JOURNAL OF PRIVATE AND PROPERTY LAW – **ISSN:1119-8206 VOL.24(2) APRIL, 2026**
PUBLISHED BY DEPARTMENT OF PRIVATE AND PROPERTY LAW, RIVERS STATE UNIVERSITY

DIGITAL GOVERNANCE AND ADMINISTRATIVE LAW IN NIGERIA: LEGAL CHALLENGES OF E-GOVERNMENT AND AUTOMATED DECISION-MAKING

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ABSTRACT
This study interrogates the juridical implications of digital governance and automated decision-making (ADM) within the framework of Nigerian administrative law, against the backdrop of accelerating technological integration in public administration. It identifies a fundamental tension between the efficiency-driven imperatives of e-government and the normative commitments of administrative law, particularly the principles of the rule of law, procedural fairness, transparency, and accountability. Adopting a doctrinal and comparative methodology, the paper critically examines Nigeria's constitutional and statutory landscape, including the 1999 Constitution (as amended), the Nigeria Data Protection Act 2023, the Cybercrimes Act 2015, and the Freedom of Information Act 2011, alongside regulatory developments in the United Kingdom and the European Union. The study finds that the Nigerian legal framework remains fragmented and normatively inadequate to address the complexities of algorithmic governance, particularly with respect to fair hearing, explainability, and accountability in automated decisions. It argues that the delegation of administrative discretion to opaque algorithmic systems engenders significant risks to constitutionalism and administrative justice. The paper concludes by advocating comprehensive legislative reform, institutional strengthening, and doctrinal recalibration to ensure that digital governance evolves in consonance with the enduring imperatives of legality, fairness, and the protection of fundamental rights.

KEYWORDS: *Administrative Law, Automated Decision-Making, Digital Governance, E-Government*

1 INTRODUCTION

The accelerated digitisation of governmental processes has precipitated a paradigmatic shift in the architecture and operation of public administration, thereby reconfiguring the normative boundaries of administrative law. In Nigeria, the gradual institutionalisation of e-government reflects a broader global trajectory toward the integration of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in governance, with the avowed objectives of enhancing administrative efficiency, transparency, and public service delivery. Notwithstanding these utilitarian gains, the infusion of automated systems into administrative decision-making processes raises profound jurisprudential concerns regarding the compatibility of such innovations with the foundational principles of administrative law. Administrative law, as a discipline, is principally concerned with the regulation of governmental power and the safeguarding of individual rights against arbitrary state action. Its doctrinal foundations are deeply rooted in the principles of the rule of law, natural justice, and procedural fairness. The classical exposition of the rule of law by A. V. Dicey

underscores the imperative that discretionary powers must be exercised within legally circumscribed limits and remain amenable to judicial control.[1]

However, the emergence of automated decision-making (ADM), characterised by the delegation of administrative discretion to algorithmic systems, problematizes this orthodoxy. Algorithmic governance, often encapsulated within opaque "black-box" frameworks, attenuates transparency and complicates the attribution of accountability, particularly where decisions are rendered without intelligible reasoning or meaningful human oversight.[2] Within the Nigerian legal milieu, the regulatory architecture governing digital governance remains both fragmented and embryonic. Existing statutory instruments, including the Nigeria Data Protection Act 2023, the Cybercrimes (Prohibition, Prevention, etc.) Act 2015, and the Freedom of Information Act 2011, provide only a piecemeal framework for addressing the legal ramifications of digital administration. More critically, these enactments do not directly engage the peculiar challenges posed by algorithmic decision-making in administrative contexts. The constitutional guarantee of fair hearing under Section 36 of the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999 (as amended) imposes procedural obligations that are difficult to reconcile with fully automated systems, particularly where affected individuals are neither notified of the decision-making logic nor afforded an opportunity to contest adverse outcomes.[3] Furthermore, the right to privacy enshrined under Section 37 of the same Constitution introduces additional complexities in light of the expansive data collection and processing practices inherent in digital governance frameworks.[4]

The central juridical problem that animates this study is the evident normative insufficiency of Nigerian administrative law in addressing the challenges posed by digital governance and automated decision-making. The progressive substitution of human discretion with algorithmic processes engenders a regulatory lacuna in which traditional safeguards, such as transparency, accountability, and procedural fairness, are significantly weakened. This development necessitates a critical interrogation of the extent to which existing legal doctrines can accommodate the realities of algorithmic administration. Consequently, this study is guided by the following research question: to what extent can automated administrative decisions satisfy the constitutional requirement of a fair hearing? How adequate is the extant Nigerian legal framework in regulating

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[1] A V Dicey, *Introduction to the Study of the Law of the Constitution* (10th edn, Macmillan 1959) 188–193.
[2] K Yeung, 'Algorithmic Regulation: A Critical Interrogation' (2018) 12 *Regulation&Governance* 505, 507–509.
[3] Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999 (as amended), s 36; *Adigun v Attorney-General of Oyo State* (1987) 1 NWLR (Pt 53) 678.
[4] Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999 (as amended), s 37; Olumide Babalola, *Data Protection and Privacy: Nigerian Law in Context* (Lawlords Publications, 2021) 45–47.

digital governance? And what doctrinal or legislative reforms are required to ensure that technological innovation does not subvert the rule of law?

Methodologically, this paper adopts a doctrinal and analytical approach, engaging in a systematic examination of constitutional provisions, statutory enactments, and judicial principles within Nigerian administrative law. It further incorporates a comparative dimension, drawing insights from jurisdictions such as the United Kingdom and the European Union, where regulatory responses to algorithmic governance have attained a higher level of sophistication. Through this comparative lens, the study seeks to illuminate the deficiencies within the Nigerian framework and articulate contextually appropriate reform strategies. This paper advances the thesis that Nigerian administrative law is normatively ill-equipped to contend with the complexities of digital governance. In the absence of deliberate doctrinal recalibration and legislative intervention, the increasing deployment of automated decision-making systems in public administration portends significant risks to constitutionalism, accountability, and the protection of fundamental rights. It is therefore imperative to reconceptualise administrative law in Nigeria in a manner that harmonises technological advancement with the enduring imperatives of legality, fairness, and transparency.

2 CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATIONS

A rigorous interrogation of digital governance within the ambit of administrative law necessarily begins with conceptual precision and theoretical grounding. This section elucidates the core concepts underpinning the study, namely digital governance, e-government, and automated decision-making, while situating them within established jurisprudential frameworks that define the limits and legitimacy of administrative power. Digital governance, though often used interchangeably with e-government, possesses a broader normative and functional scope. While e-government primarily denotes the utilisation of information and communication technologies (ICTs) to enhance the delivery of public services, digital governance encapsulates the systemic integration of digital technologies into the processes, structures, and decision-making mechanisms of government.[5] It extends beyond service delivery to include data-driven policymaking, digital regulation, and the reconfiguration of state-citizen interactions.

In Nigeria, e-government initiatives have evolved incrementally, reflecting policy efforts to modernise administrative processes and improve efficiency. However, the absence of a comprehensive legislative framework has resulted in a fragmented implementation landscape, characterised by institutional overlaps and regulatory inconsistencies.[6] This structural deficiency has significant implications for legality and accountability, particularly where administrative actions are executed through digital platforms without clear normative guidance. Automated

[5] R Heeks, *Implementing and Managing eGovernment: An International Text* (SAGE Publications 2006) 2–5.
[6] I M Sani, 'E-Government and Administrative Efficiency in Nigeria: Challenges and Prospects' [2019] 7 *African Journal of Public Administration* 112, 118–120.

decision-making (ADM) refers to the use of computational algorithms to make or assist in making decisions traditionally undertaken by human administrative authorities.[7] Such systems range from rule-based automation to more complex machine-learning models capable of predictive analytics and adaptive reasoning. Within administrative contexts, ADM is increasingly deployed in areas such as taxation, immigration control, social welfare administration, and regulatory enforcement.

Notwithstanding its operational advantages, ADM introduces profound legal complexities. Unlike traditional administrative decision-making, which is predicated on human discretion and reason-giving, algorithmic systems often operate within opaque frameworks that obscure the rationale underpinning specific outcomes. This opacity, commonly described as the "black-box problem", undermines the principle of transparency and complicates the ability of affected individuals to challenge administrative decisions.[8] Moreover, the delegation of discretionary authority to non-human systems raises fundamental questions regarding the legality and legitimacy of such decisions within the orthodox framework of administrative law. The legal interrogation of digital governance must be anchored in established theoretical constructs that define the nature and limits of administrative power. Three interrelated frameworks are particularly instructive in this regard: the rule of law, procedural fairness (natural justice), and accountability/transparency theory.

First, the rule of law, as classically articulated by A. V. Dicey, demands that all exercises of governmental power be grounded in law, constrained by legal norms, and subject to judicial oversight.[9] Within this paradigm, discretion, whether human or algorithmic, must not be exercised arbitrarily. However, the rise of ADM challenges the operationalisation of this principle, particularly where decision-making processes are neither accessible nor intelligible to those affected. Second, the doctrine of procedural fairness, rooted in the principles of natural justice, mandates that administrative decisions be reached through fair procedures. The twin pillars of this doctrine—*audi alteram partem* (the right to be heard) and *nemo judex in causa sua* (the rule against bias)—are integral to the legitimacy of administrative action. Nigerian jurisprudence has consistently affirmed the centrality of fair hearing, particularly under Section 36 of the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999 (as amended).[10] However, the integration of automated systems into decision-making processes raises significant concerns as to whether these principles can be meaningfully upheld in the absence of human adjudicatory engagement.

Third, accountability and transparency theory underscores the necessity of openness in administrative processes and the availability of mechanisms for holding public authorities answerable for their actions. Transparency, in particular, requires that decisions be accompanied

[7] C Coglianese and D Lehr, 'Regulating by Robot: Administrative Decision Making in the Machine-Learning Era' [2017] 105 *Georgetown Law Journal* 1147, 1151–1153.
[8] F Pasquale, *The Black Box Society: The Secret Algorithms That Control Money and Information* (Harvard University Press 2015) 3–7.
[9] A V Dicey, *Introduction to the Study of the Law of the Constitution* (10th edn, Macmillan 1959) 188–193.
[10] Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999 (as amended), s 36; *Legal Practitioners Disciplinary Committee v Fawehinmi* (1985) 2 NWLR (Pt 7) 300.

by intelligible reasons capable of scrutiny.[11] In the context of algorithmic governance, this requirement is frequently compromised by proprietary technologies and technical complexity, thereby creating accountability deficits and undermining public trust in administrative institutions. The conceptual and theoretical foundations examined in this section reveal a fundamental tension between the efficiencies promised by digital governance and the normative imperatives of administrative law. While digital technologies offer transformative potential for public administration, their unregulated deployment risks eroding the legal principles that underpin democratic governance. This tension necessitates a careful recalibration of existing doctrines to ensure that innovation does not come at the expense of legality, fairness, and accountability.

3 LEGAL AND INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK FOR DIGITAL GOVERNANCE IN NIGERIA

The efficacy and legitimacy of digital governance within any jurisdiction are contingent upon the robustness of its legal and institutional architecture. In Nigeria, while notable strides have been made toward the adoption of digital technologies in public administration, the corresponding legal framework remains largely fragmented and insufficiently attuned to the complexities of automated decision-making. This section critically examines the constitutional, statutory, and institutional structures that underpin digital governance in Nigeria, with a view to exposing their doctrinal limitations and regulatory gaps. The constitutional framework provides the normative bedrock upon which all administrative actions, digital or otherwise, must be anchored. Central to this framework is the guarantee of fair hearing under Section 36 of the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999 (as amended), which mandates that individuals affected by administrative decisions be allowed to present their case before an impartial tribunal.[12] This provision, deeply rooted in the principles of natural justice, imposes procedural obligations that are difficult to reconcile with fully automated decision-making systems, particularly those that operate without human intervention or provide no avenue for contestation.

Complementing this is the right to privacy under Section 37 of the same Constitution, which safeguards the confidentiality of personal data and communications.[13] In the context of digital governance, where large-scale data collection and processing are intrinsic, this provision assumes heightened significance. The deployment of algorithmic systems by administrative agencies often entails the aggregation and analysis of vast datasets, thereby raising concerns about surveillance, data misuse, and potential infringements of constitutionally protected rights. Nigeria's statutory landscape for digital governance is characterised by a multiplicity of enactments that address discrete aspects of information technology and administrative regulation, albeit without a unified

[11] M Bovens, 'Analysing and Assessing Accountability: A Conceptual Framework' [2007] 13 *European Law Journal* 447, 450–452.
[12] Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999 (as amended), s 36; *Adigun v Attorney-General of Oyo State* (1987) 1 NWLR (Pt 53) 678.
[13] Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999 (as amended), s 37.

legislative scheme. Foremost among these is the Nigeria Data Protection Act 2023, which establishes a comprehensive framework for the protection of personal data and the regulation of data processing activities.[14] The Act introduces key principles such as lawfulness, fairness, transparency, and accountability in data handling, thereby aligning Nigeria with global data protection standards. However, while the Act provides safeguards for data subjects, it does not directly regulate the use of automated decision-making in administrative contexts, leaving a critical gap in the legal regime.

Similarly, the Cybercrimes (Prohibition, Prevention, etc.) Act 2015 primarily addresses issues of cybersecurity, criminalising unauthorised access to computer systems and the misuse of digital infrastructure.[15] Although essential for safeguarding digital systems, the Act is largely silent on the administrative implications of algorithmic governance. The Freedom of Information Act 2011 further contributes to the regulatory framework by promoting transparency and access to public records.[16] Nevertheless, its effectiveness in the context of algorithmic decision-making is limited, particularly where proprietary technologies and technical complexities hinder meaningful disclosure. The cumulative effect of these statutes is the creation of a piecemeal regulatory environment that inadequately addresses the multifaceted challenges posed by digital governance. The absence of specific legislative provisions governing automated administrative decision-making underscores the need for a more coherent and comprehensive legal framework. The institutional landscape for digital governance in Nigeria comprises several regulatory bodies with overlapping mandates. Prominent among these is the Nigeria Data Protection Commission (NDPC), which is charged with enforcing data protection laws and ensuring compliance with established standards.[17] The Commission plays a pivotal role in safeguarding personal data within digital systems, yet its mandate does not extend to the broader regulation of algorithmic decision-making in administrative processes.

In addition, the National Information Technology Development Agency (NITDA) is responsible for formulating policies and guidelines for the development of information technology in Nigeria.[18] While NITDA has issued various frameworks aimed at promoting digital transformation, its regulatory authority remains largely advisory, thereby limiting its capacity to enforce compliance across administrative agencies. This multiplicity of institutions, coupled with the absence of clear delineation of responsibilities, engenders regulatory fragmentation and weakens the overall governance structure. The lack of a centralised authority specifically tasked with overseeing digital administrative processes further exacerbates the problem, resulting in gaps in accountability and enforcement. A critical appraisal of the legal and institutional framework reveals several structural

[14] Nigeria Data Protection Act 2023.
[15] Cybercrimes (Prohibition, Prevention, etc.) Act 2015.
[16] Freedom of Information Act 2011.
[17] Nigeria Data Protection Act 2023, s 4.
[18] National Information Technology Development Agency Act 2007.

deficiencies that undermine the effective regulation of digital governance in Nigeria. First, the absence of a comprehensive e-government legislation creates a normative vacuum in which administrative agencies operate without clear legal guidance on the deployment of automated systems.[19] This lacuna not only fosters inconsistency in implementation but also exposes citizens to potential abuses of power.

Second, the fragmented nature of the regulatory framework leads to jurisdictional overlaps and institutional inefficiencies. Multiple agencies with intersecting mandates often operate in silos, thereby impeding coordinated governance and effective oversight. Third, enforcement mechanisms remain weak, with regulatory bodies lacking the technical capacity and resources required to monitor complex algorithmic systems. Finally, there is a conspicuous absence of legal provisions addressing critical issues such as algorithmic transparency, explainability, and accountability. In the absence of such safeguards, the deployment of automated decision-making systems risks undermining fundamental principles of administrative law, including fairness, legality, and the right to effective remedy. The legal and institutional framework for digital governance in Nigeria is marked by fragmentation, regulatory gaps, and limited enforcement capacity. While existing constitutional and statutory provisions provide a foundational basis for regulating aspects of digital administration, they fall short of addressing the unique challenges posed by automated decision-making. This inadequacy necessitates a comprehensive reform of the legal architecture to ensure that digital governance operates within the bounds of administrative legality and constitutionalism.

4 ADMINISTRATIVE DISCRETION IN THE AGE OF AUTOMATION

Administrative discretion constitutes a central pillar of administrative law, enabling public authorities to make decisions within the bounds of statutory mandates and policy considerations. Traditionally, such discretion is exercised by human officials who are expected to act reasonably, fairly, and in accordance with established legal principles. However, the advent of automated decision-making (ADM) systems has fundamentally altered the modalities through which discretion is exercised, thereby raising critical doctrinal and normative questions regarding its legitimacy, control, and accountability within the framework of administrative law. At its core, administrative discretion refers to the latitude granted to public authorities in choosing between alternative courses of action where the law does not prescribe a single determinate outcome.[20] This discretion is not unfettered; rather, it is circumscribed by legal doctrines such as reasonableness, proportionality, and procedural fairness, all of which are enforceable through judicial review. The classical understanding of discretion presupposes human judgment, interpretive reasoning, and the capacity to balance competing interests in context-specific situations.[21] However, the increasing

[19] I M Sani, 'E-Government and Administrative Efficiency in Nigeria: Challenges and Prospects' (2019) 7 *African Journal of Public Administration* 112, 121.
[20] H W R Wade and C F Forsyth, *Administrative Law* (11th edn, Oxford University Press 2014) 267–269.
[21] P Craig, *Administrative Law* (8th edn, Sweet & Maxwell 2016) 526–528.

reliance on algorithmic systems in administrative processes signals a shift from human-centred decision-making to what may be described as "coded discretion."

Coded discretion refers to the embedding of decision-making criteria within algorithmic frameworks, whereby pre-programmed rules or machine-learning models determine administrative outcomes.[22] In such systems, the locus of discretion is effectively transferred from the administrative officer to the software developer or the algorithm itself. This transformation raises a fundamental question: can discretion, as conceptualised within administrative law, legitimately be exercised by non-human actors? The answer is far from straightforward. While algorithms may enhance consistency and efficiency by eliminating human biases and errors, they simultaneously introduce new forms of opacity and rigidity that are antithetical to the flexible and context-sensitive nature of traditional administrative discretion. One of the most significant implications of algorithmic discretion is the erosion of transparency. Unlike human decision-makers, who are generally required to provide reasons for their decisions, algorithmic systems often operate within opaque structures that render their internal logic inaccessible to affected individuals. This "black-box" phenomenon undermines the principle that administrative decisions must be intelligible and capable of justification.[23] Without access to the reasoning underlying a decision, individuals are effectively deprived of the ability to challenge its legality, thereby weakening the safeguards provided by judicial review.

Furthermore, the delegation of discretion to automated systems raises concerns regarding the abdication of administrative responsibility. Under orthodox administrative law principles, a public authority cannot unlawfully fetter its discretion or delegate decision-making powers beyond what is authorised by law.[24] The use of algorithmic systems, particularly those that operate autonomously, may constitute an impermissible delegation of discretion, especially where human oversight is minimal or non-existent. This is particularly problematic in the Nigerian context, where statutory frameworks rarely contemplate the use of automated systems in decision-making processes. Another critical issue relates to the rigidity of algorithmic systems. While human discretion allows for the consideration of exceptional circumstances and equitable factors, algorithmic decision-making is inherently rule-bound and may fail to accommodate nuances that fall outside predefined parameters. This rigidity can lead to unjust outcomes, particularly in cases where strict adherence to programmed criteria produces decisions that are legally valid but substantively unfair.[25] The inability of automated systems to exercise moral judgment or contextual

[22] C Coglianese and D Lehr, 'Regulating by Robot: Administrative Decision Making in the Machine-Learning Era' [2017] 105 *Georgetown Law Journal* 1147, 1158–1160.
[23] F Pasquale, *The Black Box Society: The Secret Algorithms That Control Money and Information* (Harvard University Press 2015) 3–10.
[24] H W R Wade and C F Forsyth (n 1) 312–315.
[25] K Yeung, 'Algorithmic Regulation: A Critical Interrogation' (2018) 12 *Regulation&Governance* 505, 512–514.

sensitivity thus poses a significant challenge to the principles of fairness and equity that underpin administrative law.

In addition, the question of accountability becomes increasingly complex in the context of algorithmic discretion. Where an automated system produces an erroneous or unlawful decision, it is often unclear who bears responsibility, the administrative agency, the software developer, or the algorithm itself. This diffusion of responsibility undermines the traditional accountability mechanisms of administrative law, which are predicated on the identification of a human decision-maker who can be held answerable for the exercise of discretion.[26] In the Nigerian legal framework, these challenges are further exacerbated by the absence of explicit legal provisions governing the use of automated systems in administrative decision-making. While general principles of administrative law, such as reasonableness and fairness, remain applicable, their practical enforcement in the context of algorithmic governance is fraught with difficulties. Courts may lack the technical expertise required to interrogate complex algorithmic systems, thereby limiting the effectiveness of judicial oversight. In sum, the transition from human discretion to algorithmic decision-making represents a profound transformation in the exercise of administrative power. While automated systems offer significant advantages in terms of efficiency and consistency, they also pose substantial risks to the core principles of administrative law, including transparency, accountability, and fairness. This necessitates a reconceptualisation of administrative discretion, one that accommodates technological innovation while preserving the legal safeguards essential to the rule of law.

5 CORE LEGAL CHALLENGES IN DIGITAL ADMINISTRATIVE GOVERNANCE

The integration of automated decision-making (ADM) into public administration, while technologically expedient, generates a constellation of legal challenges that strike at the very foundations of administrative law. These challenges are neither merely technical nor incidental; rather, they expose deep structural tensions between algorithmic governance and the normative commitments of legality, fairness, accountability, and transparency. This section critically interrogates the principal legal difficulties associated with digital administrative governance in Nigeria, with particular emphasis on their implications for constitutionalism and administrative justice. One of the most pressing concerns arising from automated administrative systems is their potential incompatibility with the constitutional guarantee of fair hearing. Section 36 of the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999 (as amended) enshrines the right of individuals to be heard before decisions affecting their rights and obligations are taken.[27] This

[26] M Bovens, 'Analysing and Assessing Accountability: A Conceptual Framework' (2007) 13 *European Law Journal* 447, 452–454.
[27] Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999 (as amended), s 36.

provision embodies the *audi alteram partem* principle, which requires that affected persons be given notice of adverse decisions and an opportunity to present their case.

However, in fully automated systems, decisions are often made instantaneously without prior notice, human interaction, or the possibility of meaningful representation. This procedural deficit undermines the essence of fair hearing, reducing it to a formalistic requirement devoid of substantive content. Nigerian courts have consistently emphasised that fair hearing is not a mere technicality but a fundamental condition for the validity of administrative action.[28] Consequently, the deployment of ADM systems that bypass participatory procedures raises serious questions regarding their constitutional validity. Transparency constitutes a cardinal principle of administrative law, requiring that decisions be accompanied by intelligible reasons capable of scrutiny. The opacity inherent in many algorithmic systems, however, presents a formidable obstacle to this requirement. As noted by Frank Pasquale, algorithmic processes often operate as "black boxes," the internal logic of which is inaccessible even to those who deploy them.[29]

In the Nigerian context, the Freedom of Information Act 2011 seeks to promote openness by granting citizens access to public records.[30] Yet, its practical application to algorithmic decision-making is limited, particularly where proprietary software and technical complexity impede meaningful disclosure. The absence of explainability not only undermines public trust but also frustrates the ability of individuals to challenge administrative decisions, thereby weakening the mechanisms of accountability and judicial review. The question of accountability assumes heightened complexity in the context of digital governance. Traditional administrative law is predicated on the identification of a decision-maker who can be held responsible for the exercise of power. In algorithmic systems, however, responsibility is diffused across multiple actors, including administrative agencies, software developers, and data processors.[31]

This diffusion creates an "accountability gap," whereby it becomes difficult to attribute liability for unlawful or erroneous decisions. Where an algorithm produces a discriminatory or irrational outcome, the absence of clear lines of responsibility undermines the effectiveness of legal remedies. This challenge is particularly acute in Nigeria, where existing legal frameworks do not adequately address the allocation of responsibility in automated decision-making processes. Digital governance is inherently data-driven, relying on the collection, storage, and analysis of vast quantities of personal information. This raises significant concerns regarding the protection of privacy rights, particularly in light of Section 37 of the Constitution of the Federal Republic of

[28] *Adigun v Attorney-General of Oyo State* (1987) 1 NWLR (Pt 53) 678; *Legal Practitioners Disciplinary Committee v Fawehinmi* (1985) 2 NWLR (Pt 7) 300.
[29] F Pasquale, *The Black Box Society: TheSecret Algorithms That Control Money and Information* (Harvard University Press 2015) 3–10.
[30] Freedom of Information Act 2011.
[31] M Bovens, 'Analysing and Assessing Accountability: A Conceptual Framework' (2007) 13 *European Law Journal* 447, 452–454.

Nigeria 1999 (as amended), which guarantees the privacy of citizens' communications and personal data.[32] The enactment of the Nigeria Data Protection Act 2023 represents a significant step toward addressing these concerns by establishing principles of lawful processing, data minimisation, and accountability.[33] However, the Act does not sufficiently regulate the specific risks associated with automated decision-making, such as profiling, predictive analytics, and mass surveillance. The potential for misuse of personal data within algorithmic systems thus remains a critical legal challenge, necessitating more robust safeguards and enforcement mechanisms.

Another significant challenge posed by ADM systems is the risk of algorithmic bias and discrimination. Algorithms are not inherently neutral; rather, they reflect the data on which they are trained and the assumptions embedded in their design.[34] Where such data is incomplete, skewed, or reflective of existing social inequalities, the resulting decisions may perpetuate or even exacerbate discriminatory outcomes. From a legal perspective, this raises serious concerns regarding the principle of equality before the law and the prohibition of discriminatory administrative action. In Nigeria, where socio-economic disparities are already pronounced, the deployment of biased algorithmic systems could entrench systemic inequalities and undermine the legitimacy of public administration. The absence of legal mechanisms to detect, prevent, and remedy algorithmic bias further compounds this problem. In aggregate, the challenges examined in this section underscore the profound tension between technological innovation and the normative framework of administrative law. The deployment of automated decision-making systems, while offering significant administrative benefits, simultaneously threatens to erode fundamental legal principles, including fair hearing, transparency, accountability, and equality. Addressing these challenges requires not only doctrinal innovation but also comprehensive legislative and institutional reform to ensure that digital governance operates within the bounds of constitutionalism and the rule of law.

6. COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVES ON ALGORITHMIC GOVERNANCE AND ADMINISTRATIVE LAW

Understanding the legal challenges posed by automated decision-making (ADM) in Nigeria requires situating the discussion within a comparative framework. Developed jurisdictions, particularly in Europe and the United Kingdom, have increasingly addressed the intersection of digital governance and administrative law through legislative, regulatory, and judicial interventions. This section examines these comparative experiences, highlighting lessons and best practices that could inform the evolution of Nigerian administrative law. The European Union (EU) has been at the forefront of regulating algorithmic governance, primarily through data protection and digital rights legislation. The General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) 2016/679

[32] Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999 (as amended), s 37.
[33] Nigeria Data Protection Act 2023.
[34] K Yeung, 'Algorithmic Regulation: A Critical Interrogation' (2018) 12 *Regulation&Governance* 505, 510–514.

establishes comprehensive rules governing automated decision-making, particularly decisions that produce legal or similarly significant effects on individuals.[35] The GDPR requires that individuals have the right not to be subjected to decisions based solely on automated processing unless certain safeguards are met, including meaningful human intervention, the right to obtain explanations, and the ability to contest the decision.[36] This framework reflects a principled balance between the benefits of digital governance and the protection of individual rights. By mandating transparency, accountability, and procedural safeguards, the GDPR ensures that algorithmic systems operate within the rule-of-law framework and do not undermine fundamental rights. The EU model underscores the importance of embedding legal and ethical constraints into digital governance, offering a structured approach that could inform regulatory reform in Nigeria.

The United Kingdom has developed both statutory and policy measures to govern algorithmic administration. The Data Protection Act 2018, which incorporates the GDPR into domestic law, provides a legal basis for controlling automated decision-making, including the right to explanation and human oversight.[37] In addition, the UK Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) has issued guidance specifically on ADM, focusing on fairness, transparency, accountability, and the mitigation of bias.[38] Judicial interventions in the UK have further clarified the limits of algorithmic discretion. In *R (on the application of Bridges) v South Wales Police* [2020] EWCA Civ 1058, the Court of Appeal emphasised that automated surveillance systems must comply with principles of proportionality and legality, particularly when personal data and civil liberties are implicated.[39] This case demonstrates how courts can adapt traditional administrative law doctrines to novel technological contexts, ensuring that algorithmic governance remains subject to meaningful oversight. Several lessons emerge from the comparative analysis of EU and UK approaches:

1. **Integration of Procedural Safeguards:** Legal frameworks must explicitly mandate that automated administrative decisions incorporate mechanisms for human intervention, explanation, and contestation.[40]
2. **Transparency and Explainability:** Both the EU and UK frameworks emphasise the necessity of making algorithmic logic intelligible to affected individuals, thereby reinforcing accountability and trust.
3. **Judicial Engagement:** Courts play a crucial role in interpreting and enforcing legal protections in the context of ADM. Nigerian courts could similarly adapt existing doctrines

[35] Regulation (EU) 2016/679 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 27 April 2016 on the protection of natural persons with regard to the processing of personal data and on the free movement of such data (General Data Protection Regulation) [2016] OJ L119/1, arts 22–23.
[36] S Wachter, B Mittelstadt and L Floridi, 'Why a Right to Explanation of Automated Decision-Making Does Not Exist in the General Data Protection Regulation' [2017] 7 *International Data Privacy Law* 76, 80–82.
[37] Data Protection Act 2018 (UK), s 13–14.
[38] Information Commissioner's Office, *Guidance on Automated Decision-Making and Profiling* (ICO 2021) https://ico.org.uk/media/for-organisations/guide-to-data-protection-2/guide-to-the-general-data-protection-regulation-gdpr/automated-decision-making-and-profiling-2.pdf accessed 24 March 2026.
[39] *R (on the application of Bridges) v South Wales Police* [2020] EWCA Civ 1058, [2020] 1 WLR 4007, 50–55.
[40] C Coglianese and D Lehr, *Regulating by Robot: Administrative Decision Making in the Machine-Learning Era* (2017) 105 *Georgetown Law Journal* 1147, 1165–1167.

of fairness, reasonableness, and proportionality to oversee algorithmic governance effectively.

4. **Proactive Institutional Regulation:** Regulatory bodies must be empowered with the authority, technical capacity, and mandate to monitor algorithmic systems, investigate complaints, and enforce compliance.[41]

For Nigeria, these lessons suggest that comprehensive legislative reform, supported by institutional capacity-building, is essential to reconcile the deployment of ADM with constitutional and administrative law principles. Such reform would entail codifying the requirements for transparency, accountability, human oversight, and protection of individual rights within a single, coherent digital governance framework.

While the EU and UK models offer valuable guidance, their direct application to Nigeria is not without challenges. First, the technological and institutional capacity required for effective oversight of ADM may be limited in the Nigerian context. Second, socio-economic and infrastructural disparities may hinder the uniform implementation of regulatory standards across public agencies. Third, legal transplant must consider the peculiarities of Nigerian constitutional law, administrative culture, and socio-political realities. Nevertheless, a tailored adaptation of best practices, particularly regarding procedural safeguards, transparency, and accountability, can significantly enhance the legitimacy and effectiveness of digital governance in Nigeria.

7 RECOMMENDATIONS

The preceding analysis has demonstrated that while digital governance and automated decision-making (ADM) offer significant efficiency gains for public administration, they simultaneously present substantial legal and normative challenges for Nigerian administrative law. To reconcile technological innovation with constitutionalism, fairness, and accountability, it is imperative to adopt a multi-faceted approach encompassing legislative reform, institutional strengthening, and doctrinal recalibration. This section outlines targeted recommendations and actionable strategies for ensuring that ADM operates within a legally and ethically robust framework. A primary step in addressing the regulatory vacuum is the enactment of a comprehensive Digital Governance and Automated Decision-Making Act. Such legislation should:

1. **Codify Procedural Safeguards:** Explicitly require that automated administrative decisions provide for meaningful human intervention, prior notice, and the right to contest decisions.[42] This aligns with Section 36 of the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999 (as amended) and ensures compliance with principles of natural justice.

[41] K Yeung, *Algorithmic Regulation: A Critical Interrogation* (2018) 12 *Regulation&Governance* 505, 518–520.
[42] C Coglianese and D Lehr, 'Regulating by Robot: Administrative Decision Making in the Machine-Learning Era' (2017) 105 *Georgetown Law Journal* 1147, 1165–1167.

2. **Mandate Transparency and Explainability:** Require public agencies deploying ADM to provide accessible explanations of decision-making logic and the factors considered.[43] This measure mitigates the "black-box" problem and enables affected persons to understand and challenge decisions effectively.
3. **Address Algorithmic Bias and Fairness:** Include provisions for the identification, mitigation, and auditing of biases in algorithmic systems.[44] This is essential to uphold equality before the law and prevent discriminatory administrative practices.
4. **Protect Data Privacy:** Integrate principles from the Nigeria Data Protection Act 2023 while specifically regulating the use of personal data in algorithmic systems.[45] This ensures that ADM operations do not compromise constitutional privacy rights under Section 37 of the Constitution.
5. **Allocate Accountability:** Clarify lines of responsibility for ADM outcomes, ensuring that agencies, software developers, and relevant officers remain legally accountable for administrative decisions.[46]

Legal reforms must be complemented by the empowerment of institutional actors capable of monitoring and enforcing compliance:

1. **Enhanced Mandates for Regulatory Bodies:** Agencies such as the Nigeria Data Protection Commission (NDPC) and the National Information Technology Development Agency (NITDA) should be formally empowered to oversee ADM systems in administrative agencies.[47]
2. **Technical Capacity Building:** Regulatory authorities and judicial bodies should be equipped with technical expertise in algorithmic systems to effectively audit, scrutinise, and adjudicate automated administrative decisions.[48]
3. **Creation of a Central Oversight Unit:** Establish a specialised unit within the Presidency or relevant ministry responsible for auditing algorithmic governance practices across federal agencies. This ensures uniform standards, reduces institutional fragmentation, and strengthens accountability mechanisms.

[43] C Coglianese and D Lehr, 'Regulating by Robot: Administrative Decision Making in the Machine-Learning Era' (2017) 105 *Georgetown Law Journal* 1147, 1165–1167.
[44] F Pasquale, *The Black Box Society: The Secret Algorithms That Control Money and Information* (Harvard University Press 2015) 3–10.
[45] K Yeung, 'Algorithmic Regulation: A Critical Interrogation' (2018) 12 *Regulation&Governance* 505, 512–514.
[46] Nigeria Data Protection Act 2023, s 5–8; Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999 (as amended), s 37.
[47] M Bovens, 'Analysing and Assessing Accountability: A Conceptual Framework' (2007) 13 *European Law Journal* 447, 452–454.
[48] National Information Technology Development Agency Act 2007; Nigeria Data Protection Act 2023, s 4.

The Nigerian judiciary and administrative authorities must recalibrate existing doctrines to accommodate the realities of ADM:

1. **Reconceptualising Administrative Discretion:** Courts should recognise "algorithmic discretion" as a form of delegated authority while enforcing limits consistent with reasonableness, proportionality, and fairness.[49]
2. **Judicial Guidelines for ADM Review:** Courts should develop procedural frameworks for evaluating ADM decisions, including the admissibility of technical audits, expert testimony, and algorithmic impact assessments. This enhances judicial oversight and reinforces the rule of law.
3. **Integration of Comparative Principles:** Nigerian courts may draw upon best practices from the EU and UK, particularly regarding transparency, human oversight, and contestability of algorithmic decisions.[50]

Legal and institutional reforms will be effective only if accompanied by initiatives to enhance public understanding and participation:

1. **Citizen Education:** Implement nationwide awareness campaigns to inform citizens about their rights in digital governance, including how to access explanations and challenge automated decisions.[51]
2. **Stakeholder Consultations:** Engage civil society, academia, and industry stakeholders in the design and implementation of ADM frameworks, ensuring that policy reforms reflect local socio-economic and cultural realities.

[49] C Coglianese and D Lehr (n 1) 1170–1172.