

Representation of The Democratic Crisis in The Visual Posters of The “Indonesia Gelap” Demonstration

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Abstract

Demonstrations are one of the main pillars of a democratic state because they serve as a platform for the public to express opinions, voice aspirations, and oversee government policies. In any protest, the posters carried by demonstrators inevitably attract attention from both the media and the public. Several mass media outlets in Indonesia captured these posters to be published as photo news. From the various posters that appeared as photo news related to the “Indonesia Gelap” demonstration, this study aims to analyze the representation of democratic meaning conveyed visually. This research uses a descriptive qualitative approach with Roland Barthes’ semiotic analysis method, which focuses on how cultural signs possess not only denotative meanings but also connotative ones. In his analysis, Barthes emphasizes the concept of myth as a second-order sign system that shapes and disseminates ideology. The results show that the “Indonesia Gelap” demonstration posters highlight public protest against government policies perceived as not prioritizing the welfare of the people. They also reflect a sense of pessimism toward the performance of the newly established leadership, which is still overshadowed by the previous administration. In today’s digital era, posters carried by demonstrators attract attention not only on the ground but also across social media and mass media. Therefore, crafting messages by linking them to popular culture increases their visibility and makes them easier for the wider public to understand. This approach also offers a new way to address youth apathy in expressing or voicing their political views.

Keywords: Representation, Democracy, Poster, Demonstration, Semiotics

INTRODUCTION

Democracy is a system of government that upholds popular sovereignty, where every individual has the right to participate in political decision-making. In a country that claims to be democratic, the existence and strengthening of democracy is essential to realizing principles such as freedom, justice, and the welfare of the people. However, democracy is not

merely a system of government; it also encompasses a political culture that must be continuously maintained and developed.

A healthy democracy requires active public participation, government transparency, the rule of law, and the protection of human rights. By ensuring that democratic principles are consistently upheld, a country can foster political stability, inclusive development, and public trust in government.

In a democratic country, public participation in criticizing government actions can be demonstrated through demonstrations or protests. Demonstrations are an important form of political participation in a democratic system. Through protests, citizens can voice their aspirations, oppose policies they deem unfair, and demand social and political change.

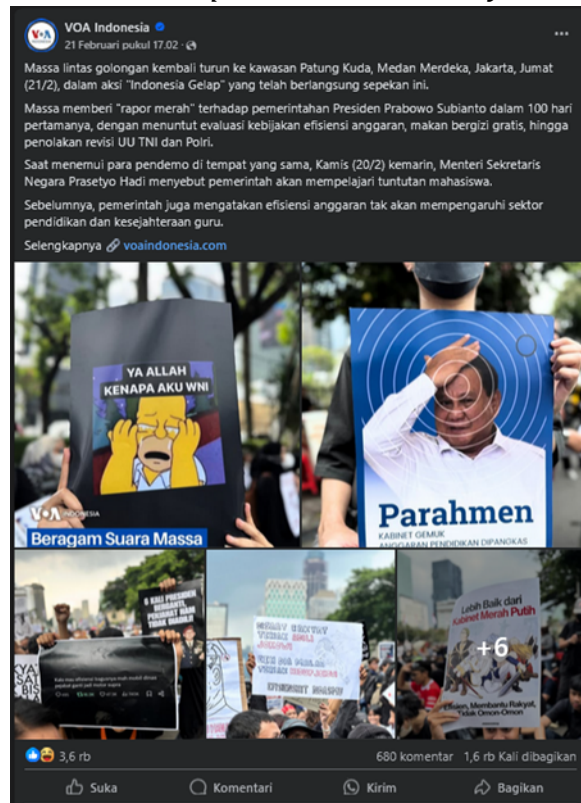
As a democratic country, Indonesia frequently hosts demonstrations criticizing government policies. In the first 100 days of Prabowo Subianto's presidency, civil society and students staged the "Indonesia Gelap" protests. The demonstrations took place from February 17 to 21, 2025, in various regions across Indonesia, including Yogyakarta, Solo, Jakarta, Banjarmasin, and elsewhere. Demonstrations with the theme "Indonesia Gelap" can serve as a symbol of resistance against various forms of injustice, the suppression of freedom, or policies deemed detrimental to the people.

During demonstrations, in addition to delivering speeches, demonstrators also carried posters containing criticisms and demands against the government. Posters are an effective visual communication medium for conveying messages and shaping public opinion. Posters serve not only as a means of expression but also as a representation of the public's understanding of democracy itself.

In the context of demonstrations, posters often contain symbols, slogans, and illustrations that reflect democratic values such as freedom of speech, justice, and human rights. However, the meanings of posters can vary depending on the social, political, and cultural context in which the demonstration takes place.

In today's digital media, the voices of demonstrations are then transmitted through digital devices. In addition to news narratives, posters carried by demonstrators also attract media attention. Several Indonesian media outlets then photographed these posters to publish as photo stories.

Picture 1. Demonstration poster summarized by VOA Indonesia



Source: <https://www.facebook.com/voaindonesia> (2025)

This study aims to examine the meaning contained in the "Indonesia Gelap" demonstration poster using a semiotic approach. By analyzing the signs, symbols, and messages contained in the poster, this study will reveal how the demonstrators represented the democratic crisis in the poster's visuals, as well as the underlying ideology. Therefore, analyzing the meaning of the poster in the demonstration is crucial for understanding how democracy is represented in the public sphere.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Demonstrations in a Democratic Country

Democracy has greater value because it has been adopted by various countries, both developed and developing, as a system of government that is considered ideal (Fakza & Tandyonomanu, 2020). Democracy as a political and governmental system in Indonesia remains a matter of debate within society. One form of controversy that has arisen is the rejection of the democratic system by certain groups, (Rohma, 2019). As a country based on democratic principles in its political system, Indonesia has a significant responsibility to implement them in daily life, including in the process of electing leaders.

Leadership that involves the active participation and contribution of all citizens reflects democratic values, (Adijaya, 2019).

Democracy is seen as a universal principle and a norm that applies across nations. Therefore, many countries implement a democratic system of government. One of the main characteristics of this system is the mandatory general elections held every five years to elect representatives and national leaders. If elections are conducted with high transparency and integrity, the welfare of society can be optimally achieved, (Fakza & Tandyonomanu, 2020). However, in its implementation, democratic crises often occur which make democracy less than ideal.

A democratic crisis occurs when key principles of democracy, such as public participation, the rule of law, transparency, accountability, and good governance, begin to weaken. Elections, which ideally represent popular sovereignty, are often distorted by money politics, oligarchic power, and transactional practices, resulting in democracy remaining procedural and neglecting its substantive essence, (Ardiyansyah et al., 2025).

Semiotics in Posters

According to Sobur (2003), semiotics is a scientific discipline or analytical method used to study signs. Signs in this context function as tools or media that help humans understand the world and interact with one another. Meanwhile, Barthes (1988) in Kurniawan (2001) explains that semiology is the science that examines how humans assign meaning to various things. This process of assigning meaning differs from communication, because an object can convey information without having to be part of direct communication. If an object is to function in the communication process, the system formed must be structured based on existing signs, (Nugraha et al., 2022)

In the digital age and globalization, signs have become increasingly complex and multifaceted. Mass media such as television, film, and the internet use a variety of signs to convey messages to a wide audience. Advertising, for example, uses visual and verbal signs to influence consumer behavior. Social media allows individuals to create and disseminate signs that reflect their personal identities and build extensive social networks, (Uyunnisya, 2024).

A poster is a visual medium that combines various elements such as images, lines and text with the aim of attracting attention and conveying information or messages concisely, (Nugraha et al., 2022). According to Ramalia, Soedarsoni, and Esfandari (2016), posters are an attractive and easy-to-understand medium because they combine visual elements with concise text but have deep meaning, (Mustafa & Syahriani, 2021). Poster media is a visual communication media for conveying a message or information, where its role is very effective in implanting the memory of readers, (Matondang et al., 2022).

METHODOLOGY

This research is a qualitative research using descriptive methods. Data collection techniques in this study used observation and documentation. Observational data were obtained through observation of social media posts from official mass media (VOA Indonesia) related to the 'Indonesia Gelap' demonstration poster. After the observation, the researcher took a representative sample from the published posters. The sampling technique used purposive sampling. This study uses Roland Barthes' Semiotic Analysis with denotative, connotative, and myth analysis units. Therefore, this study not only reveals the meaning behind the signs but also the ideology that accompanies them.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In a democracy, citizens have the authority to express their opinions, whether they criticize or protest the government. One concrete form of freedom of opinion and expression for citizens is through demonstrations. Demonstrations provide a platform for citizens to express their opinions, aspirations, and critique government policies they perceive as unjust. In a democratic context, demonstrations are not only acts of protest but also a means of political communication between the people and the government.

During demonstrations, props also play a role in ensuring the message gets attention. Demonstrations rely not only on speeches delivered through loudspeakers but also on writing and images carried in the form of posters. The power of visual messages from symbolic sketches and the choice of sarcastic diction can attract the attention of the public and the mass media. The use of humorous words with subtle satire is more easily accepted and goes viral on social media, reaching even more people than speeches delivered in the field. This demonstrates that posters in the form of memes and sarcastic words are not just jokes but also political expressions that allow for intelligent, critical, and non-violent speech.



"Indonesia Gelap" was the slogan used in demonstrations across Indonesia in February 2025. The "Indonesia Gelap" protests were motivated by numerous issues, including budgetary issues, education issues, and revisions to several laws (the Indonesian National Armed Forces, Mineral and Coal Mining, and others). Several of the key issues demanded by the demonstrations were reflected in the posters and props the demonstrators carried. VOA Indonesia, one of the media outlets, shared various visual images of the protests.

In this study, posters as demonstration props need to be examined to see the forms of visual communication and political communication in the demonstration process. Through images, colors and diction, demonstration

posters convey criticism, hope and resistance in a way that is easy to understand and attracts public attention. This study uses semiotic analysis to uncover the meaning of the signs displayed in posters related to the "Indonesia Gelap" action. Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis divides reading into two stages: discovering denotative and connotative meanings and, in the next stage, discovering myths that emerge from the meaning of the message.

Ten images from the "Indonesia Gelap" protest were documented by VOA Indonesia and published on its social media channels. These ten images were the subject of this research analysis, which the researcher will discuss in the table below.

Table 1. Analysis of Denotative and Connotative Meaning

No	Picture	Denotative	Connotative
1		A poster with a cartoon image of The Simpsons crying accompanied by the words "YA ALLAH KENAPA AKU WNI".	The poster suggests that humans are born with a destiny determined by God, including being destined to become Indonesian citizens. Therefore, sadness and a form of rejection of fate lead to questioning the Creator. The choice of The Simpsons cartoon is also linked to several coincidences that occur in the future; this cartoon often has political and satirical content.
2		The poster features a photo of President Prabowo wearing a white shirt, with his hands on his head and a frown on his forehead, with several circles covering the photo. The poster is accompanied by the words "Parahmen. Kabinet Gemuk. Anggaran Pendidikan Dipangkas. Multifungsi TNI. 20 Juta Hektare Hutan Mau Dibabat. BIKIN SAKIT KEPALA".	The poster resembles a package for a headache medication, the brand name "Paramex," which has been changed to "Parahmen," meaning "very severe." The following text highlights the issues considered to be contributing factors to people's illnesses.
3		The image shows two posters carried by	The front poster emphasizes the satire

		term used to refer to someone.
5		<p>A demonstrator carried a poster depicting an anime character with a weapon. The poster also included the words "Lebih Baik dari Kabinet Merah Putih" at the top and "Efisien, Membantu Rakyat, Tidak Omon-Omon" at the bottom. A demonstrator smiled as he held up the poster.</p> <p>This poster shows the protest action from a youth perspective by comparing anime/fiction and the real Indonesian government as indicated by the words that say "Kabinet Merah Putih".</p> <p>This poster also emphasizes pessimism regarding the government's performance. "Omom-omom" has become a popular phrase used by President Prabowo during his campaign, aimed at criticizing those who produce too much rhetoric without results. The phrase backfired, as demonstrators aimed it at Prabowo's current administration.</p>
6		<p>The next image shows a demonstrator lying prone with a poster behind him. The poster is written in black and white and offers a comparison between the cabinet and the citizens. It depicts two opposing sides, with only one letter differing in meaning: "gemuk" and "gebuk".</p> <p>The prone position can be interpreted as indicating a sneak attack, but it can also be interpreted as a form of surrender.</p> <p>Black and white are two colors often used to define opposing sides.</p> <p>In relation to the satirical words used, the people and the cabinet are two separate entities. This, of course, is inconsistent with the spirit of democracy, where the cabinet represents the people. Yet, they are treated differently. Therefore, the tone of protest against this injustice becomes the focus of the voice.</p>
7	The image shows a demonstrator wearing	The all-black color scheme aligns with the



sunglasses and black clothing, with a blank, unsmiling expression. He holds a poster against a black background with the words "kita butuh gas LPG bukan Gaslight dari pejabat." Several words are written in white, green, and red letters, along with a sketch of the Indonesian Minister of Energy and Mineral Resources (ESDM).

protest theme "Indonesia Gelap" The poster's text emphasizes the dichotomy between us and the officials. The LPG gas issue is a key issue, addressing how the state is present to meet the people's needs. This demonstrates that the people have the right to demand that the government provide public services. Furthermore, the word "Gaslight" demonstrates how the government's (officials') response manipulates the public's psychology. The officials in question are depicted directly in the facial sketches on the poster.

8



A demonstrator carries a poster that reads: "Bobby Kertanegara kalau bisa ngomong juga akan sepakat #INDONESIAGELAP" accompanied by a picture of President Prabowo holding a cat that is scratching his face.

Bobby is the name of President Prabowo's pet cat, which lives at his residence in Kertanegara. This poster is a joke, suggesting that not only all levels of society, but even a cat is protesting against President Prabowo.

9



The next image shown by VOA Indonesia is a poster carried by a demonstrator. At the top, a person wearing a jersey with a soccer club logo is shown.

Below, several demonstrators are using smartphones, seemingly taking pictures with their cameras. They are holding red and white posters with the following text: "Ini mah 3 Periode tapi pake second account". Still

Popular culture dominated the posters carried by demonstrators at the "Indonesia Gelap" protest. They compared the current state of Indonesia to a football club, used cartoon attributes, and linked it to the "second account" phenomenon prevalent in the digital world.

The messages were delivered using popular issues, with a satirical tone, to highlight the issues in a simple way.

around him there are clowns using the cartoon The Simpsons.

10



The image shows demonstrators carrying a large poster, a screenshot of one of President Prabowo's social media posts. The 2016 post reflects Prabowo's perspective on the demonstrations.

The posters carried by the demonstrators were an attempt to validate their activities. However, they could also be used to criticize current President Prabowo's actions, which are deemed inconsistent with his digital footprint in 2016.

Source: Researcher Analysis Results, 2025.

Based on the explanation of denotative and connotative meanings in the table above, the researchers then analyzed the myths raised in the posters carried by demonstrators during the "Indonesia Gelap" demonstration, which were selected by VOA Indonesia as photo reports. The researchers grouped them into several points, as follows:

A. Dichotomy of the People and the Government

In a democracy, the people have sovereignty over the government. When a dichotomy exists between the government and the people, it certainly indicates a democratic crisis, as articulated in the vicious campaign "Indonesia Gelap." This is highlighted in five of the ten posters, which highlight the pressing issues arising from the government's lack of support for its citizens. The people are subjected to policies that only benefit the government. Furthermore, several government programs, which emphasize efficiency, are deemed to have failed to achieve true efficiency among officials.

B. Pessimism in Current Policies and Past Problems

Narratives related to past human rights violations committed by President Prabowo continued to emerge during the "Indonesia Gelap" protests. Furthermore, numerous posters suggested that President Prabowo's administration was still in the shadow of the previous president, whose policies were considered failures. This fueled pessimism among those hoping for change.

C. Protest Narratives in Popular Culture

Nearly all of the posters carried by demonstrators featured by VOA Indonesia featured popular culture themes, ranging from anime and cartoons to football clubs and social psychology, to digital activities.

This is compelling because the protest message is presented in a minimalist yet meaningful manner. The connection between the issue and current social activities builds a connection with the reader, who is the one who gives meaning to the message.

From the research findings, the researcher then divided the discussion into two points which were of concern from the analysis carried out, namely:

a. The Crisis of Democracy Voiced in the "Indonesia Gelap" Demonstration

As intended, demonstrations provide a platform for people to voice criticism of government performance, and posters are a supporting tool in conveying that criticism. The critical message displayed in the "Indonesia Gelap" demonstration poster, published by VOA Indonesia on its social media pages, focuses on various government policies that are inconsistent with a democratic state.

Public participation, the supremacy of law, openness and accountability as well as the implementation of good governance in the state are the basic values of democracy that must be implemented, (Ardiyansyah et al., 2025). The government's failure to properly implement basic democratic values has fueled the demonstrations. The issue of the Indonesian National Army (TNI)'s multifunctional role has highlighted how the state grants legal legitimacy, which has led to its strengthening and the silencing of civil society. One poster also protested the stifling of freedom of speech, using the phrase "citizens beaten."

Vulnerabilities in democracy are demonstrated through anti-democratic actions that are often framed as solutions to existing social problems, (Dahlum et al., 2025). This interconnectedness between law enforcement, accountability, and good governance. The government was deemed not to be implementing good governance, as evidenced by the messages on demonstration posters protesting, among other things, the slashed education budget and the formation of a cabinet with too many members, which contradicts the stated mission of efficiency.

The message conveyed through the "Indonesia Gelap" demonstration poster represents a form of democratic awareness of the various policies the government has adopted to address the issues currently facing Indonesia. Democratic awareness emerges when individuals experience discomfort, compare experiences, and engage in critical dialogue. This awareness develops from pre-existing values and commitments, (Chankseliani et al., 2025). Therefore, demonstrations are needed as a reminder that a democratic crisis may be faced if government policies are not corrected.

b. Demonstration Posters Distributed on Social Media: Representation of Public Discourse

Mass media is needed as an intermediary in the wider and more efficient dissemination of information, (Perdana et al., 2023). Today's mass media have utilized social media as a platform for disseminating information and news. VOA Indonesia has also done this by sharing photo reports related to the "Indonesia Gelap" demonstration on its Facebook and Instagram channels. Social media has become a platform that allows for interactivity, allowing messages to be reproduced and re-shared.

Social media, with its interactivity advantage, provides opportunities and space for diverse and constructive dialogue, which has implications for shaping public opinion on policies and events. Therefore, in today's digital age, social media forums are needed as mechanisms to represent and gauge public opinion, (Sarwar et al., 2025). The critical message contained in the "Indonesia Gelap" demonstration poster certainly created its own meaning in the minds of the audience. Opinions can also develop through the comments section, which features diverse perspectives and often shares similar assessments.

In the culturalist approach, the messages individuals interpret are the result of negotiations based on their experiences. Cultural backgrounds, ideologies, and knowledge will provide various interpretations that may differ from the messages conveyed by the media, (Perdana, 2020). In today's world, as McLuhan described it, where we are "global villagers," shared preferences are possible, given our interconnectedness through the spread of information. The message conveyed on the "Dark Indonesia" demonstration poster, packaged in various terminologies, can also foster audience engagement. The use of anime, football clubs, cartoons, and specific terms like "omon-omon" and "ndasmu," conveys a meaning deeply connected to the audience's experiences and knowledge. The term "omon-omon" is not simply a substitute for "nonsense," but more than that, it is a way for protesters to distort reality and the government's commitments. Likewise, the term "ndasmu" is not simply a substitute for "your head," but rather a manifestation of anger. Previously unlikely to appear in formal state forums, the term "ndasmu" has now become a common insult referring to the head of state.

Social media has become key to the dissemination of cultural knowledge, influencing public cognition, cultural identity, and cross-cultural interactions in today's digital age. On social media platforms, users can reproduce content through imitation, editing, and secondary processing, adapting to the rhythms and preferences of digital communication interests, (Huang, 2025). The "Indonesia Gelap" demonstration poster published by VOA on its social media pages isn't just about reporting an event, but also

about encouraging the audience to interpret and evaluate the meaning of each message. This can even contribute to the formation of public opinion on the issues presented by the media.

This research ultimately found a representation of democracy, indicating that the "Indonesia Gelap" demonstrations were carried out by the people due to a crisis of trust in the government and protest against policies that were not in favor of the people. This research also found that in the digital era, demonstrations are not only carried out in person but also brought into the virtual world to expand their distribution and reach a wider audience. Demonstration posters are necessary to understand how protest messages are constructed, through symbols and sarcasm. This has implications for the formation of public opinion and social movements, both in person and on social media.

CONCLUSION

From the analysis conducted, it can be concluded that the "Indonesia Gelap" demonstration represents a form of public protest against current government policies that do not support the welfare of the people. There is a form of pessimism regarding the performance of the new leadership, which is still overshadowed by the previous administration. In today's digital era, the posters carried by demonstrators will attract attention not only on the ground but also on social media and the mass media. Therefore, packaging the message by connecting it to popular culture will increase the insight of the message so that it can be understood by the entire community. This also represents a new step to overcome the apathy of the younger generation in voicing or expressing their political views.

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