Regulating the Sacred: The Paradox of Convenience and Complexity in Indonesia's Hajj Management System

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ABSTRACT

Indonesia has long held the world's largest Hajj quota, an achievement often celebrated as a marker of administrative capability and national devotion. Yet behind this numerical triumph lies a persistent paradox: despite continual reforms, digital integration, and expanded logistical capacity, the regulatory landscape of the Hajj continues to generate new layers of complexity. This study asks whether the 2025 Hajj season will finally deliver genuine accessibility, or whether Indonesian pilgrims remain caught between spiritual aspiration and bureaucratic constraint. Using a two-stage qualitative design, Study 1 examines independent narratives drawn from news media coverage, while Study 2 gathers insights from government officials responsible for Hajj administration to understand the institutional logic that sustains ongoing regulatory obstacles. The comparative analysis reveals a widening gap between regulatory ideals and pilgrims' lived spiritual experiences, showing that efficiency-driven governance often overlooks the emotional and contemplative dimensions of the Hajj journey. Findings indicate that, although Indonesia's Hajj management system has become increasingly sophisticated, it remains emotionally fragmented and procedurally burdened. This raises a critical question: when will the Hajj system value not only the physical journey, but also create a sustained cycle of ease for the pilgrims it seeks to serve?

INTRODUCTION

Indonesia holds the largest Hajj quota in the world (World Population Review, 2025), a status often interpreted as evidence of strong administrative capacity and a deep national commitment to religious service. Over the past decades, the Indonesian government has continuously reformed its Hajj management system through regulatory restructuring, digital integration, and expanded logistical coordination. These reforms are intended to improve accessibility, fairness, and efficiency for pilgrims undertaking one of the most sacred journeys in Islam. However, despite these advancements, the governance of Hajj in Indonesia remains marked by a persistent paradox: efforts designed to simplify the pilgrimage process have instead generated new layers of bureaucratic complexity.

This paradox reflects a broader pattern in public governance, where policies driven by moral intent and public service ideals encounter significant challenges at the point of implementation. Contemporary governance literature highlights that well-intentioned regulatory expansion often outpaces institutional capacity, producing gaps between policy objectives and lived experience. In the context of Hajj management, this gap becomes especially consequential because the pilgrimage is not merely a logistical exercise, but a deeply emotional, spiritual, and contemplative journey for pilgrims.

Within this landscape, Indonesia's Hajj management system stands at a crossroads. On one hand, it demonstrates institutional sophistication and global-scale logistical coordination. On the other, it reveals emotional fragmentation, procedural burden, and a growing disconnect between regulatory ideals and pilgrims' lived spiritual realities. This condition raises a fundamental question that underpins this study: whether contemporary Hajj governance in Indonesia can move beyond administrative success toward a model that genuinely balances procedural control with spiritual accessibility and human dignity.

This study is situated within the unresolved tension between administrative efficiency and lived spiritual experience in Indonesia's Hajj governance. It examines how regulatory intent, institutional mechanisms, and public narratives intersect to shape the pilgrimage experience. By foregrounding both governance structures and pilgrims' lived realities, the research seeks to contribute to a more holistic understanding of religious administration not only efficiency, but also empathy and reflective care.

Accordingly, the study explores how Indonesian pilgrims experience accessibility, regulation, and spiritual fulfillment within the current Hajj management system, while also analyzing how Hajj administrators conceptualize and justify regulatory design, procedural efficiency, and institutional performance. Finally, it examines the gap between regulatory intent and pilgrims' lived spiritual experiences, with particular attention to the role of media as a feedback mechanism in shaping public accountability and institutional response.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Across the landscape of public governance, the desire to "do good" often collides with the messy terrain of implementation. Studies below over the past three years have repeatedly illuminated this paradox, that the state's noblest intentions can produce unintended consequences once policy meets reality.

Segaro and Haag (2022) demonstrate how interventions built on moral urgency can unravel amid local complexity, leading to outcomes that diverge from the original mission. Similarly, Knill et al. (2023) argue that the growth of modern policy infrastructures, while designed to ensure inclusivity and fairness, often outpaces administrative capacity, creating a vacuum between regulation and execution.

Fernández et al. (2023) expand this view by exposing the capacity–task mismatch that haunts many "smart" bureaucracies: governments may have advanced digital tools, but lack the adaptive reflexes to manage diverse, lived contexts. This echoes the principle–practice gap identified by Power et al. (2025), who show that even in well-trained institutions, implementation stumbles when change metrics focus more on compliance than care.

Gershgoren and Cohen (2023) reveal how frontline actors, the clerks, officers, and field facilitators, oscillate between independence and paralysis. When decisions are made "jointly" in tightly controlled systems, discretion collapses, leading to frustration among citizens. Gofen et al. (2024) describe this as the co-creation dilemma: citizens and implementers can improve outcomes, but only when bureaucratic design allows genuine collaboration.

If policy implementation tends to fail at the human edge, scholars argue that the problem begins long before execution. The new generation of policy design literature from 2022 to 2025 shifts focus toward ex-ante mitigation, or the readiness of institutions before policies are deployed. Tay et al. (2022) conceptualize a stage-gated approach to public mitigation, where risk identification precedes intervention a structure inspired by disaster management models that anticipate rather than react. Howlett and Migone (2025) extends this framework into the political domain, noting that policy designers must balance technical feasibility with blame management: anticipating the political risks that sabotage implementation.

Meanwhile, digitalization adds a new layer of risk. Northcott (2025), warns that over-automation can quietly erode the decision-making judgment that human officers use to resolve nuance, a danger especially acute in religious governance and pilgrimage management systems.

Cedergen et al. (2022) provides longitudinal evidence that tracking risk through stages such as design, rollout, feedback produces far fewer field breakdowns than post-facto crisis management. Likewise, the Buildings (2025) study on contractual claims frames mitigation as a living model, evolving with each iteration of policy execution. Taken together, this body of work reframes policy from a static plan to a dynamic system of anticipation, where errors are not punished but prevented through reflexive design.

Schwinges and Nielsen (2024) describe the modern watchdog as a hybrid creature: part journalist, part algorithm, operating within digital platforms that both empower and constrain scrutiny. Ots and colleagues (2024) go further, mapping "meta-accountability systems" organizations that monitor the watchdogs themselves, forming a feedback ecosystem of oversight.

Across 14 countries, Harro-Loit et al. (2024) find that the strength of media monitoring directly correlates with implementation integrity. Where media systems are free and well-networked, bureaucracies display greater policy coherence. Schwinges et al. (2025) reinforces this by showing that public expectations of watchdog journalism have evolved, citizens no longer demand neutral reporting but participatory vigilance, expecting media to serve as both whistleblower and civic tutor.

On the digital frontier, Villodre (2025) analyze how social media affordances foster transparency through virality; a single video or tweet can expose failures faster than institutional audits. Napoli (2023) interprets this as the platformization of public interest, where algorithms distribute accountability narratives faster than bureaucracies can respond.

These insights culminate in a broader truth: media oversight has become a stage of implementation itself. Regulations no longer live in isolation; they are continuously performed, challenged, and reinterpreted under the public gaze.

These strands form a compelling storyline. The literature first exposes the moral optimism of government intent noble in design, but fragile in practice. It then reveals how mitigation and risk design offer tools to prevent recurring mistakes, though their success depends on institutional humility and flexibility. Finally, it acknowledges that media ecosystems now constitute a fourth arm of governance, capable of accelerating accountability or chaos.

For Indonesia's hajj regulation, this triad of forces converges sharply. Policies built on devotion and service often falter amid bureaucratic congestion; readiness mechanisms exist but lack emotional intelligence; and media monitoring from news to viral pilgrim testimonials increasingly dictates public trust in religious administration. The story told by the literature is thus not one of failure, but of unfinished evolution: the ongoing effort to harmonize intention, prevention, and reflection within the sacred machinery of governance.

Theoretical Overview:

1. Religious Bureaucracy Theory explains how modern states institutionalize religious practice by translating faith-based obligations into formal administrative systems.
2. The Governance and Accessibility Framework provides a structured approach to examining how public governance systems balance procedural control with equitable and meaningful access.
3. The Governance and Accessibility Framework which examines how public systems balance procedural control with equitable access. It provides four analytical stages that correspond to the lifecycle of policy design and reflection linked to policy intent, institutional mechanisms, accessibility outcomes, and feedback loops.

   Hypotheses 1: Indonesian pilgrims experience accessibility primarily as procedural access rather than experiential ease.

   Hypotheses 2: Hajj administrators conceptualize spiritual compassion as a secondary outcome of procedural efficiency rather than as a core regulatory design principle.

   Hypotheses 3: A persistent gap exists between regulatory intent and pilgrims' lived spiritual experiences, and this gap is primarily mediated through public and media discourse rather than internal governance mechanisms.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative, two-stage comparative research design to examine Hajj governance in Indonesia from both experiential and institutional perspectives. The design enables systematic comparison between public narratives and governmental rationales, allowing the study to capture gaps and alignments between regulatory intent and pilgrims' lived spiritual experiences.

Study 1 employs a qualitative narrative analysis of 373 non-government news articles published by Kompas, Jawa Pos, and Radio Republik Indonesia (RRI) across the pre-operational, operational, and post-operational phases of the 2025 Hajj season. These outlets were selected to represent national, regional, and public-service media perspectives outside official government communication. The analysis examines how regulation is publicly framed and experienced, structured around four analytical dimensions: policy intent, institutional mechanisms, accessibility outcomes, and feedback loops.

Study 2 consists of semi-structured interviews with purposively selected government officials involved in Hajj administration, chosen for their strategic roles in public communication and operational management. The interviews explore how administrators conceptualize regulatory design, procedural efficiency, accountability, and responsiveness to media feedback. The same four analytical dimensions are applied to ensure analytical symmetry and enable direct comparison with Study 1.

Data from both studies were analyzed thematically and interpreted through Religious Bureaucracy Theory and the Governance and Accessibility Framework. This integrated comparative approach allows the study to trace how regulation moves from institutional intention to public experience, and to assess how media-mediated feedback shapes governance learning within Indonesia's religious administration system.

This research is structured by Religious Bureaucracy Theory (Eickelman & Piscatori, 1996) and the Governance and Accessibility Framework (Kettunen, 2017). Religious Bureaucracy Theory explains how modern states institutionalize religious practice, transforming acts of faith into administratively regulated processes. In the context of Hajj management, this framework helps illuminate how sacred rituals are mediated through bureaucratic systems, shaping pilgrims' emotional and spiritual experiences of regulation.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Study 1

Across media, policy intent is consistently framed as the state's responsibility to ensure order, safety, and legitimacy in managing the Hajj, though with differing emphases. Kompas presents regulation as anticipatory stewardship, aimed at readiness, reassurance, and procedural reliability so that worship can proceed without logistical anxiety. However, spiritual ease is implicitly treated as a by-product of administrative order rather than an explicit policy objective. Jawa Pos frames policy intent more assertively as control for protection. Regulation is depicted as necessary discipline to manage risk, enforce compliance, and prevent disorder, particularly to protect elderly pilgrims and institutional credibility. This framing normalizes rigidity and repeated checks as unavoidable trade-offs, positioning devotion within tightly controlled operational boundaries. RRI emphasizes public service, inclusivity, and care. Regulation is framed as a tool to equalize access and protect vulnerable groups, with stronger attention to dignity and guidance. While administrative order remains central, RRI more explicitly acknowledges the need to balance efficiency with empathy in facilitating worship.

Kompas portrays institutional mechanisms as a coordinated national infrastructure built on planning, digital integration, and inter-agency synchronization. Bureaucratic systems and technologies are framed as rational, preventive tools that function largely as intended, with limited attention to how pilgrims navigate them individually. Jawa Pos highlights the physical and operational presence of bureaucracy. Institutional mechanisms appear as visible checkpoints—service posts, officers, document checks, and regulated routes—that discipline movement and behavior. Governance is experienced through constant oversight, making regulation tangible and intrusive in daily pilgrim life. RRI frames institutional mechanisms through communication and facilitation. Bureaucracy is presented as a network of guidance channels supported by digital systems and public education. Regulation is depicted not only as control but as translation, helping pilgrims—especially the elderly and digitally limited—navigate complex procedures.

In Kompas, accessibility is framed as functional and conditional. When procedures are followed, services appear orderly and predictable. However, pilgrims are expected to adapt to procedural and digital demands, with confusion and fatigue emerging particularly around documentation, transitions, and elderly care, indicating limited emotional ease. Jawa Pos presents accessibility as physically and emotionally demanding. Pilgrims' experiences are shaped by endurance under strict schedules, repeated checks, and environmental strain. Accessibility exists, but at significant human cost, with pilgrims adapting themselves to the system rather than the system adapting to them. RRI links accessibility to guidance and mediation. When information and assistance are present, pilgrims are better able to navigate regulation. Yet uneven experiences persist, especially for elderly and low–digital literacy pilgrims, showing that accessibility depends heavily on human facilitation rather than system design alone.

Feedback loops in Kompas operate through reflection and recalibration. Repeated media concerns function as early warnings that prompt clarification, coordination, and incremental adjustment, reinforcing administrative legitimacy rather than structural change. Jawa Pos frames feedback as reactive and pressure-driven. Media exposure accelerates immediate operational fixes redeployment, tighter supervision, coordination with providers, prioritizing short-term stabilization and damage control over long-term learning. RRI channels feedback into communicative improvement, emphasizing clearer messaging and public education as responses to confusion and concern.

Across all media, feedback follows a shared sequence: public experience → media reporting → repeated framing → public visibility and legitimacy pressure → governance response.

Across Kompas, Jawa Pos, and RRI, Hajj governance is consistently framed as necessary to ensure order, safety, and legitimacy, but with distinct emphases that together reveal its complexity. Kompas highlights preparedness, coordination, and institutional credibility, portraying governance as anticipatory stewardship that reassures pilgrims while implicitly treating spiritual ease as a by-product of administrative order. Jawa Pos foregrounds control and operational discipline, framing regulation as protective yet rigid, where risk containment comes at the cost of physical and emotional strain. In contrast, RRI emphasizes public service, inclusivity, and guidance, presenting regulation as a mechanism that must be balanced with empathy to uphold dignity, especially for vulnerable pilgrims. Across institutional mechanisms and accessibility outcomes, the media collectively show that while systems are increasingly organized and technology-driven, they are unevenly experienced, requiring pilgrims—particularly the elderly and digitally limited—to adapt themselves to complex procedures. Feedback loops further position the media as an informal governance circuit: Kompas supports reflective adjustment, Jawa Pos accelerates operational correction through pressure, and RRI channels feedback into clearer communication. Together, these narratives indicate that Indonesian Hajj governance is administratively effective yet reactive, relying on media visibility to surface human and experiential gaps that are not fully anticipated within policy design.

Study 2

This study purposively selected government officials occupying strategic positions across Indonesia's Hajj governance system to capture how regulation is translated into practice and mediated to the public. The selection focused on roles that bridge procedural execution and experiential management within the Hajj framework.

Husni Anggoro serves as the principal public communication authority for Indonesia's Hajj operations at Madinah Airport. Positioned at the intersection of real-time operations and public information, he is responsible for data validation, inter-agency coordination, and translating technical procedures into publicly comprehensible narratives. He was selected because the Hajj Media Center functions as a critical governance interface where regulatory implementation meets public perception. His perspective provides insight into how information control, transparency, and narrative stabilization are deployed during uncertainty and how media feedback operates as an informal accountability mechanism.

Nur Arif Muhammad oversees the return phase of Indonesian pilgrims, the most procedurally dense and risk-prone stage of the Hajj cycle. His responsibilities include documentation verification, baggage handling, health monitoring, and coordination with airlines and Saudi authorities. He was chosen because the return phase represents a stress test for governance capacity, where policy design is most visibly translated into practice under time pressure and physical fatigue. His role offers insight into how accessibility challenges—particularly for elderly and low–digital literacy pilgrims—are managed through procedural execution, where success is defined primarily by completion rather than experiential quality.

From the Media Center's perspective, policy intent centers on stabilizing public trust during operational uncertainty. Regulation is framed less as control over pilgrims and more as control over information, aimed at maintaining calm, accuracy, and continuity to prevent anxiety and misinformation during peak operations. From the Return Service perspective, policy intent is defined by procedural continuity and risk containment. Regulation is necessary to ensure pilgrims' safe, legal, and orderly return under compressed timelines and complex logistics, particularly to prevent documentation errors, health oversights, and coordination breakdowns.

Institutional mechanisms supporting these intents are coordination-intensive and technology-driven. The Media Center relies on real-time integration with Saudi and Indonesian agencies, using digital systems such as Integrated Hajj Computerized System *(SISKOHAT)* and internal dashboards for verification and traceability. However, communication is often delayed until data consistency is achieved, reflecting a governance model that prioritizes accuracy over immediacy. The return system operates through a two-wave structure between Madinah and Jeddah, supported by digital tracking through *SISKOHAT* and Integrated Hajj Computerized Health System *(SISKOHATKES)*. Yet some critical processes, such as baggage handling, still depend on physical tagging, revealing a hybrid system where digital infrastructure remains incomplete. Coordination with airlines and service providers is managed through designated contact points to enable rapid problem resolution.

Media narratives and citizen-generated content show that pilgrims primarily experience these mechanisms through delays, baggage issues, documentation problems, and concerns over elderly safety. While official communication is perceived as reliable, it often arrives after emotional distress has circulated on social media. Accessibility is therefore procedurally strong but emotionally delayed. The Media Center acknowledges social media as an informal sensor system that reveals lived experiences not immediately visible through formal channels. Accessibility challenges are most pronounced among elderly and low–digital literacy pilgrims, who struggle with navigation, documentation, language barriers, and procedural sequencing. These difficulties are intensified by physical fatigue during return transit. Although orientation sessions and digital alerts exist, their effectiveness is uneven, resulting in accessibility that is achieved administratively but remains fragile experientially.

Within the Media Center, feedback loops are structured and continuous. Media coverage is monitored for repetition, emotional intensity, and framing, and translated into adjustments such as refined messaging, simplified language, FAQs, and operational reprioritization. Media feedback also informs real-time operational responses, including staff redeployment and prioritization of elderly services, producing a cycle of rapid procedural and narrative adaptation. In the Return Service, feedback loops are pragmatic and cumulative. Media reports and complaints trigger immediate coordination to resolve acute issues, while unresolved cases feed into post-season evaluations that inform the next Hajj cycle. Learning remains largely procedural, focusing on service correction rather than emotional or spiritual recalibration.

Overall, feedback follows a shared sequence: media-visible issues → internal interpretation → operational coordination → procedural adjustment → implementation.

The perspectives of Husni Anggoro and Nur Arif Muhammad reveal two complementary governance functions: narrative stabilization and procedural containment. While operating in distinct domains—communication governance and return-phase operations—both are oriented toward preserving order, legitimacy, and public trust. Together, they demonstrate that Indonesian Hajj governance relies not on a single center of control, but on parallel systems that manage different forms of vulnerability: informational volatility and operational fragility.

CONCLUSION

Indonesian pilgrims experience accessibility as procedurally available yet experientially uneven. Media narratives indicate that while systems governing registration, transportation, accommodation, and return operate largely as designed, pilgrims often perceive accessibility as contingent upon physical endurance, digital literacy, and the capacity to comply with layered procedures. Elderly pilgrims and first-time participants are particularly vulnerable to confusion, fatigue, and emotional strain, suggesting that administrative access does not consistently translate into felt ease or sustained spiritual focus.

Hajj administrators, by contrast, conceptualize accessibility through a governance lens that prioritizes procedural efficiency and risk containment as prerequisites for service delivery. Efficiency and regulatory control are framed as essential to ensuring safety, legality, and public trust within a high-risk, large-scale pilgrimage operation. While spiritual compassion is acknowledged as important, it is largely positioned as a secondary outcome that follows successful procedural execution rather than as a core design principle embedded within regulatory frameworks.

The findings reveal a clear gap between regulatory intent and pilgrims' lived spiritual experiences. Although governance aims to facilitate worship through order and protection, media accounts consistently surface emotional fatigue, anxiety, and moments of spiritual disruption in practice. This gap is mediated through public and media discourse, which transforms individual experiences into visible accountability signals. Media exposure prompts communication refinement and operational adjustment, yet institutional learning remains predominantly reactive, addressing experiential shortcomings after they become publicly visible rather than preventing them through anticipatory design.

The correlation between the two studies is most evident in the role of media as a feedback mechanism. What emerges in Study 1 as public frustration, confusion, or anxiety is recognized in Study 2 as actionable input that triggers narrative recalibration, operational correction, and procedural adjustment. Media thus functions as a connective layer between lived experience and institutional response, translating experiential realities into governance action.

Taken together, the studies expose a shared structural limitation. While Indonesia's Hajj governance system is administratively robust and operationally adaptive, it remains emotionally fragmented. Study 1 reveals where and how the system is experienced, while Study 2 explains why it functions as it does. Together, they confirm the central paradox of this research: Indonesia's Hajj governance succeeds in managing movement and order, yet continues to struggle to create a sustained cycle of ease that aligns bureaucratic efficiency with pilgrims' lived spiritual experience.

RECOMMENDATION

1. Policy Makers are encouraged to see pilgrims not only as units within a system, but as individuals undertaking a deeply meaningful spiritual journey. Embedding emotional and spiritual accessibility alongside safety and efficiency can help regulations feel more caring and humane. This approach ensures that governance protects dignity as much as it protects order.

2. Hajj Administrators carry the responsibility of translating policy into lived experience, often under intense pressure. Balancing procedural discipline with flexibility and empathy—especially for elderly and first-time pilgrims—can significantly reduce confusion and fatigue. Small adjustments in support can make pilgrims feel guided rather than managed.

3. Public Communication Units Public communication teams play a vital role in calming anxiety during uncertain moments. Proactive, clear, and compassionate communication can prevent confusion before it escalates into distress. Treating media and social platforms as early signals of pilgrim concern strengthens trust and reassurance.

4. Digital System Developers Digital systems should support pilgrims, not test their technological ability. Human-centered and age-inclusive design can reduce stress for those unfamiliar with digital tools. When technology feels intuitive and forgiving, it allows pilgrims to focus on worship rather than compliance.

5. Pilgrim support organizations and community groups often serve as the emotional anchor for pilgrims and their families. Strengthening guidance and accompaniment before, during, and after the pilgrimage helps transform complex procedures into reassuring, human-centered support. Through this role, communities effectively bridge the gap between administrative systems and pilgrims' spiritual comfort.

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