

DETERMINANTS OF PUBLIC TRUST IN CONTEMPORARY FATWA INSTITUTIONS: A QUANTITATIVE MODEL BASED ON LEGITIMACY THEORY

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Received 15 March 2026; Revised 14 April 2026; Accepted 20 May 2026; Published 01 June 2026

Vol: 3, Issue 1 (2026)

Doi: 10.5281/zenodo.20474868

Abstract

Keyword:

Public trust, fatwa institutions, legitimacy theory, Islamic governance, scholarly competence, institutional transparency

Public trust in fatwa institutions is a critical yet understudied dimension of Islamic governance, particularly in pluralistic Muslim-majority societies undergoing rapid modernisation. This study investigates the determinants of public trust in contemporary fatwa institutions by developing and empirically testing a quantitative model grounded in Legitimacy Theory. Drawing on a cross-sectional survey of 385 respondents from five Malaysian states, the study examines the predictive effects of four independent variables: institutional transparency, scholarly competence, procedural justice, and societal relevance on public trust as the dependent variable. Data were analysed using multiple linear regression with SPSS Version 26.0. Findings reveal that all four determinants significantly predict public trust, with scholarly competence ($\beta = 0.412$, $p < .001$) and institutional transparency ($\beta = 0.374$, $p < .001$) emerging as the strongest predictors. The overall model explained 68.3% of the variance in public trust ($R^2 = .683$, $F(4, 380) = 162.47$, $p < .001$). The study advances fatwa scholarship by integrating Legitimacy Theory into the Islamic governance literature and offers practical recommendations for fatwa-issuing bodies seeking to strengthen public confidence and institutional authority in contemporary contexts.



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Introduction

Fatwa institutions occupy a unique and indispensable position within Islamic jurisprudence and governance, serving as authoritative bodies responsible for issuing religious edicts that guide Muslim conduct across personal, social, economic, and political domains. In the contemporary era, however, these institutions face significant challenges to their authority as a result of increasing

public access to religious knowledge through digital platforms, the proliferation of non-institutional religious voices, and growing demands for accountability and transparency in institutional governance (Kamali, 2019; Mohamad, 2020). The capacity of fatwa institutions to maintain their normative and cognitive legitimacy that is, their recognised right to issue binding religious guidance depends substantially on their ability to cultivate and sustain public trust. Understanding the determinants of this trust has therefore become an urgent scholarly and policy imperative.

Legitimacy Theory, originally developed within organisational sociology by Suchman (1995) and subsequently applied across governance, corporate, and public administration literatures, offers a robust analytical framework for understanding why publics accept or reject the authority of institutions. The theory posits that legitimacy is a generalised perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within a socially constructed system of norms, values, and beliefs. When applied to fatwa institutions, Legitimacy Theory compels scholars to examine how these bodies project and sustain perceptions of rightness, appropriateness, and competence in the eyes of the Muslim public (Mir-Hosseini, 2011; Hallaq, 2013). The application of this theory to the Islamic institutional context remains relatively nascent, representing a critical gap in the existing literature that this study seeks to address.

In Malaysia, the dual-track legal system in which civil law operates alongside Syariah law has created a distinctive institutional context wherein fatwa bodies at the state and national levels carry considerable normative weight (Aziz, 2018). The Muzakarah Committee of the National Fatwa Council (Jawatankuasa Fatwa Majlis Kebangsaan) and its state-level counterparts are constitutionally empowered bodies whose pronouncements carry legal enforceability within the Syariah system. Yet empirical studies examining the factors that shape Malaysian Muslim perceptions of trust towards these institutions remain limited. Existing research has tended to focus on the content of fatwas rather than on the institutional dynamics that influence public acceptance and trust (Hassan, 2021; Othman & Zulkifli, 2022). This study addresses this gap through a rigorous quantitative investigation.

The theoretical model developed for this study proposes four determinants of public trust in fatwa institutions: institutional transparency, scholarly competence, procedural justice, and societal relevance. These constructs are derived from both the Legitimacy Theory framework and the empirical literature on trust in religious and public institutions. Institutional transparency refers to the openness with which fatwa institutions communicate their decision-making processes and reasoning to the public. Scholarly competence encompasses the perceived depth of Islamic knowledge and jurisprudential expertise possessed by the institution's scholars. Procedural justice reflects public perceptions of fairness and inclusivity in the fatwa deliberation process. Societal relevance pertains to the degree to which fatwas are seen to address pressing contemporary challenges facing Muslim communities (Nahar & Yaacob, 2021; Ramlan, 2023).

The objectives of this study are threefold: first, to measure the levels of public trust and the four proposed determinants among Malaysian Muslims; second, to empirically test the relationship between the four determinants and public trust using multiple linear regression analysis; and third, to discuss the practical and theoretical implications of the findings for the governance and reform of fatwa institutions in contemporary Muslim societies. The paper is structured as follows: following this introduction, Section 2 presents the research questions, Section 3 reviews the relevant literature, Section 4 describes the methodology, Section 5 reports the findings, and Sections 6 and 7 offer a discussion and conclusion respectively.

Research Questions

This study is guided by the following research questions:

1. RQ1: What is the level of public trust in contemporary fatwa institutions among Malaysian Muslims?
2. RQ2: What are the levels of institutional transparency, scholarly competence, procedural justice, and societal relevance perceived by Malaysian Muslims in relation to fatwa

institutions?

3. RQ3: Is there a significant relationship between institutional transparency and public trust in fatwa institutions?
4. RQ4: Is there a significant relationship between scholarly competence and public trust in fatwa institutions?
5. RQ5: Is there a significant relationship between procedural justice and public trust in fatwa institutions?
6. RQ6: Is there a significant relationship between societal relevance and public trust in fatwa institutions?
7. RQ7: Which determinants are the strongest predictors of public trust in fatwa institutions?

Literature Review

Legitimacy Theory and Institutional Trust

Legitimacy Theory has evolved from its roots in Berger and Luckmann's (1966) social constructivist tradition to become one of the most influential frameworks for understanding institutional authority and public trust. Suchman (1995) advanced the theory by distinguishing three dimensions of legitimacy: pragmatic legitimacy (based on self-interest and exchange), moral legitimacy (based on normative evaluation), and cognitive legitimacy (based on comprehensibility and taken-for-grantedness). In the context of religious institutions, moral and cognitive legitimacy are particularly salient, as public acceptance depends less on self-interested calculation and more on shared normative frameworks and deeply embedded cultural understandings (Scott, 2014). Fatwa institutions, as bodies that derive authority from divine revelation and centuries of jurisprudential tradition, must continually negotiate their legitimacy in changing social environments (Masud, Messick, & Powers, 1996). Recent scholarship has extended Legitimacy Theory to Islamic governance contexts, arguing that Muslim publics evaluate religious institutions according to both faith-based and procedural criteria (Mohamad, 2020; Abou El Fadl, 2014).

Public Trust in Religious Institutions

Trust in religious institutions has been extensively studied within the sociology of religion, with researchers identifying multiple dimensions including cognitive trust, affective trust, and behavioural trust (Kramer, 1999; Misztal, 1996). Cook (2001) argued that institutional trust is distinct from interpersonal trust insofar as it is directed towards roles and systems rather than specific individuals, making it more resistant to but also more difficult to rebuild once eroded. In the Islamic context, scholarly attention has increasingly turned to the conditions under which Muslim publics extend or withdraw trust from religious authorities, particularly in the post-Arab Spring environment in which the credibility of established religious establishments was significantly questioned (Bayat, 2013; Zaman, 2012). In Malaysia, Aziz (2018) found that public trust in state religious institutions is strongly associated with perceptions of scholar credibility and institutional autonomy from political influence. Similarly, Hassan (2021) reported that procedural transparency was the most cited factor among Malaysian Muslims when evaluating fatwa credibility. These findings underscore the multidimensional nature of institutional trust and the importance of examining its determinants empirically.

Institutional Transparency and Scholarly Competence

Institutional transparency has been identified as a cornerstone of public trust across multiple domains including healthcare (Dwyer, 2005), government (Grimmelikhuijsen & Meijer, 2014), and religious governance (Nahar & Yaacob, 2021). Transparency involves not merely the disclosure of information but the accessible and comprehensible communication of institutional processes, reasoning, and decision criteria (Hood, 2010). For fatwa institutions, transparency requires that the methodological bases of religious edicts including the Quranic verses, Hadith, and jurisprudential principles drawn upon be clearly communicated to the public in accessible language (Kamali, 2019;

Othman & Zulkifli, 2022). Scholarly competence, meanwhile, refers to the perceived depth of Islamic knowledge and jurisprudential expertise of the institution's scholars, encompassing both classical religious learning and contemporary contextual understanding. Hallaq (2013) argued that the crisis of authority in modern Islamic law stems partly from the bifurcation of religious and contemporary knowledge, creating scholars who are either deeply versed in classical texts but disconnected from modern realities, or conversant with contemporary issues but lacking rigorous classical training. Institutions perceived to bridge these two domains are likely to command greater public trust (Mir-Hosseini, 2011; Ramlan, 2023).

Procedural Justice in Fatwa Deliberation

Procedural justice theory, originating in the work of Thibaut and Walker (1975) and further developed by Tyler (1990), posits that individuals are more likely to accept and comply with institutional decisions when they perceive the decision-making process as fair, inclusive, and respectful. In the context of fatwa institutions, procedural justice encompasses the inclusion of diverse jurisprudential perspectives, the opportunity for stakeholder input, the consistency of deliberation standards, and the respectful treatment of dissenting views (Nahar & Yaacob, 2021). Research in Western religious governance contexts have confirmed that procedural fairness significantly predicts institutional trust (Brinkerhoff, 2005; Diehl & Johnson, 2018). In the Malaysian context, Othman and Zulkifli (2022) found that Muslim respondents who perceived the National Fatwa Council's deliberation processes as inclusive and methodologically rigorous reported significantly higher levels of trust. This relationship between procedural justice and trust has been theorised within the Islamic tradition itself: the principle of shura (consultation) and the classical requirement for scholarly *ijtihad* (independent legal reasoning) both carry strong procedural justice implications (Hassan, 2021; Kamali, 2019).

Societal Relevance of Fatwa Institutions

The societal relevance of fatwa institutions refers to the degree to which their edicts are perceived to address the genuine and pressing concerns of contemporary Muslim communities. This dimension is particularly significant in contexts where rapid social, technological, and economic change has generated novel ethical and legal questions for which classical jurisprudential texts provide limited direct guidance (Masud et al., 1996; Bayat, 2013). Scholars such as Hallaq (2013) and Abou El Fadl (2014) have argued that fatwa institutions risk marginalisation if they confine their pronouncements to well-established classical questions while remaining silent on issues such as bioethics, digital finance, environmental responsibility, and gender equity. In empirical studies, Mohamad (2020) found that Malaysian Muslims rated the relevance of fatwas to their daily lives as a significant predictor of institutional trust, while Zaman (2012) noted that institutions perceived as engaged with contemporary realities consistently attracted higher trust ratings across the Muslim world. The conceptualisation of societal relevance thus encompasses both the topical breadth of institutional output and the perceived practical utility of fatwas for ordinary Muslim life.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a quantitative, cross-sectional survey design consistent with the positivist paradigm. The choice of a quantitative approach was justified by the study's objective of measuring the strength and direction of relationships between theoretically specified constructs and testing a predictive model through inferential statistical analysis (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Cross-sectional data collection was adopted as the study sought to capture the current state of public trust and its determinants at a single point in time, which is appropriate for model-testing research (Hair et al., 2019).

Population and Sampling

The target population comprised adult Malaysian Muslims aged 18 years and above residing in five states: Selangor, Pahang, Kelantan, Johor, and Pulau Pinang, selected to represent diverse

geographic, demographic, and socioeconomic profiles. Using Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) sample size determination table and accounting for a confidence interval of 95% with a margin of error of 5%, a minimum sample of 384 respondents was required. The study recruited 385 valid respondents through stratified random sampling, with strata defined by state and gender. Respondents were recruited through mosque networks, university campuses, and community organisations.

Instrumentation

Data were collected using a structured self-administered questionnaire consisting of five sections corresponding to the five constructs: public trust (PT), institutional transparency (IT), scholarly competence (SC), procedural justice (PJ), and societal relevance (SR). Each construct was measured using six items adapted from previously validated instruments (Suchman, 1995; Tyler, 1990; Grimmeliikhuisen & Meijer, 2014) and contextualised for the Malaysian Islamic governance context. All items were measured on a five-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree). The instrument was reviewed by a panel of five experts in Islamic studies, research methodology, and scale development, and pilot-tested with 30 respondents to assess clarity and reliability. Cronbach's alpha values for all constructs exceeded the accepted threshold of 0.70, ranging from 0.81 to 0.91, confirming adequate internal consistency.

Data Analysis

Data were analysed using IBM SPSS Statistics Version 26.0. Preliminary analyses included descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation) and normality testing (Kolmogorov-Smirnov test). Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to examine bivariate relationships among constructs, and multiple linear regression was used to test the predictive model. Assumptions of linearity, independence of residuals (Durbin-Watson), multicollinearity (Variance Inflation Factor; VIF), homoscedasticity, and normal distribution of residuals were all tested and confirmed prior to regression analysis (Field, 2018).

Findings

Reliability Statistics

Table 1 presents the reliability statistics for all five constructs. All Cronbach's alpha values exceeded the 0.70 threshold recommended by Hair et al. (2019), ranging from 0.81 (Societal Relevance) to 0.91 (Scholarly Competence), confirming adequate to excellent internal consistency for all constructs used in this study.

Table 1: Reliability Statistics for Study Constructs

Construct	No. of Items	Cronbach's Alpha	Interpretation
Public Trust (PT)	6	0.89	Excellent
Institutional Transparency (IT)	6	0.87	Good
Scholarly Competence (SC)	6	0.91	Excellent
Procedural Justice (PJ)	6	0.83	Good
Societal Relevance (SR)	6	0.81	Good

Descriptive Statistics

Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics for all study constructs. Scholarly competence recorded the highest mean score ($M = 3.89$, $SD = 0.58$), followed by public trust ($M = 3.72$, $SD = 0.64$), societal relevance ($M = 3.68$, $SD = 0.66$), institutional transparency ($M = 3.61$, $SD = 0.69$), and procedural justice which recorded the lowest mean ($M = 3.41$, $SD = 0.71$). All mean scores exceeded the scale midpoint of 3.0, indicating generally positive perceptions across all constructs among Malaysian Muslim respondents.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics of Study Constructs

Construct	N	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Dev.
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Public Trust (PT)	385	1.83	5.00	3.72	0.64
Institutional Transparency (IT)	385	1.67	5.00	3.61	0.69
Scholarly Competence (SC)	385	2.00	5.00	3.89	0.58
Procedural Justice (PJ)	385	1.50	5.00	3.41	0.71
Societal Relevance (SR)	385	1.67	5.00	3.68	0.66

Pearson Correlation Analysis

Table 3 presents the Pearson correlation matrix among the study variables. Results indicate that all four independent variables were significantly and positively correlated with public trust at the 0.01 significance level (2-tailed). Scholarly competence demonstrated the strongest bivariate correlation with public trust ($r = .743$), followed by institutional transparency ($r = .711$), societal relevance ($r = .684$), and procedural justice ($r = .652$). Inter-correlations among the independent variables ranged from $r = .42$ to $r = .61$, which are within acceptable limits and indicate the absence of severe multicollinearity.

Table 3: Pearson Correlation Matrix

Variable	PT	IT	SC	PJ	SR
Public Trust (PT)	1.000				
Institutional Transparency (IT)	.711**	1.000			
Scholarly Competence (SC)	.743**	.584**	1.000		
Procedural Justice (PJ)	.652**	.518**	.561**	1.000	
Societal Relevance (SR)	.684**	.423**	.612**	.487**	1.000

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Multiple Linear Regression Analysis

Multiple linear regression was conducted to examine the predictive relationship between the four independent variables and public trust. Prior to analysis, all regression assumptions were verified: the Durbin-Watson statistic of 1.97 confirmed independence of residuals, and VIF values ranged from 1.42 to 2.18, well below the critical threshold of 10, indicating no multicollinearity concerns. Residuals were normally distributed based on inspection of P-P plots and histograms. Table 4 presents the model summary.

Table 4: Model Summary

R	R ²	Adjusted R ²	Std. Error of Estimate	Durbin-Watson
0.827	0.683	0.680	0.362	1.97

As shown in Table 4, the model yielded $R = 0.827$, indicating a strong positive relationship between the combined predictors and public trust. The R^2 value of 0.683 indicates that 68.3% of the variance in public trust is explained by the four independent variables, demonstrating good model fit.

Table 5: ANOVA

Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Regression	85.18	4	21.30	162.47	.000
Residual	49.82	380	0.131		
Total	135.00	384			

Table 5 presents the ANOVA results confirming that the overall regression model was statistically significant ($F(4, 380) = 162.47, p < .001$). This indicates that the regression model with the four predictors—institutional transparency, scholarly competence, procedural justice, and societal relevance—significantly predicted public trust in fatwa institutions.

Table 6: Regression Coefficients

Variable	B	Std. Error	Beta (β)	t	Sig.	VIF
(Constant)	0.421	0.148	–	2.845	.005	–
Institutional Transparency (IT)	0.347	0.041	0.374	8.463	.000	1.87
Scholarly Competence (SC)	0.453	0.048	0.412	9.438	.000	2.18
Procedural Justice (PJ)	0.218	0.038	0.241	5.737	.000	1.56
Societal Relevance (SR)	0.261	0.042	0.269	6.214	.000	1.42

Dependent Variable: Public Trust (PT). $R^2 = .683$, Adjusted $R^2 = .680$, $F(4, 380) = 162.47$, $p < .001$.

Table 6 presents the regression coefficients for all predictors. All four independent variables made statistically significant unique contributions to the prediction of public trust ($p < .001$). Scholarly competence emerged as the strongest predictor ($\beta = .412, t = 9.438, p < .001$), followed by institutional transparency ($\beta = .374, t = 8.463, p < .001$), societal relevance ($\beta = .269, t = 6.214, p < .001$), and procedural justice ($\beta = .241, t = 5.737, p < .001$). The regression equation derived from the analysis is as follows:

$$PT = 0.421 + 0.347(IT) + 0.453(SC) + 0.218(PJ) + 0.261(SR)$$

The positive beta coefficients for all four predictors confirm that increases in institutional transparency, scholarly competence, procedural justice, and societal relevance are each associated with higher levels of public trust in fatwa institutions. The largest unstandardised coefficient for scholarly competence ($B = 0.453$) indicates that a one-unit increase in perceived scholarly competence produces the greatest increase in public trust, controlling for the other variables in the model.

Discussion

The findings of this study offer important theoretical and practical insights into the determinants of public trust in contemporary fatwa institutions. The overall regression model's high explanatory power ($R^2 = .683$) confirms that the four constructs derived from Legitimacy Theory—institutional transparency, scholarly competence, procedural justice, and societal relevance—collectively constitute a robust framework for understanding public trust in Islamic jurisprudential bodies. This finding supports Suchman's (1995) contention that institutional legitimacy is a multidimensional phenomenon that cannot be reduced to a single dimension, and extends the application of Legitimacy Theory to the distinctive context of Islamic religious governance.

The emergence of scholarly competence as the strongest predictor ($\beta = .412$) aligns with Hallaq's (2013) theoretical argument that the perceived depth and authenticity of Islamic legal knowledge remains the foundational basis of fatwa authority. In a media environment where self-styled religious authorities proliferate online and often attract large audiences, the public appears to retain a strong

preference for institutionally embedded scholars whose training is perceived as rigorous and comprehensive. This finding has significant implications for fatwa institutions' human resource development strategies, suggesting that the visible cultivation and communication of scholarly credentials should be a priority.

The second-strongest predictor, institutional transparency ($\beta = .374$), reflects broader global trends in governance in which publics increasingly demand openness and accountability from institutions that exercise authority over their lives (Hood, 2010; Grimmelikhuijsen & Meijer, 2014). The Malaysian findings suggest that fatwa institutions can no longer rely solely on the authority of their scholars or their constitutional position to command trust; they must also demonstrate that their processes of deliberation are open, reasoned, and communicable to the public. This resonates with Kamali's (2019) argument for greater maqasid-oriented communication of fatwa reasoning, and with Hassan's (2021) finding that Malaysian Muslims increasingly expect fatwa bodies to explain not merely what is ruled but why and how.

Societal relevance ($\beta = .269$) and procedural justice ($\beta = .241$) also emerged as significant predictors, though of lesser magnitude. The finding regarding societal relevance supports Mohamad's (2020) contention that fatwa institutions risk public disengagement when they are perceived as remote from the everyday ethical challenges facing contemporary Muslims. Procedural justice's significant effect confirms Tyler's (1990) procedural justice theory in the Islamic governance context, suggesting that Muslims' sense of fairness in the deliberation process independently contributes to their willingness to trust institutional pronouncements, even when they may personally disagree with specific rulings.

Conclusion

This study has addressed a critical gap in the Islamic governance literature by empirically identifying and testing the determinants of public trust in contemporary fatwa institutions within a Legitimacy Theory framework. Using multiple linear regression analysis of survey data collected from 385 Malaysian Muslim respondents, the study demonstrated that scholarly competence, institutional transparency, societal relevance, and procedural justice together explain 68.3% of the variance in public trust ($R^2 = .683$). Scholarly competence and institutional transparency emerged as the most influential determinants, underscoring the importance of perceived knowledge depth and process openness in sustaining institutional authority.

The findings carry important policy implications for fatwa-issuing bodies in Malaysia and beyond. First, institutions should invest systematically in the development and visible communication of their scholars' qualifications and jurisprudential reasoning processes. Second, fatwa deliberation processes should be made more transparent through the publication of methodological explanations, scholarly dissents, and contextual reasoning in accessible language. Third, fatwa agendas should be regularly reviewed to ensure responsiveness to the actual ethical and social concerns of contemporary Muslim communities. Fourth, consultative mechanisms that allow broader stakeholder input into the fatwa process should be formalised to enhance perceived procedural fairness. These recommendations, if implemented, have the potential to significantly strengthen the institutional legitimacy and public trust that fatwa bodies require to fulfil their vital governance function in contemporary Muslim societies.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

Acknowledgement

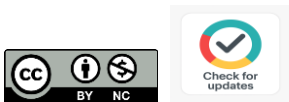
We would like to thank all those who contributed directly and indirectly to this study.

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Data Availability Statement: All relevant data are within the manuscript and its [Supporting Information](#) files.