

WHEN DOES GOVERNANCE BECOME GENOCIDE? A PHILOSOPHICAL ANALYSIS OF STATE POWER AND THE NIGERIAN CRISIS

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Abstract

This paper examines an unsettling question: at what point does the exercise of governance cross the line into genocide? The paper observes how state power when misused or exercised negligibly, creates conditions that threaten the life, dignity and survival of certain communities by using Nigeria as a case study. While genocide is often understood as mass killing, this paper broadens the perspective to include structural violence, predictable harm and institutional neglect, emphasizing the moral and ethical responsibilities of governments. Philosophical method of normative analysis is employed in this paper to clarify the conceptual foundations of genocide, governance and state power; to identify the ethical thresholds where governance risks becoming destructive and to propose strategies for accountability, reform and prevention. The paper argues that governance becomes morally impermissible when it selectively exposes its population to harm, fails to uphold equitable protection and institutionalizes structural neglect. The paper emphasizes the lived consequences of policy decisions and highlights the urgent need for ethical, accountable and preventive governance in diverse societies like Nigeria.

Keywords: Genocide, State Power, Collective Punishment, Structural Violence, Nigerian Crisis, Governance, Human Security.

Introduction

Governance is often understood as the art and practice of managing a state, ensuring security, providing public services and promoting the welfare of citizens. Yet, what happens when governance itself becomes a source of harm, rather than protection? This question is not merely theoretical; it resounds deeply in contexts where state power interconnects with social divisions, historical grievances and systemic neglect. Nigeria provides a vivid, contemporary case study. Across its diverse regions, ethnic and religious divides, armed militias and jihadist insurgencies have exposed the weakness of governance, raising profound ethical questions: at what point does the failure or misuse of state power amount to systematic harm or even genocide? While genocide is often narrowly perceived as mass killing, philosophical inquiry invites us to expand the perspective, considering structural violence, predictable neglect and institutionalized discrimination as morally relevant forms of destruction (Card, 2003, 69-72). By examining these dynamics, we are compelled to confront not only the legal definitions of genocide but also the moral responsibilities that come with governing a diverse population.

Nigeria's crises reveal a complex interplay of actors and structures. Fulani ethnic militias, often described in media and local discourse as perpetrators of ethnic cleansing, have been involved in recurring attacks against agrarian communities, particularly in the Middle Belt. Simultaneously, jihadist groups in the North-East, such as *Boko Haram* and its offshoots, have inflicted indiscriminate violence on civilians, displacing thousands and undermining social cohesion. Compounding these challenges is the perception of selective government protection, especially

under a Muslim-dominated federal administration. Citizens frequently observe partial or delayed judicial action against perpetrators of violence, creating the impression that some lives are more protected than others. These realities demonstrate how governance, when exercised unevenly or negligently, can contribute to the suffering of targeted groups, raising urgent moral questions about the ethical boundaries of state authority (Mbembe, 2003, 11; Semelin, 2005, 34-41).

Philosophically, the stakes are profound. Governance is not a neutral exercise of authority; it is a moral endeavor. The state is entrusted with the protection of all citizens, the maintenance of justice and the prevention of harm. When this trust is violated through selective protection, predictable neglect or systemic marginalization the state risks transforming from a guardian into a source of structural harm. Ethical analysis illuminates this transition, showing that harm need not be overt or immediate to be morally significant. Patterns of predictable vulnerability, sustained insecurity and bureaucratic indifference can produce consequences analogous to genocide, particularly when they repeatedly target specific populations (Card, 2003, 72). In Nigeria, the convergence of ethnic militias, jihadist insurgencies and governmental neglect exemplifies this risk, further emphasizing the need for a moral framework that goes beyond legal definitions to address foreseeable and preventable harm.

This paper, therefore, examines the ethical and normative dimensions of governance in Nigeria, focusing on the threshold where state power may evolve into destructive or genocidal practices. By examining the conceptual foundations, historical patterns, ethical thresholds, case studies and normative solutions, the paper provides both an analytical background and a moral compass. It emphasizes that governance is not simply a matter of efficiency or administration; it is a continuous ethical engagement, requiring vigilance, accountability and a commitment to the equitable protection of all citizens. Understanding when governance becomes genocidal is not only a scholarly exercise it is a moral imperative, a call to recognize the human cost of state neglect and selective action and to envision governance that genuinely safeguards life, dignity and social cohesion.

Conceptual Foundations

A rigorous philosophical analysis of the question, “*When does governance become genocidal?*” requires a careful conceptual examination of its central terms: genocide, governance and state power. Without such clarification, any discussion risks conflating moral, legal and administrative categories, thereby undermining both analytic precision and ethical evaluation. Genocide, in both its legal and philosophical formulations, encompasses more than the immediate act of mass killing; it involves systematic processes that threaten the social, cultural and political existence of particular groups. Raphael Lemkin, who coined the term in 1944, defined genocide as a coordinated plan of different actions aimed at the destruction of the essential foundations of a national, ethnic, racial or religious group (Lemkin, 1944, 79). For Lemkin, genocide included not only direct physical extermination but also measures that eroded the social and political structures that sustain a community. This broad conceptualization emphasizes the continuity and intentionality of harm, highlighting that genocide is often a process rather than an isolated event. The subsequent codification in the 1948 United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide narrowed the definition to include acts committed with the specific intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a protected group (UN, 1948, 2). While the legal definition emphasizes intent, philosophical analyses expand the moral field, arguing that acts or omissions that predictably produce destruction may be morally equivalent to explicit genocidal intent. Scholars such as Claudia Card (2003, 69-72) propose the notion of “social death,” wherein the systematic erosion of a group's social, political or cultural existence constitutes a form of genocide. This philosophical lens

is particularly relevant in examining cases of structural or institutionalized neglect, which can produce the functional equivalent of destruction for vulnerable populations.

In parallel, the concept of governance entails both administrative function and ethical responsibility. Governance, at its core, is the exercise of authority to organize and manage societal affairs; however, it is inseparable from the moral obligations that derive from political legitimacy. Rosenau (1992, 4) describes governance as a system of rule characterized by shared goals, negotiated norms and coordinated practices, highlighting its relational dimension. From a philosophical standpoint, the legitimacy of governance is inseparable from its capacity to protect life, preserve rights and promote equitable treatment of citizens. Locke (1690, 132) emphasizes that political authority is justified only insofar as it protects the life, liberty and property of individuals, suggesting that governance becomes morally suspect when it systematically fails to fulfill these obligations. Rousseau (1762, 56) similarly asserts that governance must operate in accordance with the general will, balancing collective interests and ensuring fairness. Contemporary theorists such as Amartya Sen (1999, 36) extend this ethical dimension by evaluating governance through the lens of substantive freedoms, arguing that political authority is legitimate only when it allows citizens to live free from deprivation, insecurity and structural disadvantage. Within this framework, governance cannot be understood purely as administrative efficiency; it must be assessed in terms of its capacity to prevent harm, protect rights and promote human flourishing. When a state systematically neglects certain groups or enforces laws and policies that disproportionately harm particular communities, governance begins to assume a morally destructive character.

State power, the third conceptual component, serves as the mechanism through which governance is implemented and enforced. Max Weber (1919, 78) famously defined the state as the entity that claims a monopoly on the legitimate use of physical force within a defined territory, thereby situating coercion at the core of political authority. While the use of force is necessary for maintaining order, it simultaneously carries the potential for abuse, particularly when the state exercises power without ethical constraints. Michel Foucault (1978, 136) conceptualizes state power through the triad of disciplinary power, biopower and sovereign power, arguing that the state regulates individuals, manages populations and, ultimately, asserts control over life and death. Achille Mbembe's concept of necropolitics extends this analysis, framing state power as the capacity to decide whose lives are protected and whose may be exposed to destruction (Mbembe, 2003, 11). Crucially, necropolitical authority does not always manifest through overt killing; it can be exercised through selective protection, structural neglect and institutionalized abandonment. Within this conceptual landscape, governance, state power and the potential for genocide are interdependent: governance is legitimate only when state power is exercised ethically to protect citizens and failure to exercise such protective authority particularly along the lines of identity, region or political affiliation can bring governance dangerously close to the moral terrain of genocide.

The connection of these three concepts illuminates the conditions under which governance may evolve toward genocidal outcomes. Legally, genocide requires specific intent to destroy a group; philosophically, however, intent can be inferred from patterns of systematic harm or predictably lethal neglect. Governance becomes ethically impermissible when state structures repeatedly fail to protect specific communities, exercise coercion selectively or institutionalize harm as an acceptable tool of political management. Historical and contemporary examples demonstrate that such

conditions rarely emerge spontaneously; they are often the product of entrenched bureaucratic practices, structural inequalities and political rationalizations that normalize harm against vulnerable populations. This analytical framework suggests that genocide exists not solely as the endpoint of overt mass killing, but as the extreme manifestation of a continuum along which governance, state power and selective protection interact. In this sense, governance transforms into a form of destructive authority when the ethical obligations that confer legitimacy are systematically violated and when the predictable consequences of state action or inaction threaten the survival, cohesion or cultural integrity of targeted groups.

Applying these conceptual insights to Nigeria highlights their relevance. Persistent ethno-religious violence, insurgencies and structural neglect reveal instances in which governance and state power intersect in ways that expose certain populations to predictable harm while privileging others. *Boko Haram's* sustained attacks in the North-East, the recurrent banditry in the North-West and police brutality against protestors during the *#EndSARS* demonstrations illustrate patterns of selective protection and omission that are morally significant, even if they do not meet the strict legal threshold for genocide. Philosophically, these patterns resonate with Card's notion of social death and Mbembe's necropolitics: governance that allows, facilitates or fails to prevent systemic harm effectively participates in the destruction of social and political life for vulnerable groups. This approach demonstrates that the ethical evaluation of governance requires attention not only to overt acts of violence but also to institutional practices, policy decisions and omissions that collectively produce harm along predictable and systematic lines.

The conceptual foundations of genocide, governance and state power reveal the moral and analytical conditions necessary for assessing when governance may evolve into a destructive or genocidal form. Genocide encompasses more than mass killing; it includes systematic, predictable and intentional or morally culpable harm that threatens the social, political or cultural existence of a group. Governance is not merely administrative authority; it carries ethical obligations to protect, preserve and promote human flourishing. State power, while necessary for enforcing governance, contains an inherent potential for coercion that can become destructive if exercised without moral accountability. The convergence of these three elements creates a conceptual framework in which governance becomes ethically perilous, particularly when certain populations are systematically exposed to harm through selective enforcement, neglect or institutionalized practices. In the Nigerian context, this framework allows scholars to interrogate contemporary crises not only as political or security problems but also as moral phenomena, highlighting the conditions under which governance risks crossing the threshold into genocidal logic.

Historical Trajectories of State Violence in Nigeria

A philosophical inquiry into the question of when governance becomes genocide cannot overlook the historical trajectory that shapes both state power and societal expectations. In Nigeria, patterns of state violence are neither accidental nor isolated; they are deeply rooted in the political, social and institutional structures inherited from colonial rule and reinforced through successive regimes. From the era of indirect rule to postcolonial authoritarianism and the challenges of democratic governance, the Nigerian state has repeatedly demonstrated a tension between the ethical obligations of governance and the exercise of coercive power, particularly in its treatment of certain regions and communities. These historical trajectories illuminate the processes through which

governance, if left unchecked, can evolve into forms of systematic harm that approach genocidal thresholds.

Colonial rule in Nigeria established a state structure primarily designed for extraction and control rather than the protection of citizens. The British colonial administration implemented indirect rule, a system that purported to respect local authority while simultaneously embedding hierarchical divisions and privileging compliant elites. As Mamdani (1996, 52) notes, indirect rule produced what he terms “decentralized despotism,” wherein local rulers were empowered to exercise coercive authority on behalf of the colonial state. This arrangement created multiple layers of governance that were simultaneously alien to the populace and dependent on mechanisms of coercion. Violence, far from being exceptional, became a normalized instrument of governance. Punitive expeditions, forced labor and violent suppression of resistance such as the Aba Women's protest of 1929 illustrate the degree to which state authority relied on the threat or use of force to achieve compliance (Falola, 2009, 78). Philosophically, this period represents a rupture between the state and moral responsibility: the state's legitimacy was grounded not in protecting citizens, but in controlling them, laying a foundation for the structural conditions under which governance might evolve into morally destructive forms of power.

The post-independence period offered an opportunity to transform these coercive structures, yet Nigerian elites largely perpetuated the authoritarian tendencies inherited from colonial administration. Regional political competition, often framed along ethnic lines, exacerbated historical divisions and produced recurrent episodes of violence. The 1966 coups and subsequent pogroms against Igbo populations in the North exemplify how the state's failure to protect vulnerable groups can have catastrophic consequences. Osaghae (1998, 81) observes that postcolonial federalism in Nigeria oscillated between maintaining unity and reinforcing fragmentation, a tension that directly contributed to cycles of communal violence. The Nigerian Civil War (1967–1970) further underscores the moral hazards of governance exercised through coercion. The federal blockade of Biafra, which resulted in mass starvation and suffering, highlights how state strategies intended to preserve territorial integrity could, in practice, produce outcomes comparable to systemic annihilation (de Waal, 2018, 134). While debate persists about whether this constitutes genocide in the legal sense, the philosophical significance is clear: the deliberate orchestration of conditions leading to mass death illustrates a scenario in which governance, wielding the full power of the state, directly endangers the lives of particular populations. The war thus exemplifies the critical intersection between historical state practice and the conceptual threshold where governance risks becoming genocidal.

Military rule from 1966 to 1999 further entrenched patterns of coercive governance. Military regimes, justified by the imperatives of national security and stability, routinely suspended democratic norms and consolidated power, normalizing the use of violence against civilians. Abubakar (2001, 22) characterizes this era as a time when governance became synonymous with command, discipline and suppression, erasing distinctions between legitimate state authority and arbitrary coercion. State responses to protests, political dissent and minority demands—ranging from student massacres to the execution of Ken Saro-Wiwa and the Ogoni activists—reflect the institutionalization of violence as a tool of governance (Ibeanu, 2006, 47). Philosophically, the

military period illustrates a deepening of what Mbembe (2003, 11) would describe as necropolitics: the state exercises discretion over life and death, deciding which communities merit protection and which may be exposed to harm. Importantly, these patterns were not incidental but were embedded within bureaucratic, legal and military structures, producing an environment where the moral responsibilities of governance were subordinated to the imperatives of power.

With the return to democratic governance in 1999, Nigeria witnessed a formal reinstatement of constitutional rights and institutions designed to protect citizens. However, the persistence of insecurity, selective protection and structural neglect demonstrates that the historical patterns of coercive governance have not been entirely dismantled. The insurgency of *Boko Haram*, chronic banditry in the North-West and ethno-religious violence in the Middle Belt reveal a state that, despite democratic legitimacy, often fails to exercise its protective mandate equitably. Some communities experience persistent exposure to violence, displacement and deprivation, while others receive relative protection or prioritization of resources. This unevenness in governance is a continuation of historical precedents: colonial hierarchies, postcolonial political rivalries and military centralization have all contributed to the moral and structural conditions in which state inaction or selective action can produce outcomes resembling genocidal harm (Ibeanu, 2006, 44; de Waal, 2018, 136). The ethical question that arises is not whether these actions constitute genocide in a strictly legal sense, but whether governance that tolerates or facilitates systematic harm violates the moral obligations inherent in state power.

Across these historical epochs, a persistent theme emerges: the Nigerian state's legitimacy and effectiveness are often contingent on the management of violence rather than the promotion of justice. From colonial coercion to contemporary selective protection, governance has repeatedly demonstrated the capacity to harm certain populations while privileging others. Philosophically, this trajectory highlights the conditions under which governance risks crossing into genocide: when the state systematically fails to protect, selectively enforces rights and normalizes harm against particular groups, it undermines the ethical foundations of political authority. Understanding this historical continuity is crucial for analyzing contemporary crises, as it situates present challenges within a lineage of structural and moral precedents that make certain populations vulnerable to harm as a predictable consequence of governance. Thus, the historical trajectory of state violence in Nigeria emphasizes the importance of situating contemporary crises within a broader temporal and structural context. Colonial legacies, post-independence political fragmentation, militarized governance and democratic selective protection have collectively produced a political culture in which the ethical obligations of governance are often subordinated to the imperatives of power. Rationally, this continuity illuminates the conditions under which governance may evolve toward genocidal outcomes: systematic neglect, selective protection and structural harm all constitute moral failures that, when repeated and institutionalized, approach the threshold of genocide. However, by examining these historical trajectories, scholars can better understand how governance, in practice, interacts with state power to produce conditions in which certain populations are rendered vulnerable, highlighting the moral and analytical stakes of contemporary Nigerian crises.

Ethical Thresholds: When Governance Crosses into Genocide

The question of when governance becomes genocidal is not merely legal or descriptive; it is profoundly philosophical requiring an examination of the moral thresholds at which state action or inaction shifts from ordinary governance to morally culpable destruction. To determine this threshold, one must interrogate the ethical obligations inherent in state power, the nature of intentionality and foreseeability in policy and administration and the structural conditions under

which groups become exposed to systematic harm. Philosophical reflection is essential because legal definitions, such as those in the 1948 UN Genocide Convention, often focus narrowly on explicit intent to destroy a protected group, while excluding forms of structural neglect or systemic violence that may produce equivalent outcomes (UN, 1948, 2). Philosophers however, emphasize that the predictability, regularity and institutionalization of harm can confer moral responsibility, even in the absence of overt homicidal intent (Card, 2003, 69–72). The ethical inquiry into genocidal governance, therefore, revolves around the intersection of deliberate action, omission and the moral obligations of the state toward its citizens. This investigation provides a basis for evaluating contemporary crises, particularly in heterogeneous societies like Nigeria, where selective protection, systemic neglect and institutionalized discrimination are recurring features of governance.

The first ethical consideration lies in the principle of intentionality, which traditionally distinguishes acts of genocide from ordinary state failure. Legal frameworks require specific intent the demonstrable purpose to destroy a group, in whole or in part—for an act to qualify as genocide (UN, 1948, 2). Ethically, however, intentionality may be broadened to include foreseeable consequences that a rational actor, particularly a state, could anticipate and prevent. Card (2003, 72) argues that moral responsibility arises not only from deliberate acts but also from patterns of predictable omission that systematically place groups at risk of annihilation, whether physical, cultural or social. This perspective highlights the ethical relevance of state inaction: when governments possess the capacity to prevent harm but choose policies, structural arrangements or neglect that foreseeably endanger a population, their governance assumes a morally destructive character. In practical terms, policies that result in prolonged famine, systemic displacement or persistent insecurity can constitute a form of “functional intent,” even if the explicit aim of extermination is absent. Ethical analysis thus shifts the focus from narrowly defined legalistic categories to the broader, morally salient consequences of governance decisions.

Closely linked to intentionality is the question of structural violence and its role in creating genocidal conditions. Structural violence refers to social, political and economic arrangements that systematically disadvantage particular populations, producing predictable harm over time (Galtung, 1969, 170). Unlike overt physical violence, structural violence is embedded in institutions, policies and bureaucratic procedures, often normalized to the point of invisibility. For instance, the unequal distribution of resources, selective enforcement of law and order and persistent marginalization of minority regions can constitute forms of structural violence with cumulative effects on human survival and dignity. Thus, the ethical threshold is crossed when governance produces harm that is both systematic and avoidable. In this sense, a government that permits or fails to prevent conditions of starvation, exposure or widespread insecurity effectively participates in the destruction of social and political life, approaching the moral terrain of genocide (Semelin, 2005, 34–41). The significance of structural violence lies in its capacity to obscure culpability: because harm is distributed through institutional mechanisms rather than immediate action, the state's role may appear diffuse, yet its moral responsibility remains acute.

A third dimension involves the normative expectations of governance and the ethical duties inherent in state power. Governance carries obligations not only to protect life but also to ensure equitable treatment, uphold rights and maintain conditions conducive to human flourishing (Locke, 1690, 132; Rousseau, 1762, 56). Ethical governance entails a duty to shield vulnerable populations from predictable harm, address grievances fairly and resist the instrumentalization of groups as political tools or obstacles. When governance selectively enforces these obligations protecting some citizens while exposing others to disproportionate risk—it violates the moral contract that legitimizes its

authority. This principle resonates with Mbembe's concept of necropolitics, which emphasizes the state's power to decide who may live and who may die, whether directly or through neglect (Mbembe, 2003, 11). The ethical threshold for genocidal governance emerges when the state repeatedly fails to fulfill these duties toward specific groups, signaling a hierarchy of human value and a de facto authorization of harm. Such selective governance does not require explicit directives to kill; the regularized omission of protection suffices to constitute moral wrongdoing of genocidal proportion.

Another critical threshold concerns the systematicity and predictability of harm. Genocide, as Lemkin (1944, 79) and subsequent scholars emphasize, is characterized by coordinated, repeated and institutionalized actions or policies aimed at undermining the life of a group. Governance crosses into genocidal territory when harm is no longer incidental but predictable and recurrent, facilitated by bureaucratic, administrative or institutional mechanisms. For example, recurrent attacks against specific communities in conflict-prone regions, combined with chronic failure of the state to intervene, demonstrate a pattern of harm that is foreseeable and preventable. Ethical analysis recognizes that such systematicity amplifies moral culpability: repeated inaction in the face of predictable harm reflects a tacit approval of destruction and an institutionalization of discriminatory governance (Card, 2003, 72; Semelin, 2005, 39). This insight is particularly important in examining contemporary Nigeria, where communities in the Middle Belt, North-East and North-West experience cycles of violence, displacement and deprivation that persist despite state capacity to intervene.

Finally, the ethical threshold of genocidal governance involves the interplay of direct and indirect responsibility. Governance entails responsibility not only for overt acts but also for the conditions and structures that facilitate harm. Hannah Arendt's analysis of totalitarian systems highlights the banality of evil in bureaucratic structures, where ordinary administrative actions, if unmoored from moral reflection, contribute to mass destruction (Arendt, 1963, 289). Applied to governance, this perspective suggests that policies prioritizing state security, political stability or resource control over human life may indirectly enable conditions approaching genocide. Philosophically, this recognition expands the moral horizon: genocide is not exclusively the result of violent actors wielding weapons, but can also emerge from systematic neglect, bureaucratic indifference and structural inequality embedded within the mechanisms of governance.

In synthesizing these considerations, it becomes clear that the philosophical thresholds for genocidal governance are met when four conditions converge: (1) harm is predictable and foreseeable; (2) the state possesses the capacity but fails to prevent or mitigate harm; (3) governance selectively exposes specific groups to suffering, signaling a hierarchy of human worth; and (4) institutional, structural or bureaucratic mechanisms reproduce these harms over time. This context sheds light on the ethical stakes of governance in heterogeneous, politically complex societies like Nigeria, where historical, structural and contemporary factors interact to produce conditions of systemic vulnerability. It emphasizes that governance becomes morally reprehensible and potentially genocidal, not only through deliberate mass killing but also through patterned neglect, structural discrimination and predictable harm that erodes the social, political and cultural integrity of targeted groups.

The ethical thresholds that distinguish ordinary governance from genocidal governance extend beyond legal definitions to encompass foreseeability, systematicity, structural violence and selective protection. Philosophical analysis insists that states bear moral responsibility for both acts

and omissions that produce predictable harm to particular groups, even in the absence of explicit homicidal intent. In the Nigerian context, repeated failures to protect vulnerable communities, selective enforcement of laws and security measures and the institutionalization of structural neglect collectively demonstrate how governance can approach or even cross, the moral threshold of genocide. Thus, by focusing on these ethical and philosophical dimensions, scholars can move beyond a purely legalistic approach, critically evaluating the conditions under which governance, when exercised through state power, risks becoming an instrument of destruction.

The Normative Implications

Examining the question of when governance becomes genocidal naturally leads to an examination of normative implications: what ethical, legal and policy measures can prevent governance from crossing the moral threshold into mass destruction? Once the conceptual, historical and ethical dimensions of governance and genocide are understood, it becomes clear that effective interventions require not only structural reform but also a reorientation of state responsibility toward ethical governance, robust accountability mechanisms and proactive preventive strategies. Normative analysis in this context seeks to articulate both the moral duties of the state and the practical mechanisms by which those duties can be fulfilled, recognizing that failure to do so perpetuates vulnerability, structural violence and, in extreme cases, conditions approaching genocide. Such an approach is indispensable for societies like Nigeria, where historical legacies, persistent insecurity and systemic inequalities continue to shape governance outcomes.

A central normative consideration is the ethical imperative for governance reform. Reform is necessary not merely to improve administrative efficiency but to ensure that governance aligns with the moral duties intrinsic to state authority, including the protection of life, equitable treatment and promotion of human dignity (Locke, 1690, 132; Rousseau, 1762, 56). Philosophical reflection emphasizes that governance reform must address both structural and procedural deficiencies. Structurally, this entails dismantling institutional practices that perpetuate selective protection, discrimination or neglect, such as biased law enforcement, regional inequities in resource allocation and the marginalization of minority populations. Procedurally, reform requires embedding transparency, accountability and ethical deliberation into decision-making processes to ensure that policies reflect the general will and the moral obligations of the state rather than the preferences of elites or the exigencies of political expediency. Sen (1999, 36) underscores the importance of expanding substantive freedoms as both a measure of effective governance and a preventative strategy, arguing that states must actively cultivate conditions in which citizens can live free from deprivation, insecurity and structural harm. However, situating governance reform within an ethical framework, states not only improve functional administration but also reinforce the moral legitimacy that underpins their authority, thereby reducing the likelihood of governance lapsing into destructive or genocidal forms.

Closely related to reform is the necessity of robust accountability mechanisms, which serve as both a moral and practical safeguard against abuses of state power. Accountability in governance is multidimensional, encompassing legal, political and social dimensions. Legal accountability requires that government officials be subject to laws and regulations that prohibit abuse, neglect and discriminatory practices and that violation be met with appropriate sanctions (UN, 1948, 2). Political accountability involves ensuring that leaders and institutions remain answerable to citizens through democratic processes, participatory oversight and mechanisms for redress. Social accountability emphasizes the active engagement of civil society, media and local communities in monitoring government actions, demanding transparency and advocating for the protection of vulnerable populations (Fox, 2015, 47). Philosophically, accountability functions as a moral brake

on the exercise of state power, signaling that governance carries inherent responsibilities that are neither arbitrary nor unassailable. In contexts like Nigeria, where historical patterns of selective protection, corruption and structural neglect persist, accountability mechanisms are particularly critical. The absence of effective oversight allows policies and actions or inaction that disproportionately harm certain populations to persist, creating conditions in which governance may inadvertently or systematically produce outcomes resembling genocide (Card, 2003, 72; Mbembe, 2003, 11).

Preventive strategies represent another key normative implication, emphasizing proactive measures to mitigate conditions conducive to genocidal governance. Prevention operates at both structural and operational levels. Structurally, states must implement policies that address systemic inequalities, historical grievances and social exclusion, including equitable access to resources, legal protections for minorities and inclusive political representation. Operationally, governments must monitor early warning signs of conflict, displacement or structural harm and deploy resources to protect vulnerable populations before harm escalates into mass suffering or destruction (Semelin, 2005, 41). Philosophical perspectives stress that prevention is not merely reactive; it entails a moral obligation to anticipate predictable harm and to act decisively to forestall its occurrence. In Nigeria, recurrent violence in regions such as the Middle Belt, North-East and North-West demonstrates the consequences of neglecting preventive governance. Persistent insecurity, inadequate law enforcement and slow response to humanitarian crises create cumulative harm that threatens both life and social cohesion. Effective prevention requires a normative commitment to protect all citizens equitably, guided by ethical imperatives that prioritize human life and dignity above political convenience or elite interests.

The normative framework further incorporates the importance of legal and institutional reforms to codify obligations and clarify responsibilities. The law functions both as a deterrent and a moral guide, establishing clear standards of conduct and providing mechanisms for recourse when those standards are violated. International legal instruments, including the Genocide Convention and human rights treaties, offer frameworks for defining obligations and prosecuting violations (UN, 1948, 2). Domestically, constitutional provisions, independent judiciaries, anti-corruption agencies and human rights commissions constitute instruments through which states can institutionalize accountability and ethical governance. Philosophically, the embedding of normative principles within legal and institutional structures underscores the inseparability of morality and governance: ethical obligations become enforceable commitments, reducing the risk that state power is exercised arbitrarily or destructively (Arendt, 1963, 289). In the Nigerian context, legal and institutional reforms must address not only gaps in enforcement but also systemic biases that perpetuate vulnerability, ensuring that governance fulfills its protective mandate consistently across all populations.

Finally, normative implications extend to the cultivation of civic engagement and moral consciousness as a preventive measure. Governance does not operate in isolation from society; the active participation of citizens, civil society and local communities is integral to reinforcing ethical state conduct. Public awareness campaigns, civic education and participatory governance mechanisms create a culture in which the moral and practical responsibilities of government are scrutinized, debated and held accountable to ethical standards (Fox, 2015, p. 50). Philosophically, this dimension recognizes that governance is relational: the legitimacy and moral integrity of state authority depend on reciprocal engagement with citizens, whose agency provides a check against selective protection, neglect and systemic violence. In societies where civic engagement is weak, marginalized populations are more likely to suffer predictable harm and governance may drift

toward morally destructive patterns. Therefore, fostering civic responsibility is both a normative imperative and a practical safeguard against conditions that could facilitate genocidal governance.

In blending these considerations, the normative implications of the study are clear. Governance reform, robust accountability mechanisms, preventive strategies, legal codification and civic engagement collectively create the moral, structural and operational conditions under which state power is exercised ethically and equitably. Philosophically, the aim is to prevent the convergence of selective protection, structural neglect and predictable harm the conditions under which governance risks crossing into genocide. Practically, these measures provide a blueprint for reforming institutions, policies and societal expectations to reduce vulnerability, promote equity and safeguard human life. In the Nigerian context, where historical legacies of coercion, marginalization and selective governance persist, these normative strategies are particularly urgent, highlighting the necessity of embedding ethical imperatives into both the structures and the practice of governance.

The normative dimensions of governance in relation to genocide emphasize that preventing moral and practical failures requires proactive, ethical and institutionalized strategies. Governance becomes morally defensible only when it aligns structural capacity, policy implementation and societal engagement with the protection of all citizens. The failure to embed ethical obligations within governance structures through reform, accountability, prevention, law and civic participation exposes populations to avoidable harm and creates conditions under which governance may assume a destructive or genocidal character. Philosophical analysis thus stresses the ethical urgency of these interventions, demonstrating that the prevention of genocidal governance is both a moral and practical responsibility, essential for sustaining legitimate, equitable and humane political authority.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the fragile line between governance and genocide, showing how state power, when misused or negligent, can place communities in predictable and sustained harm. In Nigeria, the attacks by Fulani ethnic militias, perceived by many as ethnic cleansing, alongside jihadist insurgencies in the North-East, illustrate how violence interconnects with structural neglect. These crises are compounded by a Muslim-dominated federal government, which is often perceived as selectively protecting some communities while leaving others vulnerable. The partial or delayed judicial response to armed bandits further reinforces this perception, signaling uneven protection under the law. Such patterns demonstrate that governance becomes morally destructive when it fails to prevent foreseeable harm, tolerates structural inequalities and allows targeted populations to suffer repeatedly (Card, 2003, 72; Mbembe, 2003, 11). Ethical governance therefore requires impartial protection, equitable enforcement of the law and proactive measures to prevent harm. Civic engagement and accountability are critical to ensuring that communities affected by militias and insurgencies have a voice and protection. Only when governance consistently safeguards all citizens regardless of ethnicity or religion can it reclaim moral legitimacy and prevent conditions that resemble systemic destruction or ethnic-targeted violence. In Nigeria, addressing selective neglect, ensuring timely judicial action and reforming structural inequalities are urgent imperatives. Thus, ethical accountable and preventive governance is not just desirable but essential to preserving life, dignity and the social fabric of the nation.

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