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Corruption In-between:
Complexity of formal institutions and informal cultural norms

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Abstract
This paper examines the presence of corruption in Malaysia's civil service despite formal reforms such as the Whistleblower Protection Act (WPA) 2010 and the National Anti-Corruption Plan (NACP) 2019-2024. The literature posits that cultural norms, such as deference to authority and group conformity, play a critical yet understudied role. Using New Institutional Theory (NIT), this paper conceptually explores the interplay between formal institutions and unspoken cultural routines. Through thematic analysis of existing literature, NIT highlights how cultural norms may inadvertently sustain corruption, advocating for greater integration of cultural perspectives in institutional reform strategies for effective governance.

Keywords: Cultural norms; corruption; formal institutions; New Institutional Theory

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1.0 Introduction
One of the main challenges in public administration is ensuring highly professional, orderly systems of national governance. Solutions commonly included the establishment of robust legal and administrative frameworks. Notable disciplinary efforts, such as the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission (MACC), the Whistleblower Protection Act (WPA) 2010 and the National Anti-Corruption Plan (NACP) 2019-2024 have aimed to curb misconduct within Malaysia's bureaucratic framework. These initiatives collectively promote accountability and institutionalise integrity across public sector institutions. However, studies (Ahmad Faiz & Zulhilmi, 2021; Nurisyal & Norhaninah, 2020; Ho, 2002) expressed concerns that maladministration issues still risk implicating Malaysian public administration. Maladministration raises concerns about potential corruption, which hinders infrastructure development and effective policy governance (Gomez, 2024; Siddiquee & Zafarullah, 2020; Gomez & Jomo, 1999). This raised questions about the limits of formal reform and legal deterrence mechanisms in mitigating bureaucratic issues (Jones, 2022; Sharifah Liyana et al., 2019; Mohamad Zulkurnai et al., 2014). Within this context, attention turns to cultural norms as informal yet influential forces that shape conduct in the civil service.

Cultural norms refer to tacit social codes and behaviours that are not codified in law but are widely practiced and accepted. Examples include are loyalty to superiors, deference to seniority and the expectation of gift-giving. Cultural norms as a social conduct derive from a communal obligation to prioritise group cohesion over individual accountability. Hofstede (2001) notes that this prioritisation results

from collectivist nations that continuously conform to social standards. This social practice may influence conduct within institutions by rationalising how behaviours are interpreted or enacted.

This conceptual paper aims to foreground the role of informal institutions within Malaysia's civil service. Rather than treating culture as a residual factor, it is repositioned here as a constitutive element of institutional habits. By using New Institutional Theory (NIT) as a theoretical lens, the paper's objective is to reconceptualise corrupt behaviours in the Malaysian civil service as an outcome of institutional duality arising from the interplay of formal institutions (laws, bureaucratic procedures) and informal institutions (cultural norms). By integrating cultural dimensions into the institutional analysis of corruption, this paper contributes to a more socially grounded framework for understanding governance in Malaysia.

2.0 Literature Review
National initiatives such as the WPA 2010 and the NACP 2019-2024 are frequently cited as evidence of institutional commitment to integrity. However, these frameworks were evaluated on policy design, legislative effectiveness (Norziaton & Zatun, 2022; Siddiquee & Zafarullah, 2020) and organisational ethics (Sharifah Liyana et al., 2019) rather than on the societal consequences of these interventions. Additionally, the recurrence of public procurement scandals such as project tender cartels and public disillusionment with the bureaucracy (Fernandez, 2024; Jones, 2022) suggests that existing evaluations of formal controls and ethical codes may not adequately capture other mechanisms that may sustain corrupt practices. As formal reforms alone have not produced the intended behavioural transformation, corruption is still a risk in Malaysia's civil service (Quah, 2022). Hence, this review was identified through a thematic selection of peer-reviewed journal articles and foundational texts frequently cited in Malaysian governance and institutional studies on corruption, informal institutions and administrative behaviour. The key discussions are: (1) corruption and the Malaysian civil service; (2) cultural norms and institutional behaviours; and (3) NIT and corruption studies.

2.1 Corruption and the Malaysian Civil Service
The Malaysian civil service has been entangled in allegations of mismanagement and corruption. Studies documented recurring integrity issues despite ongoing institutional reforms (Gomez, 2024; Ho, 2002). These scholarly discourses suggest that embedded informal dynamics may affect institutional processes and procedures. Subsequently, studies (Nashril-Abaidah & Mohammad Agus, 2022; Case, 2009; Gomez & Jomo, 1999) proposed that high-ranking leadership shapes civil service behaviour and routines, thereby complicating enforcement and oversight mechanisms.

Research indicated that while legal enforcement mechanisms have improved, they may fail to penetrate the informal networks and patronage structures that underpin administrative decision-making (Hairuzzaki et al., 2024). Ho (2002) and Gomez & Jomo (1999) explained that political patronage and rent-seeking behaviour have become institutionalised features. These dynamics reinforce the meaning of loyalty towards networks rather than regulations. Thus, regulatory inefficiency driven by broader cultural norms as informal power relations, may reveal corrupt behaviours.

2.2 Cultural Norms and Institutional Behaviours
A growing body of institutional scholarship challenges traditional explanations of corruption as rule compliance, institutional autonomy and law enforcement. Interdisciplinary studies underscore the role of informal institutions that operate alongside formal structures to shape behaviour (Scott, 2014; Aranson, 1998). Informal institutions are not codified, yet they subconsciously influence how individuals interpret rules and exercise discretion. Informal institutions are separated by several identifiers, mainly social norms and cultural norms. By definition, social norms are socially expected actions, while cultural norms are unwritten, shared rules created, communicated and enforced outside formal regulatory mechanisms. Banfield (1958) presented cultural norms as social practices, moral obligations and social expectations that may subconsciously support or undermine formal institutions.

Within the Malaysian context, scholars have long noted the influence of cultural practices such as *"ikut adat"* (follow customs) and *"jangan malukan orang"* (don't shame others) in shaping bureaucratic conduct (Quah, 2022; Syed Hussein Alatas, 1968). These norms often prioritise social harmony, face-saving and loyalty over transparency and accountability, potentially discouraging whistleblowing or disciplinary action. For instance, junior officers may refrain from reporting misconduct due to deference to authority or fear of social retaliation. Similarly, culturally sanctioned practices such as gift-giving during official occasions may blur the boundary between courtesy and corruption, facilitating clientelistic relationships.

The literature suggests that cultural norms may reinforce or contradict formal rules and procedures. When formal institutions lack the legitimacy or capacity to override cultural expectations, rules and procedures may become symbolic practices disoriented by generational habits and routines (Syed Hussein Alatas, 1968). How these cultural norms continue to shape institutional responses to misconduct remains an issue that awaits further investigation. While these dynamics are acknowledged, few studies empirically examine how these norms are internalised and reproduced within everyday bureaucratic practice. The coexistence of these opposite behaviours and routines is proposed as a complication of efforts to implement anti-corruption measures. These practices, though seemingly harmless, may facilitate collective silence and tolerance for misconduct.

2.3 Conceptual Framework: NIT and Corruption Studies
NIT offers a useful framework for understanding the complex interplay between formal institutions and informal institutions. Unlike earlier institutional approaches, NIT emphasises both the formal aspects of institutions and their symbolic, cultural and ideational dimensions. By symbolically complying with formal rules and maintaining informal practices that aligned more closely with cultural norms and external

expectations, organisations may adopt institutional practices to gain legitimacy rather than to improve efficiency (Aranson, 1998; DiMaggio & Powell, 1991). This helps facilitate further explanation of how institutions are shaped not only by formal rules but also by cultural expectations.

In corruption studies, NIT has provided valuable insights to explain why anti-corruption reforms may fail to produce behavioural change (Zimelis et al., 2020; Pillay & Kluvers, 2014). Interrelationships between formal institutions (rules and enforcement) with informal institutions (shared beliefs, values and norms) may affect how individuals behave in reality. If formal rules are not internalised through informal channels, they may be ignored, manipulated or merely performed for appearances' sake. In the Malaysian context, the dynamic where formal mechanisms coexist with cultural norms warrants closer examination. As such, reform efforts must engage with the full spectrum of institutional influences, including those rooted in identity and social interaction.

By applying NIT, this paper draws attention to how cultural norms as informal institutions shape individual habits and collective behaviours of civil servants in ways that may reinforce or undermine anti-corruption measures. The present study extends the existing literature by examining how behaviours that appear to be procedural compliance may mask corrupt practices.

3.0 Methodology

This paper adopts a conceptual research design grounded in a systematic synthesis of established theoretical works and peer-reviewed secondary empirical studies on corruption, institutions and public administration. The sources reviewed comprise journal articles and academic books published primarily between 2000 and 2024, selected through keyword searches on corruption, informal institutions and the Malaysian civil service. Inclusion criteria were relevance to NIT, focus on formal-informal institutional interaction and scholarly credibility.

The conceptual approach is justified by the study's objective: to develop an analytically coherent framework rather than to test hypotheses or generate new empirical data. The approach focuses on interpretive reasoning and thematic categorisation, which is appropriate for examining culturally embedded and context-dependent phenomena, particularly informal institutions that are often underexplored in positivist or rationalist models of corruption.

The analysis is guided by NIT, conceptualising corruption as arising from misalignments between formal institutions (laws, regulations, integrity systems) and informal institutions (norms, values, and practices). To ensure analytical clarity, the discussion is structured around four recurrent themes identified across the literature: (1) deference to authority, (2) loyalty and patronage, (3) gift-giving and reciprocity and (4) collective conformity and face-saving. Each theme is examined in relation to formal integrity mechanisms to identify institutional tensions and reform implications from a cultural perspective.

4.0 Findings

The analysis of existing theoretical literature and secondary empirical studies suggests that corruption in Malaysia's civil service is not solely a product of weak enforcement or inadequate formal rules, but is interwoven with historically rooted and socially embedded cultural norms. These norms function as social systems that guide, shape and influence behaviours of civil servants. While formal integrity policies and anti-corruption frameworks have improved in recent decades, their practical effectiveness are moderately limited.

Based on NIT, this section presents four thematic conceptual findings that help to explain how cultural norms interact with formal institutional arrangements to sustain corrupt practices. Each theme reveals a distinct mechanism through which cultural expectations, such as deference to authority, loyalty, reciprocity and collective conformity, may distort or neutralise formal integrity systems. These findings offer insights into the cultural habits and routines that govern everyday decision-making within the bureaucracy. Subsequently, this study frames corruption as an institutionalised practice shaped by dual legitimacy systems: one formal and regulatory, the other informal and cultural. This duality creates a grey zone where civil servants may comply symbolically with official policies while realistically adhering to cultural norms that reward complicity and discourage social disagreements. The following subsections discuss four themes identified through thematic analysis, each of which reflects the culturally embedded nature of informal institutional practices in Malaysia's civil service.

4.1 Deference to Authority

The first emergent theme concerns the norm of deference to authority. Hofstede (2001) identified that deference to authority is a socially embedded disposition commonly practiced among collectivist nations. From an NIT perspective, this arrangement does not primarily originate from a formally stringent bureaucratic procedure, but is simultaneously formed by the intersection of informal expectations of standards. In Malaysia's civil service, deference to authority can be traced to several sources, such as ideals of obedience (particularly from cultural and religious teachings), colonial legacies of centralised power and feudal traditions that promote hierarchical order. While respect for superiors is often rationalised as a mechanism for preserving administrative discipline and procedural clarity, it simultaneously breeds structural vulnerabilities when taken to extremes. Subsequently, excessive deference may lead to unquestioning obedience, with junior officers rarely challenging their superiors.

Excessive deference generates a bureaucratic ethos that prioritises submission over scrutiny. In practice, junior officers are discouraged, both formally and informally, from questioning directives or flagging unethical behaviour by their superiors (Jones, 2022; Quah, 2022). This cultural environment fosters a form of irresponsibility, wherein accountability is diffused and subordinated to interpersonal loyalty. Furthermore, excessive submission to hierarchy may encourage behavioural patterns that limit whistleblowing. Civil servants may prioritise personal loyalty and obedience over institutional duty, thereby perpetuating a culture of silence even in the

face of evident misconduct. As such, whistleblowing is perceived as an act of betrayal rather than civic duty, particularly when it involves exposing misconduct by a respected superior. This norm is further reinforced by the fear of career stagnation, social exclusion or reputational harm associated with challenging superiors. Thus, civil servants may withhold scrutiny and critical reflection towards orders that can potentially jeopardise the enforcement of ethical standards. As a result, this norm reinforces institutional inertia by protecting status hierarchies and insulating power from critical oversight (Gomez, 2024). Consequently, integrity mechanisms such as internal audits, reporting hotlines or grievance procedures may be underutilised or symbolically observed even when legal protections exist.

4.2 Loyalty and Patronage
Closely linked to deference to authority is the norm of personalised loyalty to one's superior. Unlike professional commitment to institutional mandates, this form of loyalty is personal, emotional and often informal. In many bureaucratic settings, career progression, access to privileges and protection are perceived to be dependent on creating and maintaining favourable relationships with higher-ranking officers (Gomez, 2024; Quah, 2022; Ho, 2002). This dynamic resembles what NIT theorists (Aranson, 1998; DiMaggio & Powell, 1991) identify as an informal social mechanism through which individuals conform not to written rules, but to expected behaviours within tightly knit power networks. Hence, acts of loyalty may foster networks of mutual dependence and patronage.

Loyalty and patronage systems function as hidden relationship expectations disguised as informal institutions (Ho, 2002; Gomez & Jomo, 1999). Substantially, subordinates may suppress or rationalise ethical breaches to protect their leaders, while superiors may tolerate and shield loyal staff from accountability. This symbiotic relationship may undermine meritocracy by creating institutional blind spots that selectively tolerate misconduct. Several studies (Quah, 2022; Khoo, 2005) described this as a double-standard procedure in which one adheres to formal codes outwardly while, internally navigates informal loyalties for survival and advancement. Similarly, Gomez (2024) noted that loyalty may embed moral hazard and distort professional governance. Procedural fairness and integrity may be conditioned by interpersonal relations rather than regulatory compliance. Thus, the subconscious continuation of these informal networks challenges the state's structural efforts to professionalise the civil service.

4.3 Gift-Giving and Reciprocity
Cultural practices of gift-giving, especially during festive seasons, ceremonial tokens or official visits, are widely accepted in Malaysian societies. Although these acts may be interpreted as gestures of goodwill and social etiquette, they raise concerns when the presentation of gifts may convey implicit impressions of relational expectations and reciprocal treatment (Jones, 2022). Gift-giving may become problematic when transposed into bureaucratic contexts, as the anticipation of reciprocity can blur the boundaries between appreciation and bribery.

Formal codes of conduct regulate gift-giving (Public Service Department, 2025) typically setting monetary thresholds or contextual prohibitions. However, ambiguous guidelines allow considerable interpretive leeway in practice (Ahmad Faiz & Zulhilmi, 2021). These guidelines are typically exemplified as discretionary powers that supplement formal regulations with individual judgment on how to handle unforeseen behaviours and situations within the civil service environment. In procurement, licensing or enforcement contexts, reciprocal exchanges can subtly influence decision-making (Sharifah Liyana et al., 2019) which may lead to preferential treatment or regulatory leniency. The problem is compounded by weak enforcement and differential interpretations of what constitutes corruption. Some may regard gift-giving and reciprocity as harmless etiquette, while others perceive it as covert bribery. As such, a misalignment persists between formal institutional expectations and culturally sanctioned behaviour. This disjuncture may undermine the symbolic integrity of anti-corruption frameworks.

4.4 Collective Conformity and Face-Saving
This theme centres on the broader cultural emphasis on maintaining social harmony, collective conformity and the avoidance of shame by face-saving. Within the Malaysian civil service, these values may translate into a reluctance to confront misconduct, report unethical colleagues or openly criticise problematic procedures when recognised as wrong. Quah (2022) noted that civil servants may refrain from reporting colleagues or participating in investigations to avoid disrupting group cohesion or causing public embarrassment. This conformity is sustained not by ignorance, but by strategic non-disclosure to preserve group cohesion and avoid reputational damage to peers or the organisation.

Based on an NIT perspective, this face-saving culture is a symbolic practice that may cause formal anti-corruption policies to be observed performatively rather than substantively. Face-saving culture, as one of the socially accepted behaviours that is ingrained to preserve group cohesion, is viewed symbolically through generational narratives promoted by leaders (Quah, 2022; Ho, 2002). NIT further elaborates that the symbolism of face-saving culture may undermine formal accountability mechanisms. Subsequently, legal mechanisms become performative rituals rather than tools of genuine institutional transformation by discouraging transparency and critical engagement. Thus, the same errors may recur without substantial behavioural correction.

Similarly, Ungku Aziz (1968) discussed that Malaysia is a nation rich in symbolism. These symbolisms are a cumulation of generational reminders that prioritised the appearance of modesty and tranquility. However these culturally embedded justifications may become institutional constraints, likely leaving governance reform cosmetic and rhetorical (Quah, 2022). Hence, superficial adherence to reforms masks the continued prevalence of informal accommodations that prioritise group stability over principled governance, which impedes organisational learning by suppressing error correction and critical feedback.

5.0 Discussion

This paper posits two advancements to the scholarly discourse of corruption in the civil service.

5.1 Formal-Informal Institutional Duality
This paper suggests that Malaysia's anti-corruption efforts have largely focused on strengthening formal institutions, often neglecting the underlying cultural norms that guide behaviour. This duality creates institutional misalignments where formal rules exist in tension with entrenched informal practices. Such misalignments can result in superficial compliance that masks corruption.

The thematic synthesis reveals a recurring pattern of institutional duality, in which formal institutions coexist uneasily with informal ones. This duality creates a condition where civil servants navigate conflicting expectations and rationalities (Jones, 2022; Ho, 2002). While formal rules prescribe accountability, impartiality and compliance, informal norms promote loyalty, discretion and relational ethics. This caused a behavioural dilemma which explains why anti-corruption reforms may result in symbolic gestures rather than substantive change. Regulatory compliance is performed to meet audit requirements or external scrutiny, but informal practices continue to shape everyday decision-making. As such, corruption may be justified within organisational life.

5.2 Implications for Governance Reform
This study highlights the need to reframe governance reform strategies by integrating cultural analysis into institutional design. A shift towards integrity ecosystems that harmonise formal and informal elements is important as top-down reforms are less likely to succeed if cultural norms are misaligned with practice. To address institutional duality, governance reform should integrate conventionally formal sanctions, like rules and regulations, with the informal cultural foundations that shape institutional behaviour. This includes cultural transformation through education and the redesign of norms.

Cultural transformation necessitates a long-term educational reorientation of civil service values. This entails embedding critical reasoning into the training curricula of government officers and administrative personnel. Rather than merely instilling knowledge of rules and sanctions, initiatives should include reflexive moral reasoning, critical awareness of institutional purpose and a sense of duty anchored in the public interest. One suggestion is participatory education. Through participatory education, civil servants across hierarchies can be educationally reoriented by co-producing policy implementation solutions through dialogues in integrity workshops, internal surveys or peer-group consultations. These dialogues can help to identify cultural impediments within policy implementation to enhance and ensure cultural sensitivity.

Redesigning norms involves a deliberate redesign of organisational rituals, routines and incentive structures. This may include revisiting promotion criteria, recognition systems and performance appraisals to reward integrity-oriented conduct and discourage collusive practices. Institutional rituals, such as oath-taking ceremonies, public commendations or team recognitions can also be recalibrated to reinforce collective commitment to ethical governance rather than being treated as procedural requirements. Engaging officials to model integrity through transparent decision-making and equitable enforcement of rules that is credible, accountable and consistent in upholding ethical values can disrupt the silent complicity that may enable corruption.

6.0 Conclusion and Recommendations
This conceptual paper proposed that corruption in the Malaysian civil service cannot be fully understood or addressed through formal legal reforms alone. Informal cultural norms ranging from deference to authority to gift-giving and face-saving practices may play a crucial role in shaping how rules are interpreted and enacted. Applying NIT, this paper conceptualises corruption as the product of institutional duality where cultural identity and regulations clash.

Several limitations must be acknowledged. First, as a conceptual study, this paper does not provide original empirical evidence and relies on secondary literature, which limits its ability to capture variation across ministries, agencies, or administrative levels. Second, cultural norms are discussed analytically and may not uniformly apply across all segments of the Malaysian civil service. Third, the interpretive nature of NIT, while analytically rich, may limit causal generalisation.

Despite these limitations, the paper contributes a theoretically grounded framework that highlights the necessity of culturally attuned governance reform. Future research should empirically examine how civil servants internalise and negotiate informal norms in everyday practice, using qualitative methods such as interviews and ethnographic observation. Policymakers should design integrity systems that bridge formal rules with cultural realities through participatory education, norm redesign and leadership modelling. This paper also recommends future studies to test the development of context-sensitive anti-corruption strategies rooted in Malaysia's cultural realities. Therefore, addressing corruption requires not only stronger laws but deeper institutional transformation rooted in social meaning and practice.

Paper Contribution to Related Field of Study
This paper contributes to public administration and corruption studies by proposing a culturally sensitive interpretation of potential

corruption within institutions. A conceptual model grounded in NIT is introduced to account for the dual influence of formal institutions (rules and regulations) and informal institutions (cultural norms). Policymakers and researchers are invited to rethink anti-corruption strategies by incorporating local cultural realities into institutional reform.

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