

Beyond Laws and Reforms: Cultural-Institutional Foundations of Corruption in Malaysia's Civil Service

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Abstract

This study examines how cultural norms sustain corruption within Malaysia's civil service through the lens of New Institutional Theory (NIT). Despite successive legal reforms and anti-corruption initiatives; including the National Integrity Plan (2004), the National Anti-Corruption Plan (2019-2023) and the National Anti-Corruption Strategy (2024-2028), as well as multiple changes of government since 2018, Malaysia's Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) has shown limited improvement since 2020, indicating that corruption persists beyond administrative and procedural shortcomings. This study argues that corruption in Malaysia's civil service is deeply embedded in informal institutions and shared social logics that shape how integrity, loyalty and legitimacy are interpreted. Using a qualitative documentary research design, the study analyses academic literature, official policy documents, media reports and publicly available elite discourse related to governance and anti-corruption. Directed content analysis, guided by the regulative, normative and cognitive dimensions of NIT identifies three interrelated cultural dynamics that sustain corruption: collective sentiment prioritising harmony over accountability, hierarchical obedience discouraging ethical dissent, and leadership narratives that symbolically legitimise misconduct. The findings demonstrate that informal institutions frequently override formal rules, limiting the effectiveness of regulatory reforms. The study concludes that sustainable anti-corruption reform requires cultural-institutional alignment in which moral beliefs and social expectations reinforce, rather than undermine, formal governance mechanisms.

Keywords: corruption, cultural norms, informal institutions, Malaysia, New Institutional Theory, civil service

INTRODUCTION

Received: 1 February 2026

Accepted: 1 March 2026

Published: 30 April 2026

Corruption remains a persistent challenge to governance and administrative integrity in Malaysia. Despite decades of institutional reforms, corruption within the civil service continues to erode public trust and weaken state capacity. Malaysia's position in the Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) ranked 57th out of 180 countries in 2023, reflects limited progress despite multiple reform cycles since 2018. The CPI score has remained between 47 and 50 since 2020, signalling institutional stagnation rather than substantive improvement. This persistence suggests that formal policy reforms have yet to address deeper sociocultural forces shaping bureaucratic behaviour.

Major initiatives such as the National Integrity Plan (2004), National Anti-Corruption Plan (2019-2023) and the National Anti-Corruption Strategy (2024-2028),

alongside legal instruments including the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission (MACC) Act 2009 and the Whistleblower Protection Act 2010 demonstrate sustained state commitment to integrity reform. While these measures have expanded enforcement capacity and investigative activity, corruption remains widely characterised as systemic and deeply entrenched within everyday governance practices. This paradox highlights the limitations of legalistic approaches that overlook how misconduct is socially rationalised and culturally legitimised.

This paper argues that cultural norms such as *balas budi* (reciprocity), respect for hierarchy and communal loyalty, function as informal institutions that shape bureaucratic conduct as powerfully as formal laws. These norms influence how civil servants interpret integrity, loyalty and legitimacy in practice. Drawing on New Institutional Theory (NIT), the study contends that corruption in Malaysia's civil service is sustained by misalignment between regulative institutions (laws and enforcement), normative expectations (values and social obligations) and cognitive frames (shared beliefs and cultural assumptions). While formal institutions prioritise procedural compliance, informal norms frequently preserve social harmony and patron-client relationships.

Accordingly, this study examines how culturally embedded informal institutions continue to sustain corruption despite repeated reform efforts. By situating corruption within Malaysia's sociocultural and institutional context, the paper offers a culturally grounded explanation of institutional failure and contributes to broader debates on governance reform in Southeast Asia.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Corruption and the Sociocultural Dimension

The study of corruption has evolved from a predominantly legal concern into a multidimensional phenomenon encompassing ethical, economic and sociocultural dimensions. Conventionally defined as the abuse of entrusted power for private gain (Transparency International, 2023), early anti-corruption approaches emphasised legal enforcement and regulatory control. However, empirical evidence across developing contexts demonstrates that legal reform alone rarely produces sustained behavioural change (Siddiquee & Zafarullah, 2020). This limitation has redirected scholarly attention toward informal institutions, which are unwritten rules, social obligations and shared beliefs that structure everyday bureaucratic conduct.

In Malaysia, the contradiction between extensive anti-corruption frameworks and persistent administrative misconduct is well documented (Beh, 2011; Gomez, 2005). Studies highlight how patronage networks, deference to authority and communal obligations undermine formal accountability mechanisms (Jones, 2022; Quah, 2022). Comparative research similarly shows that corruption flourishes where societal norms conflict with institutional integrity (Ham & Heo, 2020; Hira, 2016). These observations align with comparative findings that corruption flourishes where societal expectations conflict with institutional integrity (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2017; Persson et al., 2013). These findings underscore the importance of examining the informal institutional environment that operates alongside formal bureaucratic structures.

Asian and Malaysian Perspectives

In the Asian context, sociological interpretations of corruption were pioneered by Syed Hussein Alatas (1995; 1968), who conceptualised corruption as a historically embedded and culturally mediated phenomenon rather than a purely moral or administrative failure. He argued that colonial legacies and post-colonial patronage systems created enduring exchange relations that normalised power abuse. In collectivist societies, loyalty to kinship networks and authority figures frequently supersedes adherence to impersonal rules.

Malaysian scholars extended this argument, noting that bureaucratic ethics are shaped by cultural norms such as *balas budi* (reciprocity) and *menjaga air muka* (face-saving), which discourage whistleblowing and prioritise social harmony over accountability (Ho, 2002; Lim, 2002). Hofstede's (2001) cultural-dimension framework further contextualises this dynamic, as Malaysia exhibits high power distance and collectivism. While these orientations promote social stability, they may also weaken ethical autonomy and constrain dissent within bureaucratic settings. Quah's (2022) comparative analysis similarly identifies "cultural obedience" as a structural constraint on effective anti-corruption enforcement in Southeast Asian bureaucracies.

Informal Institutions and Cultural Normalisation

Informal institutions consist of socially constructed and unwritten expectations that regulate interaction and behaviour (North, 1990; Ostrom, 1990). These institutions

may complement, compete with or override formal rules (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991). In Malaysia, informal institutions manifest through patron-client relations, gift-giving practices and symbolic expressions of loyalty that blur the boundary between ethical conduct and social obligation. When such practices are framed as moral duties, corruption becomes culturally normalised rather than perceived as deviant behaviour (Syed Hussein Alatas, 1995).

Scholars describe this process as cognitive normalisation, whereby repeated exposure integrates corruption into accepted social practice (Quah, 2022; Gomez & Jomo, 1999). Empirical studies support this interpretation. Lim et al. (2022) demonstrate how familial socialisation influences tolerance toward bribery, while Irma et al. (2022) find persistent acceptance of favour-exchange even among educated populations. These findings suggest that corruption is sustained less by weak enforcement than by collective expectations embedded in social life.

Theoretical Lens: New Institutional Theory (NIT)

To analyse the interaction between formal rules and cultural practices, this study applies New Institutional Theory (NIT). Building on Scott (2008) and North (1990), New Institutional Theory conceptualises institutions through three interdependent pillars: the regulative (formal rules and sanctions), the normative (values and social obligations) and the cognitive (shared beliefs and cultural logics). Institutional behaviour emerges from the interaction among these dimensions rather than from formal design alone.

In collectivist contexts, normative and cognitive pressures often outweigh regulative constraints, leading individuals to conform to culturally defined notions of legitimacy rather than written law. Within Malaysia's civil service, this tension is evident when loyalty to superiors overrides procedural compliance. Practices such as *duit kopi* (facilitation payments) or preferential treatment in procurement are frequently reframed as acts of kindness or respect rather than corruption.

Consequently, reforms that neglect sociocultural dynamics risk producing symbolic compliance, where institutional structures change but practices remain largely intact. NIT therefore provides a robust framework for explaining the limited behavioural impact of formal anti-corruption reforms.

Analytical Gap and Contribution

Although extensive literature examines Malaysia's legal and institutional reforms, relatively few studies systematically analyse how cultural norms interact with institutional rules to sustain corruption. Existing works often emphasises policy failure or political interference (Jones, 2022; Siddiquee, 2011) while overlooking the micro-cultural mechanisms embedded within bureaucratic life. This study addresses that gap by integrating sociological insights with NIT to conceptualise corruption as an institutionalised cultural practice rather than a purely administrative deficiency.

By drawing on comparative insights from Indonesia's community-based integrity initiatives (Aspinal & Mada, 2016) and South Korea's leadership-centred accountability reforms (Han & Shim, 2021; Hahm & Heo, 2020), the study further situates Malaysia's experience within a broader regional context. Overall, this literature establishes the foundation for a culturally grounded analytical model that explains why formal reforms often fail to translate into substantive behavioural change.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative library-based research design anchored in NIT to examine how cultural norms sustain corruption within Malaysia's civil service. The qualitative approach is appropriate for exploring meanings, beliefs and social logics through which informal institutions influence administrative behaviour. Rather than generating primary interview data or conducting fieldwork, the study relies on systematic analysis of existing texts and publicly available materials. This design enables in-depth examination of institutional narratives and elite discourse surrounding corruption while remaining sensitive to historically embedded and culturally nuanced governance practices. As all data sources were publicly accessible, formal ethics approval was not required.

Data were collected from multiple secondary and open sources between 2022 and 2024. These sources include academic literature on corruption, governance and institutional theory; official government documents such as the National Integrity Plan (2004), the National Anti-Corruption Plan (2019-2023) and annual reports issued by the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission (MACC); as well as verified news archives and media transcripts that capture public and elite discourse on corruption in Malaysia. In addition, the study analysed publicly available statements, interviews and recorded

commentaries by prominent Malaysian figures associated with integrity and anti-corruption efforts, including former senior officials of the MACC, the Inspector-General of Police, and senior representatives of Transparency International Malaysia. For analytical consistency, private documentary sources are anonymised and referenced as I-1 to I-5. For prominent figures whose statements were made in publicly available media and official capacities; their names appear in the analysis. All materials originally published in Malay were translated into English by the researcher to ensure consistency in analysis.

The data were analysed using directed content analysis, following the approach outlined by Creswell and Poth (2018). Analytical coding was conducted deductively, guided by the three institutional pillars of NIT: the regulative, normative and cognitive dimensions. The analysis began with identification of recurring phrases, narratives and statements that reflected culturally embedded interpretations of corruption, including themes related to loyalty to authority, *balas budi* (reciprocity) and shame avoidance. These codes were subsequently organised into broader analytical categories aligned with the NIT framework. Through an iterative process of comparison and refinement, three dominant themes emerged that structure the study's findings: collective sentiment, hierarchical obedience and leadership narratives. This analytical process enabled systematic tracing of how informal cultural logics interact with formal bureaucratic rules in sustaining corrupt practices.

To enhance analytical rigour, several strategies were employed. First, data triangulation was applied by cross-referencing evidence across academic sources, official documents and media materials to minimise interpretive bias. Second, transparency was ensured by contextualising quotations and narratives within their original documentary sources. Third, critical reflexivity was maintained throughout the analytical process, with attention to the researcher's interpretive positioning during coding and synthesis. The credibility of the findings was further reinforced through comparison with established empirical studies on corruption and institutional culture in Malaysia and the wider Southeast Asian context. Overall, this methodological approach provides a robust foundation for analysing corruption as an institutionalised and culturally mediated practice within Malaysia's civil service.

THE FINDINGS

The analysis reveals three dominant cultural dynamics that sustain corruption within Malaysia's civil service: (1) collective sentiment and emotional attachment to tradition, (2) hierarchical obedience and institutionalised complicity, and (3) leadership narratives that normalise misconduct through charisma and loyalty. These themes illustrate how normative and cognitive pressures within informal institutions often override the regulative dimensions of law and enforcement.

NIT Pillar	Formal Institution	Competing Informal Norm	Outcome: Cultural Override
Regulative	MACC Act; sanctions; anti-corruption laws	Duit kopi reframed as facilitation; selective enforcement normalised	Symbolic compliance; impunity at senior levels
Normative	Whistleblower protections; transparency obligations	<i>Balas budi</i> (reciprocity); <i>rasa kasihan</i> (pity); <i>menjaga air muka</i> (face-saving)	Harmony prioritised; wrongdoing not reported; collective silence
Cognitive	Integrity training; ethics education; institutional norms of accountability	Hierarchical obedience; charisma-based legitimacy; loyalty as moral duty	Reform perceived as disloyal; personal integrity substitutes for institutional safeguards

Figure 1: New Institutional Theory Pillars and the Cultural Override of Formal Anti-Corruption Rules in Malaysia's Civil Service

Source: Authors' own conceptualisation based on Scott (2008) and empirical findings.

Collective Sentiment and the Moral Ambiguity of Harmony

One of the most salient findings concerns the tension between preserving communal harmony and enforcing accountability within the Malaysian civil service. Analysis of documentary sources indicates that reluctance to expose wrongdoing is frequently shaped by emotional considerations, particularly *rasa kasihan* (pity) and the fear of embarrassing colleagues or superiors. As reflected in a public statement by a senior official, "*We sympathise, feel pity, and fear. In a way, we don't want to air our dirty laundry. That's why the problem persists until today.*" (I-2, SelangorKini, 2024)

This expression reflects a deeply cultural logic in which public disclosure of misconduct is interpreted as betrayal rather than civic responsibility. Although such sentiment is often justified as a means of preserving unity, it simultaneously lowers the moral threshold for tolerating unethical behaviour. From the NIT perspective, this dynamic illustrates the dominance of normative pressures, whereby social obligations and emotional bonds take precedence over formal duties.

Collective sentiment is further reinforced through historical and political narratives that personalise authority and moral legitimacy. National memory frequently valorises founding leaders and senior figures, while institutional principles and procedural accountability receive less emphasis. When moral integrity becomes associated with personal charisma rather than impersonal rules, accountability mechanisms are weakened. This process contributes to cognitive conditioning, whereby criticism of authority is perceived as disloyal or socially disruptive rather than as a legitimate component of governance.

This pattern aligns with Hofstede's (2001) characterisation of collectivist cultures, in which group harmony is prioritised over individual rectitude. Within bureaucratic settings, such orientation manifests as organisational risk aversion, where civil servants avoid challenging misconduct to prevent conflict or social sanction. As a result, anti-corruption enforcement is often reduced to symbolic compliance, reinforcing the persistence of informal norms that undermine substantive accountability.

Hierarchical Obedience and Institutionalised Complicity

A second prominent finding relates to power distance and the institutionalisation of obedience within hierarchical bureaucratic structures. Documentary sources reveal that excessive reverence for authority fosters an environment in which subordinates internalise compliance, even when such compliance conflicts with ethical standards. A public statement by a senior official illustrates this dynamic: *"If the boss takes bribes, then the subordinates will do the same. Everyone conspires to take as much as they can before they die."* (I-2, Warta Oriental, 2024).

This narrative suggests that corruption is not merely tolerated but reproduced through hierarchical socialisation. Within the framework of New Institutional Theory, the regulative pillar such as laws, rules and sanctions, remains formally intact, yet its

influence is weakened by normative expectations of loyalty and obedience. When senior leadership engages in unethical conduct, such behaviour establishes a precedent that legitimises misconduct throughout the organisational hierarchy.

Official enforcement data further reinforce this pattern. Statistics published by the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission (MACC) indicate that civil servants consistently constitute a significant proportion of corruption arrests, with cases increasing by approximately 23% from 2022 and 2023 (MACC Website, 2024). Despite this rise, enforcement is widely perceived as selective, as high-ranking officials are rarely prosecuted. Documentary accounts and elite discourse highlight that such selective accountability undermines morale and normalises impunity within public organisations. As reflected in a widely cited public remark *“action is taken against those at the bottom, but if those at the top are left alone, those below will act with impunity.”* (I-2, SelangorKini, 2024).

This imbalance reflects a structural contradiction within Malaysia’s anti-corruption framework, where the formal independence of institutions such as the MACC coexists with cognitive acceptance of hierarchical and political dominance. From an NIT perspective, this represents a misalignment between regulative constraints and cognitive beliefs that privilege authority over rule adherence. The persistence of top-down control not only limits organisational autonomy but also weakens ethical reflexivity among civil servants.

In addition, documentary evidence indicates that religious and cultural narratives are occasionally mobilised to rationalise unethical conduct. References that frame illicit political contributions as sedekah (charitable giving) blur moral boundaries and instrumentalise religious language to confer legitimacy on misconduct. A public rebuttal by a senior integrity advocate captures this concern: *“There is no need for different interpretations. What is haram remains haram.”* (I-2, Armada of Malaysia, 2024).

Such statements reflect growing frustration among reform-oriented actors who recognise how moral vocabulary can be deployed to shield elites from scrutiny. When hierarchical authority intersects with moral and religious symbolism, the space for ethical dissent within the bureaucracy becomes further constrained.

Leadership Narratives and the Symbolism of Integrity

The third theme identifies leadership as both a central reference point for institutional integrity and a key source of vulnerability within governance systems. Documentary analysis indicates a consistent emphasis on leadership behaviour as the primary driver of ethical standards within the public sector. A public statement by a former senior anti-corruption official illustrates this perception: *“Leadership is a critical factor in strengthening governance, enhancing integrity, and combating corruption. The actions of leaders have a very significant impact on society.”* (I-1, Muhammad Asri, 2022).

This finding aligns with NIT’s proposition that legitimacy is socially constructed and cognitively reinforced. Leaders function as symbolic and cognitive reference points whose actions signal what forms of behaviour are acceptable within an institution. When leaders act decisively against misconduct, they reinforce the regulative framework; when they rationalise or overlook unethical practices, they weaken institutional constraints and reshape normative expectations.

Malaysia’s political administrative culture has long been characterised by paternalistic leadership norms, which personalise authority and blur the boundary between moral authority and institutional accountability. In such contexts, charisma and reputation may substitute for procedural integrity, rendering reforms highly dependent on individual leaders rather than institutionalised safeguards. As a result, integrity initiatives often struggle to endure leadership transitions. Documentary accounts further suggest that meaningful ethical leadership requires moral courage, particularly the willingness to uphold integrity despite political or social costs. As cautioned in a public remark by a former senior official, *“Don’t wait until it appears as though we are not being proactive.”* (I-1, Muhammad Asri, 2022)

Comparative evidence from other Asian contexts reinforce this interpretation and invites reflection on whether Malaysia’s cultural-institutional paradox is unique or reflects a broader pattern among collectivist bureaucracies in the region. In Indonesia, the early effectiveness of the Komisi Pemberantasan Korupsi (KPK) was widely attributed to leadership independence and strong public mobilisation, while subsequent decline followed increasing political interference (Aspinall & Mada, 2016). Crucially, however, Indonesia’s experience also illustrates how community-based integrity initiatives, such

as participatory social audits at the sub-national level, can partially offset elite-level corruption by mobilising normative pressures from below. This suggests that where top-down reform stalls, civic mobilisation may provide an alternative source of institutional legitimacy. In South Korea, the impeachment of President Park Geun-hye demonstrated how societal norms of shame and equality before the law strengthened institutional credibility and public trust (Hahm & Heo, 2020). South Korea's case is particularly instructive because reform gains were achieved not solely through legislation but through the alignment of public moral expectations with formal accountability mechanisms which is precisely the kind of cultural-institutional synchronisation that NIT identifies as essential. Taken together, these cases suggest that Malaysia's challenge is not entirely unique; collectivist bureaucracies across Southeast and East Asia share structural tensions between hierarchical loyalty and institutional accountability. What distinguishes national outcomes is the degree to which normative and cognitive institutions are consciously reformed alongside regulative frameworks. The Malaysian context, shaped by its particular blend of ethnic communalism, paternalistic governance and patron-client reciprocity, may require culturally tailored strategies that go beyond the technocratic or leadership-centred approaches adopted in comparable regional contexts. These cases suggest that sustainable anti-corruption reform depends on aligning leadership conduct with broader social expectations that prioritise integrity over personal loyalty.

In the Malaysian context, however, loyalty remains a double-edged institutional value. While it contributes to organisational stability, it also discourages whistleblowing and critical feedback. Documentary discourse indicates that although ethics education and integrity training programmes exist, cognitive change occurs gradually. As noted by a senior civil society figure, moral reorientation “*takes a long time to correct minds that react emotionally rather than reason ethically.*” (I-5, Astro AWANI, 2022). This observation underscores the importance of cognitive reform within NIT, emphasising the need to reshape collective understandings of integrity beyond symbolic leadership narratives.

Interlinking the Themes: A Cultural-Institutional Paradox

Synthesising these themes reveals a cultural-institutional paradox within Malaysia's anti-corruption framework. While successive reforms have strengthened the regulative pillar through new laws, agencies and enforcement mechanisms, informal institutions continue to dominate the normative and cognitive dimensions of bureaucratic

life. This produces a dual institutional condition in which legality is formally emphasised, but legitimacy remains culturally contested. Such a configuration helps to explain the limited impact of reform efforts, as reflected in Malaysia's relatively stagnant Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) scores, which have remained within a narrow range since 2020 despite repeated policy initiatives and political turnover.

At the institutional level, collective sentiment sustains empathy and social harmony at the expense of accountability, while hierarchical obedience normalises fear, dependency and compliance. Leadership narratives in turn, function as symbolic cues that can either reinforce ethical reform or legitimise misconduct through personalised authority. From the perspective of New Institutional Theory, corruption persists not because of an absence of formal regulation, but because institutional change has remained largely technical rather than cultural. Regulatory adjustments are introduced, yet the moral grammar that governs bureaucratic behaviour remains largely unaltered.

Effective reform therefore requires alignment across all three institutional pillars: regulative rules must be reinforced by normative expectations that value accountability, and by cognitive frameworks that normalise ethical dissent rather than loyalty-based silence. Without such synchronisation, formal reforms risk producing compliance in appearance while leaving underlying practices intact.

Implications for Reform

The findings suggest that sustainable anti-corruption reform in Malaysia requires a shift from predominantly legalistic enforcement toward cultural-institutional re-alignment. Rather than treating corruption solely as a compliance failure, reform strategies must address the informal norms and shared beliefs that shape bureaucratic behaviour. From a New Institutional Theory perspective, effective reform depends on synchronising regulative instruments with normative expectations and cognitive understandings of integrity.

First, loyalty and reciprocity, particularly *balas budi*, require reinterpretation within the civil service. Instead of functioning as personal obligation, loyalty must be reframed as commitment to public integrity and institutional responsibility. Recognition and reward structures that valorise ethical courage and principled dissent, rather than

passive compliance, may help recalibrate cultural expectations within bureaucratic organisations.

Second, leadership development should move beyond managerial efficiency to emphasise ethical judgement and institutional accountability. As leadership behaviour operates as a cognitive signal within hierarchical systems, reform initiatives are unlikely to endure unless leaders consistently model integrity and reinforce procedural fairness. Strengthening ethical leadership at both senior and middle-management levels may reduce excessive power concentration and foster horizontal accountability.

Third integrity education should be embedded as an ongoing professional practice rather than a symbolic training requirement. Culturally grounded approaches that draw on values such as *amanah* (trust), responsibility and communal obligation may enhance the legitimacy of formal ethics programmes and encourage internalisation rather than compliance-based adherence.

Finally, transparency and public engagement remain critical in reshaping normative expectations. Mechanisms such as open data initiatives and citizen oversight can increase the social cost of corruption, reinforcing accountability beyond internal bureaucratic controls. Collectively, these measures highlight the importance of aligning informal cultural norms with formal institutional frameworks to achieve substantive reform.

CONCLUSION

This study sought to explain why corruption remains persistent within Malaysia's civil service despite decades of reform, legislation and institutional restructuring. Drawing on New Institutional Theory, the analysis demonstrates that corruption persists not because of weak laws, but because informal institutions, cultural norms and shared beliefs frequently override formal regulatory mechanisms.

Three interrelated cultural-institutional dynamics were identified. Collective sentiment prioritises social harmony over transparency, discouraging the exposure of wrongdoing. Hierarchical obedience reinforces power asymmetries that normalise silence and compliance. Leadership narratives, meanwhile, shape the moral imagination of governance, functioning either as catalysts for integrity or as symbolic justifications for

misconduct. Together, these dynamics produce a condition in which extensive regulative reforms coexist with misaligned normative and cognitive foundations.

Theoretically, this study contributes to NIT by illustrating how informal institutions in collectivist contexts can resist reform even under robust regulatory regimes. It underscores that institutional change is unlikely to be sustained unless coherence is achieved across the regulative, normative and cognitive pillars. Without cultural legitimacy, formal reforms risk devolving into symbolic compliance rather than behavioural transformation.

While this study is based on documentary and secondary sources, it offers a culturally grounded explanation of reform limitations within Malaysia's civil service. Future research may extend this framework through qualitative fieldwork to examine how informal norms are enacted, contested or resisted within specific administrative settings. Such inquiry would deepen understanding of how integrity reforms can move beyond procedural design toward meaningful institutional change. Ultimately, the findings suggest that combating corruption in Malaysia requires not only stronger laws, but also sustained engagement with the cultural logics that shape everyday governance.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their constructive comments and suggestions, which have helped improve the clarity and quality of this article. Special thanks to scholars in Public Administration, Political Science and Sociology for their fundamental research.

Funding

This study was funded by the Endowment Unit, Universiti Teknologi MARA.

Author contributions

The first author contributes to writing and analysis while the second author supervises and checks accurateness of materials.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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