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FROM BARAKAH TO BUREAUCRACY: REFRAMING ORGANISATIONAL LEGITIMACY IN ISLAMIC EDUCATION THROUGH INSTITUTIONAL THEORY

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Abstract

The expansion of bureaucratic governance has repositioned accreditation, accountability, and regulatory compliance as dominant sources of organisational legitimacy in contemporary education. Institutional theory explains this development through regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive pillars that shape organisational conformity. However, its adequacy in faith-based educational contexts remains insufficiently examined. This study critically reassesses institutional legitimacy theory through the case of Islamic education and proposes a conceptual extension. Employing a qualitative library-based design, the article systematically analyses foundational institutional theory alongside classical and contemporary scholarship on Islamic educational authority. The findings indicate that while bureaucratic rationality secures formal recognition, legitimacy in Islamic education is also grounded in perceived alignment with transcendent moral order, articulated through the concept of *barakah*. Reframed as spiritual capital, barakah functions as a source of communal trust and ethical credibility that operates beyond procedural compliance. The study advances a layered model of organisational legitimacy in which spiritual-moral legitimacy complements existing institutional pillars. By introducing vertical accountability to sacred values into institutional analysis, this article expands the theoretical scope of organisational legitimacy and contributes to broader debates on governance, rationalisation, and the persistence of religious authority within modern educational systems.

Keywords: Organisational Legitimacy; Institutional Theory; Islamic Education; Spiritual Capital; Barakah; Educational Governance;

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INTRODUCTION

The expansion of bureaucratic governance has become one of the defining features of contemporary educational systems. Across diverse national contexts, schools and universities are increasingly structured by accreditation regimes, accountability mechanisms, performance indicators, and audit cultures that prioritise procedural transparency and measurable outcomes (Powers 2004; Arruda Filho et al. 2019; Haller and Shore 2005). This transformation reflects a broader process of rationalisation described by Max Weber, in which legal-rational authority gradually displaces traditional and charismatic forms of legitimacy (Weber 2013). In this environment, educational institutions are expected to demonstrate their legitimacy through compliance with regulatory frameworks and alignment with standardised norms of organisational practice.

Institutional theory has provided a powerful explanatory framework for understanding this development. Meyer and Rowan (1977) argued that formal organisational structures often function as symbolic mechanisms designed to secure legitimacy rather than improve technical efficiency (Meyers et al. 2013). DiMaggio and Powell demonstrated how coercive, normative, and mimetic pressures generate institutional isomorphism, leading organisations within a field to resemble one another (Powell 2022). This further conceptualised legitimacy as a generalised perception that

organisational actions are appropriate within socially constructed systems of values and beliefs. Holley synthesised these insights into a three-pillar framework—regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive—through which institutions gain and maintain legitimacy (Holley et al. 2017).

These theoretical developments have profoundly influenced research on higher education governance, organisational reform, and policy compliance (Powell 2022). Yet the dominant formulations of institutional legitimacy remain grounded in secular organisational contexts. Even when applied to religious or faith-based institutions, analyses typically emphasise regulatory negotiation, identity preservation, or organisational adaptation within state structures (Fazila et al. 2025). What remains under-theorised is whether institutional theory adequately captures the distinct moral and spiritual dimensions that shape legitimacy in religious educational settings.

Islamic education provides a compelling case for examining this theoretical limitation. Historically, Islamic institutions derived their legitimacy not from bureaucratic endorsement but from moral authority, scholarly lineage (*sanad*), epistemic continuity, and communal trust (A'la and Makhshun 2022). Authority was embedded in networks of transmission and ethical exemplarity rather than in formal accreditation systems. Knowledge was authenticated through chains of teachers and students, and institutional credibility rested on perceived integrity and benefit. These features align more closely with Weber's categories of traditional and charismatic authority than with legal-rational bureaucracy (McCormick 1998).

In contemporary contexts, however, Islamic educational institutions operate within modern nation-states characterised by regulatory oversight and standardisation. Accreditation status influences funding eligibility, public recognition, and institutional survival. Curriculum frameworks, financial reporting systems, and governance manuals are increasingly mandated. This environment subjects Islamic education to institutional pressures consistent with the dynamics described by DiMaggio and Powell (DiMaggio and Powell 2000). Yet despite bureaucratic incorporation, Islamic institutions frequently continue to articulate their legitimacy in terms that transcend regulatory compliance.

A key concept in this regard is *barakah*. Within Islamic intellectual tradition, barakah refers to a form of enduring spiritual benefit associated with divine favour, moral integrity, and continuity of knowledge (Alfiyanto et al. 2024). While theological in origin, barakah also operates sociologically as a source of symbolic authority and communal trust. It shapes perceptions of authenticity, ethical credibility, and institutional worth. Parents, students, and teachers may attribute legitimacy to an institution not solely because it meets formal standards but because it is believed to embody spiritual efficacy and moral coherence.

From a sociological perspective, barakah can be interpreted as a form of spiritual capital—analogous to Bourdieu's concept of symbolic capital, yet grounded in transcendent moral reference (Bourdieu 1990). Spiritual capital generates loyalty, resilience, and communal recognition beyond procedural compliance (Smith 1974). However, mainstream institutional theory does not explicitly account for such transcendence-oriented sources of legitimacy. Scott's normative and cultural-cognitive pillars partially address value systems and shared beliefs, but they remain conceptually anchored in socially constructed legitimacy rather than theologically grounded authority (Chan et al. 2020).

This theoretical gap becomes more visible in the context of expanding audit culture. Power argued that auditing transforms trust into verification, institutionalising suspicion through procedural oversight. In educational settings, this shift redefines legitimacy as demonstrable compliance rather than moral credibility (Powers 2004). For Islamic educational institutions, such transformation raises critical questions: Can bureaucratic rationality substitute for spiritual-moral authority? Does accreditation redefine legitimacy, or does it coexist with alternative sources of recognition? More fundamentally, does institutional theory require conceptual expansion to account for spiritual legitimacy?

This article addresses these questions through a systematic library-based analysis of institutional theory and Islamic intellectual traditions. Rather than presenting new empirical data, the study undertakes conceptual reconstruction. It critically examines dominant formulations of organisational legitimacy and reinterprets them in light of Islamic concepts of authority, particularly barakah. The objective is not to romanticise tradition nor to reject bureaucratic modernity, but to theorise how spiritual-moral legitimacy interacts with legal-rational structures in contemporary Islamic education (Aderibigbe et al. 2023).

By integrating Islamic intellectual resources with institutional theory, this article contributes to two intersecting fields. First, it enriches the sociology of organisations by introducing a conceptual category capable of analysing faith-based legitimacy beyond secular assumptions. Second, it advances scholarship on Islamic education by situating its governance challenges within broader theoretical debates on rationalisation, authority, and institutional survival. In doing so, the study invites reconsideration of how sacred values persist, transform, and negotiate space within bureaucratically structured systems.

In an era in which faith-based institutions increasingly operate under state-regulated accountability regimes, understanding the interplay between spiritual capital and bureaucratic rationality becomes analytically urgent. Islamic education offers a distinctive yet globally relevant case, revealing that legitimacy in modern institutions is not solely constructed through compliance but also sustained through moral and spiritual recognition. Reframing organisational legitimacy through this lens opens new pathways for institutional theory, challenging its secular boundaries while preserving its analytical strengths.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative library-based research design aimed at conceptual reconstruction and theoretical elaboration. Rather than generating primary empirical data, the research systematically examines and synthesises existing scholarly works to extend institutional theory within the context of Islamic education. The study operates within an interpretive paradigm, recognising that organisational legitimacy is not an objective entity but a socially constructed and historically embedded concept (Berger 2020). In this framework, theory is not merely applied but critically re-examined and reformulated through dialogical engagement with diverse intellectual traditions.

he primary data of this research consist of peer-reviewed journal articles, foundational theoretical texts, and classical Islamic scholarly works relevant to institutional theory, organisational legitimacy, and Islamic conceptions of authority. Literature was identified through major academic databases, including Scopus and Web of Science, with a focus on highly cited and theoretically influential works in organisational sociology and educational governance. Foundational contributions such as institutional analysis, the theory of isomorphism, the typology of legitimacy, and the three institutional pillars framework were treated as core analytical references. These works establish the conceptual boundaries within which legitimacy has predominantly been understood in contemporary organisational theory (Ghasemy et al. 2022).

In parallel, this study engaged both classical and contemporary scholarship on Islamic educational authority, including works that address scholarly transmission, moral legitimacy, and spiritual authority within Islamic intellectual history (Abidin 2020). Rather than approaching key Islamic concepts such as *barakah* and *sanad* as theological doctrines, the analysis treated them as sociologically meaningful categories. Through hermeneutic interpretation, these concepts were examined as institutional resources that shape perceptions of authority, continuity, and ethical credibility (Aljunied 2025). The objective was to identify analytically transferable constructs capable of contributing to institutional theory without reducing theological meaning to secular functional equivalence.

The analytical process proceeded through iterative conceptual comparison. Initially, institutional theory was systematically mapped to clarify how legitimacy has been defined and operationalised within regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive dimensions (Holley et al. 2017). Particular attention was devoted to Suchman's differentiation between pragmatic, moral, and cognitive legitimacy, given its central role in structuring contemporary debates on organisational recognition. This stage highlighted the explanatory strength of institutional theory, especially its capacity to account for organisational conformity under coercive and normative pressures.

Subsequently, Islamic intellectual sources and recent analyses of faith-based institutions were examined to identify dimensions of authority that extend beyond regulatory compliance and professional normativity. Through sustained close reading and comparative interpretation, recurrent themes emerged, including moral exemplarity, perceived spiritual efficacy, epistemic continuity, and communal trust. These themes were conceptualised as manifestations of spiritual capital, informed by Bourdieu theory of symbolic capital yet analytically expanded to incorporate

transcendence-oriented foundations of moral authority. In this reframing, spiritual capital was understood not merely as accumulated prestige but as recognition grounded in perceived alignment with sacred moral order (Bourdieu 1990).

The final stage involved conceptual synthesis. Rather than positioning Islamic educational authority in opposition to institutional theory, the study adopted theory elaboration as its methodological strategy (Arar et al. 2021). Points of convergence and divergence were systematically identified, particularly concerning the ontological grounding of legitimacy. Whereas institutional theory frames legitimacy as socially constructed and embedded within normative systems, Islamic traditions articulate legitimacy as simultaneously socially mediated and transcendent in orientation. Through structured comparison, the analysis formulated spiritual-moral legitimacy as a theoretically distinct yet complementary dimension capable of extending the explanatory reach of institutional analysis (Akhtar 2013).

Throughout the research process, analytical rigour was maintained through transparent criteria of source selection, sustained engagement with foundational texts, and avoidance of selective or confirmatory interpretation. Cross-disciplinary dialogue between sociology, organisational studies, and Islamic intellectual history was employed to minimise conceptual reductionism. Reflexive awareness guided the analysis to prevent romanticisation of religious categories and to ensure that *barakah* was treated as an analytical construct rather than a devotional affirmation.

As a library-based inquiry, the study did not involve human participants and therefore did not require formal ethical clearance. Nonetheless, scholarly integrity was upheld through accurate citation practices and faithful representation of primary arguments. By integrating systematic literature mapping, hermeneutic analysis, and conceptual synthesis, the study develops a theoretically grounded framework for reframing organisational legitimacy in Islamic education beyond the secular boundary conditions of existing institutional models.

RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Research Results

The Structural Limits of Institutional Legitimacy Theory in Explaining Faith-Based Education

Institutional theory has achieved considerable explanatory power in analysing how organisations secure survival and stability within modern governance regimes (Brammer et al. 2012). Foundational work established that formal organisational structures often function as institutional myths adopted to signal conformity rather than technical efficiency. Subsequent developments introduced the concept of institutional isomorphism, demonstrating how coercive regulations, professional norms, and mimetic processes generate structural convergence across organisational fields (Fuenfschilling and Truffer 2014). Within this framework, legitimacy is secured through alignment with institutionalised expectations; organisations endure not solely because they are efficient, but because they appear appropriate within prevailing normative environments.

Further refinement of the concept emerged through the distinction between pragmatic, moral, and cognitive legitimacy. Pragmatic legitimacy is grounded in stakeholder interests, moral legitimacy in normative evaluation, and cognitive legitimacy in taken-for-granted assumptions (Palazzo and Scherer 2006). These distinctions were later synthesised into the regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive pillars that structure institutional environments (Willke and Willke 2008). Together, these formulations provide a comprehensive account of how legitimacy operates within secular organisational fields, including education systems shaped by accreditation regimes, accountability mechanisms, and performance-based governance structures ((Suchman 1995).

Embedded within this theoretical architecture, however, is a largely unexamined ontological premise: legitimacy is treated as a socially constructed phenomenon grounded in humanly generated norms, rules, and shared cognitive schemas. Even moral legitimacy remains contingent upon socially evaluated standards of appropriateness (Hampel and Tracey 2019). Authority is validated horizontally—through regulatory endorsement, peer recognition, or cultural internalisation—rather than vertically through reference to sacred or transcendent sources. Legitimacy is therefore conceptualised as immanent to social systems.

This assumption becomes analytically problematic when applied to faith-based educational institutions, particularly Islamic education. Historically, Islamic institutions derived legitimacy from

epistemic continuity and moral exemplarity rather than bureaucratic certification. Scholarly authority was authenticated through *sanad*, the chain of transmission linking teachers to earlier scholars and ultimately to prophetic knowledge (Hussin et al. 2019). Legitimacy was relational and ethical, anchored in perceived fidelity to revelation. Institutional recognition was inseparable from moral character and spiritual integrity. In Weberian terms, while modern bureaucracy rests on legal-rational authority, classical Islamic scholarship embodied elements of traditional and charismatic authority grounded in religious authenticity (Darniah 2025).

Institutional theory can partially interpret these dynamics through normative or cultural-cognitive legitimacy (Ghasemy et al. 2022). Yet such categorisation risks conceptual reductionism. Normative legitimacy refers to alignment with socially constructed values and professional standards, but in Islamic educational contexts moral evaluation is frequently articulated as alignment with divine command rather than merely societal expectation. An institution may be perceived as legitimate because it embodies proximity to sacred knowledge, not simply because it conforms to professional norms. Reducing this dimension to normative conformity obscures its transcendence-oriented grounding.

The dynamics of audit culture further illuminate this complexity. Audit regimes transform trust into verification, replacing moral confidence with procedural inspection (Adnani and Mahbub 2021). In secular institutional environments, legitimacy increasingly depends upon demonstrable compliance. However, in Islamic educational contexts, trust may remain anchored in perceptions of *barakah*, understood as spiritual efficacy associated with moral integrity and divine favour. While institutional theory effectively explains how audit mechanisms reshape organisational behaviour, it under-theorises how pre-existing spiritual trust structures persist or interact with bureaucratic verification processes.

The limitation identified here is therefore epistemic rather than empirical. Institutional theory operates within a secular-modern horizon that conceptualises legitimacy as immanent to social systems. It insufficiently addresses contexts in which actors interpret legitimacy as simultaneously social and transcendent. In Islamic educational discourse, legitimacy may be articulated as deriving from divine blessing, ethical exemplarity, and continuity with sacred tradition (Hussin et al. 2019). These claims are not merely symbolic rhetoric; they function as operative evaluative criteria shaping stakeholder commitment, institutional loyalty, and reputational endurance.

Moreover, the emphasis on isomorphism presupposes that conformity enhances survival prospects (Abidin 2020; Azhari 2024). Yet faith-based institutions may deliberately resist full structural convergence in order to preserve spiritual distinctiveness. Excessive bureaucratisation may even be perceived as eroding moral authenticity. Legitimacy within Islamic education therefore cannot be understood solely through adaptation to external pressures; it also involves ongoing negotiation between regulatory conformity and preservation of sacred identity.

Recognising this limitation does not require abandoning institutional theory. Its analytical precision remains indispensable for understanding bureaucratic transformation within Islamic education. However, its explanatory scope must be expanded. Faith-based educational institutions expose the secular boundary conditions embedded within prevailing legitimacy models and call for theoretical elaboration capable of incorporating spiritual-moral dimensions of authority (Arifin and Turmudi 2019).

In sum, the structural and epistemic limits identified here do not undermine the core insights of institutional theory. Rather, they demonstrate that in contexts where transcendence remains a living social force, conceptual augmentation is necessary. Islamic education, situated at the intersection of sacred tradition and modern bureaucracy, offers a fertile site for such elaboration. Legitimacy in these institutional fields is not exhausted by compliance, normativity, or cognitive taken-for-grantedness; it is also anchored in perceived alignment with sacred moral order—an analytical dimension that warrants explicit theorisation within contemporary institutional scholarship.

Barakah as Spiritual-Moral Legitimacy: Constructing a Layered Model of Organisational Authority

If institutional theory has convincingly demonstrated that organisational survival depends upon conformity to institutionalised expectations (Arifin and Turmudi 2019), the present analysis

suggests that such conformity does not exhaust the sources of legitimacy in faith-based educational contexts. Islamic education reveals an additional dimension of organisational authority that extends beyond regulatory compliance, professional normativity, and cultural taken-for-grantedness. This dimension—conceptualised here as spiritual-moral legitimacy—demands explicit theoretical articulation within institutional analysis (Fauzi et al. 2025).

The analytical bridge for this reconstruction lies in the Islamic concept of *barakah*. In classical Islamic thought, *barakah* denotes enduring spiritual efficacy manifested through moral integrity, continuity of knowledge, and divine favour (Abrar et al. 2025). While theological in origin, *barakah* functions sociologically as a marker of institutional authenticity. It signals that an institution is not merely procedurally compliant but ethically aligned with sacred values. Within educational settings, *barakah* is invoked to describe environments in which knowledge transmission cultivates not only technical competence but moral transformation and spiritual depth (Hussin et al. 2019).

To render this concept analytically productive within organisational theory, *barakah* must be reframed as spiritual capital: a form of authority generated through perceived alignment with transcendental moral order. Whereas symbolic capital captures accumulated prestige convertible into influence (Bourdieu 1990), spiritual capital introduces a vertical dimension of validation. Its legitimacy does not arise solely from social recognition but from the belief that institutional practices embody divine moral coherence. Recognition, therefore, is simultaneously communal and transcendent. Actors attribute authority not merely because it is socially endorsed, but because it is perceived as ethically and spiritually authentic.

This distinction is theoretically significant. Institutional theory conceptualises legitimacy as horizontally constructed and socially validated—through regulatory endorsement, peer approval, and cultural consensus (Von Denffer 1976). Even moral legitimacy remains grounded in collectively negotiated standards of appropriateness. In Islamic education, however, legitimacy may be articulated as fidelity to divine command rather than conformity to professional norms (Khairani and Jasman 2025). An institution may sustain communal trust even when operating outside dominant bureaucratic models if it is perceived as morally upright and spiritually grounded. Legitimacy, in this context, is not reducible to procedural compliance.

Understanding this layered configuration allows institutional theory to move beyond binary narratives of secularisation or rationalisation. Islamic education illustrates that modern governance does not necessarily eliminate sacred authority; instead, it reconfigures its institutional expression (Sahin 2018). Spiritual-moral legitimacy persists not as residual tradition but as an active, socially operative dimension of organisational authority. Recognising this dimension does not weaken institutional analysis; rather, it strengthens its explanatory capacity in contexts where transcendence remains a meaningful source of legitimacy (Talbani 2022).

To clarify the analytical distinctiveness of spiritual-moral legitimacy, the following condensed comparison situates it alongside existing institutional pillars:

Table 1
A Layered Model of Organisational Legitimacy

Dimension	Source of Authority	Mode of Validation	Orientation
Regulative	Legal rules, state mandates	Formal compliance	Horizontal (regulatory)
Normative	Professional and social standards	Moral approval by peers	Horizontal (societal)
Cultural-Cognitive	Shared beliefs and taken-for-granted models	Social internalisation	Horizontal (collective meaning)
Spiritual-Moral	**Perceived alignment with divine moral order**	**Communal trust rooted in transcendence**	**Vertical (sacred reference) + relational**

This compressed schema highlights two theoretical innovations. First, spiritual-moral legitimacy introduces vertical accountability—reference to transcendent moral order—into a framework otherwise dominated by horizontal social validation. Second, it demonstrates that legitimacy may be simultaneously socially mediated and theologically interpreted. Stakeholders validate institutions through communal recognition, yet the evaluative criterion invokes sacred coherence rather than mere professional consensus.

This layered model also reframes Weber's theory of rationalisation. Modern bureaucracy, grounded in legal-rational authority, does not fully eliminate charismatic or traditional forms of authority within Islamic education. Instead, spiritual authority is institutionalised alongside

bureaucratic procedures (Weber 2013; Fauzi et al. 2025). The persistence of barakah discourse within formally accredited institutions illustrates that rationalisation and transcendence are not mutually exclusive trajectories. They coexist within hybrid organisational forms.

The theoretical implication is significant. Institutional theory has often been criticised for overemphasising conformity and underestimating agency and moral meaning (Willmott 2014). By incorporating spiritual-moral legitimacy, the framework becomes more sensitive to how actors interpret legitimacy beyond regulatory compliance. It acknowledges that in faith-based contexts, organisational authority is not solely constructed through social expectations but also through shared belief in divine accountability.

In this model, organisational legitimacy becomes multidimensional. Regulative legitimacy secures survival within state systems. Normative legitimacy maintains professional credibility. Cultural-cognitive legitimacy embeds institutions within shared meaning systems. Spiritual-moral legitimacy sustains ethical authenticity and communal trust anchored in transcendence. Together, these layers offer a more comprehensive account of organisational authority in Islamic education and expand the theoretical vocabulary of institutional analysis beyond its secular assumptions.

Discussion

This study interrogated the adequacy of institutional legitimacy theory in explaining authority formation within Islamic educational institutions and examined whether its analytical scope requires expansion. The findings indicate that while institutional theory remains indispensable for analysing bureaucratic adaptation and regulatory conformity, it does not fully capture the multidimensional character of legitimacy operative in faith-based educational contexts (Heath 2009). The discussion situates this conclusion within broader theoretical debates and clarifies the contribution of the proposed layered legitimacy model.

Institutional theory has long illuminated how organisations conform to external pressures in order to secure legitimacy and survival (Powers 2004). In education, it convincingly explains the global diffusion of accreditation systems, quality assurance regimes, and performance-based governance structures (Clegg 2010). Islamic educational institutions similarly operate within regulatory environments demanding formal compliance, documented procedures, and measurable standards. Their adoption of bureaucratic mechanisms reflects coercive and normative isomorphic pressures consistent with institutional theory's predictions (Arar et al. 2021).

However, conformity to bureaucratic rationality does not exhaust the basis of organisational authority in Islamic education. Stakeholders frequently evaluate legitimacy through criteria that extend beyond procedural compliance and professional normativity. Moral credibility, perceived ethical coherence, and continuity with sacred knowledge traditions remain central evaluative dimensions (Hussin et al. 2019). These findings resonate with critiques suggesting that institutional theory privileges structural conformity over interpretive meaning-making (Shofiyyah et al. 2023)). In faith-based contexts, meaning-making is inseparable from transcendence-oriented moral reference.

The layered model advanced here contributes to institutional theory in three interrelated ways. First, it expands the ontological scope of legitimacy. Institutional theory traditionally assumes that legitimacy emerges from socially constructed systems of norms and rules. The present analysis demonstrates that, in Islamic education, legitimacy is also interpreted as deriving from alignment with sacred values (Rahman 2025). Recognising this does not require adopting theological premises; it requires acknowledging that actors' transcendence-oriented beliefs materially shape organisational recognition.

Second, the model refines understanding of organisational hybridity. Faith-based educational institutions neither simply resist nor fully internalise bureaucratic rationalisation. Instead, they negotiate between regulatory conformity and spiritual authenticity (Hasan 2025). This negotiation produces hybrid organisational forms in which accreditation systems coexist with moral authority structures. Such hybridity aligns with scholarship on the coexistence of multiple institutional logics within organisations (Sahin 2018). In Islamic education, bureaucratic logic and religious logic intersect in dynamic and sometimes tension-filled ways. The concept of spiritual-moral legitimacy clarifies how religious logic retains operative force within bureaucratised environments.

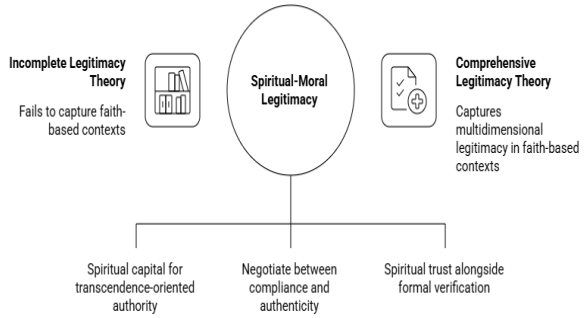
Third, the model contributes to debates on audit culture and trust. Audit regimes institutionalise verification and transform trust into procedural accountability (Powers 2004). While accreditation may secure external recognition, communal trust in Islamic educational contexts often depends upon perceived moral integrity. This suggests that bureaucratic accountability does not automatically displace relational trust; rather, multiple trust regimes may coexist. Institutional theory, enriched by the concept of spiritual-moral legitimacy, becomes better equipped to analyse this layered configuration.

The implications of this reconceptualisation extend beyond Islamic education. Faith-based institutions across religious traditions confront similar tensions between sacred identity and bureaucratic governance (Buanaputra et al. 2021). Explicitly theorising spiritual-moral legitimacy offers a conceptual tool for comparative inquiry into how transcendence-oriented authority interacts with modern regulatory systems in diverse institutional settings.

At the same time, caution is warranted. Spiritual-moral legitimacy can sustain ethical coherence and communal trust, yet it may also obscure internal power asymmetries or resist necessary procedural accountability (Chanda 2025). The layered model does not privilege spiritual authority over bureaucratic rationality; rather, it insists upon analytical differentiation. Recognising spiritual-moral legitimacy enables scholars to examine how sacred identity shapes organisational dynamics without collapsing analysis into normative endorsement (McCormick 1998; Buanaputra et al. 2021).

Practically, the layered legitimacy model suggests that governance reform in Islamic education should not be framed as a zero-sum contest between spirituality and bureaucracy. Effective governance requires navigating both domains (Amini 2022). Overemphasis on bureaucratic compliance may erode communal trust if perceived as diluting moral authenticity, while exclusive reliance on spiritual authority without procedural transparency risks undermining public accountability. Recognising multiple dimensions of legitimacy enables more nuanced leadership strategies capable of sustaining both institutional credibility and sacred identity.

Figure 1 Layered Legitimacy Model



Ultimately, the contribution of this study lies in reframing organisational legitimacy as multidimensional in contexts where sacred values remain central to institutional identity. Islamic education reveals that legitimacy is not solely constructed through conformity to institutionalised norms but also through perceived alignment with transcendent moral order. By conceptualising barakah as spiritual capital and positioning spiritual-moral legitimacy alongside regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive pillars, the study extends institutional theory beyond its secular boundary conditions.

This theoretical expansion does not replace existing frameworks but deepens them. It affirms the enduring relevance of institutional analysis while inviting greater sensitivity to contexts in which organisational authority is simultaneously bureaucratic and sacred. In doing so, the study contributes to a more comprehensive sociology of legitimacy—one capable of explaining how faith-based institutions inhabit modern governance regimes without relinquishing their spiritual foundations.

CONCLUSION

This study has critically reassessed the capacity of institutional legitimacy theory to explain authority formation within Islamic educational institutions. While institutional theory provides a powerful account of how organisations secure survival through regulatory compliance and normative alignment, it does not fully capture the multidimensional character of legitimacy operative in faith-based educational contexts. In Islamic education, organisational authority is not derived solely from procedural conformity or social approval. It is also sustained through perceived alignment with sacred moral order and enduring ethical credibility.

By conceptualising spiritual-moral legitimacy as a distinct yet complementary dimension of organisational authority, this study extends the analytical boundaries of institutional theory. Spiritual-moral legitimacy, reframed through the concept of spiritual capital, operates through communal trust, moral exemplarity, and transcendence-oriented accountability. Its force lies not in formal certification but in the belief that institutional practices embody ethical coherence and sacred continuity. Although intangible in procedural terms, its organisational effects are concrete: sustained loyalty, reputational durability, and moral authority.

The layered model proposed here demonstrates that bureaucratic rationality and spiritual authority do not exist in a zero-sum relationship. Legal-rational structures provide institutional stability and formal recognition, while spiritual-moral legitimacy sustains ethical authenticity and relational trust. Rather than displacing sacred authority, modern governance reconfigures its institutional expression. Islamic education thus reveals that legitimacy within contemporary organisations may operate simultaneously across regulatory, social, and transcendence-oriented dimensions.

Future inquiry may explore how such layered legitimacy operates empirically across diverse religious traditions and institutional environments, particularly in contexts where bureaucratic expansion intensifies tensions between accountability and authenticity. What remains evident, however, is that organisational legitimacy in faith-based education is neither purely bureaucratic nor purely symbolic. It is structured through an ongoing negotiation between formal governance and sacred moral order—a negotiation that demands theoretical attention beyond the limits of conventional institutional models.

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