Challenges of Halal Certification at Pahang: Insights from Halal Auditors in Kuantan

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ABSTRACT

Halal certification has garnered considerable focus as an essential component of the worldwide halal industry. Nevertheless, the majority of research about halal certification predominantly emphasizes issues at the national level, so creating a deficiency in comprehending the challenges encountered by halal auditors at the state level. This study seeks to address the challenges encountered by auditors within the Halal Management Division of the Pahang Islamic Religious Department (JAIP), a crucial entity in the execution of the Malaysian halal certification system. This study identified seven primary hurdles in the halal certification process in Pahang through semi-structured interviews with JAIP auditors, thereby emphasizing the local limits in the state. These findings enhance the current literature on the difficulties of halal certification and establish a basis for additional study focused on optimizing state-level halal certification procedures.

Keywords: Halal Certification, Halal Auditors, State-Level Challenges, Pahang Islamic Religious Department (JAIP), Halal Certification Process.

INTRODUCTION

A halal certification is an official document that confirms a product or service's adherence to halal criteria. Halal certification serves as a mechanism to ensure customer satisfaction, confidence, and trustworthiness. To obtain halal certification, a product must comply with the halal and haram regulations in Islam as established by a reputable organization or Islamic agency (Ahmad Hidayat Buang, 2012). Moreover, it is imperative that the entire process complies with halal requirements, in addition to guaranteeing that the food itself is halal. Halal certification applies to consumer goods, cosmetics, food products, beverages, dietary supplements, and other associated items. The halal certification method rigorously assesses all facets of production and operational procedures, together with the substances utilized in the product.

In addition to adhering to halal standards, the principle of toyyib is very significant. The essential element of halal is its quality, which underpins halal certification. This certification process entails evaluating and certifying cleanliness and sanitation as fundamental components. Halal-certified products must adhere to stringent criteria of cleanliness, safety, nutrition, and hygiene that meet the requirements of consumers, particularly those practicing the Islamic faith (Asa, 2019). The frequent misunderstanding of halal is that it merely denotes the exclusion of pork or alcohol in dietary items (Haleem et al., 2020).

Acquiring halal certification requires considerable dedication and commitment from the applicant, rendering the certification procedure arduous. Adherence to governmental requirements and regulations is essential for acquiring halal certification. The Malaysian Islamic Development Department (JAKIM) is responsible for the issue of halal certificates in Malaysia. At the state level, the obligation for certification resides with the corresponding State Islamic Religious Department (JAIN). The Pahang Islamic Religious Department (JAIP) executes this responsibility in Pahang. The Malaysian Halal Certification Procedure Manual (Domestic) 2020 is the most current and important guideline for halal certification in Malaysia. Applicants must comply with this manual to effectively manage and maintain halal integrity. Upon approval from either JAKIM or JAIN, it is imperative to affix a unique logo and secure Halal certification for the respective items. Products that have successfully achieved the halal certification have undergone stringent procedures and assessments to verify their absence of impurities and adherence to dietary restrictions (Setyaningsih & Marwansyah, 2019).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Halal Auditors

Halal auditors are vital professionals who significantly contribute to the acquisition of halal certification. Their responsibilities include document examination, fee payment verification, compliance audits on-site, report generation, and submission of results to the Halal Certification Panel Council Meeting for approval. The halal certification process in Malaysia involves inspections of facilities to verify compliance with Islamic law in the preparation, processing, and storage of products. It also entails assuring adherence to good manufacturing practices (GMP) and good hygienic practices (GHP) (Ahmad et al., 2018).

Halal auditors possess diverse responsibilities, encompassing the examination of company profile documents, evaluation of the Halal Assurance system, inspection of raw materials and ingredients, assessment of processing equipment, review of labelling and packaging, examination of raw material storage, analysis of processing flow, evaluation of logistics, assessment of employee practices, and inspection of cleanliness and sanitation of premises. These responsibilities are highly difficult and require extensive training, patience, ethical conduct, and steadfast character to maintain audit quality.

Halal auditors are crucial for ensuring compliance with halal regulations across several industries, particularly in the food and beverage sectors. Research highlights the necessity of a comprehensive understanding of Islamic law and the ability to effectively assess processes and products for halal certification to perform efficient halal audits. Aziz & Hussin (2024) emphasise the importance of training and expertise in halal auditing to uphold integrity and enhance consumer trust in halal products. The role of halal auditors is essential in fostering a reliable halal ecosystem, despite persistent obstacles in standardisation and training.

Challenge of Halal Auditors

Halal audits seek to verify adherence to Malaysian Halal requirements, encompassing system examination, Shariah compliance, raw material assessment, supporting documentation, and evaluation of local products (JAKIM, 2020). Halal auditors are essential for the effective functioning of the Halal certification process. A survey of contemporary literature reveals many concerns and challenges frequently faced in the Halal auditing process.

Recent research indicates that halal auditors face numerous problems that concurrently affect the efficacy of the halal certification process. A noted constraint is the lack of standardised procedures and training for auditors, resulting in inconsistencies in halal certification among different locations and organisations (Aziz & Hussin, 2024). This gap compromises the reliability of halal certificates and presents challenges for auditors managing a complicated supply chain that spans multiple countries with varying rules (Muhammad, 2020). Moreover, the auditor's responsibility to verify adherence to halal standards is exacerbated by erratic record-keeping and insufficient transparency from suppliers (Harun et al., 2023).

A significant difficulty is the restricted availability of manpower and resources within halal-certifying organisations. Noordin et al. (2014) and Ahmad et al. (2017) have determined that inadequate staffing leads to delays in the processing of halal certification applications. This occurs due to auditors being often inundated with a substantial volume of applications. The issue is exacerbated by inadequate access to halal auditing tools and technology, leading to a deceleration of the auditing process (Harun et al., 2023). The MYeHALAL system, currently utilised for submissions, has been criticised for its instability and inefficiency, hence complicating the certification process greatly (Muhammad, 2020).

The rapid advancement of food processing technologies presents an added challenge for halal auditors. Auditors may encounter challenges in accurately evaluating food products due to the increasing use of food additives and the emergence of new raw materials, necessitating specialised knowledge (Harun et al., 2023). Insufficient knowledge of food science terminology and reliance on industry representatives for information may lead to potential manipulation and mistakes in the auditing process (Muhammad et al., 2019). These issues underscore the imperative for continuous professional development for halal auditors to remain informed about industry developments and maintain the integrity of halal certification.

Moreover, halal auditors face interpersonal challenges while engaging with candidates exhibiting varied attitudes and behaviours. This may complicate the auditing process, especially when many stakeholders, including original equipment manufacturers (OEMs) and brand owners, are engaged (Harun et al., 2023). Auditors must forfeit personal time owing to the rigorous demands of their profession. This is particularly applicable in sectors like slaughterhouses and factories, which function in the early morning hours. Consequently, auditors frequently must do audits during unconventional hours (Harun et al., 2023). Moreover, halal executives must navigate several schedules established by different bodies, hence complicating the certification process (Harun et al., 2024).

Although many studies have highlighted the common issues faced by halal auditors in Malaysia, there is a lack of study specifically addressing the challenges associated with the application of halal certification by the Islamic Religious Department of Pahang (JAIP). Most current study focusses on national-level concerns, neglecting the regional context or specific obstacles faced by halal inspectors in areas like Pahang. Moreover, most previous studies on halal issues have concentrated on the perspectives of stakeholders, especially those within the industry (Muhammad, 2020). This study aimed to identify the obstacles faced by halal auditors from JAIP. This study will enhance the current research on halal challenges from the perspective of halal auditors. A comprehensive analysis of the challenges faced by Halal Auditors is essential to foster innovation and improve auditors' effectiveness in their professional activities, hence benefiting the halal industry overall.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative approach, utilizing semi-structured interviews and online interviews as primary data collection methods. Semi-structured interviews are widely recognized as effective for gaining in-depth insights through guided yet flexible discussions, enabling the exploration of participants' unique experiences and perspectives (Kakilla & Trials, 2021).

The in-person interviews were conducted at the Halal Management Division, Jabatan Agama Islam Pahang (JAIP), with each session lasting approximately 15–20 minutes. The interviewer posed open-ended questions to facilitate a two-way communication process, allowing respondents to elaborate on their experiences and insights. Similarly, the online interviews adhered to the semi-structured format, maintaining the conversational nature and fostering real-time interaction despite the virtual setting.

The participants were purposively selected based on their extensive experience in managing halal certification processes for certificate holders across Pahang. A total of four respondents participated, representing various roles within JAIP's Halal Management Division. Prior to data collection, informed consent was obtained from all participants, and the study adhered to ethical guidelines approved by UiTM . Their profiles are summarized in Table 1 below:

Table 1:- Profile Of Informants

Informant	Position	Length of Service
A	Audit Unit Officer	5 years
B	Audit Unit Officer	9 years
C	Inspection Unit Officer	5 years
D	Internship Student	4 months

This selection ensured a diversity of viewpoints, particularly from experienced officers directly involved in halal auditing and inspections, as well as an intern who provided a fresh perspective on operational processes. The participants were chosen based on their roles in overseeing halal compliance, certifying processes, and addressing challenges encountered in auditing. Their collective experiences offered comprehensive insights into the operational dynamics, limitations, and opportunities for improving halal certification processes within the state. The interview data was transcribed and analyzed thematically, focusing on recurring patterns and unique insights to address the research objectives.

RESULTS & DISCUSSIONS

Interviews reveal a multifaceted set of challenges encountered by halal auditors from JAIP in ensuring compliance with Malaysian Halal Certification standards. These challenges can be categorized into several key themes, as discussed below:

Low Awareness and Commitment among Industry Stakeholders

Many companies demonstrate inadequate understanding of halal certification requirements. Employees and management often perceive halal certification as merely a marketing tool, failing to grasp its technical and religious significance. This weak commitment hinders the effectiveness of halal management systems.

"Awareness of employees and management about halal is very weak. If the halal executive resigns, the halal management in the company will be idle and no other employees can manage the halal." (Informant A)

"Most companies are not committed to halal certification." (Informant B)

Additionally, some companies fail to involve all relevant stakeholders, placing full responsibility on halal executives while neglecting the roles of the Internal Halal Committee (IHC).

"Based on the results of monitoring in the industry, there are some employees who are unaware of the existence of the Internal Halal Committee and the top management will place the full responsibility on halal executives only." (Informant D)

The results of the conducted interviews may be used to draw the conclusion that everyone interviewed agreed that there is a difficulty for the halal sector since very few halal certification holders in Pahang have a high degree of understanding of halal. The whole organization of halal certificate holders, including top management and employees, lacks awareness and comprehension of the halal idea. Usually, subordinate employees are the ones that lack knowledge and awareness of halal. IHC is consequently in charge of educating staff about halal. Additionally, explanations or briefings must be given to staff before any halal SOP is established because it's conceivable that some of them don't comprehend the processes. Employees in the transport and distribution department must be instructed on the SOP for that department, for instance, that only halal items should be transported without being contaminated by non-halal goods.

Resource Constraints in the Industry and Halal Auditing Units

IHC is a committee set up by the organizations to be in charge of creating, overseeing, and managing the halal assurance system among the organization to ensure its efficacy. Top management must appoint halal

executives who have been recognized by the Halal Professional Board (HPB) to carry out duties in regulating internal halal management. Due to the lack of explicit requirements for the selection of halal committee members, several businesses fill open positions on their internal halal committees with current personnel. The nominated committee members must, however, be familiar with halal and have received halal standards training to adhere to the general concept of the nomination of internal halal committee members following the Guidelines for Halal Assurance Management System (JAKIM, n.d.). There is also an industry that refused to open up a position for a halal executive because they want to save costs for paying workers' salaries. A halal executive is required personnel needed to manage halal within an industry.

"There is a few numbers of companies use the same workers to fill IHC posts. Halal implementation is unsuccessful when employees hold both their primary positions and as an IHC." (Informant A)

"When the auditor comes at the location for the inspection, there may not always be somebody there who can be considered a halal executive. The management may give an excuse to the auditor to avoid any action taken upon them, but often the auditor will issue a non-conformance notice that must be responded to within the allotted time, which is typically 7 to 14 working days." (Informant C)

"Members of the Internal Halal Committee do not pay full attention to their responsibilities in managing halal." (Informant D)

One's ability to perform their job effectively will decrease from the added workload of taking on extra obligations. Due to committee members' increased attention to their main responsibilities, the implementation of halal is not progressing smoothly.

Procedural Challenges and Industry Readiness

Many companies lack an in-depth understanding of the halal certification procedure manual, leading to non-compliance during audits. Smaller businesses, in particular, struggle with navigating the procedural complexities.

"Before applying for halal certification, they need to understand the contents of the procedure manual, but there are parties who do not read and understand the contents of the MPPHM." (Informant A)

"The industry refuses to understand all the procedures more deeply even though they lack exposure and their level of understanding is low." (Informant D)

The lack of readiness among companies often results in delays and poor cooperation during audits. For instance, the auditor may be denied access to the premises because the company is not yet prepared for an audit or monitoring. However, improvements have been noted with the introduction of procedural manuals that notify companies in advance of audit dates.

"There are some companies that do not cooperate well because they are not ready. However, the cooperation provided has improved since the existence of the new procedural manual." (Informant A)

Interpersonal and External Pressures

Auditors face interpersonal challenges, such as threats from businesses reluctant to comply. These pressures can create an unsafe and hostile working environment for halal auditors. The auditors sometimes receive threats to free their companies from any action taken such as revocation of halal certification. Besides, some industry parties use cables to save their companies from any action.

"I once got a threat from a premise and said that their hotel was the property of a powerful person." (Informant A)

The IHC in one industry threatened halal auditors so that their certifications wouldn't be suspended on the basis that their firm belonged to the royal family, which was one of the challenges the researcher personally encountered. Additionally, there are instances of top management pressuring halal officers to expedite the certification process despite companies' non-compliance.

"The delay in halal certification approval comes from the company itself, but there is top management that will push halal officers to speed up their halal certification approval." (Informant A)

Insufficient Documentation and Record-Keeping

Inadequate preparation and maintenance of documentation remain major barriers to halal certification compliance. Auditors frequently encounter incomplete or outdated records, which complicate the auditing process and lead to non-conformance notices.

"Among the problems of the company is the lack of documents required by the auditor." (Informant A)

"Most of the halal files are not updated." (Informants A and D)

Important documentation must be kept in a halal file for the company's use and the auditor's reference. The general requirements for documentation and record based on MPPHM are the records of each worker, pest control records, previous audit and inspection records or NCR form, and any other records or documents that may be related to halal certification. The NCR from previous audits or inspections is very important because the halal auditor may use the NCR form to ensure that the organization did not repeat the same non-conformances.

Besides the lack of information in the halal file, the issue of the validity of the halal file also could be a problem for the JAIP's halal auditor. The issue of validity could be in terms of information in the file being inaccurate or putting the address of the processing area different from the actual processing area, and others that are related.

"The premises must make sure that the documentation they declared is valid and hasn't been altered without BPH JAIP's knowledge or authorization." (Informant C)

Many issues come from the halal file which is certain companies failed to update their halal file. For example, an issue that has occurred in a hotel at Kuantan, Pahang is they did not update the organization chart for Internal Halal Committee. There are one or two personnel from the members of that IHC that already resigned from the company. The internal halal committee members are often asked to attend meetings throughout the monitoring process, however, there is a problem when those people whose names are on the organizational chart do not even show up. The person in charge of halal claims that a few of the committee members listed in the halal file have quit being employed. This demonstrates that the organization neglected to update the data in the halal file.

Misaligned Perceptions of Halal Certification

One of the significant challenges faced by halal auditors is the misaligned perception of halal certification by applicants. Many businesses view halal certification primarily as a marketing tool rather than a religious or ethical obligation. This mindset leads to a lack of genuine commitment to adhering to the comprehensive requirements of halal certification, including compliance with related business laws.

"The applicant wants halal certification but does not want to comply with other business-related laws' requirements because most companies consider halal certification as a marketing tool only." (Informant B)

This issue is further compounded by the lack of understanding of the technical and procedural aspects of halal certification among business owners and employees. Instead of committing to compliance, many applicants

focus solely on the certification's potential to attract Muslim consumers, neglecting the detailed standards and regulations involved.

"Owners occasionally fail to follow the rules even though information about the halal procedures is generally available." (Informant C)

"Most companies are not committed to halal certification." (Informant B)

Managing halal is not only related to halal, but it also includes aspects of premise hygiene, food hygiene, and others. In addition to the halal system, every firm has to prioritize the Good Manufacturing Practices (GMP) and Good Hygiene Practices (GHP) system. Rat droppings in the retail area are one example of the Non-Conformance concerns that frequently arise throughout the majority of audit and monitoring activities. The requirements of other acts and regulations also need to be prioritized by the industry such as requirements for premises and food in Food Act 1983, Food Regulations 1985, and Food Hygiene Regulation 2009.

Additionally, this perception contributes to businesses failing to read and understand the Manual Procedure for Malaysia Halal Certification (MPPHM) thoroughly. Consequently, discrepancies and non-compliance issues frequently arise during audits, requiring auditors to issue notices of non-conformance.

Resource Constraints in Auditing

The limited number of auditors is a significant issue. Not more than 10 employees are working in the JAIP's Halal Management Division as halal officers. They struggle to manage and monitor the more than 400 businesses that obtain halal certification because of manpower shortages. As a result, it is unable to properly monitor and audit the halal certification process in Pahang, which leads many industry participants to disregard all requirements and the halal certification system. Companies that lack staff with extensive understanding of halal regulations will be more likely to not adhere to the criteria for halal certification. Small and medium-sized businesses are typically more likely to be given NCR for failing to adhere to the prescribed halal SOP.

"The auditing unit officers at BPH Pahang are only four people, and we have to travel far and wide all over Pahang to conduct audits." (Informant A)

"If the workforce can be increased, monitoring and enforcement will be strengthened." (Informant B)

Auditors are often required to juggle monitoring, enforcement, and complaint handling, making it difficult to allocate sufficient time for each task.

"We cannot focus only on monitoring because enforcement and halal complaint issues also need to be given priority." (Informant A)

DISCUSSIONS

Organizational and Resource Constraints

This study indicates that organizational and resource constraints are major challenges faced in the halal certification process in Pahang. One of the biggest issues is the shortage of qualified human resources in both the industry sector and halal auditing units. Some companies fill positions in the Internal Halal Committee (IHC) with existing staff who are not adequately trained, leading to weak halal management. This finding aligns with the work of Aziz & Hussin (2024), which highlights that the lack of training and knowledge among IHC members hinders the effective implementation of halal assurance systems.

In addition, there are resource constraints within halal auditing units, where the limited number of auditors makes it difficult to monitor over 400 businesses with halal certification in Pahang. Auditors, burdened with many tasks, including monitoring and enforcement, cannot fully focus on each business being audited,

resulting in inefficiencies in oversight (Harun et al., 2023). The shortage of trained personnel further increases the risk of non-compliance in the halal certification process.

The issue of incomplete and outdated documentation also complicates the halal auditing process. Many companies fail to maintain the necessary records, such as employee records, pest control logs, and non-conformance notices from previous audits. Incomplete and inaccurate records make audits more complicated and often lead to non-conformance reports (NCRs) that must be addressed within a short time frame. This documentation issue is common in organizations that lack structured filing systems or rely on manual record-keeping methods (Aziz & Hussin, 2024; Harun et al., 2023). Furthermore, the absence of a proper filing system exacerbates the issue of incomplete documentation. Without a centralized and organized system for storing and retrieving documents, auditors may struggle to access the information needed to conduct thorough audits, causing delays and inefficiencies in the auditing process (Aziz & Hussin, 2024; Muhammad et al., 2020).

Stakeholder Awareness, Commitment, and Perception

The findings of this study highlight challenges related to the awareness, commitment, and perception of stakeholders in the halal certification process. Some companies exhibit a limited understanding of halal certification requirements, with management and employees often viewing halal certification solely as a marketing tool rather than a religious or ethical obligation. They perceive halal certification merely as a means to attract Muslim consumers, without comprehending the broader implications of halal compliance, including the need to adhere to food safety regulations, hygiene standards, and other related laws (Muhammad et al., 2020). This finding aligns with Aziz & Hussin (2024), which suggests that many businesses fail to understand the technical and religious significance of halal certification. This limited understanding hampers the proper implementation of halal management systems, as halal certification is viewed more as a commercial strategy rather than a comprehensive framework.

The lack of commitment from industry stakeholders to halal certification is also a challenge. Study informants reported that most businesses are not fully engaged in the halal certification process. This finding confirms the observations of Sulaiman et al. (2017), who argue that without strong support from top management, organizations lack the motivation to prioritize halal compliance at all levels. The lack of commitment often results in halal management responsibilities being placed solely on halal executives, without involving all relevant stakeholders. This lack of organizational support for halal management systems is a significant barrier to ensuring compliance with halal standards (Harun et al., 2023).

Furthermore, the lack of understanding about halal procedures among employees and business owners exacerbates this issue. The study findings show that many businesses fail to educate their employees about halal requirements. As one informant stated, "Awareness of employees and management about halal is very weak" (Informant A). This aligns with findings in the literature, where the lack of training and awareness within organizations results in weak compliance with halal certification standards (Harun et al., 2023). Failing to ensure that employees, especially those in key departments like transportation and distribution, understand standard operating procedures (SOPs) for handling halal products often leads to contamination and non-compliance.

Procedural and External Challenges

The study also finds that there are challenges related to procedural issues and external pressures. Some industries exhibit low preparedness, making the auditing process difficult. They are unprepared when auditors arrive for inspections, as if they have not read or understood the contents of the Malaysian Halal Certification Procedure Manual (MPPHM). This lack of preparation leads to poor cooperation and adds difficulties to the auditing process, as noted by Informant A, "Some companies do not cooperate well because they are not ready." The commitment of an organization to halal compliance is a critical internal factor influencing auditing practices and company readiness. Organizations that prioritize halal compliance are more likely to invest in robust auditing processes and ensure that their products meet halal standards. For instance, a study on the

effectiveness of internal Shariah audits in Islamic financial institutions found that the commitment of organizations to Shariah compliance was a key determinant of the effectiveness of internal audit practices (Hakim, 2021; Arwani, 2018).

However, the lack of organizational commitment can also create challenges. For example, a study on the challenges faced by halal auditors in Malaysia identified the absence of digital tools for managing audit checklists and reports as a significant issue, which could be attributed to a lack of investment in audit infrastructure (Aziz & Hussin, 2024).

In addition to procedural challenges, halal auditors also face interpersonal pressures from external sources, which further complicate their work environment. Some auditors have reported receiving threats from business owners unwilling to comply with halal regulations, citing their influence or connections to authorities. For example, Informant A recounted being threatened by the owner of a hotel who claimed that the hotel was owned by a powerful individual. These external pressures are further exacerbated by the influence of top management, who sometimes pressure halal officers to expedite the halal certification process even when the company has not yet complied with all halal requirements. As Informant A stated, "Management will pressure halal officers to expedite halal certification approval." This pressure indicates a lack of commitment from the management to ensure that halal certification is carried out according to the correct procedures, leading to statements that may indirectly place pressure on halal auditors.

CONCLUSION

This study highlights the variety of obstacles encountered by halal auditors from the Halal Management Division (BPH) of Jabatan Agama Islam Pahang (JAIP) in their endeavours to maintain the integrity of halal certification. The results indicate that these obstacles arise from systemic, operational, and human reasons, such as inadequate manpower and resources, misaligned perceptions of halal certification among industry stakeholders, noncompliance with standards and processes, and resistance to enforcement efforts.

A frequent issue is the insufficient awareness and comprehension of halal principles among business proprietors and staff, who frequently perceive halal certification as a marketing strategy rather than a dedication to ethical and religious responsibilities. Furthermore, logistical limitations, such the vast geographical scope needed and insufficient technological utilisation, intensify delays and inefficiencies in the certification process.

Despite these hurdles, JAIP's halal auditors persist in their duties through ongoing training and cooperation with pertinent authorities. To properly tackle these challenges, it is essential to bolster public awareness campaigns, improve regulatory enforcement, and dedicate adequate resources and support structures for halal audits. Addressing these shortcomings will preserve the integrity of the halal certification process and guarantee that the production and sale of halal products conform to Shariah principles and national requirements.

Ultimately, overcoming these challenges necessitates the collaborative efforts of auditors, regulatory authorities, and industry stakeholders to cultivate a culture of accountability and compliance, thereby ensuring that halal certification maintains its importance as a hallmark of quality, trust, and religious integrity.

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