

Exploring Spiritual Factors Influencing Public Servants' Involvement in Corruption: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

Corruption among public servants remains a threat to governance, institutional integrity, and public trust. Despite anti-corruption initiatives, increasing cases and arrests suggest that measures require attention to spiritual factors. This study identifies the spiritual factors influencing public servants' involvement in corruption and examines how they shape susceptibility to corrupt behavior. A Basic Qualitative Inquiry design was employed. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with ten participants from the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission, the Institute of Integrity Malaysia, the Public Service Department, and the Royal Malaysia Police. The data were coded manually and analyzed thematically. Four themes emerged: institutional space and loosened controls, material pressure and moral rationalization, spiritual fragility as a risk facilitator, and the spiritual-integrity bastion as a protective mechanism. The findings show that spirituality functions as an internal control complementing legal, enforcement, and governance mechanisms in preventing public-sector corruption. The study contributes by identifying a dual-register pattern in which public servants express spiritual resilience through religious language, including sin, retribution, and work as worship, and moral-practical language, including blessing, family dignity, and career trajectory. It demonstrates how spiritual mechanisms interact with each element of the Fraud Triangle to enable or inhibit corrupt behavior, extending existing corruption frameworks with an internal moral dimension.

Keywords: corruption; public servants; spiritual factors; integrity; qualitative study

Introduction

Corruption in the public sector is an administrative ethics problem that directly affects public trust, the effectiveness of government policy, and social justice. Within the context of national administration, public servants are not merely employees of government organizations but are policy implementers, managers of public resources, service providers, and the principal link between government and citizens. When public servants become involved in corruption, the act not only tarnishes the individual's reputation but also undermines public confidence in public institutions as a whole. The corruption literature consistently shows that corruption weakens institutional quality, disrupts

economic development, increases administrative inefficiency, and damages the principle of public accountability.¹ Therefore, efforts to understand the roots of corruption cannot focus solely on weaknesses in systems, procedures, or enforcement, but must also address the spiritual factors of the individuals who make decisions in situations of risk.

Malaysia has implemented various anti-corruption initiatives through legal approaches, enforcement, integrity education, and governance reform. The National Anti-Corruption Plan (NACP) 2019–2023 was designed as a national policy to strengthen transparency, accountability, and integrity in national administration.² This plan focuses on key areas such as public sector administration, public procurement, law enforcement, political governance, the judiciary, and corporate governance. Nevertheless, corruption statistics reported by the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission show that the corruption issue has not been satisfactorily controlled, particularly given that public servants continue to feature prominently in corruption arrest statistics.³ At the same time, Malaysia's position and score in the Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) have yet to demonstrate sufficiently strong achievement to reflect a major shift in perceptions of public sector integrity.⁴ This situation suggests that existing anti-corruption strategies need to be re-evaluated,

¹ Eugen Dimant and Guglielmo Tosato, "Causes and Effects of Corruption: What Has Past Decade's Empirical Research Taught Us? A Survey," *Journal of Economic Surveys* 32.2 (2018), 336 & 346-348.

² Pusat Governans, Integriti dan Antirasuah Nasional, *National Anti-Corruption Plan 2019-2023* (Putrajaya: Jabatan Perdana Menteri, 2019), 28-55.

³ Suruhanjaya Pencegahan Rasuah Malaysia, "Statistik Keseluruhan Tahun 2024," accessed July 5, 2025, https://www.sprm.gov.my/index.php?id=21&page_id=120&year=2024; Suruhanjaya Pencegahan Rasuah Malaysia, "SPRM Tak Pilih Kasih 'Pukat' Pemberi dan Penerima Rasuah," accessed July 5, 2024, https://www.sprm.gov.my/index.php?id=21&page_id=103&contentid=3302&cat=BKH.

⁴ Transparency International Malaysia, "Press Release: Corruption Perceptions Index 2024," accessed February 11, 2025, <https://transparency.org.my/pages/news-and-events/press-releases/corruption-perceptions-index-2024-2>.

particularly from the perspective of the human factors that influence corrupt behavior.

Building on this background, this article proceeds from two main problem statements. First, the increasing number of corruption cases among public servants indicates that the level of corruption remains too high despite the implementation of various national anti-corruption initiatives. Second, the continuing rise in corruption arrests suggests that existing anti-corruption strategies may still be insufficient in addressing the spiritual factors underlying corrupt behaviour. Both problem statements reveal an important gap in the corruption discourse, namely the tendency of current approaches to place greater emphasis on external controls such as procedures, laws, punishment, compliance, and organisational structures, while the internal condition of individuals who engage in corruption remains underexplored. Previous studies show that corruption has a complex relationship with culture, religiosity, moral beliefs, and social norms.⁵ This provides a basis for the view that corruption cannot necessarily be fully understood through institutional variables alone.

In this study, spiritual factors refer to internal dimensions related to consciousness of the Divine, trustworthiness (*amanah*), honesty, self-control, fear of sin, moral accountability, religious internalisation, and the capacity to refrain from abusing power for personal gain. This dimension is important because formal knowledge of laws and regulations is insufficient if it is not accompanied by moral strength and an internalisation of values capable of guiding public servants when they face opportunities, pressures, or material temptations. Accordingly, the spiritual

⁵ Omer Gokcekus and Tufan Ekici, "Religion, Religiosity, and Corruption," *Review of Religious Research* 62 (2020), 563-578; Yaw M. Mensah, "An Analysis of the Effect of Culture and Religion on Perceived Corruption in a Global Context," *Journal of Business Ethics* 121 (2014), 255-282; Ines Valdovinos-Hernandez, Marek Szymanski, and Karolina Grabowska, "Mea Culpa: The Role of Religion in Corruption Perception," *Forum Scientiae Oeconomia* 7.3 (2019), 50; Yaron Zelekha and Gil Avnimelech, "Cultural and Personal Channels between Religion, Religiosity, and Corruption," *Heliyon* 9 (2023), 2-4.

aspect deserves attention as one of the lenses through which to understand why an individual becomes involved in misconduct such as corruption. Discussions of religion and corruption have also produced inconsistent findings. Some studies find that religiosity can influence perceptions of and propensities toward corruption through channels of culture, social values, and levels of public trust.⁶ Other studies show that religious internalisation is more important to understand than religious affiliation alone.⁷ This article therefore does not treat the spiritual element as a simple answer to corruption; rather, it views it as an internal factor that needs to be explored in order to understand how it fails to function as a moral control within public servants. Without spiritual awareness, trustworthiness, moral accountability, and self-control, anti-corruption strategies risk becoming overly mechanical and fail to address the root of corrupt behaviour. The exploration of the spiritual factors that influence public servants' involvement in corruption can therefore open new avenues for understanding corruption in a more holistic, humane, and contextual manner.

Literature Review

Corruption in the public sector is a complex phenomenon because it involves the convergence of power, opportunity, systemic weaknesses, organisational culture, and the internal condition of individuals. In governance studies, corruption is often understood as the abuse of entrusted power for private gain. However, this definition is inadequate if corruption is viewed merely as a procedural error or a breach of law. Jain explains that corruption is closely linked to the use of public power, personal incentives, and weaknesses in control mechanisms.⁸ Treisman shows that corruption is influenced by a country's institutional, historical, developmental, and political-cultural factors.⁹ Dimant and Tosato

⁶ Zelekha and Avnimelech, "Cultural and Personal Channels," 2 & 4-5.

⁷ Gokcekus and Ekici, "Religion, Religiosity, and Corruption," 573-578.

⁸ Arvind K. Jain, "Corruption: A Review," *Journal of Economic Surveys* 15.1 (2001), 73 & 77-79.

⁹ Treisman, "The Causes of Corruption: A Cross-National Study," *Journal of Public Economics* 76.3 (2000), 400-401 & 438-441.

note that scholarship on corruption originated in political, sociological, historical, and criminal law research, with economic analysis only emerging as a major focus in recent decades.¹⁰ Public servants' involvement in corruption must therefore be understood as a form of moral decision-making that occurs within a particular administrative environment, rather than merely as a criminal act isolated from human and organisational context.

Within the public sector, public servants occupy a strategic position because they manage policy, approvals, licenses, enforcement, procurement, assistance, and public resources. This position renders them susceptible to corruption risk when a combination of discretionary power, opportunity, pressure, and weak integrity is present. The anti-corruption literature shows that laws, audits, punishments, monitoring, and internal controls are indeed important, but such instruments are not always sufficient to prevent corruption if organizational culture and individuals' internal motivations do not change. Persson et al. argue that many anti-corruption reforms fail because, in certain contexts, corruption can no longer be understood merely as a problem of the trust relationship between those who delegate power and those who exercise it.¹¹ Instead, corruption must be seen as a collective action problem when individuals perceive integrity violations as widespread, normalized, and difficult to avoid. Peltier-Rivest similarly emphasizes that preventing corruption requires a comprehensive approach addressing root causes, opportunities, justifications, and control weaknesses.¹² This indicates that anti-corruption strategies cannot simply add more rules but must address the human dimension of decision-making within the system.

Discussion of human spiritual factors in corruption is crucial because corruption ultimately occurs through individual actions and choices. Knowledge of regulations, exposure to integrity training, and awareness of the risk of punishment do not necessarily guarantee integrity-driven behavior when material

¹⁰ Dimant and Tosato, "Causes and Effects of Corruption," 336.

¹¹ Anna Persson, Bo Rothstein, and Jan Teorell, "Why Anticorruption Reforms Fail: Systemic Corruption as a Collective Action Problem," *Governance* 26.3 (2013), 451-458.

¹² Dominic Peltier-Rivest, "A Model for Preventing Corruption," *Journal of Financial Crime* 25.2 (2018), 545-559.

incentives, life pressures, organizational opportunities, and moral rationalization outweigh self-control. Said et al.'s study of enforcement officers in Malaysia found that pressure, opportunity, and rationalization were positively associated with employee misconduct, while religiosity was negatively associated with it.¹³ This finding is important because it shows that internal elements such as religiosity can function as a moral control, while also needing to be read alongside other factors such as financial pressure and the opportunity to commit wrongdoing. In the field of misconduct prevention, Purnamasari and Amaliah likewise link workplace religiosity to the prevention of misconduct.¹⁴ Although misconduct and corruption are not entirely identical, both share important elements such as the abuse of trust, rationalization of wrongdoing, opportunity, self-interest, and weak integrity.

Spiritual elements refer to internalization that influences moral decisions, self-control, awareness of sin, the sense of being watched by God, trustworthiness, and accountability. In the workplace context, Koerber and Neck discuss how workplace religiosity may have implications for financial fraud and organizational decision-making.¹⁵ Albrecht, however, challenges this view, arguing that when all three elements of the Fraud Triangle are considered together, workplace religiosity overall reduces the risk of financial fraud, as its positive effects on pressure and rationalization outweigh the increased opportunity it may create.¹⁶ Such findings are important because they avoid the simplistic assumption that the presence of religious symbols or ritual practice will automatically eliminate corruption. The more important question, instead, is the extent to which spiritual values are genuinely internalized in workplace behavior.

¹³ Jamaliah Said et al., "Integrating Religiosity into Fraud Triangle Theory: Empirical Findings from Enforcement Officers," *Global Journal al-Thaqafah* 8, Special Issue (2018), 137-139.

¹⁴ Pupung Purnamasari and Ishaq Amaliah, "Fraud Prevention: Relevance to Religiosity and Spirituality in the Workplace," *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences* 211 (2015), 833-834.

¹⁵ Christopher P. Koerber and Christopher P. Neck, "Religion in the Workplace: Implications for Financial Fraud and Organizational Decision Making," *Journal of Management, Spirituality & Religion* 3.4 (2006), 305-306 & 310.

¹⁶ Conan Albrecht, "A Comment on Koerber and Neck's (2006) 'Religion in the Workplace: Implications for Financial Fraud and Organizational Decision Making,'" *Journal of Management, Spirituality & Religion* 4.1 (2007), 87-88 & 93.

Contemporary studies of spiritual intelligence in the workplace reinforce the need to examine internal dimensions in the prevention of misconduct. Abdullah et al. found that the spiritual quotient significantly strengthens the relationship between the governance internal control system and fraud prevention, though this moderating effect did not extend to the regional management information system, suggesting that spirituality operates more effectively in human-centred governance mechanisms than in automated reporting systems.¹⁷ Mahdi et al. examined spiritual intelligence as a moderator in fraud prevention and showed that spiritual factors can form part of a prevention framework, although their effect is not necessarily uniform across all relationships.¹⁸ Siregar et al. likewise show that workplace spirituality has a positive effect on fraud prevention in government accounting, whereas individual spiritual intelligence does not necessarily have a strong direct effect.¹⁹ These findings suggest that spirituality is more effective when present as a workplace culture, organizational value, and leadership practice, rather than merely as a personal trait separate from the system.

The relationship between religiosity and corruption likewise shows mixed findings. Beets examines the global relationship between religion and corruption²⁰, while Mensah shows that culture and religion can influence perceptions of corruption at the global level²¹. Gokcekus and Ekici distinguish between religion as affiliation and religiosity as internalization, demonstrating that the relationship between religiosity and corruption cannot be understood too simplistically.²² Valdovinos-Hernandez et al. argue that the role of religion in perceptions of corruption still requires

¹⁷ Muhammad Wahyuddin Abdullah, Hasanuddin Hanafie, and Andi Yusuf Mappamiring Bayan, "Internal Governance and Fraud Prevention System: The Potentiality of the Spiritual Quotient," *Journal of Governance & Regulation* 12.4 (2023), 55-56.

¹⁸ Salman Abdul Rachman Mahdi et al., "Determinants of Fraud Prevention with Spiritual Intelligence as Moderator," *Estudios de Economia Aplicada* 39.12 (2021), 11-13.

¹⁹ Hadi Ahmad Siregar et al., "Spiritual Intelligence, Workplace Spirituality, and Fraud Prevention: The Moderating Role of Women's Leadership in Government Accounting," *Management (Montevideo)* 3.271 (2025), 5-9.

²⁰ S. Douglas Beets, "Global Corruption and Religion: An Empirical Examination," *Journal of Global Ethics* 3.1 (2007), 82.

²¹ Mensah, "An Analysis of the Effect of Culture and Religion," 276.

²² Gokcekus and Ekici, "Religion, Religiosity, and Corruption," 573-578.

further research because earlier findings have not always been consistent.²³ Zelekha and Avnimelech add that religion and religiosity influence corruption through two main channels, namely cultural and personal channels.²⁴ In other words, religion can shape social norms and individual values, but its effect depends on how those values are translated into daily life and institutions.

Several other studies show that religion can interact with social and political systems differently depending on context. Sommer et al. discuss the relationship between religion, politics, and corruption, emphasizing that faith does not necessarily automatically limit immoral behavior in the political sphere.²⁵ North et al. show that the relationship between religion, corruption, and the rule of law needs to be understood together with institutional quality.²⁶ Marquette et al., in a study on India, emphasize that attitudes toward corruption can also become a collective action problem when social norms and expectations regarding others' behavior influence individual positions.²⁷ Xu et al. show that religious culture, functioning as an informal institution, is negatively associated with bureaucratic corruption in China, and that this effect is stronger in provinces with weaker legal enforcement, suggesting a substitution relationship between religious constraint and formal legal supervision.²⁸ Kodila-Tedika further shows that religious symbols or moral heritage are not necessarily directly associated with lower levels of corruption.²⁹ All these findings emphasize that research on spirituality and corruption must avoid overly simplistic claims.

²³ Valdovinos-Hernandez, Szymanski, and Grabowska, "Mea Culpa," 55.

²⁴ Zelekha and Avnimelech, "Cultural and Personal Channels," 4-5.

²⁵ Udi Sommer, Pazit Ben-Nun Bloom, and Gizem Arikan, "Does Faith Limit Immorality? The Politics of Religion and Corruption," *Democratization* 20.2 (2013), 302-303.

²⁶ Charles M. North, Wafa Hakim Orman, and Carl R. Gwin, "Religion, Corruption, and the Rule of Law," *Journal of Money, Credit and Banking* 45.5 (2013), 758 & 777.

²⁷ Heather Marquette, Vinod Pavarala, and Kanchan K. Malik, "Religion and Attitudes towards Corruption in India: A Collective Action Problem?," *Development in Practice* 24.7 (2014), 863-864.

²⁸ Xixiong Xu, Yaoqin Li, Xing Liu, and Wei Gan, "Does Religion Matter to Corruption? Evidence from China," *China Economic Review* 42 (2017), 40.

²⁹ Oasis Kodila-Tedika, "Religion and Corruption: Are There Any Saints?," *Economics of Governance* 27.7 (2026), 10-37.

Based on the literature reviewed, an important gap can be identified. Much corruption research remains focused on institutional, enforcement, economic, cultural, and control-system factors. Studies on religion and corruption, meanwhile, largely use macro-level data, perception indices, or cross-national analyses. While such approaches are important, they explain less about how those involved in the integrity and enforcement ecosystem understand the spiritual factors that influence public servants' involvement in corruption. In the Malaysian context, Said et al.'s study makes an important contribution because it involves enforcement officers, but its focus remains within a quantitative framework of misconduct and religiosity.³⁰ There is therefore still a need to explore spiritual factors in greater depth, particularly among public servants as policy implementers and holders of public trust.

A conceptual framework that may be considered in this article is one that links spiritual factors to the propensity to engage in corruption through moral and spiritual mechanisms. Within this framework, spiritual factors may encompass trustworthiness, consciousness of the Divine, the sense of being watched by God, internalization of the lawful and the unlawful, self-control, the sense of sin, honesty, and moral accountability. These factors do not necessarily act directly; rather, they influence how a person evaluates opportunities for corruption, resists material impulses, rejects rationalization, and understands public office as a trust. At the same time, organizational context, such as work culture, leadership, pressure, control weaknesses, and the normalization of integrity violations, can strengthen or weaken the functioning of these spiritual mechanisms. In other words, spiritual elements may serve as an internal bastion, but that bastion can be weakened when an organization allows a culture of misconduct to develop unchecked. This framework is anchored within the Fraud Triangle, Cressey, which identifies pressure, opportunity, and rationalization as the three conditions enabling corruption. The present article extends this framework by positioning spiritual mechanisms as internal moderators of all three vertices: spiritual fragility amplifies susceptibility to pressure and rationalization, while a strong spiritual bastion reduces an individual's

³⁰ Said et al., "Integrating Religiosity into Fraud Triangle Theory," 135-138.

responsiveness to both. This extension constitutes the theoretical contribution of the article.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research method to explore the spiritual factors that influence public servants' involvement in corrupt behavior. The choice of a qualitative method is consistent with the nature of the study, which aims to understand meaning, interpretation, professional experience, and the moral considerations of participants regarding the phenomenon under investigation. Qualitative research is suitable when researchers wish to examine a social issue in depth, particularly when that issue involves human experience, context, values, and processes of meaning-making that cannot be adequately explained through numbers alone³¹. In the context of this article, corruption is viewed not merely as a violation of law or a weakness in the administrative system, but as a human behavior that is also related to internal aspects such as trustworthiness, self-control, the sense of sin, consciousness of the Divine, and moral accountability. The qualitative approach, therefore, enables this study to gain an understanding closer to the perspectives of participants who possess knowledge and experience related to issues of integrity, enforcement, discipline, and public sector governance.

The design of this study is a Basic Qualitative Inquiry. This design was chosen because the study's objectives are to identify the spiritual factors that influence public servants' involvement in corruption and to analyze how these factors influence public servants' propensity to engage in corrupt behavior. Basic Qualitative Inquiry is appropriate when researchers wish to understand how participants interpret a phenomenon, how they make meaning of their experiences or observations, and how that meaning can be systematically described in the form of study themes³². This design also gives researchers the flexibility to focus

³¹ John W. Creswell and Cheryl N. Poth, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing among Five Approaches*, 4th ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2018), 12; Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln, eds., *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 5th ed. (Thousand Oaks: SAGE, 2018), 9; Sharan B. Merriam and Elizabeth J. Tisdell, *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation*, 4th ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2016), 6.

³² Merriam and Tisdell, *Qualitative Research*, 22.

on descriptive and interpretive understanding without being fully bound to a specific approach, such as phenomenology, ethnography, case study, or grounded theory.³³ In this article, the research aim is neither to formally build a new theory as in grounded theory, nor to comprehensively examine organizational culture as in ethnography. Rather, this study aims to explore participants' views and explanations regarding the spiritual factors associated with corrupt behavior among public servants. Basic Qualitative Inquiry is, therefore, most appropriate because it enables the researcher to produce an understanding that is clear, focused, and grounded in interview data.

The principal method of data collection was semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews were chosen because they provide a balance between the researcher's control over the focus of the study and participants' freedom to elaborate their views in depth. In qualitative research, interviews are an effective method for understanding participants' perspectives, particularly when the issue under study involves views, experiences, values, and interpretations of a social phenomenon.³⁴ The interview protocol was developed based on the title, problem statements, and objectives of the study. Among the focal points of the interview questions were participants' understanding of corruption among public servants, spiritual factors that may weaken integrity, the relationship between trustworthiness and abuse of power, the effect of neglecting religious values on moral decisions, and how factors such as self-control, the sense of sin, and consciousness of the Divine may influence a person's propensity to accept or reject corruption. This approach is consistent with Patton's view that qualitative interviews enable researchers to obtain rich, deep, and contextual information from participants who possess direct experience or knowledge of the issue under study.³⁵

³³ Creswell and Poth, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design*, 84; Michael Quinn Patton, *Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods: Integrating Theory and Practice*, 4th ed. (Thousand Oaks: SAGE, 2015), 121.

³⁴ Irving Seidman, *Interviewing as Qualitative Research: A Guide for Researchers in Education and the Social Sciences*, 3rd ed. (New York: Teachers College Press, 2006), 14; David Silverman, *Doing Qualitative Research*, 5th ed. (London: SAGE, 2017), 89; Steven J. Taylor, Robert Bogdan, and Marjorie L. DeVault, *Introduction to Qualitative Research Methods: A Guidebook and Resource*, 4th ed. (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2016), 102.

³⁵ Patton, *Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods*, 426.

This study employed purposive sampling. This strategy was chosen because qualitative research does not aim to obtain a statistically representative sample of the population, but instead selects participants able to provide rich, relevant, and in-depth information regarding the phenomenon under study.³⁶ The target population of the study comprised officers of government agencies who possess knowledge, work experience, or professional exposure to issues of corruption, integrity, public service, discipline, and enforcement. A total of ten participants were interviewed, comprising two officers from the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission, two officers from the Institute of Integrity Malaysia, three officers from the Public Service Department, and three officers from the Royal Malaysia Police. The selection of participants from these four agencies was appropriate because each agency offers a distinct yet complementary perspective. The Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission represents the aspects of corruption prevention and enforcement, the Institute of Integrity Malaysia represents the cultivation of integrity, the Public Service Department represents public service governance, while the Royal Malaysia Police represents enforcement and institutional discipline. Participants were selected based on three explicit criteria: (1) a minimum of five years of direct service in roles involving integrity enforcement, anti-corruption policy, public service governance, or institutional discipline; (2) current or recent involvement in integrity-related training, investigation, or advisory functions; and (3) willingness to engage in substantive reflection on the moral and spiritual dimensions of public sector conduct. These criteria ensured that participants possessed the professional depth necessary to address the study's objectives.

A sample size of ten is reasonable in the context of this study because participants were selected based on criteria of expertise and information relevance rather than on a large number. In qualitative research, the adequacy of a sample is typically determined by the depth of the data, information saturation, the

³⁶ Merriam and Tisdell, *Qualitative Research*, 96; Patton, *Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods*, 311; Sarah J. Tracy, *Qualitative Research Methods: Collecting Evidence, Crafting Analysis, Communicating Impact* (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 134.

suitability of participants to the study's objectives, and the data's capacity to answer the research questions.³⁷ Given that this study has a specific focus, namely the spiritual factors in public servants' involvement in corruption, the selection of ten participants from relevant agencies was considered adequate to obtain in-depth data. Furthermore, the Basic Qualitative Inquiry design does not require a large number of participants as would a quantitative survey. What is more important is that the selected participants genuinely understand the issue under study and are able to provide rich explanations of the phenomenon. Data saturation was monitored throughout the collection process. By the eighth interview, no substantially new codes were emerging across the four thematic domains, and the final two interviews served primarily to confirm and reinforce existing themes, supporting the adequacy of the ten participant sample.

Data analysis was conducted manually through a process of coding and thematic analysis using Microsoft Word. After the interviews were conducted, the recordings were transcribed verbatim. The transcripts were then read repeatedly to enable the researcher to understand the data as a whole before commencing the coding process. The coding process involved marking data segments relevant to the study's objectives, assigning code labels to key ideas, grouping codes with similar meanings, and forming the main themes that explain the spiritual factors in corrupt behavior. This approach is consistent with Miles and colleagues, who emphasize the importance of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing in qualitative analysis³⁸. Saldana similarly explains that codes function as analytical tools that help researchers manage, organize, and interpret qualitative data systematically.³⁹

Thematic analysis was chosen because this method is suitable for identifying patterns of meaning in interview data and for constructing themes directly related to the research questions.

³⁷ Creswell and Poth, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design*, 156; Patton, *Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods*, 311; Robert K. Yin, *Qualitative Research from Start to Finish*, 2nd ed. (New York: Guilford Press, 2016), 92.

³⁸ Matthew B. Miles, A. Michael Huberman, and Johnny Saldana, *Qualitative Data Analysis: A Methods Sourcebook*, 3rd ed. (Thousand Oaks: SAGE, 2014), 12.

³⁹ Johnny Saldana, *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*, 2nd ed. (London: SAGE, 2013), 4.

In this article, the themes anticipated to emerge were expected to relate to weaknesses in trustworthiness, neglect of the sense of sin, lack of consciousness of the Divine, rationalization of corruption, weak self-control, and the gap between religious knowledge and actual behavior. However, the final themes were not determined absolutely in advance but were instead constructed based on participant data. The use of Microsoft Word for manual analysis was appropriate given that the size of the study's data was manageable and involved only ten interview transcripts. Manual coding allowed the researcher to read the data closely, mark important quotations, build code tables, write analytic memos, and re-examine the relationships between codes and themes. Bazeley and Richards emphasize that qualitative analysis depends not only on software but on clarity of analytical thinking, rigor in reading the data, and the researcher's consistency in constructing interpretation.⁴⁰ The use of Microsoft Word was therefore adequate, provided that the analysis process was conducted systematically, transparently, and with a clear audit trail. To strengthen analytical rigor, intercoder reliability was established by having a second researcher independently code approximately twenty percent of the transcripts (two of ten). Codes and themes were then compared and discussed until consensus was reached, with discrepancies resolved through re-examination of the source data. In addition, member checking was conducted by sharing a summary of the emergent themes with three participants, who confirmed that the themes accurately reflected their intended meanings. These procedures support the credibility and confirmability of the findings.

Ethical considerations were observed throughout the study because the topic of corruption is sensitive and involves participants from government agencies. Prior to data collection, the researcher obtained ethical approval from the relevant research ethics committee. All participants were informed of the purpose of the study, the nature of their involvement, their right to withdraw, the confidentiality of information, and how the data would be used in academic writing. Informed consent was obtained before the

⁴⁰ Pat Bazeley, *Qualitative Data Analysis: Practical Strategies* (London: SAGE, 2013), 6; Lyn Richards, *Handling Qualitative Data: A Practical Guide*, 3rd ed. (London: SAGE, 2015), 33.

interviews were conducted. The names, specific positions, and any identifying information of participants are not disclosed in the study report. Instead, participants are identified by codes such as P1, P2, and so on. This step is consistent with the principles of social research ethics, which emphasize informed consent, confidentiality, participant protection, and researcher accountability regarding collected data.⁴¹

The validity and reliability of the data in this study were addressed through the concept of trustworthiness. In qualitative research, the quality of a study is typically assessed through credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, rather than through statistical measures as in quantitative research.⁴² The credibility of the study was strengthened through the selection of participants with direct knowledge of integrity and corruption issues, the use of semi-structured interviews, verbatim transcription, and repeated reading of the data. Transferability was supported through a description of the study context, including the Malaysian setting, the focus on public servants, and the profile of participating agencies. Dependability was strengthened through a clear analytical procedure, including the use of code tables, analytic memos, and systematic theme organization. Confirmability was achieved by ensuring that the researcher's interpretations were consistently supported by participant data excerpts rather than relying solely on the researcher's assumptions.

Results

Based on the analysis of interview questions and transcripts involving ten participants from the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission (SPRM), the Institute of Integrity Malaysia (IIM), the Public Service Department (JPA), and the Royal Malaysia Police (PDRM), the findings show that public servants' involvement in corruption cannot be explained by a single factor. Participants repeatedly linked corruption to a combination of three intersecting layers: first, the existence of space and opportunity within the

⁴¹ Denzin and Lincoln, eds., *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 121; Kevin Love, ed., *Ethics in Social Research* (Bingley: Emerald Group Publishing, 2012), 45; Silverman, *Doing Qualitative Research*, 154.

⁴² Creswell and Poth, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design*, 261; Merriam and Tisdell, *Qualitative Research*, 242.

system; second, material drivers such as debt, lifestyle, and status; and third, the weakness of an internal bastion that is spiritual and moral in nature. In other words, structure opens the pathway, but an individual's spiritual condition determines whether that pathway will be used to deviate or not. The interview questions themselves were directed toward factors of corruption, the role of religion, spiritual wellbeing, integrity, and the effectiveness of national strategies, and the transcripts as a whole show that participants consistently addressed this issue from both external and internal angles simultaneously.

The most striking observation is that participants did not deny the importance of systems, enforcement, audits, job rotation, the OACP, the ABMS, the NACP, or the NACS. However, they were nearly unanimous in agreeing that these external instruments are insufficient if not supported by internal controls within public servants. PDRM and SPRM participants spoke directly about religiosity, weakness of faith, the sense of sin, regarding work as worship, and fear of divine retribution. JPA participants, meanwhile, manifested a more morally experiential form of internal bastion, such as the feeling of "being watched," the blessing (*keberkatan*) of one's sustenance, and long-term thinking up to retirement. IIM participants emphasized that corruption often begins when "space and opportunity" meet a "mentality of wanting luxury" and a culture that causes people to begin viewing misconduct as ordinary.

Another important observation is that the spiritual factor found in the data is not limited to religious rituals. It appeared in broader forms such as trustworthiness, honesty, blessing (*keberkatan*), the sense of being watched, fear of losing dignity, fear of bringing shame upon one's family, shame before God, and the view that public office is a responsibility that must not be tainted. Accordingly, "spiritual factor" in this study is more accurately understood as an internal condition that shapes moral judgment, rather than merely a religious identity or outward practice. This finding is important because it distinguishes between religion as a symbol and spirituality as an internal resilience against corruption.

Table 1: Coding results and the themes that emerged from the transcripts

Theme	Main Codes	Analytical Meaning	Interview Excerpts
Institutional space and loosened controls	space and opportunity; loophole; lack of job rotation; unchecked power; vendor communication; procedural weakness	A loose system does not automatically produce corruption, but it provides conditions that make misconduct possible	“space and opportunity”; “no job rotation”; “procurement... a place with space and opportunity”
Material pressure and moral rationalization	low salary; debt; luxury lifestyle; greed; materialism; reciprocity (balas budi); side income	Economic pressure and social desire become justifications that legitimize the acceptance of corruption	“grade N11 but want to live like N48”; “mentality of wanting luxury”; “the trait of greed”; “reciprocity (balas budi)”
Spiritual fragility as a risk facilitator	lack of religious internalisation; weak faith; absence of the sense of sin; work not regarded as worship; no fear of retribution	Internal weaknesses make external opportunities and pressures more easily translated into corrupt action	“lack of religious internalization”; “weakness of faith”; “work as a form of worship”
The spiritual-integrity bastion as a protective mechanism	trustworthiness; honesty; blessing (keberkatan); sense of being watched; fear of consequences; willingness to report; leadership by example	Internalized spirituality functions as a deterrent mechanism and even encourages reporting and rejection of corruption	“I just think of the blessing”; “I want the blessing”; “rejecting corruption”; “the feeling of being watched”
Institutional space and	space and opportunity; loophole; lack of	A loose system does not automatically	“space and opportunity”; “no job rotation”;

loosened controls	job rotation; unchecked power; vendor communication; procedural weakness	produce corruption, but it provides conditions that make misconduct possible	“procurement... a place with space and opportunity”
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Institutional Space and Loosened Controls

The first theme shows that most participants began their explanations with external factors, particularly space and opportunity. In the IIM interview, participants explicitly stated that the main driver was not salary alone, but “opportunity and space,” that is, situations where procedures exist but enforcement is weak, reviews are irregular, and officers who remain too long in sensitive positions become overly familiar with the “loops” of the system. JPA participants also acknowledged that areas such as procurement, scholarships, pensions, and certain administrative matters do contain potential “space and opportunity,” although they emphasized that JPA as an organization does not directly record internal corruption cases. SPRM, meanwhile, identified the failure of internal organizational controls and the absence of job rotation as among the important causes, while PDRM linked field officers’ exposure, enforcement power, and discretionary space to integrity violation risk.

Interestingly, although participants spoke extensively about structure, they never stopped at structure itself. Almost every response contained the idea that space only becomes dangerous when it meets a person whose self-control is weak. In this sense, structure is not the final cause but a catalyst. This is why IIM participants emphasized that technology or digitalization alone does not close every door, because people can still manipulate the system through relationships, insider information, or shell companies. This theme shows that organizational factors must be read together with spiritual factors, not separately.

Material Pressure and Moral Rationalization

The second theme reveals that participants distinguished between lower-level and higher-level corruption. For junior officers, several participants linked misconduct to economic pressure, the

cost of urban living, debt, and efforts to obtain additional income. In the JPA interview, a participant mentioned that the support-group staff “quite struggle” to live in the city, leading some to falsify overtime claims or commit minor financial misconduct. However, for high-ranking cases, the explanation changes. The JPA participants themselves acknowledged that when it involves the “big fish,” the main factor relates more to “the trait of greed” and the effort to maintain a “luxurious lifestyle.” This finding aligns with SPRM’s explanation that one of the highest-ranking causes is the desire to live luxuriously, sharply expressed as the desire for “grade N11 but want to live like N48,” followed by low salary and heavy debt burdens. IIM also cited the “mentality of wanting luxury” as an important driver. PDRM, meanwhile, used the terms “materialistic” and “luxury lifestyle.”

More important than the material element itself is how participants explained moral rationalization. In the SPRM transcript, participants referred to a culture of “reciprocity” (*balas budi*), a situation in which a person does not view a gift as corruption but as an ordinary reward. IIM mentioned the feeling of “why can the boss do it, but I can’t,” reflecting social comparison and the influence of negative role models. JPA stated that the practice begins with small things, such as hospitality, hotel meals, gifts, or overly close relationships with contractors, before growing larger. Analytically, this theme shows that involvement in corruption occurs gradually. It usually does not begin with a large sum of cash, but with a process of habituation that blunts moral sensitivity. At this point, the spiritual element becomes crucially important because what erodes first is not intellectual capacity but a sense of revulsion toward wrongdoing.

Spiritual Fragility as a Risk Facilitator

The third theme is the one most closely connected to the article’s objective. Across all transcripts, although using different languages, participants linked corruption to internal fragility. PDRM directly mentioned “self-factors and religious adherence,” followed by descriptions of irresponsibility, greed, materialism, failure to control desire, and ultimately “weakness of faith” that leaves a person “unafraid of retribution.” SPRM stated that a study they referenced found that 77% associated symptoms of

corruption with “lack of religious internalization.” One SPRM participant posed an analytically powerful question: “when we feel that work is a form of worship, do you think we would still take corruption?” This question shifts the focus from law to the meaning of work itself. Corruption, according to this participant, occurs when work is divorced from worship, trustworthiness, and the values of sin and reward.

Findings from JPA and IIM reinforce this theme, albeit using more experience-based vocabulary. In JPA, participants acknowledged that what prevents them from abusing space is fear, the feeling of “being watched,” and considerations of blessing (*keberkatan*) and one’s career trajectory up to retirement. In IIM, an example of an officer who refused corruption was grounded in the principle that he “already receives a salary” and wants “blessing,” not immediate luxury. All these expressions show that spirituality in the data is not necessarily expressed in formal theological terms but operates as a system of meaning that connects work with trustworthiness, sustenance with blessing, and daily choices with consequences in the afterlife and one’s personal dignity. Here lies the core of the finding: the spiritual factor influencing corruption is a weakness in the internalization of moral and religious meaning in work, not merely an absence of knowledge.

The Spiritual-Integrity Bastion as a Protective Mechanism

The fourth theme shows the opposite side of the third theme. Participants spoke not only of why people engage in corruption, but also of why some public servants reject it even when given the opportunity. In the IIM interview, a clear example was given: a figure who had long held a senior position chose to reject an approach because he held to the principle of “I have already been given a salary” and “I want blessing.” In JPA, a participant who had managed procurement emphasized that one major bastion is limiting communication with contractors, and the personal consideration that “I just think of the blessing,” together with the awareness that a career must be safeguarded until retirement. In PDRM, the agency does not merely talk about rejecting corruption but builds a culture of recognition for it through incentives and the “Corruption Rejection Ceremony” (*Majlis Tolak Rasuah*); this

shows that the rejection of corruption is regarded as a moral achievement worthy of celebration. SPRM raised the example of a district council officer who handed over an envelope containing money to the authorities and cooperated in the resulting arrest.

What is striking is that this bastion always appears as a combination of inner elements and organizational support. Trustworthiness, honesty, blessing (*keberkatan*), the sense of being watched, fear of consequences, family, and good leadership do not stand alone. Participants repeatedly linked them to training, reporting channels, recognition, integrity modules, audits, and supervisory oversight. This means that the spirituality that is effective in preventing corruption is not abstract spirituality, but spirituality that is lived out within workplace culture. In other words, the spiritual factor influences the propensity toward corruption not only because it instills fear, but because it builds an integrity identity that is then supported by the system.

Discussion

The findings of this study show that corruption among public servants is most accurately understood as the result of an encounter between organizational conditions and the condition of the soul. Participants from all agencies acknowledged that corruption is unlikely to occur without institutional space such as loose procedures, weak audits, dysfunctional job rotation, or excessively concentrated power. At the same time, however, they also emphasized that not everyone within that space will take corruption. That difference, in their view, is determined by the strength or weakness of the internal bastion. Here, the spiritual factor becomes the crucial variable that distinguishes between opportunity and action.

One important contribution of these findings is the discovery that participants' spiritual language took two forms. The first form is explicitly religious language, such as faith, religiosity, sin, reward, worship, and retribution. The second is moral-practical language, such as trustworthiness, honesty, blessing, pension, family, and the sense of being watched. Both forms actually point to the same domain, namely the formation of self-control that prevents public servants from rationalizing corruption. This carries the implication that anti-corruption efforts seeking to

incorporate a spiritual dimension cannot stop at religious lectures that remain merely external. They must build a connection between internal values and daily decisions in the workplace, including in procurement, enforcement, approvals, and dealings with the public. This dual-register pattern constitutes a theoretically significant finding that extends existing literature. Gokcekus and Ekici distinguish between religion as affiliation and religiosity as internalization, but their framework operates at the level of identity. The present findings reveal a further distinction at the level of practice, where internalized spirituality manifests through two registers rather than one. This suggests that anti-corruption practitioners should attend to both registers when designing integrity interventions, rather than assuming that formal religious training alone will activate the moral mechanisms that inhibit corruption.

These findings also provide a more nuanced understanding of the longstanding debate over whether corruption occurs because of the system or because of the individual. Based on the data, the answer is not either one, but both. A poor system enlarges opportunity, but a fragile soul grants moral permission to act. Conversely, a strong soul can resist corruption even when opportunity exists, yet if the system is too weak, the pressure on individuals of integrity becomes greater. This article, therefore, has strong grounds to argue that the spiritual dimension should be seen as a complement to law and administration, not as a substitute for them. Mapped onto the Fraud Triangle, the findings show a consistent pattern: spiritual fragility does not create pressure or opportunity, but it amplifies susceptibility to both. When a public servant lacks consciousness of divine accountability, the rationalization vertex becomes especially porous, as the moral filter that would reject “this is just a gift” or “everyone does it” no longer operates. Conversely, strong spiritual resilience functions as a counter-rationalization mechanism, reframing corrupt opportunities as threats to blessing (*keberkatan*), family honor, and career integrity. This operationalizes the spiritual dimension within an established theoretical framework.

Several unexpected findings also emerged. First, an increase in arrest or complaint statistics was not always interpreted by participants as a sign of total failure of anti-corruption policy.

IIM participants in particular suggested that an increase in figures might also indicate that people are increasingly willing to report that whistle-blower channels are increasingly used, and that detection systems are increasingly active. This is important because it rejects an overly linear reading in which rising numbers necessarily mean that interventions have failed entirely.

Second, the issue of salary emerged in a manner that was contradictory yet consistent across hierarchical levels. For junior officers or staff, economic pressure was indeed cited as a real factor. JPA emphasized the cost of urban living and small-scale financial fraud; SPRM also listed low salaries and debt burdens. However, for large-scale corruption, participants no longer highlighted poverty, but instead greed, luxury lifestyles, and social status. This means that material factors do not operate uniformly; they change according to position, rank, and level of access to power.

Third, religious identity or appearance is not a guarantee of integrity. SPRM's findings were particularly clear, with participants noting that religious teaching is indeed important, but that "faith fluctuates," and that individuals who outwardly appear to represent religion can also be among those caught in corruption. This finding is important because it separates religious symbolism from the internalization that genuinely shapes moral decisions. Theoretically, this strengthens the argument that what matters in corruption prevention is not merely outward religiosity, but the internalization of spiritual values in workplace conduct.

Fourth, although JPA stated that its organization does not directly record internal corruption cases, participants nevertheless identified many vulnerable points, such as procurement, scholarships, pensions, support letters, and approval processes. This finding is notable because it shows that the absence of recorded cases does not necessarily mean the absence of risk. Accordingly, a culture of integrity and spirituality still needs to be cultivated even in organizations that appear "safe."

Conclusion

This study concludes that public servants' involvement in corruption cannot be explained solely through weaknesses in law, policy, or the administrative system. Although various anti-

corruption initiatives have been implemented, the issue of corruption in the public sector continues to demonstrate the need for a more holistic approach. Corruption is not merely a question of system failure or procedural laxity but is also related to the internal dimension of individuals that shapes how they evaluate trust, power, responsibility, and moral risk. This article, therefore, emphasizes that spiritual factors deserve attention as one important lens for understanding why a public servant becomes involved in corruption or chooses to reject it, even when situated within the same space of opportunity.

Four main themes were identified: institutional space and loosened controls, material pressure and moral rationalization, spiritual fragility as a risk facilitator, and the spiritual-integrity bastion as a protective mechanism. The first theme shows that corruption occurs more easily when there are weaknesses in internal controls, lax procedures, insufficient job rotation, uncontrolled communication with stakeholders, and unmonitored use of discretionary power. However, such institutional space does not automatically produce corruption. Corruption occurs when space and opportunity meet material drivers, life pressures, self-interest, and weak self-control.

Material factors such as financial burdens, debt, perceived insufficient salary, luxury lifestyles, greed, and materialism can drive a person toward corruption. However, material factors do not stand alone. They are often accompanied by a process of moral rationalization, in which an individual begins to justify wrongdoing as a small gift, a form of reciprocity, ordinary assistance, or a practice that has become accepted in the workplace culture. This process makes corruption appear less serious, more acceptable, and ultimately more difficult to reject. Under these conditions, spiritual weakness accelerates the risk of corruption because the individual no longer perceives the act as a breach of trust, a sin, a betrayal of public responsibility, or a violation of the public's rights.

Spiritual elements can function as a bastion of integrity. Values such as trustworthiness, the sense of being watched by God, fear of sin, awareness of consequences in this world and the next, contentment with lawful sustenance, family dignity, and the understanding that work is a form of worship can build a stronger

internal control. Spirituality in this context is not a substitute for law, enforcement, audits, or institutional reform. Rather, spirituality serves as a complement that strengthens the internal dimension of public servants, so that they not only comply because they are being watched but also reject corruption because they hold a living moral conviction.

The findings also offer a more mature understanding of the longstanding debate over whether corruption occurs because of the system or because of the individual. Based on the data, the answer is not either/or, but both. A poor system enlarges opportunity, but a fragile soul grants moral permission to act. Conversely, a strong soul can resist corruption even when opportunity exists, yet if the system is too weak, the pressure on individuals of integrity becomes greater. This article, therefore, has a strong basis for arguing that the spiritual dimension should be seen as complementary to law and administration, not as a replacement for them.

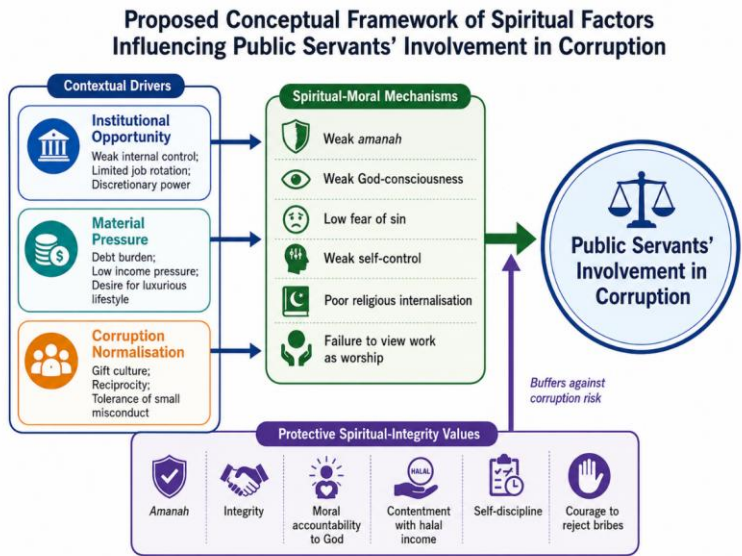
The main contribution of this article is to extend the discourse on corruption through a spiritual approach. This article demonstrates that corruption cannot be adequately understood solely as a matter of systems, regulations, or governance weaknesses, but must also be read as a matter of the soul, values, and moral accountability. In the context of public servants, loose institutional space, material pressure, and a workplace culture that normalises misconduct can act as catalysts for corruption when not balanced by the strength of trustworthiness, consciousness of the Divine, and self-control. Accordingly, corruption prevention cannot rely solely on external enforcement but must also be supported by internal development that shapes the meaning of work as worship, the courage to reject wrongdoing, and a sense of responsibility toward lawfully earned sustenance. More specifically, this article makes two original contributions to the corruption literature. First, it identifies a dual-register pattern in the articulation of spiritual resilience among Malaysian public servants: an explicitly religious register (sin, divine retribution, work as worship) and a moral-practical register (blessing, family dignity, career integrity). This distinction extends the affiliation-versus-internalization typology of Gokcekus and Ekici into a practice-level framework applicable to workplace integrity

contexts. Second, it maps spiritual mechanisms onto the Fraud Triangle by demonstrating that spiritual fragility amplifies susceptibility to pressure and rationalization, while spiritual resilience functions as a counter-rationalization mechanism. This mapping provides a theoretically grounded basis for designing anti-corruption programs that address the internal moral dimension alongside structural and enforcement reforms.

Based on these arguments, this article proposes a conceptual model linking external factors, internal mechanisms, and spiritual-integrity protective values in explaining public servants' propensity toward corruption. This model helps to show that corruption occurs through the interaction between opportunity, pressure, and normalization at the organizational level, and the spiritual condition of the individual. In other words, contextual factors provide the space and impetus, while spiritual mechanisms determine whether a public servant tends to accept, rationalize, or reject corruption. At the same time, protective values such as trustworthiness, integrity, accountability to God, contentment (*qana'ah*) with lawful sustenance, self-discipline, and moral courage serve as an internal bastion that complements existing enforcement and governance systems.

As shown in Figure 1, the left side of the model presents three principal drivers of corruption: Institutional Opportunity, Material Pressure, and Corruption Normalization. Institutional Opportunity refers to the institutional space that allows corruption to occur, such as weaknesses in internal controls, inconsistent oversight, and the absence of job rotation. Material Pressure encompasses financial pressure, debt burdens, and the drive toward a luxury lifestyle that may increase a person's vulnerability to corruption. Corruption Normalization describes a condition in which minor misconduct, gift-giving cultures, and ethical compromises are regarded as ordinary in the work environment. These three factors, in turn, influence the Spiritual-Moral Mechanisms, the internal mechanisms that determine a person's propensity to accept or reject corruption. These mechanisms encompass weak trustworthiness, low consciousness of the Divine, a diminished sense of sin, weak self-control, shallow religious internalization, and the failure to regard work as worship.

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of Spiritual Factors Influencing Public Servants' Involvement in Corruption⁴³



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Artificial Intelligence (AI) Declaration

The authors acknowledge the use of AI-assisted tools in the creation of this manuscript. ChatGPT (OpenAI) helped with language polishing and organizing content, while Google Translate and Grammarly were used for translation and editing. All AI-generated output was carefully reviewed and proofread by the authors. They are responsible for all aspects of the content, including accuracy, originality, and ethical compliance.

⁴³ This figure was generated using ChatGPT on 25 May 2026.

⁴⁴ Fundamental Research Grant Scheme (FRGS) 2023, grant reference FRGS/1/2023/SSI13/UM/02/9, Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia.

Ethics Approval

This study has obtained ethical approval from the Universiti Malaya Research Ethics Committee (UMREC) under the reference number UM.TNC2/UMREC_3817. All procedures were performed in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional research committee.

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