

Professional Ethics of Judges: A Normative Study of Ethical Violations and Their Implications for Public Perception

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Abstract

This study aims to normatively examine the ethics of the judicial profession in Indonesia as regulated in the Code of Ethics and Guidelines for Judges' Conduct (KEPPH), and to analyze the implications of ethical violations on public perception of judicial institutions. Although KEPPH has established basic principles such as integrity, independence, and impartiality, practice in the field still shows many ethical violations by judges, including bribery, conflicts of interest, and inappropriate behavior. Through a legislative, conceptual, and case study approach, this study finds that ethical violations have a serious impact on the legitimacy of judicial institutions and reduce public trust. Negative public perception of the integrity of judges strengthens procedural injustice and weakens the principle of the rule of law. This study recommends strengthening supervision, institutional culture reform, and continuous ethical education as strategic steps to improve the integrity of the judicial profession and restore public trust.

Keywords: professional ethics, judges, ethical violations, public perception.

INTRODUCTION

Judges are the main actors in the modern judicial system, holding a central role as the final decision-makers in resolving legal cases—be it criminal, civil, or administrative. The independent and impartial status of judges is one of the key pillars of a state based on the rule of law (*rechtsstaat*). Therefore, judges are expected not only to have a deep understanding of legal substance but also to possess high moral and ethical integrity in carrying out their judicial duties. This is crucial, as a judge's decision impacts not only the parties involved in the case but also

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reflects the image of the judiciary as a whole in the eyes of the public.

However, in practice, serious issues have emerged that tarnish the dignity of the judicial profession. Numerous cases of ethical violations and criminal acts involving judges—particularly in District Courts—have surfaced in the public domain. These cases are not limited to minor offenses such as conflicts of interest or inappropriate conduct but also include serious violations such as bribery, gratification, and abuse of power. This has led to a crisis of public trust in the judiciary, which is supposed to be the last bastion for those seeking justice.

The Code of Ethics and Judicial Conduct Guidelines (KEPPH), formulated by the Judicial Commission and the Supreme Court, essentially provide a clear ethical framework outlining how judges should behave and act. KEPPH includes core values such as integrity, impartiality, independence, and accountability, all aimed at maintaining the professionalism and honor of the judicial office. Nevertheless, the implementation of KEPPH in practice still faces various obstacles, including weak ethical oversight mechanisms, limited continuing education on professional ethics, and an internal legal culture that does not fully support the enforcement of ethical standards.

Ethical violations by judges directly affect public perceptions of justice. The public becomes skeptical of court decisions, especially when it is suspected that the judicial process is not clean or is influenced by particular interests. In the context of democracy and fair law enforcement, public perception of the judiciary's integrity is crucial. If public trust collapses, then the legitimacy of the entire legal system is at risk.

Given this phenomenon, it is imperative to conduct a normative study on the ethical standards of the judicial profession as regulated in KEPPH, including the implications of ethical violations on public perceptions of justice and the challenges in implementing these standards. This study is expected to provide both theoretical and practical contributions to strengthening judicial ethics and restoring public trust in the judiciary.

RESEARCH METHOD

This research is normative legal research, which relies on the analysis of written legal norms as the primary subject of study. Normative legal research is used to understand, explain, and evaluate the ethical standards of the judicial profession as set out in legislation and ethical documents, as well as to examine their relevance in the context of ethical violations occurring in practice. This method is chosen because the focus of the study is on the existing legal system, particularly the regulations governing the ethics and behavior of judges in District Courts.

This research uses three approaches. First, the *statute approach*, which examines the laws



forming the legal basis for the development and enforcement of judicial ethics, such as Law No. 48 of 2009 on Judicial Power, Law No. 49 of 2009 on General Courts, and the Code of Ethics and Judicial Conduct Guidelines (KEPPH). Second, the *conceptual approach*, which aims to examine legal and philosophical concepts regarding professional ethics, integrity, and the moral responsibility of judges in the exercise of judicial power. This approach is essential in forming a comprehensive understanding of the ethical foundation of the judicial profession within the framework of a state based on law.

Third, the *case study approach* is used to analyze concrete cases of ethical violations by judges and their impact on public perception and the integrity of the judiciary. Secondary data is obtained through literature review of decisions from the Judicial Commission, annual reports from oversight institutions such as the KY and the Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK), official news sources, and relevant academic publications.

The data analysis technique used is qualitative analysis, emphasizing the interpretation of legal norms, ethical principles, and social facts related to public perception. The results of this analysis are then used to formulate legal arguments that address the research questions and provide normative and practical recommendations to strengthen judicial ethics in Indonesia.

DISCUSSION

Judicial Professional Ethics

Professional ethics are a set of moral values and behavioral principles that guide professionals in carrying out their duties. In the context of judges, professional ethics are the foundation for achieving fair, impartial, and dignified justice. The KEPPH, jointly drafted by the Supreme Court and the Judicial Commission, outlines seven core principles: independence, integrity, impartiality, propriety and decorum, equality, competence, and diligence

As upholders of justice, judges have the responsibility to maintain the dignity of the judiciary and meet society's moral expectations. KEPPH is not only a set of ethical norms but also a reflection of the social values needed to uphold the law justly. Ethical principles such as independence and impartiality require strong internalization in judges' attitudes and behavior, as without these, judicial decisions are prone to being perceived as the result of compromise or external pressure.

According to Bagir Manan (2004), the judicial profession carries a significant public responsibility because it concerns citizens' rights and interests. Therefore, judges' behavior must reflect high morality and should not rely solely on legality. Jimly Asshiddiqie (2011) adds that the



honor and dignity of judges are forms of *constitutional ethics*, linking personal ethics with constitutional responsibility. Judges are the extension of the constitution in upholding the principles of a *rechtsstaat*. Satjipto Rahardjo (2009) argues that law is not just about written norms but also concerns values, substantive justice, and sensitivity to social realities.

Ethical Violations: Case Studies and Empirical Data

Although the KEPPH has been comprehensively designed, in practice, many violations still occur. Data from the Judicial Commission (KY) shows that in 2020, there were 153 reports of ethical violations, 42 of which resulted in recommended sanctions. Common violations include:

- 1) Inappropriate relationships with litigating parties
- 2) Improper lifestyle (hedonism, flaunting wealth)
- 3) Non-compliance with open trial principles
- 4) Inappropriate behavior or use of language in court

A striking case occurred in 2025, when the Attorney General's Office named four judges as suspects in a bribery case related to palm oil export trials. The suspects were South Jakarta District Court Chief Judge Muhammad Arif Nuryanta, Djuyamto, Agam Syarif Baharuddin, and Ali Muhtarom. The bribes received totaled IDR 82 billion, with Arif receiving IDR 60 billion, while the other three judges shared IDR 22 billion. They acquitted three large corporations—Wilmar Group, Permata Hijau Group, and Musim Mas—that were supposed to pay over IDR 17 trillion in compensation.

Previously, another bribery case ensnared three judges in Surabaya District Court in the murder case of Ronald Tannur (2024), sparking public outrage. The Indonesian Corruption Watch (ICW) report (2023) noted that 26 judges were involved in corruption from 2011 to 2023. These findings indicate that ethical violations among judges are systemic rather than incidental.

Below is a table listing the names of judges involved in ethical violation cases:

Table 1. Listing The Names Of Judges Involved In Ethical Violation Cases

No.	Judge's Name	Court / Institution	Year	Case & Amount of Bribe/Gratuity/Corruption	Legal Status
1	Itong Isnaini Hidayat	Surabaya District Court	2022	Bribe of IDR 450 million and gratuity of IDR 390 million from PT SGP. Received bribes and gratuities related to an	Sentenced to 5 years in prison, IDR 300 million



No.	Judge's Name	Court / Institution	Year	Case & Amount of Bribe/Gratuity/Corruption	Legal Status
				industrial relations case. Total received: IDR 840 million.	fine or 6 months in jail
2	Edy Wibowo	Judicial Judge at Supreme Court	2022	Bribe of IDR 3.7 billion related to a bankruptcy cassation of Sandi Karsa Hospital Makassar	Sentenced to 4.5 years in prison
3	Sudrajad Dimiyati	Supreme Court	2022	Bribes related to case handling at the Supreme Court	Sentenced to 8 years in prison, reduced on appeal
4	Gazalba Saleh	Supreme Court	2022	Gratuity of IDR 650 million related to cassation case	Acquitted; KPK (Corruption Eradication Commission) filed a cassation
5	Elly Tri Pangestu	Supreme Court	2022	Bribes related to case handling at the Supreme Court	Sentenced to 4.5 years in prison
6	Prasetio Nugroho	Supreme Court	2022	Bribes related to case handling at the Supreme Court	Sentenced to 9 years in prison
7	Erintuah Damanik	Surabaya District Court	2024	Bribe of IDR 4.67 billion and gratuities in various currencies	Indicted for receiving bribes related to the acquittal of Ronald Tannur
8	Heru Hanindyo	Surabaya District Court	2024	Bribe of IDR 4.67 billion and gratuities in various currencies	Indicted for receiving bribes related to the acquittal of Ronald Tannur



No.	Judge's Name	Court / Institution	Year	Case & Amount of Bribe/Gratuity/Corruption	Legal Status
9	Mangapul	Surabaya District Court	2024	Bribe of IDR 4.67 billion and gratuities in various currencies	Indicted for receiving bribes related to the acquittal of Ronald Tannur

a. The Impact of Ethical Violations on Public Perception

Sociologically, public trust in the judiciary is greatly influenced by perceptions of procedural justice. Tom Tyler (2006) refers to this phenomenon as *procedural justice*, where citizens evaluate the judicial system not only based on the outcome of decisions but also on the process, including the integrity of judges. A survey by LSI (2021) revealed that only 28% of respondents believe judges are neutral, while 61% believe that money and connections influence court decisions. This reflects a form of *procedural injustice*, which undermines the legitimacy of the legal system as a whole. As a result, the public becomes skeptical of legal pathways and perceives that justice is only accessible to certain privileged groups.

b. Reform Efforts: Ethical Reform and Oversight

Several key strategies can be pursued to strengthen judicial ethics and improve public perception, including:

- 1) **Strengthening internal and external oversight:** Repositioning the Judicial Commission as an independent supervisory body with direct access to public complaints.
- 2) **Digitization of reporting systems:** Implementing online applications such as *e-Lapor KY* to facilitate reporting and transparency.
- 3) **Public information disclosure:** Ethical sanctions and examination processes for judges should be openly published through official judicial institution websites.
- 4) **Ethics and moral psychology training:** Judges should receive training that integrates legal understanding with ethical comprehension, including simulations of moral dilemmas in practice.
- 5) **Improving recruitment and promotion systems:** A merit-based system is needed that thoroughly evaluates integrity and ethical track records, not just legal technical competence.



c. Structural Challenges and Judicial Culture

The main challenge in maintaining judicial ethics lies in institutional culture and weak oversight systems. A closed bureaucratic culture, low accountability, and strong seniority in the judiciary often allow unethical practices to go unaddressed. Young judges also face dilemmas between idealism and structural pressure. Efforts to increase salaries, as proposed by President Prabowo Subianto, may not be effective—particularly in cases of greed-driven corruption. As stated by Zaenur Rohman (2025), factors such as oversight, organizational culture, and a system of rewards for whistleblowers are more decisive in prevention. The lack of protection mechanisms for judges who report their peers reinforces a culture of silence. Likewise, the role of lawyers, who are often the bribe-givers, has not been matched with firm action from their professional associations.

CONCLUSION

Ethical violations by judges are a serious issue that not only damages the dignity of the judiciary but also undermines the legitimacy of legal institutions in the eyes of the public. The *Judicial Code of Ethics and Code of Conduct (KEPPH)* has provided a comprehensive normative framework, yet its implementation faces multiple challenges—both institutionally and culturally. Cases of ethical breaches such as bribery, conflicts of interest, and inappropriate lifestyles indicate a moral decline within judicial practice. The impact of such ethical violations is evident in the erosion of public trust in the judicial system. People are increasingly skeptical about the neutrality and integrity of judges, ultimately weakening the principles of both substantive and procedural justice. In the long run, this condition may erode the foundations of a rule of law (*rechtsstaat*) and create inequality in access to justice.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To strengthen judicial ethics and restore public trust in the judiciary, the following steps are recommended:

1. **Strengthening the Judicial Commission** as an independent ethics oversight body with broader authority to process public complaints.
2. **Transparency in ethical oversight**, including public and periodic publication of the results of ethics investigations into judges.
3. **Reform in the recruitment and promotion of judges**, emphasizing integrity and moral track records, not just legal technical skills.



4. **Continuous ethics education**, through in-depth training on ethical dilemmas, codes of ethics, and the values of substantive justice.
5. **Protection for whistleblowers** within the judiciary to foster a culture of internal accountability.
6. **Synergy among the Supreme Court, Judicial Commission, and bar associations** to ensure all legal

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