

OPERATIONAL CONSTRAINTS AND OMBUDSMAN EFFECTIVENESS IN CONFLICT MITIGATION: AN INSTITUTIONAL ANALYSIS FROM NORTHERN NIGERIA

Auwal Ahmad¹, Hindatu M. Yerima, (Ph.D)², Yusuf Abdu Yusuf, (Ph.D)³ and Naziru Musalli,
(Ph.D)⁴

^{1,2,3& 4} Sa'adu Zungur University, Bauchi, Department of Public Administration, Bauchi State-Nigeria
nazirumusalli@sazu.edu.ng

Abstract

Ombudsman institutions serve as key administrative justice mechanisms designed to resolve grievances between citizens and the state. In fragile governance environments, these institutions may also function as non-coercive conflict mitigation mechanisms by preventing administrative grievances from escalating into violent disputes. However, their effectiveness depends critically on operational capacity, institutional independence, and public accessibility. This article examines the operational challenges limiting the effectiveness of Nigeria's Public Complaints Commission (PCC) in mitigating administrative-induced violent conflict in Northern Nigeria. Using qualitative data from 32 semi-structured interviews with Ombudsman officials, legal practitioners, policy analysts, and traditional leaders across Katsina, Nasarawa, and Yobe states, the study employs reflexive thematic analysis to identify institutional constraints affecting conflict mitigation outcomes. Findings reveal four principal operational constraints: limited institutional capacity, restricted enforcement authority, accessibility deficits, and political interference. These constraints weaken the Commission's ability to resolve grievances before they escalate into conflict. Nevertheless, respondents recognize the Commission's informal mediation role in preventing dispute escalation in specific instances. The study contributes to governance and security scholarship by demonstrating how strengthening administrative justice institutions can enhance non-coercive conflict prevention mechanisms in fragile governance contexts.

Keywords: Ombudsman effectiveness, Public Complaints Commission, maladministration, conflict mitigation, institutional mediation, Northern Nigeria

1. Introduction

The relationship between governance failure and violent conflict has become a central concern in contemporary political and development scholarship, particularly within fragile and conflict-affected states. While traditional security studies have emphasized ethnic divisions, resource competition, and insurgency dynamics, an emerging body of literature increasingly identifies maladministration and unresolved grievances as critical structural drivers of conflict escalation. This shift reflects a broader 'governance turn' in conflict studies, which foregrounds the role of state institutions in either mitigating or exacerbating social tensions (Fukuyama, 2013; Joshi, Hossain, & Pande, 2023). Institutionalized grievance redress mechanisms (GRMs), including Ombudsman institutions, are designed to serve as non-judicial accountability mechanisms that enable citizens to challenge

administrative injustice and seek remedies without resorting to contentious or violent means. These institutions occupy a strategic position within the governance architecture, functioning as intermediaries between citizens and the state. However, empirical evidence suggests that many GRMs, particularly in the Global South, operate with limited effectiveness, constrained by weak enforcement powers, political interference, and inadequate institutional capacity. As noted in recent scholarship, some grievance systems 'appear to be more ornamental than functional,' lacking the authority and resources necessary to ensure meaningful redress (Joshi et al., 2023).

The implications of such institutional weaknesses are profound. Where formal channels of grievance resolution fail, citizens may resort to informal or extra-legal mechanisms, including protest, resistance, or violence. This aligns with the frustration-aggression hypothesis and relative deprivation theory, which posit that perceived injustice and blocked access to redress mechanisms can trigger collective violence (Gurr, 1970). In this sense, maladministration is not merely a governance deficit but a latent conflict catalyst, particularly in contexts characterised by weak institutional trust and high socio-economic vulnerability. Northern Nigeria provides a particularly compelling empirical setting for examining this relationship. The region has experienced persistent and overlapping forms of violent conflict, including insurgency, communal clashes, and resource-based disputes. While much of the existing literature attributes these conflicts to identity politics, poverty, and environmental pressures, comparatively less attention has been paid to the administrative dimensions of conflict production, such as delayed service delivery, corruption, and unresolved public complaints. Within this context, the Public Complaints Commission (PCC), Nigeria's national Ombudsman institution, represents a critical but under-examined mechanism for conflict mitigation. Theoretically, the PCC has the potential to function as a preventive conflict management institution capable of addressing grievances before they escalate. However, its effectiveness is mediated by institutional capacity, accessibility, enforcement authority, and public trust.

This study addresses a significant gap in the literature by examining how these operational constraints shape the effectiveness of Ombudsman institutions in mitigating violent conflict. Anchored in the Institutional Mediation Framework for Conflict Mitigation (IMFCM), the study advances the argument that Ombudsman effectiveness is not a direct determinant of conflict mitigation but is mediated by institutional conditions that influence both access to justice and the quality of grievance resolution. By focusing specifically on operational challenges, this article contributes to three key debates: it extends the literature on governance and conflict by empirically linking administrative justice institutions to conflict dynamics; it enriches scholarship on Ombudsman institutions by situating them within peace and conflict studies; and it provides policy-relevant insights into how strengthening administrative accountability mechanisms can serve as a cost-effective and preventive approach to conflict mitigation in fragile settings.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Maladministration and Conflict Dynamics

The relationship between maladministration and violent conflict has increasingly attracted scholarly attention within the broader field of governance and security studies. Maladministration commonly defined as bureaucratic inefficiency, corruption, arbitrariness, and abuse of administrative power, represents a critical dimension of governance failure that directly shapes citizens' interactions with the state (Fukuyama, 2013). While early conflict literature focused predominantly on structural drivers such as ethnicity, resource scarcity, and political exclusion, contemporary scholarship has shifted toward understanding how everyday governance failures generate micro-level grievances that cumulatively contribute to macro-level instability (Justino, Brück, & Verwimp, 2013; Joshi et al., 2023). The theoretical linkage is rooted in the relative deprivation framework, which posits that perceived injustice and unmet expectations can trigger collective mobilisation and violence (Gurr, 1970). Recent empirical studies further reinforce this connection, demonstrating that citizens' dissatisfaction with public service delivery is strongly associated with protest behaviour and social unrest, particularly in fragile and conflict-affected settings (Brinkerhoff, Wetterberg, & Wibbels, 2018). However, the pathway from maladministration to conflict is not deterministic; it is mediated by the availability and effectiveness of institutions capable of addressing grievances.

2.2 Ombudsman Institutions as Administrative Justice Mechanisms

Ombudsman institutions represent a central pillar of administrative justice systems, designed to provide accessible, impartial, and non-judicial mechanisms for addressing citizens' complaints against public authorities. Originating in Scandinavia, the Ombudsman model has been widely adopted across developed and developing contexts, reflecting its perceived value in enhancing accountability and protecting citizens' rights (Reif, 2004). The effectiveness of Ombudsman institutions is typically conceptualised along several dimensions, including independence, accessibility, responsiveness, and enforcement capacity (Gregory & Giddings, 2016). These dimensions collectively determine the institution's ability to function as a credible and effective intermediary between citizens and the state. In theory, a well-functioning Ombudsman reduces the likelihood of conflict by providing timely and fair resolution of grievances, thereby preventing escalation.

However, empirical evidence from developing contexts suggests that many Ombudsman institutions face significant operational constraints. Studies have documented challenges such as limited financial resources, inadequate staffing, weak legal mandates, and political interference, all of which undermine institutional effectiveness (O'Brien, 2019; Ahsan & Rahman, 2022). In some cases, Ombudsman institutions are described as 'toothless watchdogs,' lacking the enforcement authority

necessary to compel compliance from government agencies. Recent scholarship has also emphasised the importance of perceived legitimacy and public trust in shaping effectiveness: even where formal structures exist, low levels of awareness and trust limit citizens' willingness to engage, thereby reducing practical impact (Tyler, 2006; OECD, 2021).

2.3 Institutional Mediation and Conflict Mitigation

The role of institutions as mediators between grievances and conflict outcomes is central to contemporary governance theory. Institutions do not merely respond to grievances; they shape how grievances are expressed, managed, and resolved. This perspective aligns with the Institutional Mediation Framework for Conflict Mitigation (IMFCM), which posits that the relationship between governance failure and conflict is mediated by the effectiveness of institutional mechanisms. Within this framework, Ombudsman institutions are conceptualised as intervening variables that can either attenuate or amplify the effects of maladministration. When effective, they serve as conflict dampeners, resolving disputes and restoring trust in public institutions; when ineffective, they may inadvertently reinforce perceptions of injustice and institutional failure. This dual role is supported by empirical research demonstrating that accessible and credible grievance redress mechanisms are associated with lower levels of conflict, while ineffective mechanisms can exacerbate tensions (World Bank, 2020). In fragile contexts, the absence of effective mediation often leads to the 'privatisation' of conflict resolution, where individuals resort to informal or violent means.

2.4 Operational Challenges and Institutional Effectiveness

A critical strand of the literature focuses on the operational challenges that constrain the effectiveness of administrative justice institutions. These challenges can be broadly categorised into four key areas.

2.4.1 Institutional Capacity

Institutional capacity encompassing human resources, financial resources, and technical infrastructure is widely recognised as a fundamental determinant of organisational performance. In the context of Ombudsman institutions, capacity constraints often result in delays, case backlogs, and limited outreach, thereby reducing the institution's ability to address grievances effectively (Fukuyama, 2013).

2.4.2 Enforcement Authority

The non-binding nature of many Ombudsman decisions represents a significant limitation. Without the power to enforce decisions, Ombudsman institutions rely on voluntary compliance, which may be insufficient in contexts characterised by weak accountability cultures (Gregory & Giddings, 2016).

2.4.3 Accessibility

Accessibility encompasses both physical and informational dimensions, including geographic reach, public awareness, and procedural simplicity. Studies have shown that marginalised populations often face significant barriers in accessing grievance mechanisms, limiting the inclusivity and effectiveness of these institutions (Joshi et al., 2023).

2.4.4 Political Interference and Institutional Independence

Institutional independence is a cornerstone of Ombudsman effectiveness. However, in many developing contexts, political interference undermines both actual and perceived independence, thereby eroding public trust and reducing institutional credibility (O'Brien, 2019).

2.5 Empirical Evidence from Fragile and Conflict-Affected Contexts

Empirical studies from fragile states provide mixed evidence regarding the effectiveness of Ombudsman institutions in conflict mitigation. There is evidence that effective grievance redress mechanisms can reduce conflict by addressing underlying grievances and enhancing state legitimacy (World Bank, 2020). Conversely, weak and under-resourced institutions may fail to perform this function, thereby allowing grievances to accumulate and escalate. In the African context, research on administrative justice institutions remains relatively limited, particularly in relation to conflict dynamics, with existing studies tending to focus on legal and institutional design rather than operational effectiveness and conflict outcomes.

2.6 Research Gap and Contribution

Despite growing recognition of the importance of governance in conflict prevention, there remains a limited empirical understanding of how administrative justice institutions influence conflict dynamics, particularly in fragile settings such as Northern Nigeria. Existing studies rarely integrate Ombudsman effectiveness with conflict mitigation outcomes; limited attention is given to operational challenges as mediating variables; and there is a lack of qualitative, context-specific analysis of institutional mechanisms. This study addresses these gaps by providing a theoretically grounded and empirically rich analysis of how operational constraints shape Ombudsman effectiveness in mitigating violent conflict.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative interpretivist case study design to examine the operational constraints affecting the effectiveness of the Public Complaints Commission (PCC) in mitigating violent conflict in Northern Nigeria. The interpretivist paradigm is premised on the understanding that institutional realities are socially constructed and context-dependent, thereby necessitating an in-depth exploration of the perceptions and experiences of actors embedded within the grievance redress system (Creswell, 2018). The case study approach enables a holistic analysis of institutional processes

and their interaction with conflict dynamics, allowing for analytical rather than statistical generalisation. The research was conducted in December 2025 across three strategically selected states of Katsina, Nasarawa, and Yobe, chosen for their varying experiences of governance challenges and conflict dynamics within Northern Nigeria.

A total of 32 participants were purposively selected using a multi-stage sampling strategy combining criterion, expert, and maximum variation sampling. The sample comprised 10 PCC officials, 8 legal practitioners, 6 policy analysts, and 8 traditional leaders, all possessing direct or specialised knowledge of grievance handling, governance processes, or conflict dynamics. Sample size was determined based on the principle of data saturation, reached after approximately 28 interviews, with additional interviews conducted to confirm thematic stability. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews designed to capture insights across four key domains: the nature of administrative grievances, institutional response mechanisms, operational challenges, and the linkages between grievances and conflict. Interviews were conducted face-to-face and virtually, lasted between 45 and 75 minutes, and were administered in English and Hausa with translations carried out during transcription. Ethical protocols were strictly adhered to, including informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity, and cautious handling of sensitive political information. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' permission, transcribed verbatim, and cross-checked for accuracy.

Data analysis was conducted using reflexive thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2006). The analytical process involved iterative stages of data familiarisation, initial coding, code categorisation, theme development, and refinement, culminating in the interpretation of themes in relation to the study's theoretical framework. A hybrid analytical strategy was employed, integrating inductive coding derived from the data with deductive coding informed by governance and conflict theories. To ensure trustworthiness, the study applied established qualitative criteria: credibility through triangulation across multiple stakeholder groups and the use of verbatim evidence; dependability through transparent documentation of analytical procedures; confirmability through reflexive neutrality; and transferability through rich contextual description.

4. Results and Discussion

The study reveals that the effectiveness of the Public Complaints Commission (PCC) in mitigating violent conflict in Northern Nigeria is fundamentally shaped by four interrelated operational constraints: limited institutional capacity, weak enforcement authority, accessibility deficits, and political interference. These findings reinforce broader governance scholarship emphasising that institutional effectiveness is contingent not only on formal design but also on operational capacity and contextual realities (Fukuyama, 2013).

Institutional capacity constraints represent the most pervasive limitation. Evidence from the field indicates severe shortages of personnel, inadequate funding, and limited logistical infrastructure, all

of which contribute to delays in grievance resolution. Analytically, these delays constitute a structural pathway through which grievances accumulate and potentially escalate into conflict, consistent with the grievance-conflict nexus articulated in relative deprivation theory (Gurr, 1970) and empirical studies linking poor service delivery to social unrest in fragile contexts (Brinkerhoff et al., 2018). Administrative inefficiency thus operates as an indirect driver of conflict escalation rather than a neutral institutional limitation.

Closely linked to capacity challenges is the issue of weak enforcement authority. The PCC operates largely through non-binding recommendations, limiting its ability to compel compliance from government agencies, particularly in cases involving powerful or politically connected actors. Analytically, this transforms the institution into a 'persuasive authority' rather than an 'enforcement authority,' weakening deterrence and perpetuating maladministration. This observation is consistent with existing literature characterising many Ombudsman institutions in developing contexts as lacking the coercive power necessary to ensure accountability (Gregory & Giddings, 2016; O'Brien, 2019).

Accessibility deficits further constrain the Commission's effectiveness. The findings indicate that awareness and utilisation of PCC services are significantly lower in rural and marginalised communities, where many administrative grievances originate. This pattern of institutional exclusion forces affected populations to rely on informal or extra-legal dispute resolution processes, thereby increasing the likelihood of escalation. This corroborates recent studies emphasising that limited access to grievance mechanisms reduces their practical impact and inclusivity (Joshi et al., 2023).

Political interference, although often indirect, emerges as a significant factor affecting both the actual and perceived independence of the PCC. Respondents highlight cautious handling of politically sensitive cases, suggesting constraints on institutional autonomy that erode public trust and reduce citizens' willingness to engage with the Commission. This aligns with theoretical perspectives on procedural justice, which emphasise that perceived fairness and neutrality are essential for institutional compliance and legitimacy (Tyler, 2006), as well as studies highlighting the negative impact of political interference on Ombudsman effectiveness (O'Brien, 2019).

Despite these structural limitations, the study identifies an important mitigating dimension: the PCC's informal mediation role. In practice, the Commission is able to resolve certain disputes through negotiation and dialogue, thereby preventing escalation in specific instances. This reflects the broader peacebuilding literature, which underscores the value of non-coercive and dialogue-based conflict resolution mechanisms (Lederach, 1997). However, such interventions remain localised and lack the scale required to address systemic governance challenges.

Overall, the findings support the conceptualisation of the Ombudsman as a 'constrained mediator,' operating at the intersection of governance and conflict dynamics. The institution possesses the

normative framework necessary for grievance redress but is limited by operational realities that reduce its effectiveness. This reinforces the argument that administrative justice institutions play a critical mediating role in the grievance-conflict relationship, and that strengthening their operational capacity, authority, accessibility, and independence is essential for enhancing their contribution to sustainable conflict prevention (World Bank, 2020).

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

This study concludes that the effectiveness of the Public Complaints Commission (PCC) as an Ombudsman institution in mitigating violent conflict in Northern Nigeria is significantly constrained by operational deficiencies rather than deficiencies in its formal institutional mandate. Limited institutional capacity, weak enforcement authority, accessibility challenges, and political interference collectively undermine the Commission's ability to resolve administrative grievances in a timely, inclusive, and authoritative manner. As a result, unresolved grievances accumulate and may escalate into conflict, reinforcing the broader governance-conflict nexus identified in existing literature. Although the PCC retains some relevance through informal mediation practices, its overall impact remains insufficient for systemic conflict prevention. The study therefore underscores that administrative justice institutions are critical but underutilised instruments of non-coercive conflict mitigation in fragile governance contexts.

In light of these findings, the study recommends a comprehensive institutional reform approach. First, the government should strengthen the operational capacity of the PCC through increased funding, recruitment of skilled personnel, and improved logistical support to enhance efficiency in grievance handling. Second, legislative reforms are necessary to enhance the Commission's enforcement authority by granting it binding or semi-binding powers to ensure compliance with its decisions. Third, deliberate efforts should be made to expand accessibility through decentralisation, public awareness campaigns, and the adoption of digital complaint platforms, particularly targeting underserved rural communities. Fourth, institutional safeguards must be established to protect the Commission's independence from political interference, thereby enhancing its credibility and public trust. Finally, the PCC should be formally integrated into national and sub-national conflict prevention frameworks as a proactive, non-coercive mechanism for addressing grievances before they escalate into violence.

References

- Ahsan, M., & Rahman, T. (2022). Administrative justice and governance reforms in developing countries. *Journal of Public Administration and Policy Research*, 14(2), 45-60.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77-101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>

- Brinkerhoff, D. W., Wetterberg, A., & Wibbels, E. (2018). Distance, services, and citizen perceptions of the state in fragile contexts. *Governance*, 31(1), 103–124. <https://doi.org/10.1111/gove.12271>
- Creswell, J. W. (2018). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (5th ed.). Sage Publications.
- Fukuyama, F. (2013). What is governance? *Governance*, 26(3), 347–368. <https://doi.org/10.1111/gove.12035>
- Gregory, R., & Giddings, P. (2016). *Righting wrongs: The ombudsman in six continents*. IOS Press.
- Gurr, T. R. (1970). *Why men rebel*. Princeton University Press.
- Joshi, A., Hossain, N., & Pande, S. (2023). Citizen engagement and state accountability in fragile settings. *World Development*, 161, 106083. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2022.106083>
- Justino, P., Brück, T., & Verwimp, P. (2013). *A micro-level perspective on the dynamics of conflict, violence, and development*. Oxford University Press.
- Lederach, J. P. (1997). *Building peace: Sustainable reconciliation in divided societies*. United States Institute of Peace Press.
- O'Brien, N. (2019). Strengthening ombudsman institutions in developing democracies. *Public Administration Review*, 79(5), 712–721. <https://doi.org/10.1111/puar.13052>
- OECD. (2021). *Government at a glance 2021*. OECD Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1787/1c258f55-en>
- Reif, L. C. (2004). *The ombudsman, good governance and the international human rights system*. Martinus Nijhoff.
- Tyler, T. R. (2006). *Why people obey the law*. Princeton University Press.
- World Bank. (2020). *Resolving grievances for improved service delivery*. World Bank Publications.