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INFLUENCE OF *IHSĀN* (BENEVOLENCE) ON SUSTAINING INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS PRACTICES AT ISLAMIC UNIVERSITIES IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

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Abstract:

Ihsān (benevolence) is frequently overlooked in industrial relations. Conventional methods of industrial relations emphasise compliance with legal and organisational mandates via a tripartite framework. Conversely, *ihsān* underscores the cultivation of a peaceful and ethical connection between employers and employees. This study explores the influence of *ihsān* on maintaining industrial connections among employees of Islamic universities in Southeast Asia. The study employed focused group discussions (FGDs) with five faculty members from Islamic universities. Participants contended that *ihsān*, manifested as trust, mutual cooperation, and a spirit of generosity, possesses superior worth. The participants recounted experiences from Islamic universities that have implemented *ihsān* for nearly a century, illustrating the viability of these institutions in fostering a harmonious and humane work environment. Participants also advocated for an *ihsān*-driven industrial relations. Thus, this study contributes in terms of *ihsān* in sustaining harmonious industrial relations practices. However, the study is confined to a limited number of Islamic universities in Southeast Asia. Future research should encompass a more extensive sample of Islamic universities around the region to yield comprehensive findings.

Keywords:

Ihsān, Industrial Relations, Islamic Universities, Southeast Asia.

Introduction

Industrial relations in the majority of organisations are primarily motivated by financial motivations, shareholder interests, and regulatory compliance. The current frameworks are primarily concerned with the reduction of operational costs and the maximisation of profits, with a predominant emphasis on legal obligations and organisational mandates (Arudsothy, 1988; Sharma, 1989; Bhopal, 1997; Hess, 2008; Shahiri, Osman, & Park, 2016). This regulatory and profit-driven approach, which is frequently reinforced by a tripartite system that involves employers, employees, and the government, prioritises the fulfilment of external requirements over the humanistic aspects of the workplace (Kuruvilla & Arudsothy, 2005; Warner, 2014; Kumar et al., 2013; Shahiri et al., 2016; Aminuddin, 2024). The tripartite system of industrial relations is illustrated in Figure 1. Consequently, the ethical and relational aspects of employer-employee interactions are frequently disregarded, resulting in a lack of progress in the cultivation of mutual respect and long-term harmony within organisations.

Figure 1: Tripartite System of Industrial Relations
Source: Aminuddin, 2024

The concept of *ihsān* (benevolence), which encourages ethical behaviour and a profound dedication to cultivating respect and compassion among individuals, is one of the significant components that are absent from traditional industrial relations practices (Akhtar, 1992; Al-Twal, Alawamleh, & Jarrar, 2024). The traditional approach, which emphasises material benefits and adherence to regulations, is in stark contrast to *ihsān*, which requires an intrinsic motivation to foster trust, compassion, and cooperation between employers and employees (Akhtar, 1992; Zakiyy, 2021; Abd Razak & Nik Mahmod, 2021; Ahmad, 2024; Al-Twal et al., 2024). The emphasis is shifted from transactional interactions to a more comprehensive perspective that prioritises ethical behaviour, shared well-being, and a spirit of benevolence in the workplace. Figure 2 illustrates the influence of *ihsān* in transitioning from the conventional approach to *ihsān*-driven industrial relations.
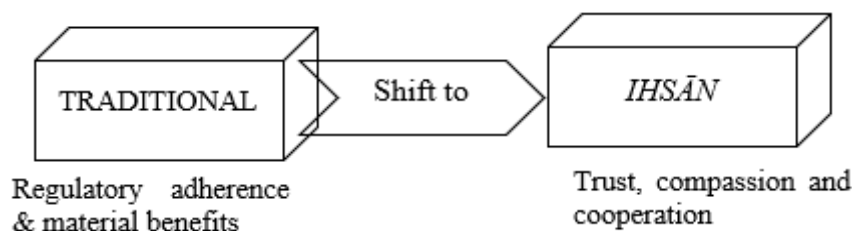

Figure 2: A Shift from Traditional to *ihsān*-Driven Industrial Relations
Source: Akhtar, 1992; Al-Twal, 2024

84

This study explores the influence of *ihsān* on sustaining industrial relations, specifically in Islamic universities across Southeast Asia. This research examines the behaviours of institutions with a longstanding record of integrating *ihsān* into their organisational culture. This integration demonstrates how compassion can augment legislative obligations and improve workplace harmony. The results will enhance the comprehension of how humanistic ideals, especially *ihsān*, can transform industrial relations to foster more sustainable and peaceful workplaces.

Literature Review

This section deliberates on a few sub topics, namely (a) definition, nature and scope of industrial relations, (b) *ihsān* and workplace harmony.

Definition, Nature and Scope of Industrial Relations

The course Industrial Relations is a sub-discipline within the Human Resources Management major of Business Management studies that is designed to investigate and execute strategies for effectively managing the complex relationships and interactions between employers, employees, trade unions, and government agencies in the workplace (Lim et al., 2012; Aminuddin, 2024). The primary goal of studying Industrial Relations is to create a harmony work environment that is both efficient and well-balanced yet compliant with legal regulations. This is accomplished by addressing subjects such as labour legislation, employee rights, workplace conflicts, negotiations between employers and employees, and the impact of labour unions. The objective of Industrial Relations is to establish a harmonious relationship among the diverse stakeholders, including employers, employees, and governments (Abd Razak & Nik Mahmod, 2021; Ahmad, 2024). Consequently, a harmonious work environment will ensure that all employees are treated fairly and that a sense of tranquilly is maintained.

The nature of industrial relations, which is a critical aspect of human resource management, is an essential component of labour, for management and law studies. The focus and approach to the study of industrial relations in management schools are different from the law schools (Aminudin, 2024; Lim et al., 2012). The primary focus of the law school is the legal components of industrial relations within the framework of labour law, with an emphasis on the analysis of regulations, the assurance of compliance, and the resolution of disputes (Abd Razak & Nik Mahmod, 2021; Ahmad, 2024). Conversely, in management schools, prioritise strategies for effectively managing relationships between employers and employees within organisations, and they adopt a practical approach to industrial relations (Kumar et al., 2013; Shahiri et al., 2016; Zakiyy, 2021).

Industrial relations are fundamentally concerned with the intricate network of relationships that exist between employers, employees, trade unions, and government entities in the workplace (Zakiyy, 2021; Abd Razak & Nik Mahmod, 2021; Ahmad, 2024). The field's goal is to supervise these relationships in order to maintain a work environment that is productive, harmonious, and legally compliant. Industrial relations encompass the regulatory influence of government agencies, the function of trade unions, dispute resolution, labour law adherence, collective bargaining, and employer-employee interactions (Aminudin, 2024; Lim et al., 2012).

Contemporary industrial relations are primarily concerned with legal frameworks, organisational regulations, and monetary incentives, despite their extensive scope. The conventional industrial relations often overlooked the humanistic components that contribute to a harmonious work environment (Zakiyy, 2021; Abd Razak & Nik Mahmod, 2021; Ahmad,

2024; Aminuddin, 2024). Aminuddin (2024) argues that the analysis of industrial relations typically encompasses management and employment law; however, it is not adequately considering the human factors that foster harmony. Lim et al. (2012) also emphasised the importance of collaborative strategies in labour relations, asserting that partnership strategies can produce strategic competitive advantages. Nevertheless, the traditional emphasis on legal compliance and profit maximisation persists.

A conflict-based paradigm that presupposes persistent tensions between capitalists, workers, administrators, and authorities influences the conventional perspective on industrial relations. The primary objective of this model is to simultaneously reduce operational costs and optimise financial profits. Arudsothy (1990) argues that industrial relations are the outcome of such conflicts, which are significantly impacted by political and bureaucratic constraints. Other researchers, including Arudsothy (1988), Sharma (1989), Bhopal (1997), Kuruvilla & Arudsothy (2005), Hess (2008), and Shahiri, Osman, & Park (2016), have emphasised the dynamic and frequently adversarial character of industrial relations in a variety of ASEAN countries. These relationships are substantially influenced by historical and economic factors, as demonstrated by these researchers. For example, in their investigations of the influence of unique historical and economic circumstances on labour relations in a variety of countries, Bhopal (1997) and Kuruvilla & Arudsothy (2005) identified adversarial and dynamic industrial relations. The same concern was expressed by Warner (2014) and Kumar et al. (2013) in relation to the diverse array of methodologies and outcomes associated with industrial relations practices in the ASEAN region. Shahiri et al. (2016) encountered additional challenges and trends as a result of the dynamic and adversarial environment. In fact, the studies collectively indicate that industrial relations are still influenced by external constraints, such as legal mandates and financial objectives, as there is a limited space for a more human-centered approach.

However, the current industrial relations practices demonstrate a significant gap in the inadequacies to prioritise the humanistic aspects, which include *ihsān* (benevolence). Indeed, Zakiyy (2021), Abd Razak & Nik Mahmod (2021), Ahmad (2024), and Aminuddin (2024) emphasise the importance of legal compliance and financial objectives; however, they neglect the more profound ethical and relational components that promote a truly harmonious work environment. The contention of this study is that the incorporation of *ihsān*, an Islamic concept of benevolence that fosters ethical behaviour, mutual respect, and trust between employers and employees, can offer a more sustainable and humane approach to industrial relations.

Ihsān and Workplace Harmony

Ihsān focuses on the promotion, advocacy, preservation, and promotion of harmony in the workplace (Akhtar, 1992; Zakiyy, 2021). The concept of *ihsān*, which is rooted in the principle of benevolence, encourages individuals to surpass their basic responsibilities by exhibiting compassion, generosity, and moral superiority (Akhtar, 1992; Zakiyy, 2021; Abd Razak & Nik Mahmod, 2021; Ahmad, 2024). In the context of industrial relations, *ihsān* fosters an environment in which the interactions between employers and employees are significantly influenced by empathy, comprehension, and reciprocal assistance (Abd Razak & Nik Mahmod, 2021; Ahmad, 2024). This approach surpasses the mere fulfilment of economic, legal, and regulatory obligations by fostering a shared sense of accountability and humanistic concern within the workplace.

Ihsān also endeavours to maintain social responsibility and attain economic benefits. Employers establish policies and strategies that not only comply with legal requirements but also exhibit a commitment to social equity and ethical superiority by integrating *ihsān* into their practices (Abd Razak & Nik Mahmod, 2021; Ahmad, 2024). For example, in addition to adhering to fundamental labour regulations, an organisation may provide employees with additional resources or flexible provisions to help them deal with personal challenges. This fosters a work environment that prioritises the well-being of its employees.

Ihsān also promotes initiatives that benefit the internal workers and the broader community, in accordance with the principles of corporate social responsibility (CSR) (Armayanto & Suntoro, 2023; Wahab & Ismail, 2019). Employers who exhibit *ihsān* are more likely to engage in corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives that have a positive impact on society and far exceed plain compliance with legal requirements (Wahab & Ismail, 2019; Armayanto & Suntoro, 2023; Badruddin, 2023; Sumi, Ahmed & Alam, 2024). Efforts to promote environmental sustainability, adherence to equitable trading practices, and philanthropic donations are all examples of initiatives that demonstrate a commitment to the well-being of society and social justice.

Organisations can achieve a more comprehensive approach to workplace administration by integrating *ihsān* into industrial relations (Badruddin, 2023; Sumi et al., 2024). This approach fosters a harmonious work environment by prioritising the humanistic aspects and addressing the demands of economic sustainability, social responsibility, and regulatory compliance (Armayanto & Suntoro, 2023; Wahab & Ismail, 2019). By exhibiting acts of benevolence, compassion, and principled guidance, *ihsān* inspires organisations to surpass their obligations, thereby cultivating an environment that is conducive to the success and development of both employers and employees.

In short, *ihsān* offers a strong framework for enhancing industrial relations by fostering a work environment that emphasises ethical uprightness, benevolence, and empathy. The integration of *ihsān* with the fundamental legal, regulatory, and economic factors facilitates the establishment, promotion, endorsement, and maintenance of a work environment that prioritises social responsibility and human dignity (Abd Razak & Nik Mahmod, 2021; Ahmad, 2024). Ultimately, this approach leads to a more cohesive, productive, and socially conscious organisation, which is advantageous to both the individual and the broader community.

Methodology

This research employed a qualitative approach using focus group discussions (FGDs). This approach allows researchers to gain deep and comprehensive insights from a diverse group of participants (Mishra, 2016; Merriam & Grenier, 2019; Khoa, Hung & Hejsalem-Brahmi, 2023; Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2023). In fact, the use of FGDs in this study enabled a comprehensive examination of the perspectives of the participants.

The researchers conducted a focus group discussion with five (5) faculty members from Islamic universities in Malaysia (2 faculty members), Indonesia (1 faculty member), Singapore (1 faculty member), and Brunei (1 faculty member). The session lasted for two hours. The objective of the discussion was to gather a collective perspective on the influence of *ihsān* on industrial relations practices in Islamic universities in Southeast Asia.

The researchers facilitated the FGD sessions. As the facilitators of the FGDs, the researchers, assured that all participants provided informed consent prior to the FGDs. The researchers also sought the informed consent from the participants to audiotape the sessions.

By employing a pre-established series of queries that were tailored to each group, the researchers systematically directed the debates throughout the discussion. The objective of these enquiries was to encourage participants to provide detailed responses and to foster interactive, dynamic dialogue. The focus group discussion (FGD) was meticulously recorded using audio technology to accurately capture the totality of the exchanges.

Following the discussions, a skilled transcriber meticulously transcribed the audio recordings, resulting in a comprehensive and detailed account of the encounters. Subsequently, the researchers employed thematic analysis to meticulously examine the transcriptions, identifying, analysing, and documenting recurring themes that were present in the data. The consolidation of complex qualitative data into fundamental themes that accurately represented the collective opinions and experiences of the participants was facilitated by this method.

Results and Discussion

The results are based on the FGD with a total of 5 staff from Islamic universities from Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore, and Brunei.

In promoting and sustaining harmony in the workplace, there is a need for a strong core value. Participant 1 from Malaysia of Islamic University A said: *"I believe ihsān is at the core of our values in the workplace. Trust and mutual cooperation make us stronger as a community. Monetary rewards are important, of course, but without ihsān, the workplace becomes transactional and cold."* The feedback from Participant 1 from Malaysia of Islamic University A emphasises the pivotal significance of *ihsān* as a standard of excellence in moral and ethical behaviour in cultivating a dynamic and unified corporate culture (Wahab & Ismail, 2019; Bella, 2023). Participant 1 from Malaysia of Islamic University A acknowledged the significance of financial incentives for fulfilling practical requirements, but contended that *ihsān* transcends material remuneration, in which Participant 1 from Malaysia from Islamic University A emphasised that trust and collaborative engagement are essential for fostering a meaningful and robust workplace community (Wahab & Ismail, 2019; LaGree et al., 2023; Prayudi & Komariyah, 2023). The participant also argued that in the absence of *ihsān*, the workplace may devolve into a "transactional and cold" environment, where relationships are characterised exclusively by material exchanges rather than profound, value-oriented connections (Wahab & Ismail, 2019; Bella, 2023; LaGree et al., 2023; Prayudi & Komariyah, 2023).

As Participant 2 from Indonesia mentioned that: *"In our experience, some established Islamic universities have been practicing ihsān for almost a century, and it's a key reason for their sustainability. It's not just about meeting financial needs—ihsān creates a sense of belonging and commitment that keeps people connected to the institution."* The feedback from Participant 2 from Indonesia emphasised that the practice of *ihsān* is indeed a journey that requires full undertaking. Despite the fact that financial necessities are of utmost importance, the participant believes that it is *ihsān* that cultivates a more profound sense of belonging and commitment among the staff and faculty, hence establishing enduring links to the institution (Wahab & Ismail, 2019; Alkaf et al., 2024; Plester & Lloyd, 2024; Savira et al., 2024). The perspective provided by the participant supports the viewpoint that the foundation of long-term institutional

performance is not exclusively based on financial incentives but rather on involvement that is driven by something of value.

For Participant 3 from Singapore: *"Financial resources are necessary, especially when it comes to fulfilling regulatory standards. However, I have seen first-hand that when ihsān is present, people are more motivated and willing to go beyond what's required. It cultivates a more humanized work environment."* Participant 3 from Singapore argued that both financial resources and *ihsān* within the workplace are necessary. The existence of *ihsān* is necessary to elevate the harmony work atmosphere, despite the fact that financial resources are recognised as being vital, particularly for the purpose of achieving regulatory criteria (Plester & Lloyd, 2024; Savira et al., 2024). Employees have a higher level of motivation and are more likely to go beyond basic compliance when *ihsān* is practiced. According to Wahab and Ismail (2019), Alkaf et al. (2024), and Plester and Lloyd (2024), the practice of *ihsān* helps to cultivate a more humanised work environment, in which individuals are motivated not only to achieve their goals but also to make a positive contribution to the general well-being of their coworkers and the organisation. Through this conversation, the concept that ethical values, when combined with financial and regulatory frameworks, can result in a workplace dynamic that is more comprehensive and sustainable is brought to light.

The advocating for harmony in the workplace requires readiness and willingness. Participant 4 from Brunei said: *"What I found in our university is that ihsān, in the form of giving and mutual respect, creates a work culture where people genuinely care about each other. It's not just about the paycheck at the end of the month; it's about working together for a shared purpose."* Participant 4 from Brunei argued that *ihsān*, as deliberated by Bella (2024), Savira et al. (2024), and Wahab and Ismail (2019), possesses transformative capacity in creating a work culture based on integrity, generosity, and respect for one another. This realisation implies that *ihsān* encourages people to perform with excellence and selflessness by fostering deeper, more meaningful relationships at work. By encouraging a giving culture, *ihsān* fosters a cooperative environment where employees put the welfare of their coworkers, social harmony, and group achievement ahead of their own interests. Long-term, sustainable growth is thus made possible by the workplace being more robust, cohesive, and in line with moral and spiritual principles.

As for Participant 5 from Malaysia of Islamic University B: *"We need to consider how an ihsān-driven approach to industrial relations could complement the existing systems. Regulatory frameworks are important, but when you bring in ihsān, you enhance relationships and create more harmonious workplaces."* The feedback from Participant 5 from Malaysia of Islamic University B emphasises the potential of incorporating an *ihsān*-driven approach into industrial relations to enhance harmony workplace within the current regulatory frameworks (Abd Razak & Nik Mahmod, 2021; Ahmad, 2024; Aminuddin, 2024). The participant recognises the significance of regulatory frameworks for ensuring order and compliance, proposing that the integration of *ihsān* into these systems can markedly improve workplace interactions (Wahab & Ismail, 2019; Badruddin, 2023; Sumi et al., 2024). An *ihsān*-driven strategy cultivates trust, respect, and cooperation, hence establishing a more harmonious work environment that transcends legal and regulatory requirements.

The results of focused group discussions with staff members from Islamic universities in Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore, and Brunei underscore the essential function of *ihsān* in promoting and maintaining harmony workplace peace. Participant 1 from Malaysia of Islamic University A highlighted *ihsān* as an essential principle, indicating that although financial

incentives hold significance, *ihsān* establishes a basis of trust and collaborative engagement that averts the workplace from devolving into a purely transactional environment. Participant 2 from Indonesia reiterated this perspective, adding that *ihsān* fosters a profound sense of belonging and dedication, hence enhancing the long-term viability of Islamic organisations. Participant 3 from Singapore emphasised that financial resources are crucial for compliance with regulatory norms; yet, *ihsān* inspires employees to surpass fundamental criteria, fostering a more compassionate and supportive workplace. Participant 4 from Brunei asserts that *ihsān*, exemplified by kindness and mutual regard, cultivates a culture in which employees prioritise one another, hence enhancing collaboration towards collective objectives beyond personal interests. Participant 5 from Malaysia of Islamic University B observed that incorporating *ihsān* into industrial relations could improve harmony within current regulatory frameworks, positing that the trust, respect, and cooperation fostered by *ihsān* may result in a more unified and ethically sound workplace. Table 1 highlights key points and themes of the focused group discussion that *ihsān* as a transforming element that, in conjunction with financial and regulatory frameworks, bolsters workplace resilience, cohesion, and adherence to ethical and spiritual principles.

Table 1: Key Points and Themes from the Focused Group Discussion

Participant	Key points	Themes
1 (Malaysia-A)	*"...ihsān is at the core of our values in the workplace. Trust and mutual cooperation make us stronger…"*	Core values Trust Mutual cooperation
2 (Indonesia)	*"...ihsān creates a sense of belonging and commitment …"*	Sense of belonging Committment
3 (Singapore)	*"...when ihsān is present, people are more motivated and willing to go beyond what's required."*	Motivation
4 (Brunei)	*"... working together for a shared purpose."*	Shared purposed
5 (Malaysia-B)	*"...when you bring in ihsān, you enhance relationships and create more harmonious workplaces."*	Enhance relationships

Source: Feedback of the Focused Group Discussion

Participants contended that *ihsān*, manifested as trust, mutual cooperation, and a spirit of generosity, possesses greater significance than financial advantages. Participants underscored that, although financial resources are essential for fulfilling regulatory obligations and enhancing workplace circumstances, the fundamental basis of a harmonious workplace is the cultivation of *ihsān* (Wahab & Ismail, 2019; Badruddin, 2023; Sumi et al., 2024). They recounted experiences from Islamic universities that have implemented *ihsān* for nearly a century, illustrating the sustainability of these institutions in fostering a harmonious and humanised work environment. Participants advocated for an *ihsān*-driven methodology in industrial relations, which would enhance the current regulatory and material-based frameworks.

Conclusion
This study underscores the crucial yet often overlooked role of *ihsān* (benevolence) in fostering and sustaining harmony in industrial relations, particularly within Islamic universities in Southeast Asia. Traditional industrial relations predominantly prioritise compliance with legal and organisational responsibilities, concentrating on cost minimisation and profit

maximisation. In contrast, *ihsān* introduces a morally principled and human-centric perspective that improves the dynamics between employers and employees. The findings indicate that trust, mutual cooperation, and a culture of generosity, which are essential components of *ihsān*, are deemed more significant than monetary incentives in cultivating a harmonious workplace. The experiences provided by Islamic universities that have used *ihsān* for nearly a century further substantiate the ongoing sustainability and effectiveness of this approach in cultivating a compassionate work environment. This study contributes in the literature of industrial relations the influence of *ihsān* in sustaining industrial relations practices with a strong framework in enhancing industrial relations by fostering a work environment that emphasises ethical uprightness, benevolence, and empathy. The integration of *ihsān* with the fundamental legal, regulatory, and economic factors facilitates the establishment, promotion, endorsement, and maintenance of a work environment that prioritises social responsibility and human dignity This research indicates that incorporating *ihsān*-driven techniques into industrial relations can improve existing material and regulatory frameworks, offering a holistic approach to promoting workplace harmony. Nonetheless, this study's focus on a certain sample of Islamic universities in Southeast Asia has a problem. Subsequent research should prioritise expanding the sample size and integrating a broader range of universities from the region. This will facilitate a more thorough comprehension of the influence of *ihsān* in industrial relations on a broader scale. Furthermore, a comprehensive analysis of the enduring impacts of *ihsān*-oriented industrial relations on organisational performance and employee well-being could provide valuable insights for policy formulation and execution in both Islamic and non-Islamic workplaces.

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