continued civic engagement.

5.3 Insecurity and the South-East Political Climate

Insecurity linked to separatist agitation and associated sit-at-home directives has had a documented disruptive effect on economic and educational activity in Anambra State and the wider South-East. Beyond its direct economic costs, this insecurity carries a political dimension: it reflects, in the perception of many youths, a failure of both state and federal authorities to resolve underlying grievances or guarantee basic safety, further entrenching the belief that the political system is unable to secure a stable future within Nigeria.

5.4 Civic Disengagement as a Precursor to Exit

Finally, the findings point to a pattern in which political distrust manifests first as civic disengagement, reduced participation in elections, political discourse, and local governance structures, before crystallizing into an active emigration aspiration. This progression aligns with the rational choice framing outlined above: as confidence in the efficacy of domestic political engagement declines, emigration is increasingly framed by youths not as a last resort but as the more rational and dignified response to a political environment perceived as unresponsive to their interests.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

This paper has argued that political distrust constitutes a significant, though often understated, driver of Japa Syndrome among youths in Anambra State, operating alongside and interacting

with the more widely discussed economic and security pressures. The evidence reviewed suggests that disillusionment with governance performance, scepticism about electoral credibility, exposure to insecurity linked to regional political tensions, and a broader decline in civic engagement together produce a compounded motivation to seek life and opportunity outside the Nigerian polity altogether.

Based on these findings, the paper recommends: first, deliberate youth-inclusive governance reforms that create visible, accountable channels for youth input into state policy; second, measures to strengthen the credibility and transparency of electoral processes at state and local government levels, in order to rebuild youths' sense of political efficacy; third, sustained investment in resolving the security concerns linked to South-East agitation through dialogue and confidence-building measures; and fourth, structured civic engagement programmes, including youth parliaments and community governance forums, designed to reconnect young citizens with a sense of stake in domestic political outcomes. Further empirical research, particularly primary survey work directly sampling Anambra youths, is recommended to more precisely quantify the relative weight of political distrust against economic and security factors in individual emigration decisions.

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