



Research Article

Digital Fatwā Issuance Mechanisms in Southeast Asia: Challenges and Opportunities for Harmonizing Sharia and Contemporary Society

Moch Nurcholis Majid ^{1*}, Iwan Setiawan Wibisono ²

¹ Universitas Uluwiyah Mojokerto, Indonesia; email: nurcholis@lecturer.uluwiyah.ac.id

² Universitas Ngudi Waluyo, Indonesia; email: iwansetiawan@unw.ac.id

* Corresponding Author: nurcholis@lecturer.uluwiyah.ac.id ¹

Abstract: The rapid expansion of digital platforms has transformed the issuance of fatwa in Southeast Asia, enabling Islamic legal opinions to be accessed widely and quickly. This shift challenges traditional patterns of religious authority, which were previously centered around formal institutions and face-to-face scholarly deliberation. While digital fatwa mechanisms enhance accessibility and responsiveness, they also raise concerns about legitimacy, legal accuracy, and public trust. This study examines the effectiveness of digital fatwa issuance mechanisms in Malaysia, Indonesia, and Brunei Darussalam, using a qualitative comparative research approach. Data were collected through content analysis of official digital fatwa portals, focusing on accessibility, authority, validation, and legal consistency. The findings reveal that digital platforms increase access speed and broaden public reach, enabling religious institutions to address emerging legal issues more effectively. However, variations in verification procedures and legitimacy frameworks across countries reflect differences in governance and state involvement. Key challenges include the authentication of mufti authority, standardization of ijihad methodologies, and consistency in legal substance. Digital fatwa contribute to improving Islamic legal literacy but risk authority fragmentation due to the proliferation of digital sources. The study concludes that integrating the efficiency of digital platforms with the authoritative safeguards of traditional institutions is crucial for developing an accountable model of digital fatwa governance.

Keywords: Digital Fatwa; Fatwa Governance; Islamic Authority; Religious Digitalization; Southeast Asia.

1. Introduction

The rapid expansion of digital platforms has significantly transformed the dissemination and issuance of Islamic fatwā across Southeast Asia. Digital media, including websites, mobile applications, and social networking platforms, have enabled fatwā to be accessed instantly by a broad audience, transcending geographical and institutional boundaries. This transformation reflects a broader shift in religious practices and authority structures driven by technological advancement and increasing internet connectivity in the region (Yoe, 2022). While digital platforms enhance accessibility and responsiveness to contemporary issues, they simultaneously raise concerns regarding the legitimacy, accuracy, and authoritative grounding of religious legal opinions.

One of the most profound impacts of digitalization is the transformation of traditional religious authority. Historically, fatwā issuance was centralized within formal religious institutions and qualified muftīs, ensuring methodological rigor and doctrinal consistency. However, digital platforms have disrupted this structure by allowing religious opinions to circulate rapidly, often without adequate verification or institutional oversight (Pabbajah et al., 2024). As a result, authority has shifted from established institutions to virtual spaces where diverse actors—ranging from independent scholars to religious influencers—participate in shaping Islamic legal discourse.

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In Southeast Asia, increased internet penetration has facilitated the emergence of localized forms of digital religiosity that respond to specific social and economic contexts. In Indonesia, for example, the National Sharia Board of the Indonesian Council of Ulama (DSN-MUI) has issued several fatwās addressing digital financial transactions, including fintech, e-commerce, and Islamic digital banking, demonstrating institutional adaptation to technological change (Hidayati et al., 2023). Similarly, epistemological debates surrounding digital transaction fatwās highlight ongoing efforts to reconcile classical Islamic jurisprudence with modern economic practices (Bashori et al., 2023).

Social media platforms further intensify these dynamics by democratizing religious discourse. Studies from Pakistan show that online fatwās disseminated through social networking sites have shifted religious discussions from traditional spaces such as mosques to digital environments, fostering broader participation while simultaneously challenging established authority structures (Adel & Numan, 2023). Comparable patterns are evident in Indonesia, where fatwās issued by the Indonesian Council of Ulama on issues such as cryptocurrency and vaccination have sparked extensive public debate on platforms like YouTube and other digital media (Hidayati et al., 2023).

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated these transformations by forcing religious education and guidance to migrate online. This shift weakened the monopoly of traditional religious institutions and enabled alternative forms of authority to emerge in virtual learning environments (Maemonah et al., 2022). Consequently, religious authority has become increasingly fragmented, with digital preachers and celebrity scholars gaining prominence by leveraging digital visibility and audience engagement. This phenomenon contributes to what scholars describe as “digital Islamization,” where religious authority intersects with media influence and economic interests (Pabbajah et al., 2024).

Digital literacy plays a crucial role in shaping perceptions of religious authority in this context. Research indicates that higher levels of digital literacy influence how individuals evaluate and engage with religious authorities online, although social media platforms themselves lack stability as reliable standards for religious authorization (Laugu et al., 2024). This condition underscores the tension between accessibility and credibility in digital fatwā dissemination.

Given the growing influence of digital platforms, there is an urgent need for regulatory frameworks and institutional oversight to ensure that online fatwās adhere to established principles of Islamic jurisprudence. Strengthening governance mechanisms, enhancing institutional communication capacities, and reinforcing scholarly credibility are essential to maintaining the quality and legitimacy of fatwā in the digital era (Adel & Numan, 2023; Pabbajah et al., 2024). Addressing these challenges is critical for harmonizing Islamic legal traditions with the demands of contemporary digital society, particularly in the diverse socio-religious landscape of Southeast Asia.

The increasing use of digital platforms in the issuance of Islamic fatwā presents significant challenges related to authority legitimacy, legal accuracy, and public trust. Digital fatwā often circulate rapidly without sufficient institutional verification, disrupting established structures of religious authority and potentially undermining legal certainty. In the context of digital transactions, inconsistencies between fatwā content and applicable sharī‘a principles may lead to uncertainty and weaken public confidence in Islamic legal institutions. These challenges highlight the need for more systematic and methodologically sound approaches to fatwā issuance in the digital era (Bashori et al., 2023).

In Indonesia, the fatwās issued by the National Sharia Board–Indonesian Council of Ulama (DSN-MUI) illustrate how Islamic legal reasoning has adapted to contemporary digital and economic realities. Studies show that DSN-MUI fatwās on digital transactions emphasize fiqh-based and methodological arguments rather than relying solely on textual sources, reflecting efforts to address modern legal complexities (Bashori et al., 2023). At the same time, this adaptive approach raises questions about consistency, transparency, and public understanding, particularly when digital fatwās are disseminated widely without adequate explanatory frameworks.

This study aims to examine the effectiveness of digital fatwā issuance mechanisms in responding to contemporary challenges and in harmonizing sharī‘a principles with modern societal needs. Specifically, it explores the methodological foundations of DSN-MUI fatwās and their role in promoting justice, balance, and moderation within the Islamic economic system. By analyzing how values of moderation are integrated into digital fatwā, this research seeks to identify opportunities for strengthening public trust, enhancing legal relevance, and

ensuring that digital fatwā contribute to an inclusive and sustainable shari‘a-based economic order (Fakhruddin & Hidayat, 2024).

2. Literature Review

Fatwa in Islamic Legal Tradition and the Authority of Mufti

In Islamic legal tradition, a fatwa is a non-binding legal opinion issued by a qualified mufti in response to specific questions concerning Islamic law. Although fatwas do not carry coercive legal force, they function as essential normative guidance for Muslims in navigating religious, social, and economic matters in daily life (Ibrahim et al., 2015). The credibility of a fatwa is closely tied to the authority of the mufti, who is recognized not only for scholarly competence but also for ethical integrity and methodological rigor.

The authority of the mufti is governed by ethical and procedural standards that regulate the process of issuing fatwas, including considerations before, during, and after the declaration. These ethical frameworks ensure accountability, consistency, and alignment with the principles of Islamic jurisprudence (Khairuddin et al., 2019). As a result, the legitimacy of fatwa issuance has traditionally been embedded within institutional structures and scholarly hierarchies that safeguard doctrinal coherence.

Transformation of Fatwa in the Digital Era

The development of digital technology has significantly transformed the dissemination of fatwas through electronic fatwa (e-fatwa) systems, official websites, and mobile applications. In Malaysia, religious institutions have actively adopted digital platforms to enhance the efficiency and accessibility of fatwa dissemination, demonstrating institutional adaptation to technological change (Khairuddin et al., 2018). These platforms enable faster responses to emerging legal issues while expanding public access to authoritative religious guidance.

Social media further reshapes the landscape of fatwa dissemination by altering patterns of religious communication and engagement. Research shows that social networking platforms have democratized religious discourse by shifting discussions from traditional physical spaces to digital environments, as evidenced in Pakistan’s online fatwa practices (Adel & Numan, 2023). Similarly, in Indonesia, alternative cyber-fatwa platforms such as *cariustadzid* have emerged to complement traditional religious authorities, particularly among urban middle-class Muslims seeking accessible religious guidance (Zamhari et al., 2021).

Digital Religion, Islamic Authority, and Fatwa Governance

The concept of digital religion highlights how digital media reconfigure religious authority by enabling rapid dissemination of religious opinions that may bypass institutional verification. Studies indicate that digital platforms challenge traditional authority structures by allowing diverse actors to participate in religious interpretation, potentially weakening centralized control over fatwa issuance (Zamhari et al., 2021). In Indonesia, social media platforms such as Instagram have been used to disseminate fatwa-related content, although their effectiveness in enhancing Islamic legal literacy remains limited (Shuhufi et al., 2022).

The governance of fatwa plays a crucial role in maintaining legal certainty and public trust in digital environments. The Indonesian Council of Ulama (MUI) represents a prominent example of institutionalized fatwa governance, exercising quasi-legislative authority through its fatwas on social interaction, digital ethics, and sharia economics (Alfitri, 2020). MUI has also issued specific fatwas regulating ethical behavior in digital spaces, such as avoiding slander, hate speech, and misinformation, demonstrating the extension of fatwa governance into contemporary digital life (Mustofa & Hasanudin, 2022; Shuhufi et al., 2022).

Beyond Southeast Asia, studies on Islamic authority in Europe reveal similar challenges in establishing centralized religious authority in pluralistic and digitally mediated contexts. The European Council for Fatwa and Research, for example, has sought to position itself as a leading authority for European Muslims but faces limitations in outreach, legitimacy, and public engagement (Shavit & Spengler, 2017). These findings suggest that digitalization amplifies existing tensions between institutional authority and public acceptance across different socio-cultural settings.

Research Gap: Cross-National Comparison of Digital Fatwa in Southeast Asia

Despite the growing body of literature on digital religion, Islamic authority, and fatwa governance, there remains a significant research gap concerning cross-national comparisons of digital fatwa mechanisms in Southeast Asia. Existing studies predominantly focus on

single-country contexts, particularly Indonesia and Malaysia, emphasizing institutional authority, ethical dimensions, and digital dissemination practices without systematically comparing institutional structures, dissemination strategies, and governance frameworks across the region (Alfitri, 2020; Khairuldin et al., 2018; Shuhufi et al., 2022). As a result, scholarly understanding of how digital fatwa systems differ across Southeast Asian countries remains fragmented.

Moreover, current research has paid limited attention to how different Southeast Asian states manage legitimacy challenges, maintain methodological consistency, and ensure the effectiveness of digital fatwa in responding to contemporary societal needs. While studies in Indonesia highlight the bureaucratization and quasi-legislative role of fatwa institutions (Alfitri, 2020; Mustofa & Hasanudin, 2022) and research in Malaysia emphasizes technological adoption and institutional ethics (Khairuldin et al., 2019), comparative analyses that integrate these perspectives at a regional level are still lacking. In contrast, studies outside Southeast Asia, such as those examining online fatwa practices in Pakistan and Europe, demonstrate the analytical value of cross-contextual comparison in understanding authority and governance in digital religious environments (Adel & Numan, 2023; Shavit & Spengler, 2017).

3. Materials and Method

This study adopts a qualitative comparative research design to examine digital fatwa issuance mechanisms in Southeast Asia by analyzing official fatwa portals in Malaysia, Indonesia, and Brunei Darussalam. Data are collected through qualitative content analysis focusing on the substance of digital fatwa, institutional structures, and procedural mechanisms of issuance. The analysis applies thematic categorization across four key dimensions—accessibility, authority, validation, and legal consistency—to identify similarities, differences, and governance challenges. This approach enables a systematic comparison of how digital platforms mediate religious authority and how institutional fatwa systems respond to contemporary societal needs in different national contexts.

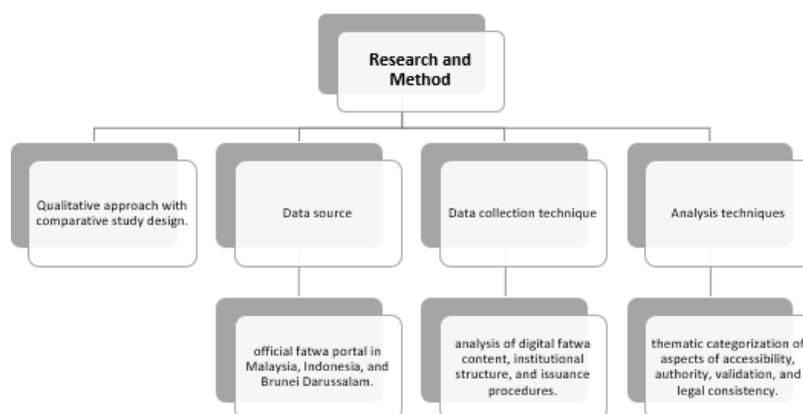


Figure 1. The structure of the Research Methodology flowchart.

Research and Method

This study employs a qualitative research approach with a comparative study design to examine the mechanisms of digital fatwa issuance in Southeast Asia. A qualitative approach is chosen to allow an in-depth understanding of institutional practices, authority structures, and governance processes underlying digital fatwa systems. The comparative design enables systematic analysis of similarities and differences across national contexts in responding to contemporary religious and social challenges.

Data Sources

The primary data sources consist of official digital fatwa portals administered by recognized religious authorities in Malaysia, Indonesia, and Brunei Darussalam. These portals were selected because they represent formal and authoritative channels for fatwa dissemination in each country. By focusing on official platforms, this study ensures that the data reflect institutionally sanctioned fatwa practices rather than informal or individual religious opinions circulating in digital spaces.

Data Collection Techniques

Data were collected through qualitative content analysis of digital fatwa published on the selected portals. The analysis focused on three main elements: (1) the substantive content

of fatwa related to contemporary issues, (2) the institutional structures responsible for fatwa issuance, and (3) the procedural mechanisms governing fatwa formulation, validation, and publication. Relevant documents, explanatory notes, and institutional information available on the portals were also examined to provide contextual understanding.

Data Analysis Techniques

The collected data were analyzed using thematic categorization to identify key patterns and characteristics of digital fatwa governance. Four analytical dimensions were applied: accessibility, authority, validation, and legal consistency. Accessibility refers to the ease with which the public can access fatwa through digital platforms; authority examines the institutional legitimacy behind fatwa issuance; validation focuses on procedural transparency and verification mechanisms; and legal consistency assesses the alignment of fatwa content with established principles of Islamic law. This thematic approach allows for a structured comparison across countries and supports the identification of regional trends, challenges, and opportunities in digital fatwa governance.

4. Results and Discussion

The results indicate that the digitalization of fatwa significantly enhances accessibility and responsiveness by enabling rapid and wide dissemination through official online platforms. However, differences in verification mechanisms and institutional legitimacy across countries reveal challenges related to mufti authentication, methodological consistency, and legal standardization. While digital fatwa contribute to improving Islamic legal literacy and public engagement, they also risk fragmenting religious authority if not supported by transparent governance frameworks. These findings highlight the need to balance technological efficiency with authoritative oversight to ensure that digital fatwa remain credible, consistent, and aligned with contemporary societal needs.

Results

The results show that the digitalization of fatwa has significantly increased the speed of access and expanded public reach. Through official digital portals, fatwa can be accessed easily by diverse segments of society without spatial or temporal limitations. This condition enables religious institutions to respond more quickly to contemporary legal issues, particularly those related to economic activities, social interaction, and digital transactions, thereby enhancing the practical relevance of fatwa in modern life.

Table 1. Key Findings on Digital Fatwa Mechanisms in Southeast Asia.

Analytical Dimension	Main Findings	Implications
Accessibility	Digital fatwa portals provide fast and wide public access without geographical constraints.	Enhances responsiveness and relevance of Islamic legal guidance.
Authority	Institutional authority varies across countries, depending on governance structure and state involvement.	Influences public trust and perceived legitimacy of fatwa.
Validation	Differences exist in verification procedures and transparency of fatwa issuance.	Lack of standardization may create legal ambiguity.
Legal Consistency	Substantive consistency depends on methodological clarity and institutional coordination.	Inconsistent rulings risk weakening normative coherence.
Social Impact	Increased exposure to fatwa improves legal literacy but also diversifies sources of authority.	Encourages engagement while potentially fragmenting authority.

The findings also reveal variations in verification mechanisms and legitimacy frameworks across countries. Differences are observed in institutional structures, procedural transparency, and validation processes used in issuing digital fatwa. While some systems emphasize formal institutional authority and structured procedures, others rely more on collective scholarly deliberation or state-supported religious bodies. These variations influence the level of public trust and perceived authority of digital fatwa in each national context.

Discussion

The accelerated accessibility of digital fatwa demonstrates the strategic role of technology in strengthening the dissemination of Islamic legal guidance. Digital platforms allow religious authorities to engage more effectively with contemporary societal issues and reach broader audiences. However, this increased accessibility also requires institutions to

balance efficiency with scholarly rigor to ensure that speed does not compromise legal accuracy and methodological integrity.

A major challenge highlighted in this study concerns the authentication of mufti authority, the standardization of *ijtihad* methodologies, and the consistency of legal substance in digital fatwa. The absence of clear indicators regarding scholarly responsibility and procedural standards may lead to ambiguity and legal uncertainty. Without transparent validation mechanisms, digital fatwa risk being perceived as fragmented opinions rather than authoritative legal guidance, potentially weakening institutional legitimacy.

From a social perspective, digital fatwa contribute to the enhancement of Islamic legal literacy by increasing public exposure to religious rulings and encouraging engagement with contemporary legal issues. At the same time, the proliferation of digital platforms may intensify the fragmentation of religious authority, as audiences selectively follow opinions that align with personal preferences or digital popularity. This tension underscores the need for stronger governance frameworks to ensure that digital fatwa remain credible, consistent, and capable of harmonizing Islamic legal principles with the evolving needs of contemporary society.

5. Comparison

The comparison between digital fatwa mechanisms and traditional fatwa practices reveals fundamental differences in responsiveness, authority, and methodological orientation. Digital fatwa mechanisms emphasize speed, accessibility, and broad public reach, enabling religious institutions to address contemporary issues in a timely manner. Through online portals and digital platforms, fatwa can be disseminated rapidly to diverse audiences, making them particularly effective in responding to dynamic developments such as digital transactions, social media ethics, and modern economic practices.

In contrast, traditional fatwa mechanisms prioritize institutional legitimacy, scholarly hierarchy, and methodological caution. Fatwa issued through conventional channels typically undergo longer deliberation processes involving qualified muftis and collective scholarly bodies. This approach ensures consistency, depth of legal reasoning, and adherence to established principles of Islamic jurisprudence. While this process may limit speed and public accessibility, it strengthens the perceived authority and reliability of fatwa as normative legal guidance.

Despite their differences, both mechanisms demonstrate complementary strengths and limitations. Digital fatwa systems risk fragmenting religious authority and reducing methodological transparency when speed outweighs scholarly rigor, whereas traditional fatwa systems may struggle to respond promptly to rapidly evolving societal challenges. Therefore, an integrative approach is needed that combines the efficiency and accessibility of digital platforms with the legitimacy, validation processes, and methodological safeguards of traditional institutions. Such integration would allow fatwa governance to remain authoritative while adapting effectively to the needs of contemporary society.

6. Conclusion

This study concludes that digital fatwa mechanisms in Southeast Asia hold significant potential for bridging Islamic legal principles with the needs of contemporary society. Through digital platforms, religious institutions are able to expand access, enhance responsiveness, and engage more effectively with modern social and economic issues. Digital fatwa therefore function as an important medium for maintaining the relevance of Islamic legal guidance in an increasingly digitalized public sphere.

Despite these opportunities, substantial challenges remain, particularly in relation to regulation, standardization, and the legitimacy of authoritative religious actors. Variations in verification procedures, methodological transparency, and institutional governance across countries may generate legal uncertainty and weaken public trust. Without clear regulatory frameworks and standardized guidelines, digital fatwa risk becoming fragmented and inconsistent, undermining their normative function.

Accordingly, this study highlights the need for a regional policy framework that promotes institutional coordination, methodological clarity, and authoritative oversight in digital fatwa governance. Such a framework would help ensure the quality, consistency, and credibility of digital fatwa while allowing flexibility for national and cultural contexts. Overall,

this research contributes to the development of an adaptive and accountable model of digital fatwa governance that supports both the integrity of Islamic jurisprudence and the evolving needs of modern society.

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