

Corruption as a Crisis of National Character: Perspectives of Public Ethics and Pancasila Values

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ABSTRACT

Corruption in Indonesia has evolved beyond a legal or administrative problem into a crisis of national character that fundamentally undermines the state's moral foundations. Despite decades of structural reform, Indonesia's standing in global integrity indices continues to deteriorate, signaling the inadequacy of compliance-based approaches when pursued in isolation from deeper ethical transformation. This conceptual article argues that sustainable anti-corruption efforts require serious engagement with public ethics and the normative value system embedded in Pancasila. Drawing on public ethics theory, democratic public service scholarship, and philosophical readings of Pancasila as a living normative order, this paper examines how corruption emerges not only from weak institutions but from the erosion of public virtue, civic identity, and moral integrity within the civil service. It further contends that the five principles of Pancasila, particularly the fourth and fifth sila, constitute a substantially under-utilized normative resource for rebuilding bureaucratic character. The article concludes by advancing five conceptual propositions for character-based anti-corruption reform grounded in Pancasila values, with implications for both public administration policy and civic education.

Keywords: corruption, public ethics, Pancasila, bureaucratic integrity, national character.

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INTRODUCTION

Corruption in Indonesia has long exceeded the boundaries of isolated misconduct. It has evolved into a systemic phenomenon that permeates governance structures, distorts public resource allocation, and, most critically, corrodes the moral foundations of the nation-state. In 2025, Indonesia registered a score of 34 on the Corruption Perceptions Index published by Transparency International, falling to 109th place out of 182 countries assessed, a decline of ten rankings compared to 2024, and a continued downward trajectory from the country's peak score of 40 in 2019 (Transparency International, 2026). This regression is not incidental. It reflects a deeper structural and moral failure that policy reforms alone have proven insufficient to address.

The scale of financial damage wrought by corruption is staggering. Indonesia Corruption Watch (ICW) reported that in 2024, law enforcement agencies investigated 364 corruption cases involving estimated state losses of Rp279.9 trillion. This figure was dominated by the PT Timah tata niaga scandal, which alone accounted for approximately 96.8 percent of total losses detected (ICW, 2025). Even as corruption persists at this magnitude, the volume of cases being prosecuted has fallen dramatically: 2024 saw the lowest number of investigated corruption cases in five years, with a 54 percent decline from the preceding year, and the KPK managed to open only 48 new cases against a target of 200 (ICW, 2025). This enforcement gap reveals something beyond mere institutional weakness; rather, it points to a systemic normalization of corrupt behavior within public organizations.

Conventional responses to corruption have predominantly centered on structural and legal instruments: strengthening anti-corruption commissions, expanding audit capacities, digitizing public procurement, and imposing harsher penalties. These approaches are necessary but not sufficient. The persistence of corruption despite decades of institutional reform in Indonesia suggests that its roots extend beyond deficiencies in formal rules. Rose-Ackerman and Palifka (2016) argue that corruption is fundamentally a symptom of governance systems operating with insufficient regard for the public interest, and that legal reform alone cannot rectify the deeper incentive structures and cultural norms that sustain it. What is at stake, this article argues, is a crisis of national character, specifically a deterioration of public virtue, civic morality, and the internalization of shared values that should animate public service.

Pancasila, as Indonesia's ideological foundation, is not merely a political doctrine but a normative framework for public life. Its five principles encode a vision of collective dignity, social justice, democratic deliberation, and moral accountability. When corruption flourishes, it does not only violate legal norms but betrays each of those principles. The task confronting scholars of civic education and public administration is therefore to reclaim Pancasila not as ceremonial rhetoric but as a living ethical standard capable of anchoring integrity in the conduct of public officials and civil servants.

This conceptual article makes three central contributions. First, it offers a theoretically grounded reading of corruption as a moral and civic crisis, drawing on public ethics scholarship and moral philosophy. Second, it analyzes Pancasila as a normative resource for anti-corruption reform, particularly in the domains of bureaucratic conduct and civic education. Third, it proposes a set of conceptual propositions for character-based anti-corruption strategies applicable at both the institutional and educational levels. By situating the corruption problem within the tradition of public ethics and

Pancasila values, this article aims to expand the horizon of anti-corruption discourse beyond legalism and technocracy.

METHOD

This article employs a conceptual or library research approach, which is recognized in academic literature as an appropriate methodology for generating theoretical propositions, synthesizing existing knowledge, and constructing normative arguments. Unlike empirical field research, conceptual research does not require the collection of primary data through surveys or interviews; instead, it engages critically and systematically with secondary sources including academic books, peer-reviewed journal articles, policy documents, and relevant statistical reports. The method is well-suited to this article's objective: to construct a theoretically coherent and normatively grounded argument about corruption as a crisis of national character, and to articulate the conceptual relationship between public ethics and Pancasila values.

The literature review was conducted systematically across multiple academic databases including Google Scholar, Scopus, and SINTA, with a focus on three thematic clusters: (1) theories of public ethics, integrity, and moral governance; (2) Pancasila scholarship in the context of public administration and civic education; and (3) empirical data and analytical reports on corruption in Indonesia from credible sources including Transparency International, Indonesia Corruption Watch (ICW), and the KPK. The selection of sources prioritized works published within the last decade (2015 to 2026), with exceptions made for foundational theoretical texts that remain analytically indispensable.

The analysis proceeds through conceptual synthesis and critical argumentation. Four theoretical frameworks are applied in dialogue with one another: Huberts' (2018) framework for public integrity and ethical conduct in government; Denhardt and Denhardt's (2015) New Public Service theory, which foregrounds democratic values and public ethics as constitutive of governance; Rose-Ackerman and Palifka's (2016) structural analysis of corruption as a governance failure; and Latif's (2020) reading of Pancasila as a normative-philosophical system for national life. These frameworks allow the article to construct an integrated conceptual argument about the relationship between institutional reform, character formation, and the Pancasila value system. Findings are presented as theoretical propositions rather than empirically tested hypotheses, consistent with the conventions of conceptual scholarship.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Corruption as a Moral and Civic Crisis

The standard analytical framework for understanding corruption defines it as the abuse of entrusted power for private gain (Transparency International, 2026). While this definition is operationally useful, it is normatively thin. It captures the legal dimension of the problem but leaves underexplored the moral and civic dimensions that are, arguably, more fundamental to understanding why corruption persists in societies that have enacted robust anti-corruption legislation. To understand corruption as a crisis of national character, a broader conceptual frame is required.

Rose-Ackerman and Palifka (2016) demonstrate through extensive comparative analysis that corruption is both a cause and a consequence of weak governance institutions. When public officials perceive that their conduct is unlikely to be detected

and sanctioned, and when the organizational culture around them normalizes rent-seeking behavior, individual compliance with integrity standards becomes structurally fragile. This finding is consistent with Tambunan's (2022) analysis of Indonesia's specific case, which identifies a compounding dynamic in which corruption at the elite level erodes the political legitimacy of the state, which in turn weakens citizens' incentives to comply with formal rules and report misconduct, which further reduces the accountability pressures on political elites.

Public ethics scholars have long argued that sustainable integrity in government depends not merely on formal rules and monitoring mechanisms, but on the cultivation of moral dispositions within public officials themselves. Huberts (2018) distinguishes between compliance-based integrity systems, which rely on external enforcement of rules, and values-based systems, which seek to internalize ethical standards as part of professional identity. His research across multiple governance contexts demonstrates that compliance-based systems, when not complemented by values-based approaches, produce what he terms 'technical conformity without moral commitment,' meaning officials who avoid technically prohibited conduct but remain susceptible to forms of corruption that evade rule-based detection (Huberts, 2018). This distinction is highly relevant to the Indonesian case.

In Indonesia's local governance, several recent cases illustrate this dynamic with precision. The 2025 detention of Semarang Mayor Hevearita Gunaryanti Rahayu, along with her husband who served as a member of the Central Java provincial legislature, on charges of procurement manipulation in school furniture procurement and infrastructure projects, reveals how officials embedded within formal governance structures can systematically exploit public resources while formally complying with bureaucratic procedures (KPK, 2025). Similarly, the KPK's investigation of two members of the DPR's Commission XI for channeling Bank Indonesia and OJK social assistance funds through their affiliated foundations between 2020 and 2023 demonstrates corruption as the product not of ignorance but of deliberate moral choice, namely the exercise of public authority in the service of private enrichment (KPK, 2025). These cases are not aberrations; they are symptoms of what Supit and Mantiri (2026) have identified, in the context of North Sulawesi local government, as a structurally coupled cycle in which elite political intervention, organizational silence, and institutional degradation reinforce one another to erode the substantive capacity of governance systems to prevent and detect corruption.

The concept of moral agency is central to this analysis. Denhardt and Denhardt (2015), in their elaboration of the New Public Service framework, argue that public administrators are not neutral technical operators but moral agents whose decisions are constitutively shaped by their values, commitments, and understandings of the public interest. When bureaucratic culture normalizes the prioritization of personal or group interests over public accountability, a process that moral philosophers call 'character corruption' rather than merely 'conduct corruption,' the result is not only the waste of public resources but the hollowing out of civic trust and the erosion of democratic legitimacy. This is precisely what makes corruption a crisis of national character: it is not merely a set of wrongful acts but a pattern of moral failure that, when systemic, degrades the very civic fabric of a nation.

Contemporary criminology and institutional theory add a further dimension. Scott's (2017) framework of institutional pillars, comprising the regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive dimensions, offers a useful analytical lens. Corruption becomes entrenched when the cultural-cognitive pillar normalizes deviant behavior as rational

adaptation. This pillar encompasses the taken-for-granted assumptions and social scripts that govern organizational life. Persson, Rothstein, and Teorell (2019) extend this argument through collective action theory, demonstrating that when a critical mass of actors within a governance system perceive corrupt behavior as the dominant norm, individual compliance with integrity standards becomes individually irrational regardless of personal moral preferences. Applied to the Indonesian context, this explains why the ICW (2025) found that the sectors with the highest rates of corruption in 2024 were those closest to citizens' basic needs, specifically village administration (77 cases), utilities (57 cases), and health services (39 cases), precisely the domains where citizens' dependence on public officials is greatest and oversight capacity is weakest.

Pancasila as a Normative Framework for Integrity

Indonesia's ideological foundation, Pancasila, is frequently invoked in official discourse on corruption. Yet this invocation tends to remain at the level of ceremonial affirmation, devoid of substantive engagement with their philosophical content and practical implications for governance. This article contends that Pancasila, properly understood, constitutes a rich normative resource for rethinking anti-corruption strategy, one that goes beyond the technocratic and legalistic approaches that have dominated policy discourse. The argument proceeds through an analysis of the philosophical content of each of the five sila and its specific relevance to the problem of corruption.

The first principle, *Ketuhanan Yang Maha Esa* (Belief in One God), establishes a theistic moral framework that grounds public ethics in transcendent accountability. This is not merely a statement about religious belief but a normative claim about the ultimate source of moral obligation. In Latif's (2020) reading, this principle implies that public officials are accountable not only to the law and to citizens, but to a higher moral order that their conduct must reflect. Corruption, on this reading, is not merely a legal violation but a moral transgression, an act of betrayal against a divinely sanctioned order of social trust and public stewardship. The implication for anti-corruption reform is that character formation grounded in religious and moral conviction should be considered a legitimate and necessary complement to legal enforcement.

The second principle, *Kemanusiaan Yang Adil dan Beradab* (Just and Civilized Humanity), articulates a commitment to human dignity, fairness, and civilized conduct. Corruption violates this principle at its most fundamental level: it treats citizens not as bearers of inherent dignity but as means to private ends. When a public official demands a bribe in exchange for a service to which a citizen is legally entitled, the act is not merely an economic transaction but a degradation of the citizen's humanity and a violation of the equal dignity that the second sila demands. Latif (2020) argues that this principle carries a strong anti-corruption mandate: a truly civilized state is one in which public power is exercised with consistent regard for the equal worth of all citizens.

The third principle, *Persatuan Indonesia* (Unity of Indonesia), is directly violated by corruption because corruption is inherently divisive. It creates, perpetuates, and deepens inequalities of access to public goods between those who can pay and those who cannot, between those with political connections and those without. Research by Yusoff, Othman, and Kamal (2023) on corruption in the Asia-Pacific context demonstrates that high-corruption environments are systematically associated with the fragmentation of social solidarity and the erosion of citizens' sense of belonging to a shared political community. When public officials exploit their positions to benefit particular groups, regions, or networks, they undermine the very unity that the third sila commands.

The fourth principle, Kerakyatan Yang Dipimpin oleh Hikmat Kebijaksanaan dalam Permusyawaratan/Perwakilan (Democracy Guided by Wisdom in Deliberation/Representation), has the most direct and elaborated relationship to anti-corruption. Democratic accountability, understood as the principle that public power derives from and must be exercised in service of the people, is the foundational norm that corruption violates. Political corruption in particular, such as the documented patterns of vote buying associated with regional elections in Indonesia, directly subverts democratic deliberation by substituting financial coercion for genuine civic participation. Riwanto and Suryaningsih (2024) have argued that the high cost of regional elections in Indonesia creates powerful incentives for elected officials to recover campaign investments through the misuse of public resources, generating a corruption cycle that is structurally embedded in the democratic process itself. The fourth sila demands a form of democracy in which wisdom and deliberation, not financial power, determine political outcomes.

The fifth principle, Keadilan Sosial Bagi Seluruh Rakyat Indonesia (Social Justice for All the People of Indonesia), provides perhaps the most immediately compelling anti-corruption argument. Corruption is, at its core, an instrument of social injustice: it systematically transfers resources from public goods, including hospitals, schools, infrastructure, and social protection, into private accounts. The ICW (2025) data showing that estimated state losses from corruption in 2024 reached Rp279.9 trillion represents not merely an accounting figure but a measure of the social justice that was denied to Indonesian citizens. When corruption diverts funds from health services, village development, and educational facilities, it is the most vulnerable citizens who bear the most severe consequences. The fifth sila demands that public officials and institutions be held to a standard of conduct that actively advances social justice and does not merely refrain from its most egregious violations.

Latif (2020) has articulated Pancasila as a 'living normative order' rather than a static ideological artifact. By this he means that the principles of Pancasila are not merely historical declarations but active normative standards that should inform and evaluate the conduct of individuals, institutions, and the state in the present. This reading has important implications for anti-corruption strategy: it suggests that Pancasila should function not as a rhetorical backdrop to governance but as a practical ethical standard against which the conduct of public officials is routinely measured and held accountable.

The Deficit of Character in Indonesian Bureaucracy

Between the normative richness of Pancasila and the empirical reality of systemic corruption in Indonesian governance lies a profound gap. Understanding this gap requires engaging with the concept of bureaucratic character, referring to the moral dispositions, values, and ethical commitments that public officials bring to the exercise of their roles. The persistence of corruption despite the formal availability of Pancasila as an ethical framework suggests that the problem is not the inadequacy of the normative resource but its failure to be genuinely internalized in the character of public officials and in the culture of public organizations.

This failure takes several analytically distinguishable forms. The first is what might be called the ceremonial appropriation of Pancasila values: officials recite its principles in formal settings while their conduct in administrative practice is governed by different, often contrary, norms. Dwiyanto (2021) observes that Indonesian bureaucratic culture has historically been shaped by strong paternalistic tendencies and hierarchical loyalty norms that can override formal integrity obligations, particularly when senior officials are implicated in misconduct. The second is the organizational normalization of deviance,

whereby what begins as exceptional or covert corrupt behavior gradually becomes institutionalized as an accepted feature of organizational life (Vaughan, 1996). The third is the structural incentivization of corruption: where formal salary structures are inadequate, where political patrons expect officials to facilitate resource extraction, and where enforcement is inconsistent, officials face a decision environment in which corrupt conduct is systematically incentivized relative to ethical behavior.

Graycar (2022) has argued that effective anti-corruption strategies must address what he calls the 'opportunity structures' for corruption, referring to the institutional arrangements, discretionary authorities, and accountability gaps that make corrupt conduct possible. But he equally emphasizes that opportunity structures are activated by character: officials who encounter the same opportunity structures will make different choices depending on the moral commitments they bring to those situations. Character-based reform is therefore not an alternative to structural reform but its necessary complement. Without genuine character transformation in the civil service, structural reforms create more sophisticated forms of corruption rather than eliminating it.

The evidence from Indonesia's own recent experience supports this argument. The KPK has invested heavily in compliance-based anti-corruption systems: mandatory asset declarations, integrity pacts, e-procurement platforms, and corruption prevention monitoring indices. Yet corruption has persisted. The explanation that emerges from the literature is consistent: compliance systems without character formation produce what Supit and Mantiri (2026) describe as 'technocratic facades,' meaning digital instruments and formal procedures that are used to perform compliance while the underlying character of corrupt conduct remains unchanged.

Toward Character-Based Anti-Corruption Reform: Pancasila as Practical Ethics

Having established both the normative content of Pancasila and the analytical framing of corruption as a character crisis, this section develops a set of conceptual propositions for character-based anti-corruption reform. These propositions are not policy prescriptions in a technical sense but theoretical arguments about the conditions under which corruption can be addressed at the level of moral character and civic identity.

Proposition 1: Anti-corruption education should be reconceived as character formation grounded in Pancasila ethics. Current civic education in Indonesia's schools and civil service training programs tends to treat Pancasila as a body of factual knowledge to be memorized rather than a set of moral commitments to be practiced. Effective character formation requires pedagogical approaches that engage students and public officials not merely cognitively but affectively and behaviorally through case-based reasoning, moral deliberation, and reflective practice. Denhardt and Denhardt (2015) argue that public service education should cultivate 'democratic citizenship' as an active moral commitment, not merely professional competence. The five sila provide the normative content for precisely this kind of education.

Proposition 2: Institutional integrity systems should be redesigned to integrate values-based alongside compliance-based approaches. Huberts (2018) has documented that the most effective integrity systems in international comparative perspective combine formal rules and enforcement mechanisms with active cultivation of ethical norms, organizational cultures that reward integrity, and leadership that models ethical conduct. In the Indonesian context, this means that agencies such as the KPK, BPKP, and local government inspectorates should develop integrity programs that go beyond audit compliance to include ethical leadership development, integrity culture assessments, and

systems for recognizing and rewarding exemplary public conduct. The normative standard for these programs should be explicitly grounded in Pancasila.

Proposition 3: Political reform must address the structural conditions that generate demand for corruption. The documented relationship between high-cost elections and corruption cycles in local governance (Riwanto & Suryaningsih, 2024) suggests that anti-corruption reform cannot succeed without addressing the financial structures of democratic competition. Campaign finance reform, transparent electoral funding, and stronger enforcement against vote-buying are structural prerequisites for the kind of authentic democratic accountability that the fourth sila demands. Without these structural changes, character-based reforms will remain vulnerable to being overwhelmed by the systemic incentives generated by political competition.

Proposition 4: Civil society, religious institutions, and educational bodies should be recognized as indispensable partners in anti-corruption character formation. The state cannot produce character transformation through legislation alone. Families, schools, religious communities, and professional associations are the primary sites where moral character is formed and sustained. Effective Pancasila-based anti-corruption reform requires investing in the capacity of these institutions to cultivate and reinforce the values of honesty, accountability, and social justice that constitute the normative core of the Pancasila. International evidence from countries that have achieved sustained improvements in governance integrity, such as Botswana, Georgia, and Estonia, consistently shows that civil society engagement was a critical factor in success (Huberts, 2018).

Proposition 5: Accountability mechanisms should be reframed not merely as legal obligations but as expressions of civic virtue and Pancasila commitment. When transparency, reporting of misconduct, and compliance with anti-corruption norms are positioned solely as legal requirements, they tend to be approached as compliance burdens. When they are reframed as expressions of commitment to Pancasila values, namely to justice, to the service of the people, and to national unity, they acquire a different moral status. This reframing is not merely rhetorical: it requires that accountability mechanisms be genuinely respected and rewarded by institutions, that whistleblowing be protected as an act of civic courage rather than penalized as organizational disloyalty, and that public officials who demonstrate exemplary integrity be recognized and celebrated as embodiments of Pancasila values.

CONCLUSION

This article has argued that corruption in Indonesia constitutes not merely a legal or institutional failure but a crisis of national character, constituting a systemic erosion of the moral commitments, civic values, and public ethics that should animate governance in a Pancasila-based state. The evidence is unambiguous: with a CPI score of 34 in 2025 and an estimated Rp279.9 trillion in state losses detected in 2024 corruption cases alone, Indonesia's experience of corruption reflects failures that decades of compliance-based reform have proven insufficient to remedy.

The analysis has demonstrated that Pancasila, properly understood as a living normative order rather than a ceremonial doctrine, contains within each of its five principles a direct and substantive mandate for anti-corruption. The first sila grounds public ethics in transcendent accountability; the second demands equal dignity in citizens' encounters with the state; the third connects civic solidarity to integrity; the fourth centers democratic accountability as the foundation of legitimate governance; and the

fifth positions social justice as both the purpose of public service and its most powerful anti-corruption argument. These are not abstract claims; they are practical normative standards that can and should inform the design of anti-corruption education, institutional reform, and public policy.

The five propositions advanced in this article share a common logic: that sustainable anti-corruption reform must address the character of public officials and the culture of public organizations, and that Pancasila provides the normative framework within which this character formation should be grounded. Compliance mechanisms are necessary but not sufficient; they must be complemented by genuine cultivation of public virtue, civic identity, and ethical commitment. This is ultimately the insight that Pancasila offers that technocratic anti-corruption strategies cannot: that the capacity of governance to serve the public good depends not only on the design of institutions but on the moral character of those who inhabit them.

Future scholarship should empirically examine the conditions under which Pancasila-based character formation programs produce measurable changes in bureaucratic conduct, and should develop comparative frameworks for assessing the effectiveness of values-based relative to compliance-based anti-corruption approaches across Indonesian local governments. The conceptual groundwork laid in this article provides a starting point for that empirical agenda.

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