

LEGITIMACY OR ILLUSION? AN EXAMINATION OF THE MORAL GROUNDS OF POLITICAL OBLIGATION IN THE FACE OF WOLFF'S PHILOSOPHICAL ANARCHISM IN NIGERIA

Elochukwu Afoka, PhD

National Open University of Nigeria

eafoka@noun.edu.ng, eloafoka@gmail.com

Abstract

The legitimacy of the state and the moral basis of political obligation remain pressing concerns in African political thought. In postcolonial Nigeria, colonial-era structures often lack organic legitimacy, raising fundamental questions about the moral authority of the state to command obedience. Robert Paul Wolff's philosophical anarchism, which argues that no state marked by coercion, corruption, or arbitrary rule can satisfy the conditions of legitimate authority, offers a critical lens for examining this challenge. While normative theories of obligation- social contract, consent-based, and utilitarian- have been widely discussed, their applicability to Nigeria is limited, and Wolff's anarchist critique has rarely been systematically applied. Likewise, indigenous governance practices and communalist traditions have largely been treated descriptively, without rigorous philosophical evaluation. This study interrogates the moral grounds of political obligation in Nigeria, guided by three questions: How have classical theories of obligation been applied or undermined in Nigerian political practice? How does Wolff's anarchism illuminate Nigeria's socio-political realities? Can a morally defensible, context-sensitive model of obligation be reconstructed for Nigeria and Africa more broadly? Employing an analytical-philosophical approach, the research integrates normative theory with Nigeria's political history, contemporary governance challenges, and indigenous practices such as communalism, consensus, and relational accountability. The study advances a hybrid framework of political obligation that upholds autonomy, strengthens participatory legitimacy, and grounds authority in morally sustainable principles across postcolonial Africa.

Keywords: Political Obligation, State Legitimacy, Philosophical Anarchism, Postcolonial Africa, Indigenous Governance.

Introduction

The question of political legitimacy, whether and why citizens are morally obligated to obey the state, remains a central concern in political philosophy. In postcolonial African contexts, it assumes particular urgency given the historical conditions of state formation. Many African states, including Nigeria, are legacies of colonial administrations designed for extraction, coercion, and control rather than consent, moral authority, or participatory legitimacy (Ake, 2001; Mamdani, 2018). Consequently, postcolonial states often struggle to secure genuine moral allegiance from citizens. Nigeria exemplifies this enduring crisis. Despite constitutional democracy and periodic elections, the Nigerian state continues to exhibit widespread corruption, weak institutions, selective justice, insecurity, insurgencies, and persistent socio-economic inequality (Dike, 2025; Agbiboa, 2023; International Crisis Group, 2022). These conditions have deepened citizens' skepticism toward state authority, undermining the moral grounds of political obligation. Civic disobedience, separatist movements, tax resistance, and declining institutional trust signal a

widening gap between citizens' expectations and the state's claims to legitimate authority (Lewis & Kew, 2024).

Philosophically, this crisis raises fundamental questions about political obligation in contexts where the state appears unable or unwilling to secure justice, protect rights, or serve the common good. Classical theories of obligation, rooted in social contract, consent, utilitarian benefit, or associative membership, presuppose minimally just institutions and functional governance (Simmons, 2016; Horton, 2018). In Nigeria, these assumptions are often violated, rendering conventional justifications of obedience fragile and empirically implausible. In this context, Robert Paul Wolff's philosophical anarchism is especially salient. Wolff (1970/1998) contends that political authority is inherently incompatible with individual moral autonomy, as no state can legitimately command obedience without undermining moral responsibility. While formulated in a Western liberal context, Wolff's critique is even more striking in postcolonial states marked by coercion, corruption, and institutional decay. Yet, his anarchist perspective has rarely been systematically applied to African political realities, particularly Nigeria.

This study addresses whether the Nigerian state can morally justify political obligation amid pervasive corruption, impunity, and institutional weakness. While the state demands obedience through legal and coercive mechanisms, its capacity to satisfy the moral criteria traditionally associated with legitimate authority remains contested. Wolff's critique intensifies this tension, suggesting that political obligation may be impossible to morally ground in contexts of structural illegitimacy. The study aims to critically assess the moral foundations of political obligation in Nigeria through Wolff's lens. Specifically, it examines the extent to which Nigerian governance meets Wolff's criteria of legitimate authority, evaluates classical and contemporary theories of political obligation in light of Nigeria's political history, and explores the potential for reconstructing a morally defensible, context-sensitive model of obligation that integrates normative theory with African political realities. Guiding research questions include: How have classical theories of political obligation fared in Nigeria's political practice? How do Wolff's arguments illuminate or challenge Nigeria's socio-political experience? Can a morally and contextually grounded model of political obligation be reconstructed for Nigeria and postcolonial Africa?

Significantly, unlike previous literature, this study bridges Western normative theory and African political philosophy, offering a hybrid framework for legitimacy that respects individual autonomy while drawing on indigenous practices such as communalism, consensus, and relational accountability. By doing so, it advances debates on authority, obedience, and legitimacy in Nigeria and across postcolonial Africa.

Philosophical Anarchism and Wolff's Critique

Philosophical anarchism represents a radical challenge to all justificatory theories of political obligation. Its central claim is that no state can satisfy the moral conditions required for legitimate authority, even under ideal circumstances. Importantly, philosophical anarchism does not advocate disorder or the abolition of political institutions but denies that states possess moral authority that

overrides individual judgment (Delmas, 2018). Wolff provides the most systematic articulation of this position. For Wolff (1970/1998), autonomy is the supreme moral obligation: individuals must always act in accordance with their own rational moral judgment. Since political authority claims the right to command obedience independently of such judgment, it is fundamentally incompatible with autonomy. Obedience to law, therefore, can never be a moral duty as such; it can only be justified case by case on independent moral grounds.

In the Nigerian context, Wolff's critique gains heightened relevance. Where authority is routinely exercised through coercion, patronage, and selective legality, the moral gap between state commands and individual judgment becomes more pronounced. Wolff's philosophical anarchism thus provides a powerful analytical lens for exposing the illusion of legitimacy sustained by force rather than moral justification.

African Communitarian and Consensus Traditions

African political philosophy offers an alternative framework for understanding legitimacy and political obligation. Precolonial African societies largely emphasized communal consent, moral accountability, and participatory governance rather than centralized coercive authority (Wiredu, 2000; Gyekye, 2010). Political legitimacy was often grounded in consensus, dialogue, and the moral character of leaders, with authority understood as conditional and revocable. Communitarian conceptions of personhood, encapsulated in notions such as *ubuntu* and relational moral identity, locate political obligation within networks of mutual responsibility rather than abstract legal commands (Metz, 2017). These traditions challenge Western state-centric models by emphasizing legitimacy as a lived moral relationship between rulers and the community. However, colonialism disrupted these indigenous governance structures, replacing them with bureaucratic states oriented toward control rather than moral reciprocity (Mamdani, 2018). Revisiting African consensus traditions therefore provides both a normative counterpoint to coercive authority and a resource for reconstructing political obligation in postcolonial contexts such as Nigeria.

By bringing Wolff's philosophical anarchism into dialogue with dominant Western theories and African communitarian traditions, this study establishes a conceptual framework capable of critically interrogating the moral grounds of political obligation in Nigeria. Rather than assuming the legitimacy of the state, it treats authority as a moral claim that must be justified against the standards of autonomy, consent, and communal accountability. This synthesis sets the stage for evaluating whether Nigeria's political authority represents genuine legitimacy or a sustained illusion.

Political Obligation in the Nigerian Context

The question of political obligation in Nigeria must be approached against the backdrop of the state's contested historical origins, fragile moral authority, and persistent governance deficits. Unlike idealized models of political obligation in normative theory, Nigeria presents a case where the conditions typically required for morally binding obedience, consent, justice, reciprocity, and accountability, are deeply compromised. This section examines how the Nigerian state emerged,

how Western theories of political obligation have been misapplied within its political reality, and how these dynamics have progressively eroded the moral grounds for citizens' obedience.

The Nigerian state is a product of colonial engineering rather than organic political development. The 1914 amalgamation of Northern and Southern protectorates by British colonial authorities was driven by administrative convenience and economic extraction, not by the consent or moral agreement of the diverse peoples incorporated into the new polity (Ake, 2001; Falola & Heaton, 2022). This foundational absence of consent has had enduring implications for political legitimacy and obligation. Colonial rule in Nigeria relied heavily on coercive institutions, the military, police, and indirect rule mechanisms, designed to secure compliance rather than moral allegiance. These structures were not dismantled at independence but were largely inherited and repurposed by postcolonial elites (Mamdani, 2018). As a result, the postcolonial Nigerian state retained the coercive logic of colonial governance while lacking the normative legitimacy that might ground political obligation in moral duty rather than fear or necessity. This historical continuity undermines the plausibility of treating Nigeria as a consensual political community in the sense assumed by classical theories of obligation. The state's authority was not constituted through collective self-authorship but imposed through external domination, a condition that continues to shape citizens' ambivalent or adversarial relationship with political power.

Western theories of political obligation have often been implicitly assumed in Nigeria's constitutional and legal frameworks, yet their normative foundations do not translate seamlessly into the Nigerian political experience. Social contract theory presupposes either an original agreement or ongoing consent among free and equal agents (Horton, 2018). In Nigeria, however, there was no historical moment of voluntary political founding, nor has postcolonial governance approximated the conditions under which hypothetical consent could plausibly be inferred. Constitutional arrangements have largely been elite-driven, frequently imposed through military decrees or manipulated transitions, weakening any claim that citizens are bound by a morally valid contract (Suberu, 2023).

Utilitarian justifications of political obligation rest on the state's capacity to promote the general welfare or the greatest good for the greatest number (Mill, 1861/2001). Yet chronic insecurity, infrastructural decay, poverty, and inequality raise serious doubts about whether obedience to Nigerian law reliably produces collective benefit. When state action disproportionately advantages political elites while imposing costs on ordinary citizens, the utilitarian basis for moral obligation collapses (Agbibo, 2023). Consent-based theories, whether actual, tacit, or hypothetical, face even greater difficulty. Citizenship in Nigeria is largely involuntary, exit options are constrained, and political participation is frequently distorted by clientelism, electoral malpractice, and coercion (Lewis & Kew, 2024). Under such conditions, continued residence or nominal participation cannot reasonably be interpreted as morally meaningful consent.

Taken together, these misapplications reveal a structural mismatch between Western justificatory theories of political obligation and Nigeria's political realities. The problem is not merely that Nigeria fails to live up to theoretical ideals, but that the theories themselves presuppose social and

institutional conditions that are systematically absent. Beyond historical and theoretical concerns, contemporary governance practices in Nigeria have further eroded the moral grounds for political obligation. Entrenched corruption, pervasive impunity, and inequitable distribution of public resources have become defining features of the political system (Transparency International, 2023). When public office is widely perceived as a means of private accumulation rather than public service, citizens struggle to see obedience as a moral duty rather than a coerced concession. The rule of law in Nigeria remains weak and unevenly applied. Selective justice, prolonged pretrial detention, and executive disregard for court orders undermine the state's claim to moral authority (International Crisis Group, 2022). In such a context, laws increasingly appear as instruments of domination rather than expressions of collective moral will. These conditions have produced a widening gap between state authority and public trust. Surveys consistently show low confidence in political institutions and a growing tendency toward civic disengagement, informal resistance, and selective compliance (Afrobarometer, 2024). Obedience, where it exists, is often prudential rather than moral, motivated by fear of sanctions rather than recognition of legitimate authority. From the perspective of Wolff's philosophical anarchism, this erosion is not accidental but symptomatic. Where the state systematically fails to align its commands with moral reason and autonomy, its claim to authority becomes illusory. In Nigeria, the convergence of coercive origins, theoretical misfit, and governance failure renders political obligation deeply suspect as a moral concept.

The Nigerian case illustrates a profound tension between the normative ideal of political obligation and the empirical realities of postcolonial governance. Rather than assuming an existing duty to obey, this study treats political obligation as a contested moral claim requiring justification. Nigeria's experience suggests that obedience is sustained more by coercion and habituation than by legitimacy, lending empirical weight to Wolff's anarchist skepticism. At the same time, the Nigerian context raises a constructive challenge: whether political obligation can be reimagined beyond inherited colonial state models and misapplied Western theories. This question sets the stage for exploring alternative, context-sensitive frameworks of legitimacy grounded in moral accountability, participatory governance, and relational responsibility.

Wolff's Philosophical Anarchism and Nigerian Political Realities

Wolff's philosophical anarchism offers one of the most stringent normative critiques of political authority in modern political philosophy. Its central claim, that no state can possess legitimate authority without undermining individual moral autonomy, poses a direct challenge to the assumption that political obligation is a natural or necessary feature of social order. When applied to Nigerian political realities, Wolff's framework functions less as an abstract philosophical provocation and more as a diagnostic tool for exposing the moral fragility of state authority in postcolonial contexts. This section examines the resonances between Wolff's critique and Nigeria's governance conditions, clarifies anarchism as an analytical rather than disorderly framework, and situates Nigeria within broader African debates on legitimacy and autonomy.

Wolff's philosophical anarchism begins from the premise that moral autonomy, the obligation to act according to one's own rational judgment, is inalienable and cannot be subordinated to external

authority (Wolff, 1970/1998). Political authority, insofar as it claims a right to command obedience independently of individual moral deliberation, therefore fails to meet the standards of moral legitimacy. Wolff maintains that states rarely, if ever, satisfy these standards even under ideal conditions. Nigeria's political conditions strongly resonate with this critique. Systemic corruption, weak institutional accountability, pervasive insecurity, and selective enforcement of law create a political environment in which state commands frequently conflict with basic moral reasoning (Agbiboa, 2023; International Crisis Group, 2022). In such circumstances, obedience cannot plausibly be understood as a moral duty but appears instead as a coerced or strategic response to power.

Moreover, the routine reliance on coercive instruments, security forces, emergency regulations, and punitive enforcement undermines any claim that the Nigerian state governs through moral authority rather than force. From a Wolffian perspective, this reliance on coercion is not merely a symptom of poor governance but evidence that authority lacks the moral grounding required to generate political obligation. The persistent gap between legal command and moral justification confirms Wolff's assertion that the state's claim to legitimacy is, at best, precarious.

Philosophical Anarchism as an Analytical Lens

Interpreted as an analytical framework rather than a political program, Wolff's philosophical anarchism provides a powerful lens for examining the disjunction between constitutional authority and lived political practice in Nigeria. While Nigeria's constitution affirms popular sovereignty, fundamental rights, and the rule of law, executive overreach, electoral manipulation, and judicial non-compliance routinely undermine these principles (Suberu, 2023). Wolff's framework exposes this gap by interrogating the moral status of authority itself rather than merely procedural defects. Authority that demands obedience irrespective of moral justification cannot ground legitimate political obligation. In Nigeria, where legality often masks injustice or elite domination, obedience to unjust laws becomes ethically problematic.

Importantly, philosophical anarchism distinguishes principled disobedience, grounded in moral reasoning, from social chaos. Civil resistance, selective compliance, and moral dissent can thus be understood as expressions of autonomy rather than threats to order. This challenges dominant narratives equating stability with unquestioning obedience and reframes autonomy as a corrective to illegitimate authority. Persistent governance failures in Nigeria have eroded public trust, weakening the normative bond between citizens and the state (Afrobarometer, 2024). Compliance with law becomes instrumental rather than ethical, highlighting why appeals to civic duty often fail. Moral obligation depends on alignment between authority and moral reason, a condition repeatedly unmet in Nigeria, rendering political obligation morally indeterminate.

Nigeria's experience reflects broader postcolonial African realities. Colonial administrative structures were designed for domination rather than legitimacy, producing enduring tensions between authority and autonomy (Mamdani, 2018). Wolff's analysis provides a non-pessimistic, non-essentialist framework for understanding these tensions and evaluating legitimacy. Applied across African contexts, it underscores the need to rethink political obligation beyond inherited

state forms and procedural formalism, privileging accountability, participation, and respect for moral agency.

Aligning Wolff's anarchism with Nigerian realities reinforces the central thesis: political obligation in Nigeria often functions as an illusion sustained by coercion rather than a moral duty rooted in legitimate authority. Simultaneously, Wolff's framework opens space to reimagine political order, foregrounding autonomy as the ultimate moral standard. This approach challenges authoritarian governance and complacent acceptance of inherited legitimacy, laying the groundwork for context-sensitive alternatives grounded in moral accountability and participatory justification.

Toward a Reconstructed Model of Political Obligation for Nigeria/Africa

Wolff's philosophical anarchism exposes the moral fragility of political obligation in coercive and poorly accountable states such as Nigeria. However, while Wolff convincingly dismantles the presumption of unconditional obedience, his analysis leaves open a crucial reconstructive question: under what conditions, if any, can political obligation be morally justified in postcolonial African contexts? This section advances a reconstructed model of political obligation that is context-sensitive, participatory, and normatively hybrid, integrating Wolff's autonomy principle with democratic theory and African indigenous political traditions.

One of the central limitations of dominant Western theories of political obligation is their tendency to universalize assumptions derived from relatively stable liberal-democratic contexts. Social contract, utilitarian, and consent-based theories often presuppose functional institutions, rule-bound governance, and a baseline of public trust (Horton, 2018). In Nigeria and many African states, these conditions are persistently absent, rendering such theories normatively insufficient without contextual adaptation.

A reconstructed model of political obligation must therefore begin by rejecting legality alone as a sufficient ground of legitimacy. Following Wolff, authority cannot derive moral force merely from constitutional form or sovereign command. Instead, legitimacy must be grounded in moral principles that citizens can rationally endorse without surrendering their autonomy (Wolff, 1970/1998). In African contexts marked by historical domination and institutional fragility, legitimacy must be earned through moral performance rather than assumed as an inherited right of the state.

This shift reframes political obligation as conditional rather than automatic. Obedience becomes morally justified only when authority demonstrably aligns with ethical standards of justice, accountability, and respect for persons. A central pillar of reconstructed political obligation is participatory democracy. If autonomy is to be preserved, citizens must not be treated merely as subjects of authority but as co-authors of the political order. Contemporary democratic theory increasingly emphasizes that legitimacy flows from inclusive participation, transparency, and deliberative accountability rather than electoral procedures alone (Applbaum, 2019; Landemore, 2020).

In the Nigerian and broader African context, this implies that political obligation can arise only where citizens play an active role in shaping laws, policies, and institutions that govern them. Moral obligation, on this view, is not obedience to command but fidelity to a political process one has reason to endorse. When governance is opaque, exclusionary, or captured by elites, citizens retain their Wolffian right, and duty, to withhold obedience.

Participatory legitimacy thus transforms political obligation into a dynamic moral relationship. Authority must continually justify itself through responsiveness and accountability, while citizens' obligation emerges from their effective agency within political institutions.

African political philosophy provides vital normative resources for reconstructing political obligation beyond Western state-centric models. Precolonial African governance systems frequently grounded authority in communal consent, moral leadership, and reciprocal responsibility rather than coercive sovereignty (Gyekye, 2010; Wiredu, 2000). Decision-making processes often emphasized consensus, dialogue, and the moral credibility of leaders.

These traditions do not negate autonomy but reconceptualize it relationally. Moral agency is exercised within a community of mutual recognition, where authority is legitimate only insofar as it sustains communal well-being and moral order (Metz, 2017). Such indigenous legitimacy norms offer a counterbalance to coercive state authority by embedding political power within ethical relationships rather than abstract legal hierarchies.

Re-engaging these traditions does not require romanticizing the past or rejecting modern state structures. Rather, it involves recovering normative principles, moral reciprocity, participatory consent, and accountability that can supplement and morally constrain contemporary governance in Nigeria and Africa more broadly.

A Hybrid Normative Model of Political Obligation

Building on these insights, this study proposes a hybrid normative model of political obligation that integrates three core elements:

1. Wolff's autonomy principle, which insists that individuals retain ultimate moral responsibility and cannot owe unconditional obedience to authority.
2. Participatory democratic theory, which grounds legitimacy in citizens' active involvement in political decision-making and institutional oversight.
3. African communitarian frameworks, which emphasize relational legitimacy, consensus, and moral accountability.

Within this model, political obligation is neither absolute nor permanently suspended. Obedience is morally justified only when the state demonstrably respects autonomy, governs transparently, and acts in accordance with shared moral norms. Where these conditions are absent, citizens are not morally deficient in resisting or selectively complying; rather, they are exercising moral agency. This reconstructed framework moves beyond Wolff's skepticism without abandoning his

normative core. It transforms philosophical anarchism from a purely critical position into a constructive foundation for ethical political order in postcolonial Africa.

For Nigeria, this model implies that restoring political obligation requires more than institutional reform or anti-corruption rhetoric. It demands a reorientation of authority toward moral justification, participatory inclusion, and relational legitimacy. For Africa more broadly, the model provides a philosophically robust alternative to both authoritarian statism and uncritical adoption of Western legitimacy paradigms. By reconceiving political obligation as conditional, participatory, and morally grounded, this framework offers a pathway toward legitimacy that neither relies on coercion nor collapses into anarchic disorder. It affirms autonomy while recognizing the ethical necessity of political order, thereby addressing the core dilemma at the heart of postcolonial African governance.

Critical Evaluation and Discussion

This section critically evaluates the normative and practical implications of applying Wolff's philosophical anarchism to the Nigerian context. While Wolff's critique offers a compelling moral diagnosis of illegitimate authority, its limitations become apparent when confronted with the demands of political organization in deeply plural and institutionally fragile societies. The discussion therefore moves beyond critique to assess the challenges and prospects of reconstructing political legitimacy in Nigeria.

A central strength of Wolff's philosophical anarchism lies in its uncompromising moral clarity. By foregrounding autonomy as the supreme moral obligation, Wolff exposes the ethical inadequacy of political authority that relies on coercion, habit, or procedural legality rather than moral justification (Wolff, 1970/1998). In the Nigerian context, marked by systemic corruption, selective justice, and weak accountability, this critique powerfully dismantles the presumption that obedience is morally required simply because commands emanate from the state. Wolff's framework thus serves as a critical corrective to statist assumptions that conflate order with legitimacy. Moreover, Wolff's insistence on individual moral judgment resonates strongly in postcolonial settings where authority has historically functioned as an instrument of domination rather than collective self-rule. His critique illuminates why appeals to civic duty often fail to inspire genuine allegiance in Nigeria: citizens are repeatedly asked to obey institutions that do not merit moral trust.

However, the limits of Wolff's anarchism become evident at the level of political construction. Wolff offers little guidance on how stable political order might be organized without authority capable of issuing generally binding directives. While he acknowledges the need for coordination, his framework does not articulate institutional mechanisms through which autonomy can be collectively exercised at scale (Horton, 2018). In contexts such as Nigeria, characterized by ethnic diversity, economic inequality, and security challenges, the absence of a clear pathway from critique to governance risks leaving anarchism normatively persuasive but practically indeterminate.

Challenges to Reconstructing Political Legitimacy

Efforts to reconstruct political legitimacy in Nigeria confront formidable structural and sociopolitical challenges. Ethno-religious fragmentation complicates the formation of shared moral norms capable of grounding political obligation across diverse communities (Suberu, 2023). Competing identities and historical grievances often undermine consensus on the purposes and limits of state authority.

Institutional weakness further constrains legitimacy reconstruction. Public institutions in Nigeria frequently lack autonomy from political elites, suffer from capacity deficits, and operate within patronage networks that distort accountability (Agbibo, 2023). Elite capture of democratic processes erodes the credibility of participation, transforming elections and consultations into symbolic rituals rather than genuine exercises of collective self-rule. Uneven democratization also poses a challenge. While formal democratic structures exist, substantive participation remains limited, and civic engagement is often constrained by poverty, insecurity, and distrust (Lewis & Kew, 2024). Under such conditions, appeals to participatory legitimacy risk becoming aspirational rather than immediately realizable.

These challenges suggest that reconstructing legitimacy is not a purely philosophical task but a deeply political and institutional one. Normative frameworks must therefore be sensitive to power asymmetries and structural constraints if they are to move beyond ideal theory.

Prospects for Reform and Moral Reconstruction

Despite persistent challenges, prospects for reform in Nigeria are neither illusory nor negligible. Reconstructing political obligation requires incremental, morally oriented institutional transformation. Strengthening key public institutions, particularly the judiciary, electoral bodies, and anti-corruption agencies, is crucial for restoring credibility and aligning legal authority with moral justification (Applbaum, 2019). Civic education also plays a pivotal role by fostering critical citizenship, cultivating the moral agency emphasized by Wolff, and channeling engagement toward constructive participation rather than passive obedience. Such education nurtures a culture of accountability in which obedience is conditional on ethical performance.

Enhancing participatory governance rooted in indigenous legitimacy traditions offers another avenue for reform. Local deliberative forums, community-based accountability mechanisms, and consensus-oriented decision-making can supplement formal institutions, embedding authority within lived moral relationships (Gyekye, 2010; Wiredu, 2000). These practices bridge Wolff's autonomy principle with the collective demands of political life.

Wolff's philosophical anarchism serves as a diagnostic and normative standard rather than a comprehensive blueprint. Its value lies in exposing moral deficits in authority, while reconstruction requires engagement with democratic theory and African traditions. Political obligation is thus treated as a contingent moral relationship: earned through ethical governance, sustained through participation, and withdrawn when authority degenerates into domination, offering a realistic, normatively robust pathway toward legitimate authority in Nigeria and Africa.

Conclusion

This study examined the moral foundations of political obligation in Nigeria through a critical engagement with Wolff's philosophical anarchism in a postcolonial African context. It demonstrates that Nigeria's legitimacy crisis is structurally entrenched and historically sustained, rooted in colonial state formation and reinforced by postcolonial patterns of coercion, elite domination, and weak institutional accountability. As a result, the Nigerian state struggles to establish the moral authority required to generate a genuine obligation to obey. Classical Western theories of political obligation- social contract, utilitarian, consent-based, and associative models- fail to justify obedience in Nigeria, as they presuppose consent, justice, and reciprocal benefit, conditions largely absent or distorted in practice.

Wolff's philosophical anarchism serves as a powerful diagnostic tool, emphasizing individual autonomy and revealing the ethical insufficiency of state authority. In Nigeria, compliance is often secured through coercion or necessity, making political obligation more illusory than morally binding. Yet, Wolff's critique is normatively critical but politically incomplete. This study advances a reconstructed model of obligation grounded in democratic participation, moral accountability, and African indigenous legitimacy traditions. Obedience is treated as conditional, earned through ethical governance and responsiveness. By integrating autonomy with participatory democracy and communitarian insights, the research reconceives political obligation as a moral relationship that must be continually justified, bridging Western theory and African political realities.

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