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Beyond Legal Formalism: an Integrative Paradigm of Legal Decision-Making for Substantive Justice

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Abstract: Legal decision-making has traditionally rested on legal formalism, which secures legal certainty, consistency, and procedural correctness. However, decisions that are formally valid may still fail to respond to the substantive dimensions of justice, particularly in disputes involving complex social realities, competing rights, and ambiguous or incomplete legislation. Existing scholarship tends to frame formalism and substantive justice as opposing alternatives. This article therefore asks how legal decision-making can reconcile legal certainty with substantive justice without undermining the authority of law. It applies a doctrinal and conceptual legal research method, combined with comparative and normative approaches, and draws on recent peer-reviewed scholarship on judicial reasoning, discretion, and proportionality. The analysis shows that adjudication is not the mechanical application of predetermined rules but an integrative process in which legal norms, factual context, constitutional principles, anticipated consequences, and reasoned justification interact. The article proposes an Integrative Paradigm of Legal Decision-Making with five dimensions, in which legal certainty remains the foundational requirement and substantive justice serves as the normative orientation of interpretation. The novelty lies in replacing the dichotomy between formalism and judicial subjectivity with a structured relationship between rules, reasoning, and justice, offering a conceptual model for courts facing complex disputes.

Keywords: Legal Formalism, Legal Decision-Making, Substantive Justice, Judicial Reasoning, Legal Certainty

Abstrak: *Pengambilan keputusan hukum secara tradisional bertumpu pada formalisme hukum yang menjamin kepastian hukum, konsistensi, dan ketepatan prosedur. Namun, putusan yang sah secara formal belum tentu responsif terhadap dimensi substantif keadilan, terutama dalam sengketa yang melibatkan realitas sosial yang kompleks, benturan hak, serta peraturan yang ambigu atau tidak lengkap. Kajian yang ada cenderung menempatkan formalisme dan keadilan substantif sebagai pilihan yang saling bertentangan. Artikel ini menelaah bagaimana pengambilan keputusan hukum dapat mendamaikan kepastian hukum dengan keadilan*

substantif tanpa melemahkan otoritas hukum. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode penelitian hukum doktrinal dan konseptual dengan pendekatan komparatif dan normatif, serta memanfaatkan literatur ilmiah mutakhir yang telah ditelaah sejawat mengenai penalaran yudisial, diskresi, proporsionalitas, dan keadilan prosedural. Hasil analisis menunjukkan bahwa peradilan bukan penerapan mekanis atas aturan yang telah ditetapkan, melainkan proses integratif yang mempertemukan norma hukum, konteks faktual, prinsip konstitusional, pertimbangan akibat, dan justifikasi yang beralasan. Artikel ini mengusulkan Paradigma Integratif Pengambilan Keputusan Hukum dengan lima dimensi, yang menempatkan kepastian hukum sebagai syarat dasar dan keadilan substantif sebagai orientasi normatif penafsiran. Kebaruannya terletak pada penggantian dikotomi antara formalisme dan subjektivitas yudisial dengan hubungan terstruktur antara aturan, penalaran, dan keadilan, sehingga menawarkan model konseptual bagi pengadilan dalam menghadapi sengketa yang semakin kompleks.

Kata Kunci: *Formalisme Hukum, Pengambilan Keputusan Hukum, Keadilan Substantif, Penalaran Yudisial, Kepastian Hukum*

INTRODUCTION

The legitimacy of law depends not only on the existence of formally valid rules but also on the capacity of legal institutions to produce decisions that are rationally justified, procedurally fair, socially responsive, and substantively just. In contemporary legal systems, however, judicial decision-making continues to confront a fundamental tension between adherence to formal legal rules and the pursuit of justice in concrete cases. Legal formalism provides an important foundation for predictability, consistency, and institutional stability because judges are expected to decide disputes within the boundaries established by legislation and recognized legal procedures. Nevertheless, when formal legality becomes the dominant or exclusive basis of adjudication, the application of law may become detached from the social circumstances, interests, vulnerabilities, and substantive consequences involved in a particular dispute (Surya, 2025).

This tension is not merely theoretical. Empirical research on Indonesian courts shows that formalistic approaches may encourage judges to resolve disputes on procedural grounds rather than on their substantive merits. Peterson et al. (2025), examining 18 Indonesian court judgments on land conflicts, found that courts frequently prioritized strict procedural correctness, so that substantive questions of dispossession and competing claims were insufficiently addressed.

The challenge grows when the complexity of contemporary disputes exceeds the capacity of a purely rule-centred approach. Modern adjudication increasingly involves human rights, vulnerable groups, environmental protection, technological change, and competing public interests, so the decision-maker must interpret the meaning, purpose, context, and consequences of a provision rather than merely identify it. Koref et al. (2026) argue that the systematic analysis of judicial arguments offers an important means of understanding judicial philosophy and the degree to which courts employ formalistic modes of reasoning.

Legal decision-making should therefore not be understood as a mechanical process in which a predetermined rule is applied to predetermined facts. Do et al. (2026) show that changes in judicial reasoning can contribute to transformations in the institutional authority of courts, which indicates that legal reasoning is connected not only with individual cases but also with broader institutional development. At the same time, procedural legality should not be dismissed as an obstacle to justice. Formal requirements protect equality before the law and keep judicial power constrained by legal norms. Robinson and Evans (2026), using survey experiments, found strong evidence that agreement with judicial outcomes affects perceptions

of fairness and legitimacy, while the effect of procedural fairness in judicial opinions was comparatively weaker. These findings caution against an overly simple opposition between formalism and justice: the central issue is how procedural and formal requirements can be integrated with substantive considerations without undermining the rule of law.

The Indonesian context is an especially important setting for examining this problem. Surya (2025, pp. 194–196), analyzing Indonesian Supreme Court jurisprudence on *obscuur libel*, demonstrates that formal requirements serve legitimate purposes in maintaining clarity and consistency in litigation, but that excessive reliance on them may restrict access to substantive judicial remedies. Similarly, Juwan et al. (2025) argue that an excessive emphasis on procedural and evidentiary requirements in cases of cyber sexual harassment may fail to capture the vulnerability and lived experiences of victims, which raises the question of whether formally correct legal processes necessarily produce substantively just outcomes. Alfons et al. (2025) examine how substantive justice can be created in state administrative courts from theoretical, philosophical, and human rights perspectives, and Syamsuddin et al. (2026) show that the debate over repeated criminal case review in Indonesia's new Criminal Procedure Code reflects a deeper conflict between substantive justice and procedural finality. Harun and Saribi (2025) add that excessive proceduralism and formalistic interpretations of judicial professionalism tend to marginalize substantive justice. Safik and Billah (2025) likewise find that criminal law enforcement in Indonesia tends to prioritize procedural legality and punishment while insufficiently addressing the protection of vulnerable groups.

These studies reveal a conceptual limitation in approaches that treat formal legality and substantive justice as mutually exclusive alternatives. A purely formalistic paradigm risks reducing adjudication to rule application, while an excessively discretionary substantive approach may create uncertainty, inconsistency, and the danger of judicial arbitrariness. The more fundamental question is how these dimensions can be integrated into a coherent paradigm of legal decision-making.

This article therefore proposes an integrative paradigm of legal decision-making as an analytical framework for moving beyond rigid legal formalism without abandoning legality. The paradigm conceptualizes judicial decision-making as a process involving five interconnected dimensions: normative fidelity, contextual interpretation, principled and constitutional reasoning, consequence evaluation, and reasoned justification oriented toward substantive justice. Recent scholarship on legal formalism in Indonesia emphasizes the need to balance procedural rigor with access to justice rather than simply eliminating formal requirements (Surya, 2025, pp. 201–203), and comparative socio-legal research shows that judicial reasoning is shaped by institutional, social, and contextual factors, so that it cannot be understood solely through the textual content of legal rules (Kubal & Oliinyk, 2026). Recent theoretical proposals, such as the Integrative-Tetradic Realism Theory, which combines legal certainty, substantive justice, social utility, and public participation (Santoso, 2025), and Participatory Rational Justice, which seeks outcomes extending beyond formal legality in criminal justice reform (Lesmana et al., 2026), also pursue integration, but they largely address legal theory and criminal justice reform rather than the structure of judicial reasoning itself. The novelty of this study lies in shifting the analytical focus from the conventional opposition between legal formalism and substantive justice toward an integrative model of legal decision-making. Rather than asking whether judges should follow rules or pursue justice, this study asks how legal rules, principles, facts, social context, constitutional values, and consequences can be systematically incorporated into judicial reasoning. Substantive justice is treated not as a justification for disregarding law but as an evaluative dimension that operates within legally disciplined adjudication.

Accordingly, this study addresses three research questions. First, what are the conceptual and practical limitations of legal formalism in contemporary judicial decision-

making? Second, how can normative, contextual, ethical, and consequential dimensions be integrated into a coherent model of legal reasoning? Third, to what extent can an integrative paradigm strengthen the capacity of legal decision-making to reconcile legal certainty, institutional legitimacy, and substantive justice?

METHODS

This study employs a doctrinal and conceptual legal research methodology to examine the limitations of legal formalism and to develop an integrative paradigm of legal decision-making oriented toward substantive justice (Koref et al., 2026). The doctrinal approach analyzes legal norms, principles, judicial reasoning, and jurisprudential concepts concerning the relationship between formal legality and substantive justice.

The research combines three complementary approaches. The conceptual approach clarifies the relationships among legal formalism, judicial reasoning, judicial discretion, legal certainty, contextual interpretation, and substantive justice. It is needed because courts may employ syllogistic, contextual, functional, and intentional reasoning, particularly when statutory rules do not adequately resolve complex disputes (Do et al., 2026). The comparative approach examines developments in judicial reasoning across legal contexts. It does not rank one legal system above another but identifies recurring patterns that can inform an integrative model, since judges may combine formal rules with contextual and extra-legal considerations in socially and economically significant disputes (Do et al., 2026, p. 538). The normative and jurisprudential approach evaluates whether decision-making can remain faithful to valid legal norms while incorporating constitutional principles, context, human dignity, equality, and foreseeable consequences, so that discretion operates within a legally structured process of justification rather than replacing legal rules.

The primary legal materials consist of legislation, constitutional provisions, and selected judicial decisions relevant to formalistic and substantive approaches to adjudication. The secondary materials are peer-reviewed academic works on legal formalism, judicial reasoning, discretion, reason-giving, judicial authority, procedural fairness, and substantive justice, with particular attention to scholarship published in Scopus-indexed Q1 journals during 2025–2026 so that the framework reflects current international debates (Koref et al., 2026, pp. 3–5). The literature was selected purposively according to four criteria: direct relevance to legal formalism or judicial decision-making; contribution to the understanding of substantive justice, judicial discretion, or judicial legitimacy; publication in reputable peer-reviewed journals; and relevance to contemporary developments in legal reasoning.

The analysis proceeds in four stages. The first identifies the principal characteristics of legal formalism, namely its emphasis on textual rules, doctrinal consistency, predictability, and judicial constraint. The second examines the limitations of formalistic reasoning when courts encounter ambiguous norms, competing rights, vulnerable parties, or disputes with significant social consequences. The third synthesizes contextual, purposive, principled, and consequence-oriented reasoning to determine how they may supplement formal analysis, an approach supported by research showing that courts use principles-based reasoning to construct legal principles where existing rules are incomplete or contested (Do et al., 2026, pp. 540–542). The fourth integrates these dimensions into a proposed Integrative Paradigm of Legal Decision-Making, developed through normative synthesis rather than statistical generalization. The resulting analytical sequence is presented in Figure 1. Argumentative analysis is used to distinguish decisions that merely invoke formal rules from decisions that connect norms with facts, principles, context, and consequences, consistent with scholarship that treats judicial reasoning as an object of systematic analysis (Koref et al., 2026, pp. 5–7).

The paradigm is evaluated according to four normative criteria: legal validity, meaning that the decision is grounded in recognized legal sources; rational justification, meaning that

the reasoning from premises to conclusion is coherent and defensible; contextual responsiveness, meaning that relevant factual, social, and institutional circumstances are adequately considered; and substantive justice, meaning that the interpretation is compatible with equality, dignity, rights protection, and fairness. The validity of the conceptual findings is strengthened through source triangulation and argumentative coherence, because claims are assessed through several strands of scholarship rather than a single theoretical perspective, and the paradigm is tested conceptually against the central tension in the literature between legal certainty and judicial restraint on the one hand and interpretive flexibility on the other (Do et al., 2026, pp. 542–545).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section addresses the three research questions in sequence. The first subsection examines the limits of legal formalism (first question); the second to fifth subsections develop multi-dimensional reasoning, the Integrative Paradigm, and the boundaries of discretion and substantive justice (second question); and the last draws these strands into an integrative model of legitimate decision-making (third question).

The Limits of Legal Formalism in Contemporary Adjudication

Legal formalism has historically played an important role in maintaining predictability, consistency, and institutional constraint in adjudication. Its central premise is that judicial decisions should be grounded primarily in recognized legal sources and that judges should apply existing legal rules rather than substitute their personal preferences for the law. The difficulty arises when formal legality is transformed from a necessary constraint into an exclusive method of adjudication. In complex disputes, the meaning and application of legal rules cannot always be determined through textual analysis alone because rules operate within factual, institutional, social, and normative contexts (Koref et al., 2026, pp. 2–3). Historical research on Holmes shows that realists countered formalist trends in the common law, which were criticized as imposing artificially invented legal ideals on a society regardless of its real-life experience (Lesiv, 2024).

Recent research shows that judicial formalism can be identified through particular patterns of legal argument. Koref et al. (2026) explain that formalistic reasoning is associated with strong reliance on legal texts and locally applicable rules and with limited reliance on broader political, social, or economic considerations. Their empirical analysis demonstrates that formalism is not merely an abstract jurisprudential concept but can be examined systematically through the argumentative structure of judicial decisions.

The problem, therefore, is not that legal rules are inherently inadequate. Rather, the problem emerges when the relationship between rules and reasons is reduced to mechanical application. A legal decision may satisfy the formal requirements of validity while still raising questions about its substantive justification. The practical limitation is visible in Indonesian courts: when procedural correctness displaces engagement with the merits, questions of dispossession and competing claims in land conflicts remain insufficiently addressed (Peterson et al., 2025), and rigid formal requirements may restrict access to substantive remedies (Surya, 2025). The limits of formalism are also visible beyond the courtroom: in the digital economy, reactive and positivist legal principles have proved inadequate for safeguarding fairness (Prihartanto et al., 2025), and algorithmic logic risks shifting constitutional interpretation toward rigid formalism anchored in historical data, at the expense of moral, social, and contextual dimensions (Asyraf & Ramadani, 2026).

The contemporary challenge is consequently to preserve the constraining function of legal rules without assuming that rules alone exhaust the reasoning required for legitimate adjudication. The objective should not be to replace formalism with unrestricted judicial discretion but to establish a more sophisticated relationship between legal validity and

substantive justification (Koref et al., 2026, pp. 5–8). Critical work on law's autonomy points in the same direction: it unsettles formal specifications of juridical sources and the isolation of legal thought, yet cautions that law retains a distinctive discursive and methodological character as an experience of normative validity (Duarte, 2022). Moving beyond formalism therefore does not require abandoning what is specific to law.

From Rule Application to Multi-Dimensional Judicial Reasoning

Judicial decision-making cannot adequately be represented as a simple sequence in which a judge identifies a rule, applies it to established facts, and reaches a predetermined conclusion. Contemporary research demonstrates that judicial reasoning may involve several different forms of argument, including textual, contextual, functional, causal, and intentional reasoning (Do et al., 2026, pp. 545–546). The empirical study of Vietnamese judicial decisions by Do et al. (2026) provides particularly relevant evidence. Examining 186 appellate cases decided between 2018 and 2024, the authors distinguish between syllogistic reasoning and principles-based reasoning, including contextual, functional, causal, and intentionality reasoning, and find that judges increasingly use legal reasoning to transform social and extralegal considerations into legally recognizable principles (Do et al., 2026, pp. 545–546). The significance of this finding for the present study is that judicial reasoning operates at multiple levels: judges do not merely determine what a rule says, but also determine which norms are relevant, how those norms should be interpreted, and how they should be connected to the circumstances of the dispute.

Contextual considerations must be translated into legally intelligible reasons. In this respect, legal reasoning functions as a mediating mechanism between the formal legal system and the complexity of social reality, and its legitimacy depends on whether additional considerations are connected to recognized legal principles and presented through transparent and rational justification (Do et al., 2026, pp. 554, 557–558). The distinction between formal rule application and reasoned interpretation therefore becomes central to the present paradigm. Formal rule application asks primarily what legal rule governs the dispute. An integrative approach asks a broader set of questions: what legal norm governs the dispute; what the norm means in this factual context; what legal principles inform its interpretation; what competing rights or interests are involved; what consequences follow from each plausible interpretation; and which interpretation can be publicly justified within the legal system.

The Integrative Paradigm of Legal Decision-Making

The central contribution of this study is the formulation of an Integrative Paradigm of Legal Decision-Making. The paradigm is designed to overcome the binary opposition between legal formalism and substantive justice by treating them as interconnected dimensions of adjudication rather than mutually exclusive alternatives. It consists of five interconnected dimensions, which are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Dimensions of the Integrative Paradigm of Legal Decision-Making

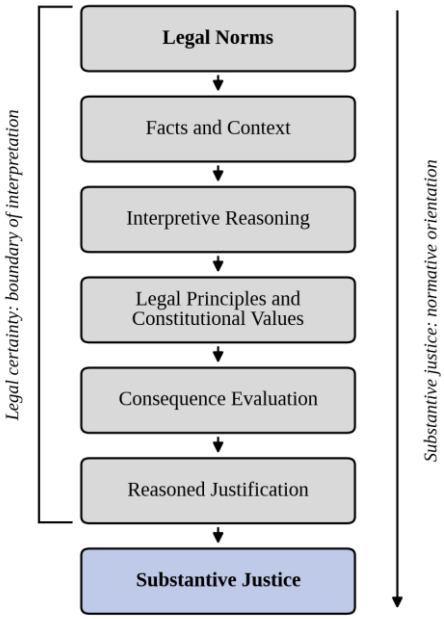
Dimension	Core requirement	Function in adjudication
1. Normative fidelity	Begin with valid legal sources: legislation, constitutional provisions, relevant precedents, and established legal principles	Protects legality and legal certainty
2. Contextual interpretation	Consider the factual, social, and institutional circumstances in which the rule operates	Prevents mechanical application of rules
3. Principled and constitutional reasoning	Identify principles such as equality, dignity, proportionality, legitimate expectations, due process, and fundamental rights	Connects rules with constitutional and legal values

4. Consequence evaluation	Consider the foreseeable legal and social consequences of competing interpretations	Directs attention to practical effects while remaining tied to legal purposes
5. Reasoned justification	Explain why a rule, interpreted in a particular way, supports the conclusion reached	Makes the decision publicly defensible and limits arbitrary discretion

Source: Authors' conceptual analysis (2026)

The first dimension, normative fidelity, requires the judge to begin with valid legal sources, which preserves legal certainty and prevents the paradigm from becoming an invitation to decide cases according to personal morality. The second dimension, contextual interpretation, recognizes that a legal rule does not operate in an abstract vacuum: its application depends on the factual, institutional, and social context of the dispute, so the decision-maker must determine whether the conventional application of a rule adequately responds to the circumstances before the court.

The third dimension is principled and constitutional reasoning. Where rules are ambiguous, incomplete, or potentially in conflict with other legal interests, judges must identify the principles that structure the legal system, which may include equality, dignity, proportionality, legitimate expectations, due process, and fundamental rights. The importance of this dimension is illustrated by contemporary human-rights adjudication, where proportionality analysis provides a structured means of evaluating limitations on rights while allowing courts to account for competing interests and contextual circumstances (Fiala-Butora et al., 2025, pp. 18–20). The fourth dimension is consequence evaluation. Judicial reasoning should consider the foreseeable legal and social consequences of competing interpretations, particularly where they involve fundamental rights or serious inequalities. This does not mean that judges may simply choose the outcome they personally consider desirable; consequences constitute an additional justificatory consideration that must remain connected to legal purposes and principles. Indonesian scholarship on rational justice similarly argues that moralistic reasoning detached from empirical evaluation can produce overcriminalization and declining public trust, and that incorporating evidence-based evaluation into legal decision-making can serve, rather than undermine, substantive justice values (Lesmana et al., 2025). The fifth dimension is reasoned justification. A judicial decision becomes legitimate not merely because a legal rule has been cited, but because the reasoning demonstrates why that rule, interpreted in a particular way, provides an adequate basis for the conclusion reached. Research on law, justice, and reason-giving emphasizes the importance of the relationship between judicial reasoning and the justification of legal decisions (Katz & Zamir, 2025, pp. 243–245). The resulting paradigm, presented in Figure 1, differs from a purely formalistic approach because the legal norm is not treated as the end of the reasoning process. At the same time, it differs from unconstrained judicial discretion because the process begins with legal norms and requires every subsequent step to be justified through legally recognizable reasons.



Source: Authors' conceptual analysis (2026)

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of the Integrative Paradigm of Legal Decision-Making

One of the principal objections to approaches that emphasize substantive justice is that they may weaken legal certainty. If judges are permitted to consider social context, consequences, morality, or competing interests, the argument goes, judicial decisions may become unpredictable. The proposed paradigm therefore does not treat legal certainty and substantive justice as opposing objectives. Instead, it conceptualizes them as complementary requirements of legitimate adjudication. Legal certainty establishes the boundaries within which judicial interpretation occurs, while substantive justice provides an orientation for determining how legally permissible interpretations should respond to rights, interests, and circumstances. The Indonesian debate over repeated case review illustrates the point: the reform seeks to harmonize human rights protection with the principle of finality rather than sacrifice either (Syamsuddin et al., 2026), and legal realism, although it holds that predictability is limited by judicial discretion and extra-legal factors, does not endorse unbridled discretion but calls for transparency and accountability in how decisions are made (Angelosanto, 2023, pp. 8–9). Research on legal hermeneutics in the Indonesian setting likewise argues that legal certainty does not lie in blind adherence to historical text but in a disciplined, bounded flexibility anchored to constitutional values (Dewi, 2026).

This distinction is particularly important in proportionality analysis. Contemporary human-rights jurisprudence demonstrates that proportionality can provide a structured framework through which courts assess legality, legitimate aims, necessity, and the proportionality of interference with protected rights. At the same time, proportionality involves an evaluative dimension because courts must consider competing interests and the specific circumstances of the case (Fiala-Butora et al., 2025, pp. 18–20). Thus, the appropriate alternative to rigid formalism is not judicial arbitrariness but structured judicial discretion. Structured discretion requires the judge to explain why a particular interpretation is legally available, why competing interpretations are rejected, which principles are relevant, and why the resulting outcome is justified in light of the circumstances of the case.

Judicial Reasoning, Discretion, and the Boundaries of Authority

The expansion of judicial reasoning inevitably raises a second question: how far may judges legitimately go in interpreting and developing law? Do et al. (2026) demonstrate this

tension in their study of Vietnamese courts. Their findings suggest that principles-based reasoning can enable judges to reinterpret statutory provisions and develop legal principles in areas where existing law is incomplete, while the development of such reasoning can also expand judicial authority over socially and economically significant disputes (Do et al., 2026, pp. 554, 558). This finding provides an important limitation for the integrative paradigm. An integrative approach therefore requires institutional self-restraint: judges should distinguish between interpreting an existing norm, developing a principle within the structure of the legal system, and creating an entirely new legal rule without sufficient legal foundation. The three forms are compared in Table 2.

Table 2. Forms of Judicial Reasoning and Their Institutional Implications

Form	Description	Institutional implication
Interpretation	Determining the meaning of an existing legal norm	Forms part of legitimate judicial reasoning when adequately justified
Principled development	Deriving a legal principle from recognized legal materials and constitutional values	Forms part of legitimate judicial reasoning when adequately justified
Unconstrained creation	Introducing a rule without sufficient connection to the existing legal order	Raises an institutional problem because it risks transferring legislative authority to the judiciary

Source: Authors' conceptual analysis, drawing on Do et al. (2026)

The first two forms can be part of legitimate judicial reasoning when adequately justified. The third raises a substantially different institutional problem because it risks transferring legislative authority to the judiciary. Accordingly, the integrative paradigm requires reason-giving as a constraint on discretion. The more significant the departure from a straightforward textual application of a rule, the stronger the justification required from the decision-maker. This principle creates an internal relationship between judicial discretion and judicial accountability: discretion expands the range of legally defensible interpretations, while reason-giving establishes the burden of justification that accompanies that discretion. This is consistent with research in international law showing that interpretive discretion is the outcome of interpretive practices rather than their cause, and that interpretive authority depends in part on recognition by a wider professional community (Hernández, 2022).

Substantive Justice as the Outcome-Oriented Dimension of Adjudication

The final dimension of the proposed paradigm is substantive justice. Substantive justice is not understood here as whatever outcome a judge subjectively considers fair, because such an understanding would make the concept too indeterminate to function as a legal criterion. Instead, it is conceptualized as a normative orientation requiring legal decision-making to take seriously equality, dignity, rights, fairness, and the concrete consequences of legal interpretation. Contemporary human-rights scholarship shows that adjudicative bodies frequently face tensions between categorical legal rules and more flexible approaches such as proportionality and balancing (Goss, 2025).

The proposed paradigm therefore treats substantive justice as the final justificatory horizon rather than an independent source of unlimited judicial authority. A decision is substantively justified when the reasoning demonstrates that the interpretation adopted is legally valid, contextually responsive, principled, rationally justified, and attentive to the relevant consequences for rights and interests. Research on Indonesian judicial professionalism similarly proposes integrating ethical integrity, judicial independence, moral reasoning, and social sensitivity as inseparable elements of progressive decision-making that bridges legal certainty and substantive justice (Harun & Saribi, 2025), and normative work on Indonesian criminal justice argues that moving beyond legal formalism requires an ethical framework that

bridges distributive justice and conscience-based justice (Safik & Billah, 2025). The paradigm can consequently be summarized through five questions:

1. Is the decision grounded in valid legal norms?
2. Has the legal norm been interpreted in light of the relevant factual and social context?
3. Are the principles and constitutional values underlying the decision explicitly identified?
4. Have the foreseeable consequences and competing rights or interests been adequately considered?
5. Can the final conclusion be publicly justified as a substantively fair application of law?

Toward an Integrative Model of Legitimate Judicial Decision-Making

The preceding analysis suggests that the principal weakness of the formalism-versus-justice debate lies in its binary structure. The proposed paradigm challenges this binary formulation. The appropriate question is not whether judges should choose law or justice, but how law can be interpreted and justified in a manner that simultaneously protects legality and advances substantive justice. The integrative model proposed by this study can therefore be formulated as follows.

Legitimate Judicial Decision = Normative Fidelity + Contextual Interpretation + Principled Reasoning + Consequence Evaluation + Reasoned Justification

This formulation does not represent a mathematical equation but expresses the conceptual structure of the paradigm. Each component performs a different function, as summarized in Table 1, and none can independently establish legitimacy. The resulting model moves beyond legal formalism without rejecting the rule of law. Contemporary research already demonstrates that judicial reasoning may combine formal rules with contextual, functional, purposive, and principles-based forms of reasoning (Do et al., 2026). The model is also compatible with broader integrative proposals that seek to balance legal structures, moral values, social contexts, and public participation (Santoso, 2025) or efficiency, accountability, and social welfare (Lesmana et al., 2026). What the present study adds is a conceptual framework that organizes these dimensions into a single model directed toward substantive justice while maintaining legal constraint. In this sense, moving "beyond legal formalism" should not be understood as abandoning legal rules. It means moving beyond the assumption that formal rule application alone exhausts legitimate legal reasoning (Do et al., 2026; Koref et al., 2026).

The novelty of this study therefore lies in reconstructing judicial decision-making as an integrated process rather than a choice between formal legality and substantive justice. The Integrative Paradigm of Legal Decision-Making conceives adjudication as a disciplined process in which rules, facts, principles, context, consequences, and justification interact to produce a decision capable of meeting both the demands of legality and the demands of substantive justice, and it offers five analytical questions through which that quality can be assessed.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion

This study concludes that legal decision-making cannot be reduced to the mechanical application of legal rules. In answer to the first research question, legal formalism secures predictability, consistency, and institutional constraint, but it becomes limiting when formal legality is treated as the exclusive method of adjudication in disputes involving ambiguous norms, competing rights, or vulnerable parties. In answer to the second, normative, contextual, principled, and consequential considerations can be integrated into a single model of reasoning

in which legal norms remain the point of departure and every later step must be justified through legally recognizable reasons. In answer to the third, the Integrative Paradigm of Legal Decision-Making strengthens the capacity of adjudication to reconcile legal certainty, institutional legitimacy, and substantive justice by treating legal certainty as the boundary of interpretation and substantive justice as its normative orientation. Ultimately, moving beyond legal formalism does not mean moving beyond law. It means developing a more disciplined and contextual form of legal reasoning in which judicial decisions remain legally grounded while responding to the complexity of contemporary disputes.

Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, it is doctrinal and conceptual: the paradigm was developed through normative synthesis and has not been tested statistically or empirically against a body of court decisions, so the findings should not be read as measurements of judicial behavior. Second, the secondary literature was selected purposively and concentrated on recent scholarship published in 2025–2026, so earlier jurisprudential traditions are represented only indirectly. Third, the comparative element identifies recurring patterns rather than exhaustively comparing legal systems.

Recommendations

Future studies should test the paradigm empirically by applying its four evaluation criteria and five analytical questions to judgments in specific fields, such as land disputes, administrative disputes, constitutional litigation, and the protection of vulnerable persons. Comparative research across more jurisdictions, mixed methods that combine doctrinal analysis with argument mining or interviews with judges, may deepen understanding of how structured discretion develops.

Author Contributions

All authors made significant contributions to this study. These contributions included research conceptualization, development of the theoretical framework, data collection, data analysis, interpretation of results, manuscript preparation, scholarly revision, and final approval of the manuscript for publication.

AI Disclosure Statement

The author declares that this research manuscript was prepared, researched, written, and edited independently without the use of artificial intelligence (AI) technology or techniques.

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