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# THE INVISIBLE INSTITUTION: HOW CULTURAL NORMS PERPETUATE CORRUPTION IN MALAYSIA'S CIVIL SERVICE

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## Abstract

Malaysia is renowned for its rich cultural diversity, which forms the foundation of its national identity. However, traditional values such as loyalty to the community and respect for hierarchy have been deeply embedded in daily life, potentially influencing institutional practices and governance outcomes. Despite numerous anti-corruption efforts implemented through institutional, legal and policy approaches, the latest report by Transparency International (2023) indicated that Malaysia's progress in combating corruption remained slow and inconsistent. This situation raised a critical question: why formal reforms have yet to produce substantial and sustained results. In response, this study seeks to explore how cultural norms play a role in sustaining and normalising corrupt practices within Malaysia's civil service. Specifically, it aims to identify how culturally embedded informal institutions interact with formal mechanisms in shaping corruption outcomes. Employing a qualitative research design, the study draws on secondary data sources, including academic literature, policy documents, news media and recorded interviews with key figures such as the Inspector-General of Police, former Chief Commissioner of the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission (MACC) and directors of anti-corruption organisations. The findings suggest that cultural norms have a significant influence on the persistence of corruption, sometimes even outweighing the power of laws and official regulations. This study contributes to a deeper understanding of how corruption is embedded within social structures and proposes public sector reform strategies that are more sensitive to local cultural contexts.

**Keywords:** cultural norms, corruption, civil service, anti-corruption strategies, New Institutional Theory

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Corruption continues to undermine governance and development efforts in Malaysia, particularly within the civil service. Governance problems due to corruption such as loss of public funds and misconduct among civil servants (Siddiquee, 2011) become recurring news headlines. Substandard development efforts (Jones, 2022) such as delayed action for water crises in certain states have fueled public frustration and distrust towards the civil service. Citizens disillusioned by repeated disappointments and the absence of justice (Fernandez, 2024) began to question the credibility and integrity of national governance systems.

Even though anti-corruption frameworks such as the National Integrity Plan 2004, National Anti-Corruption Plan (2019-2024) and National Anti-Corruption Strategy (2025-2029) have proliferated in the form of legal instruments and institutional reforms, corruption remain deeply entrenched in Malaysia's civil service. Legal instruments such as the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission (MACC) Act 2009, the Whistleblower Protection Act (WPA) 2010 and long-standing campaigns by the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission (MACC) have led to thousands of investigations and prosecutions over the years. Nevertheless, corruption cases are

often described as “Stage 4 cancer” in policy discourse which signals a deeper systemic entrenchment in everyday governance structures. This paradox signals a limitation in relying solely on formal mechanisms to combat corruption without adequately addressing the underlying socio-cultural dimensions that enable it.

Corruption, in this context, can be defined as the abuse of entrusted power for private gain, whether through bribery, embezzlement, nepotism or favouritism and whether in petty day-to-day exchanges or in grand political transactions (Transparency International, 2023). While existing studies and policy reforms have focused on strengthening formal institutions (e.g. laws, regulations and enforcement procedures) these efforts often overlook the influence of informal institutions, particularly cultural norms, that shape institutional behaviour, legitimacy and resistance to change.

Informal institutions refer to unwritten, socially shared rules that emerge outside formal legal systems. They shape expectations and structure behaviours within communities which encompass a broad range of societal patterns, including traditions, patronage networks and symbolic practices. Meanwhile, cultural norms are a distinct subset of informal institutions, that refer specifically to the shared values, beliefs and behavioural expectations for what is considered appropriate behaviour within a community. In the Malaysian civil service, some cultural norms include reciprocal gift-giving is interpreted as courtesy but can blur ethical boundaries (Jones, 2022) and protecting superiors is a display of loyalty even when wrongdoing is observed (Quah, 2022). These practices not only shape moral boundaries but also create a shadow system of expectations that can normalise or even valorise corruption.

Grounded in New Institutional Theory (NIT), this article contends that the persistence of corruption in Malaysia cannot be fully understood without acknowledging the influence of cultural norms within formal institutions. NIT offers a valuable analytical lens by distinguishing between three structures: regulative (laws and sanctions), normative (social obligations and values) and cognitive (beliefs and assumptions). These structures help to explain how individuals perceive legitimacy, authority and acceptable behaviour through simultaneous interaction between formal rules and cultural norms. Within this framework, the gap between Malaysia’s well-developed legal instruments and existing corruption practices reflects a misalignment between formal institutional reforms and cultural expectations. The aim of this study is to explore how specific cultural norms within Malaysia’s civil service sustain or normalise corruption despite decades of legal and institutional reforms. By identifying which culturally embedded values enable or inhibit corruption, this research seeks to contribute to a more culturally grounded understanding of governance failure and offer alternative reform pathways.

But how exactly do cultural norms wield such power? Aren’t systemic processes such as meritocracy and legal rules sufficient to address misconduct and ethical violations that give rise to corruption? Why won’t strict enforcement yield desired outcomes that direct anti-corruption efforts? Are there alternative approaches beyond formal enforcement that have been overlooked? If the government is genuinely committed to tackling corruption at its roots, why does corruption continue to linger quietly within the civil service as if it is there to stay?

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

The study of cultural norms in corruption have produced compelling insights. In advanced countries such as Sweden, the United Kingdom and Italy, the link between cultural norms and bureaucratic behaviour has been explored since the 1950s. Scholars (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2017;

Cialdini & Trost, 1998; Banfield, 1958) posited that corruption results from unchecked human behaviours due to misuse of cultural values. However, in Asia, pioneer scholar Syed Hussein Alatas proposed in his 1968 book, that corruption is not merely an ethical lapse or a failure of structured national bureaucratic foresight, but a deeply sociological problem. He argued that corruption is a historical phenomenon rooted in the impacts of wars and colonialism. Syed Hussein Alatas (1995) further theorised that low tolerance for differing ideologies and ways of life among nations give rise to corruption. Subsequently, he explained that ambitious colonisers often manipulated and exploited ideological disagreements. Consequently, corruption became a barometer of strength and a reward system used by the colonial powers to take advantage of the colonised nations.

There are varying outcomes for the discussion on corruption activities. Some scholars (Aspinall & Mada, 2016; Banfield, 1958) controversially argue that corruption may, under certain conditions, facilitate development or administrative efficiency, especially in settings where formal institutions are weak or overly rigid. Despite possible positive indicators, most scholars (Masykurotur et al., 2024; Syed Hussein Alatas, 1995) agree that corruption walks a fine line between securing rights delayed by bureaucratic inefficiencies and unjustly seizing entitlement. Besides that, economic performance has posited an elemental discussion of corruption. North (1990) described corruption as a hidden economic process that redistributes resources. Other scholars echoed similar findings and linked corruption to three societal trends that are the maturity of individuals, the social development of citizens and the political evolution of the state. These trends determine whether a nation's trajectory is guided by rational ambition or compromised by lust and desire.

Over time, studies on corruption have increasingly been used to understand how bureaucratic systems work. Bureaucracies are generally understood to operate through structured, neutral processes that aim to ensure accountability and responsibility of civil service towards the benefit of the state. Rules and regulations are prioritised as they offer transparency and can be applied universally. However, studies (Quah, 2022; Irma et al., 2022; Gomez, 2005) recognised that alongside formal institutional procedures, informal institutional expectations subtly influence bureaucratic decision-making processes. This line of inquiry aimed to test the boundaries of formality and assess how far can individuals deviate from rational objectivity, acknowledging the inherently sentimental nature of human behaviour.

Research on the boundaries of rules and formality revealed the struggle faced by civil servants worldwide. In many Western nations, systems are designed to encourage citizens to take part in solving national issues, thus, the civil servants' duties were only to ensure compliance and procedural enforcement. Contrarily, citizens from other parts of the world did not manage to achieve similar results. The standard of individual discipline and depth of logical reasoning was entrenched by double standards and vague explanations. These discrepancies have prompted researchers to explore how the willpower of individuals and groups swerve from established standards in pursuit of desires and personal gain.

The body of work identified the boundaries beyond rules and formality in three broad levels that discussed the way informal institutional pressures challenge formal rules and regulations. Firstly, the gateway for bureaucratic behaviour. Hofstede's (2001) study introduced six cultural dimensions to analyse the influence of culture on institutional behaviour. The six cultural dimensions can be measured through large data analysis. These dimensions indicated the gateway of bureaucratic behaviour that showed how nations are culturally inclined. The most important indicator is collectivism where the greater benefit and harmony for community precedes

individual righteousness. If nations are culturally inclined, then the gateway of bureaucrats' behaviours is affected by social pressures. These dimensions can foster environments where subordinates defer to superiors unquestioningly as group harmony is valued over rule enforcement. If otherwise, then bureaucrats are highly principled and strive to serve the nation based on ethical principles.

Second is cognitive conditioning. This is a process of integrating general justification of corruption into cultural identities. Many scholars observed that authoritative figures possess significant influence over public discourse in collectivist societies. This is because deference to authority is a cultural ideal for community loyalty. In Malaysia, scholars (Quah, 2022; Ho, 2002) established that Malaysians often revere charismatic figures and equate loyalty to leadership with collective peace and sustenance. Gomez & Jomo (1999) explained that political and economic elites hold great power in their speeches to mobilise general coordination from a group of people and legitimise informal power structures as a parallel to formal authority. These methods often accommodate patronage networks and determine access to public resources, positions and opportunities. Siddiquee & Zafarullah (2020) find that such systems persist due to cultural values that prioritise familial and ethnic loyalty over bureaucratic neutrality. As a result, patronage practices, though formally prohibited, are often culturally justified as expressions of loyalty or reciprocity.

Lastly is cultural normalisation of corruption. Cultural norms can normalise corrupt practices by framing them as customary or necessary (Syed Hussein Alatas, 1995). Many studies (Persson et al., 2013, Ostrom, 1990) argued that a culturally inclined bureaucrat may mechanically ingrain corruption as a social practice. Practices such as gift-giving, returning favours or protecting superiors are not merely tolerated but often demanded by social expectations. However, these practices clash with civil service standards for accountability and integrity in national duties set by Transparency International in 1995. In the Malaysian context, numerous studies (M. Kamal Hassan, 2022; Lim, 2002) have argued that cultural practices like communal loyalty are often maintained while international measures for accountability and integrity are adopted as symbolic gestures. This duality fostered moral ambiguity where corrupt acts are interpreted as fulfilling social obligations rather than breaching ethical standards.

The discussion above calls for clarity of complex practices and behaviours. Since many studies identified that collectivist mentality produced double standards and symbolic compliance, a balance of practicality and common sense must be advocated especially in governance matters. Moreover, pragmatic explanations are needed to ensure deep reasoning to combat the paradoxes and dilemma of choosing global barometers over cultural principalities. This necessitates a new approach to examine bureaucratic compliance and assess anti-corruption policy effectiveness within the culturally dominant Malaysian civil service.

### **Conceptual Framework: New Institutional Theory and Informal Institutions**

The study of institutionalism originated as an effort to understand social behaviours within structured environments. Pioneers of classical institutionalism such as North (1990) and Ostrom (1990) tested the boundaries of structured rules on how resources are allocated within organisational and societal settings. The goal was to identify factors that create an organised method for social governance. However, this approach overlooked the influence of informal institutions. Over time, classical institutionalism studies evolved into NIT to address gaps within the study of social dynamics.

DiMaggio & Powell (1991) elaborated that the dynamics of informal interactions and formal rules follow a systematic process designed to illustrate the relationship of institutional behaviours and social development. Unlike formal rules that are codified in legislation or official procedures, informal institutions consist of socially constructed, culturally transmitted and unwritten rules that influence decisions and actions in subtle ways. Building on these foundations, Scott (2008) re-structured NIT as a framework that involves three interdependent pressures which govern social behaviour, namely, regulative (rules and enforcement), normative (values and obligations) and cognitive (shared beliefs). These dimensions accommodated explanations beyond superficial standards and measurable factors like economic supply and demand. In doing so, NIT extended the scope of classical institutional theory by emphasising the significant interrelationship of formal institutions (rules and regulations) and informal institutions (cultural norms and social beliefs).

NIT posited that institutions operate in a complex manner where socially constructed, culturally transmitted and unwritten routines and habits collide with structured rules and laws. NIT highlights that informal institutions are not always visible but deeply influential. In the context of corruption, NIT suggest that actors do not always respond to formal incentives or deterrents. Rather, they often behave in accordance with social expectations or conformity, even if those behaviours contravene legal rules. This duality creates a complex institutional environment where formal anti-corruption measures may be undermined by prevailing cultural norms such as communal loyalty, reciprocity or deference to hierarchy. In Malaysia, practices like ‘duit kopi’ or symbolic compliance with integrity policies illustrate how deeply rooted norms can legitimise corruption, not as deviance, but as a socially accepted behaviour.

This study adopts NIT to explore how cultural norms within Malaysia’s civil service interact with and often subvert formal anti-corruption mechanisms. By situating corruption within the interplay of regulative, normative and cognitive pressures, the study aims to explain why reforms have achieved limited success. The framework allows for a context-sensitive understanding of corruption as both a legal and cultural phenomenon, revealing how informal institutions may sustain, normalise or reinterpret corrupt practices despite formal reforms.

### **NIT in Practice: Rules and Standards vs Cultural Norms in Practice**

The general prioritisation of rules and standards for national accountability may mitigate corruption. Besides being regulation and enforcement for good governance, laws and legal precedents also function as ethical guidelines for individual civil servants to fulfil their duties with integrity. In contexts like Sweden, where individual progression precedes collectivist harmony, formal rules such as stringent laws are celebrated as individual devotion to social development (Hira, 2016). Subsequently, equity and justice become universally upheld as essential to national stability. Thus, social issues such as abuse of power or unfair distribution of resources are treated as isolated cases rather than characteristic features of Swedish society. However, this generalisation cannot be uniformly applied to other national contexts, particularly those countries that do not share the same sentiment for rules and regulations like Sweden.

In this case, deeper factors from cultural norms, such as respect for hierarchy, emphasis on communal loyalty and obligations of reciprocity, must be considered in analyses of social development, particularly in contexts where these values shape institutional behaviour and governance outcomes (Irma et al., 2022; Lim et al., 2022). Some countries may adopt a more lenient approach to formal rules in order to preserve the cultural heritage they regard as a core component of national identity. Therefore, NIT offers a valuable framework to discuss civil

progression and reform which enables a discussion of the synergy between objective legal standards and obscure social practices.

Through the lens of NIT, this article interprets cultural norms as informal institutions that complement, compete or override formal rules. Studies (Jones, 2022; Quah, 2022; Lim et al., 2022) suggest cultural norms may be dominant in collectivist environments as the regulative, normative and cognitive pressures coordinate to support collectivist ideals. In such settings, institutional actors make decisions not only based on legal requirements (regulative) but also according to culturally shaped habits (normative) and cultural mindsets (cognitive). Formal descriptions of legitimacy, trust and obligation are underlined as accountability and transparency of one's principal when performing duties for the nation. Contrariwise, cultural interpretations of legitimacy, trust and obligation are grounded in established generational practices such as concentrated power by a revered figure and customary expectations that aimed to preserve familial or ethnic continuity.

The contrast between two philosophies of social development, one oriented toward national progress while the other toward sustaining communal or familial lineage. For instance, in public procurement processes, a civil servant may face a legal obligation to remain impartial while simultaneously experiencing the cultural expectation to favour a known supplier connected to their ethnic or familial network. Cultural norms such as prioritising kinship ties, favouring individuals from the same ethnic or community background and upholding long-standing patron-client relationships are often practised to maintain loyalty and reciprocity. These norms may ultimately determine behaviour if a civil servant allows such expectations to override formal standards and professional obligations. This duality often led to institutional incoherence and inertia for bureaucratic efficiency, where the law existed in tension with the spirit of local culture. Consequently, anti-corruption efforts that ignore this complexity risk being ineffective or counterproductive.

### **3. METHODOLOGY**

This qualitative study employed library research as its primary method. Library research is a recognised approach that utilises library resources to gather information, data and knowledge on specific topics. It is a fundamental research method that initiates deeper investigations for research queries. Authorised access was granted to various printed and digital materials, including academic books, peer-reviewed journals, archived forums, official publications and multimedia sources such as open-access interviews. All materials were selected based on their prominence in shaping understanding of corruption within the civil service. To ensure coherence, only publicly available pre-recorded interviews of five authoritative figures<sup>1</sup> were analysed. Thematic analysis was employed to identify recurring patterns and meanings across these sources. Several ethical considerations, such as the risk of researcher bias and selective interpretation, were addressed through data triangulation and data concentration strategies. These techniques enhanced the credibility and reliability of findings by reducing subjective bias and ensuring analytic rigour.

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<sup>1</sup> These individuals are prominent advocates for anti-corruption standards in Malaysia and have consistently contributed to public discourse through media statements and speeches addressing the nation's anti-corruption efforts. The key figures referenced in this study include Tan Sri Abu Kassim Mohamed, Dato' Seri Ayob Khan Mydin Pitchay, Dato' Shafee Yahya, Raymon Ram and Dr. Mohamad Mohan.

#### 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents thematic findings and analyses derived from a combination of academic literature, secondary sources and open-access interviews. The analysis is organised according to three core themes identified through NIT that illustrate the cultural dimensions that sustain corruption within Malaysian civil service.

The World Bank (1997) emphasised that corruption in the public sector has far-reaching consequences, including inefficiencies, bureaucratic red tape and misallocation of public resources. Numerous scholars concur that corruption undermines public trust, deters domestic and foreign investment and obstructs national development (Jones, 2022). When regulations lack enforcement, policy implementation becomes fragmented thus leading to diminished public confidence. The erosion of trust in institutions subsequently led to civic disengagement and weak national accountability. When corruption is normalised within bureaucratic routines, it compromises civil servants' integrity and ethical standards. This deterioration of values limits the government's capacity to innovate and respond effectively to pressing social issues. Based on the insights gathered, several recurring cultural factors are identified by informants as contributing to the facilitation and perpetuation of corruption within the civil service.

##### *Influence of Collective Sentiment*

The tension between cultural preservation and reformist zeal was a recurring theme in this investigation. Sentiment in this context referred to personal and collective emotional attachment to tradition that often clashed with the passion for progressive change. Sources revealed that cultural sentiment often supersedes formal governance priorities. According to Dato' Seri Ayob Khan (3 December 2024)<sup>2</sup>:

*"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. Only when wrongdoing is acknowledged and action is taken can we address and reduce corruption cases"* (as cited in SelangorKini, 2024).

Ayob Khan's expression reflected that cultural aversion to misconduct, like avoiding shame, may overshadow transparency and accountability. This statement implied that sentiment clashes with nation-building goals and deterred effective anti-corruption enforcements. Other sources also collectively observed that emotional reluctance to confront misconduct impairs enforcement and fosters leniency, thus normalising corrupt practices.

Additional data also highlighted that certain segments of Malaysia's history are selectively emphasised to create nationalistic sentiment around political figures. For example, historical accounts often highlight leaders like Tunku Abdul Rahman while omitting the role of ordinary citizens<sup>3</sup> who contributed significantly to Malaysia's independence. These emotionally charged narratives have institutional effects as reverence for charismatic figures fosters blind loyalty and inhibits accountability within the civil service. Consequently, rational objectivity among civil servants became swayed as they deemed that charismatic leaders who touched on sentiments are ultimate role models for motivation. Therefore, ambiguous narrative played on emotions became

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<sup>2</sup> All verbatim have been translated from Malay to English.

<sup>3</sup> Datuk Siti Rahmah Kassim, along with other citizens of Tanah Melayu at that time, collectively raised funds by contributing their own financial resources and personal jewellery, to pay for Tunku Abdul Rahman's expedition to negotiate Malaya's independence in London. Historical accounts suggest that many of these donors chose to remain anonymous, expressing that their contributions were an expression of duty and love for the nation.

a political leverage for unscrupulous political agenda for personal benefit. As Dato' Shafee Yahya (2010) aptly remarked: *"The PM is so powerful. Who will believe us?"* (Shafee Yahya, as cited in Kalsom Taib, 2010).

### *Social Hierarchy and Institutional Obedience*

Findings revealed that previous vertical hierarchies continued to be in use today. Uncontrolled reverence for authority figures and elites contribute to a culture of silence and complicity. Sources noted that Malaysians generally emulate their leaders which pose a challenge when those leaders exhibit unethical behaviour. Further, foreign political analysts noted that Malaysians are passionately obedient to their leaders. Quah (2022) highlighted this trend during Dato' Seri Najib Razak's tenure, where civil service support remained unwavering despite mounting allegations. This suggests that many Malaysians exhibit a lack of personal willpower and critical initiative to uphold moral principles, particularly when confronted with questionable directives from superiors. Several sources revealed that Malaysians' reverence for their leaders bred blind obedience. Subsequently, studies (Wan Murshida & Mazlena, 2019; Ahmad Faiz et al., 2012) revealed that civil servants often refrain from reporting misconduct despite clear procedural guidelines thus, reflecting low willpower. Ayob Khan emphasised that leaders' conduct and moral principles are the cause for a civil servant's conflict between duty and group cohesion. He highlighted that when leaders themselves engage in corrupt practices, it sets a precedent that normalises misconduct among subordinates. According to him:

*"If the boss takes bribes, then the subordinates will do the same. Everyone conspires to take as much as they can before they die"* (Ayob Khan, 9 August 2024, as cited in WartaOriental, 2024).

This expression illustrates the existence of collusion among certain civil servants, where corruption is not only tolerated but also seen as a shared opportunity for personal gain. He further stressed the urgent need to ensure that both leaders and those appointed to positions of power uphold ethical standards and remain free from corrupt practices: *"We must ensure that corruption is eradicated. Leaders and those appointed must be upright (do not engage in corruption)"* (Ayob Khan, 9 August 2024, as cited in Warta Oriental).

These concerns are supported by empirical data. According to the MACC, civil servants have consistently represented a significant proportion of individuals arrested for corruption. In 2023, MACC reported that a 23% increase of arrests involved civil servants from 323 cases in 2022 (MACC Website, 2024). Additionally, the Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) by Transparency International ranked Malaysia at 57 out of 180 countries, with a score of 50 out of 100 in 2023. This indicated a stagnation of public confidence towards civil service integrity. These figures underline the systemic nature of corruption and reinforce the argument that moral leadership is central to institutional reform.

This reflects the broader institutional issue: when leadership lacks integrity, it cascades down the hierarchy. Moreover, Malaysia's centralised governance structure reinforces this challenge. The MACC, though legally independent, reports to the Prime Minister. Political interference may question the persecutory powers of the MACC thus, raising concerns about its ability to act impartially. This top-heavy structure undermines decentralisation and reinforces power distances that may discourage institutional challenge or reform. Despite urgency for leaders to ensure continuity of global standards for anti-corruption, further investigations revealed that the MACC website publicly displayed a list of financial fraud and money-laundering offenders among civil servants and ordinary citizens but omitted those among authority figures beginning from the year

2015. Additionally, statistical data for arrests from the last five years showed a total of 2208 arrests were made among civil servants (MACC Website, 2024) but there is a lack of open data records for authority figures. This may dilute the impact of well-intentioned policies and may condemn the rule of justice as powerful perpetrators seemed to be left unarrested. According to Ayob Khan (3 December 2024):

*“We take action against those at the bottom, but if action is taken against those at the top, then the subordinates will be fearful. However, if those at the top are left alone, then those below will act with impunity.”* (as cited in Selangor Kini).

This statement reflects that power hierarchies in Malaysia continue to dictate institutional action, even as various agencies share legal responsibilities. The phrase underscores the symbolic power of punishing senior figures, not merely for legal compliance, but as a behavioural signal throughout the organisational hierarchy. Legal instruments such as the WPA 2010 offer structural support, but enforcement is perceived as inconsistent. Studies have shown that regulatory tools like audits and risk reports often lack impact due to poor implementation. Data from Transparency International and the MACC statistics suggested selective enforcement such as double laws and the lack of public participation are due to political power imbalances. The centralised nature of governance limits the autonomy of enforcement bodies and undermines institutional legitimacy as most anti-corruption initiatives are top-down and controlled by political and economic elites (Gomez & Jomo, 1999). Contextually, various narratives, including religious discourses have been strategically manipulated to blur ethical boundaries and justify questionable practices. In one example, Ayob Khan stressed: *“We don’t need to issue different fatwas (religious rulings). This is not a donation or almsgiving. There’s no donation, no charity, what is haram (forbidden) remains haram”* (Ayob Khan, 5 December 2024, as cited in Armada of Malaysian, 2024)

Additional sources reported widespread hesitation among Malaysians to publicly denounce wrongdoing due to fear of unpopularity or political retaliation. Subsequently, this weakens the moral fabric of governance. However, other sources placed educational efforts as the main factor whether corruption continued or halted. According to Dr Muhammad Mohan, the president of Transparency International Malaysia (2022): *“Although it has been well received, this does not easily guarantee that in the next five to ten years, corruption among youth will decline.”* (as cited in Astro AWANI, 2022)

Other sources unanimously reveal that education is a crucial factor to the success of anti-corruption efforts, but it takes a long time to correct the minds that have been deeply associated with reaction instead of leveraging rational reasoning when faced with ethical challenges. Scholars (Jones, 2022; Beh, 2011) noted that Malaysians are more reactive than philosophical. Thus, there are major concerns among experts on the emulation of global best practices for reforms. These concerns tally with local studies where cognitive pressures are further complicated by a lack of contextual adaptation. Sources reflect that political influences diluted reform outcomes as the influence of political culture where civil servants often prioritise loyalty over accountability especially over ethnic narratives. Ayob Khan also stated:

*“There are also certain parties who try to link corruption to racial issues... If we are Muslims, if our faith is truly strong, we would not engage in corruption. There is no need to blame others”* (Ayob Khan, 8 August 2024, as cited in Malaysia Kini).

Based on the statement above, it is evident that certain parties have attempted to frame corruption through ethnic and religious lenses, thereby distorting collective narratives and diverting attention from the ethical responsibilities shared across all communities. These reflections point that social stigma was diluted with low principle and moral reasoning which may be caused by emotional attachment to charismatic narratives.

### *Leadership Narrative*

Leadership emerged as a critical factor influencing institutional behaviour. While many studies focused on governance structures and legal frameworks, informants emphasised the importance of leadership willpower in upholding ethical standards. According to Tan Sri Abu Kassim Mohamed (2020):

*“Leadership is a critical factor in efforts to strengthen governance, enhance integrity and combat corruption. If we look at human civilisation itself, all changes, especially the actions of leaders and those in positions of power, have a really big effect, a very significant impact on society”* (as cited in Muhammad Asri, 2022)

This response underscores the centrality of leadership in shaping institutional behaviour and public morality. Leadership is framed not merely as administrative but also moral and symbolic which is empowered to catalyse or hinder institutional integrity. Several sources credit that genuine leadership is a powerful tool to change the way a society behaves. In this context, leadership does not refer to an authoritative figure on top of the hierarchy of concentrated power, rather, genuine leadership is defined as personal willpower and moral courage to act ethically even in the face of adversity. Abu Kassim<sup>4</sup> stressed: *“Don’t wait until it appears as though we are not being proactive”* (as cited in Muhammad Asri, 2022). This statement underscores the need for proactive, principle-driven individuals to model accountability and inspire institutional reform. In this context, proactivity is not merely about policy action, but also about taking visible actions to signal responsibility and responsiveness.

### **Implications for Reform**

Comparative experiences from other countries offer valuable insights into how cultural norms and institutional structures shape anti-corruption outcomes. For instance, Indonesia has faced persistent corruption challenges, especially within local governments and law enforcement agencies. However, the establishment of the Corruption Eradication Commission (Komisi Pemberantasan Korupsi, KPK) in 2002 marked a turning point. The KPK’s early success was attributed not only to its strong legal mandate and operational independence but also to widespread public support rooted in civil society’s growing intolerance toward corruption. Despite recent political setbacks that weakened the KPK, the Indonesian case underscores the role of public pressure and normative change in sustaining reform momentum. In contrast, South Korea’s anti-corruption progress has been more closely tied to leadership accountability (Han & Shim, 2021) and institutional responsiveness (Yoonkyung, 2019). High-profile prosecutions of former presidents and business elites, including the impeachment of President Park Geun-hye in 2017, demonstrated the country’s commitment to legal equality and rule of law (Hahm & Heo, 2020). Thus, cultural emphasis on public shame and collective responsibility amplified the social costs of corruption which reinforced formal legal mechanisms. These examples highlight that

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<sup>4</sup> He is known to be a courageous and principled individual. Tan Sri Abu Kassim consistently advocated leadership in the sense of personal strength and willpower to uphold courage and righteous acts.

while institutional design is crucial, enduring reform also depends on cultural values that either support or resist corrupt practices. Integrating such comparative insights helps position Malaysia's challenges within a broader context and reinforces the argument that aligning formal institutions with positive cultural norms is essential for sustainable reform.

Findings from this study suggest that cultural norms are integral to institutional behaviour. Several informants supported that correction on cultural narrative may produce substantial integrity behaviours among civil servants and the general public. However, policies that impose top-down reforms without addressing the cultural substrates of corruption are unlikely to produce sustainable change. Therefore, anti-corruption frameworks and reform strategies must be contextually grounded and culturally sensitive. Several recommendations are proposed. The first is redefining cultural narratives. Cultural and religious narratives that emphasise values of integrity and public accountability should be continuously advocated. Public narratives and educational campaigns should draw on positive cultural archetypes and international benchmarks from Transparency International and the CPI that may assist to educate people to uphold righteous acts. The second is aligning informal and formal institutions. Institutional designs that recognize and work with existing norms should be leveraged. Since Malaysia is generally a collectivist society, reform strategies should leverage this detail as a tool for effective measures. For example, loyalty to community can be reframed as loyalty to national integrity. This may be sufficiently promoted if affirmations and positive reactions towards morally righteous acts are constantly awarded and honoured. Thus, enhancing public trust towards formal institutions.

## **5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

This article underscores the critical role of cultural norms as informal institutions that shape bureaucratic behaviour and institutional integrity. Through the lens of NIT, this study reveals that the persistence and normalisation of corruption within Malaysia's civil service is not merely a result of regulatory shortcomings, but also a consequence of deeply entrenched cultural expectations and practices. Aligned with the study's objective, this study emphasises that anti-corruption reforms must go beyond legal domains and engage with the cultural dimensions that influence everyday bureaucratic behaviour. A culturally informed approach to institutional reform not only enhances theoretical understanding of corruption but also paves the way for more effective and sustainable reforms in public service.

In light of these findings, this study proposes a culturally grounded public policy initiative which is to advocate for community-based integrity education into civil service training modules. Specifically, the government should institutionalise integrity education rooted in local values, such as communal responsibility and respect for elders, as part of mandatory professional development for civil servants. By embedding positive cultural norms into formal training programs, this policy may transform cultural expectations into ethical accountability. Moreover, by engaging local communities to collectively define and promote acceptable practices, this initiative could create a bottom-up social pressure against corruption, complementing formal anti-corruption mechanisms with community-driven moral enforcement. Additionally, future research could explore the implementation and effectiveness of culturally embedded integrity training through pilot programs in specific agencies or states. This would further illuminate how varied cultures influence corruption tolerance and integrity-building, thus refining both theory and practice.

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