

Strengthening bureaucratic ethics to prevent abuse of power in public administration

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Abstract: This study discusses strengthening bureaucratic ethics as a strategic effort to prevent abuse of power in public administration. The main issue raised is the continued prevalence of ethical violations within the bureaucracy, such as practices of collusion, nepotism, and corruption that erode public trust in the government. Theoretically, this study is based on the theory of public ethics and good governance, which emphasize the importance of moral values, accountability, and transparency in carrying out state administrative functions. The research method used is a qualitative descriptive approach with data collection techniques through literature studies, policy document analysis, and studies of cases of abuse of authority in the public sector. The results show that strengthening bureaucratic ethics can be achieved through internalizing integrity values, ethics training for civil servants, implementing a strict code of ethics, and establishing an effective oversight system. In addition, leadership with integrity and an organizational culture oriented towards public service are key factors in preventing abuse of power. In conclusion, strengthening bureaucratic ethics is the main foundation in realizing a clean, just, and trusted government.

Keywords: *Abuse of Power, Bureaucratic Ethics, Integrity*

1. Introduction

This article seeks to provide a specific theoretical contribution to the study of public administration ethics by emphasizing the relationship between the internalization of ethical values, leadership with integrity, and the quality of bureaucratic governance. Conceptually, the article develops an analytical framework that integrates individual (official morality), organizational (culture and oversight mechanisms), and external environmental (political pressure, regulations, and sanctions) dimensions to explain how bureaucratic ethics can prevent abuse of power and enhance accountability. With this approach, the article not only emphasizes the importance of codes of ethics as formal norms but also explains the dynamics of their implementation in public administration practice, as well as their implications for legitimacy and public trust. This contribution enriches the literature by offering an interdisciplinary perspective that links ethics, leadership, and governance as an analytical whole that is applicable and relevant to public policy.

According to recent academic literature, several dominant factors contribute to the weak internalization of ethics in government institutions, resulting in suboptimal administrative practices and public service delivery. First, low levels of individual morality and integrity among civil servants—including intentions, motivation, and self-control—often underlie unethical behavior, as internal officials lack a genuine understanding of ethical values in their daily actions, leading to a tendency to prioritize personal interests over the public interest. Second, weak organizational culture and internal oversight, where ethical control, accountability, and professional training are often inadequate or inconsistently implemented, create opportunities for abuse of power and fraud. Third, external factors such as political pressure, the lack of a robust legal system, and unclear sanctions also contribute to low commitment to codes of ethics, as officials do not feel bound or effectively supervised. These factors interact, so internalizing ethics is not simply a matter of understanding the rules but also requires a transformation of

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the organizational culture to sustainably support integrity. Bureaucratic ethics are the moral foundation that determines the direction and quality of governance. In the context of public administration, the bureaucracy functions as the implementer of state policy and as a liaison between the government and the public (Rokhman et al., 2023). Ideally, the bureaucracy operates based on the values of honesty, justice, responsibility, and service. However, in practice, the bureaucracy in Indonesia still faces various ethical issues such as abuse of power, corruption, collusion, and nepotism (KKN), and weak integrity within state officials. This phenomenon not only undermines public trust in the government but also hinders the achievement of the primary goal of public administration, namely fair, efficient, and welfare-oriented services (Maria & Halim, 2021).

Abuse of power within the bureaucracy arises when the authority granted to public officials is used not for the public interest, but rather for the benefit of individuals or specific groups. This is often triggered by weak internal controls, an organizational culture that is permissive of ethical violations, and the ineffective implementation of a bureaucratic code of ethics (Sulfiyah et al., 2023). Yet, an ethical bureaucracy is a prerequisite for the realization of clean and accountable governance. Therefore, strengthening bureaucratic ethics is an urgent need to prevent abuse of power and improve the image and performance of public administration in Indonesia. Throughout the history of bureaucratic reform, the Indonesian government has attempted various improvements, from establishing a code of ethics for civil servants (ASN), increasing internal oversight, to digitizing public services to reduce the scope for misconduct. However, these policies are often merely administrative in nature and fail to address the moral values that underlie ethical behavior. As a result, the changes that occur remain structural, not cultural. The bureaucracy remains vulnerable to abuse of power because ethics are not yet internally embedded in every employee, but rather merely formal rules that are compelled to comply (Dian Handayani et al., 2024).

Within the framework of public administration ethics, moral values are not merely complementary but key elements that distinguish between right and wrong actions in the context of public service. According to Denhardt & Denhardt (2000), modern public administration should focus on "serving the public, not controlling the public." However, when bureaucracy loses its moral orientation, the function of public service becomes a vehicle for power. Many officials use their positions to enrich themselves or manipulate policies for political gain, ultimately deteriorating the quality of public service. Beyond individual factors, abuse of power is also influenced by a hierarchical and rigid bureaucratic system. In such a structure, lower-level employees often submit absolutely to their superiors, lacking the courage to criticize or reject unethical orders. This situation creates a "feudalistic" bureaucratic culture, where loyalty to superiors takes precedence over loyalty to ethical values and the public interest. As a result, ethical violations can persist systematically without effective corrective mechanisms (Sulfiyah et al., 2023).

From a public administration perspective, this situation poses a serious challenge to efforts to achieve good governance. Principles such as accountability, transparency, participation, and the rule of law will not be implemented if the bureaucracy is dominated by unethical behavior. Therefore, strengthening bureaucratic ethics is not only about shaping moral individual behavior, but also about building a value system and organizational culture that supports the creation of a government with integrity. Furthermore, in the era of digitalization and public information transparency, the public is increasingly critical of the behavior of state officials (Alicia Caecariaz Khoirullisa et al., 2023). Cases of abuse of power revealed on social media demonstrate that ethical violations are now more easily identified and publicly highlighted. This situation demands a transformation of bureaucratic ethics that is based not only on regulations but also on the moral awareness and professionalism of civil servants. Public officials must understand that the power they hold is a mandate, not a privilege. Ethical issues in bureaucracy are also closely related to education and moral development. Many civil servants lack a thorough understanding of the ethical values of public administration. The training provided is often technical and underemphasizes values. Yet, as Frederickson (1997) points out, so-

cial justice and moral integrity must be at the core of public service. Without strong ethical development, civil servants are easily tempted to abuse their authority, especially when faced with political pressure or economic temptations(Iriyanto, 2023).

Furthermore, the recruitment and promotion systems within the bureaucracy also play a role in strengthening or weakening ethics. When positions are awarded based more on personal relationships or political interests than on competence and integrity, the bureaucracy becomes a breeding ground for opportunistic behavior. Employees no longer work based on a spirit of service, but rather for personal gain. In such situations, the implementation of a code of ethics will be ineffective without reforming the organizational culture that emphasizes meritocracy, professionalism, and moral responsibility(Albertus Sunuwata Triprasetya, Laksono Trisnantoro, 2014). In the Indonesian context, the State Civil Service Commission (KASN) and the Ministry of Administrative and Bureaucratic Reform (PAN-RB) have emphasized the importance of a code of ethics and a code of conduct for civil servants as guidelines for carrying out their duties. However, its implementation is often weak due to a lack of oversight, low individual awareness, and the absence of firm sanctions for ethical violations. Therefore, a more comprehensive strategy is needed, encompassing structural, cultural, and moral aspects, to ensure effective and sustainable strengthening of bureaucratic ethics. Therefore, strengthening bureaucratic ethics is a fundamental agenda in public administration reform. Without ethics, bureaucratic power has the potential to become a tool of oppression and abuse. However, with strong ethics, bureaucracy can become an instrument of public service and welfare. The main challenge is not only how to design ethical regulations, but how to foster moral awareness at every level of the bureaucracy so that the value of integrity becomes part of the daily work culture(Nurva & Maharani, 2023).

Public administration ethics is rooted in classical moral theories that have been adapted to the context of modern governance. Three main approaches to the study of bureaucratic ethics include deontological ethics, teleological ethics (utilitarianism), and virtue ethics. These three offer different perspectives in assessing bureaucratic actions and the behavior of public officials. First, deontological ethical theory (Immanuel Kant) emphasizes that an action is considered right not because of its results, but because it conforms to moral obligations. In a bureaucratic context, civil servants are required to comply with regulations and carry out their duties based on moral principles such as honesty, fairness, and responsibility, even if this may not provide personal or immediate benefits. This ethic forms the basis for the concept of a code of ethics adopted in various public institutions, where every official is required to uphold the values of professionalism and integrity. Second, the ethical theory of utilitarianism (Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill) assesses the rightness of an action based on the greatest benefit to the greatest number of people. In public administration, good bureaucratic decisions are those that can have a positive impact and welfare for the public at large. This approach requires public officials to consider the consequences of each policy and ensure that personal or group interests do not dominate the interests of society(Han & goleman, daniel; boyatzis, Richard; Mckee, 2019).

Third, virtue ethics emphasizes the formation of moral character within individuals. Ethical bureaucrats not only obey regulations but also possess an inner awareness to do good, driven by moral values such as honesty, simplicity, empathy, and justice. This virtue ethics is relevant in the context of strengthening bureaucratic ethics because it encourages continuous moral development, not simply the enforcement of administrative discipline. In addition to these three main theories, modern studies of public administration ethics also incorporate the principle of good governance as a normative foundation. Principles such as transparency, accountability, participation, efficiency, and the rule of law are ethical dimensions of governance. When these principles are violated, the bureaucracy ethically deviates from its public mandate. Therefore, strengthening bureaucratic ethics must go hand in hand with the implementation of good governance principles so that the government system can run cleanly and professionally(Moeller, 2021). In public administration, power is an instrument for achieving service goals.

However, power also carries the potential for abuse if not controlled by ethical values. According to Max Weber, an ideal bureaucracy should be rational, impersonal, and rule-oriented. However, in practice, bureaucratic power is often used subjectively by certain individuals or groups to defend personal interests. Abuse of power can occur in various forms: budget manipulation, nepotism in recruitment, political intervention in public services, or discriminatory actions against citizens. This phenomenon demonstrates that bureaucracy requires not only formal rules but also moral values to guide behavior. Without ethics, power will lose its direction and give rise to social inequality and administrative injustice (Rosidin et al., 2019).

Foucault (1978) explained that power is always productive and distributed within social relations. This means that power resides not only in the hands of high-ranking officials but also in daily interactions between officials and the public. Therefore, abuse of power occurs not only at the elite level but also in everyday public services, such as the abuse of authority in granting permits, extortion, or discrimination against the poor. In this context, bureaucratic ethics serves as a social and moral control mechanism that ensures that power is used for the public interest, not for personal gain. The Indonesian bureaucracy faces various complex and multidimensional ethical issues. Based on data from the Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK), the majority of corruption cases in Indonesia involve state officials, both at the central and regional levels. This demonstrates that abuse of power remains a chronic problem in public administration (Ekawati et al., 2018). This problem is not only caused by a weak oversight system, but also by a low level of ethical awareness among civil servants. First, a patrimonial and hierarchical bureaucratic culture is a major obstacle to strengthening ethics. In a system still oriented toward superior power, loyalty to leaders often outweighs loyalty to ethical values and the public interest. Employees are reluctant to refuse or report incorrect orders for fear of being perceived as disloyal. This culture creates a situation where ethical violations become socially accepted "normal" within the bureaucracy. Second, there is a lack of internalization of ethical values within the civil servant education and training system. Training provided by institutions such as the State Administration Institute (LAN) or the State Civil Service Agency (BKN) is still more emphasizes technical and managerial aspects over moral character building. Bureaucratic ethics, however, is not just about knowledge, but also about habituation and the formation of moral personality (Budiman et al., 2022).

Third, the weak reward and sanction system within the bureaucracy. Officials who behave ethically often do not receive proper recognition, while ethical violations are not always consistently prosecuted. This imbalance results in a lack of moral incentive for employees to behave honestly and professionally. Fourth, political intervention within the bureaucracy is also a significant factor weakening ethics. In many cases, bureaucratic officials are appointed not based on competence, but because of political proximity to those in power. This creates conflicts of interest that encourage abuse of power. Officials are more likely to serve political interests than the public interest, thus degrading bureaucratic integrity (Evie & Saman, 2023).

Fifth, the influence of the social and economic environment cannot be ignored. In difficult economic conditions, employees with limited incomes tend to seek shortcuts through unethical practices such as gratuities or extortion. On the other hand, social pressure to demonstrate economic status also encourages consumerist behavior that has the potential to lead to abuse of office. The above problems demonstrate that bureaucratic ethics cannot be strengthened solely through formal regulations (M. Sufriyadi, 2014). A more comprehensive approach is needed, considering the individual, organizational, and systemic dimensions. At the individual level, it is crucial to instill moral awareness and public responsibility. At the organizational level, a work culture that supports the values of integrity and openness is needed. Meanwhile, at the systemic level, effective regulations and oversight mechanisms are needed to prevent ethical violations early on (Kurniawan, 2007).

The Relevance of Strengthening Ethics to Bureaucratic Reform The government's proposed bureaucratic reform aims to create a professional, integrity-driven, and service-oriented bureaucracy. However, without strengthening ethics, reform will only result in procedural changes, not substantive ones. Ethics is the spirit of bureaucratic reform; it serves as a guideline for every official in carrying out their duties in accordance with moral principles and public responsibility. Within the framework of the Grand Design for National Bureaucratic Reform 2010–2025, one of the most crucial areas for change is improving the integrity and accountability of officials. Strengthening ethics is a prerequisite for sustainable reform. By strengthening ethics, the bureaucracy will not only be administratively efficient but also morally dignified. Furthermore, strengthening ethics also contributes to increased public trust. Public trust is a crucial social capital for the sustainability of government. Without trust, public policies will be difficult to accept and implement effectively. Therefore, strengthening bureaucratic ethics directly impacts the government's political and social legitimacy (Anshar, 2018).

Strong bureaucratic ethics begin with individuals possessing a strong moral conscience. Therefore, strategies for strengthening ethics must also focus on developing individual character. In the context of public administration, individual ethics encompasses honesty, responsibility, justice, and a commitment to public service. First, character education and ethical spirituality can serve as a moral foundation for state officials. Mental and spiritual development programs in government agencies are not merely formalities but must be directed at strengthening the values of honesty and a sense of responsibility towards the public trust. Universal religious and humanitarian values can serve as a moral source that enriches bureaucratic ethics without violating the principle of civil servant neutrality. Second, public officials must understand that power is a mandate that must be accounted for, not a privilege. This awareness will prevent the emergence of arrogant and arbitrary behavior. By understanding the concept of power as a mandate, every bureaucratic decision and action will be directed toward the public interest, not personal gain.

Third, strengthening social empathy and public service is a crucial aspect in shaping individual ethics. Civil servants who can put themselves in the shoes of the community will be more cautious in using their authority. Empathy fosters sensitivity to justice and equality in service, thereby reducing the potential for discrimination or abuse of office. In the era of digital government, information technology can be utilized as an instrument to strengthen bureaucratic ethics. Digitalization enables increased transparency and efficiency, while minimizing opportunities for abuse of power. First, the implementation of e-government and digital governance encourages a more open and accountable bureaucracy. Digital systems such as e-budgeting, E-procurement and e-performance management can reduce direct interaction between officials and the public, thereby reducing the potential for corruption or bribery. Furthermore, digital data allows for faster and more objective oversight of official behavior (Antoni, D A Darius Muhammad & Muhamad, 2022).

Second, transparency of public information through official government portals is an essential part of modern ethics. When the public can access information about government performance, budgets, and policies, the opportunity for abuse of power is reduced. Digital transparency is not just about technology, but also a reflection of the government's moral commitment to openness and fairness (Norfai et al., 2022). Third, the use of a digital whistleblowing system provides a safe space for the public and employees to report ethical violations without fear of intimidation. This system strengthens public oversight mechanisms and serves as a symbol of moral courage in upholding bureaucratic integrity (Wahyuli, 2021).

2. Materials and Methods

The literature selection criteria used in the analysis were designed to ensure the relevance and validity of the findings by emphasizing several key aspects. First, topic relevance, meaning the literature must directly address bureaucratic ethics, leadership with integ-

rity, or the prevention of abuse of power to ensure conceptual relevance. Second, the authority and credibility of the sources, including publications from reputable scientific journals, academic books, official agency reports, and peer-reviewed empirical research, were considered. Third, topicality and contextualization, meaning the literature was selected based on the most recent data and studies and relevant to the context of Indonesian public administration or similar contexts. Fourth, comprehensiveness of perspective, meaning it encompasses normative, empirical, and interdisciplinary approaches to produce a comprehensive analysis. With these criteria, the literature used not only supports the validity of the findings but also strengthens the academic argumentation and proposed policies. This research uses a qualitative descriptive approach, which aims to describe and analyze in depth the phenomenon of strengthening bureaucratic ethics in an effort to prevent abuse of power in public administration. This approach was chosen because the problem being studied is complex and requires a contextual understanding of the values, norms, and ethical practices within the government bureaucracy. Through a qualitative approach, researchers seek to understand social reality as it is, not simply measuring variables quantitatively, but exploring the meaning and dynamics of bureaucratic behavior in carrying out their duties. The type of research used is library research, by reviewing various literature sources such as books, scientific journals, government policy reports, and laws and regulations relevant to the topic of bureaucratic ethics and public administration. Data were collected through documentation and content analysis of these sources. This step aims to obtain a comprehensive picture of how bureaucratic ethics is applied, the factors causing weak integrity of the apparatus, and strengthening strategies that can be implemented effectively. With this method, it is hoped that the research will be able to provide theoretical and practical contributions to the development of the concept of ethical public administration and encourage the creation of a bureaucracy with integrity, transparency, and accountability in carrying out public service functions.

3. Results

Based on research findings, leadership with integrity plays a central role in breaking the chain of abuse of power because ethical leaders not only serve as role models but also establish organizational cultural standards that emphasize accountability, transparency, and responsibility. This type of leadership creates effective oversight mechanisms, encourages the internalization of ethical values across all levels of the bureaucracy, and strengthens sanctions against corrupt behavior or abuse of authority. Furthermore, leaders with integrity are able to build a work climate that supports staff participation, prevents nepotism, collusion, and corruption, and instills awareness that organizational success must be achieved through legitimate procedures and principles of justice. Thus, ethical leadership serves as a key driver that breaks the cycle of abuse of power and strengthens the institution's legitimacy and performance. The research findings indicate that strengthening bureaucratic ethics plays a crucial role in preventing abuse of power within public administration. Based on literature and policy analysis, various forms of ethical violations are still committed by government officials, such as corruption, collusion, nepotism, abuse of office, and discriminatory behavior against the public. These conditions not only hamper the effectiveness of public services but also undermine public trust in the government. This phenomenon indicates a weak internalization of moral and ethical values within the bureaucracy. Theoretically, the research findings support the theory of public ethics and good governance, which emphasize the importance of integrity, responsibility, and accountability in the implementation of public administration. An ethical bureaucracy is not only oriented towards compliance with formal regulations but also fosters the moral awareness of officials in carrying out their duties as public servants. In this context, strengthening ethics cannot be achieved solely through written regulations but must be internalized through organizational culture, exemplary leadership, and a continuous development system (Megawati S et al., 2023).

Strengthening bureaucratic ethics is key to preventing abuse of power in public administration. Ethics is not merely a set of formal rules, but rather moral values that must be internalized into the work culture, organizational structure, and individual awareness of state officials. Through structural, cultural, moral, and digital approaches, the bureaucracy can become an instrument of clean, transparent, and accountable public service. In the long term, the success of strengthening bureaucratic ethics will determine the quality of government and the state's legitimacy in the eyes of the people. Ethical governance not only provides good service but also builds trust and social justice for all citizens. Therefore, strengthening bureaucratic ethics is not merely a reform agenda, but also serves as a moral foundation for the sustainability of democracy and public welfare in Indonesia (Satibi & Ediyanto, 2020).

3.1 Discussion

The most realistic multi-stakeholder synergy model for strengthening bureaucratic ethics is a collaborative approach that integrates government, internal officials, independent oversight bodies, academics, and civil society. In this model, the government establishes clear regulations and ethical standards, while the bureaucratic apparatus is responsible for internalizing and implementing these values in daily practice. The independent oversight body plays a role in ensuring transparency and accountability, while academics provide empirical studies and research-based recommendations for improving procedures and organizational culture. Civil society, through public participation and complaint mechanisms, adds social pressure to encourage ethical compliance. This synergy enables information exchange, continuous learning, and strengthened social control, so that bureaucratic ethics becomes not only a formal norm but also a concrete practice implemented consistently across all levels of government. The research also found that one of the main causes of weak bureaucratic ethics is weak internal oversight and the suboptimal implementation of codes of ethics in many agencies. Many officials do not yet understand the meaning and implications of ethical violations on public trust and government stability. Therefore, strategic measures are needed, such as increasing ethics training for officials, strengthening internal oversight institutions, and implementing consistent rewards and punishments. Furthermore, leadership with integrity has been proven to have a significant influence on creating an ethical work culture. Leaders who are able to set moral examples will encourage their subordinates to be honest, fair, and responsible in carrying out their duties (Sukri J et al., 2017).

Multi-Party Collaboration in Strengthening Ethics Strengthening bureaucratic ethics cannot be done by the government alone. Synergy is needed between the government, educational institutions, the mass media, and civil society. Educational institutions play a crucial role in instilling ethical values from an early age in aspiring bureaucrats. Public administration curricula at universities should include courses on government ethics, the morality of public policy, and the philosophy of social responsibility. Thus, prospective civil servants recruited into the bureaucracy already possess a strong moral foundation. The mass media plays a role as a watchdog of public morality. Through investigative journalism and objective reporting, the media can uncover ethical violations and promote transparency. Furthermore, the media can also serve as a means of public education on the importance of bureaucratic integrity. Meanwhile, civil society organizations play a critical role as partners with the government. They can participate in developing ethical guidelines, advocating against integrity violations, and developing public campaigns that raise awareness of social ethics. With this multi-stakeholder collaboration, strengthening bureaucratic ethics becomes a national movement involving all elements of the nation (Fitri Hayani et al., 2024).

4. Conclusions

Further research that can enrich the study of bureaucratic ethics and the prevention of abuse of power should emphasize empirical, comparative, and interdisciplinary approaches. Empirical research can explore the factors influencing the internalization of

ethics among civil servants, the effectiveness of oversight mechanisms, and the impact of leadership with integrity on bureaucratic behavior at various levels of government. A comparative approach allows for the analysis of best practices from various regional or national contexts, thereby identifying effective strategies for strengthening bureaucratic accountability and integrity. Meanwhile, an interdisciplinary perspective, combining public administration, organizational psychology, law, and sociology, can provide a deeper understanding of the ethical dynamics, social pressures, and structural factors that trigger or prevent abuse of power. The results of such research not only enrich the academic literature but also form the basis for more evidence-based and contextualized policy recommendations. Strengthening bureaucratic ethics has significant strategic implications for the quality of governance and the level of public trust, as strong ethics form the foundation for accountable, transparent, and professional behavior by officials. By internalizing ethical values, the bureaucracy is able to reduce the practices of corruption, collusion, and nepotism, thereby making public decisions more objective and fair and internal oversight and accountability mechanisms more effective. Another implication is that strengthening bureaucratic ethics increases the legitimacy of government institutions in the eyes of the public, strengthens public participation in decision-making, and encourages the sustainability of quality public programs and policies. Strategically, bureaucratic ethics is not only an internal norm, but also an important instrument for building long-term trust, strengthening governance, and creating an administrative environment conducive to sustainable socio-economic development. Strengthening bureaucratic ethics is a key factor in preventing abuse of power and realizing a clean, transparent, and accountable public administration. This study confirms that the application of ethics is not limited to compliance with regulations, but also includes the internalization of moral values, integrity, and social responsibility in every action of state officials. An ethical bureaucracy will be able to suppress the practices of corruption, collusion, and nepotism, while increasing public trust in the government. Therefore, strengthening ethics needs to be carried out continuously through education, training, leadership role models, and effective supervision, to create a work culture oriented towards public service and social justice.

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