

An Investigation into Shariah Governance Practices of Islamic Cooperatives in Thailand: A Case Study of Ibnu Affan Islamic Cooperative Limited

Aubaidillah Doloh

IIUM Institute of Islamic Banking and Finance

International Islamic University Malaysia, Malaysia

Received: Jul. 12, 2026 Accepted: Aug. 22, 2025 Online published: Oct. 8, 2026

doi:10.5296/jpag.v16i2.24082

URL: <https://doi.org/10.5296/jpag.v16i2.24082>

Abstract

This study investigates the Shariah governance practices of Islamic cooperatives in Thailand through a case study of Ibnu Affan Islamic Cooperative Limited. The research aims to explore the existing governance structure, assess the implementation of Shariah compliance mechanisms, and identify challenges faced in maintaining effective oversight. A qualitative research design was employed, utilizing a semi-structured interview with the only Shariah officer in the cooperative as the primary data source, complemented by document analysis and literature review. The data were analyzed thematically following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework. Findings reveal that the cooperative operates under a dual-tier Shariah governance structure, consisting of a Shariah Subcommittee responsible for internal supervision and a Shariah Experts Council that provides external advisory support. While this structure promotes accountability and adherence to Islamic principles, challenges remain, including limited Shariah literacy among officers, absence of standardized national governance guidelines, and resource constraints that hinder regular compliance audits. Despite these limitations, the cooperative demonstrates a strong ethical commitment to Shariah principles and community welfare. The study concludes that strengthening human capital, developing a unified national Shariah governance framework, and enhancing collaboration with educational institutions are essential for improving the credibility and sustainability of Islamic cooperatives in Thailand. The findings offer practical recommendations for policymakers and provide comparative insights for other Muslim-minority countries seeking to institutionalize Shariah governance effectively.

Keywords: Shariah governance, Islamic cooperative, Thailand, qualitative study, Ibnu Affan Islamic Cooperative

1. Introduction

Islamic finance has evolved from a niche system serving specific Muslim communities to a rapidly expanding component of the global financial structure. It is grounded in ethical principles derived from the Qur'an and Sunnah, emphasizing justice ('adl), trust (amanah), and the prohibition of riba (interest). Over the past two decades, Islamic financial institutions have proliferated in both Muslim-majority and minority countries, offering products that align with Shariah law while promoting social welfare and economic inclusion (Lahsasna, 2014; IFSB, 2009).

In Thailand, the growth of Islamic finance has taken a unique shape through Islamic cooperatives, which serve as community-based institutions providing Shariah-compliant financial services to Muslim communities, particularly in southern provinces such as Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat. These cooperatives embody the principles of ta'awun (mutual assistance) and maslahah (public benefit), offering accessible financing to individuals who wish to avoid interest-based systems (Rahman & Noor, 2019). The Islamic cooperative model provides an inclusive and grassroots financial mechanism that promotes socio-economic empowerment consistent with Islamic moral and ethical values.

However, the effectiveness of Islamic cooperatives depends largely on their ability to uphold Shariah governance, a system ensuring that all financial activities and transactions comply with Islamic principles. Shariah governance covers institutional arrangements, control mechanisms, and advisory processes designed to maintain compliance and credibility (IFSB, 2009). Strong governance structures not only safeguard stakeholders' trust but also differentiate Islamic cooperatives from conventional cooperatives.

In Thailand, the regulatory framework for Islamic cooperatives remains fragmented. Although cooperatives operate under the Cooperative Promotion Department (CPD), there is no specific national Shariah governance framework or supervisory body comparable to Malaysia's Bank Negara Malaysia (BNM) GP28 Policy Document (BNM, 2019). Consequently, each cooperative develops its own internal governance system, often with limited expertise, varying degrees of formality, and inconsistent oversight.

This study investigates Ibnu Affan Islamic Cooperative Limited, one of the most active Islamic cooperatives in southern Thailand and the highest number of membership and only Islamic cooperative that have a specific Shariah officer. The research examines how the cooperative structures, implements, and monitors its Shariah governance mechanisms, highlighting challenges and proposing recommendations for improvement. The case of Ibnu Affan Cooperative provides valuable insights into how Shariah governance functions in a Muslim-minority context where institutional support is still developing

1.1 Problem Statement

Despite the growing presence of Islamic cooperatives in Thailand, their Shariah governance systems remain underdeveloped and inconsistent. Unlike Malaysia, Shariah governance is regulated through national frameworks (GP28). Thailand lacks clear guidelines to ensure that cooperatives operate in full compliance with Islamic principles. As a result, practices vary

widely across institutions, and many cooperatives depend on the personal commitment and knowledge of individual Shariah officers rather than standardized institutional mechanisms (Ismail & Abdullah, 2020).

Moreover, many cooperative officers possess limited understanding of Shariah-compliant financial concepts. Although periodic training sessions are conducted, they are often insufficient to ensure that day-to-day transactions strictly adhere to Shariah requirements. This knowledge gap undermines the quality of implementation and contributes to potential non-compliance risks (Hassan, 2020).

Another critical challenge lies in the absence of an external supervisory body that provides guidance or oversight similar to Malaysia's Shariah Advisory Council. As a result, internal Shariah committees within Thai cooperatives face constraints in decision-making authority, expertise, and independence. This raises concerns about transparency, accountability, and consistency in Shariah rulings.

Given these issues, there is an instant need to investigate how Shariah governance is practiced in Thailand's Islamic cooperatives, particularly at Ibnu Affan Islamic Cooperative Limited, which has established a relatively advanced governance structure. This research seeks to fill the empirical gap by examining how Shariah governance functions in practice and how it can be improved through structural and educational interventions.

1.2 Research Objectives

1. To explore the Shariah governance structure of Ibnu Affan Islamic Cooperative Limited.
2. To examine the implementation process of Shariah compliance and monitoring.
3. To identify challenges and suggest improvements for better Shariah governance.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Concept and Definition of Shariah Governance

The concept of Shariah governance refers to a comprehensive framework that ensures financial institutions comply with Islamic law in all their operations. According to the Islamic Financial Services Board (IFSB, 2009), Shariah governance encompasses "a set of institutional and organizational arrangements through which Islamic financial institutions ensure effective oversight, responsibility, and accountability to uphold Shariah compliance." It involves not only the Shariah Supervisory Board but also management, internal audit, and compliance functions (AAOIFI, 2017).

The Accounting and Auditing Organization for Islamic Financial Institutions (AAOIFI) further elaborates that Shariah governance includes processes for issuing Shariah rulings (fatwas), reviewing and auditing compliance, and resolving conflicts between management and Shariah scholars (AAOIFI, 2017). In short, Shariah governance serves as the backbone of Islamic financial integrity, ensuring that institutions not only avoid *riba* (interest), *gharar* (uncertainty), and *maysir* (gambling), but also promote justice and ethical conduct in financial dealings.

2.2 Importance of Shariah Governance in Islamic Financial Institutions

Strong Shariah governance enhances institutional credibility, mitigates risks, and protects stakeholders' confidence. As Hassan (2020) points out, weak Shariah oversight can lead to reputational damage and financial instability, especially when non-compliance is detected. In the cooperative sector, where public trust and communal ties are central, maintaining Shariah credibility is even more critical.

Effective Shariah governance contributes to several outcomes:

1. **Transparency:** Clear governance structures ensure accountability and clarity in decision-making.
2. **Compliance:** Structured monitoring minimizes non-compliance incidents.
3. **Public Confidence:** A well-governed cooperative attracts more members and capital participation.
4. **Institutional Sustainability:** Ethical operations aligned with Islamic principles foster long-term stability.

As Lahsasna (2014) emphasizes, "Shariah governance is not only a regulatory necessity but an ethical imperative."

2.3 Shariah Governance Models: Comparative Perspectives

Malaysia's Shariah governance framework is often considered the regional benchmark. Bank Negara Malaysia's GP28 Policy Document (2019) provides a comprehensive structure delineating responsibilities between the board of directors, management, and Shariah committees. The framework also institutionalizes internal Shariah review and audit functions to ensure compliance at all levels. This structured model has been instrumental in maintaining Malaysia's global leadership in Islamic finance (BNM, 2019; Rahman & Noor, 2019).

In contrast, Indonesia employs a dual-layer governance model, where Islamic financial institutions are supervised by both the Financial Services Authority (OJK) and the National Shariah Council (DSN-MUI). This dual authority ensures that all Shariah decisions are consistent across institutions (Yusof, 2021).

In Thailand, however, Islamic cooperatives operate independently under the Cooperative Promotion Department without centralized Shariah supervision. As a result, governance practices vary among cooperatives, and Shariah oversight often depends on individual initiative rather than institutionalized mechanisms (Ismail & Abdullah, 2020).

2.4 Theoretical Foundation of Shariah Governance

Shariah governance is grounded in key Islamic ethical and administrative principles:

- **Amanah (Trust):** Institutions are entrusted with public funds and must manage them responsibly.
- **Shura (Consultation):** Decision-making must involve consultation among knowledgeable

parties.

- Maslahah (Public Interest): Institutional actions should aim for the welfare of the community.
- Adl (Justice): Fairness and equity must guide all transactions and governance processes.

These principles align closely with modern corporate governance concepts such as accountability, transparency, and responsibility. However, unlike secular models, Shariah governance integrates the spiritual dimension, viewing compliance as both a legal and moral duty (Lahsasna, 2014).

2.5 Shariah Governance in Islamic Cooperatives

Islamic cooperatives differ from banks in that they are member-owned, community-driven, and guided by the principle of mutual assistance (ta'awun). They function as micro-financial institutions catering to individuals excluded from the formal banking sector. Shariah governance in cooperatives, therefore, must be flexible yet robust enough to ensure compliance without stifling operations.

Research on Shariah governance in cooperatives is limited, particularly in Southeast Asia. Ismail and Abdullah (2020) identify that many Islamic cooperatives lack trained Shariah advisors, systematic audits, and proper documentation. Similarly, Rahman and Noor (2019) found that weak governance structures hinder financial inclusion efforts in southern Thailand.

In Malaysia, Islamic cooperatives benefit from national Shariah guidelines and access to trained Shariah auditors. This institutional support significantly improves compliance monitoring and product innovation. However, in Thailand, cooperatives such as Ibnu Affan must rely on internal committees and external experts without formal regulatory backing, which constrains their capacity for consistent governance.

2.6 Research Gap

Despite the growing academic attention to Islamic finance, empirical studies focusing on Islamic cooperatives in Thailand remain scarce. Existing research largely addresses Islamic banking, while cooperatives are underexplored although vital to Muslim communities (Rafay, 2022). The lack of documented studies on their governance systems, compliance processes, and practical challenges creates a significant research gap.

This study, therefore, contributes to the literature by offering an in-depth case study of Ibnu Affan Islamic Cooperative Limited, examining its Shariah governance practices through qualitative analysis. The study provides both theoretical and practical insights into how Islamic cooperatives can enhance compliance, build credibility, and adapt best practices from successful models such as Malaysia.

3. Method

This study adopts a qualitative research design with a single case study approach to explore Shariah governance practices within Ibnu Affan Islamic Cooperative Limited. The case study

method allows the researcher to conduct an in-depth examination of contemporary phenomena in their real-life context, especially when the boundaries between the phenomenon and its context are not clearly defined (Yin, 2018). The focus on one cooperative facilitates a nuanced understanding of governance practices, internal structures, and challenges specific to the Thai Islamic cooperative sector.

The qualitative method was selected because Shariah governance involves human behavior, interpretation of Islamic law, and institutional interactions which require deep, contextual analysis rather than statistical generalization (Creswell, 2014).

3.1 Research Design

The research employs an exploratory qualitative case study design, as the aim is to understand “how” and “why” Shariah governance operates within the cooperative. The design allows for flexibility, enabling the researcher to adapt and probe further into emerging themes during data collection. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), qualitative case studies are especially useful for examining complex systems like governance frameworks, which involve multiple stakeholders and layered decision-making processes.

The case of Ibnu Affan Islamic Cooperative Limited was chosen using purposive sampling, as it represents one of the most active and organized Islamic cooperatives in southern Thailand, with a structured Shariah committee and engagement with external Shariah experts. The cooperative also demonstrates efforts to balance compliance with operational practicality, making it a rich case for analysis.

3.2 Data Collection Methods

3.2.1 Primary Data

The primary data were collected through an in-depth semi-structured interview with a Shariah officer of the cooperative. Semi-structured interviews are preferred for this type of study because they allow the participant to express experiences freely while ensuring that all key topics are covered (Bryman, 2016). The interview questions revolved around the following areas:

1. The structure of Shariah governance within the cooperative.
2. Roles and responsibilities of Shariah officers and committees.
3. Interaction between the cooperative and external Shariah advisory bodies.
4. Challenges and limitations in implementing Shariah compliance.
5. Recommendations for improvement and policy development.

The interview lasted approximately half an hour and was conducted on 1st June 2025. It was recorded with the participant's consent and later transcribed verbatim to maintain accuracy in original language and then was translated into English. The transcription forms the core dataset of this research.

3.2.2 Secondary Data

Secondary data were collected from several sources, including cooperative documents, official reports, and existing literature on Shariah governance and Islamic cooperatives in Southeast Asia. The integration of secondary data enhanced the validity of findings through data triangulation, allowing cross-verification of information from different sources (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

3.3 Research Context

Ibnu Affan Islamic Cooperative Limited operates as a member-owned financial institution providing savings, financing, and welfare services to Muslim communities. It was established to offer an alternative to conventional credit systems, ensuring that financial activities adhere to Shariah law. The cooperative's Shariah governance structure consists of a Shariah Subcommittee and an external Shariah Experts Council, which oversee product approvals, compliance checks, and periodic reviews.

The cooperative's environment represents a Muslim-minority context, where Shariah governance practices evolve without formal national frameworks. This setting provides an opportunity to explore how local Islamic institutions operationalize Shariah compliance in the absence of government-mandated guidelines.

3.4 Data Analysis Process

The interview data were analyzed using thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework:

1. Familiarization: The researcher read the transcript multiple times to immerse himself in the data.
2. Coding: Meaningful units were identified and coded manually
3. Theme Development: Related codes were grouped into broader themes reflecting patterns in governance practice, implementation, and challenges.
4. Theme Review: Themes were refined to ensure internal consistency and clear distinction.
5. Defining and Naming Themes: Each theme was clearly defined with supporting quotes from the interview.
6. Reporting: The final narrative was developed by integrating themes with relevant literature and theoretical frameworks.

Thematic analysis was chosen due to its flexibility and compatibility with Islamic studies research, allowing both inductive and deductive interpretation. The inductive element allowed the themes to emerge naturally from the data, while the deductive approach ensured alignment with the Shariah governance theoretical framework (IFSB, 2009; BNM, 2019).

3.5 Validity and Trustworthiness

Ethical integrity is a cornerstone of Islamic and academic research. The participant was

informed of the study's objectives, and consent was obtained before conducting the interview. Confidentiality was guaranteed by anonymizing the cooperative and the participant's personal details in the report.

From an Islamic ethics perspective, this research adhered to the principle of Amanah (trustworthiness) ensuring that all information is handled responsibly and used solely for scholarly purposes (Lahsasna, 2014).

3.6 Analytical Framework

The analytical framework of this study is grounded in the Shariah Governance Framework outlined by the Islamic Financial Services Board (2009) and Bank Negara Malaysia (2019). These frameworks identify key components necessary for effective Shariah governance:

- 1.Accountability: All levels of management are accountable for ensuring Shariah compliance.
- 2.Independence: Shariah committees must exercise decisions free from managerial influence.
- 3.Competency: Members of Shariah bodies must possess adequate knowledge of both Shariah and finance.
- 4.Confidentiality: Sensitive information must be handled with professional integrity.
- 5.Consistency: Shariah rulings should be applied uniformly across all operations.

Using this framework, the data were analyzed to identify how Ibnu Affan Cooperative aligns or diverges from these principles. The framework also guided the thematic categorization in the next section, where findings are discussed in depth.

4. Results

The thematic analysis of the interview data with the sole Shariah officer of Ibnu Affan Islamic Cooperative Limited produced three major themes:

1. Governance Structure and Institutional Roles
2. Implementation of Shariah Compliance
3. Challenges and Improvement Strategies

These findings are discussed below in light of relevant literature and Shariah governance frameworks (IFSB, 2009; BNM, 2019).

4.1 Governance Structure and Institutional Roles

The findings reveal that Ibnu Affan Islamic Cooperative Limited operates under a two-tier Shariah governance structure, comprising the Shariah Subcommittee and an external Shariah Experts Council. Initially, the cooperative employed one Shariah officer and two Shariah committee members; however, due to organizational restructuring, only one Shariah officer currently remains, directly reporting to the general manager.

This dual structure aligns conceptually with the Shariah governance principles proposed by

the IFSB (2009), which emphasize the need for both internal and external layers of oversight. The Shariah Subcommittee handles daily operations, product reviews, and compliance monitoring, while the Shariah Experts Council, composed of three external scholars, provides advisory and fatwa validation on complex issues.

However, unlike Malaysia's Shariah Governance Policy Document (GP28), which mandates a clear separation between management and Shariah supervision (BNM, 2019), the cooperative's internal Shariah function lacks full independence. The Shariah committee member's accountability to the general manager may limit the autonomy required for impartial decision-making.

This finding echoes Lahsasna (2014), who argued that independence is a critical factor for ensuring credible Shariah decisions. Nonetheless, the existence of the external Shariah Experts Council offers a degree of oversight that mitigates potential conflicts of interest.

The cooperative's approach also reflects a context-driven adaptation of governance, where resource limitations necessitate flexibility. As Yusof (2021) observed in Muslim-minority countries, Shariah institutions often develop "functional hybrids", governance systems that combine formal structure with community-based consultation (shura).

4.2 Implementation of Shariah Compliance

The study finds that the Shariah committee actively conducts regular product reviews and branch inspections to ensure compliance. The committee alternates its monitoring activities monthly, checking financing practices for one month and financial transactions the next. In months where on-site visits are not feasible, compliance is monitored via telephone discussions with branch officers and members.

Such practices demonstrate commitment to operational-level Shariah compliance. According to the interviewee, the Shariah committee also ensures that newly introduced products or contracts receive pre-approval from the Shariah Experts Council before implementation. This ensures that the cooperative's financial activities remain consistent with Islamic law.

However, the study identifies significant gaps in documentation and standardization. There is no systematic Shariah audit or periodic internal review report, and compliance activities are largely dependent on the initiative of individual officers. This observation supports the findings of Ismail and Abdullah (2020), who noted that many Islamic cooperatives in Southeast Asia lack structured Shariah auditing mechanisms due to limited resources and expertise.

Furthermore, while the cooperative's leadership is deeply committed to Shariah principles, there is no evidence of a formal Shariah compliance manual or a written governance charter. In comparison, Malaysia's GP28 framework mandates both a Shariah manual and a documented internal review process, providing operational clarity and accountability (BNM, 2019).

In this context, Ibnu Affan Cooperative exhibits a functional but informal governance practice, one that relies heavily on personal commitment rather than institutionalized systems.

While effective to an extent, this model presents sustainability risks as it depends on individual expertise rather than structured processes.

4.3 Challenges in Shariah Governance

4.3.1 Limited Shariah Literacy among Officers

The most prominent challenge identified is the limited Shariah awareness among cooperative officers. According to the participant, “officers’ awareness of Shariah practices is low, even though clients are often more knowledgeable.” Despite occasional training sessions, many staff members are unfamiliar with Islamic finance concepts such as murabahah, mudarabah, and ijarah.

This finding corroborates research by Hassan (2020) and Rahman and Noor (2019), who argue that human capital is the weakest link in many Islamic cooperatives. Without a strong understanding of Shariah principles, employees cannot effectively implement compliance policies or explain Islamic financial concepts to clients.

4.3.2 Resource Constraints

The cooperative’s limited financial and human resources restrict the frequency of Shariah audits and council meetings. Meetings are held only when issues arise rather than at fixed intervals. This reactive approach contrasts with the proactive monitoring model prescribed in Malaysia and Indonesia, where regular quarterly meetings are mandatory (BNM, 2019; Yusof, 2021).

4.3.3 Lack of Standardized National Framework

A broader institutional challenge is Thailand’s absence of a national Shariah governance framework. Cooperatives operate independently, and there is no centralized Shariah Advisory Council equivalent to Malaysia’s. This lack of coordination leads to inconsistencies in rulings and practices among cooperatives across provinces.

Ismail and Abdullah (2020) suggest that a national regulatory framework would not only standardize governance practices but also enhance credibility and investor confidence. The participant in this study echoed this sentiment, expressing strong support for adopting Malaysia’s GP28 framework, adapted to Thailand’s legal and cultural context.

4.3.4 Limited Collaboration with Academic and Religious Institutions

Another emerging issue is the limited collaboration between cooperatives and Islamic educational institutions. While universities such as Prince of Songkla University and Fatoni University offer Islamic finance programs, there are few structured partnerships for staff training or Shariah research development. Establishing such collaborations could provide technical support and professional certification for Shariah officers, bridging the knowledge gap between theory and practice

4.4 Improvement Strategies and Policy Adaptation

The participant emphasized that learning from Malaysia’s experience could significantly

accelerate Thailand's progress in Islamic finance. As he stated, "We do not need to start from zero. We can adopt and adapt frameworks from Malaysia according to our context."

Adapting Malaysia's GP28 framework would help Thailand develop a more coherent and standardized Shariah governance system. Key recommendations include:

1. Establishing a National Shariah Advisory Council under the Central Islamic Council of Thailand to provide authoritative rulings and policy guidance.
2. Creating a Shariah Governance Guideline for cooperatives, outlining duties, structure, and accountability similar to BNM (2019).
3. Strengthening Human Capital Development through continuous professional training programs and certifications in Islamic finance.
4. Introducing Internal Shariah Audit Mechanisms at the cooperative level to ensure ongoing compliance.
5. Encouraging Academic Partnerships between cooperatives and universities to support research, innovation, and training in Shariah governance.

These recommendations are consistent with findings from Rafay (2022), who argued that adopting regional best practices while respecting local context is the most effective way to institutionalize Shariah governance in emerging Islamic finance markets.

5. Conclusion

This study examined the Shariah governance practices of Ibnu Affan Islamic Cooperative Limited, highlighting both its strengths and areas for improvement. The cooperative maintains Shariah compliance through a two-tier governance structure, involving internal and external Shariah bodies, regular monitoring, and consultation with scholars. However, governance remains constrained by the absence of standardized policies, limited formal documentation and audit procedures, inadequate Shariah training, and resource limitations. The findings also reveal that the lack of a national Shariah governance framework in Thailand hinders consistency across Islamic cooperatives. The study contributes to the literature by providing empirical evidence from a Muslim-minority context, demonstrating that institutional commitment and scholarly support can sustain effective governance. It recommends developing national Shariah governance guidelines, establishing a centralized Shariah Advisory Council, formalizing internal audit systems, strengthening staff training, and expanding collaboration with universities. Adopting Malaysia's GP28 framework would enhance governance consistency, transparency, credibility, and long-term sustainability in Thailand's Islamic cooperative sector.

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