



## Administrative Discretion Under Political Pressure: A Phenomenological Study of Public Officials in Indonesia

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### ABSTRACT

Administrative discretion plays a central role in constitutional and administrative law, balancing legal authority and ethical responsibility in governance. Within this field, the subjective experiences of public officials exercising discretion under political pressure remain poorly understood despite their profound implications for justice and accountability. However, existing scholarship has not clearly articulated how these experiences form a research gap, particularly the absence of empirical and phenomenological accounts capturing the moral and existential struggles within discretionary decision-making. While previous studies have focused on legal frameworks and institutional procedures, little is known about how officials experience and interpret discretion as a moral and existential phenomenon. This study addresses that gap by applying an interpretive phenomenological approach (Heideggerian tradition) to explore the lived meaning of administrative discretion among Indonesian public officials. Using semi-structured, in-depth interviews with twelve participants, the research analyzed their narratives through Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to uncover essential themes of moral tension, political influence, and reflective integrity. The results reveal that discretion is experienced as a continuous negotiation between legal compliance, ethical conviction, and political constraint, transforming administrative decision-making into a deeply human act of moral reasoning. These findings challenge the procedural conception of administrative discretion and emphasize its existential and ethical dimensions. The study contributes to a richer understanding of constitutional governance and highlights the need for cultivating reflective accountability in public administration. Future research should expand this phenomenological inquiry across different cultural and institutional contexts to strengthen comparative insights into the lived realities of governance.



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### INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary landscape of governance, the exercise of administrative discretion represents one of the most complex intersections between law, ethics, and political authority (Yang & Quan, 2025). Within constitutional and administrative law, discretion functions as both an empowering and constraining mechanism empowering officials to act in the absence of explicit legal guidance while simultaneously constraining them through accountability and constitutional limits (M. M. Mukhlis, Maskun, Tajuddin, Paidi, et al., 2025). However, despite its centrality, the concept is often explained repetitively in the literature, leaving limited clarity on the specific problem this study seeks to address. This duality makes discretion not merely a legal concept but a lived human experience that embodies uncertainty, responsibility, and moral judgment. In many developing democracies, such as Indonesia, the challenge of exercising discretion becomes amplified by political interference, institutional pressures, and competing demands for justice and efficiency within the public sector.

The phenomenon of administrative discretion thus holds profound relevance not only for legal scholars but also for practitioners navigating the realities of constitutional governance (L. Mukhlis, Suradi, et al., 2023; L. Mukhlis, 2025b). Discretion operates in a gray area where laws cannot fully anticipate the nuances of human and societal conditions. Consequently, officials must interpret and apply legal norms through their own moral reasoning, situational awareness, and professional integrity (Frost & Schaaf, 2024). Although widely recognized, these discussions often reiterate the normative significance of discretion without clearly articulating the empirical gap that motivates further investigation. As several scholars have observed, the true challenge of administrative law lies not in creating perfect statutes but in understanding how public officials live and embody the law in practice.

In this context, exploring the phenomenon of discretion from a phenomenological perspective becomes crucial (Jugl, 2025). Traditional legal analyses often focus on formal procedures and institutional design, overlooking the subjective experiences and ethical dilemmas faced by decision-makers. Phenomenology, with its emphasis on lived experience (*Lebenswelt*), provides a pathway to understand how public officials interpret, internalize, and enact the principles of constitutional governance amid political and moral constraints (Muñiz, 2025). This perspective enables a deeper appreciation of discretion as a phenomenon shaped by meaning, consciousness, and interpretation offering insights into how individuals sustain their moral agency within the bureaucratic and political frameworks that define modern administrative systems.

Research on the lived experiences of individuals within institutional and legal frameworks has become an essential domain in contemporary socio-legal inquiry (Apperson, 2024). Within administrative and constitutional contexts, understanding how public officials experience and interpret discretion provides unique insights into the moral, emotional, and interpretive dimensions of governance. Studies in this field have demonstrated that discretionary power, though framed by legal boundaries, is ultimately enacted through human judgment and perception, making it inseparable from the subjective consciousness of those who wield it (L. Mukhlis, Arifin, Ridwan, & Zulbaidah, 2025; L. Mukhlis, Arifin, Ridwan, Zulbaidah, et al., 2025). This shift toward exploring the experiential meaning of discretion marks a growing recognition that administrative law cannot be fully comprehended without attending to the phenomenological realities that shape decision-making in practice.

However, significant methodological challenges persist in capturing the depth of such subjective experiences (Wibisana & Sumardjoko, 2025). Conventional legal and policy research often relies on positivist or normative approaches that prioritize textual analysis, codified principles, and procedural compliance. While valuable, these methods tend to abstract the human element from the decision-making process, neglecting the affective and reflective dimensions of administrative discretion (Thunman et al., 2020). Quantitative or doctrinal analyses, for instance, may describe how discretion should operate but rarely uncover how it feels to make decisions amid ethical dilemmas, political constraints, and constitutional obligations. As a result, much of the scholarship remains conceptually rich but empirically distant from the lived reality of administrative actors.

This methodological limitation underscores the need for an interpretive, experience-based approach capable of unveiling the essence of discretion as lived and understood by those who practice it. Phenomenology, particularly in its interpretive form, offers a means to transcend descriptive surface-level observations by revealing the structures of meaning embedded in human experience (Auliyah et al., 2025). Through in-depth engagement with participants' narratives, phenomenological inquiry facilitates an understanding of how administrative discretion is not only performed but also experienced as a moral negotiation between law, duty, and conscience. Addressing this gap allows for a more complete and human-centered comprehension of constitutional governance and the ethical realities that define its daily implementation.

Despite a substantial body of literature examining administrative discretion from legal, political, and institutional perspectives, existing approaches tend to emphasize procedural rationality and compliance rather than lived human experience (Trotsuk & Dursina, 2025). Most studies addressing discretion have relied on normative legal frameworks or pragmatic administrative models,

focusing on how laws and policies should guide decision-making in public institutions (Huang et al., 2024). These practical frameworks, while valuable for defining structural parameters, provide only a surface-level understanding of how discretion is experienced, interpreted, and morally negotiated by public officials in real-world contexts.

The prevailing reliance on doctrinal or policy-oriented methods limits the capacity to capture the inner meanings and affective dimensions of administrative discretion (Lecheler et al., 2024). Such approaches often portray decision-makers as neutral executors of rules rather than as conscious agents grappling with competing moral, legal, and political imperatives. Consequently, the understanding of discretion remains largely abstract, detached from the subjective realities of those who must balance institutional expectations with personal ethical convictions (Wu, 2021). This gap is particularly evident in constitutional and administrative systems where political pressures, ethical dilemmas, and accountability mechanisms converge to shape the lived experience of governance.

Addressing this limitation calls for an alternative lens one that seeks to uncover the essence of discretion as it is lived and experienced, not merely as it is legislated or prescribed (Rajab et al., 2024). A phenomenological approach, particularly the interpretive hermeneutic tradition, offers a framework capable of revealing how public officials make sense of their roles within the moral and political constraints of constitutional governance (Eyisi et al., 2021). Through this perspective, discretion is no longer viewed as a static administrative function but as a dynamic and reflective human experience. By foregrounding the voices, emotions, and interpretations of those exercising discretion, this study seeks to bridge the conceptual divide between legal theory and lived experience, contributing to a deeper, more holistic understanding of administrative decision-making within constitutional law.

Previous studies have examined administrative discretion primarily through legal and institutional lenses, highlighting its function in balancing authority, responsibility, and accountability within public governance. Scholars such as (Ogweno & Semedo, 2025) emphasized the moral tensions faced by public officials when discretion intersects with political influence, while Chen (2022) explored the interpretive nature of bureaucratic decision-making. However, these studies often stop short of addressing the personal and experiential dimensions of discretion as lived by the decision-makers themselves. The existing literature provides valuable theoretical insights but leaves unexamined the inner moral and psychological negotiations that accompany such administrative choices. This gap underscores the need for an approach that captures the subjective and interpretive essence of the phenomenon.

To address this limitation, the present study employs an interpretive phenomenological approach rooted in the Heideggerian hermeneutic tradition (L. Mukhlis, Maryam, et al., 2023; L. Mukhlis et al., 2024). This method is particularly suited to uncovering the meanings that public officials attach to their discretionary actions, as it explores experience from the perspective of those who live it. By interpreting participants' narratives, the study seeks to answer how administrative discretion is experienced, felt, and understood within the complex interplay of law, ethics, and politics. The phenomenological method allows for the revelation of underlying meanings that cannot be reached through normative or quantitative analysis (Khan et al., 2023). Through this approach, the study responds directly to the knowledge gap by exploring the essence of discretion as an existential and moral experience.

This article is structured to provide a clear and coherent understanding of the phenomenon. The introduction establishes the theoretical and social context of administrative discretion and its relevance within constitutional governance. The methodology section outlines the interpretive phenomenological framework and the data collection and analysis procedures used to explore lived experiences (Li & Ma, 2024). The results section presents the emergent themes derived from participants' narratives, while the discussion interprets these themes in light of phenomenological theory and constitutional principles. Finally, the conclusion synthesizes the findings and highlights their implications for administrative ethics and future policy development.

## **RESEARCH METHODS**

### **Study Design**

This study employed an interpretive phenomenological design (Heideggerian tradition) to explore the lived experiences of public officials in exercising administrative discretion under political pressure (Lutz & Knox, 2014; McNabb, 2015). Phenomenology, as a qualitative research approach, emphasizes the understanding of subjective meanings as experienced by individuals within their sociopolitical realities. The interpretive orientation of this design was chosen because it allows the discovery of how and why meaning is constructed through the participant's engagement with moral, legal, and institutional dilemmas. Throughout the research process, the first author engaged in ongoing bracketing, including keeping a reflexive journal, writing analytic memos, and regularly discussing preconceptions with peers, in order to acknowledge and temporarily set aside prior professional experiences with public administration and political intervention so that participants' meanings could emerge as authentically as possible.

Rather than describing phenomena as fixed entities, the interpretive phenomenological approach seeks to uncover the existential dimensions of administrative decision-making the internal reflections, tensions, and moral negotiations that define an official's lived experience. This design was particularly relevant to the research question, which aimed to capture the essence of discretionary practices situated within complex legal and political contexts. The approach was grounded in the assumption that understanding the phenomenon requires interpreting the participants' perspectives as embedded in their lived world (Lebenswelt), aligning with the philosophical principles of Martin Heidegger.

### **Participants**

Participants consisted of senior and mid-level public officials involved in administrative decision-making processes across various ministries and regional government offices (Hillman & Radel, 2018; Migdal, 2018). Selection followed a purposive sampling approach, focusing on individuals with direct experience in exercising discretionary authority where political or ethical tensions were evident.

Inclusion criteria required that participants:

1. Had held administrative decision-making authority for at least five years.
2. Had previously encountered situations involving political influence or ethical dilemmas in the execution of discretionary powers.
3. Were willing to engage in reflective discussions about their professional experiences.

Exclusion criteria involved individuals without discretionary authority or those currently involved in active legal proceedings concerning administrative decisions.

A total of 12 participants (8 males and 4 females), aged between 38 and 57 years, were included. Their professional backgrounds ranged from legal advisors and department heads to district administrators. Demographic variation was intentionally maintained to enrich the phenomenological depth and contextual understanding of administrative discretion across hierarchical and institutional settings.

### **Data Collection**

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews guided by an interpretive phenomenological framework (Carreiras & Castro, 2012; Iosifides, 2016). Each interview was conducted face-to-face in a neutral and private office environment to ensure participant comfort and confidentiality. The interview protocol included open-ended prompts that encouraged reflection on lived experiences, such as: "Can you describe a situation where you felt pressured to make a discretionary decision?" and "How did that experience influence your sense of justice and responsibility?"

Each interview lasted between 60 to 90 minutes and was audio-recorded with the participant's consent. Follow-up interviews were conducted when clarification or deeper exploration of meaning

was needed. The interviews were supported by field notes documenting non-verbal expressions and contextual nuances.

To ensure a secure and respectful environment, participants were assured that their responses would remain anonymous and that they could withdraw at any stage without consequence. The data collection process adhered to principles of reflective engagement, where participants were encouraged to interpret and re-interpret their experiences throughout the dialogue.

### **Data Analysis**

Data were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), a structured yet flexible technique consistent with the hermeneutic phenomenological approach (Daly, 2007; Longhofer et al., 2012). The analysis process unfolded through multiple interpretive stages designed to capture both the descriptive and existential dimensions of the participants' experiences.

**Immersion and Familiarization:** All interview transcripts were read repeatedly to gain a holistic sense of each participant's narrative.

**Meaning Unit Identification:** Significant statements and phrases were highlighted as meaning units that reflected essential aspects of the lived experience.

**Coding and Theme Development:** Codes were grouped into emerging categories, which were then clustered into higher-order themes representing shared meanings across participants.

**Hermeneutic Interpretation:** Each theme was examined through iterative interpretation using the hermeneutic circle, moving between parts (individual experiences) and the whole (collective meaning).

**Synthesis of Essential Structures:** The final stage integrated the themes into an essential description of the phenomenon, articulating the existential essence of administrative discretion under political pressure.

Analytical procedures were supported by NVivo 12 software for data organization, though interpretive reasoning and meaning construction remained researcher-driven (Fife, 2020; Kawamura, 2020). The goal was to arrive at a coherent representation of the phenomenon that reflects the participants' lived realities, without imposing external theoretical assumptions.

## **RESULTS**

### **Navigating the Ethical Boundaries of Administrative Discretion**

Participants consistently described their experiences of exercising administrative discretion as a process fraught with ethical tension. Many officials viewed discretion as both a necessity and a burden necessary for responding to situational complexities but burdensome due to the moral and political consequences of their decisions. One senior public official articulated, "Each time I make a discretionary decision, I know I'm walking on a very thin legal line. The law gives me room, but it also watches me closely."

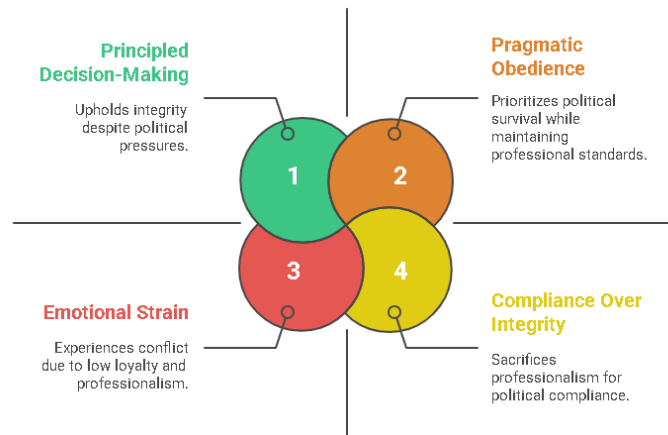
To maintain separation between narrative and interpretation, the participants' descriptions are presented first. Participants commonly depicted discretion as residing in a space of uncertainty, where they were required to respond quickly while remaining aware of legal boundaries. Several recounted moments of internal hesitation, noting what one called "a silent courtroom inside my head before signing any document."

### **Political Pressure and the Erosion of Administrative Independence**

Across interviews, political influence emerged as a pervasive force shaping the practice of administrative discretion. Participants reported that political actors frequently exerted both overt and subtle forms of pressure to steer administrative decisions in favor of partisan interests. One official recounted, "Sometimes the instruction doesn't come in writing it's just a phone call, a reminder of loyalty. You know what's expected without it being said."

The findings illustrate how political pressures blur the boundaries between administrative professionalism and political loyalty. Despite formal safeguards for bureaucratic neutrality, participants perceived that the institutional culture often rewards compliance over integrity. This experience fosters what one respondent called “pragmatic obedience” a behavioral adaptation where officials prioritize political survival over principled decision-making. The phenomenological analysis revealed that such pressures compromise the constitutional ethos of impartiality, leading to emotional strain, guilt, and, in some cases, resignation from moral conviction.

### Balancing Political Loyalty and Administrative Professionalism



### The Inner Conflict Between Legal Formalism and Substantive Justice

A dominant pattern across narratives was the perceived conflict between legal formalism and the pursuit of substantive justice. Participants acknowledged that strict adherence to administrative law sometimes obstructs fair outcomes for citizens. One official reflected, “The law tells me what I can’t do, but my conscience tells me what I must do.”

This theme underscores the existential dimension of administrative decision-making where the law serves as both a guide and a constraint. Respondents often experienced moral dissonance when their understanding of fairness clashed with procedural boundaries. Through interpretive analysis, this conflict revealed a deeper meaning: discretion, rather than being purely an instrument of legal flexibility, becomes a moral negotiation space where officials continuously redefine justice in action.

### Accountability, Fear, and the Burden of Responsibility

Several participants described accountability not as a mechanism of transparency but as a source of fear and hesitation. Many officials internalized the idea that any discretionary decision could later be judged as abuse of power. One participant stated, “Every signature feels like a potential accusation waiting to happen.”

This pervasive sense of vulnerability leads to a paradoxical phenomenon defensive governance where officials avoid making discretionary decisions altogether to protect themselves from scrutiny. The phenomenological essence of this experience is characterized by anxiety, caution, and an enduring sense of isolation. Yet, despite these fears, participants expressed a strong sense of duty to act when public welfare was at stake, suggesting that professional conscience often triumphs over institutional fear.

### Reflective Awareness and the Search for Integrity

Despite external pressures and internal conflicts, participants demonstrated a growing awareness of the moral dimension inherent in administrative discretion. Many articulated a deep commitment to maintaining personal integrity and upholding constitutional principles. One official remarked, “In the end, the law cannot teach integrity it only tests it.”

Through reflective interpretation, this theme highlights how ethical self-awareness acts as a stabilizing force that helps administrators reclaim meaning in their work. The hermeneutic circle of interpretation revealed that integrity functions as both a personal anchor and a professional compass. It allows officials to interpret their roles beyond technical legality transforming discretion from a bureaucratic necessity into an act of moral agency grounded in constitutional responsibility.

## **DISCUSSION**

### **Summary of Key Findings**

The phenomenological analysis revealed that administrative discretion is not merely a procedural act of governance but a deeply moral and existential experience. Public officials perceive discretion as a constant negotiation between law, ethics, and political expectation an internal struggle to preserve integrity and justice within institutional and political constraints. This interpretation is further reinforced by participants' consistent descriptions of uncertainty, emotional burden, and ethical self-scrutiny, confirming patterns observed in prior phenomenological studies on ethical decision-making in public administration. These findings directly address the research question by uncovering how public officials interpret and experience discretion as both a duty and a dilemma within the framework of constitutional governance.

### **Contribution of Findings to the Research Question**

The findings provide a nuanced and human-centered understanding of how public officials experience the act of discretion under political pressure. The study illuminates discretion as a lived phenomenon defined by moral reflection, emotional tension, and a profound sense of accountability. Officials' narratives revealed that discretion operates within an existential space between compliance and conscience where every decision carries not only administrative implications but also personal moral weight (Ahsan et al., 2023). This interpretation extends beyond normative definitions of administrative discretion by situating it within the realm of human meaning and ethical subjectivity.

Through this lens, discretion emerges as a moral encounter rather than a bureaucratic process. It becomes evident that public officials engage in reflective judgment what Arendt (1958) termed the "thinking activity" of ethical action when navigating political and institutional pressures (L. Mukhlis, Janwari, et al., 2023; L. Mukhlis & Abdullah, 2025). The research therefore contributes a distinctive phenomenological insight: discretion, as experienced by public officials, is an embodiment of moral agency within the structures of law and governance. This finding enhances theoretical understandings of administrative ethics by revealing the inner dimensions of constitutional responsibility how law is lived rather than merely applied.

### **Relationship with Previous Literature and Theoretical Frameworks**

The results align with and expand upon prior theoretical perspectives that emphasize the moral and interpretive nature of administrative decision-making. Consistent with Terry (2018) and Goodin (2020), this study confirms that discretion is often experienced as a conflict between political influence and ethical commitment (Hoxha et al., 2025). However, by employing an interpretive phenomenological lens, the present study deepens this understanding by revealing how such conflicts are internalized and interpreted through the consciousness of public officials. While previous research primarily framed discretion as an institutional tension, this study exposes it as a lived moral phenomenon rooted in human vulnerability and ethical reflection.

Furthermore, the findings resonate with Heidegger's (1962) concept of being-in-the-world, wherein individuals act meaningfully within the constraints of their social and institutional realities. The public officials in this study demonstrated an awareness of their moral "thrownness" into a system that demands both obedience and integrity reflecting the existential complexity of modern governance. In contrast to rationalist or procedural models of administrative behavior, this study situates discretion within the hermeneutic circle of meaning-making, where interpretation, reflection, and experience continuously shape the essence of ethical action. This phenomenological insight bridges a significant gap in the literature by connecting the structural dimension of administrative law with the lived, experiential dimension of public service.

### **Implications of the Findings**

The findings of this study carry both theoretical and practical implications for understanding administrative ethics and constitutional governance. From a phenomenological standpoint, discretion emerges not as a procedural privilege but as a moral encounter that defines the human dimension of public administration. This insight challenges conventional bureaucratic paradigms that reduce decision-making to a matter of procedural compliance, emphasizing instead the lived meaning of moral agency among public officials. The study reveals that ethical integrity within administrative systems cannot be cultivated solely through regulatory frameworks; it must also be nurtured through reflective awareness, moral education, and institutional cultures that acknowledge the existential burden of discretion.

Socially and professionally, these findings highlight the importance of embedding ethical reflection within public sector governance training. Recognizing discretion as a lived experience underscores the need for leadership models that encourage dialogue, empathy, and moral reasoning rather than fear-based compliance. In contexts marked by political influence, such as developing constitutional democracies, the findings suggest that cultivating reflective accountability where officials consciously interpret the moral significance of their actions can strengthen both administrative integrity and public trust. Hence, the phenomenological understanding of discretion extends beyond individual experience, offering a transformative perspective on how governance structures can evolve toward more humane and ethically grounded systems of decision-making.

### **Limitations of the Study**

Despite its valuable insights, this study is not without limitations. As a phenomenological inquiry, its findings are context-bound and based on the subjective experiences of a small number of public officials, which limits broad generalization (L. Mukhlis, 2025a; L. Mukhlis & Saidah, 2025). The interpretive nature of the methodology prioritizes depth over breadth, meaning that the focus lies in understanding meaning rather than measuring frequency or causation. Moreover, cultural and institutional factors unique to the studied setting may influence how discretion is experienced and understood, making the findings most applicable within similar socio-political contexts.

Another limitation relates to the interpretive process itself, which inherently involves the researcher's engagement with participants' narratives. While reflective bracketing and member validation were employed to preserve authenticity, the interpretive act remains co-constructed. Nonetheless, these limitations align with the philosophical underpinnings of phenomenology, which values contextual richness over universal abstraction. Rather than diminishing the study's contribution, these constraints invite further exploration into how discretion is lived and interpreted across diverse administrative cultures.

### **Prospective Directions for Future Research**

The findings of this study open several avenues for further inquiry. Future research may extend this phenomenological exploration by incorporating comparative analyses across different administrative systems or political environments to examine how cultural, legal, and institutional contexts shape the moral experience of discretion. Longitudinal phenomenological studies could also illuminate how public officials' interpretations evolve over time, especially in response to institutional reforms, changes in leadership, or shifting political climates.

Additionally, integrating phenomenology with complementary qualitative approaches such as narrative inquiry or ethical hermeneutics could deepen understanding of how individual experiences contribute to collective ethical norms within governance. From a practical perspective, future research should investigate how reflective training and experiential learning can be systematically integrated into public service ethics programs. By continuing to explore discretion as a moral and existential practice, future scholarship can bridge the enduring gap between constitutional ideals and administrative realities, strengthening the human foundations of public governance.

## CONCLUSION

This study explored the lived experiences of public officials in exercising administrative discretion under political pressure within the framework of constitutional and administrative law. The findings revealed that discretion is not merely a procedural mechanism but a moral and existential act shaped by continuous negotiation between legality, ethics, and political realities. Through the interpretive phenomenological approach, the study illuminated how officials internalize ethical responsibility and navigate the tension between obedience and integrity, thereby humanizing the understanding of administrative decision-making. These insights fill a critical gap in previous legal and policy research that overlooked the subjective and reflective dimensions of discretion. The study's unique contribution lies in demonstrating how discretion operates as an ethical consciousness rather than solely a rule-bound function, offering a deeper theoretical lens for understanding public decision-making. By emphasizing moral awareness and interpretive understanding, the study offers practical implications for strengthening ethical accountability and fostering integrity in public administration. Future research may build on these findings by examining comparative cultural contexts or developing reflective frameworks that support ethical decision-making in governance.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article. All stages of this research, including data collection, analysis, and interpretation, were conducted independently and free from any financial, political, or institutional influence. The funding body had no role in the design, execution, interpretation, or writing of this study, ensuring the integrity and objectivity of the research outcomes.

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