

THE DISCOURSE BATTLE BETWEEN POPULISM AND ANTI-POPULISM IN INDONESIA'S DIGITAL POLITICAL LANDSCAPE IN THE POST-TRUTH ERA

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ABSTRACT

This study analyzes truth claims in President Prabowo Subianto's inaugural speech amidst the contestation between populist and anti-populist narratives. Employing Critical Discourse Analysis, the research reveals that official narrative construction relies less on factual validity and more on emotional mobilization and nationalist symbolism aligned with social media algorithmic logic. The findings highlight a dialectical tension between power legitimacy based on populist rhetoric—which reduces policy complexity to a 'people' versus 'elite' dichotomy—and public demands for rationality. This phenomenon marks an epistemic shift where political narratives become commodities negotiated through algorithmic virality rather than rational deliberation. The study argues that consistency among narrative, action, and rationality is a prerequisite for public trust and elite legitimacy. Contributing to the understanding of collective rationality degradation, this research underscores the urgency of communicative integrity in maintaining democratic quality within an increasingly fragmented public sphere.

Keywords: *Algorithmic virality, digital populisme, political legitimacy, post-truth politics.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The inaugural speech of President Prabowo Subianto at the Plenary Session of the People's Consultative Assembly (MPR RI) on October 20, 2024, transcends mere ceremonial ritual; it must be contextualized as a strategic instrument within Indonesia's political landscape, currently situated in the post-truth era (Setkab.go.id, 2024). With real of political communication, presidential speeches serve as crucial mechanisms for negotiating legitimacy, aiming to bridge social polarization and address global uncertainty through narrative

constructions that integrate national interests with geopolitical dynamics. The fundamental challenge lies not merely in the technical aspects of development, but in the effort to reconcile state-society relations amidst a crisis of public trust.

The urgency of this analysis resides not in stylistics or diction, but in the ontological substance of the governing ideology being constructed. Drawing on Brown (2004), the conception of 'Indonesia' has evolved from a static geographical entity into a dynamic, multidimensional socio-political construct. Consequently, PPS's speech should be interpreted as a

discursive practice aimed at redefining the nation's collective identity, wherein claims of political truth are negotiated through the coherence between leadership rhetoric and the structural realities of a contemporary digital society characterized by affectivity, segregation, and fragmentation.

Indonesia is currently undergoing an intense phase of global communication transformation, a shift that has catalyzed new configurations of power, most notably the ascendancy of post-truth politics. In this post-truth era, characterized by the hegemony of social media platforms, objective facts no longer serve as the primary basis for verifying information. Instead, epistemic authority has shifted toward symbol, identity, and emotion-based narratives. The dynamics of digital media technologies facilitate the rapid, massive, and often unverifiable production and distribution of information (Harsin, 2015). Consequently, the public political sphere suffers from epistemic bias, wherein the boundaries between fact, opinion, propaganda, and disinformation become increasingly blurred. In this context, politics ceases to be an arena for rational-programmatic ideological competition, devolving instead into a contest of narratives, symbols, and affective mobilization (McIntyre, 2018).

This phenomenon has visibly shaped the dynamics of contemporary Indonesian politics in the post-Jokowi era, particularly by intensifying the contestation between populist and anti-populist narratives. Populism emerges as a political strategy that constructs a dichotomy between 'the people' and 'the elite,' while simultaneously claiming to be the

authentic representation of the public will (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). Conversely, anti-populism constitutes an attitude, ideology, or movement that opposes populist narratives and policies. Operationally, anti-populism encompasses various forms of resistance against anti-establishment politics, the marginalization of rational institutions, and the defense of pluralistic values (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007).

In Indonesia, populism manifests in diverse forms, ranging from religious and nationalist movements to anarcho-syndicalism, environmental initiatives (eco-labeling), and digital populism. Conversely, anti-populism emerges as a response to the intensification of emotional politics and identity polarization, emphasizing rationality, moderation, and democratic stability. It constitutes a political, intellectual, and social counter-movement against divisive populist narratives. Anti-populist efforts aim to safeguard democratic institutions, the rule of law, and pluralism from politicians who exploit narrow, corrupt, banal, and resistance-to-change sentiments. These two forces do not operate in isolation; rather, they interact and compete in shaping public political perceptions (Moffitt, 2018).

The political landscape of Indonesia following the 2014 and 2019 elections illustrates how populism has evolved through identity mobilization, emotional exploitation, and the deployment of social sentiment within digital spaces. Political polarization along religious, nationalist, and group-identity lines has been intensified by social media platforms, which accelerate the dissemination of disinformation and political propaganda

(Lim, 2017). This phenomenon demonstrates that digital technology functions not merely as a communication medium, but as an infrastructure that actively produces and reproduces political reality. In this post-truth ecosystem, political legitimacy is frequently constructed not through rational argumentation, but through the capacity to generate emotional resonance and foster identity-based collective loyalty (Fuchs, 2024).

However, in the Indonesian context, literature on political communication and media studies continues to interpret populism and anti-populism through a normative lens, viewing them merely as leadership paradigms or technical electoral instruments. Critical-reflective approaches are considered insufficient for uncovering the mechanisms of meaning production and the construction of power relations that underpin populist and anti-populist discourses within the architecture of the digital ecosystem. In parallel, research on post-truth phenomena remains confined to the technical dimensions of disinformation and misinformation, failing to establish a substantive analytical link with the ideological contestation between populism and anti-populism. Consequently, there exists an epistemic and methodological gap in understanding communication processes, information exposure, and the legitimization of political narratives in digital spaces—particularly regarding how algorithmic infrastructures and elite discursive practices mutually reconfigure public opinion and collective perception (Stavrakakis, 2014).

Conversely, the dynamics of digital politics in Indonesia demonstrate that social media has served as the primary

arena for contesting political meaning and legitimacy for the past two decades. Digital platform algorithms have catalyzed the emergence of echo chambers, emotional polarization, social segregation, and political fragmentation, thereby reinforcing identity politics (Sunstein, 2018). Under these conditions, populist movements have found significant space for expansion by leveraging the logic of digital virality. Conversely, anti-populist movements have grown subtly through discourses emphasizing democratic rationality and critiquing identity politics perceived as threatening social cohesion. In this context, political contestation no longer occurs solely at the formal-institutional level but has transformed into a struggle over discourse production, control of digital infrastructure, and the management of connected and distributed public perceptions.

Drawing on the aforementioned phenomena, this study analyzes the dynamics of populist versus anti-populist discourses within Indonesia's post-truth political landscape. Conceptually, these discourses are not constructed as static, dichotomous entities, but rather as dynamic discursive formations that produce meaning, activate identity symbols, and reconfigure collective affiliations in digital spaces. Through this perspective, the study seeks to uncover how the intersection of technological infrastructure, power relations, and narrative strategies generates a digital political configuration that—under the Prabowo administration—is politically, socially, and culturally fragmented, yet seamlessly integrated within algorithmic formations.

Theoretically, this study employs the post-truth framework popularized by Steve Tesich in 1992 (ScienceDirect, 2017) and Michel Foucault's (1980) theory of power/discourse. The objective is to understand how knowledge and narratives are produced as instruments of political legitimacy. Furthermore, Ernesto Laclau's (2005) concept of populism is utilized to explain how 'the people' are constructed as an antagonistic identity within the articulation of political discourse. This perspective enables a more critical analysis of the interplay between populism, digital media, and the production of truth in the contemporary Indonesian political landscape.

The current state of the art indicates that studies on populism in Indonesia have expanded significantly, particularly concerning Islamic populism, social media, and digital democracy (Hadiz, 2016; Mietzner, 2020). Meanwhile, research on post-truth phenomena has predominantly focused on the dissemination of hoaxes and political disinformation within digital media (Lim, 2017). However, there remains a scarcity of studies specifically mapping the dialectical relationship between populism and anti-populism within the post-truth political context. Most existing literature treats these two phenomena in isolation, thereby failing to comprehensively explain how they mutually produce and reproduce political polarization in digital spaces.

The novelty of this study lies in its academic effort to integrate perspectives on populism, anti-populism, and post-truth within a single critical analytical framework. Rather than viewing populism merely as a political strategy, this research

conceptualizes it as a discursive practice that operates through algorithmic logic, identity politics, and emotional resonance on social media platforms. Consequently, this study aims to contribute to the academic understanding of the transformation of democracy and political communication in Indonesia during the post-truth political era.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative design within an interpretive paradigm, employing Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as outlined by Wodak and Meyer (2016). This methodological approach was selected to systematically construct the mechanisms of meaning-making, power relations, and rhetorical strategies that mediate the discursive contestation between populism and anti-populism (Nadzier, 2022) within Indonesia's digital ecosystem during the Prabowo Subianto administration.

The unit of analysis focuses on public texts, including official statements from Prabowo Subianto and his political elite, verified social media content, and national news articles from the 2024–2026 period. Samples were determined using purposive sampling, with inclusion parameters based on thematic relevance to the dynamics of populism versus anti-populism. Specifically, selection criteria considered thematic pertinence, circulation intensity, and representational capacity in mapping mutually contesting narratives (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The data analysis technique adopts a three-dimensional model, encompassing textual analysis, discursive practice analysis, and social practice analysis. Prior

to analysis, the data were thematically coded to identify framing patterns, identity dichotomies, and mechanisms of meaning production. The data were then interpreted iteratively to examine the coherence between empirical findings and the post-truth theoretical framework (Miles et al., 2014).

The study's data are presented in a narrative-thematic format, supplemented by a findings matrix and contextualized direct quotations. This structure facilitates the tracking of argumentative flows, ensures transparency in the coding process, and enables cross-verification by academic readers (Miles et al., 2014). The validity of the findings is maintained through source triangulation, researcher reflexivity, and the documentation of analytical trails. Although this study is exploratory-critical in nature, the results are designed to provide an evaluative framework that allows for iterative re-examination of the data within the context of Indonesia's dynamically evolving digital politics.

3. DISSCUSSION

A. Post-Truth Politics and the Reconfiguration of Elite Truth Production in Digital Public Spheres

The transformation of political communication in Indonesia under President Prabowo Subianto marks a significant shift from a deliberative model to an affective model oriented toward managing public perception. In this post-truth political context, the effectiveness of political communication is no longer determined by the consistency of rational argumentation or factual verification, but rather by the capacity of political

narratives to generate emotional resonance, symbolic proximity, and identity-based loyalty. This transition coincides with the expansion of a social media ecosystem driven by the logic of virality and algorithmic amplification. Within this landscape, simple, emotional, and visual political messages dominate the digital public sphere more readily than complex and dynamic policy arguments characteristic of traditional political spaces.

A significant manifestation of this digital transformation is evident in the political rebranding of Prabowo Subianto during and after the 2024 presidential election. Research on the 'Gemoy' persona reveals that Prabowo's communication strategy was deliberately designed to reshape his previously hardline, militaristic image into a more humorous, relaxed, and youth-oriented figure. This strategy operated through the production of visual content on TikTok, Instagram, and Twitter/X, emphasizing emotional expression, body gestures, popular music, and symbols of personal proximity. Studies by Temby (2024) and Djumadin (2025) argue that the 'Gemoy' framing did not rely on ideological argumentation, but rather on emotional management capable of establishing an affective connection with young voters.

From the perspective of political communication, this style reflects the tendency of digital populism—a political practice that constructs legitimacy through issue simplification, leadership personalization, and symbolic articulation based on the 'pro-people' jargon. The rhetoric of Prabowo's post-inauguration speeches demonstrates the dominance of pathos (emotion) over logos (reasoning),

particularly through the use of humor, satire, informal styles, and nationalistic metaphors that place excessive emphasis on loyalty and national unity.

Research by Trisnaningtyas et al. (2006) reveals that Prabowo's communication style is consistently oriented toward constructing an image of communicative and emotional leadership to strengthen psychological bonds with the audience. In the post-truth era, such emotion-based communication strategies often prove more politically effective than complex technocratic explanations, which are slower to gain traction among digital publics.

Conversely, the political communication of the Prabowo administration demonstrates an intensification of nationalist symbolism as an instrument of legitimacy. An editorial in *The Jakarta Post* (2025) notes that narratives of national unity and state stability are consistently reproduced in Prabowo's speeches and government policies. Simultaneously, Prabowo consciously and consistently cultivates an image as the defender of national unity. However, this symbolism is frequently accompanied by the construction of antagonism toward parties positioned as disruptors of national stability, including civil society groups, activists, and students. Within Laclau's (2005) framework of populism, this practice illustrates how the identity of 'the people' is constructed through symbolic opposition to 'the other.' Consequently, political communication functions not merely as a vehicle for message transmission, but as a mechanism for shaping collective political identity.

This phenomenon is further reinforced by the structure of digital media, which enables the rapid and massive reproduction of political messages without verification processes. A Reuters report (2026) indicates that disinformation campaigns via digital media are predominantly aimed at discrediting critical anti-regime groups through labeling them as 'foreign agents' or 'threats to national interest.' This practice demonstrates how digital political communication can shift into a mechanism for perception control and the marginalization of critical discourse, achieved through both symbolic manipulation and the exploitation of public sentiment.

By exploiting public sentiment, political elites seek to construct discursive hegemony in digital spaces, transforming them from arenas of critical idea exchange into monopolistic and hegemonic fields of contestation over the 'meaning of truth.' Consequently, audience autonomy and the integrity of substantive democratic discourse are diminished. In this context, the digital public sphere no longer functions primarily as a space for deliberating ideas or critical facts, but rather as a battleground for defining 'political truth' and imposing labels according to the dominant elite's narrative (Farid, 2023).

Concurrently, the communication style of President Prabowo's administration exhibits a tendency toward rapid issue containment rather than providing factual, honest, and argumentative explanations. Communication scholars argue that Prabowo's aides are experiencing a public communication crisis, as their statements

often prioritize emotive, coercive, and tone-deaf dimensions over persuasive, empathetic, and sympathetic engagement (ugm.ac.id, 2025). Within the logic of social media, tone-deaf communication appears more interactive and responsive to algorithmic dissemination than critical-reflec-tive discourse. However, this style frequently results in inappropriate, non-empathetic remarks regarding sensitive public issues. Political communication among Indonesian elites, including Prabowo, increasingly adheres to tone-deaf techniques, where information speed and viral potential serve as metrics of 'communication success,' superseding the quality of rational argumentation.

This phenomenon reflects a crisis of rationality within digital democracy, where the dominance of affective and hyper-personal content degrades the quality of public delibe-ration. The public becomes trapped in echo chambers and confirmation biases, rendering opinion polarization inevitable. In Indonesia, this polarization manifests in the delegitimiza-tion of empirical data, such as the survey by the Center for Economic and Law Studies (Celios), which assigned President Prabowo's performance a score of 3 out of 10 (indicating 'very poor'). Skepticism toward the objectivity of survey institutions signals a shift wherein political legitimacy no longer rests on normative accountability, but rather on the sophistication of symbolic perception manage-ment and algorithmic engineering aimed at consolidating popular support (bbc.com, 2025).

The communication style of the elite during the Prabowo era clearly represents the crystallization of digital populism,

which operationalizes affective politics and national-ist symbolism as hegemonic instruments. Within a post-truth epistemology, factual validity is superseded by narratives capable of triggering viral resonance, thereby reconstruc-ting political truth through algorithmic logic rather than empirical verification. This dyna-mic degrades public rationality, intensifies polarization, and blurs the demarcation between substantive deliberation and percep-tion management. Consequently, the democra-tic sphere is often fractured into contests of identity and emotion, which are structurally vulnerable to manipulation by ruling elites.

B. Legitimation Strategy Thought Populist Discourse

The initial phase of Prabowo's leadership, following his victory in the 2024 presidential election, serves as a critical juncture in deter-mining the orientation of the government's political policies. The communication model adopted as the official format for governmen-tal political communication will inevitably have significant implications for public percep-tion, political stability, and the effectiveness of the national policy agenda.

Drawing on Foucault's (1980) thesis, power in the post-truth regime operates not merely through coercive state instruments, but through the production of discourse that delineates the boundaries between what is deemed true, rational, and legitimate, and what is considered false, irrational, and illegal. During Prabowo's leadership, political communication practices have exhibited a strong tendency

toward establishing a 'regime of truth.' This mechanism involves the production of dominant narratives that link governmental legitimacy to national stability, economic development, and national unity as the primary framing devices.

In this context, political communication functions not merely as a channel for policy dissemination, but also as a mechanism for constructing discursive hegemony in the public sphere. This process establishes binary oppositions, distinguishing between actors deemed constructive and patriotic, while stigmatizing, labeling, or positioning political opponents as threats to 'national interest' (Syukri et al., 2025).

A defining characteristic of Prabowo's political communication is its emphasis on the rhetoric of political stability and economic nationalism. In state addresses and official statements, Prabowo frequently frames his government's agenda around maintaining national sovereignty and rectifying economic 'leakages.' For instance, in his speech to the House of Representatives (DPR) in May 2026, Prabowo highlighted that: (1) Indonesia had lost US\$343 billion due to under-invoicing and transfer pricing practices; (2) consequently, the government would tighten the governance of natural resource exports through a single-state-owned exporter; and (3) Article 33 of the 1945 Constitution must be reinstated as the foundational basis of Indonesia's economic system (infobanknews.com, 2026). This narrative illustrates how economic development is constructed not merely as a technocratic policy control, but as a patriotic project

that positions the government as the protector of national interests against the threats posed by rent-seeking entrepreneurs and global oligarchies.

Prabowo's communication strategy constitutes a form of discursive political normalization operating under the logic of knowledge production rooted in specific political or ideological interests. The Prabowo regime not only offers economic solutions but also shapes the definition of 'national interest' and determines who is deemed trustworthy to safeguard it. Government social media channels, elite speeches, and mainstream media networks are mobilized to reproduce Prabowo's image as a nationalist, pro-people leader. In this context, power relations operate subtly through symbols, narrative repetition, and the continuous reproduction of a leadership image inextricably linked to national stability (Soeharno et al., 2025).

However, this production of legitimacy is accompanied by a tendency to discipline public criticism through antagonistic representations of public opposition. This phenomenon was evident in the government's response to the #IndonesiaGelap demonstration wave in February 2025. Initially triggered by budget efficiency policies and the Free Nutritious Meals program, the protests evolved into broader criticism of the Prabowo-Gibran administration's direction. Digital data indicate that the hashtag #IndonesiaGelap garnered millions of interactions on platform X, with negative sentiment reaching 81%. Nevertheless, rather than being treated as a form of democratic participation, much of this public criticism was framed as

provocative political action disrupting national political stability (monash.edu, 2025).

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This tendency is reinforced by an Amnesty International (AI) report highlighting the use of digital disinformation campaigns to label students, activists, journalists, and civil society organizations as 'foreign agents' (amnesty.org, 2026). AI's investigation uncovered several social media accounts affiliated with military units and specific political networks that systematically disseminated negative narratives regarding public criticism of the government. Within the framework of discursive power theory, this practice demonstrates that political communication is no longer neutral; rather, it functions as a mechanism for producing political truth aimed at suppressing dissent, controlling

perception, and constraining the operational space of opposition.

The logic of digital media further reinforces the effectiveness of this communication strategy. Within an algorithmic ecosystem, narratives characterized by affective, nationalistic, and antagonistic elements achieve virality more readily than those that are logical, argumentative, critical, or reflective. Consequently, Indonesia's digital public sphere is increasingly transforming into an arena of affective competition and symbolic politics. The government derives significant advantage from its capacity to mobilize emotional loyalty through imagery of patriotism, stability, and national development; meanwhile, public criticism often faces state repression, threats of suspension, or hacker attacks. In this context, power operates not only through formal state institutions but also through coercion and algorithmic circulation, which amplify the visibility of dominant narratives.

In practice, the communication style of President Prabowo and Indonesia's political elite illustrates how power operates through the production and 'normalization of discourse,' co-constructed with platform architectures that reinforce dominant narratives and transform affective engagement into the primary currency of political influence. Narratives of stability, development, and nationalism function not merely as political discourse, but as mechanisms of legitimacy that shape the public's collective perception of truth and national interest.

Conversely, the representation of criticism as a threat to stability reveals a

tendency to control public opinion through media regulation, particularly on social media platforms. Within the post-truth political landscape and the polarizing, fragmentary structure of digital media, political communication has become the primary arena for the production of symbolic power and discursive hegemony. In this context, governmental legitimacy increasingly depends on the capacity to manage perceptions, orchestrate emotional resonance, construct public opinion, and unilaterally redefine 'political truth' in alignment with elite interests.

C. The Identity of the People and Digital Antagonism

This sub-theme aims to explore how political communication in the Prabowo era operates through the production of collective identity and symbolic division within the digital public sphere. From Laclau's (2005) perspective, populism is constructed through the articulation of 'the people,' unified by a shared sense of threat against 'oligarchies,' 'foreign elites,' or specific critical groups positioned as symbolic political adversaries.

In the digital era, the process of political construction is no longer fully mediated (or supervised) by formal institutions; instead, it operates through algorithms designed by social media platforms, political buzzers, memes, and narrative reproduction that accelerate the formation of emotional solidarity and political antagonism. This phenomenon is known as 'algorithmic democracy,' wherein the public sphere is governed by viral narratives that blur the boundaries between truth and sensation. In this context, public opinion formation no

longer relies on rational discourse or factual information controlled by formal institutions (Assadiyah et al., 2025).

In the context of the Prabowo administration, the construction of 'the people's' identity is frequently produced through symbols of personal proximity, populist nationalism, and the image of a 'man of the people.' Studies by Aviansyah et al. (2025) and Yulianti et al. (2024) indicate that Prabowo's personal branding on social media platforms is not merely an electoral imaging strategy, but part of affective politics aimed at building emotional identification between the leader and the public. For instance, the 'Gemoy' persona was crafted using humorous, relaxed, and informal narratives to position Prabowo as an 'ordinary citizen.' In digital populism, the identity of 'the people' is constructed not through pro-people ideological programs, but through emotional proximity, virtual engagement, and visual performativity that are easily replicated within social media culture.

The construction of populist identity is further reinforced by political buzzers, influencers, and networks of digital communication actors supporting the government. Studies on the role of Prabowo's political buzzers indicate that social media is utilized to shape public opinion through the distribution of identity-laden content, emotional slogans, and supportive narratives that sharpen the distinction between 'us' and 'them' (Seah, 2024; Assadiyah et al., 2025). In practice, political antagonism is directed not only at formal opposition but also at civil society groups, activists, students, or netizens perceived as obstacles to governmental

political stability. This situation illustrates how digital populism operates through the logic of affective polarization, fostering political loyalty based on emotional identity rather than mere rational agreement on public policy.

The phenomenon of political antagonism has become increasingly evident in the dynamics of digital resistance during the early phase of the Prabowo administration. The virality of hashtags such as #KaburAjaDulu (Just Leave First) and #IndonesiaGelap (Dark Indonesia) illustrates how social media has become an arena of contestation between governmental optimism and public disillusionment. Studies by Octaviani et al. (2025), Lauren et al. (2025), and a Reuters report (2025) reveal that these hashtags evolved into symbols of digital resistance against socio-political conditions perceived to restrict participation and social mobility for the younger generation. Notably, the government's response framed this dissent within a nationalist dichotomy, labeling critics as pessimistic, anti-state, and pro-foreign elements. Political antagonism is thus produced through moral categorizations that distinguish who constitutes the 'true people' from those positioned as (symbolic) threats to national unity (Ardianti et al., 2025).

In the context of digital media, this process of antagonization is reinforced by social media algorithms that tend to amplify emotional and fragmentary content. Studies on digital populism indicate that content containing identity conflicts, anger, or sarcastic humor generates higher public engagement than technocratic policy discourse.

Consequently, the digital public sphere is increasingly saturated with political communication practices that emphasize emotional-identity performativity over critical-rational argumentation. In this scenario, retweets, memes, or political video clips no longer function merely as information disseminators, but have become instruments for the symbolic production of group solidarity and the delegitimization of political opponents.

National political surveys indicate that high levels of public satisfaction with Prabowo persist alongside increasing discursive polarization in social media spaces. Although satisfaction rates remain high, ranging from 75–78% (Poltracking) to 79.9% (Indikator Politik), these approval ratings exist under the shadow of student demonstrations, civil society criticism, and controversial political elite communication. This survey reality demonstrates that digital populism operates paradoxically: while it strengthens the government's symbolic legitimacy, it simultaneously deepens the fragmentation of the public sphere through the continuous reproduction of political antagonism (kompas.com, 2026).

The construction of 'the people's' identity within the digital populism of the Prabowo era cannot be understood merely as a governmental public communication strategy, but rather as a mechanism for producing symbolic hegemony in the digital public sphere. This identity is shaped through narratives of nationalism, emotional proximity, and opposition to groups positioned as threats to stability or national interest. Under these conditions, social media functions not only as a medium for political communication but

also as an arena for the production of collective emotion, identity polarization, and the normalization of antagonism, with direct implications for the quality and performance of Indonesian democracy.

D. Polarization of Discourse and the Crisis of Rationality in the Prabowo Era

Political discursive polarization during the Prabowo era is characterized by segregation and the degradation of the public sphere, which erodes public rationality. Sensitive issues that frequently trigger polarization and fragmentation revolve around sensitivities and an anti-critical stance inherent to Prabowo himself. The snide and sensationalist responses relied upon by Prabowo and his administration further reinforce confirmation biases, provoke conflict, and ignite polarization. The intensification of labels such as 'pretentious experts' or 'habitual critics' increasingly trivializes public criticism. For Prabowo, marginalizing public critical reasoning while mobilizing loyalty is deemed more crucial as electoral capital for 2029, thereby serving as a tool for his regime's political legitimacy (Hardi, 2025).

In *The Disinformation Age* (2018), Bennett and Livingston provide a new analytical framework, arguing that the digitalization of democracy has the potential to create a communication ecosystem that reinforces disinformation, echo chambers, confirmation bias, and epistemic fragmentation. As acknowledged by Bennett and Livingston, the spread of disinformation has undermined the norms and foundational values underpinning institutional legitimacy and political stability, thereby weakening

authoritative institutions such as political parties, electoral bodies, public organizations, scientific communities, independent journalism, and civil society groups. In Indonesia, this phenomenon is evident in the widespread reproduction of simplistic narratives, such as 'pro-people supporters' versus 'traitors of the nation,' or 'nationalists' versus 'anti-state elements,' which circulate extensively across various social media platforms. These narratives are not only produced by paid buzzers, political influencers, or bot accounts but are also organically replicated by partisan digital communities, further narrowing the space for reflective-rational dialogue (Al Fatih, 2024).

Empirically, this phenomenon is evident in the intensity of public criticism regarding Indonesia's political dynamics throughout 2025–2026. Digital conversation data on social media concerning government policies—such as evaluations of the Free Nutritious Meals (MBG) program, the erosion of press and civil freedoms, and the reactive 'viral first, retract later' pattern—reveals significant information asymmetry. The emergence of podcasts and 'pseudo-informative' experts, inconsistent clarifications from the House of Representatives (DPR), polemics surrounding the 'foreign proxy' label, fiscal policy revisions, and student demonstrations all indicate high levels of fragmentation and polarization in public politics. These dynamics reflect the fragility of public trust during the early phase of Prabowo's administration, where the legitimacy of authority is continuously negotiated through sharp interpretive conflicts in the digital sphere (thecolumnist.id, 2026).

The intensification of public resistance in digital spaces is marked by networked protests initiated by Generation Z and millennials. Debates in these digital spheres have not evolved as rational-deliberative discourses, but rather as arenas of fierce political identity contestation between pro-government groups and the opposition, or between ‘the people’ and ‘the rulers.’ In this context, social media has assumed the alternative function traditionally held by opposition groups, which were previously effective in pressuring the government to evaluate or revoke controversial public policies (kompas.id, 2025; Hidayat et al., 2025).

The communication style of President Prabowo’s cabinet ministers has also contributed to the reproduction of fragmentation and polarization. Notable instances include the Minister of Women’s Empowerment and Child Protection’s (PPPA) proposal to relocate women-only train carriages, the Ministry of Human Rights’ request for a fantastical budget increase, statements by the Minister of Culture, Fadli Zon, and Coordinating Minister Yusril Ihza Mahendra characterizing the 1998 Tragedy as not constituting gross human rights violations, the misuse of ministry letterheads for family events, and the Coordinating Minister for Food Affairs’ incident of misstating village data (bbc.com, 2024). The high frequency of such blunders by presidential aides led Prabowo to publicly acknowledge the poor quality of governmental communication, accepting responsibility for these shortcomings.

Conversely, mainstream digital media platforms continue to construct a political hyperreality by prioritizing symbolic

performativity over policy substance. This dynamic marks the strengthening of affective political logic, wherein support mobilization is driven by emotional resonance rather than critical-rational argumentation. Studies on digital populism by Lim (2017), Bennett and Livingston (2020), and Djumadin (2025) affirm that the effectiveness of communication within Indonesia’s affective-populist digital ecosystem relies entirely on algorithmic logic—exemplified by the viral humor of the ‘Prabowo Gemoy’ persona. However, algorithmic logic inherently tends to reduce the complexity of critical-rational argumentation in favor of maximizing public emotional engagement.

The dominance of algorithmic logic has serious implications for the intensification of discursive polarization and the proliferation of a public rationality crisis, ultimately degrading the quality and performance of democracy. The continuous reproduction of polarization by digital media risks transforming the public sphere into an ‘arena of slander’ and ‘political coercion.’ The public becomes increasingly susceptible to selective information that reinforces group identities while diminishing their critical-reflective capacity regarding complex state policies.

Consequently, Indonesian democracy risks experiencing an epistemic crisis—a condition in which society loses the shared knowledge base necessary for building political consensus. This fragmented reality hinders the formation of fundamental agreements regarding facts, rendering public deliberation impossible. Without mutually recognized factual truth,

rational argumentation is replaced by contradictory identity claims. This dynamic will likely trigger policy stagnation, as each side operates within closed and self-reinforcing information ecosystems.

Mainstream media has lost its function as a gatekeeper, replaced by buzzers and influencers who frequently validate confirmation biases. Educational and scientific institutions also face credibility attacks when their findings contradict popular narratives on social media. In the long term, such epistemic fragmentation can reinforce distrust toward democratic institutions, independent media, and expert-led criticism. Consequently, citizens become either apathetic or radicalized, as they no longer perceive accessible channels or arenas for dialogue capable of fostering shared understanding.

Ultimately, governmental legitimacy becomes reliant solely on the manipulation of perception, rather than on substantive performance that can be objectively verified. This condition paves the way for digital authoritarianism, wherein truth is unilaterally defined by algorithm managers and narrative architects. Consequently, the quality of democracy deteriorates significantly, as elections and public oversight are no longer based on rational policy evaluation, but rather on subjective and irrational personal loyalty and digital tribalism.

Empirically, discursive polarization under Prabowo's leadership cannot be understood as a spontaneous consequence of digital media development, but rather as the result of an interaction between populist communication strategies, algorithmic logic, and the production of

identity- and emotion-laden political narratives. In the post-truth arena, practical political communication increasingly relies on the capacity to manage collective emotions and identity-based loyalty, while deliberative rationality is progressively marginalized by the performative competitions continuously generated by digital media.

4. CONCLUSION

The Prabowo Subianto administration reflects the manipulation of truth production within digital spaces. In the post-truth political landscape, political narratives are no longer evaluated based on empirical validity, but rather on their capacity to trigger virality and resonance. This fact marks a fundamental epistemic shift: moving public epistemology from rational deliberation toward consensus based on virality and emotional resonance. This reality has the potential to deconstruct verification processes, undermine argumentation, marginalize critical-reflective stances, and blur the boundaries between subjective opinion and objective fact.

Political legitimacy strategies are often framed through populist narratives that simplify the complexity of state policies as 'our affair' rather than a 'public matter.' Elites leverage digital infrastructure to bypass public political participation while consolidating support through the repetition of anti-critical and segregative political messages. This mechanism has effectively transformed governmental public communication from an instrument of public accountability into merely an industry for managing public opinion.

The construction of 'the people's' identity is reconfigured through sharp digital political antagonism. Populism in this era not only unifies but also actively produces an 'adversary' to strengthen internal group cohesion. Identity symbols are mobilized to create exclusive boundaries between 'us,' the patriotic, and 'them,' the anti-stability elements. Political solidarity is thus constructed through the thesis of binary opposition: 'us' versus 'them.'

This dynamic triggers profound discursive polarization and a crisis of public rationality. Under Prabowo's leadership, the space for deliberation has effectively degraded into echo chambers and algorithmic environments that reinforce confirmation bias. Rational arguments are overshadowed by emotional appeals and the dissemination of narratives labeling critics as 'foreign proxies.' The public is thus trapped in an ambiguous political reality, which hinders the possibility of constructive dialogue among political groups.

Overall, this contestation reveals the vulnerability of Indonesian democracy to perception manipulation and opinion engineering, which are systematically and structurally conditioned by state apparatuses. Without a revitalization of communication ethics and critical literacy, the hegemony of populist narratives poses a significant risk of eroding citizen rational autonomy in the future. The primary urgency lies in restoring discursive integrity to prevent further degradation of governance quality and the democratic public sphere.

The primary challenge for Indonesian democracy moving forward is how

democratic elements can revitalize a fractured public sphere into one that is cohesive, rational, reflective, and grounded in critical argumentation. Given the dominance of a subjective-emotional political ecosystem and the increasing fragmentation and polarization of digital politics—which degrade the face of substantive democracy—this effort is highly relevant to addressing the crisis of public trust during the Prabowo administration. If this reconstructive effort fails, a second wave of reform movements may emerge as the most realistic political response in the future.

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