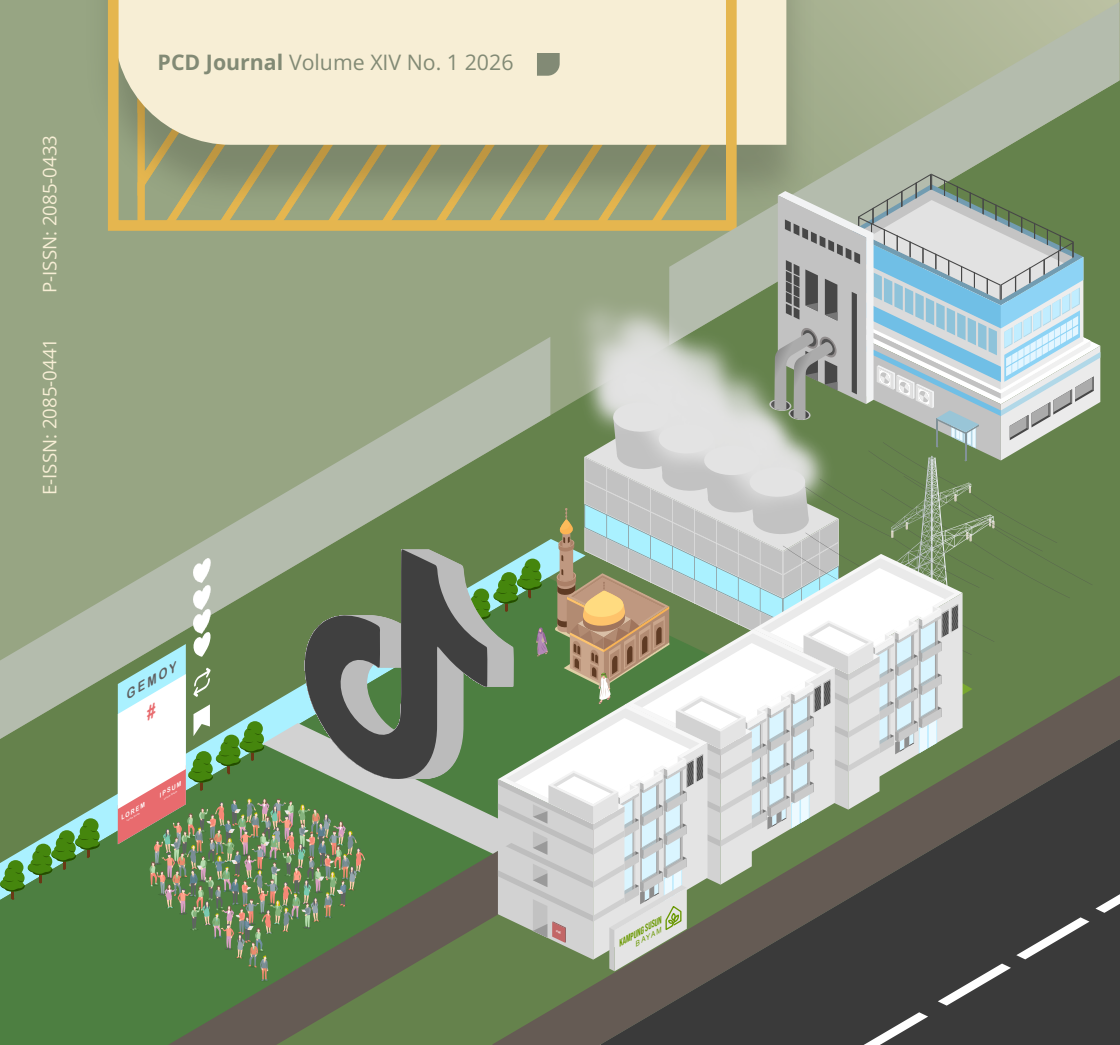
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Power, Conflict and Democracy Journal (PCD Journal) is an international refereed journal initiated by the Power, Conflict, and Democracy (PCD) consortium, a collaborative work by the University of Colombo in Sri Lanka, Universitas Gadjah Mada in Indonesia, and the University of Oslo in Norway. This network also comprised Demos Indonesia (the Indonesian Centre for Democracy and Human Rights Studies), the Social Scientists' Association of Sri Lanka, and the International Centre for Ethnic Studies in Sri Lanka. PCD Journal is an initiative dedicated to advancing high-quality academic research and reports focused on the dynamics of power, conflict, and democracy in the Global South, with particular emphasis on South and Southeast Asia. This journal publishes articles, literature review, field notes, and book reviews in major sub fields of political science, prioritizing themes such as rights-based democratic practices, popular representation, and participatory public policy. Recognizing the significant scarcity of scholarly publishers in this region and thematic area—partly attributable to geographic biases in international publishing, PCD Journal aims to address and transform this imbalance. The initiative primarily operates within the social sciences, encompassing sub fields including political science, human geography, and political anthropology. While the journal is open to all methodological approaches, all submissions are expected to be theoretically grounded. The journal can be of great value to teachers, students, researchers, experts, journalists, and social movement activist dealing with these issues and regions.

Submission

Submitted papers should be no longer than 8,000 words excluding tables and figures. Submit the manuscript via e-mail to the editor-in-chief at pcd@ugm.ac.id.

Manuscript Preparation

For detailed instruction check our website: https://jurnal.ugm.ac.id/v3/PCD or http://www.jurnal.ugm.ac.id/pcd.

Peer Review

Every submitted article will be subject to peer review. The normal review period is three months. Most research articles in this journal have undergone rigorous peer review based on initial editorial screening and refereeing by anonymous referees. Authors should take care that the manuscript contains no clues as to identity. Nevertheless, articles published under 'Research Notes' section, aimed at setting up future research agenda, arenonpeer-reviewed.

PCD Programme

The state of democracy in the Global South is marked by a striking paradox: while liberal democracy has attained an ideologically hegemonic position through two so-called waves of democracy, the qualities of such democracies is increasingly called into question. The "old" democracies in the global South like Sri Lanka are weakened. Democracy deficits have emerged within constitutional and institutional arrangements as well as in political practices. Further, the "third wave of democracy "is over. "New" democracies like in Indonesia have fostered freedoms, privatisation and decentralisation but continue to suffer from poor governance, representation and participation.Hence there are general signs of decline. Vulnerable people are frustrated with lack of actual influence and sustained elitism. Politicians winning elections often need to foster ethnic and religious loyalties, clientelism and the abuse of public resources. Powerful groups and middle classes with poor ability to win elections tend to opt for privatisation and return partially to authoritarian governance.

Critical questions are therefore asked about the feasibility of democracy in developing country contexts. Some observers say it is only a problem of better crafting of institutions. Others contend that "full" democratisation was premature in the first place and that necessary preconditions need to be created beforehand. Both positions are based on a narrow and static understanding of democracy. While the core elements of democracy are universal, real world democracies develop (or decline) over time and through contextual dynamics; in processes and contexts of actors, institutions and

relations of power. Therefore, the crucial task is to analyse the problems and options of expanding the historically "early" freedoms and deficient elements of democracy that fortunately exist in spite of poor socio- economic and political conditions in counties such as Sri Lanka and Indonesia rather than giving up on these freedoms until the other have somehow improved. This is to advance towards the universally accepted aim of democracy in terms of popular control of public affairs on the basis of political equality, and to be able to use democracy to handle conflicts and alter unequal and unsustainable development.

With this in mind, researchers at the University of Oslo (Norway), Gadjah Mada (Indonesia) and Colombo (Sri Lanka) have come together in a collective research— and post- graduate programme. The idea is to pool their research projects and results, and to promote doctoral as well as master studies by way of, first, a joint framework for analysing power, conflict and democracy and, second, a basic electronic peer reviewed journal and report series (published by PCD-Press) to the benefit of students, scholars and priorities in the region. Basic resources—in addition to the participants own voluntary work and projects— are provided by their respective universities and the Norwegian Centre for International Cooperation in Higher Education (SIU).

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Reclaiming Spaces from the Margins: The Making and Shaping of Participatory Spaces in the Development of Kampung Susun Bayam

Ahmad Ryan Faza Siddiq[1]

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Abstract

This article explores the social production of participatory spaces, its effect on the participatory mechanisms, and how marginalised groups could reshape these spaces to claim their rights. The issue of housing the poor in Indonesia has rarely been a participatory process and is dominated by state-led evictions and government-controlled public housing. A recent initiative proposed by urban poor social movements, termed kampung susun attempted to shift decision-making and empower the marginalised. Despite early successful attempts, not all have managed to deliver changes smoothly. This article aims to investigate how these spaces of participation could fail to achieve transformative results and what kinds of opportunities exist for reclaiming decisive participation. The study argues that existing power relations and prevailing political culture of the local bureaucracy, state-owned company, and even within the urban poor hinders attempts at delivering the desired outcome for the movement. Nevertheless, avenues of reshaping spaces still exist through electoral institutions and the act of creating their own spaces of engagement.

Keywords: *Participation; development; spaces; social movements*

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Introduction

For the urban poor of Jakarta, struggles in affording decent housing have characterised their everyday politics of precariousness. Despite earlier visions of 'social housing' proposed by Muhammad Hatta, the government's treatment of the urban poor has never been far from neglect and exclusion (Kusno, 2024). After the fall of Suharto and the New Order regime, democratic institutions have provided the urban poor with new spaces of participation to take advantage of and maneuver around.

The *kampung susun* projects is perceived as a result of this opening, in which urban poor residents of evicted *kampung* had the participatory space to design and operate the *kampung susun*, a new form of vertical housing in which the poor could dictate their own terms of engagement (Putri, 2020; Sari et al., 2023). However, the processes had not always been straightforward, which was the case for recipients of the *kampung susun* in Bayam, North Jakarta (Kampung Susun Bayam). The infrastructure was nearly taken over from them and failing to improve their well-being, which led to questions on how feasible participatory development really is for empowering the marginalised.

Literature surrounding participatory initiatives has been riddled with critiques regarding its potential to entrench already existing

inequalities rather than delivering transformative social changes (Cornwall, 2002; Hickey and Mohan, 2005). From early approaches to participation the 1970s, which aims to include recipients for purposes of cost efficiency by sharing burdens of the project (Bamberger, 1986) and achieving compliance (Cornwall, 2002), to a neoliberal perspective of 'user and chooser' (Cornwall and Gaventa, 2001) that positioned recipients as consumers, these initiatives were seen as depoliticising the acts of participation and ignoring its social and political context. Projects were deemed too focused on personal reform rather than political struggle (Chambers, 1994), overtly romanticising the 'local' (Mohan, 2001), and appropriating alternative visions of development (Henkel and Stirrat, 2001). This has led to the susceptibility of participatory avenues to elite capture, domesticating local organisations, obfuscating existing power relations within communities, and hence sustaining social, political, and economic inequalities.

Some scholars have prescribed methods on which participatory development could fulfill their transformative potential. Glynn (2004) underscored the democratic tendencies in participatory projects that could be taken advantage by social movements and/or NGOs to realise actual political changes, i.e. the

characteristics of transparency and self-criticism. He also highlights that the initiatives must be imaginative and attempt to pressurise the expansion of participatory chances into other arenas. Meanwhile, in a more citizenship-oriented analysis, Hickey and Mohan (2005) argued that successful attempts to achieving transformative changes in participatory approaches are most likely to follow four characteristics: pursued as a wider political project, aimed at citizenship rights and participation for marginal groups, engaging development as an underlying process for social change rather than mere technocratic innovation, and a structural separation between the modes of accumulating political and economic power in the targeted community (Hickey and Mohan, 2005).

Both of these literatures gave considerable input on transformative methods; however, Glynn (2004) gives too much attention to the marginalised's agency (which is of course still crucial), but few on the power relations supplementing these institutions. While Hickey and Mohan's (2005) analysis on social movements falls short on how the agency of these movements manage competing interests of the government and/or donors when they are invited into participatory institutions. Questions evaluating end results are not enough, and more should be done to

dissect the political background of participatory arenas and how this affects the dynamic within them. To this end, the concept of participatory spaces is highly useful.

Spaces of participation is defined as opportunities and moments where citizen engagement is conceived and perceived and has the potential to affect policies and discourses (Cornwall, 2002; Gaventa, 2006). This notion was built upon conceptions by Lefebvre, Foucault, and Bourdieu, which underlined the interrelation between power and difference in the making of space and the interplays within them (Cornwall, 2002). Lefevbre's (1991) influence lies on his notion of the production of space, in which each social space is the outcome of past actions, etching within it a 'generative past' that influences future action. His thought helps in dismantling assumptions of space as a political vacuum and to analyse spaces in regard to the past power relations that constitute them. From Bourdieu (1997), uncontested and entrenched patterns of interaction in social spaces could become embodied in particular places. Foucault (1975) suggest the replication of existing power relations in new arenas, domination through architecture, and the affect of discourse on shaping spaces. However, Cornwall (2002) also noted the influence of Foucault's thought on the permeability of

these spaces and the 'strategic reversibility' of power relations, which enables multiple points of resistance and the possibility of reshaping those spaces.

Based on how and by whom spaces are created, Gaventa (2006) divided spaces into three categories: closed spaces, invited spaces, and claimed/created spaces. Closed spaces are arenas in which decisions are negotiated solely within by actors of the state without inclusion whatsoever of the public. Invited spaces are created by various authorities (whether government, supranational agencies, or NGOs) that invites the public to participate in the process of development. Cornwall (2002) dichomotised these invited spaces into those that are regularised, which are more institutionalised, and 'fleeting formations,' which are transient in nature and rarely devolves decision-making. Claimed spaces, on the other hand, are arenas initiated purely by less powerful actors, or claimed by them from authorities. These spaces could also be institutionalised in the forms of groups or associations (Cornwall, 2002). Gaventa (2006) underlined the dynamic relationship within the three forms of spaces, as constantly leaving room for opening up and closing. Closed spaces could be opened up by a motive for legitimacy, while invited spaces could be restricted when little resistance is offered from other spaces to

counteract powerful elite interests.

Despite it being a creation of more powerful actors, invited spaces still harbor potential to deliver transformative changes that could reconfigure power relations. Cornwall (2017) argues that this potential is determined by the locus of its creation, whether it is a result of public demand (termed conquered spaces) or the initiative of authoritative actors (provided spaces). It is also contingent on the landscape of the existing governance, whether there is popular mobilisation, support from a ruling party, or a highly organised bureaucracy. Lastly are the 'particularities of context,' which are history of power relations in governance and the existing political culture.

In the case of Jakarta, some scholars have examined how social movements of the urban poor creatively move between these spaces and deploy a number of strategies to defend their livelihood (Savirani and Aspinall, 2017; Putri, 2020; Sari et al., 2023; Irawaty et al., 2023). They showed how the urban poor movement of Jakarta was able to be invited into new spaces as a result of political contracts and the electoral process. Irawaty et al. (2023, p. 990) argued how the political contracts the urban poor arranged were a form of invented space, due to being a vehicle to envision a form of living distinct to the urban poor. However, at the same

time they were also an invited space by using the electoral process and giving the urban poor a voice in urban governance (Irawaty et al., 2023, p. 998).

By analysing the case of participatory development in the Kampung Susun Bayam (KSB) project, this article attempts to resolve two main questions: how did spaces intially intended to be inclusive could in the midst of development be closed off? And how a reshaping of spaces is possible despite attempts at pushing less powerful actors to the margins? In the process of the answering these two main questions, Cornwall (2002) and Gaventa's (2006) work on participatory spaces provided supplementary questions that should be asked on an analysis of participation in development: how is the configuration of existing power relations? What is the political, social, or economic context of the production of said space? Who initiated, chose the methods, and facilitated the space? Who takes part? And finally, how do the people involved perceive these spaces?

This article would hope to provide the 'particularities' that Cornwall (2002, 2017) underscored in order to fully understand the transformative capabilities of participation. Cornwall (2002) argues that there is no panacea for influential development, therefore this case study could contribute to an understanding of

development struggles from a Global South perspective and of a post-authoritarian nation slipping back to its repressive past.

In order to answer these questions, in-depth qualitative interviews were conducted with six individuals. Two of the interviewees are active organisers in the Bayam urban poor movement. Due to the conflict that divided the Bayam movement into two groups, interviews were conducted with the leader of each group to avoid factional bias.

Two other interviewees are organisers from two different NGOs that have accompanied the Bayam urban poor. These activists came from different organisations, each of which sided with one of the opposing Bayam groups, again to avoid factional bias.

The final two interviewees were involved in a similar development project in Kampung Susun Akurarium. Their experiences help situate the historical context of participatory spaces in housing development in Jakarta and provide a comparison for understanding how two similar participatory spaces can lead to different trajectories.

To balance perspectives, interviews with Jakpro and the Jakarta Provincial Government were initially sought. However, Jakpro declined the request and the Provincial Government did not respond. As a result, this article draws on official statements made in press

conferences and media interviews to represent their perspectives. The rationale is that any potential interview would likely not diverge significantly from the public narrative they have already articulated.

Explanations regarding the historical context of power relations were taken from literature of government interventions on housing, particularly which targets the urban poor and of the Bayam urban poor's previous experience confronting state policies. Interviews with Bayam residents and NGO activists are expected to reveal their experiences in the original process of space production, interaction with more powerful actors during the process of participation, and attempts of reshaping places that threatens to limit their room for participation. Besides their experiences, answers regarding their perception on those spaces are also sought for, specifically on how they 'perceive and enact' their sense of citizenship (Cornwall, 2002).

The article is divided into four sections. The first part introduced background context for the case study and explores various literature regarding participatory initiatives, their propensity for transformative change, and the concept of spaces of participation. The second section gives historical context on housing development policy targeting the poor in Jakarta,

government treatment of the Kampung Bayam settlement, and production of participatory space in housing development. The third part examines how the Bayam urban poor movement and NGO activists took part in the newly created space, the mechanisms which restricts their inclusion, and the attempts to reshape these spaces to their favour. The final part concludes the article by resolving the questions posed in the first section and offering insights for future endeavours in participatory development.

Histories of Housing Development on the Urban Poor

The Indonesian governments handling of housing exhibits a continuity with the attitudes of the Dutch colonial government (Kusno, 2024). Prioritising land and housing projects to those of more affluent economic status, while delivering scarce attention to the livelihood of the poor. During the authoritarian New Order regime, expansive economic growth was followed with rapid urbanisation, and with neither state nor private actors providing a formal market for lower-income families, the spread of informal settlements intensified (Zhu & Simarmata, 2015).

Of the limited interventions the state conducted during the New Order, almost all were of top-down nature. Programmes such as a national low-cost housing

scheme (PERUMNAS) and a mixed housing ratio policy (The 1:3:6 Policy) were policies born purely from closed spaces without public involvement. These progammes also faced criticism for inadequately solving the housing backlog (Tunas and Peresthu, 2010). Two programmes contain some sort of participation, however all were backed by foreign donors. The Kampung Improvement Program (KIP) was fully funded by the World Bank and attempted to upgrade local infrastructure in informal settlements rather than supplying housing. Local residents were invited to collaborate under guidance of a local committee in determining the needs of their settlement, such as repairing roads, drainage, or water sanitation (Tunas and Peresthu, 2010). It was regarded as highly successful in its objective. However, some critique it lacked sustainability after the flight of donors (Werlin, 1999; Taylor, 2016). The other programme was the P2BPK, a community-based housing development programme. It was a Ministry of Public Housing project with support from UNHCS and UNDP. The programme intended to lower housing costs by including communities and directing them to mobilise resources such as labor and finance (Rukmana, 2018).

The Kampung Bayam settlement did not become recipients of any of the aforementioned programmes.

It was a settlement formed surrounding Bersih Manusiawi dan Berwibawa (BMW) Park in the Papanggo subdistrict, Northern Jakarta. Muhammad Furqon, a farmer in Kampung Bayam and head of the Bayam farmers community (Tani Bayam Madani), claimed he was the second generation to have settled and farmed in the area. Dwellings have been built since as early as the 1980s, when a few migrants from rural areas took advantage of unused land and began farming them (Interview with Furqon, Head of Tani Bayam Madani, 20 April 2025).

The fall of the authoritarian regime after 1998 unleashed a wave of democratic reforms in the country. One consequential political reform was the decentralisation of powers from the central government to local apparatus, mainly city and regency governments. This reform offered city governments more flexibility in utilising fiscal income, which enabled projects tailored to local-specific needs. Coupled with the introduction of direct electoral elections, this would provide the breeding ground for new political spaces. However, these seemingly inclusive reforms did not halt the state's repressive acts against the urban poor. Evictions are still a routine occurrence in the capital in which security forces clear off poor households, supported by thugs and ethnic gangs paid for by the state, local

government, or corporations (Wilson, 2019). Wilson (2019) also describes how large segments of the urban poor still relies on relations of patronage for their material needs. Class-based solidarity is deemed as risky and limiting opportunities for the urban poor, and due to long-standing anti-lefitst stigma in Indonesia, risks inviting unwanted hostility.

Bayam was not exempted from repressive acts by authorities. The settlement experienced several evictions prior to 2017, with one massive eviction by the provincial government under Governor Fauzi Bowo in 2008. The evictions were part of plans to build a new stadium for Jakarta's football club. The provincial government utilised not only Satpol PP, the local government's security apparatus, in displacing *kampung* residents, but also squads of thugs or *preman*. These *preman* came from various 'civil' organisations or *ormas*, surrounding the Bayam residents with their *ormas* flags encircling the settlement (Interview with Furqon, Head of Tani Bayam Madani, 20 April 2025). Shirley Aplonia, Head of the Bayam peoples' cooperative (PWKB), reiterated that the 2008 evictions eventually drove the Bayam residents from the centre of the park to its outskirts, eventually bordering a railway (Interview with Shirley Aplonia, Head of PWKB, 12 May 2025). However, they were still technically in the park area,

and thus any further projects in the park would inadvertently result in their complete eviction.

As a response to frequent repression by the state and its private partners, some organisations were formed with the aim of protecting the interests of the urban poor. The Urban Poor Consortium (UPC) was founded to organise the *kampungs* of the urban poor and defend their social, political, and economic rights. Situating the urban poor rather than elites as instigators of political change, UPC was bringing forward an ideology that could be perceived as radical under a regime paranoid of remotely anything mimicking lower class resistance (Savirani & Guntoro, 2020). UPC worked in tandem with JRMK (Jaringan Rakyat Miskin Kota) which is an alliance of the Jakarta urban poor, consisting of *becak* drivers, street sellers, and *kampung* dwellers. While the diversity of its consortium could lead to a broader understanding of being poor, this heterogeneity also creates difficulty in perceiving commonality (Wilson, 2019).

In 2012, facing incoming gubernatorial elections, UPC/JRMK engineered a political contract with eventual winners Jokowi-Ahok. This linkage resulted in the first housing programme born from the urban poor's participation. Taking advantage of a new regulation that gave local governments more fiscal power in housing, the Jokowi government refurbished 123

homes in the Petogogan area, being the first local government to initiate a housing programme (Savirani & Aspinall, 2017; Rukmana, 2018). The programme was received positively by *kampung* residents owing to an increase in living standards and reducing disruptions caused by evictions (Rukmana, 2018).

Jokowi's deputy and successor, Basuki Tjahaja Purnama or commonly known as Ahok, initially continued to utilise participatory methods in dealing with the housing of urban poor. However, in order to solve Jakarta's flood problem and appease the middle-class, Ahok began using an 'iron fist' approach by mass evicting *kampungs* along riverbanks without prior negotiation and mostly inadequate compensation (LBH Jakarta, 2017). Bayam was also affected by Ahok's regime, with the government disturbing residents' water supply and pressuring them to flee the land (Interview with M. Furqon, Head of Tani Bayam Madani, 20 April 2025). Under Ahok, evicted residents were forced to locate to state-built low-income vertical housing termed *rusunawa*. However, it also has several disadvantages, including relative seclusion, insecure tenure, the loss of community, and a deprivation of agency (Siagian, 2024).

Ahok's repressive approach led to UPC/JRMK endorsing Anies Baswedan in the 2017 elections. The political contract assembled with

Anies was more detailed and rigorous than the Jokowi-Ahok agreement in order to prevent another reversal of approach (Savirani & Aspinall, 2017). Anies eventually won the elections and for a second time UPC/JRMK achieved political influence by virtue of political contract. The demands surrounding settlement and housing were executed through two new programmes: Community Action Plan (CAP) and Collaborative Implementation Program (CIP). These programmes were a collaborative framework that aimed to include the urban poor and NGOs in the planning process (through CAP) and the construction (through CIP) of *kampung* developments (Sari et al., 2023). From the CAP programme, evicted kampung residents were aided by NGO activists and architects to design a new mode of housing for the urban poor called the *kampung susun* with support from the Provincial Housing Agency.

The *kampung susun* is a form of mid-rise low-cost housing that differs from *rusunawa* in the decision-making process of its day-to-day operations. Rather than the local or national housing department, residents themselves manage the building through a cooperative, taking over matters ranging from maintenance to finances (Irawaty & Muhammad, 2023). The first projects were constructed in the former settlements of Kampung

Akuarium, Kampung Kunir, and the Cakung area. Topaz Juanda, Head of a Neighborhood Unit (RT) in Kampung Akuarium, claimed that the idea of *kampung susun* had actually been formulated by the *kampung* members, NGO activists, and urban architects before Anies had entered office. Thus when the CAP was kickstarted, the *kampung susun* concept had already been relatively mature (Interview with Topaz Juanda, Head of RT, 22 May 2025).

The Housing Agency played a relatively minor role in planning of future day-to-day operations (Interview with Topaz Juanda, Head of RT, 22 May 2025). Debates did occur between the agency and the cooperative; however, most concerned technical aspects of the building (Interview Topaz Juanda, Head of RT, 22 May 2025). Sari et al. (2023) described how arguments emerged between architects appointed by the agency and architects accompanying the urban poor movement. The urban poor and activists criticised how the government-appointed planners projected a sense of superior expertise during the planning process (Irawaty et al., 2023, p. 1000).

After two of the planned five blocks in KSA were completed in 2021, residents were not yet allowed to move into the site by the housing agency due to administrative reasons. Fearing exclusion from the compound, residents occupied the building before the housing agency

completed the administrative process. The Akuarium urban poor also demanded intervention from Governor Anies, who proceeded to instruct bureaucrats below to speed up the process. Musdalifah, Secretary of the KSA Cooperative, claimed that residents were successful in inhabiting KSA in part due to being sheltered in close proximity to the building during construction.

At first, the Provincial Government rejected the proposed location of the shelter, citing security concerns. However, the movement insisted and eventually constructed the shelter themselves without major support from the government. The shelter's location was intended to ease supervision of the building's construction by the urban poor and was incited by fears of the building being reappropriated by the authorities after completion (Interview with Musdalifah, Secretary of the KSA Cooperative, 22 May 2025). Conflict initially arose within the Akuarium urban poor regarding the allocation of spaces within the shelter; however, this was short-lived, attributed to a strong leadership by Yuni, head of the Akuarium cooperative (Interview with Musdalifah, Secretary of the KSA Cooperative, 22 May 2025).

After Caretaker Governor Heru took over office from Anies in 2022, the three remaining blocks experienced a sluggish construction

process. Topaz complained that after Anies, the bureaucrats in charge were 'back to their default settings.' They had no pressure from above to quickly accommodate the urban poor. The urban poor were also never given a chance to even meet face to face with Heru during his term (Interview with Topaz Juanda, Head of RT, 22 May 2025).

This section has attempted to provide a chronological narrative of the power relations and political culture that pervades low-income housing policy interventions and the urban poor of Jakarta. Development policies on low-income housing during the New Order era were mostly arenas closed to public participation. Of those that do, all were financially backed up by supranational donors and reflected aforementioned critiques on participatory development. The P2BPK programme approached inclusion as a method of cost-efficiency, and while the KIP programme did receive community aspirations, they were still quite passive agents and no attempt at reconfiguring power relations were present, unsurprisingly.

Democratisation did open up spaces, and these were taken advantaged of by organised urban poor groups engaging in direct local elections. This has resulted in a participatory space which has been used to challenge existing assumptions regarding housing development as a top-down

approach and implement visions of an empowered community. Construction of the *kampung susun* displayed a culture of resistance. Collectivity is also apparent within the urban poor and has given birth to a successful experiment in transformative development.

However, post-authoritarian Indonesia exhibits a culture of violent evictions and paradigms of patronage that still prevails and fragments the poor. Policy influences are still dependent on a linkage with elite candidates rather than candidates from within these movements. Hence, they are prone to reversibility due to not having any institutional leverage, such as through legislative bodies. Also noteworthy are contestations of knowledge within the CAP spaces, which shows that the prejudice towards knowledge from less powerful actors or non-professionals still persists within bureaucratic institutions.

Making and Shaping Spaces in Bayam

In 2019, Kampung Bayam underwent its largest eviction process to make way for the Jakarta International Stadium (JIS). The process was led by Jakpro, a real estate company majority-owned by Jakarta's Provincial Government. Rather than immediately using force, Jakpro persuaded residents with compensation under the guise of a "Resettlement Action Plan" (Mujtahid & Machdum, 2024). In the midst

of this resettlement programme, a group of fifty households under the leadership of Furqon were still hesitant on whether to accept the compensations. These households engaged in farming and thus far more dependent on the land. Gugun Muhammad, Coordinator of UPC, claimed that Furqon was inspired by *kampung susun* that has undergone planning in several *kampungs* and eventually demanded a *kampung susun* for themselves (Interview with Gugun Muhammad, Coordinator of UPC, 5 May 2025). Anies, who two years prior won the election and had built an image of a pro-poor leader, eventually accepted their demands. Aid money was given in order to build a temporary shelter until both the JIS and the KSB finished construction (Interview with Furqon, Head of Tani Bayam Madani, 20 April 2025).

A collaborative institution for planning was then constructed, similar to the Community Action Plan already underway in other *kampung susun* projects. The Bayam residents were aided by architects from the University of Indonesia to help translate their aspirations (Interview with Furqon, Head of Tani Bayam Madani, 20 April 2025). However, in Bayam the role of the housing agency was replaced by the Jakpro company, who is also responsible for the JIS project adjacent to the proposed KSB. For KSB, Jakpro had planned to build 135 units. First 50

units were to be occupied by Bayam farmers organised under Furqon. The next 35 units were allocated to Bayam residents who had assisted Jakpro in persuading other residents to accept compensations during the earlier eviction process. These residents were referred to as *warga binaan* by other residents. *Binaan* literally means 'fostered' or 'guided,' implying that they were perceived as being subordinate to Jakpro. Gugun Muhammad claimed that Jakpro allocated these units in return for their role in the eviction process (Interview with Gugun Muhammad, Coordinator of UPC, 5 May 2025). Jakpro had given no explanation for allocation of the remaining 50 units. UPC/JRMK proposed these units be occupied by other former Bayam residents. Gugun explained this was to avoid the units being misused by Jakpro, especially for commercial purposes (Interview with Gugun Muhammad, Coordinator of UPC, 5 May 2025). To fill the remaining units, UPC/JRMK searched for former Bayam residents who had been living in rental housing in and around Papanggo.

After finding the 50 potential households, UPC/JRMK gave the list to Jakpro and demanded a verification process. Jakpro accepted and a letter was soon issued by the Administrative Mayor of North Jakarta in June 2022 which would be the legal basis that verified and determined

the 135 inhabitants of KSB. A lottery was then held to distribute the units to the 135 households already verified. The verification letter explicitly divided upcoming inhabitants into three groups: The Huntara or Tani Bayam Madani group, residents living in the temporary shelter and led by Furqon; *binaan* Jakpro residents; and members of Persaudaraan Warga Kampung Bayam (PWKB). PWKB is a cooperative consisting of the 50 households that UPC/JRMK had found to occupy the remaining units. The group is headed by Shirley Aplonia. Since the construction of the temporary shelter in Tongkol, UPC/JRMK had parted ways with the Huntara group, citing disagreement with the leadership style which they perceived as less participative (Interview with Gugun Muhammad, Coordinator of UPC, 5 May 2025). Understanding the fragmentation of Bayam residents into these three groups is crucial to grasping how the dynamic that eventually emerged was possible.

As part of its Resettlement Action Plan, Jakpro established a cooperative for Bayam residents. This cooperative was created mainly to operate a workers canteen in JIS. In order to empower residents, as described by Mujtahid and Machdum (2024), income from the canteen would be distributed to residents and managed by the cooperative.

R, a resident from the Jakpro *binaan* group, won the election for head of cooperative in a process that other groups claimed had been heavily intervened in by Jakpro (Interview with Furqon, Head of Tani Bayam Madani, 20 April 2025; Interview Shirley Aplonia, Head of PWKB, 12 May 2025). Unlike *kampung* cooperatives formed in Akuarium, discussion and planning on the future management of KSB was never initiated due to the cooperative becoming overly focused on managing the canteen and the distribution of its profits (Interview Shirley Aplonia, Head of PWKB, 12 May 2025). Besides R, the board of the cooperative consisted of heads of the three groups. Shirley Aplonia, head of PWKB, eventually left the cooperative, claiming it was acting more like a puppet of Jakpro rather than for the interests of Bayam residents themselves. Conflict also arose due to suspicions of embezzlement of the canteen's profits and other income of the cooperative (Interview with Furqon, Head of Tani Bayam Madani, 20 April 2025). Jakpro persuaded cooperative leaders to distribute any external aid only to their respective groups and to restrict information to other cooperative members, a move which Shirley interpreted as an effort to divide Bayam residents (Interview Shirley Aplonia, Head of PWKB, 12 May 2025). After leaving, Shirley established a new cooperative with other

members of PWKB which earned its legal status in July 2022. PWKB started to initiate internal discussions regarding the future management of KSB, which they demanded to be maintained by occupants themselves. Jakpro ignored PWKB cooperative and insisted on KSB being managed by Jakpro.

The KSB was unveiled in October 2022, only four days before Anies left office. At the time, Anies promised that the housing could be inhabited in November, pending the completion of administrative processes. However, when November finally came, Jakpro, without prior notice, established a rental cost of 1.5 million rupiah. Both the Huntara group and PWKB rejected the nonsensical rent which was far above what future occupants could afford. Meanwhile, other *kampung susun* such as in Akuarium only had to pay the government a symbolic 1 million rupiah a year for five years (Irawaty & Muhammad, 2023). Defending their decision, Jakpro stressed how they have given compensation funds in the early eviction process (BBC News Indonesia, 2024). The narrative slowly morphed into KSB being built primarily to support JIS activities, not as a living space for formerly evicted Bayam residents (Kompas, 2024). Statements were even made by Jakpro that claimed the building was too 'fancy' to be inhabited by the Bayam people's and were of a 'commercial quality'

(Interview with Hari Apriawan, NGO activist, 23 April 2025). The Provincial Government, now under Caretaker Heru, responded by affirming this was a strictly Jakpro affair and declined to intervene (Republika, 2022). From then on, both of these groups would be engaged in a struggle against Jakpro and the Provincial Government to reclaim the KSB, proclaiming the jargon "*Kampung Bayam pulang ke rumah!*" (Bayam residents are coming home).

Henceforth, Jakpro would never accept meetings with the Bayam residents, and protests in front of their office was ignored. This led the Huntara group deciding that protests and mere requests for negotiation would not be enough. On March 2023, they decided to physically occupy the KSB by force. They claimed that the KSB rightfully belonged to them and that they had the right to inhabit it, whether officials approved or not (Interview with Furqon, Head of Tani Bayam Madani, 20 April 2025). The act was also done to incite officials from either Jakpro or the Provincial Government to meet residents and directly address their demands (Interview with Hari Apriawana, NGO activists, 23 April 2025). The guards were outnumbered and the occupiers quickly settled in the main courtyard. A few Jakpro officials eventually came to KSB, but residents demanded that high-ranking executives meet them. The Provincial Government, under

Caretaker Heru Budi, did not even meet with residents during the span of the occupation (Interview with Furqon, Head of Tani Bayam Madani, 20 April 2025). Heru often deflected responsibility solely to Jakpro, asserting KSB is an asset owned by Jakpro and thus the Provincial Government had no say in the affair.

While the Huntara households occupied the KSB, PWKB members erected tents behind the gates. From July 2023, Jakpro made efforts to relocate the tent dwellers due to the upcoming FIFA U-20 World Cup, with JIS set to serve as one of the host stadiums. The tent dwellers were then successfully persuaded to relocate to Rusunawa Nagrak, located 10 kilometres from KSB. They had written an agreement with the Chief of Papanggo, which stated that their stay in Rusunawa Nagrak was temporary and they would be returned back to KSB (Interview with Shirley Aplonia, Head of PWKB, 12 May 2025). Despite moving to Nagrak, PWKB remained active, and with legal assistance from LBH Jakarta, continued efforts to communicate their demands to the Provincial Government and Jakpro. With PWKB households moving to Nagrak, the Huntara group became the only group of the Bayam urban poor remaining in the KSB area.

After a year, Jakpro decided to take extreme measures to force the occupiers out. Furqon was

detained by police while visiting the shelter in April 2024. Following his detention, hundreds of police officers and JIS security personnel were deployed to reclaim the KSB by force. The occupiers held their ground and demanded that Furqon be released before any negotiations could take place. The clash ended with an agreement signed between the squatters and Jakpro which stated that further negotiations surrounding the future of Bayam residents housing would be mediated by Komnas HAM (National Committee for Human Rights), Furqon would be released from the police station; and occupiers would return to the shelter while awaiting the mediation process. The eventual negotiations mediated by Komnas HAM resulted in Huntara residents accepting the offer to relocate to a yet-to-be built *rusunawa* in Yos Sudarso street.

Bayam residents seemed to be in retreat and apparent defeat. However, the incoming 2024 gubernatorial elections offered a new opportunity. The Tani Bayam Madani group took advantage by inviting the three running candidates to the shelter. They eventually chose to establish an integrity pact with candidate Pramono-Rano. They had chosen Pramono instead of the other two candidates, Ridwan Kamil and Dharmono, because they had thought them as a continuation of the previous Heru Budi regime (Interview with Furqon, Head of Tani

Bayam Madani, 20 April 2025). Differing from the political contract in 2016 between JRMK and Anies, this agreement is far more particularistic and only addressed the Bayam problem. At the same time, the wording was also quite broad, with no specific mechanism in how the KSB will be managed, the ownership status, and the question of rent. Pramono only promised to 'solve' the Bayam question and restore the resident's rights. Pramono himself was hesitant to describe the deal as a political contract, stating that the integrity pact was open to interpretation (Wienanto, 2024).

In contrast to Tani Bayam Madani, PWKB did not engage in talks with any of the candidates. Instead, they followed UPC/JRMK's decision to campaign for *Gerakan Coblos Semua* (Gercos), which encouraged voters to mark all candidates on the ballot as a show of no confidence. UPC/JRMK viewed all candidates in the Jakarta elections as being staged by, and purely reflecting the interests of, the oligarchic elite (Interview with Gugun Muhammad, Coordinator of UPC, 5 May 2025). Despite abstaining from the gubernatorial election, UPC/JRMK nominated their own members in the legislative election through the Labour Party.

To the surprise of many, Pramono won the gubernatorial election in a

single round. Less than a month after inauguration, the new Provincial Government held a symbolic ceremony handing over the KSB keys to Tani Bayam Madani. At the same time, masses of the PWKB and UPC/JRMK held protests outside KSB demanding that the keys be given to all originally registered inhabitants. The protests led to further talks between the Provincial Government, both groups of the Bayam urban poor, and Jakpro to discuss the future of KSB inhabitants. However, these talks tended to be one-sided, with the government dominating and effectively dictating the discussions (Interview with Furqon, Head of Tani Bayam Madani, 20 April 2025; Interview with Hari Apriawan, NGO activist, 23 April 2025; Interview with Shirley Aplonia, Head of PWKB, 12 May 2025; Interview with Gugun Muhammad, Coordinator of UPC, 5 May 2025).

Jakpro remained adamant about retaining control over the management of KSB and implementing high rental costs, citing 'economic' and 'rational' considerations. The Provincial Government and Jakpro proposed a new arrangement in which residents would be employed by Jakpro and receive a minimum wage of 5.4 million rupiah, from which 1.7 million would be deducted for rent. Jakpro also demanded that PWKB households return the compensation money before being allowed to inhabit KSB.

While Tani Bayam Madani accepted these terms, the PWKB rejected them and instead demanded that KSB be managed by a residents' cooperative, similar to the management model used in other *kampung susun*. According to PWKB and UPC/JRMK, being offered work in JIS was not inherently problematic, However, linking the right to inhabit KSB to residents' ability to maintain employment would make the urban poor's occupancy of KSB highly insecure (Interview Gugun Muhammad, Coordinator of UPC, 5 May 2025).

After a long run of negotiations and protests, both Tani Bayam Madani and PWKB households finally received the keys to KSB in August 2025. PWKB accepted the terms after Jakpro conceded that the 1.7 million rent would be waived for the first six months and that no repayment of compensation would be required. Management of KSB would be transferred from Jakpro to the Provincial Housing Agency, while questions regarding self-management and future rent would be discussed after residents had moved into the building.

It is true that the participatory space surrounding KSB was initially created by the urban poor residents themselves rather than offered by authoritative actors. However, this alone did not determine the transformative outcomes of the project. The eventual

mechanisms of these spaces were soon dominated by more powerful figures, particularly Jakpro. Under the guise of empowering residents through a cooperative, Jakpro instead sought to domesticate more radical aspirations, such as self-management, and to fragment the Bayam urban poor.

This fragmentation however, did not result merely from Jakpro's methods. Each of the groups had differing contexts regarding its formation that influenced their actions and perceptions of the space. The *binaan* groups paternalistic origins made it lack any radical visions; the Tani Bayam group was heavily focused on gaining their lost chances of farming and fully trusted the benevolency of authorities in the early parts of the project; and PWKB is closely linked with interests of UPC. These differences were taken advantage of by Jakpro, which transplanted its profit-oriented approach to a space originally devoid of profit-making. Meanwhile, the local authorities seemed unwilling to intervene, particularly after Caretaker Heru took the reins. This was not out of legal restrictions, as Anies easily instructed Jakpro to facilitate KSB in the first place. Bureaucratic culture of ignoring the lower classes had seemingly returned due to a change in executive leadership.

Conclusion

In its introduction, the article puts forward two main

questions regarding participatory initiatives: how did spaces intially intended to be inclusive could be closed in the midst of participation? And how is a reshaping of spaces possible despite attempts at pushing less powerful actors to the margins? Utilising Cornwall's (2002) and Gaventa's (2006) conceptualisations on spaces of participation, this article dissects these spaces to investigate their transformative capabilities.

The case of Bayam reflected Cornwall's (2002) argument on how simply creating new spaces for participation is not sufficient. Within these spaces, attempts at achieving an equitable outcome are hampered by existing power relations which are transplanted onto the novel institutions. The diverse perceptions of the fragmented urban poor, profit-oriented culture of Jakpro, and prevailing bureaucratic ignorance has hindered efforts of realising transformative change. Similar projects in other contexts may result in different outcomes due to differing social, political, and economic conditions.

Nevertheless, the efforts of the Bayam urban poor had proven Cornwall's (2002) view of the permeability of these spaces to strategic reversals. Using elections, which in participatory literature is frequently seen as restrictive (Cornwall, 2002), the poor managed to reshape and be reinvited to these spaces.

However, when it risked slipping back and reducing the transformative demands, popular spaces of protests pressured authorities to give in to the more rights-based and inclusive demand of the Bayam residents. Demonstrating the importance of combining resistance in invited and claimed spaces, when invited spaces are slowly domesticated.

In Jakarta, social movements attempting to democratise development spaces still rely on linkages with local elites. This reliance has proved risky when transitions occur, a risk that could potentially be mitigated through the presence of a wider political project. However, such a solution is also restricted by the prevailing paradigm of patronage in Indonesia. It would be interesting for future research to observe how newly founded parties claiming to be progressive, such as the Labour Party, navigate these treacherous terrain of Indonesian politics.

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Algorithmic Governmentality and the Construction of Political Truth: A Foucauldian Analysis of TikTok's Role in Prabowo–Gibran's 2024 Campaign

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Abstract

The shift in political campaigning style ahead of the 2024 election has been largely driven by technological advancements. Candidates increasingly utilised social media, particularly TikTok, to attract the attention of Gen Z and Millennial voters. This study aims to examine how the TikTok algorithm functioned as a political marketing strategy for the Prabowo–Gibran pair and to analyse the power relations embedded within their digital campaign. Employing a qualitative methodology the research uses content analysis techniques underpinned by Michel Foucault's perspective on discourse theory. Were gathered through a literature review and observation of TikTok content. While content analysis identifies specific campaign patterns and strategies, the Foucauldian lens reveals the power relations operating within algorithmic mechanisms. The findings demonstrate that the Prabowo–Gibran campaign used the 'gemoy' dance, viral jingles, and AI-generated cartoons to engage young voters. Through discourse practices that shape a new 'regime of truth', the 'reversal to real' strategy successfully transformed Prabowo's public persona from a stern military figure into a populist one. Furthermore, the power relations within Jokowi's political network were widely disseminated via TikTok, with algorithms serving as a 'technology of power' that governed voter preferences and contributes to the pair's victory.

Keywords: *Algorithms; campaigns; election; governmentality; marketing; TikTok*

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Introduction

In the modern era, digital transformation has fundamentally altered the landscape of political communication, with technology and algorithms now serving as the primary connectors in the democratisation process and the formation of public opinion. The way political players engage with audiences has shifted as a result of the transition from traditional mass media to algorithmically driven social platforms. Broadcast approaches have been superseded by personalised, interactive, and data-driven techniques. This phenomenon is also evident in Indonesia, where the adoption of digital technology and social media has transformed political campaign models from conventional format to more interactive and content-based ones. These technological developments have brought significant changes to civic life, including political practices in Indonesia. Technological advancements and internet access provide opportunities for political actors to utilise social media as a primary instrument in digital campaigns. Recent studies show that the use of social media has become an important component of political marketing for reaching young voters and establishing a two-way relationship between candidates and the public (Moslehpour et al., 2024).

The use of algorithmic platforms in political campaigns is not unique to

Indonesia. Similar phenomenon have been observed globally, such as the Cambridge Analytica scandal during the 2016 United States Presidential election, where big-data analysis was used to map voter behavior and tailor campaign messages to specific audiences (Yovana and Gatra, 2022). More recently, the 2022 Philippine presidential election saw Ferdinand 'Bongbong' Marcos Jr. employs TikTok as a central platform to rehabilitate his family's politics legacy through nostalgic content, viral dances, and youth-oriented memes (Mendoza, 2022). A comparative study by Febriana and Rahman (2024) on TikTok's role in Southeast Asian elections confirms that the platform democratises political expression by lowering barriers to participation; however, it simultaneously magnifies post-truth dynamic and risks marginalising dissenting voices through algorithmic bias. These cases demonstrate that algorithmic platforms have become active participants in the construction of political reality worldwide, making the Indonesian case both locally significant and globally relevant.

In the past, open rallies, television commercials, and grassroots mobilisation by community leaders were the primary components of Indonesian political campaigns. However, the 2024 election marked a crucial turning point, with internet platforms taking centre stage in the national

discourse. A survey conducted in December 2023 by Kompas Research and Development found that 40 per cent of voters obtained their election-related information from social media, significantly higher than from online media (23.9 per cent) or television (29.6 per cent) (Sakti, 2023). These data underscore a massive migration of political attention, particularly among younger demographics who are digital natives. In the context of the 2024 elections, TikTok emerged as the most prominent social media site. It serves as both a communication tool and a catalyst for high levels of engagement. TikTok distinguishes itself from other platforms through its capacity to deliver captivating and viral material via short video formats, making it a crucial venue for political actors to establish a connection with younger voters.

Indonesia's digital landscape provides fertile ground for TikTok-based political campaigning. According to Data Reportal, Indonesia had 139 million social media users in January 2024, equivalent to 49.9 per cent of the total population. TikTok specifically had 126.8 million users aged 18 and above, making Indonesia one of the TikTok's largest markets globally (Kemp, 2024). The platform's unique algorithmic architecture, which prioritises content discoverability based on engagement metrics rather

than follower relationships, allows political messages to reach vast audiences regardless of account size, provided the content aligns with trending patterns. This is evident from Drone Emprit survey, which shows that the Prabowo–Gibran pair significantly outperformed rivals on TikTok, garnering 376 million interactions during the campaign period based on the keywords such as 'Prabowo', 'prabowosubianto', 'gibranrakabuming', and 'prabowogibran2024' (Fahmi, 2024). This interpretation suggests that the pair conducted a highly effective campaign on TikTok, attracting greater attention and interaction than to other candidates. The Prabowo–Gibran team used TikTok's unique vernacular, music, dancing, and memes to rebuild their political brand, in contrast to their rivals who primarily used social media for policy platforms.

The algorithm is a key component of this digital strategy. Political exposure for specific voter segments is indirectly determined by algorithms on sites such as TikTok that filter and distribute information according to user preferences (Tufekci, 2015). Based on behavioural data points such as watch time, likes, and shares, algorithms function as 'unseen censors', shaping the political reality that users experience. Algorithms must be studied not merely as technological advancements but as social and political phenomena that

impact the distribution of power and discourse in digital spaces. Currently, algorithms are considered more than just mathematical formulas; they are imbued with value and power dynamics that shape social norms and political outcomes (Mujhid, 2025). Furthermore, algorithms are not impartial technological systems. Within Michel Foucault's discourse theory paradigm, they must be viewed as a component of a power mechanism, namely a collection of practices that methodically mould the subject under discussion through the processes of content selection and distribution (Foucault, 2013).

According to Foucauldian philosophy, discourse is not merely a collection of signs or word; rather, it is an activity that systematically forms the objects of which it speaks (Foucault, 2013). Discourse establishes the parameters of what can be said, who is authorised to speak, and what counstitutes 'truth' within a given society. The viral strategies used in Prabowo–Gibran's on TikTok content, such as the 'gemoy dance', catchy jingles, or AI-generated visuals, are viewed as discursive practices. These contents consistently shape and reinforce a specific political persona: Prabowo as a personable, approachable individual who resonates with the younger generation. A new 'regime of truth' is constructed through the strategic repetition of these visual and aural signifiers. This regime effectively displaces historical narratives of Prabowo's

military background, replacing them with a reconstructed identity centred on accessibility and pop-culture relevance.

Furthermore, according to Foucault (1977b), 'power and knowledge directly imply one another; there is no power relation without the corelative constitution of a field of knowledge.' In the digital age, this power-knowledge nexus is mediated by data. Algorithms gather intimate knowledge of user preferences and vulnerabilities, which is subsequently utilised to exercise power by directing attention and shaping political subjectivities. Within the context of TikTok, power-knowledge relations are at play as the algorithm actively generates and reinforces particular political knowledge. This includes determining who is deemed 'worthy' of visibility and whose are suppressed within the digital public sphere, in addition to regulating content.

Foucault's concept of disciplinary power, as described in Discipline and Punish (1977a), centres on the Panopticon, an architectural figure that facilitates continuous surveillance and encourages individuals to internalise the gaze of authority, thereby regulating their own behaviour. The power of the Panopticon lies not in direct repression, but in its capacity to induce self-discipline through the mere possibility of being watched.

Although Foucault developed this framework within the context of

eighteenth and nineteenth century institutions such as prisons, schools, and hospitals, his analytical framework can be productively extended to understand contemporary digital platforms. This study argues that TikTok's algorithmic architecture operates as a functional 'digital Panopticon'. Here, surveillance is automatic and pervasive, carried out through the continuous tracking of user data including watch time, likes, shares, and dwell time. The disciplinary power generated is not exercised by visible guards, but by an algorithmic logic that normalises specific behaviours, preferences, and political content, prompting users to regulate themselves according to the platform's incentives. This form of power is subtle and pervasive; it does not coerce comformity but rather encourages users to self-regulate and align their actions with algorithmic incentives. Consequently, to remain relevant TikTok users must normalise their habits and preferences to fit the patterns established by the algorithm, a process that exemplifies governmentality (Foucault, 1991).

Examples of how digital power technologies are used to alter political discourse include the prevalence of Prabowo–Gibran content, the virality of the 'gemoy' dance, and the transformation of Prabowo's public image through the 'reversal to real' tactic. Similar phenomena

have been observed globally; for instance, during the 2022 Philippine election, Bongbong Marcos utilised TikTok to rebrand his family's political legacy, demonstrating a global trend where algorithmic platforms are employed to rewrite political narrative. Although earlier research often praised social media as a neutral and democratic infrastructure, contemporary analysis necessitates a critical examination of platform power (Benkler, 2006; Shirky, 2008). However, significant gaps remain in research that applies a Foucauldian lens to analyse how algorithms function as tools of power in shaping political discourse, particularly in the context of the 2024 Indonesian general election. Existing literature tends to prioritise communication strategies or quantitative engagement metrics, often overlooking the structural power dynamics embedded within and operated by the algorithmic infrastructure itself.

Thus, the purpose of this study is to examine how the TikTok algorithm functioned within the Prabowo–Gibran pair's political marketing strategy for the 2024 general election and to critically elaborate on the mechanisms and roles of power, discourse, and digital governmentality in influencing the political choices and perceptions of Indonesia's youth. This study utilises a qualitative desk-study methodology, combining critical analysis of

existing literature with digital ethnographic observation of TikTok content. Data collection was conducted from the start of the official campaign period on 28 November 2023 until poling day on 14 February 2024, covering the entire digital dynamics of the campaign.

This study focuses on Indonesia youth, defined as users aged 17-35 years, encompassing both Generation Z and Millennial demographics. A purposive sampling strategy was employed to select and analyse 15 influential TikTok accounts that were central to the discourse surrounding the Prabowo–Gibran campaign. The observed accounts were categorised into three types: (1) official campaign channels (e.g., @prabowosubianto08, @gibran_rakabuming); (2) content hubs generated by well-known supporters; and (3) influential political observers. Content was systematically tracked using a set of campaign-specific hashtags, including #prabowogibran and #koalisiindonesiamaju. Foucault's discourse analysis framework, was subsequently applied to examine how TikTok's algorithmic mechanisms function as a 'technology of power' that shapes voter subjectivity and regulates the visibility of political debate.

This study is grounded in Michel Foucault's analysis of power, knowledge, and governmentality. Several key concepts are used as analytical guides. Governmentality refers to the

ensemble of institutions, procedures, analyses, and tactics that facilitate the exercise of power over a population; it transcends national borders to encompass various forms of knowledge and normalisation (Foucault, 1991). In the digital age, this concept has been expanded into 'algorithmic governmentality', which refers to modes of governance that rely on automated data processing and algorithmic logic to predict, pre-empt, and regulate social behaviour, often bypassing human consciousness and democratic deliberation (Rouvroy, 2020).

A central concept in understanding political campaigns is the 'regime of truth', a historical system that determines what is considered true and who is authorised to speak the truth (Foucault, 1977b). Within this framework, power operates not only repressively but also productively through 'disciplinary power'. This functions through continuous surveillance and internalised normalisation, as illustrated by the Panopticon architectural model (Foucault, 1977b). In the digital context, platform architecture functions as a 'digital Panopticon', facilitating continuous algorithmic surveillance.

Furthermore, discourse is understood not merely as language but as a practice that systematically shapes the objects it claims to describe (Foucault, 1972). Finally, this study employs the concept of 'political technology', defined

as a set of tools, techniques, and procedures through which power is exercised over a population (Foucault, 1977b). Collectively, these concepts provide a lens through which to analyse TikTok's algorithmic mechanisms as a 'technology of power' within the 2024 Indonesia general election.

Results and discussions

The analysis shows that TikTok's algorithmic architecture functions as a core mechanism of political power within the 2024 Prabowo–Gibran campaign, operating through two interconnected logics. First, the algorithm acts as a non-human political technology that systematically curates and amplifies content to shape the public image and campaign narrative of the candidates. Second, the campaign harnesses this algorithmic logic to execute a highly effective digital marketing strategy by constructing and normalising a new 'regime of truth' that successfully reconfigured Prabowo's historical persona and mobilised youth support. The following sections delineate these processes, analysing the technical operations of the algorithm, the campaign's adaptive tactics, and the resulting power dynamics and social implications.

The mechanism of TikTok algorithm in political content distribution

This study finds that the TikTok algorithm functions as a sophisticated system that

determines the distribution of political content to users. Based on text and metadata analysis, the algorithm operates through four fundamental stages. To ensure adherence to the platform's community guidelines, the algorithm first examines the video. This initial screening act as a digital gatekeeper, ensuring that content does not violate policies regarding hate speech or misinformation, although the definitions of these categories can be ambiguous and subject to algorithmic bias. Secondly, the technology utilises factors such as hashtags, captions, popular music, visual effects, geography, and language to predict an appropriate audience. This predictive capability is central to the algorithm's power, as it categorises users into micro-segments based on their potential interest, effectively creating personalised political feeds.

Thirdly, in order to evaluate performance ratings based on interactions such as comments, likes, saves, and shares, TikTok restricts the initial audience group of its videos to a test group of 300-500 accounts. This 'test phase' is crucial as it democratises viral potential to some extent, even accounts with few followers can achieve virality if their content resonates strongly with the initial group. However, this also necessitates that content be immediately engaging to survive this filter. Fourthly, only video with the highest interaction quality will have

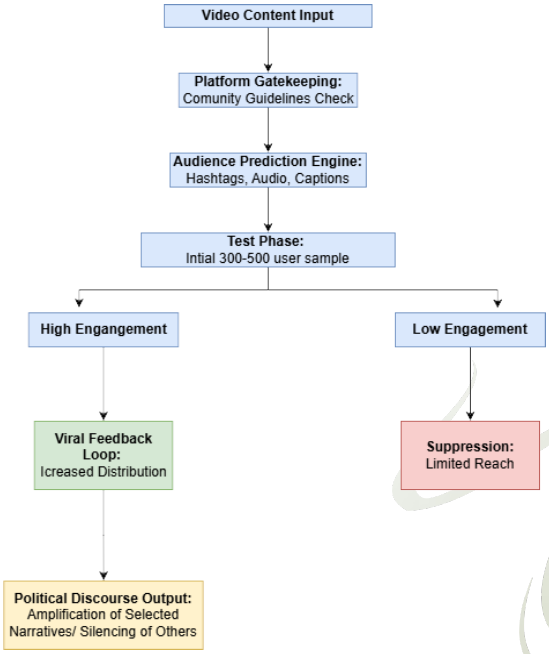
their distribution increased; the algorithm determines the ratio by comparing a video's performance with similar content (The Infinite Agency, 2022). The cyclical nature of this process creates what may be termed 'algorithmic co-production', where content creators and the algorithm work in tandem to optimise for engagement. Each interaction, whether a like, comment, share, or even the viewing duration, feeds back into the system, refining its predictive models and adjusting future recommendations.

Furthermore, research by Brady et al. (2017) demonstrates that the algorithm exhibits 'engagement bias', a systematic preference for content that provokes strong emotional responses. Their study found that the presence of moral-emotional words in social media messages increased their diffusion by approximately 20 per cent for each additional word. Consequently, political content that evokes emotions such as joy, outrage, or surprise tends to generate higher engagement and thus receives greater algorithmic amplification. This structural incentive has profound implications for political discourse, as it rewards affective appeals over reasoned deliberation and prioritises entertainment value over informational accuracy. This iterative process creates a feedback loop where high-engagement content is continuously

amplified while low-engagement content is suppressed, regardless of its factual merit or political importance. The mechanism can be visualised in figure 1.

This scheme illustrates the step-by-step process used by TikTok's algorithm to regulate the visibility of political discourse. The process begins with automatic uploading and filtering, where the algorithm predicts the audience, test content on micro-segments, and expands or suppresses

Figure 1. The mechanism of TikTok algorithm in the distribution of political content



Source: Author's original illustration

distribution based on engagement levels. We refer to this process as 'algorithmic co-production'. This mechanism functions as a form of non-human digital filtering and a technology of power that shapes what becomes visible and normalised as political truth.

The fact that algorithms are more than just neutral technical systems is confirmed by this finding. Algorithms function as power structures that control the visibility and dissemination of political speech in digital space. Unlike traditional censorship which operates by suppression, algorithmic power operates by production and promotion. It does not necessarily forbid speech, but rather drowns out certain discourses by amplifying others that align with its logic of engagement. According to Sianipar et al. (2025), algorithms operate as a 'digital Panopticon' that uses biopower technology to monitor and control user behaviour, establishing a 'regime of truth' that defines digital subjectivity and regulates information distribution. Users are not merely watched in this digital Panopticon; their actions are constantly examined in order to improve the system that govern them.

In this context, TikTok's algorithm systematically shapes political objects, namely the candidate's public image with campaign

narrative and voter preferences through selection and distribution mechanisms concealed behind the platform's technical interface. Empirical evidence from observed campaigns illustrates this process. The algorithm consistently reinforced content this performed well in engagement metrics (likes, shares, and watch time), such as the viral 'gemoy' dance video featuring Prabowo with influencers such as Ria Ricis, which generated 83,2 million views, funny AI-generated cartoons depicting Prabowo as 'cute', and catchy campaign jingles 'Oke Gas'.

The algorithm's preference for emotionally resonant and actively entertaining content actively builds a new campaign narrative, namely the transformation of Prabowo's public image from a stern military figure to a friendly, approachable, and populist figure. As a result, this algorithm influences voter preferences through repeated exposure to normalised positive imagery, while content containing policy criticism or historical discussion receives far less attention and visibility. Foucault (1972) defined discourse as a 'practice that systematically forms the objects it speaks about' (Febriana and Rahman, 2024). By giving preference to stories that are emotionally charged, visually appealing, and easily consumable qualities that the Prabowo–Gibran campaign mastered, the algorithm

functions as a non-human discourse construction.

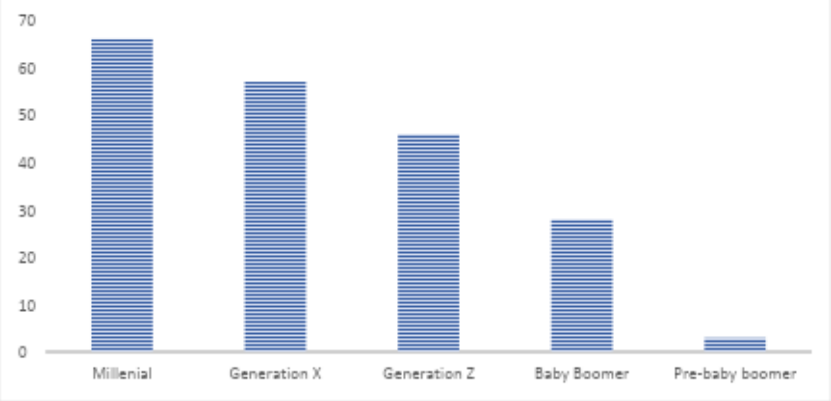
Political marketing strategy of Prabowo–Gibran campaign

The analysis shows that the Prabowo–Gibran campaign team implemented a political marketing strategy that was highly adaptive to the logic of the TikTok algorithm. This strategy was built upon three core components of political marketing outlined by Firmanzah (2012): segmentation, targeting, and positioning. Crucially, specific campaign tactics are not treated as separate analytical layers; rather, they are analytically intergrated into each of these three stages, demonstrating a cohesive and algorithmically optimised campaign architecture. By aligning their tactics with the platform's features, the campaign team effectively 'outsmarted' the algorithm to maximise reach and influence.

a) Segmentation

In the segmentation stage, the campaign team identified the dominant user demographics on TikTok, namely Generation Z and Millennials, who together constitute approximately 56,45 per cent of the total voters in the 2024 election (Muhammad, 2023). This segment is characterised by digital savviness, a degree of political apathy towards traditional rhetoric, and a clear preference for authentic and entertaining content. The decision to utilise TikTok as the primary campaign tool was strategically based on this segmentation.

Figure 2. Voter composition in 2024 Indonesian election by age group



Source: Databoks Katadata (2023)

This integrated segmentation strategy was executed through two primary tactical channels. Firstly, 'gemoy' dance content involving high-profile influencers such as Ria Ricis, directly appealed to the cultural and aesthetic interests of this demographic. Secondly, AI-generated cartoons featuring a humorous and 'gemoy' depiction of Prabowo were specifically tailored to the visual and entertainment-oriented consumption habits of young users.

b) Targeting

Targeting is carried out by utilising user behaviour data to identify potential voter groups and existing trends. The campaign uses data analysis to identify voting trends, visual styles, and topics that resonate with

segmented audiences, ensuring that content is tailored to algorithm preferences. Integrated targeting tactics include coordinated hashtags (e.g. #prabowogibran) to increase visibility and facilitate algorithmic grouping; viral jingles (e.g. 'Oke Gas') and memorable closing song utilise trending audio formats to increase shareability and engagement; and collaborations with influencers expand reach to established followers bases, effectively micro-targeting niche communities.

c) Positioning

Positioning was carried out through a 'reversal to real' strategy, which systematically changed Prabowo's public image from a stern military figure to a friendly, humorous, and approachable person (Lubis & Wijayanto, 2023). This rebranding was a discursive shift designed with values oriented toward the younger generation. Integrated positioning tactics include the 'gemoy' dance and AI-generated cartoons visually reinforce the new, softer image; viral jingles and meme friendly content integrate the campaign into pop culture, positioning the candidate as relatable and contemporary; the integration of narratives with Jokowi's legacy (continuing Jokowi's programmes) is disseminated through engaging formats, transferring symbolic capital and legitimising the ticket. These create a widespread culture presence on the

platform, making the campaign feel less like political propaganda and more like a participatory pop culture phenomenon. Figure 3, which features 'gemoy' dance content with fans and influencers illustrates how this concept is implemented.

Data from Drone Emprit show the effectiveness of this strategy, with views of Prabowo–Gibran content soaring from 6 billion to 24 billion, resulting in a total of 376 million interactions during the campaign period (Fahmi, 2024). A study by Fulcrum

Figure 3. Examples of Prabowo–Gibran's 'gemoy' dance campaign content on TikTok



Source: (a) tiktok.com/@riaricis; (b) tiktok.com/ @indonesiamajubanget

Singapore confirmed that the Prabowo campaign utilised all of TikTok's features, including choreographed video, meme-able content, AI-generated visuals such as animations, and viral trends, to connect with young voters in a way unmatched by other media. The photober2.ai application recorded over 2.5 million uses within six weeks, turning ordinary user into amplifiers of Prabowo's rebranding efforts (Jalli et al., 2025).

From Foucault's perspective, these discursive practices are not merely communication strategies, but are also linked to mechanisms of power knowledge production. The campaign produced a new form of political knowledge where 'authenticity' and 'relatability' became the primary markers of leadership suitability, displacing traditional metrics like policy competence or human rights record. Political video dance 'gemoy', jingles, and memes are 'statements' within a discursive formation that repeatedly construct and legitimise specific political ideals. The more frequently that statement is replicated and consumed, the more dominant its position becomes as a 'regime of truth' accepted by young voters (Foucault, 1977b). This regime of truth effectively rendered alternative narrative, such as critiques of dynastic politics or past human rights abuses as irrelevant or 'noise' within the dominant algorithmic discourse.

Table 1. Voter preference for Prabowo–Gibran based on exit poll Indicator 2024

Category	Percentage
Generation Z	71%
Nahdlatul Ulama (NU)	59.3%
Income 1-2 million	60.9%
Rural areas	60.7%
Junior high school graduates	63%

Source: Indikator, 2024

The data presented in Table 1 reveals several significant patterns that merit further analysis. The overwhelming support from generation Z (71 per cent) confirms the campaign's success in reaching its primary target demographic through TikTok. However, equally noteworthy is the strong support from voters affiliated with Nahdlatul Ulama (59.3 per cent), a traditionally moderate Islamic organisation that has historically maintained different political alignments. This cross-over appeal suggests that the algorithmic campaign successfully transcended traditional political boundaries by creating a cultural phenomenon that resonated across diverse demographic segments. The high support from rural areas (60,7 per cent and lower education level (63 per cent among junior high school graduates) also raises

important questions about the relationship between algorithmic campaigning and information access. These findings indicate that TikTok's reach extends far beyond urban, highly-educated demographics, positioning it as a truly mass medium for political communication in Indonesia.

Echo chamber effect and political polarisation

This research also identifies algorithmic impacts such as the reinforcement of 'filter bubbles' and 'echo chambers' in the context of political campaigns. TikTok's algorithm tends to present similar content to users based on their previous preferences, creating a homogeneous information environment (Pariser, 2011). A filter bubble is an individualised information universal that is highly dependent on how a person interacts with the internet, while an echo chamber is an environment where an individual is exposed only to opinions or information that support their existing views (Geschke et al., 2018). The echo chamber phenomenon on TikTok exhibits distinctive characteristics that differentiate it from similar effects on other platforms. Due to TikTok's emphasis on passive content consumption through the For You Page (FYP), users are less likely to actively seek out diverse perspective compared to platforms where content discovery is driven by search

or social connections. The algorithm's optimisation for 'watch time' means that users are continuously served content designed to keep them engaged, which typically means content that confirms their existing preferences rather than challenges them.

From Foucauldian perspective, this creates a fragmented discursive space where different 'regime of truth' operate in parallel, each reinforced by its own algorithmic logic, making cross-discourse dialogue increasingly difficult. The implications for democratic discourse are significant: supporters of different candidates often inhabit entirely different informational environments, reducing the possibility for meaningful deliberation across partisan lines. In the context of the 2024 elections, users who have been exposed to Prabowo–Gibran content will continue to receive similar content, reinforcing existing political beliefs and reducing openness to alternative viewpoints (Az-zahra et al., 2021) .

An algorithmic curation creates a self-reinforcing loop where users are constantly affirmed in their choices, leading to a fragmented public sphere where different voter groups inhabit entirely different realities. Philips (2024) found a significant correlation ($r = 065$, $p < 0.01$) between the level of engagement in echo chambers and the expression of extreme political views,

which contributes to polarisation. This polarisation is not necessarily ideological but affective; users feel a stronger emotional connection to their chosen candidate and a deeper alienation from opponents, driven by the emotionally resonant content served by the algorithm. A study by the Centre for Digital Society at Universitas Gadjah Mada confirms that the TikTok's algorithms bias towards specific political candidates renders user more, vulnerable to believing misinformation (Palijama, 2024). The implication is that political support can be mobilised rapidly and on a massive, yet the space for deliberation and criticism is becoming increasingly narrow.

From Foucault's perspective (1991), this mechanism constitutes form of 'digital governmentality', a pattern of controlling and regulating populations that operates subtly through knowledge, preferences, and subjectivities shaped without explicit coercion. Digital governmentality differs from traditional disciplinary power in that it does not rely on physical confinement, but on modulation. It controls individuals in open environments by modulating their access to information and manipulating their range of choices. The algorithm disciplines the way users conceptualise politics by systematically conditioning what is deemed worthy of being consumed and

internalised as political truth. Users, in turn, participate in their own subjugation by actively engaging with and propagating the content that aligns with algorithmic logic, thereby becoming both subjects and agents of this nascent form of power.

Power relations in digital campaign network

The research findings indicate that power relations played a significant role in the success of the Prabowo–Gibran digital campaign. According to the Ipang Wahid Stratejik survey, President Joko Widodo's approval rating reached 75 per cent (Lubis and Wijayanto, 2023). The campaign team leveraged this symbolic capital by building a sense of closeness between Prabowo–Gibran and Jokowi through harmonious and positive digital narrative. This strategic alignment was not subtle; it was systematically embedded in every piece of content, creating a visual and narrative continuity between the popular outgoing president and his would-be successors. Gibran's image as the President's son and Prabowo's as Jokowi's Defence Minister became political capital that was effectively communicated via TikTok content.

The narrative of 'continuing Jokowi's programmes' was disseminated through engaging content formats such as dancing, jingles, and memes, making it more easily accepted by voters who are Jokowi partisans. This

transfer of legitimacy was facilitated by the algorithmic tendency towards content clustering. Users who previously engaged with pro-Jokowi content were automatically served pro-Prabowo content, creating a seamless 'algorithmic bridge' between the two political brands. Data from exit polls confirms the effectiveness of this strategy: voters from the Nahdlatul Ulama base, which is not traditionally a Prabowo Stronghold, contributed 59.3 per cent of the votes (Indikator, 2024).

The mechanism through which Jokowi's political capital was transferred to the Prabowo–Gibran ticket deserves closer examination through a Foucauldian lens. In this case, the TikTok algorithm functioned as a political technology that enabled the seamless transfer of legitimacy without requiring formal endorsement or explicit policy continuity. The algorithm's content-clustering feature meant that users who had previously engaged with pro-Jokowi content were automatically identified as potentially receptive audiences for pro-Prabowo content, creating an invisible bridge between the two political brands. This algorithmic mediation of political succession represents a novel form of power transfer that bypasses traditional democratic mechanisms. Unlike formal endorsements, which can be scrutinised and debated, algorithms operate beneath

the threshold of conscious awareness, raising fundamental questions about the nature of political agency in the algorithmic age.

Fulcrum notes that the support of former President Jokowi was a critical factor enabling this strategy to succeed. By positioning his eldest son, Gibran Rakabuming Raka, as a vice-presidential candidate through a controversial Constitutional Court ruling, Jokowi expanded his political influence while simultaneously helping the ticket attract young voters (Jalli et al., 2025). This manoeuvre demonstrates how traditional political power can be amplified and laundered through digital platforms. Within Foucault's framework, this pattern of power distribution is 'capillary', not top down, but flowing through networks, produced by content, creators, disseminated, reinterpreted by audiences, and redistributed through duet and repost features (Foucault, 1977b). Power is no longer held solely by the state or political parties but is dispersed throughout the social body, operating through millions of micro-interactions on screens. Algorithms become mediators that enable the transfer of political loyalty to occur without direct coercion, solely through digital 'situational identification' amplified by content virality. In this capillary network, every user who likes or shares a campaign video becomes

a node in the power structure, unwittingly participating in the reproduction of the dominant political discourse.

Critical insights and ethical considerations

Although algorithmic strategies have proven effective, this research also identifies a several ethical risks that necessitate consideration. Firstly, algorithms tend to reinforce existing views, potentially exacerbating political polarisation (Rahmawati, 2018). This polarisation threatens the democratic ideal of a shared public sphere where diverse opinions can be debated. Secondly, algorithms can be utilised to rapidly disseminate missinformation, damaging candidate's reputations and influencing public opinion (Perdana, 2023). The speed at which misinformation travels on TikTok, driven by engagement metrics rather than accuracy, makes it nearly impossible to correct false narratives once they have taken root. Thirdly, a lack of algorithmic transparency results in bias within the presentation of information (Sahputra, 2023). Users are often unaware that their feed is a curated reality, leading to a false sense of informedness. Fourthly, reliance on digital technology renders campaigns vulnerable to technical issues or platform policy changes.

Jalli et al., (2025) highlight that Prabowo's campaign approach also contributes to the marginalisation of diverse

voices and critical perspective from the mainstream. Although counter-narrative of enclaves persist, complex questions about policy proposals or past controversies are largely absent from the dominant discourse, filtered through algorithmically curated campaign strategies on TikTok. Substantive political debate is replaced by performative gestures, reducing citizenship to spectatorship. From Foucault's perspective, this critique points to the disciplinary dimension of algorithmic power. The algorithm operates as a mechanism that systematically restricts the space for criticism and minority voices, not through explicit bans, but through the 'selective visibility' concealed behind technical logic (Sianipar et al., 2025). By rendering critical discourses invisible or algorithmically unprofitable, the system effectively silences dissent without ever having to formally censor it. The production of political discourse has become highly centralised around agendas supported by algorithmic logic, while alternative narrative struggle to gain an equal platform.

The ethical concerns raised by algorithmic political campaigning extend beyond individual elections to the nature of political discourse itself. When political success becomes primarily dependent on algorithmic optimisation

rather than substantive policy proposal, a shift toward 'performative politics' occurs, where the appearance of leadership qualities matters more than their substance. In Foucauldian terms, this represent a transformation in the 'discursive formation' of political legitimacy, where virality and engagement replace competence and accountability as the primary markers of political worthiness (Foucault, 2013). The algorithm thus not only distributes existing political discourse but actively reshapes the very criteria by which political actors are evaluated. Moreover, as Febriana and Rahman (2024) observe in their comparative study of Southeast Asia elections, TikTok democratises political expression by lowering barriers for participation but simultaneously magnifies post-truth dynamics and risks marginalising dissenting voices through algorithmic bias. This paradox democratisation coupled with potential manipulation, representing a fundamental challenge for electoral integrity in the digital age.

Conclusion

This research demonstrates that the TikTok algorithm is not merely a neutral technical instrument, but a productive tool of power that shapes the visibility of political discourse, constructs voter subjectivity, and

mediates the distribution of power in the 2024 general election. Prabowo–Gibran's highly adaptive political marketing strategy, which leverages the logic of the algorithm through 'gemoy' dance content, viral jingles, AI-generated cartoons, and collaborations with influencers, has successfully created a new 'regime of truth' that transforms the candidate's image and attracts massive support from young voters. By mastering 'algorithmic grammar', the campaign was able to reshape the political narrative, turn potential weakness into assets, and mobilise a generation of voters through emotional engagement rather than ideological alignment.

The theoretical contribution of this study lies in its demonstration of how Foucauldian concepts, such as governmentality, disciplinary power, and regimes of truth, can be productively adapted to analyse algorithmic politics. However, this adaptation also reveals certain limitations that are instructive rather invalidating. Foucault's concept of governmentality was developed in the context of centralised physical institutions such as prisons, hospitals, and schools, which rely on direct surveillance and physical confinement. When applied to user-generated decentralised digital platforms such as TikTok, this framework requires careful

reinterpretation, as digital power operates through voluntary participation, continuous data monitoring, and algorithmic modulation rather than overt coercion. Moreover, although users are subject as potential producers of alternative discourses, albeit within the structural constraints imposed by the platform's architecture. These limitations do not diminish the usefulness of Foucauldian analysis, but rather point a necessary evolution. This study proposes that algorithms be understood as a contemporary technology of power that operationalises what Rouvroy and Berns (2013) refer to as algorithmic governmentality, namely a mode of governance that relies on automated data processing and machine learning to predict, encourage, and modulate social behaviour without direct coercion, often operating below the threshold of conscious awareness and democratic deliberation. This represents a significant shift from Foucault's disciplinary society toward what Deleuze call a control society, where power is continuous, limitless, and embedded in the structures of everyday digital interactions. Therefore, while Foucault's framework remains fundamental for understanding the productive and discursive nature power, it must be expanded to consider the unique logic of algorithmic platforms, a task that represents a promising direction for future theoretical development.

In addition to its theoretical implications, this research has urgent practical relevance. These findings highlight the need for greater algorithmic transparency, robust critical digital literacy education, and a regulatory framework capable of mitigating the risks of filter bubbles, political polarisation, and substantial degradation of political discourse. Young voters, who are most immersed in the information sphere driven by platforms, must be equipped with analytical tools to recognise and critique how algorithmic forces shape their political preferences and perceptions. Political actors and platform companies must also be held accountable for ensuring that algorithmic campaigns do not undermine democratic integrity by prioritising emotional engagement over factual accuracy or visibility of discursive diversity. Future research should expand this analysis through comparative studies of algorithmic campaigns in different national and cultural context, long-term investigations into the persistence of algorithmically induced political preferences, and interdisciplinary collaboration between political science, computer science, and law to develop robust methods for auditing algorithmic bias and promoting platform accountability.

Finally, the 2024 Indonesian presidential election is an important case study in the global rise of algorithmic politics. The success if the Prabowo–

Gibran campaign demonstrates how mastery of platform logic can alter public perception and election outcomes on an unprecedented scale. For academics, this case offers rich material for formulating theories about the complex interrelationship between technology, power, and democracy in the digital age. For political practitioners, it provides both a template and a warning about the techniques and consequences of algorithmic campaigning. For citizens and voters, it highlights the urgent need to develop critical awareness of how political preferences are shaped by systems operating outside conscious awareness and control. Therefore, the key question is no longer whether algorithms will continue to shape political outcomes, which is now a reality, but whether democratic societies can develop the institutional, educational, and ethical capacity to ensure that algorithmic power serves rater than undermines the core values of democratic life.

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Rage with the Machine: When Cyber Troops Oppose the Regime

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Abstract

The advent of social media has brought political conversations and activities into the cyber world. One consequence of this is the emergence of cyber troops: special cyber forces that aim to manipulate public opinion on social media. These cyber troops are usually hired by political or economic entities to serve their interests. However, the concept of ludic cybermilitia challenges this, suggesting that cyber troops are not solely controlled by political and economic entities. According to this concept, cyber troops are independent actors engaged in a form of privatised violence. This study builds on findings relating to the hashtags #SaveKIPKuliah and #SavePulauGebe, which oppose political and economic actors. Similarities in content and posting patterns between the tweets suggest that the two hashtags represent coordinated attacks. Based on these findings, the study proposes that cyber troops may also resist political and economic actors through privatised violence.

Keywords: *Cyber troops; digital politics; big data; ludic cybermilitia*

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Introduction

Advances in digital technology have created a new public space in the form of social media. Social media enables people to interact with each other regardless of physical boundaries. This vast space for interaction enables widespread contestation of power. One way to influence this arena of contestation is to use cyber troops.

According to Bradshaw and Howard (2017), cyber troops are groups or teams tasked with manipulating public opinion on social media. This manipulation is generally carried out by spreading certain ideas, directing the public agenda and shaping public perception of an issue. Cyber troops are often employed by political entities such as governments, military forces, and political parties.

Cyber troops coordinate both real and fake bot accounts. By using multiple accounts, cyber troops can make a conversation or issue appear to be widely discussed. In their operations, they use various strategies when interacting on social media, such as spreading positive and negative sentiments about an issue and using nationalistic and pro-government language. They also engage in terrorising and attacking other accounts (Bradshaw & Howard, 2017).

The study by Bradshaw and Howard (2017) found different patterns of cyber troop attacks in each country. In terms of message narrative

strategy, three types were identified. The first is to promote narratives that support the government or certain ideologies. This strategy was observed in Israel, Vietnam and Venezuela. Conversely, there is a strategy involving messages of bullying and harassment targeted at political opponents or activists. This strategy was commonly found in Azerbaijan, Mexico and Russia. The third strategy involves conveying messages or narratives that divert public attention from sensitive issues. Saudi Arabia and the Czech Republic used this strategy.

Apart from the narrative strategies employed, the organisational structure of cyber troops also differs. In Vietnam, the United Kingdom and South Korea, for example, cyber troop operations are carried out directly by government and military units. In contrast, in Mexico, Russia and the United States, these operations are subcontracted to third parties or private entities. These third parties can be hacker groups, PR companies, or communications agencies. In the context of elections, it is also common for politicians and political parties to carry out cyber troop attacks. Examples of this can be found in the United States, Brazil, and Turkey. In addition to political and private actors, cyber troop attacks can utilise volunteers and paid citizens. Influencers are usually given

incentives to amplify certain narratives. Examples of this can be found in Israel, India and China (Bradshaw & Howard, 2017).

Research by Bradshaw et al. (2021) shows that the number of countries using cyber troops increased from 70 in 2016 to 81 in 2020. This increase occurred because political actors, such as governments and political parties, started using cyber troops on a large scale to disrupt elections, democracy and civil rights. The existence of the private sector, which coordinates cyber troops according to the directions of political actors, has made cyber troop attacks easier to carry out.

One study on cyber troops was conducted in Indonesia by Wijayanto et al. (2024). Their research successfully identified the characteristics of cyber troops in Indonesia. According to this study, cyber troops in Indonesia are characterised by three main features: they are paid covertly, they are highly coordinated, and they use anonymous accounts. In terms of funding, Wijayanto et al. (2024) identified four groups funding cyber troop operations. These four groups are the government or government agencies, politicians, political parties and the economic elite. This suggests that cyber troops have become a profession that can be hired according to a client's interests.

This is in line with Rasidi's (2023) concept of the 'ludic

cybermilitia'. This concept suggests that cyber troops constitute a form of privatised violence. This is a type of violence that is perpetrated by non-state entities. According to Rasidi (2023), cyber troops extend this form of violence into the digital realm. Therefore, rather than being an extension of the government, cyber troops are independent actors with their own power.

On the other hand, according to Rasidi (2023), ludic cybermilitias also exhibit a playful aspect. Those behind cybermilitias derive satisfaction from the thrill of being involved in secret cyber operations. They view cybertroop operations as nothing more than a strategic game.

In their operations, ludic cybermilitias employ a variety of strategies. According to Rasidi (2023), ludic cybermilitias follow three main narrative patterns. The first is the positive narrative. This pattern is characterised by narratives that promote campaign messages and highlight the positive aspects of a particular candidate or policy. The second pattern is the negative narrative, which aims to delegitimise political opponents or groups that criticise the client's interests. The third pattern involves special operations. This pattern involves trolling, doxxing and framing opponents personally. When implementing these patterns, ludic cybermilitias also seek to provoke netizens into

participating in attacks against targets.

These four groups pay cyber troops to pursue various interests. According to Wijayanto et al. (2024), the deployment of cyber troops by these actors is not limited to electoral issues, but also extends to policy matters. The study found instances of cyber troops being paid to disseminate narratives in support of the revision of the KPK Law (Hermawan, 2024; Hermawan, 2025).[2] Similar patterns have been observed in other studies, including those on electoral issues (Masduki, 2022; Okthariza et al., 2024) and the Omnibus Law (Sastramidjaja & Rasidi, 2021).

In addition to being paid covertly, cyber troops in Indonesia operate using anonymous accounts. According to Wijayanto et al. (2024), the characteristics of these accounts include an absence of personal identity or the use of false identities. Nevertheless, these cyber troops have a main account, known as a 'core account'. This main account is dedicated and is developed to attract a large follower. During operations, the core account initiates the posting of narratives to be disseminated. The anonymous accounts then retweet these posts (Wijayanto et al., 2024).

[2] The KPK (Komisi Pemberantasan Korupsi) is Indonesia's Corruption Eradication Commission. Established in 2002, it was long considered one of the country's most independent public institutions. The 2019 revision of the KPK Law sparked widespread public protests, as critics argued it structurally stripped the agency of its independence and investigative powers.

These accounts, both the core account and the anonymous ones, are operated in a coordinated manner. This coordination extends to both the standardisation of the presented narratives and the timing of posts. According to Wijayanto et al. (2024), cyber troops attempt to post as many messages as possible simultaneously. The aim is to get the presented narratives onto the trending topics list via the X (formerly Twitter) algorithm.

This article examined two hashtags that appeared on X's list of trending topics: #SaveKIPKuliah and #SavePulauGebe. Both hashtags promote a narrative that opposes the regime, with #SaveKIPKuliah appearing on 13 February 2025 and #SavePulauGebe on 5 August 2025. #SaveKIPKuliah is a response to the government's plans to cut the education budget. It conveys a narrative of opposition to these budget cuts. In contrast, #SavePulauGebe conveys opposition to mining activities on Gebe Island in North Maluku, which are considered to be damaging the island's environment.

Upon closer examination, both hashtags exhibit two of the three characteristics of cyber troops proposed by Wijayanto et al. (2024): a coordinated posting pattern and a dominance of anonymous accounts. The number of posts for both hashtags increased sharply on those days, and there is high

content similarity between the two hashtags. This was enough to prompt the X algorithm to include both hashtags in the trending topics list.

The existence of these two hashtags suggests a new phenomenon: the use of cyber troops to disseminate populist narratives or engage in activism. Using Rasidi's (2023) 'ludic cybermilitia' framework, such privatised violence, in the form of cyber troops, can also be used to resist the regime. They do not always act as an extension of the regime. While Bradshaw and Howard (2017) and Bradshaw et al. (2021) note that cyber troops in various countries are used by governments and political actors to disrupt elections, democracy and citizens' rights, these findings suggest that cyber troops are also being used to disseminate pro-public narratives.

Methods

Data collection for this study used Tweet Harvest, a web scraping tool for collecting tweets. The keywords and time period used for data collection are shown in the following table:

Table 1. Details of Keywords and Time Range

No.	Keyword	Time Range
1.	#SaveKIPKuliah	10 February 2025 - 17 February 2025
2.	#SavePulauGebe	3 August 2025 - 9 August 2025

Source: Researcher's data processing results

These keywords and hashtags were chosen because they are used by cyber troops to promote narratives critical of the state. The timeframe covers the three days prior to and the three days following the cyber troop attack. This timeframe was chosen in order to examine posting patterns before and after the attack. In this way, the study can identify the patterns of coordinated cyber troop attacks proposed by Wijayanto et al. (2024). A total of 2,486 tweets were identified using the hashtag #SaveKIPKuliah, and 1,522 using #SavePulauGebe.

The collected dataset was analysed using sentiment analysis and Corpus-Assisted Discourse Studies (CADS). Sentiment analysis examined the emotional tone within the dataset using the IndoNLU algorithm developed by Wilie et al. (2020). This Indonesian natural language processing (NLP) algorithm serves as a benchmark to categorise the outputs into positive, neutral, and negative sentiments.

Concurrently, CADS is employed to analyse large-scale textual data by combining corpus linguistics and discourse analysis (Ancarno, 2020). This methodological approach allows researchers to identify frequently occurring words and systematically compare shifting discourses within the data (Kusumasari et al., 2021).

The collected tweet data was tokenised into individual words, which formed the basis of the corpora analysed through CADS. During this process, stopwords were removed from the tweets to

form the corpora. The next step involved identifying keywords. According to Ancarno (2020), keywords are words that occur frequently in a dataset. These keywords were then grouped based on their discourse group, and the frequency of each keyword group was calculated.

In addition to sentiment and discourse analysis, this study analysed the metadata from the collected tweets, including the upload dates and the metrics for retweets, quotes, and replies. The number of retweets, quotes and replies were evaluated to determine the level of engagement associated with each hashtag, while the upload timestamps were examined to identify temporal posting patterns.

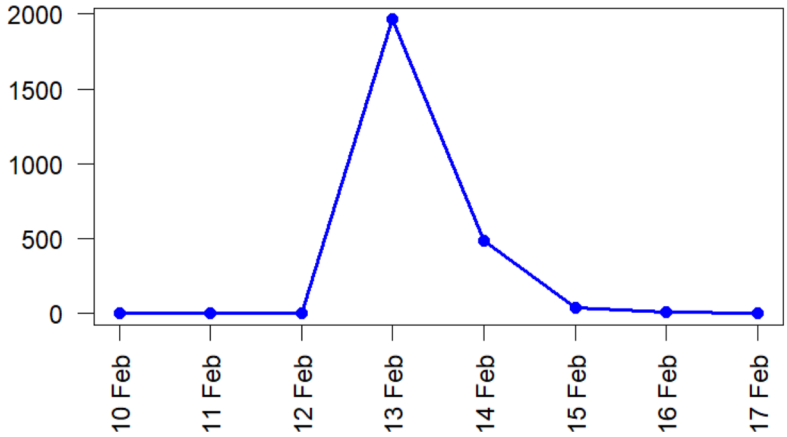
Furthermore, the level of content similarity between tweets was assessed using the Jaccard coefficient method proposed by Niwattanakul et al. (2013). This approach was selected because cyber troop attacks are typically coordinated not only in terms of posting time but also in content duplication (Wijayanto et al., 2024). The Jaccard coefficient scores ranged from 0 to 1, where 0 indicated no similarity and 1 represented identical tweet content. The equation used is as follows:

$$J(A,B) = \frac{A \cap B}{A \cup B}$$

J(A,B): Level of content similarity between tweet 1 and tweet 2
A ∩ B: Number of identical words between tweet 1 and tweet 2
A ∪ B: Total number of words in tweet 1 and tweet 2

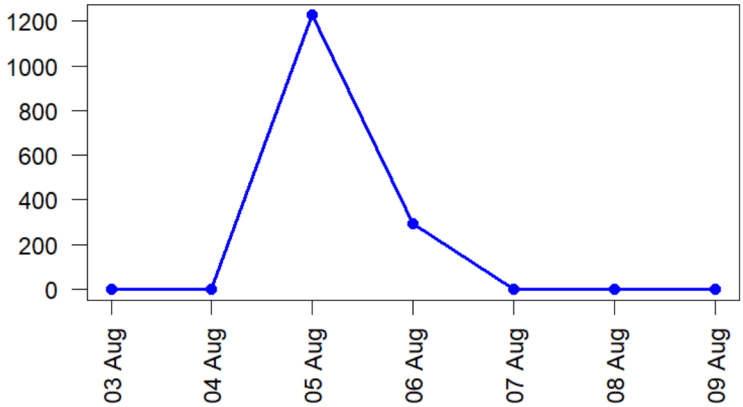
Source: Niwattanakul et al., 2013

Figure 1. Timeline of #SaveKIPKuliah Tweets



Source: Researcher's data processing results

Figure 2. Timeline of #SavePulauGebe Tweets



Source: Researcher's data processing results

Results

Of the 2,486 tweets using the #SaveKIPKuliah hashtag, one was posted on 12 February 2025, 1,964 were posted on 13 February, 484 were posted on 14 February, 31 were posted on 15 February and six were posted on 16 February. In contrast, of the total 1,522 tweets under the hashtag #SavePulauGebe, 1,227 were posted on 5 August 2025, while 295 were posted the following day. This shows that both hashtags exhibit similar patterns. Both hashtags saw a large number of tweets in one day: 13 February 2025 for #SaveKIPKuliah and 5 August 2025 for #SavePulauGebe. The number of uploads for both hashtags decreased dramatically the next day, with no new uploads on the third day.

From the data collected and analysed using the Jaccard coefficient, the following results were found:

Table 2. Jaccard Coefficient Results

No.	Keyword	Average Similarity Level
1	#SaveKIPKuliah	0.29
2.	#SavePulauGebe	0.17

Source: Researcher's data processing results

Table 3. Examples of Tweets with High Similarity Levels from #SaveKIPKuliah

No.	Username	Tweet	Similarity Level
1.	@Sawala_Rasa	@fmnpusat TOLAK PEMANGKASAN DANA PENDIDIKAN â€¼ï¸ #daruratpendidikan #savekipkuliah #turunkanuktptn	1
	@origamisenn	@fmnpusat TOLAK PEMANGKASAN DANA PENDIDIKAN â€¼ï¸ #daruratpendidikan #savekipkuliah #turunkanuktptn	1
2.	@mnsglovee	TOLAK PEMANGKASAN DANA PENDIDIKAN â€¼ï¸ #daruratpendidikan #savekipkuliah #turunkanuktptn	1
	@runjpeg	TOLAK PEMANGKASAN DANA PENDIDIKAN â€¼ï¸ #daruratpendidikan #savekipkuliah #turunkanuktptn	1
3.	@gapunyanamaya_	@iubberry TOLAK PEMANGKASAN DANA PENDIDIKAN #daruratpendidikan #savekipkuliah #turunkanuktptn	1
	@arreinjun	@iubberry TOLAK PEMANGKASAN DANA PENDIDIKAN #daruratpendidikan #savekipkuliah #turunkanuktptn	1

Source: X, Researcher's data processing results

Table 4. Example of Tweets with High Similarity Levels from #SavePulauGebe

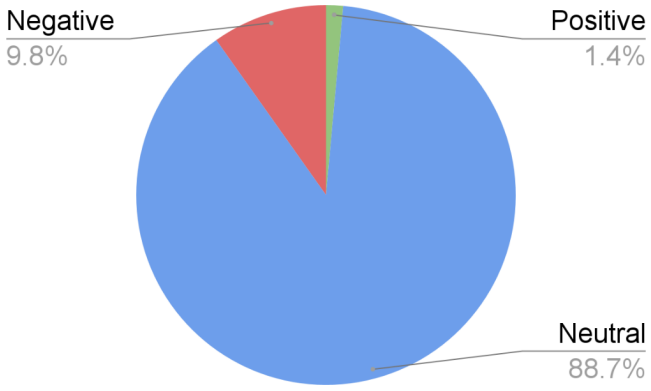
No.	Username	Tweet	Similarity Level
1.	@NaylaHafizaw	Setiap hari ada nikel yang keluar dari Pulau Gebe tanpa izin tapi negara diem aja. Ini bukan lagi lalai ini pengkhianatan terhadap lingkungan! #SavePulauGebe	1
	@Melisaheraw	Setiap hari ada nikel yang keluar dari Pulau Gebe tanpa izin tapi negara diem aja. Ini bukan lagi lalai ini pengkhianatan terhadap lingkungan! #SavePulauGebe	1
2.	@DarusWj	#SavePulauGebe ayo kita selamatkan pulau gebe	1
	@jatiw9549	#SavePulauGebe ayo kita selamatkan pulau gebe	1
3.	@Xixicutesy	PT MJM dan PT BPM rampas ruang hidup warga Gebe lewat TAMBANG ILEGAL . Ekonomi lumpuh warga terpaksa tinggalkan pulau! #SavePulauGebe	1
	@AishiOishi20988	PT MJM dan PT BPM rampas ruang hidup warga Gebe lewat TAMBANG ILEGAL . Ekonomi lumpuh warga terpaksa tinggalkan pulau! #SavePulauGebe	1

	@AishiOishi20988	PT MJM dan PT BPM rampas ruang hidup warga Gebe lewat TAMBANG ILEGAL . Ekonomi lumpuh warga terpaksa tinggalkan pulau! #SavePulauGebe	1

Source: X, Researcher's data processing results

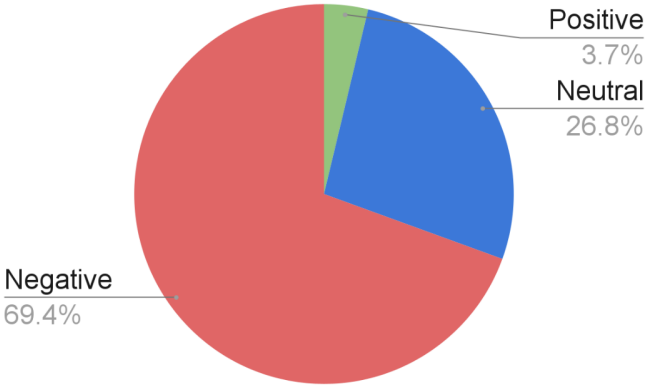
The Jaccard coefficient calculation shows that tweets with a similarity level of 1 are uploaded by different accounts. This suggests a coordinated attack. This aligns with Wijayanto et al.'s (2024) argument that cyber troop operators carry out such attacks using multiple accounts to convey similar narratives simultaneously.

Figure 3. Sentiment Distribution in the #SaveKIPKuliah Hashtag



Source: X, Researcher's data processing results

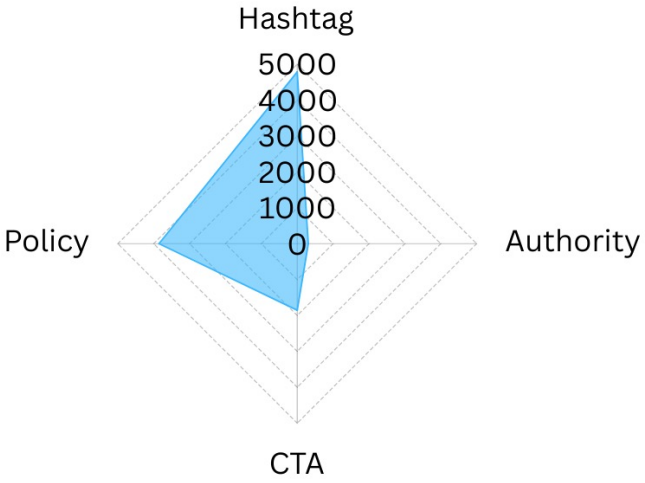
Figure 4. Sentiment Distribution in the #SavePulauGebe Hashtag



Source: X, Researcher's data processing results

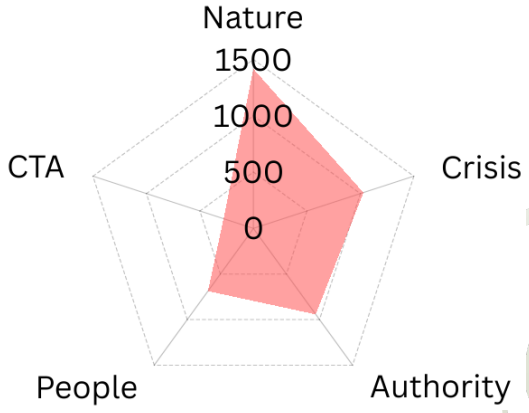
The results of the sentiment analysis reveal different sentiment distributions between the two hashtags. The hashtag #SaveKIPKuliah is dominated by neutral sentiment, accounting for 88.7% of the total. In contrast, negative sentiment dominates the hashtag #SavePulauGebe, accounting for 69.4% of the total. Nevertheless, both hashtags exhibit the same pattern: negative sentiment consistently outweighs positive sentiment. The hashtag #SaveKIPKuliah has only 1.4% positive sentiment, in contrast to 9.8% negative sentiment. The #SavePulauGebe hashtag has far less positive sentiment than negative sentiment, at only 3.7%.

Figure 5. Discourse Distribution in the #SaveKIPKuliah Hashtag



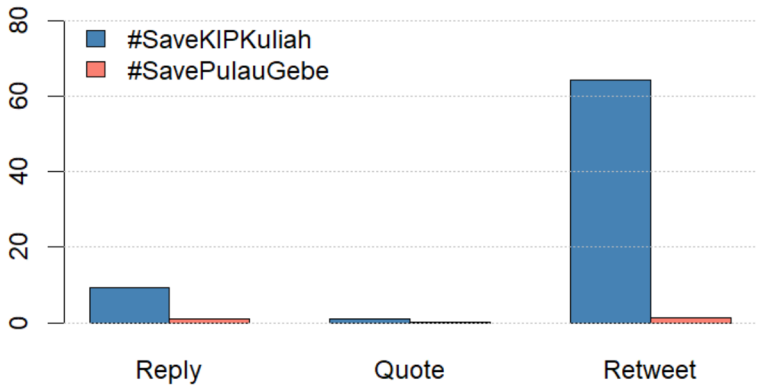
Source: X, Researcher's data processing results

Figure 6. Discourse Distribution in the #SavePulauGebe Hashtag



Source: X, Researcher's data processing results

Figure 7. Comparison of Average Engagement for #SaveKIPKuliah and #SavePulauGebe



Source: X, Researcher's data processing results

The two hashtags show different results in the CADS analysis. The #SaveKIPKuliah hashtag is consistently used alongside other hashtags such as #DaruratPendidikan #TurunkanUKT and #AnggaranBijakUntukRakyat. In other words, the #SaveKIPKuliah campaign aims to promote these hashtags in the X trending topics algorithm. Additionally, the #SaveKIPKuliah hashtag also highlights policies concerning the efficiency of the education budget. However, very few #SaveKIPKuliah tweets mention government authorities. In contrast, the #SavePulauGebe hashtag focuses more on the

environmental crisis. Another difference is that the #SavePulauGebe hashtag discusses the authorities more than the #SaveKIPKuliah hashtag. However, the #SaveKIPKuliah hashtag contains more calls to action (CTA) than the #SavePulauGebe hashtag.

The #SaveKIPKuliah hashtag has a higher number of CTA narratives than the #SavePulauGebe hashtag, resulting in higher engagement. Tweets with the #SaveKIPKuliah hashtag received an average of 9.215 replies. In contrast, tweets with the #SavePulauGebe hashtag only received an average of 1.003 replies. A similar pattern occurred in the retweet metric. Tweets with the #SaveKIPKuliah hashtag were retweeted an average of 64.272 times. Conversely, tweets with the #SavePulauGebe hashtag only received an average of 1.315 retweets. However, both hashtags had a low average number of quotes, 1.009 for #SaveKIPKuliah and 0.253 for #SavePulauGebe.

Discussions

A sudden surge in posts on a single day may suggest that they are part of a coordinated attack, which is consistent with Wijayanto et al.'s (2024) findings that cyber troop operators upload a large number of posts simultaneously and in a coordinated manner to ensure that the narrative they are promoting is picked up by X's algorithm. In other words,

these two hashtags did not emerge organically, but were coordinated and orchestrated.

In terms of the sentiment associated with the hashtags #SaveKIPKuliah and #SavePulauGebe, the sentiment is more negative than positive. The discourse associated with these hashtags shows that the cyber troop attack was directed at the government and economic actors. This demonstrates that cyber troops can be used as a form of privatised violence against governments and economic actors. Power in the digital world is no longer monopolised by political and economic forces alone. These same cyber troops can be used to counter those forces.

Table 5. Examples of Negative Sentiment Tweets in the #SaveKIPKuliah Hashtag

No.	Username	Tweet
1.	@rgantas	Celios udah ngingetin. itung2-an dana surplus dalam skema pemangkasan yg bnr bs sampe: 259 76 T. Itu bisa dipake buat tambahan bantuan KIPK sebesar 13 94 T mengcover sampe 1 04 jt mahasiswa. Kenapa rezim ini selalu mengambil skenario terburuk! #savekipkuliah #PeringatanDarurat https://t.co/t7u0C5lOkq

2.	@raffimulyaa	gila ye. saking jeleknya pemerintah ni peringatan darurat sampe punya banyak warna. bisa-bisa kalo semua warna udah dipake merahnya dipecah lagi jadi maroon burgundy rose red. saking jeleknya. #daruratpendidikan #savekipkuliah #turunkanuktptn #kipk
3.	@ilhampid	bukan lebay soal #savekipkuliah LPDP atau #daruratpendidikan tetapi potret sekolah di papua atau sulawesi masih seperti ini Stop ndasmu ndasmu fokus pd pendidikan .!!! Pemerintah bucin dan mainnya sama pengusaha atau taipan sedangkan rakyat kecil hanya bisa tolong ..!! https://t.co/JjPRy4Cgfu

Source: X, Researcher's data processing results

Table 6. Examples of Negative Sentiment Tweets in the #SavePulauGebe Hashtag

No.	Username	Tweet
1.	@gadisberjilbabb	Pulau Gebe sedang dijarah habis-habisan! Hutan digunduli air dicemari tanah diacak-acak. Semua ini ulah perusahaan-perusahaan rakus yang melakukan TAMBANG ILEGAL tanpa peduli nasib warga. Kita tidak boleh diam! #SavePulauGebe https://t.co/eSLU8nnTIJ

2.	@PartaiSocmed	@susipudjiastuti Aktivitas ilegal ini mencerminkan wajah buruk tata kelola tambang di Indonesia. Jika pulau kecil seperti Gebe saja bisa digerogoti tanpa izin siapa yang akan menjaga Indonesia Timur?
3.	@PartaiSocmed	PT MRI dan PT Smart Marsindo tidak tercatat memiliki izin resmi untuk kegiatan tersebut di Pulau Gebe. Tapi mereka terus beroperasi. Kenapa hukum tumpul ke atas tajam ke rakyat kecil? Bahkan berita tentang hal tersebut di takedown https://t.co/1irN02z68Z

Source: X, Researcher's data processing results

Furthermore, the hashtags #SaveKIPKuliah and #SavePulauGebe use two different strategies. The #SaveKIPKuliah hashtag aims to raise awareness of the issue by using multiple hashtags simultaneously. This increased visibility is accompanied by a strong call to action that encourages other X users to spread the word about the issue. In contrast, the #SavePulauGebe hashtag focuses on highlighting the environmental impact and criticising those in power, including government bodies and economic actors such as mining companies.

Table 7. Examples of Call-to-Action Narratives in the #SaveKIPKuliah Hashtag

No.	Username	Tweet
1.	@alctual	LAGI LAGI BERTINDAK SEENAKNYA! Katanya mau menuju Indonesia emas? Ini sih lebih ke Indonesia cemas. Selamat karena sudah menghancurkan mimpi para generasi bangsa TOLAK PEMANGKASAN DANA PENDIDIKANâ€¼ï¸ #daruratpendidikan #savekipkuliah #AnggaranBijakUntukRakyat #turunkanuktptn #kipk https://t.co/pp34ZfheyK
2.	@ayalogi	UKT naik beasiswa juga diilangin. ketahanan pangan dijadikan prioritas nomor satu tapi anak mau kuliah makin dipersulit. kita tuh krisis pendidikan bukan krisis pangan. apa sih maunya pemerintah?! bantu naikin hastag guys! #daruratpendidikan #savekipkuliah #turunkanuktptn #kipk
3.	@iubberry	ayo naikin tagarnya semua sebelum skema pemangkasan anggaran ini dibatalkan. #HapuskanMBG #BatalkanEfisiensiAnggaranPendidikan #savekipkuliah #daruratpendidikan

Source: X, Researcher's data processing results

The CTA narrative used in the #SaveKIPKuliah hashtag encourages rejection of the policy to make the education budget more efficient. Additionally, the CTA narrative focuses on increasing conversation traffic. This can be seen from the use of narratives that encourage people to promote and raise awareness of the hashtag, as well as the use of other hashtags in the same post.

Table 8. Examples of Call-to-Action Narratives in the #SavePulauGebe Hashtag

No.	Username	Tweet
1	@gadisberjilbabb	Pulau Gebe sedang dijarah habis-habisan! Hutan digunduli air dicemari tanah diacak-acak. Semua ini ulah perusahaan-perusahaan rakus yang melakukan TAMBANG ILEGAL tanpa peduli nasib warga. Kita tidak boleh diam! #SavePulauGebe https://t.co/eSLU8nnTIJ
2.	@zy_zy_lestary	Bicara soal kemajuan itu gampang. Tapi coba tinggal di Pulau Gebe mandi air lumpur dan lihat hutan yg lo cintai berubah jadi kubangan tambang.Baru lo paham bahwa TAMBANG ILEGAL bukan cuma kriminal tp bentuk kolonialisme modern.Maka #SavePulauGebe adalah perlawanan bkn keluhan
3.	@evelyn123617	@xvciup Diamnya aparat = izin tak tertulis bagi para perusak. Saatnya bersuara untuk Pulau Gebe! #SavePulauGebe

Source: X, Researcher's data processing results

The CTA narrative on the hashtag #SavePulauGebe tends to encourage people to speak up and oppose mining development on Pulau Gebe in North Maluku. This is evident from the use of words such as "lawan", "bersuara", and "jangan diam"[3].

The different strategies used for the two hashtags resulted in different levels of engagement. On average, the hashtag #SaveKIPKuliah received 9.215 replies, while the hashtag #SavePulauGebe received just 1.003. This indicates minimal interaction resulting from these tweets. Despite the lack of discussion, tweets with the #SaveKIPKuliah hashtag received an average of 64.272 retweets per tweet.

Table 9. Five #SaveKIPKuliah Tweets with the Highest Number of Retweets

No.	Username	Tweet	Number of Retweets
1.	@bluegazings	Temen-temen boleh gak di sela ngefangirl kita sama-sama naikin ht... kondisi sekarang udah memprihantinkan banget apalagi buat kalian yang sedang kuliah. TOLAK PEMANGKASAN DANA PENDIDIKAN #daruratpendidikan #savekipkuliah #AnggaranBijakUntukRakyat #turunkanuktptn #kipk https://t.co/nQfcZk8CFw	18045

[3] Lawan: *Resist*; Bersuara: *Speak up*; Jangan diam: *Don't stay silent*

2.	@canineh oon	600k masyarkat yg bergantung dgn kip-k kebanyakan adalah anak-anak yang pertama kali menjadi sarjana di keluarganya tapi terancam putus kuliah jika efisiensi ini dilaksanakan. TOLAK PEMANGKASAN DANA PENDIDIKAN #daruratpendidikan #savekipkuliah #turunkanuktptn https://t.co/gZyZmxfGhP	13204
3.	@n_nisirn	KEMBALIKAN HAK KAMI UNTUK MENDAPATKAN PENDIDIKAN YG LAYAKÃ¢â‚¬Â¼Ã¯Â¸ÂÃ¢â‚¬Â¼Ã¯Â¸Â #daruratpendidikan #savekipkuliah #turunkanuktptn https://t.co/k1s2C7BNUP	12019
4.	@Akrrab	Pendidikan adalah hak bukan beban anggaran. Pemangkasan dana KIP Kuliah hanya akan mempersempit akses pendidikan. Jangan biarkan efisiensi mengorbankan masa depan mahasiswa. TOLAK PEMANGKASAN DANA PENDIDIKAN! #daruratpendidikan #savekipkuliah #turunkanuktptn https://t.co/tdDC49L3tg	11042
5.	@devoidea l	Sekalian saja. Sekalian. #daruratpendidikan #savekipkuliah #AnggaranBijakUntukRakyat #turunkanuktptn https://t.co/uOuixpEyvd	8635

Source: X, Researcher's data processing results

Table 10. Five #SaveKIPKuliah Tweets with the Highest Number of Retweets

No.	Username	Tweet	Number of Retweets
1	@PartaiSocmed	Raja Ampat Jilid II kembali terjadi kali ini di Pulau Gebe Halmahera Tengah. Eksploitasi tambang nikel ilegal makin brutal. Warga menolak hutan rusak laut tercemar. Tapi alat berat terus berdatangan https://t.co/LutY53twpc	1589
2.	@gadisberjilbabb	Pulau Gebe sedang dijarah habis-habisan! Hutan digunduli air dicemari tanah diacak-acak. Semua ini ulah perusahaan-perusahaan rakus yang melakukan TAMBANG ILEGAL tanpa peduli nasib warga. Kita tidak boleh diam! #SavePulauGebe https://t.co/eSLU8nnTIJ	51
3.	@jaranotjarak	miris bgt lihat Pulau Gebe makin rusak. Fauna hilang tanah gundul laut tercemar. Tapi aparat kayak tutup mata tutup telinga sprti tdk trjdi apa .. Kalau rakyat protes baru deh rame #SavePulauGebe	50
4.	@iftirarhmayani	Pulau Gebe jadi korban semoga korban berikutnya adalah keserakahan kalian sendiri. #SavePulauGebe https://t.co/cK56vorSuE	50

5.	@PartaiSocmed	Lokasi: Desa Kacepi Pulau Gebe Maluku Utara. Puluhan alat berat & dump truck milik cukong lokal terlihat beroperasi mengambil nikel tanpa IUP (izin usaha pertambangan). Ini jelas ilegal dan merusak lingkungan	38

Source: X, Researcher's data processing results

The high number of calls to action to spread the narrative under the hashtag #SaveKIPKuliah corresponds with the high number of retweets for that hashtag. This suggests two possibilities. First, the CTA narrative may have successfully encouraged other users to help spread the narrative conveyed by the hashtag #savekipkuliah. The second is that the high retweet count was caused by cyber troop operators coordinating to retweet one another. This second possibility is supported by the findings of Wijayanto et al. (2024), who found that cyber troops retweet each other's posts so that their narrative can be captured by the X algorithm. Unfortunately, Tweet Harvest, the tool used in this study, was unable to capture data on the accounts that carried out the retweets. Consequently, this study cannot confirm either of the two possibilities regarding the high number of retweets mentioned earlier.

Negative narratives demonstrate ludic cybermilitias' use of negative narrative patterns, as

proposed by Rasidi (2023). The hashtag #SaveKIPKuliah conveys a negative narrative about the decision to cut the education budget. Similarly, #SavePulauGebe conveys a negative narrative about mining activities on Gebe Island.

Furthermore, the #SavePulauGebe campaign also employs doxxing strategies. This is evident in the naming of several mining companies operating on Gebe Island, such as PT. MRI and PT. Smart Marsindo. These companies are also accused of engaging in illegal mining activities on Gebe Island. This aligns with Rasidi's (2023) argument that ludic cybermilitias employ doxxing and framing strategies against their opponents. In the context of the #SavePulauGebe campaign, cyber troop operators carried out doxxing and framing against the mining companies operating on Gebe Island.

These findings suggest that the narrative patterns and strategies employed by the hashtags #SaveKIPKuliah and #SavePulauGebe are similar to those of ludic cybermilitias, as proposed by Rasidi (2023). This suggests that both hashtags are manifestations of ludic cybermilitia operations. However, rather than defending the interests of the regime, they are used to oppose the regime.

Conclusion

From the analysis above, it can be concluded that the two hashtags (#SaveKIPKuliah

and #SavePulauGebe) are not organic. These hashtags demonstrate a new pattern of cyber troop operation: cyber troops spreading narratives that contradict the positions of the government and economic actors. Both hashtags are characterised by cyber troops using anonymous accounts and coordinated posting patterns.

This finding supports the concept of the 'ludic cybermilitia' as proposed by Rasidi (2023). Rasidi (2023) argues that cyber troops in Indonesia are not part of the political and economic elite, but rather independent actors who engage in a form of privatised violence. The hashtags #SaveKIPKuliah and #SavePulauGebe support this argument, as both oppose the political and economic elite.

Furthermore, this research expands upon the concept of the ludic cybermilitia. As independent actors engaged in a form of privatised violence, ludic cybermilitias act in the political and economic interests of their clients, who typically belong to the political and economic elite (Rasidi, 2023). However, this study's findings suggest that cyber troops can also act against the political and economic regime as independent actors.

This raises two possible motives behind the cyber troop's operations against the regime. The first is that the actions of the cyber troop against the political and economic regime may stem

from awareness among the operators. The operators may also derive a sense of personal satisfaction from carrying out operations against the regime, in line with the 'ludic' aspect of the 'ludic cybermilitia' concept. This suggests that cyber troops do not solely act in service of economic and political interests, as in the concept of 'privatised violence' within the 'ludic cybermilitia', but may also act in pursuit of personal ideological interests.

A second possibility is that there is a professional contract to disseminate narratives against the regime. As a form of privatised violence, cyber troops act in their clients' interests. This suggests that the two aforementioned hashtags may have originated from a client's request for cyber troop operations against the political and economic regime. If so, this demonstrates that the digital age has made privatised violence services more accessible. Whereas previously, these services were accessible only to political and economic elites to support their interests, they are now accessible to anyone for any purpose, including opposing political and economic regimes.

Unfortunately, this study has its limitations. One such limitation is that the method used can only analyse text posted on social media. This means that the study cannot examine data beyond the text itself, such as the motives

behind cyber troop members posting these hashtags.

Due to these limitations, the study was unable to investigate the background to the two hashtags under review: #SaveKIPKuliah and #SavePulauGebe Consequently, it was not possible to determine whether these hashtags originated from cyber troops or if there were transactional aspects involved in their posting. Future research could explore the behind-the-scenes aspects of cyber troop activities opposing the regime. By examining these aspects, we can determine whether the activities of this anti-regime cyber troop are based on the concept of a 'ludic cybermilitia', or if they represent a new model of digital activism.

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Clean Energy vis-à-vis Capital Extraction: Arjuno-Welirang Geothermal Development in Batu City

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Abstract

This article examines the paradoxical aspects of the Arjuno-Welirang geothermal project in Batu City, which, due to its exploitative nature, has the potential to threaten the availability of springs. Theoretically, the study employs Social Conflict Theory (SCT) and a political economy approach to analyse how energy transition projects operate according to the logic of capital accumulation. Using a qualitative case study method involving field observations of residents' advocacy against the project in Batu City, as well as a literature review, the study finds that the Arjuno-Welirang project is deeply entrenched in the dynamics of an infrastructure alliance (comprising the state, financial institutions and corporations), which functions as a specific manifestation of a dominant social alliance. This alliance strategically utilises the narrative of a green energy transition to facilitate an extractive project that endangers the material foundation of local communities. In response, the mobilisation of Batu residents constitutes anticipatory grassroots resistance organised as a material struggle to defend their ecological commons and water resources from the monopolistic threats posed by energy capitalism.

Keywords: *Geothermal, social conflict theory, energy transition, Batu City, capital accumulation*

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Introduction

The topic of green energy has always been a hot topic in energy politics. Indonesia, the largest energy consumer in the ASEAN with a consumption of 10.11 exajoules in 2024, and the 18th largest energy consumer in the world as of 2025, is under pressure to immediately switch to using new and renewable energy (EBT) (Dana Mitra Lingkungan, 2024; Hasiana, 2024). Indonesia's carbon dioxide (CO_2) emissions are relatively high, at around 262 million tonnes of CO_2e released in 2025, according to Kata Data. Coal is the largest contributor to carbon emissions in Indonesia, with production reaching 790 million tonnes (Ahdiat, 2025; Setiawan, 2026). This data is supported by the Emission Gap Report from the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), which recorded Indonesia's emissions in 2025 at 4.8 tCO_2e per capita per year, slightly 3.8% higher than 2023 record. This trend indicates that Indonesia is one of the largest emitters of greenhouse gases among G20 countries (UNEP, 2025).

This situation has serious health implications. The high levels of air pollution and the widespread respiratory infections among the Jakarta's citizens demonstrate the serious threat that carbon emissions pose to the lives of Indonesians, and reform of the energy sector is a top priority in achieving net zero

emissions. As a result, energy infrastructure projects have been designated as strategic programmes under Joko Widodo's leadership to fulfil this commitment by 2060. One such project is the construction of a geothermal power plant on Arjuno-Welirang Mountain in Batu City (hereafter referred to as Arjuno-Welirang) (Enjang, 2025a).

Plans for the geothermal power plant in Batu City date back to 2017, when the Ministry of Energy and Mineral Resources (ESDM) designated Mount Arjuno as a Geothermal Working Area. However, work on the project did not begin until 2023, when President Jokowi included the Arjuno-Welirang geothermal project in the National Strategic Project (PSN) programme. Despite extensive surveys and socialisation of geothermal development being carried out with academics from Brawijaya University, this project has been met with resistance from Batu residents. This opposition is based on a range of issues that will arise, including water scarcity and long-term environmental vulnerability after the development of the Arjuno-Welirang area, especially following the flash floods of 2021 (Wismabrata, 2021).

In addition to environmental damage, concerns have been raised about the track record of PT Geo Dipa Energi, the government's mandate holder for the geothermal power

plant construction (known as Pembangkit Listrik Tenaga Panas Bumi, or PLTPB). Geo Dipa Energi was originally a private company, established by PLN and Pertamina in 2002, with a focus on geothermal exploitation and PLTPB development. In 2011, it officially became a state-owned enterprise (SOE) when the Indonesian government and Ministry of Finance transferred 67% of its shares. Thus, Geo Dipa Energi became the government's primary promoter of geothermal energy as a new and renewable energy source (Geo Dipa Energi, 2022).

Upon investigation, the appointment of Geo Dipa Energi as the Welirang geothermal project leader has raised serious issues. Geo Dipa Energi is a company known for its involvement in legal disputes; in 2017, it was involved in a legal dispute with PT Bumigas Energi regarding the Patuha and Dieng geothermal power plant projects. Geo Dipa Energi accused Bumigas of falling to carry out construction in accordance with the 2005 contract. This non-compliance resulted in estimated state losses of up to IDR 60 billion (CNN Indonesia, 2017). Conversely, PT Bumigas Energi reported the CEO of Geo Dipa Energi, Samsudin Warsa, for allegedly committing fraud by granting a development permit to the company. The allegations made by each party were brought to the attention of

various authorities, including the Information Commission (KI), and the Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK), and ultimately resolved in court (Hamdi, 2022).

The initial dispute settlement ruling between Geo Dipa Energi and Bumigas was favour of Bumigas, as decided by the South Jakarta District Court (Pengadilan Negeri Jakarta Selatan) in 2017. This caused delays to the development on the slopes of Arjuno-Welirang. However, Geo Dipa Energi filed an appeal, which reached the Supreme Court (Mahkamah Agung), which ruled in Geo Dipa Energi's favour in 2019 (Indrawan, 2023). Undeterred, Bumigas filed another lawsuit against Geo Dipa Energi in 2022 with similar evidence, and the outcome remains unclear (Enjang, 2025b).

The two cases described above, particularly with regard to the potential damage and legal disputes, make it clear that the energy transition project at Arjuno-Welirang is fraught with complications. In this paper, the author intends to raise two main questions to begin to unravel the political-economy dynamics of the Arjuno-Welirang geothermal project. The problem formulation used in this article begins with these two questions. Firstly, how does the configuration of the political economy impact the development of the Arjuno-Welirang geothermal project? Secondly, how does the geothermal project generate

resistance from the community in Batu City?

This study uses a qualitative case study methodology. The use of a case study in the Arjuno-Welirang geothermal project aims to critically analyse two aspects: political-economy dynamics of the Arjuno-Welirang PLTPB project, and the civil resistance in Batu City opposing energy commodification through geothermal power. Data collection was conducted from December 2024 to June 2025. Two techniques were developed during this period. The first focused on the field observations of several initiatives organised by the Batu City's citizen forum (Umbul Gemulo and Kasinan), which opposed geothermal energy, such as monthly meetings and public discussions initiated by the Umbul Gemulo forum and Wahana Lingkungan Hidup (WALHI) East Java. The second technique focused on a desk study of literature, using sources such as journals, reports and online news in order to identify dynamics in the Arjuno-Welirang geothermal area.

This study is grounded in the Social Conflict Theory (SCT) and takes a political-economy approach. SCT is used to explore the political and economic formations that shape geothermal development, demonstrating how state-capital relations drive the capital accumulation and spatial expansion through the explanation of energy.

Furthermore, this framework is employed to analyse grassroots resistance to the commodification of nature. Rather than viewing community pushback as merely cultural preservation, this study frames local resistance, manifested through policy advocacy and mass action, as a material struggle. By utilising their collective identity and treating water as a political agency, the community strives to defend their living spaces and essential water resources from the monopolistic threats posed by energy capitalism.

Discussions of SCT, proposed by Karl Marx and developed by the Murdoch School, begin with the argument that state institutions and policies (including the energy transitions) do not emerge in response to climate mitigation. Rather, they are manifestations of conflicts of interest among various social forces (Carroll & Sovacool, 2010). International norms, such as Conference on Parties (COP) and Just Energy Transition Partnership (JETP), do not necessarily dictate that state institutions act as the sole regulator of energy transition policies. Rather, these norms serve as a gateway through which various dominant forces can reshape geothermal energy in accordance with capital accumulation (Hameiri & Jones, 2020).

There are four main SCT concepts for analysing power relations within the Arjuno-

Welirang geothermal project. Firstly, there is the complexity of social relations. In the context of geothermal development, multiple actors do not entirely align their interests with a rigid mechanism. Instead, they negotiate their interests within that mechanism to arrange an institutional fix that favours securing access to resources (Hameiri & Jones, 2020). Secondly, social alliances, specifically operationalised as infrastructure alliances. Drawing upon Trissia Wijaya's (2021) framework, alliances formed in energy projects are not understood as a purely technical alignments for renewable energy, but as heavily politicised transnational state-capital networks.

This infrastructure alliance effectively consolidates the interests of transnational capital, SOEs and domestic elites into a cohesive governance structure (Hameiri & Scarpello, 2018). In the energy sector, this network institutionalises financial and political risks, thereby facilitating large-scale green extraction. Crucially, the alliance's primary function is to insulate foreign and elite developers from localised social and environmental pushback, thereby marginalising dissenting local communities (Wijaya, 2021).

Thirdly, there is embedded integration. Within the SCT framework, the expansion of green infrastructure is inherently tied to the integration of multi-level

actors into political-economic alliances. Embedded integration explains how transnational capital (ADB and JETP), SOEs, and local government networks consolidate their extractive interests through formal institutional and regulatory mechanisms. This concept shifts the analytical focus away from viewing the state as a neutral arbiter and instead exposes how state institutions embed global energy capital into the local regulatory landscape. This facilitates resource commodification while insulating elite developers from grassroots friction (Brenner et al., 2003; Wijaya, 2021).

Fourthly, the enclosure of ecological commons and anticipatory resistance. In order to analyse the grassroots mobilisation against this project, this study focuses on the contestation of ecological 'commons', specifically water resources in Batu City. In political economy, capital expansion often seeks to enclose public or communal natural resources for corporate extraction (Harvey, 2004; Jeffrey & Mcfarlane, 2011). This pattern is evident in the political and economic collusion that grants exploration permits and alters spatial planning (RTRW), activities that threaten the community's material livelihood, particularly with regard to the struggle for water resources rights. Therefore, the resistance organised by the Batu

community is framed as anticipatory resistance. Drawing lessons from ecological crises and water scarcity at older geothermal sites such as Dieng and Ijen, the community's proactive policy advocacy and mass actions embody a tangible struggle to safeguard their ecological foundation from the imminent threats posed by energy commodification (Fajri et al., 2023).

The SCT framework helps to assess the extent to which political-economic alliances drive the institutionalisation process of geothermal projects, providing a platform for capital accumulation amidst the growing demand for a sustainable energy transition.

Results and Discussion

Power Configuration and Institutional Arrangements inside the Arjuno-Welirang Geothermal Development

This section examines the power configuration and institutional arrangements inside the Arjuno-Welirang geothermal project by unfolding the complex social relations. To begin with, construction of the Welirang PLTPB began when the Ministry of Energy and Mineral Resources designated Arjuno-Welirang as a Mining Working Area (WKP) for geothermal exploration in 2014. This decision was made in response to the enactment of Law No. 21 of 2014 on Geothermal Energy (later

amended by Law No. 6 of 2023 on Job Creation). From the presidency of Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono to that of Joko Widodo, the focus of geothermal exploration shifted from mining to utilisation, thus providing legitimacy for exploration in the Arjuno-Welirang area. The area, which covers Mojokerto, Pasuruan, Batu City and Malang, has an estimated energy potential of 22 MW (megawatts) according to a rough estimation of energy exploitation (Amrullah, 2024).

The ESDM claims that its potential can be maximised to reach 280 MW. Thus, the plan to develop the Arjuno-Welirang geothermal capacity by 2025 will produce an output of 110 MW. In accordance with the National Grand Energy Strategy, the Arjuno-Welirang project has become a development priority in order to support the ambitious target of increasing geothermal output to 9.3 GW by 2035. This is in line with Indonesia's commitment to achieving net zero emissions, as set out in the COP30 agreement in Belém, Brazil (Ayudina, 2026). However, it should be noted that geothermal energy is part of green capitalism. This infrastructure paves the way for the commercialisation of energy, cloaked by the promise of reduced carbon emissions (Wallis, 2010). To examine the correlation between geothermal exploration in Arjuno-Welirang and

compliance with capital accumulation, two strategies were employed to negotiate support for the project: RTRW revision and land conversion to 'fix' the space.

The first issue lies in the RTRW version, where spatial planning is never positioned as a neutral mechanism. Instead, the RTRW exists as a contested arena shaped by several forces to accommodate specific agendas. Regarding the revision of the RTRW, |the Jokowi administration ratified Presidential Regulation No. 13 of 2017 concerning the National Spatial Plan, exempting geothermal exploration from the definition of mining activity and classifying geothermal energy as a natural resource. This exemption provides the legitimacy required to include the geothermal exploration agenda in every potential district or city, including the Arjuno-Welirang mountains as a potential location. Following the establishment of the WKP, spatial planning must change to accommodate the exploration of this energy source (Faisal & Muhyidin, 2024).

In the context of Batu City, efforts to amend spatial planning have been ongoing since 2020. Discussion to revise the RTRW have been inconsistent between the Batu City Government and the Batu City Regional House of Representatives (City Council). This reflects social contestations between Batu City officials and civil society

regarding the amendments, which have been treated as a political mechanism to accommodate geothermal exploration (Beritabaru, 2020). There has been no follow-up regarding the RTRW revision discourse, particularly with regard to the changes made to the 2010-2030 Batu City RTRW Regional Regulation by the Batu City Council and Mayor, which are accessible to the public. However, the revised Regional Regulation on Spatial Planning No. 7 of 2022 and Mayor Regulation No. 7 of 2024 concerning the Batu Spatial Plan 2024-2044 have been released to the public. These regulations open up opportunities for geothermal exploration in the Arjuno-Welirang and Songgoriti areas (Styawan & Indra, 2022).

In addition to the confusion surrounding the amendment to the Batu City Spatial Plan Regulation, another issue is the absence of a Strategic Environmental Assessment (KLHS). According to Purnawan D. Negara, the KLHS should be the initial guideline for revising spatial planning. This includes spatial planning in mountainous areas prone to disasters, particularly when tourism expansion and energy transition occur in upstream areas. However, rumours circulating among Bulukerto residents suggest that the KLHS was never presented to them before the proposed revision was implemented. Neither local residents nor academics concerned with this issue, such as Imam

Kushwahyono (Brawijaya University) and Purnawan D. Negara (Widayagama University), received a copy of the SEA document when the public consultation forum on this revision was held (LPM Perspektif, 2022).

The lack of SEA disclosure has raised serious concerns among several civil society groups, particularly WALHI East Java and the Umbul Gemulo Citizen Forum. These concerns have been evident in their comments on several occasions, where some residents stating at their regular meetings: "How can we guarantee that geothermal development will have a positive impact on the environment if the environmental impact assessment for Batu City is being kept from the public? This situation poses a serious threat to the sustainability of our water sources, which were previously threatened by eviction for hotel development in the 2010.[2]" These views are further linked to allegations that the RTRW revision was expedited solely to accommodate economic interests, rather than to ensure environmental sustainability.

These two statements demonstrate that RTRW amendment was not carried out in a transparent or accountable manner, and that it was also in accordance with the central government's agenda. The revision then paved the way for the establishment and exploration of the Arjuno-Welirang WKP,

[2] Field notes during routine meeting at Bulukerto Village, 22 January 2025

facing the little opposition from civil society. In 2022, The Alliance to Save Greater Malang held a peaceful demonstration at the Batu City Council building to reject the RTRW revision. They rejected the non-transparent revision of the RTRW and demanded that the Batu City Council cancel the revision (Azmy, 2022). Back then, the alliance had considerable strength, involving Umbul Gemulo and Kasinan citizens, the Malang Raya student group, and three NGOs (Malang Corruption Watch, WALHI East Java, and the Legal Aid Foundation of Malang). The main reason for their action was concern about water scarcity.

However, as the action was seen as a 'passing breeze', the demand was never followed up until now. In addition, the weakening of the civil consolidation to reject the RTRW cancellation meant that their resistance did not prompt the government to review this revision. The RTRW revision then paved the way for greater capital expansion. Since the RTRW changes were implemented in 2022, land conversion in Batu City has become increasingly unstoppable. According to a statement by the Head of Bulukerto Village in 2023, the conversion of green areas into housing has occurred more frequently in the Arjuno-Welirang mountainous region. This clearly violates the RTRW regulations, which state that green areas cannot be converted into tourist areas (Wicaksana, 2024).

This phenomenon shows that the problem lies not only in the implementation, but also in the power relations behind the revision of the RTRW to create flexibility in land ownership. Amidst the growing demand for tourism, Harvey demonstrated that the flexibility of land permits, predominantly utilised by a selected few businessmen, is being used to build residential areas as a means of maximising profit from the tourism sector, while simultaneously reducing areas dedicated to water source conservation in the long term (Harvey, 2004).

Land conversion for tourism is not directly related to geothermal infrastructure. However, the flexibility in land conversion provided by the RTRW gives Arjuno-Welirang strong legitimacy and ample space in the in long-term. To begin with, permits for the operation and construction of the PLTPB were granted to ensure the sustainability of geothermal exploitation activities. On 11 April 2017, a new geothermal development permit was granted to Geo Dipa Energi in accordance with the Minister of Energy and Mineral Resources Decree No. 1748, opening up the exploration permit to Geo Dipa Energi. Since then, Geo Dipa Energi, the ESDM and academics from the Faculty of Natural Sciences and Engineering at Brawijaya University have continued to conduct exploration activities (Qatrunnada et al., 2024; Yurika, 2021).

In terms of academic involvement, one of the leading figures in support of geothermal exploration is Professor Sukir Maryanto. He has been advocating for geothermal exploration in Batu City since 2017 in order to utilise renewable energy. The establishment of the Centre for Volcanology and Geothermal Studies at Brawijaya University is a testament to this, and the work of the researchers there indirectly demonstrates that the intervention of various social forces, including academia, will be necessary to support geothermal exploitation in the future. The presence of an epistemic community provides further justification for the state and corporations to exploit the hidden energy inside Arjuno-Welirang (Yusnia & Kristanti, 2022).

Apart from academic intervention, another prominent force to be reckoned with is corporations, especially Geo Dipa Energi. As the corporation responsible for operating the Dieng geothermal, Geo Dipa Energi has been mandated to lead the Arjuno-Welirang project since 2017. Consequently, Geo Dipa became SOE and now operates independently in infrastructure development and geothermal management. Every geothermal project undertaken by Geo Dipa receives financial support from various stakeholders (Geo Dipa Energi, 2022).

On the one hand, financial support from national

institutions is provided by PT Sarana Multi Infrastruktur (PT SMI) through a green fund scheme. Since 2020, PT SMI has been mandated by the Ministry of Finance to provide loans for green infrastructure development, particularly geothermal projects, in order to support the SDG target of increasing clean energy use by 2023 (PT SMI, 2025a). As of December 2024, PT SMI had disbursed loans amounting to IDR 33.45 trillion to 94 climate-related projects. These loans were also intended for the Arjuno-Welirang project, accelerating the exploration process and construction auction through the Geothermal Resource Risk Mitigation (GREM) scheme (PT SMI, 2025b; Silfia, 2025).

Meanwhile, the involvement of the ADB and the World Bank in funding this project reflects financial support from international institutions. In 2017, the ADB provided USD 200 million to fund Arjuno-Welirang geothermal exploration, with the potential to increase electricity production to 189 MW (ADB & The World Bank, 2015). In addition, the World Bank disbursed USD 120 million for Welirang WKP exploration in 2021. This assistance continued until 2023 to enable the geothermal exploration to continue until the power plant is fully operational without bearing the risks of failure through Clean Technology Fund scheme.

Thus, it is clear how the combination of national and international funding is allocated to Geo Dipa Energi to secure exploration until 2030. The multi-year financing scheme has two advantages. Firstly, this financing can cover the substantial costs incurred by the government for geothermal development (Yurika, 2021). Geothermal development could cost more than IDR 2 trillion. The second advantage is the existence of an infrastructure alliance comprising PT SMI, Geo Dipa, the ADB and the World Bank, which shows that state support for geothermal expansion is in line with the capital obtained once energy conversion is carried out. The intervention of the ADB and the World Bank illustrates their interest in redirecting the financial burden from corporations (both SOEs and private companies) to international institutions, which opens up a path for capital extraction in environmentally sensitive regions, as argued with Carroll (2010) in the context of market-led environmentalism.

The Infrastructure Alliance and Ecological Enclosure within the Arjuno-Welirang Geothermal Area

The existence of geothermal energy is inextricably linked to infrastructure alliances and their critique. Geothermal has become a political arena in which conflicts of interest

arise from the dominant alliance. Since the capital accumulation embedded in geothermal energy, which requires large amounts of funding and a long implementation period, the conflicts within the infrastructure alliances of this project raise several issues. Firstly, there is the marketisation of energy in geothermal. The construction of the Blawan-Ijen geothermal power plant, for example, illustrates the concept of 'double alchemy' in action, involving the extraction of capital and the creation of new energy spaces during the energy transition (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2019).

Natural resources, especially geothermal, will be extracted and converted into energy. This energy will generate financial wealth for companies and the state. For example, the conversion of 100-200 MW of electricity generated by geothermal energy can add billions of rupiah to the state coffers. Additionally, the energy generated is monetised to generate capital returns for international financial institutions or to fund project expansion in other countries (Operacz et al., 2025).

All of this is made possible by de-risking scheme, which utilises state budgets or international loans to fully fund geothermal exploration. This grants corporations the flexibility to extract and convert the energy source into an economic commodity. In the context of geothermal

energy, the World Bank, through its Geothermal Resource Risk Mitigation program, provides financial and technical assistance to PT SMI to support geothermal financing. Funding ranges from USD 300,000 to USD 40 million over 10 years (Siahaan et al., 2023; The World Bank, 2025).

The Ministry of Finance, through Minister of Finance Regulation No. 62 of 2017, mandated PT SMI to manage the Geothermal Sector Infrastructure Financing (PISP). This provided funding for loans and equity investments for geothermal exploration, while assuming the failure risk (Kementerian Keuangan, 2017). In 2025, it secured a geothermal resource risk mitigation facility, with funding allocated from USD 645 million for technical assistance and USD 6.5 million for capacity building. This enabled PT SMI to prepare, operate and manage the GREM facility (Asnawi, 2025).

Through the GREM and de-risking, the benefits provided by the World Bank primarily support corporations instead of local communities due to the centralisation of de-risking fund for high-risk exploration activities (Inchauste & Victor, 2017). If corporations cause environmental damage through their exploration activities, this scheme does not provide holistic socio-economic compensation for the community. Furthermore, corporations' minimal accountability is limited to

charity funds akin to CSR. However, if the exploration is profitable, PLN will be the primary stakeholder in the energy monetisation scheme, purchasing electricity to meet national energy consumption needs—a scheme that benefits geothermal corporations. This centralises the profits generated for the capitalist class, whether the state or international corporations (Lochery, 2022).

Secondly, there are the economic losses suffered by local communities. The exploitation of clean energy generates profits for the state and corporations, but also causes economic losses due to dispossession and land grabbing (Harvey, 2004). The Center for Law and Economic Studies (CELIOS) report on the Blawan-Ijen PLTPB operation noted that the Macan hamlet community lost IDR 100 million per hectare of cabbage farmland to PT MEDCO's geothermal development. In addition, the seizure of 20 hectares of land from this community could result in losses of up to IDR 2 billion per year (Utomo & Husnudin, 2025).

CELIOS and WALHI have recorded losses to agricultural activities amounting to IDR 230 billion in the second year of operation of the Wae Sono geothermal power plant in East Nusa Tenggara, due to reduced water availability. These losses, in turn, have triggered greater inequality in Wae Sono, as evidenced by an inequality ratio of 0.7

in the second and third years, because the PLTPB does not provide alternative livelihoods for the local population once it begins operating. This is connected to the flow of profits from the Wae Sono PLTPB to the state and the international corporations operating behind it (Jamil, 2023; Jemadin, 2024).

The community's losses also stem from the aforementioned de-risking implementation, whereby geothermal development projects funded by international aid have resulted in greater losses than benefits. From a financial perspective, the international loans provided by the World Bank are ultimately repaid through the national budget (APBN). Recorded in the debt burden for the fourth quarter of 2025, this reached USD 431.7 billion (IDR 7,271 trillion) for energy development, including geothermal (Setiaji, 2026). This means that the Indonesian public will have to bear this debt long term. In addition to the debt burden, the benefits of geothermal electricity are subject to further disparities. Geothermal output is monopolised by PLN for integration into the national grid, meaning that the distribution of geothermal electricity operates in a top-down manner. As a result, residents living near geothermal sites do not directly benefit from geothermal energy, and the right to energy is once again commodified for the

provider's profit (Hartami & Karjoko, 2025).

Thirdly, issues have also been raised regarding the composition of Geo Dipa Energi's management. Several members of the board of commissioners are suspected of holding multiple positions, leading to significant conflicts of interest. Research by the Indonesian Forum for Budget Transparency (FITRA) shows that several Geo Dipa Energi commissioners also hold strategic positions in government ministries. The Ministry of Finance has the highest number of cases of dual positions. Two of these individuals are Heri Setiawan and Tio Serepina Siahaan. Heri Setiawan, for example, serves as Director of State Financial Risk Management at the Ministry of Finance and also holds the position of commissioner at Geo Dipa Energi (FITRA, 2023).

Conversely, Tio Siahaan, the Legal Bureau Chief at the Ministry of Finance, has served as a Geo Dipa Energi commissioner since 2023. The presence of two Ministry of Finance officials within Geo Dipa Energi's organisational structure highlights a potential conflict of interest in geothermal management. This phenomenon of dual positions has the potential to result in a repeat of the corruption case at the Dieng geothermal power plant in 2016, particularly given that the Ministry of Finance now dominates geothermal exploration instead of the Ministry of SOE (now

Danantara), following a change in Geo Dipa Energi's status as a SOE under the direct command of the Ministry of Finance (ICW, 2023).

This project is not only plagued by a conflict of interest, but also by allegations of corruption. The dispute over geothermal development for Dieng and Patuha remains unresolved and has implications for the growing corruption allegations surrounding the Dieng geothermal project. This dispute is contested by PT Bumigas and Geo Dipa Energi. Bumigas accuses individuals from the KPK and the Attorney General's Office (Kejagung) of colluding with Geo Dipa Energi to eliminate competitors in these two projects. Khreshna, as Bumigas' representative, suspects that the KPK and Kejagung used bribes and shady transactions to influence the District Court's decision in the previous case. A report on this alleged maladministration was addressed to the Ombudsman, who was asked to investigate alleged violations of legal procedure and bribery by the KPK and Kejagung. Although the evidence for these allegations is unclear, this case has set a bad precedent for geothermal projects (Siregar, 2022).

The myriad problems surrounding geothermal energy have a significant impact on the future of the Welirang PLTPB. Over the past four years, progress in the

Arjuno-Welirang development has focused on field surveys and outreach activities conducted by Geo Dipa in collaboration with Brawijaya University. Their involvement has not been limited to seismic monitoring, but has also included geothermal exploration (I. Fajar, 2020). The involvement of intellectuals, particularly Professor Sukir Maryanto and the Centre for Volcanology and Geothermal Studies at Brawijaya University, shows how academic critics, of environmentally unfriendly development have shifted their position to become 'intellectual craftsmen'. One reasons for this shift is that the material incentives obtained from this project (fees, commissions, and power networks) are more lucrative than rejecting it, which offers no incentives whatsoever. As a result, this position negates their inherent role as civil intellectuals, transforming them into actors who shape public perception of the benefits of geothermal energy (Kusman, 2019).

In addition to exploration activities, the ESDM has launched an expanded auction for the Arjuno-Welirang WKP—particularly the Songgoriti area—in order to support PLN's 2025-2034 Electricity Supply Business Plan (RUPTL). The auction was launched at the 11th Indonesia International Geothermal Convention & Exhibition (IIGCE) to encourage investment in geothermal financing. The

auction signals that geothermal development will intensify in the coming years (Gurky, 2025). Thus, it is possible that geothermal exploration will expand beyond the Arjuno-Welirang area to other regions between the mountain ranges of Batu City. However, excessive water extraction could have fatal consequences for the residents of Batu City.

The first issue is the availability of spring water. Excessive extraction of water from geothermal sources can lead to shortages in mountainous areas and threaten local residents. Since 2009, WALHI East Java has recorded a drastic decline in water sources, from 111 to 58. The main causes are land use change and deforestation, with the expansion of tourism in Batu City making this decline inevitable. If the Arjuno-Welirang geothermal plant operates at full capacity, it is possible that the water sources in Batu City will be completely depleted, given that the drilling and construction capacity of PLTPBs can reach 4,536 litres of water per minute (Medco Energi Geothermal, 2023). The second issue is the water quality. Geothermal conversion produces dangerous waste, such as sulphur and toxic sludge.

This waste is a by-product of the extraction of water sources with a high sulphur content, which is then heated by turbines. Uncontrolled waste content renders the soil unproductive for agriculture,

as experienced by residents of Muara Laboh in West Sumatra. In addition, heating these turbines produces hot steam, which kills the surrounding vegetation. Thus, the steam from these turbines makes the area vulnerable to deforestation and rising temperatures (WALHI, 2025).

It is predicted that water scarcity in Batu City will become even more severe when the Welirang Geothermal Power Plant begins operating. The losses incurred will not only affect the economic, causing crop failure and unemployment, but will also lead to an environmental crisis for the citizens of Greater Malang for years to come (Puspita, 2024). Prior to the geothermal energy threat, Batu City had faced the threat of privatisation of its water sources. One example is the Umbul Gemulo spring in Bulukerto Village, which was threatened with eviction to make way for the construction of the Rayja Hotel in 2016. When rumours of the eviction spread, the residents of Bulukerto panicked that their long-standing water source would be depleted.

The threat of water sources eviction did not only occur in Gemulo. The Kasinan water source was also threatened. This threat arose in connection with the discussion about the construction of the Alas Kasinan (Alaska) Tourism project in 2020, where Alaska would be projected as an artificial tourist attraction equivalent to Jatim Park.

There are concerns that the construction of Alaska will involve cutting down many trees in the Kasinan valley, and that operating the various rides at Alaska will consume large amounts of water. Consequently, the completion of Alaska would lead to forest destruction and water scarcity (AO, 2023).

Countering the Infrastructure Alliance: Community Mobilisation against Geothermal Expansion

The aggressive expansion of the transnational infrastructure alliance inevitably triggers pushback from the global-local interface. This is reflected in Batu City's community action to preserve Arjuno-Welirang and oppose the construction of geothermal construction. Arjuno-Welirang is the lifeblood of Batu City and holds deep significance for the local community. Their action is not merely as a cultural or symbolic preservation, but a material struggle to protect the ecological commons. Aris, a resident and activist from Bulukerto, noted that 'the abundance of water sources in Bulukerto is a blessing from God, bestowed upon Batu City as the headwaters of the Malang Raya region. This abundance is also a legacy from our ancestors, and we, as the next generation, have a duty to preserve this resource for our children and grandchildren. However, alongside the massive growth of tourism and economic development in Batu City, this

abundance, in turn, brings threats. These threats come from various directions, ranging from large-scale hotel construction to recent geothermal developments (Interview with Aris, Bulukerto activist, 14 March 2025).

Aris's statement implies that water sources are an integral part of life for the people of Bulukerto. Within the SCT framework, water is analysed not merely as a cultural and spiritual symbol, but as the fundamental material basis for local agriculture and livelihoods, which are not solely positioned as an economic commodity to be bought and sold. The community's narrative regarding ancestral heritage provides them with a means of political agency with which to contest the institutional enclosure of their ecological commons. Disruption to water sources in Bulukerto, such as the geothermal project or previous privatisation attempts in 2016, directly threatens the survival of the community and will trigger an unavoidable class-based ecological conflict in Greater Malang for years to come.

Responding to the water depletion and ecological disaster threat, the residents of Bulukerto and Kasinan have proactively organised community resistance. This resistance is a strategic struggle to challenge the attempt by the state-capital alliance to commodify their crucial water resources under the guise of a green transition.

Generally speaking, there are two forms of anticipatory resistance. The first involves forming forums to strengthen collective action vis-à-vis state power and capital. Examples of this include the Umbul Gemulo Community Forum for Spring Water Conservation (FMPMA) and the Kasinan Community Forum. Through these forums, they are raising awareness among residents about the importance of preserving spring water. The methods used are quite diverse. In the Kasinan area specifically, the Kasinan Forum consistently carries out reforestation around Coban Kasinan by planting young seedlings to restore the area's natural vegetation (Rahmadhani, 2023). The Kasinan Forum also distributes water management through HIPAM (Drinking Water Users Association).

The water quotas distribution from HIPAM is proportional, ensuring that daily consumption does not exceed 20–30 litres. However, Udin acknowledged that HIPAM is currently limited to the Kasinan subdistrict, as attempts to expand HIPAM throughout Batu City require permits and intervention from the local government. Furthermore, HIPAM's distribution capacity is not yet as extensive as that of Among Tirto's or the Regional Water Supply Company (PDAM), which raises questions about HIPAM's expansion into areas adjacent to the Arjuno-

Welirang range. Nevertheless, this self-managed system demonstrates how environmental stewardship begins with collective water source management. The community recognises that equitable water distribution prevents excessive exploitation by corporations or the state. Thus, HIPAM is maintained for that purpose (Interview with Ahmad Syaifuddin, Kasinan Village Officials, 7 April 2025)

This forum also took part in a symbolic action. Organised by Kasinan residents, it took place at the Batu City Council and conveyed the key message of rejecting the construction of Alaska. This was followed by a hearing with the Batu City Government, where an agreement was signed to stop the construction of Alaska. This hearing also involved the 'Gebrak' alliance, comprising various civil society groups such as WALHI East Java, Malang Corruption Watch (MCW), Sindikat Aksata, and LBH Surabaya Pos Malang. Combined with the overwhelming rejection, the hearing succeeded in stopping the construction of Alaska (Richa, 2020). This small victory achieved by the Kasinan Forum's resistance movements proves that local community-centred movements are better able to push for the halting of projects like Alaska by leveraging their status as political actors in Kasinan.

On the other hand, the FMPMA has also made a significant contribution to the

movement against geothermal energy. Previously, in 2014, FMPMA and Walhi East Java filed a lawsuit against PT Panggon Sarkarya Sukses Mandiri (PSSM), the developer. They won the lawsuit against the hotel construction permit when the Malang District Court upheld the sentence against the developer. Although the litigation process was fraught with twists and turns, including the Supreme Court rejecting both parties' appeals, the Batu City Government ultimately decided to halt the hotel construction, enabling Umbul Gemulo to survive (Firman, 2017). In addition to legal action, the FMPMA also staged a long march to the House of Representatives and the President, as well as holding symbolic protests at the Batu City Council. These actions aimed to reject the eviction of Umbul Gemulo. The cancellation of the plans to convert the spring into a hotel was a small victory in their defence of the spring against the threat of extractivism. However, their struggle is not yet over (J. Fajar, 2014).

In the face of threats to seize the water source for energy conversion, preserving Umbul Gemulo is crucial for the survival of Batu City citizens. In response to this new threat, Batu City residents continue to fight to unite in rejecting geothermal energy. Since January 2025, WALHI East Java and MCW have consistently supported FMPMA and Kasinan

residents in disseminating information criticising geothermal energy, which can be understood as a counter-hegemonic strategy. By emphasising the irreplaceable value of their water resources, the community is constructing shared knowledge of the fact that the geothermal project is a manifestation of green capitalism, and that the politicisation of legal instruments (RTRW and PSN) has been used to strip citizens of sovereignty over their living spaces for the sake of capital accumulation. Information has been disseminated through social media content and zine publications, with the assistance from student groups such as Sindikat Aksata, PPMI (Indonesian Student Press Association) in Malang City, and Area Baca Selasa (Dhewy & Pertiwi, 2024).

This agenda goes beyond constructing a shared class consciousness that counters the capitalist logic of the infrastructure alliance within the geothermal sector. Politically, this united movement also summoned Nurrochman, the Batu Mayor and Didik, the Batu City Council chairman for the period 2024-2029, to appear. This summons created public pressure on the Batu City government to cancel geothermal development (Styawan, 2025). In conclusion, these actions reflect how civil society is working together to defend environmental sustainability in the context of the transition

to green energy. Furthermore, resistance from Batu citizens regarding the ongoing concession auction for this project continues, making it essential to sustain and escalate these efforts.[3]

Most recently, the demonstration by residents of Tretes in March 2026 served as a collective wake-up call. Although the demonstration took place on the opposite side of the mountain slope, specifically in the Tretes District of the Pasuruan Regency, the community alliance known as the Gerakan Masyarakat Peduli Hutan (Gema Duta) condemned the conversion of approximately 22.5 hectares of forest area into residential land. This commercialisation will damage the Arjuno-Welirang ecosystem, which is already under threat from geothermal activity (Rinanda, 2026).

However, the movement to reject geothermal energy also faces challenges that are no less daunting. In order for this movement to survive, the civil society alliance in Batu City must overcome two major challenges. Firstly, they must recruit supporters from outside Bulukerto and Kasinan. Opposition to geothermal tends to be stronger in areas that are geographically close to the source of the geothermal activity. Conversely, it takes time for communities living in downstream areas to show solidarity in opposing geothermal mining because

[3] Field notes during WALHI & FMPMA meeting at Bulukerto & Kasinan Village, 17 June 2025

they do not directly experience its impacts.

Thus, the grassroots base needs to be expanded through campaigns and discussions throughout Batu City to raise awareness of geothermal energy (Fadhillah et al., 2023). Secondly, there is pressure from the state. Although the Arjuno-Welirang geothermal project's PSN status has not been revoked by the Prabowo regime, expansion of this project will involve coercive (security forces) and hegemonic (propaganda and aid) forces. This will result in any resistance to geothermal being crushed by the authorities in the future.

To anticipate this, the existing campaigns and discussions must be reinforced by setting-up community forums in each region (Puspita, 2024). These forums must have the capability to take legal action and engage in political activities (e.g. hearings and lobbying), so that each member has the skills and courage to defend their water sources. In addition, each forum should build alliances with other civil society networks and maintain the consistency of the movement through monthly meetings. This will help to maintain strength and develop measured advocacy steps, as demonstrated by the Save Slamet Alliance (Santoso & Kusumasari, 2019). Although their journey is not yet complete, this resistance movement continues to be consistent.

To sum, the collaboration between the Batu residents (Umbul Gemulo and Kasinan forum) and civil society organisations such as WALHI East Java, MCW, and LBH represents the formation of a counter-alliance designed to challenge the dominant transnational infrastructure network. This counter-alliance challenges the strategy of selectivity by providing legal defence, conducting independent environmental assessments and staging mass actions. Through this coordinated struggle, the grassroots movement aims to break through the insulation provided by institutions to protect elite developers and reclaim public sovereignty over the ecological commons (Azmy, 2025).

Conclusion

Overall, this article concludes that the Arjuno-Welirang geothermal project is a concrete manifestation of the clean energy paradox within the framework of SCT. According to SCT, this development is not merely as an effort to mitigate climate change, but rather the result of the contestation of interests among social forces, with state policy functioning as a tool to facilitate capital accumulation. A collaboration between the state, PT Geo Dipa Energi, and international financial institutions such as the ADB and the World Bank works to redefine the extraction of natural resources as a legitimate green transition agenda.

This discussion on the development of the Arjuno-Welirang geothermal project shows that its realisation relies heavily on the integration of multi-level actors. This integration demonstrates how transnational capital, SOEs, and local elites consolidate their interests through formal institutional arrangements. This integration is operationalised through regulatory mechanisms, most notably the opaque revision of Batu City's RTRW and the project's designation as a PSN. Rather than viewing these policy shifts as mere administrative procedures, the SCT perspective frames them as political and economic instruments designed to integrate global energy capital into the local landscape. By altering the spatial regulations, the infrastructure alliance successfully incorporates its extractive agenda into the state's legal framework, thereby ensuring that transnational and elite developers are legally permitted to exploit ecologically sensitive areas for the purpose of capital accumulation.

This study emphasises how the infrastructure alliance prioritises national energy agendas and transnational capital over local ecological security. By presenting the Arjuno-Welirang geothermal project as a pilot for national green energy strategy, the alliance effectively institutionalises its inherent

risks. Consequently, the potential burden of ecological degradation and public debt is shifted onto the public, while the dominant capitalist class secures future monetary gains from energy monetisation. Recognising these projected trajectories, the community's mobilisation is driven by material evidence of water crises at older geothermal sites such as Dieng and Ijen. These historical precedents provide the material foundation for Batu City's proactive resistance, uniting residents in rejecting a model of energy capitalism that threatens the long-term sustainability of their living spaces.

In conclusion, the residents of Batu City are engaged in pivotal anticipatory resistance, directly challenging the hegemony of energy capitalism and capitalist resource extraction. The community's strategies, which deploy their collective identity regarding water as a form of political agency alongside counter-advocacy and mass mobilisation, constitute a profound material struggle to reclaim sovereignty over their ecological commons. Ultimately, this study demonstrates that a just energy transition cannot be achieved while renewable energy policies are weaponised by a transnational infrastructure alliance to facilitate green capital accumulation. This subordinates ecological sustainability and public safety to the imperative of corporate profit.

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Consolidating Wealth and Power: Arab Family Businesses and Politics in Post-Reform Purwokerto

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Abstract

This study examines how the Basalamah family business was strengthened using political and social strategies. A qualitative method and case study approach was used for data collection, involving observation, in-depth interviews and documentation. Unlike previous business and political studies, this paper considers social capital as well as economic capital. This study complements political economy literature by demonstrating the influence of economic, political and religious identity forces on business and politics at the local level. The political strategy employed involved building a patronage network with local political elites, such as the Regent of Banyumas under the leadership of Joko Sudantoko, Aris Setiono and Mardjoko, and entering the world of practical politics by holding strategic positions in the Banyumas Regency Regional House of Representatives (Regency Council). Both strategies are important because informal connectivity is needed to build relationships with local political elites and to become directly involved in politics (i.e. policy-making) for the sake of business interests. The social strategy employed was to strengthen social networks and reinforce the religious social space through the Al-Irsyad Al-Islamiyyah social foundation in Purwokerto. This social strategy strengthens the bond between economic and political forces in perpetuating their business interests while safeguarding ethnic identity.

Keywords: *Business; patronage; politics; strategy*

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Introduction

The economic development of Purwokerto is closely linked to the economic activities that influence the rate of economic growth in the area. As the capital of Banyumas Regency, Purwokerto serves as the centre of government and economic activity in the southern part of Central Java Province, with the largest business centre in the region. Banyumas Regency is one of the areas in Central Java with the fourth-highest economic growth, at 5.86%, which is higher than the regional growth rate of 5.31% (BPS Kabupaten Banyumas, 2022). This was influenced by increased business activity, including that of the Basalamah family from the Arab community. The business sector in Purwokerto is dominated by two ethnic groups: Chinese and Arab. Since the New Order era, the Chinese ethnic group has dominated business in Purwokerto (Nurprojo, 2019). Following the reforms, the Chinese and Arab ethnic groups coexisted, and both now hold economic power in Purwokerto. Currently, the Arab ethnicity holds a more dominant position in terms of the power dynamic between the Chinese and Arab ethnicities. Besides their economic and political power, the Arab community has also been more easily accepted due to a shared identity: Islam is the majority religion in Purwokerto.

The Basalamah family has a huge business network in the property sector under the name PT Griya Satria and PT Sapphire Group. They are the leading player in the property sector and are known for their PT Sapphire Group label in regions such as Banyumas, Brebes, Cirebon, Pekalongan, Slawi and Tegal. Purwokerto is Sapphire's largest housing development area, comprising approximately 17 housing estates and 1,000 units across 10 housing cluster types (Sapphire Group, 2024). In the education sector, the Al-Irsyad Al-Islamiyyah social foundation has established ten schools ranging from kindergaten to senior high school level, which are considered the best private schools in Purwokerto. The family has also developed a family-like business networks in the construction, education, health, and tourism sectors. They are not only trying to build political power in the business sector; their family has also held legislative power in the Golkar Party-affiliated Banyumas Regency Council. Despite being a minority group, they have successfully entered the political arena due to their economic and social strength, religious identity and strong mass base in Purwokerto. This has affected their business and political activities at the local level.

Studies on the relationship between business and politics within the state still largely rely on economic power rather than social capital. Many still see the Chinese ethnic group

dominating business within the state sphere. The struggle for the state's material capital will revolve around the strength of the capital of both the Chinese ethnic group and the 'indigenous' capitalist class, with the former continuing to dominate private businesses (Hadiz, 2013). In the context of Purwokerto, a strong religious identity influences business and politics at a local level. As a wealthy minority in Purwokerto, Arab families have sought to build political power and religious identity as a binding force for economic and political strength, maintaining their dominance in Purwokerto through a large mass base. This phenomenon supplements the study of political economy, which suggests that the relationship between business and politics within a state reflects its economic, political, and religious identities. This research aims to explain the political and social strategies employed by the Arab family to strengthen their business and political influence in Purwokerto post-reform.

Conceptual Framework

Business and politics are often referred to together as 'business and the state' because the state is a collective of political actors (Heywood, 2002). However, political understanding is broader than the state because politics involves anyone who is involved in activities through which people create, maintain, and

change the general rules that underpin their lives (Heywood, 2002). Politics is not limited to individuals who join political parties or engage in government activities; it encompasses anyone who can develop influence and allocate resources within a broader context of life (Heywood, 2002). Meanwhile, business is related to the allocation of material resources to generate profit. The two are closely linked: political processes are used to achieve business interests, while economic aspects are used to achieve political power. The state also views politics as an activity undertaken by business actors to accumulate wealth through political parties, political elites, community organisations or business organisations in order to access business opportunities. The relationship between business actors/entrepreneurs and the state is characterised primarily by patronage (Savirani, 2015). As Robison (1986) explains, business and politics during the New Order Era show the relationship between the state and business, where the state became a space to protect and support business power. This business patronage network centred on the Soeharto family and was based on a political-economic structure controlled by the president (the patron) and his cronies (the clients). This structure used the political-economic logic of capitalism

to benefit of the family and surrounding elites. The state provided businesses with facilities such as subsidies, licenses and monopolies, or eased credit restrictions (Robison, 1986).

After the New Order ended, patronage networks continued in the era of decentralisation, growing stronger through a more fluid and open political arena. A decentralised political structure down to regional level, including the political economy agenda implemented by the old elite (part of the New Order legacy), as well as the emergence of new elites comprising more diverse actors, strengthens patronage relationships locally.

The study of the family as a political institution that operates alongside, and sometimes independently of, other institutions, as a political actor with strategic goals and agency (Purdey & Savirani 2016). As a political institution, the family reflects the role that shapes, influences, and participate in politics in modern democratic states. This includes formal, informal, and non-institutional (shadow) forms, such as the formation of networks within family ties and the family's relationships with ruling elites (Purdey & Savirani, 2016).

This institutionalist approach to analysing elites and their families connects them to the electoral democratic system, including the direct election of regional

heads, the multiparty system, and the ways in which these systems help ensure the survival of elites and their families (Purdey & Savirani, 2016) This approach shows how local elites and their families utilise patronage and clientelism to succeed. The election of regional heads strengthens the position of local elites because the system facilitates individuals' and their family networks' role in mobilising political support (Purdey & Savirani, 2016). Local elites and their families exploit the electoral system, political parties and the strengthened patronage networks among elites to secure political power and advance their business and political interests at the local level through complex relational patterns.

Through direct elections, decentralisation politics became an instrument of collusion, strengthening business and political patronage for economic interests (Hadiz, 2005). Patronage is defined as the relationship between individuals who possess advantages in terms of wealth, status or influence (Haryanto, 2005). At the local level, the relationship between business and politics is inseparable from electoral democracy (Savirani, 2015). Electing regional heads under an open proportional system significantly increases open market competition among local businesses for easier access to state resources.

Institutional reforms have created more opportunities for democratic institutions, such as elections. This has lead to the formation of business and political relationships that are inextricably linked to electoral democracy. One business actor took advantage of these opportunities to develop their business, building relationships with politicians, bureaucrats and civil society organisations in order to access business opportunities (Savirani, 2015). The relationship between business actors and political actors is highly interdependent, with a strong focus on patron-client relationships. Business actors leverage this direct election system to build connections with state actors or participate directly in elections, gaining access to business and political concessions at the local level. Understanding business activities in the local sphere requires attention not only to economic and political aspects, but also to informal rules relating to society, culture, and religion. The value of these rules depends on the situation, context, and actors involved, and they are related to different forms of capital (Savirani, 2015).

Social capital acts as a binding force between economic and political capital, emphasising the importance of social relationships and community trust. It is a characteristic of social organisations, including networks, norms and trust,

that facilitate coordination and cooperation for the common good. Putnam (1993) also describes social capital as the properties of social organisations that can increase the efficiency of joint work emphasising collective and participatory action. Social capital can be transferred from individuals and groups to larger populations. Social capital is often cumulative and self-reinforcing. It can be accumulated to strengthen networks and achieve common political and economic goals.

Ultimately, the Basalamah family's network in Purwokerto exemplifies the strategic integration of economic, political, and social capital to consolidate local power. By mobilising wealth across strategic sectors, positioning family members as political actors, and leveraging socio-religious networks, they construct robust patronage systems. This framework will be used to examine how the Basalamah family utilises electoral democracy—whether by cultivating alliances with state actors or engaging directly in elections—as a mechanism to secure exclusive business and political concessions at the regional level.

Research Method

This study employs a descriptive qualitative case study approach to examine the relationship between Arab family business and politics in Purwokerto. Data is gathered

through semi-structured interviews, direct field observations, and document analysis. Following Gerring (2004), this approach was selected because it prioritises depth over breadth, enabling an in-depth analysis of specific incidents, relationships, and political processes from multiple perspectives. The sixteen informants selected for this study are categorised as follows:

1. Private sector representatives: The Basalamah family and their business colleagues, including Syafiq Basalamah, Ali Rofi Basalamah, Burhani Islami, Yasir Basalamah, Budi Santoso, and Yusri Adi Wisena.
2. Banyumas Regency Government: Achmad Husein (Regent of Banyumas), Sardi Susanto (Chairman of Commission A, Banyumas Regency Council), Budhi Setiawan (Chairman of the Banyumas Regency Council), Andrie Subandrio (Former Head of the Housing Agency), and Tauqif Noerarifin (Head of the Investment Agency).
3. Religious and community figures: Abu Ibrahim Zain, Ahmad Rofiq, and Farkhan Aji.
4. Civil society organisations: Sambadi (Chairman of the LIBAS).

To ensure in-depth information, the interviews and observations were conducted between 20 and

180 minutes. Data validity was established through source and methodological triangulation. This was done by comparing interview results with observations, as well as comparing what informants said publicly versus privately, and during the research versus in general. Furthermore, perspectives were compared across different backgrounds, including ordinary citizens, educated individuals, wealthy people, and government officials. Finally, the interview results were cross-checked with related documents.

Data analysis was conducted in four systematic stages. First, raw data collected from observations, in-depth interviews, and documentation were transcribed and cross-referenced with secondary sources. Second, data reduction was applied to simplify, abstract, and filter the raw data, retaining only the information most relevant to the research objectives. Third, the refined data were displayed using matrices, graphs, and charts to help identify structural patterns. Finally, conclusions were drawn and verified based on these synthesized findings.

Finding and Discussion

The Origins of Arab Families in Purwokerto and Their Business Expansion

Arab first arrived in Southeast Asia around the 10th century (Berg, 2010). They established relations with the natives in the

archipelago through trade, which connected the region to areas that became centres for the spread of Islam (Berg, 2010). The origins of Arab families in Purwokerto can be traced back to the migration of Hadrami Arabs to Indonesia from the Hadramaut region in the 13th century via trade routes connected to areas that were centres of Islamic dissemination, including Java Island. The largest number of Hadrami Arab migrants are found in cities such as Jakarta, Tegal, Pekalongan, Semarang, and Surabaya (Kesheh, 2007). The 14 Arabs in the former Banyumas Residency are believed to be of mixed descent from migration bases in these five regions, spreading to Purwokerto. This includes those who are not Sayyids, such as the Basalamah family (Lestari, 2025). The spirit of Arab migration in Java was trading in coastal areas, and their activities later expanded to include economic development, as with the Basalamah family, who attempted to expand their business in Purwokerto.

Arab family businesses in Purwokerto expanded rapidly in the post-New Order era. Driven by new opportunities created by regional development initiatives and local electoral democracy, these families strategically combined economic expansion with political power-building. This dual approach enabled them to establish extensive networks across strategic sectors,

including construction, education, and tourism, as property, healthcare, furniture, detailed below:

Table 1. Arab Family Business Network

No	Arab Family	Business Sector	Type of Business	Year
1.	Abdullah Basalamah	Trade	Building materials (operated through Gunung Jati hardware store), Islamic jewelry, and furniture	1990 to 2004
2.	Umar Basalamah	Trade	Building materials (operated through Prapatan hardware store)	1990 to 2003
3.	Nasir Basalamah	Construction, oil and gas	Project contracting (operated through PT Linggar Jati Permai) and a petrol station	2000 to present
4.	Ali Umar Basalamah	Property and construction	Housing development (operated through PT Griya Satria) and construction (operated through PT Binagung Damar Buana Group)	2000 to present
5.	Ali Rofi Basalamah	Property and tourism	Real estate (PT Sapphire Group) and tourism (Caping Park)	2007 to present
6.	Syafiq Basalamah	Healthcare	Siaga Medika Hospital	2003 to present
7.	Muhammad Basalamah	Healthcare	Omnia children's clinic	2016 to present
8.	Afif Basalamah	Trade	Building materials (operated through Gunung Jati hardware store)	2004 to present
9.	Haidar Basalamah	Trade	Building materials (operated through Prapatan hardware store)	2003 to present
10.	All members of Basalamah Family	Education	Al-Irsyad Al-Islamiyyah schools, from kindergarten to high school	2000 to present

Source: Primary interviews conducted with the Basalamah family (April–October 2024), processed by the author.

The Political Strategy of Arab Families in Building Their Business Networks

1. Building Relationships with the State: Establishing Patronage

As business actors, Arab families strive to connect with state actors in order to access business opportunities. They continuously build patronage relationships with Purwokerto's political authorities. Nasir Basalamah and Ali Umar Basalamah are well-known contractors in Purwokerto who have cultivated close relationships with local political actors, including former Regents of Banyumas, since the time of Regent Joko Sudantoko (1988–1998). The Basalamah family frequently facilitated local government projects to maintain a privileged partnership with the Regent. This alliance smoothed the region's development during the initial economic zoning in central Purwokerto. Regent Joko Sudantoko was a prominent New Order figure and a high-ranking regional official within the Golkar Party. This proximity to the New Order power structure likely catalysed Ali Umar Basalamah's political ascent, paving the way for him to join the Golkar Party leadership at the end of the regime. He served as the party treasurer and remained a key Golkar official in Banyumas Regency from 1998 to 2018. To this day, he retains significant influence within the local party leadership.

Following the end of Regent Joko Sudantoko's leadership in 1998, Arab entrepreneurs continued to foster patronage with the local political elite through their close tied with Regent Aris Setiono (1998-2008), who was a member of the Golkar Party. Their position within the Golkar Party made it easier for them to communicate with and lobby Regent Aris Setiono regarding regional development policies. The entrepreneurs' position drove this condition, influencing Regent Aris Setiono to expand the policy of exchanging village-owned land.

Under the leadership of Regent Aris Setiono, Arab entrepreneurs enjoyed considerable success, including in their efforts to influence the regent to implement policies. This indicates that Arab entrepreneurs have significant economic resources that can influence local government policies. The regent also benefits from the resource exchange related to the presence of Arab businesspeople, who consistently supported Regent Aris Setiono's victory in the Banyumas local elections. This reflects the relationship between entrepreneurial actors and state actors, who both have resources to exchange. This situation provided the Basalamah family with an initial gateway into the state's sphere of influence, enabling them to build patronage and strengthen their business and

political relations at the local level. Exchanging resources between entrepreneurial and political actors is a step towards building patronage to facilitate business and political activities.

2. The Land Policy Exchange for Banda Desa from 1988 to 2008: Strategic Land Control

Strategic land ownership and business dominance in Purwokerto were deeply intertwined with the local political structure throughout the New Order and Reform eras. Over a 20-year period spanning the administrations of Djoko Sudantoko (1988–1998) and Aris Setiono (1998–2008), patronage practices were monopolised by two primary factions: Chinese-Indonesian networks, represented by Made Widiana, and Arab-Indonesian networks, led by Nasir and Ali Umar Basalamah. This dominance was facilitated by a closed political system heavily influenced by the military and bureaucracy. For instance, enjoying significant political intimacy with Regent Djoko Sudantoko, Widiana largely controlled local land swap processes. Backed by the New Order regime, his network successfully acquired strategic areas across Arcawinangun, Tambaksogra, and Sokanegara villages (Nurprojo, 2019).

Following the collapse of the New Order, the Basalamah family rose to prominence by leveraging their established business networks to penetrate the

local political arena. Their patronage network with the regents facilitated political lobbying acquire village-owned land. This was driven by Ali Umar Basalamah's strategic position in the Golkar Party and his political intimacy with Regent Aris Setiono, which made it easier for Arab businesspeople to acquired land in strategic locations, including Sumampir, Berkoh, Pasir, and Karanglewas villages, which remain heavily dominated by their businesses today. Ultimately, this demonstrates how effectively patronage alliances with the Regent were leveraged to monopolise strategic land acquisitions.

During the land swap process for village-owned properties, the Basalamah family's acquisition of state resources triggered minimal community resistance. This smooth acquisition was largely driven by prevailing local dynamics. During the New Order, public resentment had grown towards Chinese-Indonesian developers who previously dominated such land acquisitions. The Arab-Indonesian network successfully capitalised on this situation, benefiting from the local residents' unfavourable perception of the Chinese faction, which was deeply rooted in identity differences (Nurprojo, 2019).

Additionally, a more open political structure that directly involves society in the land swap process leads to greater societal acceptance of Arab ethnic group, based on a

shared sense of emotional connection through religious identity. Furthermore, distribution politics are used to allocate economic resources and actively engage in the socio-religious field through the Al-Irsyad Al-Islamiyyah social foundation, which acts as a social capital binder influencing the process of acquiring village-owned land. The patronage network formed between Arab businesspeople and local political actors, particularly the Regent, reflects the ease with which strategic land can be acquired. The development of business patronage in a more open political system is significantly influenced by economic, political and religious identity capital, making it easier for Arab groups to take ownership of strategic land for business development.

3. The Banyumas Regional Election 2008: An Arena for the Exchange of Interests between Businesspeople and Politicians

The relationship between business and politics at the local level cannot be separated from electoral democracy. Business leaders have capitalised on institutional reforms by networking with politicians, policymakers, and civil society to advance their commercial interests (Savirani, 2015). The 2008 Banyumas regional election provided an arena for the Basalamah family and Regent Mardjoko to forge a mutually beneficial alliance.

Beyond material wealth, the Basalamahs provided crucial electoral support through the Al-Irsyad Al-Islamiyyah network's substantial mass base, which proved instrumental to Mardjoko's victory. In return, the family gained privileged political access to expand their businesses in Purwokerto City, directly facilitated by Mardjoko's 'Building Banyumas with Investment' policy.

Under Regent Mardjoko's leadership, the Basalamah family received significant regulatory accommodations, including expedited property permits and the conversion of agricultural land into residential areas. Notably, they secured housing permits on the city's outskirts despite these areas being designated as green zones in the Regional Spatial Plan (RTRW). This political patronage permanently solidified the family's property networks. Ali Rofi and Ali Umar Basalamah established major real estate firms—PT Sapphire Group and PT Griya Satria, respectively. Sapphire Group has seen particularly rapid growth, expanding extensively across the Purwokerto Barat, Purwokerto Selatan, Purwokerto Utara, Ajibarang, Baturaden, and Sokaraja districts.

This condition indicates a classic patronage exchange. The Arab family became a political force for the victory of Regent Mardjoko, and in return, his administration facilitated their wealth

accumulation. Leveraging their real estate dominance, the Basalamah business networks have since diversified beyond housing into other strategic sectors across Purwokerto, including healthcare, education, and tourism.

4. **Entering the Legislative Arena to Strengthen Business and Political Relations**

When expanding their businesses, Arab families did not limit themselves to operating as indirect political actors who built close relationships with local politicians. They also involved themselves directly in politics as a strategy to strengthen their business and political standing. The greater the need to maintain wealth, the more necessary it is for businesspeople to engage with political power (Hadiz, 2005). In 2009, Arab families entered electoral politics directly for the first time in Banyumas, nominating their family member Ali Umar Basalamah as a legislative candidate for the Golkar Party in Electoral District 4, which covers Kembaran, Sokaraja, Purwokerto Barat, Purwokerto Timur, Purwokerto Selatan and Purwokerto Utara.

The nomination in Banyumas Electoral District 4 presented the Arab family with a unique challenge in getting Ali Umar Basalamah elected to the Banyumas Regency Council. This was because they were a minority group

that had never been directly involved in local politics. However, the family possessed the resources to mobilise votes, making it relatively easy for them to win the electoral contest. In the 2009 election, Ali Umar received approximately 14,000 votes out of the total 33,964 votes for the Golkar Party in Electoral District 4 (KPU Kabupaten Banyumas, 2009). This contributed about 12% to the total 116,830 votes for the Golkar Party in Banyumas (KPU Kabupaten Banyumas, 2009). This was considered a significant achievement given his status as a newcomer to the political world, despite his long-standing involvement in business. Ultimately, he was the only legislative candidate from the Golkar Party in Electoral District 4 to be elected to parliament.

Firstly, this electoral victory was underpinned by the Arab family's economic strength, leveraging their financial resources as a decisive political instrument. They used financial capital to mobilise votes by buying and selling them in five sub-districts: Kembaran, Sokaraja, Purwokerto Barat, Purwokerto Timur, Purwokerto Selatan, and Purwokerto Utara. The aim was for each sub-district to obtain a minimum of 2,000 votes in order to secure a parliamentary seat (Lestari, 2025). Secondly, in addition to economic capital, Arab families utilised their social

capital, as they have a relatively large mass base through the Al-Irsyad Al-Islamiyyah social foundation network and Salafi Islamic boarding schools spread throughout the Purwokerto area. Money politics is ineffective without social capital, and similarly, social capital can be bound by money. When social capital and money are combined, they have a significant influence (Assidiq, 2019).

The position of the Basalamah family was further consolidated when Ali Umar Basalamah was appointed as the Chairman of the Banyumas Regency Council's Commission D, a highly strategic position. Other family members were also elected to key roles, such as Ali Rofi Basalamah as Chairman of the Real Estate Indonesia (REI) Banyumas branch and Vice Chairman of REI Central Java for the 2009-14 period (Helmy, 2018). REI is an organisation with the authority to issue housing permits. Ali Umar Basalamah also served as Chairman of the Indonesian Employers Association (Gapensi) in Banyumas from 2009 to 2019. The rapid expansion of the family's property business through PT Sapphire Group began at a strategic intersection of political and industrial power: the administration of Regent Mardjoko, Ali Umar Basalamah's chairmanship of Banyumas Regency Council's Commission D, and other family members securing key positions within local REI and Gapensi branches.

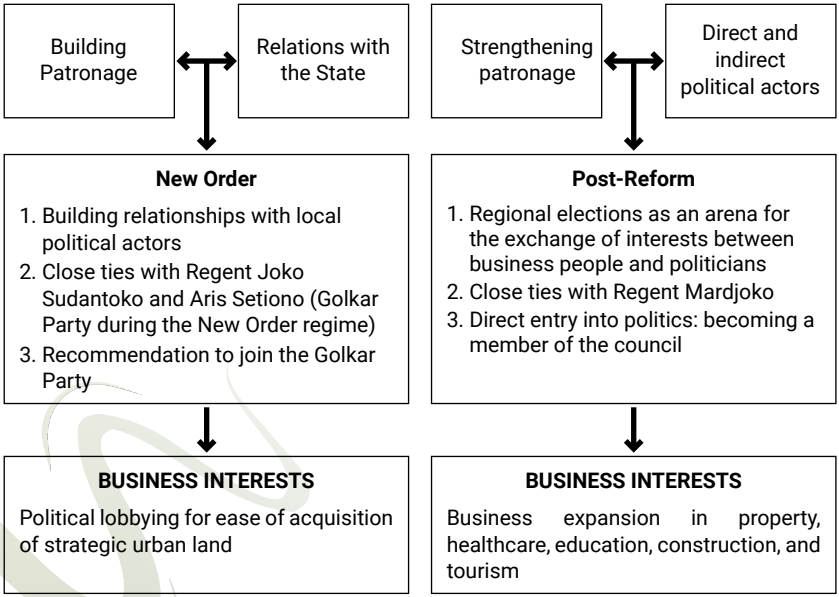
Table 2. Business and Politics Arab Family

No	Name	Business	Politics	Social	Business Location
1	Ali Rofi Basalamah	PT Sapphire Group	Having a close relationship with Regent Joko Sudantoko (1988-1998) and Regent Mardjoko (2008-2013)	First Chairman of the Development Division of the Al-Irsyad Al-Islamiyyah social foundation	Purwokerto, Brebes, Tegal, Slawi, Pemalang, Kajen, Pekalongan, Purbalingga, Cirebon
2.	Ali Umar Basalamah	PT Griya Satria	Golkar Party official, Chairman of Commission D at the Banyumas Regency Council, and the PKS candidate for Regent in 2019	First Chairman of the Education and Instruction Division of the Al-Irsyad Al-Islamiyah social foundation	Purbalingga, Purwokerto, Banjarnegara, Cilacap, Kebumen
3.	Nasir Basalamah	Construction, petrol station, Al-Irsyad Al-Islamiyyah social foundation	Having a close relationship with Regent Joko Sudantoko (1988-1998) and Regent Mardjoko (2008-2013)	General Chairman and First Chairman of the Education and Instruction Division of the Al-Irsyad Al-Islamiyah social foundation	Purwokerto, Purbalingga, Banjarnegara, Cilacap, Kebumen
4.	Syafiq Basalamah	Siaga Medika Hospital	Having a political ties with Regent Mardjoko (2008-2013)	Manager of the Al-Irsyad Al-Islamiyyah social foundation	Purwokerto, Purbalingga, Pemalang
5.	Afif Basalamah	Building materials distributor	-	Manager of the Al-Irsyad Al-Islamiyyah social foundation	Purwokerto, Purbalingga

No	Name	Business	Politics	Social	Business Location
6.	M. Basalamah	Omnia children's clinic	-	Manager of the Al-Irsyad Al-Islamiyyah social foundation	Purwokerto
7.	Haidar Basalamah	Building materials distributor	-	Manager of the Al-Irsyad Al-Islamiyyah social foundation	Purwokerto

Source: Primary interviews conducted with the Basalamah family (April–October 2024), processed by the author.

Figure 1. Strengthening Patronage Networks and Busniness Interests



Source: Data processed by the author.

Social Strategy: Using Religious Identity to Build Social Power

Arab families in Purwokerto are building social power to manifest their economic dominance and sustain their business and political existence. Religious identity is used to bolster this power, functioning as a strategic tool to maintain networks. This serves both business and ethnicity interests. The use of religious identity as a source of strength has intensified alongside growing market competition in Purwokerto.

The Basalamah family lives alongside Chinese businesspeople. While economically comparable, the Basalamah family is more dominant in strengthening its socio-religious base in Purwokerto. In addition to their success in developing business networks, they are increasingly involved in politics to reinforce their position by leveraging Islamic identity. This has created a disadvantage for Chinese business owners, as they lack the social power that the Basalamah family wields. By utilising religious identity to protect their business and ethnic interests, the family has effectively fostered emotional bonds and gained greater societal acceptance within the majority Muslim community. Arab families translate this economic expansion into social strength through the following:

a) The Al-Irsyad Al-Islamiyyah social foundation,

managed by the Basalamah family, allocates the wealth owned by Arab families to become the main donor for the development of religious sites, such as mosques, prayer rooms and Islamic boarding schools. For example, they have established several large mosques in the centre of Purwokerto and prayer rooms on the outskirts of the city. To date, the foundation has built approximately 650 prayer rooms in Purwokerto and other areas, including Tegal, Pemalang, Pekalongan, Cilacap and Purbalingga (Saputra, 2018). Large and famous mosques in Purwokerto built by the Al-Irsyad Al-Islamiyyah include the Fatimatuzzahra (Mafaza), PJKA Darussalam, Jenderal Soedirman, Tujuh Belas, Gelora Indah and Al-Islah. This strengthening the bargaining position of the Basalamah family, improving their acceptance within society and safeguarding their business interests (Saputra, 2018). In order to expand their influence, the Basalamah family regularly and systematically hosts Salafist studies in the mosques they have established. They also publish a bulletin commonly distributed in Salafi mosques to provide reading material for others. Additionally, they also have a radio channel that can be accessed from outside the region for these studies.

b) The Basalamah family became a donor in the

formation of a Sharia-based economic group called the Komunitas Pengusaha Muslim Banyumas (KPMB). This group operates in the field of small and medium-sized economic activities. The Basalamah family provided capital to members of several mosque administrators under the Al-Irsyad Al-Islamiyyah network, while simultaneously involving local community members who ran businesses but lacked funds.

The economic and political rise of the Basalamah family influenced the formation of the mass base within the Al-Irsyad Al-Islamiyyah network and the Hafizhul Qur'an Al-Manshuroh pesantren in Purwokerto. They expanded their political influence by supporting religious study, preaching, and hosting community events. This strategy succeeded because the community recognises the family's role as consistent donors for social and religious causes. Furthermore, the family actively collaborates with the Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah to organise religious and educational events. By leveraging these networks, which command large congregations in Purwokerto, the Basalamahs have effectively transformed their religious social capital into a significant force for vote mobilisation during regional elections.

The influence of social forces on the business and politics of the Basalamah

family at the local level is distinct. In Purwokerto, rather than exploiting social strength for controversial business activities or managing social friction, the Arab family utilises this social influence to secure electoral political capital. This strategy enables them to expand their political influence for business interests and perpetuate patronage networks.

Furthermore, the intersection of business and politics extends beyond economics, influencing the formation of social forces that ensure the continued existence of Arab-owned enterprises amidst recent local developments. Religious identity serves to strengthen social capital, fostering social embeddedness that acts as a bond for economic and political capital, which is particularly relevant to the priorities of Arab businesspeople regarding their business and ethnic interests. The Basalamah family does not operate in a one-way manner; instead, they utilise economic dominance to benefit their ethnic identity, which subsequently enhances their social capital and helps sustain their economic dominance in Purwokerto.

Conclusion

In sum, the business and political trajectory of the Basalamah family reflects the broader impacts of political decentralisation, which has incentivised the consolidation of patronage networks in Purwokerto. Their strategy

hinges on cultivating informal ties with local elites to secure access to formal business procedures, while direct political participation enables them to influence policies favouring their commercial interests. They utilise electoral democracy to facilitate the survival of Arab entrepreneurs and access to business concessions. Parallel to this, their social strategies, allocating Arab family wealth through the Al-Irsyad Al-Islamiyyah to build mosques, schools and Sharia cooperatives, builds profound community acceptance. These religious spaces serve as effective channels for maintaining their social base, which in turn reinforces their business and ethnic dominance. Ultimately, the Basalamah family's activities demonstrate the symbiotic relationship between political patronage and business expansion, offering a valuable lens for understanding local democracy in Indonesia today and providing a robust reference point for further political economy studies.

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State Versus Citizens (A Study of the Dispute over Marine Space in Lifuleo Village, West Kupang District)

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Abstract

This study aims to demonstrate that citizens are structurally forced to confront the state, despite state authority being founded on citizen sovereignty, by analysing the dynamics of the struggle over marine space in Lifuleo Village, West Kupang District. This conflict arises from the overlapping use of marine space between seaweed-farming coastal communities and the Timor-1 Coal-Fired Power Plant, a National Strategic Project (PSN). This study integrates three theoretical frameworks into a layered analytical approach, namely the production of space (Lefebvre), territorialisation (Vandergeest and Peluso), and access (Ribot and Peluso). The production of space explains how power plant's presence socially reproduces marine space. This process of reproduction subsequently enables state territorialisation by redefining spatial utilisation boundaries, reducing the community's access to marine space. This qualitative case study draws on interviews, observation, and documentation. Findings show that the struggle over marine space in Lifuleo unfolds through spatial reproduction by state infrastructure, which paves the way for territorialisation and erodes community access. These findings suggest that when state authority and corporate interest merge, as in State Electricity Company (PLN)'s dual legitimacy regime, citizen access becomes especially difficult to contest, pointing to the need for frameworks that separate state and corporate accountability in Indonesia's marine resource governance.

Keywords: *Space; spatial production; territorialisation; access*

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Introduction

Marine space is a strategic resource that is not only ecologically and economically valuable but also an arena for the contestation of various interests. Space, from a socio-spatial perspective, is not understood as a neutral container but rather as a product of social relations, power, and competing interests (Lefebvre, 1991), deriving its value from its location, extent, and capacity to provide benefits through its functions and as a venue for various activities. Space is finite and cannot be multiplied; consequently, one party's utilisation can restrict access for others. This is what makes space vulnerable to contention, particularly when a single space hosts diverse activities with differing objectives.

In Indonesia, the complexity of the struggle over marine space is becoming increasingly apparent with the emergence of energy infrastructure in coastal areas as part of the National Strategic Projects (PSN) agenda. Development, which is framed as being in the national interest with the aim of driving economic growth and equitable welfare, in practice often results in the same pattern of impacts: coastal communities bear the ecological and social costs, whilst the economic benefits are reaped by others. This is not merely an abstract concept. The Batang Coal-

Fired Power Plant in Central Java, for instance, has pushed fishermen further out to sea, sharply raising operational costs; in Bali, the Celukan Bawang Coal-Fired Power Plant has caused catches to fall from hundreds of buckets a day to barely a dozen; and in South Sulawesi, the Jeneponto Coal-Fired Power Plant has produced serious public health impacts.

This situation is no coincidence; rather, it is the result of an alliance between the state and capital in the management of resources. Harvey (2004) refers to this process as 'accumulation by dispossession'. Accumulation does not occur through the production of new value, but through the transfer of access to and control over resources previously managed communally, with the state acting as an active facilitator through regulatory instruments, licensing and development policies.

This study aims to fill a gap in research that has largely been neglected. Previous studies have examined power relations and mechanisms of community marginalisation, yet they remain focused on terrestrial or coastal spaces rather than marine spaces. Adhinata (2025) examined the conflict between farmers and tourism investors at the Batur Bukit Payang Nature Park, Kintamani, through the framework of 'power of exclusion' (regulation, coercion, the market, and legitimisation); Sahetapy et al. (2026) drew on Lefebvre's

framework of spatial production to show the dominance of state-investor spatial representations over local spatial practices in the Rempang Eco-City Project, a National Strategic Project in Batam; Takwim (2023) employed the same framework to examine the spatial contestation involving street vendors in Palu City; Pono et al. (2025) examined the construction of a jogging track along the Kelapa Lima coastal strip in Kupang City and found that the spatial practices of coastal communities were displaced by spatial representations that favoured tourism investors.

This terrestrial bias is likewise evident in territorialisation research. Vandergeest & Peluso (1995) developed this framework within a forestry context, explaining how the state classifies, maps and regulates access to terrestrial spaces, and its extension to marine spaces has only recently emerged internationally, as seen in Raycraft's (2019) study on territorialisation in marine conservation in Tanzania. The closest precedent is provided by Sujadmi & Murtasidin (2020), who examined marine spatial conflicts in Bangka Belitung arising from the shift of tin mining from land to sea. Employing Lefebvre's socio-spatial approach to demonstrate how the drafting of the RZWP3K[2] became an arena for local economic and

[2] RZWP3K stands for Rencana Zonasi Wilayah Pesisir dan Pulau-Pulau Kecil (Zoning Plan for Coastal Areas and Small Islands). It is established as a regional regulation (Peraturan Daerah) in Indonesian provinces to map and manage coastal and marine spatial zones.

political contestation—though this precedent remains confined to small-scale tin mining rather than state energy infrastructure, such as coal-fired power plants.

Mujio et al. (2016) go a step further by identifying the potential for serious conflict when coal-fired power plants and the oil and gas industry coexist with seaweed cultivation and capture fisheries; however, this study is limited to mapping potential conflicts based on regional assessments. A similar gap is evident in the literature on eastern Indonesia. Malawi & Mokodompit (2025) examined the environmental and socio-economic impacts of nickel exploration and exploitation along the coast of Southeast Sulawesi through a systematic literature review; however, they remain focused on impacts on land, rather than the dynamics of the marine space itself.

Based on a review of previous studies, this research aims to address two gaps. In substance, no study has yet integrated the production of marine space, territorialisation, and the expansion of state energy infrastructure into a single analytical framework that accounts for the resulting reduction in community access. Geographically, a gap remains in eastern Indonesia—a region where state energy projects continue to expand—yet related studies have so far been limited to environmental and social impacts on land.

This study examines the dynamics of the production, regulation and contestation of marine space in Lifuleo Village, West Kupang District, Kupang Regency, East Nusa Tenggara. Lifuleo is a coastal village with a population of 1,233 people spread across 328 households. Its ethnic composition is heterogeneous, comprising seven ethnic groups originating from various regions of East Nusa Tenggara, with the Rote ethnic group being the dominant group (78.5 per cent of the population whose ethnicity has been identified). The dominance of the Rote ethnic group, which brings a seafaring tradition, has shaped the village's livelihood structure, in which the marine sector—particularly seaweed cultivation—forms the main economic base. Of the 802 residents whose occupations have been identified, 87.3 per cent work as seaweed farmers, whilst traditional fishermen account for only 3.5 per cent.

The planned construction of the Timor-1 Coal-Fired Power Plant, announced in 2016 through the Electricity Supply Business Plan (RUPTL), triggered a profound struggle for space. Built in 2019 and operational by 2023 with a capacity of 2 x 50 MW, the facility has encroached upon the marine area that the community had utilised for decades for seaweed cultivation. Consequently, the coastal waters of Lifuleo have become a battleground

between local livelihood claims and the logic of capital operating through state infrastructure.

The marine space of Lifuleo is not merely an ordinary area for Lifuleo residents. The community views this marine space as their primary livelihood base, which has been established over decades. Now they must contend with the presence of the Timor-1 Coal-Fired Power Plant, which stands only about 650 metres from their settlements and 1.5 kilometres from their cultivation sites. This distance is formally deemed by the government to be 'in accordance with spatial planning', yet it directly overlaps with the living space that the residents have long utilised.

This study argues that the struggle over marine space in Lifuleo is not merely a matter of overlapping land use, but a reflection of how the state shapes citizens' living spaces without meaningful civic involvement. While narratives surrounding energy infrastructure development often frame the state's presence as a vehicle for public welfare, it is precisely through this process that communities' rights to their living spaces, marine livelihoods, coastal environment, and the recognition of their identity and socio-cultural practices become highly vulnerable to violation.

To examine the spatial struggle in Lifuleo, this study integrates three analytical frameworks into a multi-layered approach, wherein each stage builds upon the preceding findings. The starting point for this analysis is Lefebvre's (1991) theory of the production of space, which argues that space is not merely the setting in which human activities take place, but something actively produced through three dimensions: spatial practices, representations of space, and representational space. Spatial practices refer to the ways in which space is used and practised in everyday life, encompassing routines, patterns of use, and the concrete activities that take place within space. Representations of space refer to space as it is understood, designed, and regulated by actors in positions of authority—such as the state, planners, and technocrats—through policies, maps, and planning documents. Representational space describes space as experienced and interpreted by the community, which is often symbolic, emotional, and closely linked to identity and life experiences.

These three dimensions of space are, in essence, potentially in conflict with one another. The state's designed representation of space often does not align with the spatial practices and representational space that have long been lived out by communities. This conflict, which Lefebvre

(1991) termed 'contradictory space', refers to space that is simultaneously understood, claimed and practised in conflicting ways by different actors. It is precisely this contradictory condition that subsequently paves the way for the state to carry out further interventions in space. These interventions can then be explained through the concept of territorialisation proposed by Vandergeest & Peluso (1995), who argue that the state establishes control over space not merely through violence, but through the demarcation of boundaries, the classification of territories, and regulations governing who is permitted to do what and where.

When the state's representation of space—as embodied in policies, permits and energy infrastructure development plans—is imposed upon marine spaces that were previously practised and interpreted differently by local communities, this process constitutes territorialisation: the establishment of de facto boundaries and rules that disregard the communities' claims and local spatial practices. The consequences of this process of territorialisation are then explained through Ribot & Peluso's (2003) theory of access, which emphasises that access is the actual ability to derive benefits from a resource, and that this ability is determined by mechanisms of power, not merely by formal ownership. When the state

establishes new boundaries and rules over marine space through territorialisation, the actual ability of coastal communities to derive benefits from that space is diminished, even though, formally speaking, they have never lost their rights to that space.

Method

This study employs a qualitative approach using a case study design to understand the processes, mechanisms and dynamics of the struggle for space in Lifuleo. A qualitative approach was adopted because this study focuses on understanding processes and meanings related to socio-spatial aspects, rather than on measuring quantities or quantitatively testing relationships between variables (Sugiyono, 2022). A case study allows for an understanding of a contemporary phenomenon within a real-life context, particularly when the boundaries between the phenomenon and its context are unclear, and when the research is directed towards 'how' or 'why' questions (Yin, 2014).

This study focuses on the contestation of marine space as a socio-spatial phenomenon shaped by practices of spatial utilisation and policy instruments. The research examines three main aspects: the process of spatial production through seaweed cultivation activities and the presence of the Timor-1 Coal-

Fired Power Plant; the process of marine spatial regulation through policy instruments and regulations; and differences in actors' capacity to access the same space.

Data collection techniques included interviews, field observations and documentation. Interviews served as the primary method for exploring informants' perspectives, experiences and understanding of the marine space in Lifuleo. Interviews were conducted using a semi-structured approach, with guidelines drawn up in accordance with the research focus. Field observations were carried out on a non-participatory basis to gain an understanding of the empirical conditions at the research site, including seaweed cultivation sites, community activities in the coastal-marine area, and the presence of infrastructure within the study area. The results were used to supplement and verify the interview data. Documentation was carried out by collecting secondary data from East Nusa Tenggara Provincial Regulation No. 4 of 2024, licensing documents and the Environmental Impact Assessment (AMDAL) for the Timor-1 Coal-Fired Power Plant, results of laboratory tests on seawater quality, and advocacy reports published in the media by Wahana Lingkungan Hidup Indonesia East Nusa Tenggara (WALHI NTT) regarding the marine space conflict in Lifuleo. These were used to

supplement and validate the findings from the interviews and observations.

Informants were selected using a purposive sampling method (n = 7), a technique chosen because key actors in coastal zone management could be clearly identified through their institutional structures and roles in marine space utilisation. This group comprised the Head of the Marine Space Management Division at the East Nusa Tenggara Provincial Department of Marine Affairs and Fisheries, the Village Head of Lifuleo, the Manager of State Electricity Company (PLN) Project Services Unit Nusa Tenggara 3 representing the Timor-1 Coal-Fired Power Plant, two seaweed farmers, one fisherman, and a staff member from the advocacy division of WALHI NTT. To protect participant safety and minimise potential inter-party conflicts, pseudonyms were assigned specifically to community-level informants (the seaweed farmers and the fisherman).

Interview guidelines were tailored to each actor category according to their position, authority, and role in marine governance. Accordingly, provincial government and corporate representatives were questioned on regulatory frameworks, spatial planning, and licensing procedures; the Village Head addressed local spatial governance dynamics, public engagement, and interest mediation;

affected communities (seaweed farmers and fishermen) focused on historical spatial utilisation and changes to their livelihoods; and the WALHI NTT member provided insights into advocacy dynamics, legal support, and community-compiled environmental impact data.

Data analysis was conducted following the stages of data reduction, data presentation, and drawing conclusions (Miles et al., 2014). Data reduction was carried out through thematic categorisation of all interview results, field observations, and documentation. The researchers read and sorted the raw data to extract key issues that emerged empirically in the field, such as a decline in seaweed cultivation yields, territorial claims based on residents' historical experiences, the project's implementation process, and territorial restrictions imposed by the coal-fired power plant. These issues were then systematically grouped into three main thematic categories in line with the theoretical framework of this study, namely the production of marine space, the regulation and control of space by the state and corporations, and the dynamics of actors' ability to access marine space.

The data are presented narratively to illustrate the interrelationships between

these three categories, before finally drawing conclusions regarding the unequal conflict between the claims of coastal communities from below and the control exercised by the state and capital from above in the utilisation of marine space.

Data validity is ensured through source triangulation and technical triangulation, namely techniques for verifying data validity by utilising external sources as a point of comparison (Moleong, 2021). Source triangulation was carried out by comparing information from different informants; for example, the explanation provided by PLN Project Services Unit Nusa Tenggara 3 regarding the licensing process for the Timor-1 Coal-Fired Power Plant was compared with the experiences of seaweed farmers and fishermen who were directly affected. Technical triangulation was carried out by comparing data from interviews and field observations, including the results of laboratory tests on seawater quality taken at different times.

Results and Discussions

The presence of the Timor-1 Coal-Fired Power Plant has not only altered the physical conditions of the waters but has also given rise to a contestation over marine space between the interests of national energy development and the living space of coastal communities, which has long

been utilised for seaweed farming. Although PLN states that all stages of construction have been carried out through formal mechanisms, including spatial planning permits, an AMDAL and public consultation, residents' experiences on the ground indicate that there have been impacts on the quality of the marine environment and the sustainability of their livelihoods.

The community does not, in fact, oppose the construction of the coal-fired power plant, provided that the activities carried out do not disrupt the sea as a source of livelihood. However, in practice, residents have observed a decline in seaweed productivity, the emergence of diseases in farmed crops, and suspected changes in seawater quality linked to the power plant's operations, including the discharge of cooling water, coal waste, and barge activities. Furthermore, the presence of infrastructure such as jetties is considered to have an impact on community access to and patterns of use of marine space.

The Production of Marine Space: From Communal Space to Contradictory Space

The Lifuleo marine space is not a neutral space, but has long been collectively produced by coastal communities through seaweed cultivation practices. Therefore, any discussion of the contestation of marine space must begin with

an understanding of how this space was shaped, interpreted and utilised by the community prior to the arrival of the Timor-1 Coal-Fired Power Plant.

Since the 1990s, the coastal community of Lifuleo has been creating marine space through collective seaweed cultivation. Data from the Indonesian Climate Change Trust Fund (2022) also indicates that Lifuleo is one of the villages in East Nusa Tenggara located within a fisheries cultivation development zone (minapolitan). This status highlights a fundamental irony. Long before the coal-fired power plant was built, the state had in fact recognised this area, even incorporating it into its maritime sector development policy. However, it is precisely this same space that has been displaced by the state's own project. Lifuleo's marine space has thus long been the subject of competing claims: recognised as a productive space for the people, yet later appropriated for other development interests also carried out in the name of the state.Based on the research findings, the selection of cultivation sites by the farmers is not based on official planning maps or zoning, but rather on accumulated knowledge derived from direct experience in the waters of Lifuleo. To date, there are four groups of farmers still actively engaged in seaweed farming: the Ofu Oeno, Oesina Indah, Tulufali and Suka Maju groups. The

arrival of the Timor-1 Coal-Fired Power Plant has displaced the community's production space.

The community's spatial practices in Lifuleo have been disrupted not because they have stopped working or changed the way they use the space, but because the material conditions of the space, which are a prerequisite for the continuation of seaweed farming practices, have now changed. As one fisherman and seaweed farmer in Lifuleo explained, since the power plant began operating, cooling water waste from the turbines has been discharged directly into the sea, and as his fishing grounds are very close to the discharge point, he has been affected as a result. He rejected the explanation that the changes in the water conditions in Lifuleo were solely due to climatic factors, given that similar conditions have persisted consistently for three consecutive years (Interview with Agus, fisherman in Lifuleo Village, 4 March 2026).

The way capital operates in the spatial dimension in Lifuleo is not through prohibition, but by altering the conditions of space so that practices that were previously possible become impossible. The marine space of Lifuleo thus becomes a battlefield where two logics of spatial production clash in a concrete and unequal manner. The communal practices of the community, which have built space from the ground up

through repeated use over decades, are pitted against industrial practices supported by state infrastructure and authority.

The next dimension is the representation of space, wherein the state uses regulation as a tool to redefine space. While the community views the marine space as a livelihood shaped through aquaculture, the government treats it as an abstract entity requiring regulation, partitioning, and mapping. In Lifuleo, this representation operates through formal spatial planning instruments. Alongside the Regional Spatial Plan (RTRW), more specific policies govern spatial utilisation, notably the implementation of the Marine Space Utilisation Activity Conformity (KKPRL), as stipulated in Government Regulation No. 21 of 2021 on the Implementation of Spatial Planning. The KKPRL regulations are further clarified by Regulation of the Minister of Marine Affairs and Fisheries No. 28 of 2021, which establishes licensing mechanism as the sole recognised legal basis for the marine space utilisation. Beyond the KKPRL, these instruments not only regulate spatial use, but also directly redefine who is recognised as a legitimate user of the area. Consequently, PLN maintains that holding permits from provincial or local governments constitutes the valid legal basis for its utilisation of space at a given location (Interview with Adhil,

PLN Project Services Unit Nusa Tenggara 3, 9 March 2026).

The regime of spatial representation regards claims made by communities based on a long history of use as unfounded. Permits have become the sole 'language' recognised for claiming rights to space. At the level of representational space, for the Lifuleo community, the marine space functions not merely as a source of income and livelihood. The sea is a space where knowledge is passed down across generations, where identity as seaweed farmers is formed through cultivation practices, and an arena for the repeated reproduction of social relations amongst groups of cultivators. As stated by WALHI NTT:

> *The community does not view their work as a profit-generating profession. They see it as something that has been built up over generations and which also has an impact on cultural rituals and even customs.* (Interview with Kelvin Wuran, Advocacy Officer at WALHI NTT, 24 April 2026).

Changes in aquatic conditions, resulting in unpredictable yields, have gradually altered the way the community perceives the marine space. A space that was once viewed as open by the community has transformed into one of uncertainty.

The transformation of space in Lifuleo, driven by the competing production of space between the community and the government, has resulted in a contradictory space—a situation in which the same space is claimed and interpreted in conflicting ways by actors with divergent interests. This contradiction is further intensified by the presence of PLN, a state-owned enterprise, which operates not only as a business entity but also as a representative of the state implementing a development agenda through corporate mechanisms.

This finding is supported by Massey's (2005) argument that space is always a 'simultaneity of stories-so-far'—that is, the convergence of various narratives unfolding simultaneously in a single place. The government and the company interpret the sea as a strategic space to support national energy infrastructure, whilst the community views the sea as a livelihood space that has been built up over decades.

Territorialising Marine Space: State Versus Citizens in a Clash of Unequal Processes

Based on the collective practice of producing space, the state and corporations subsequently re-represent marine space through formal spatial planning and licensing instruments. At this point, marine space is no longer understood solely as a space for community livelihoods, but

also as an object of regulation determined by state authority.

The formal representation of marine space in Lifuleo does not stop at the designation of area functions, but develops into a process of territorialisation that restricts who can utilise the space and in what manner. Territorialisation in Lifuleo's marine space takes place through zoning, licensing and material changes to the space that affect the practices of coastal communities.

Territorialisation can occur in three stages: (1) all 'ownerless' or 'unclaimed' land becomes the property of the state; (2) distinctions are drawn between 'forest areas' and 'non-forest areas' as a form of state control over a territory, thereby requiring a permit to access that area; and (3) 'functional territorialisation' is carried out by categorising the functions of an area based on criteria such as production forests, protected forests and nature reserves (Suwarno & Harahap, 2025). In other contexts, such as Marine National Parks, the division is established by designating specific zones, such as core zones or utilisation zones. These stages of territorialisation occur sequentially in Lifuleo: marine spaces that were originally open are designated as state conservation areas; then divided into protected and utilisation zones; and finally subdivided into functional sub-zones that determine who is permitted to do what within each spatial unit.

Territorialisation, as defined by Vandergeest (1996), is a process established by the state to control people and their actions by drawing boundaries around a geographical area, which may involve prohibitions or permissions regarding specific individuals or activities within those boundaries. The state is often identified as the sole actor involved in shaping territorialisation, whilst communities are frequently positioned as passive objects; however, interestingly, the process of territorialisation occurring in the marine space of Lifuleo is not one-sided. Communities and the government/capital both engage in territorialisation of the same marine space, but with unequal instruments and legitimacy.

The coastal community of Lifuleo was the first actor to engage in territorialisation. Long before policies regulating marine space in Lifuleo were introduced, the community had already established boundaries for resource utilisation through informal agreements and unwritten collective experience. However, although the local coastal community acted as the first agents to carry out territorialisation, the foundation they established was weak because it lacked formal recognition. Conversely, the territorialisation established by the government has become increasingly robust.

The state establishes control over marine space through regulatory instruments that restrict citizens' freedom of movement. As Mahmud et al. (2016) note, marine territorialisation differs from its terrestrial (forest) counterpart, operating instead through the demarcation of boundaries based on ownership regimes and functional regulation. This process manifests as shifts from open-access to state property, or from non-conservation to marine conservation areas, which are automatically accompanied by corresponding zoning regulations.

The designation of the Lifuleo marine area as part of the Sawu Sea Marine National Park, covering 3,355,352.82 hectares (ha), through Minister of Marine Affairs and Fisheries Decree No. 5 of 2014, constituted the earliest act of territorialisation undertaken by the state. The state mapped, classified and determined the functions of this marine area without incorporating the spatial knowledge developed by the Lifuleo community, as outlined in the previous sub-chapter. Zoning in the Lifuleo region is thus not merely an instrument of environmental management, but the starting point for a series of spatial representations that are at odds with the way the community interprets and utilises their own marine space.

Table 1. Zoning of the Sawu Sea National Park

Zone/sub-zone	Area	Use
Core zone	±79,668.62 ha	Absolute protection (all extractive and cultivation activities prohibited)
Utilisation zone	±58,861.14 ha	Ecosystem monitoring (limited and strictly controlled activities)
Cetacean protection sub-zone	±1,240,768.54 ha	Marine mammal habitat protection (very limited utilisation activities)
Traditional sustainable fisheries sub-zone	±581,970.83 ha	Limited utilisation based on local knowledge and traditional fishing practices
General sustainable fisheries sub-zone	±1,392,858.61 ha	Commercial and industrial fisheries permitted with a licence (including energy infrastructure activities)
Local knowledge sub-zone	±768.72 ha	Utilisation based on recognised local knowledge and practices
Tourism and aquaculture sub-zone	±456.36 ha	Marine aquaculture and tourism are formally permitted

Source: Ministry of Marine Affairs and Fisheries (Ministerial Decree No. 6 of 2014)

As per the zoning of marine conservation areas in Table 1, the seaweed aquaculture area in Lifuleo falls within the utilisation zone/sub-zone for tourism and aquaculture, which may be utilised provided formal authorisation is granted. However, this has opened the door to new obligations that tighten the mechanisms for utilising marine space—obligations that are structurally easier to fulfil for actors with substantial capital and administrative capacity. The KKPRL has consequently become the primary reference for determining the suitability

of the type of activity in relation to the marine space being utilised. As emphasised by the Head of the Marine Space Management Division at the East Nusa Tenggara Marine and Fisheries Agency:

> *Anyone utilising marine space for more than 30 days must hold a KKPRL permit and obtain the necessary subsidiary permits; this also applies to seaweed cultivation practices.* (Interview with Muhammad Saleh Goro, Head of the Marine Space Management Division at the East Nusa Tenggara Marine and Fisheries Agency, 30 March 2026).

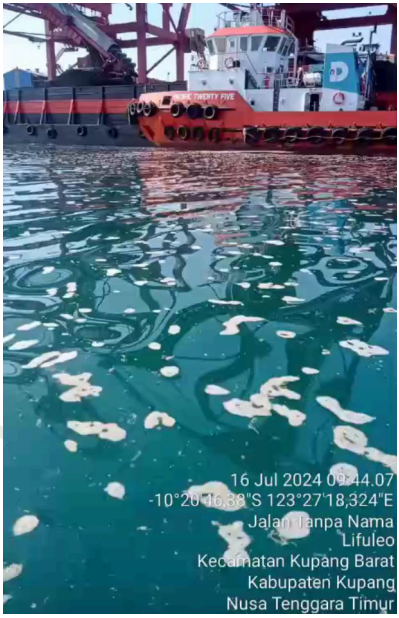
The community subsequently found itself at a disadvantage. Those who had been in the Lifuleo marine area for a longer period were required to prove the legality of activities they had long carried out based on traditional knowledge and mutual agreement. Meanwhile, PLN, as a new actor entering the area to utilise the space, already possessed a KKPRL and various marine space utilisation permits through its institutional capacity.

Furthermore, the designation of the Sawu Sea Marine National Park and the implementation of the KKPRL have not proceeded in a neutral manner. Both instruments reinforce state control over who may legally utilise the marine space and, in practice, result in the subtle exclusion of coastal communities whose cultivation practices have long been established in that area. This is the most

subtle form of state territorialisation.

This territorialisation is further reinforced by the coal-fired power plant through changes to the physical conditions of the marine space in Lifuleo: the construction of a barge jetty, the discharge of cooling water from the power plant's engines, and the dispersal of coal ash waste. These actions indirectly impose restrictions on the community's activities within this space, constituting a form of control over the space achieved through physical alterations and shifts in community practices, without the need for explicit prohibition.

Figure 1. Pollution in the Lifuleo Sea



Source: Informant's documentation, 2024

Figure 2. Pollution in the Lifuleo Sea



Source: Informant's documentation, 2026

In addition to regulatory instruments and physical alterations to material conditions, the territorialisation of Lifuleo's marine space by the state and capital also operates epistemologically as a struggle over knowledge and truth. The state not only dictates physical and administrative boundaries but also establishes control to determine what is recognised as truth. When the seaweed farming community complained of plant diseases and a decline in productivity, PLN responded by conducting water quality tests. However, findings from local laboratory tests conducted by Nusa

Cendana University (Undana) and the East Nusa Tenggara Provincial Health Office indicated a clear deterioration in water quality, including temperature fluctuations and the presence of oil and metals across five sampling points.

Figure 3. Laboratory test results from the East Nusa Tenggara Provincial Health Office



PEMERINTAH PROVINSI NUSA TENGGARA TIMUR
DINAS KESEHATAN, KEPENDUDUKAN DAN PENCATATAN SIPIL
UPTD LABORATORIUM KESEHATAN
Jl. Soeprapto No. 15 – Oebobo - Kupang

HASIL PEMERIKSAAN LABORATORIUM

PENGIRIM : PLTU TIMOR 1
TANGGAL KIRIM : 07 DESEMBER 2023
JENIS SAMPEL : AIR LAUT
LOKASI : PANTAI OESAPA KEC. KUPANG BARAT

NO	PARAMETER	SATUAN	HASIL PEMERIKSAAN									PERATURAN PEMERINTAH REPUBLIK INDONESIA NO.22 TAHUN 2021 TENTANG PENYELANGGARAAN PERLINDUNGAN DAN PENGELOLAAN LINGKUNGAN HIDUP
			Titik 1A Permukaan	Titik 1B 1 Meter	Titik 1C 3 Meter	Titik 2A Permukaan	Titik 2B 1 Meter	Titik 2C 3 Meter	Titik 3A Permukaan	Titik 3B 1 Meter	Titik 3B 3 Meter	
1	COD	mg/L	2550	2603	2216	2354	2346	2354	2950	2399	2000	COD = Tidak disyaratkan
2	BOD	mg/L	8,4	7,6	10,0	5,6	6,8	8,8	6,4	7,6	7,6	BOD = 20 mg/L
3	Fosfat	mg/L	0,65	0,61	0,37	0,40	0,40	0,28	1,19	0,22	0,48	Fosfat = Tidak disyaratkan
4	Nitrit	mg/L	0,049	0,060	0,044	0,044	0,055	0,044	0,039	0,044	0,044	Nitrit = Tidak disyaratkan
5	pH	-	8,41	8,41	8,37	8,47	8,35	8,46	8,40	8,47	8,40	pH = 7-8,5
6	Minyak & Lemak	-	5,9756	5,9668	3,259	3,0948	5,8172	2,9406	4,6018	3,1798	3,8234	Minyak & Lemak = Nihil
7	Oksigen Terlarut (DO)	mg/L	7,6	7,2	7,2	6,8	7,6	8,0	8,0	8,0	9,2	Oksigen Terlarut = >5
8	Salinitas	‰	29,5	30,5	30,4	31,3	31,7	31,7	31,9	31,9	31,7	Salinitas = Alami coral : 33-34 ‰ Mangrove : s/d 34 ‰ Lamun : 33-34 ‰

Catatan : Hasil hanya berlaku pada sampel yang diperiksa

Mengetahui,
Kepala UPTD Laboratorium Kesehatan
pada Dinas Kesehatan, Kependudukan
dan Pencatatan Sipil Provinsi NTT
Dra. Anastasia Ratu, Apt. MM
Pembina Tk.I
NIP. 19660626 199303 1 012

Kupang, 19 Januari 2024
Koordinator Pemeriksaan,
Agustin R.Y. Kamlasi, S.Si.MPH
NIP. 19760828 200012 2 007

Source: Documentation provided by the interviewee, 2023

Figure 4. Laboratory test results from the Undana laboratory unit



KEMENTERIAN PENDIDIKAN, KEBUDAYAAN, RISET, DAN TEKNOLOGI
UNIVERSITAS NUSA CENDANA
UPT LABORATORIUM TERPADU
Jln. Adisucipto – Penfui, PO BOX 104, Kupang 85001, NTT
Website : https://bioscience.undana.ac.id/# . Email : undana.labterpadu@gmail.com

REPORT OF ANALYSIS

No. : 031/LHU/LAB-UNDANA/XI/2023

NAMA PELANGGAN : Joice Ga
(Customer Name)
ALAMAT : Liliba
(Adress)
JENIS SAMPEL : Rumput Laut
(Sample Matrix)
LOKASI SAMPLING : Pantai Oesina
(Sampling Location)
TITIK KOORDINAT : -
(Coodinate Point)

PARAMETER : Pb, Cu, Mn
(Parameter)
METODE SAMPLING : -
(Sampling Method)
TANGGAL SAMPLING : 27/11/2023
(sampling Date)
TGL. TERIMA DI LAB. : 28/11/2023
(Received Date)
TGL. ANALISIS LAB. : 4-0/12/2023
(Date Analysis)
TGL. LAPORAN : 20/12/2023
(Report Date)

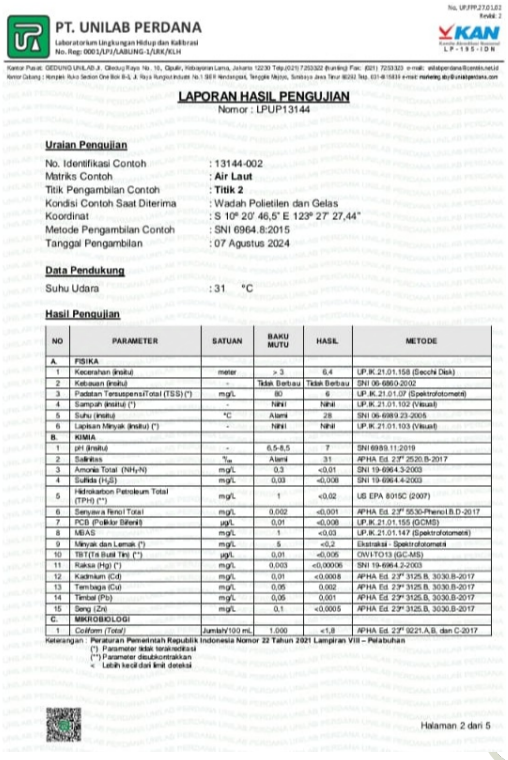
NO.	KODE SAMPEL*)	HASIL			SATUAN	METODE
		Tembaga (Cu)	Mangan (Mn)	Timbal (Pb)		
1	Kelompok Tani 01	0,0155	0,0238	0,1641	(mg/kg)	AAS
2	Kelompok Tani 02	0,0078	0,0196	0,1393	(mg/kg)	AAS
3	Kelompok Tani 03	0,0234	0,1165	0,1802	(mg/kg)	AAS
4	Kelompok Tani 04	0,0192	0,0112	0,2170	(mg/kg)	AAS
5	Kelompok Tani 01 Cokelat	0,0144	0,0297	0,2205	(mg/kg)	AAS
6	Kelompok Tani 02 Cokelat	0,0192	0,1221	0,2028	(mg/kg)	AAS
7	Kelompok Tani 03 Cokelat	0,0249	0,0950	0,2473	(mg/kg)	AAS
8	Kelompok Tani 04 Cokelat	0,0380	0,0366	0,2721	(mg/kg)	AAS

NO. FORMULIR: F/7.8.3/LAB-UNDANA

Source: Documentation provided by the interviewee, 2023

PLN subsequently dismissed the laboratory test results from the Provincial Health Office and Undana on the grounds that neither laboratory met the national accreditation standards set by the National Accreditation Committee. PLN then carried out water quality tests at another accredited laboratory, and the sampling process did not involve the local community.

Figure 5. Laboratory test results from PT Unilab



PT. UNILAB PERDANA

Laboratorium Lingkungan Hidup dan Kalibrasi

LAPORAN HASIL PENGUJIAN

Nomor : LPUP13144

Uraian Pengujian

No. Identifikasi Contoh	: 13144-002
Matriks Contoh	: Air Laut
Titik Pengambilan Contoh	: Titik 2
Kondisi Contoh Saat Diterima	: Wadah Polietilen dan Gelas
Koordinat	: S 10° 20' 46,5" E 123° 27' 27,44"
Metode Pengambilan Contoh	: SNI 6964.8:2015
Tanggal Pengambilan	: 07 Agustus 2024

Data Pendukung

Suhu Udara : 31 °C

Hasil Pengujian

NO	PARAMETER	SATUAN	BAKU MUTU	HASIL	METODE
A.	FISIKA				
1	Kecerahan (insitu)	meter	> 3	6,4	LP.IK.21.01.158 (Secchi Disk)
2	Kebauan (insitu)	-	Tidak Berbau	Tidak Berbau	SNI 06-6860-2002
3	Padatan Tersuspensi Total (TSS) (*)	mg/L	80	6	LP.IK.21.01.07 (Spektrofotometri)
4	Sampah (insitu) (*)	-	Nihil	Nihil	LP.IK.21.01.102 (Visual)
5	Suhu (insitu)	°C	Alami	28	SNI 06-6989.23-2005
6	Lapisan Minyak (insitu) (*)	-	Nihil	Nihil	LP.IK.21.01.103 (Visual)
B.	KIMIA				
1	pH (insitu)	-	6,5-8,5	7	SNI 6989.11:2019
2	Salinitas	‰	Alami	31	APHA Ed. 23th 2520.B-2017
3	Amonia Total (NH_3-N)	mg/L	0,3	<0,01	SNI 19-6964.3-2003
4	Sulfida (H_2S)	mg/L	0,03	<0,008	SNI 19-6964.4-2003
5	Hidrokarbon Petroleum Total (TPH) (**)	mg/L	1	<0,02	US EPA 8015C (2007)
6	Senyawa Fenol Total	mg/L	0,002	<0,001	APHA Ed. 23th 5530-Phenol.B.D-2017
7	PCB (Poliklor Bifenil)	µg/L	0,01	<0,008	LP.IK.21.01.155 (GCMS)
8	MBAS	mg/L	1	<0,03	LP.IK.21.01.147 (Spektrofotometri)
9	Minyak dan Lemak (*)	mg/L	5	<0,2	Ekstraksi - Spektrofotometri
10	TBT (Tri Butil Tin) (**)	µg/L	0,01	<0,005	OW/TOT13 (GC-MS)
11	Raksa (Hg) (*)	mg/L	0,003	<0,00006	SNI 19-6964.2-2003
12	Kadmium (Cd)	mg/L	0,01	<0,0008	APHA Ed. 23th 3125.B, 3030.B-2017
13	Tembaga (Cu)	mg/L	0,05	0,002	APHA Ed. 23th 3125.B, 3030.B-2017
14	Timbal (Pb)	mg/L	0,05	0,001	APHA Ed. 23th 3125.B, 3030.B-2017
15	Seng (Zn)	mg/L	0,1	<0,0005	APHA Ed. 23th 3125.B, 3030.B-2017
C.	MIKROBIOLOGI				
1	Coliform (Total)	Jumlah/100 mL	1.000	<1,8	APHA Ed. 23th 9221.A,B, dan C-2017

Keterangan : Peraturan Pemerintah Republik Indonesia Nomor 22 Tahun 2021 Lampiran VIII – Pelabuhan
(*) Parameter tidak terakreditasi
(**) Parameter disubkontrakkan
< Lebih kecil dari limit deteksi

Halaman 2 dari 5

Source: Documentation provided by the interviewee, 2024

The laboratory test results from PT Unilab were subsequently used as a reference, confirming that the quality of the seawater at Lifuleo remains below the environmental quality standards and that there is no pollution.

The discrepancies in the results between the three tests stemmed not only from issues regarding a laboratory's accreditation, but also from fundamental differences in sampling methods. In terms of parameters, the three laboratories conducting the tests did not test exactly the same things. The Undana laboratory only measured heavy metal content (copper, manganese and lead). The East Nusa Tenggara Provincial Health Office laboratory tested water quality indicators using parameters such as oil and grease, sanitation, dissolved oxygen (DO), pH, nitrite, phosphate, COD and BOD, whilst the Unilab laboratory conducted a more comprehensive analysis of temperature, oil content and metals. Furthermore, the sampling carried out by Undana took place on 27 November 2023, whilst the sampling by Provincial Health Office was conducted on 7 December 2023. PT Unilab's samples were only taken on 7 August 2024, approximately eight months after the first two tests were carried out. This means that the samples used as the official reference by PLN to declare the absence of pollution were taken at a different time from the

incident in question raised by the community. The Undana and East Nusa Tenggara Provincial Health Office tests were carried out with the involvement of the laboratory, PLN and the seaweed farmers, whilst the Unilab sampling, according to the head of the seaweed farmers' association, took place without the involvement of the seaweed farmers at all. This is what was subsequently obscured by the formal legitimacy of 'accreditation'.

PLN's delegitimisation of the previous laboratory test results does indeed have a strong legal basis, namely Minister of Environment and Forestry Regulation No. 23 of 2020 on Environmental Laboratories, which mandates that all environmental quality testing for regulatory purposes must be carried out by laboratories accredited by the National Accreditation Committee. However, the existence of this ministerial regulation cannot be interpreted merely as a neutral administrative regulation. There is a close link between the rigidity of accreditation rules and the state's efforts to radically abstract space.

The state deliberately creates an epistemic boundary that stifles evidence from below, or popular science. This phenomenon demonstrates that, under the state's territorial control, the validity of knowledge does not depend on the material reality directly experienced by the public, but rather on the power of the institutions that control

that knowledge. Laboratory certification has been transformed into a new tool of exclusion. Consequently, this clash has given rise to a space devoid of citizens, a condition in which the community's empirical experiences crumble in the face of claims to truth produced by the state and PLN.

This control is further reinforced through national-level policy changes. By excluding fly ash and bottom ash (FABA) from the category of hazardous and toxic waste (B3) for certain types of coal-fired power plants, Government Regulation No. 22 of 2021 on the Implementation of Environmental Protection and Management has redefines what constitutes an ecological threat. Through this regulation shift, the state alters the legal definition of pollution, effectively narrowing the legal avenues available for the public to hold actors accountable for the consequences of power plant activities. In line with Foucault's (1972) perspective on the relationship between power and knowledge, power does not operate by forbidding the public from speaking out against environmental damage, but rather by producing 'truth'. Consequently, the state and capital have established a regime of truth that subtly stifles and localises the ecological grievances of seaweed farmers in Lifuleo.

In response, the community mounted resistance by blocking access roads to the power plant site, constructing alternative narratives through mass media, and engaging in advocacy led by WALHI NTT, representing the most tangible form of re-territorialisation the community could undertake. Beyond merely voicing protests, the community sought to reclaim control over the definition of space. However, the capacity for such re-territorialisation remained severely limited, as residents found themselves pitted against state apparatus, rigid regulations, corporate capital, and an overwhelming degree of institutional legitimacy.

Diminishing Access: The Discrepancy between Formal Rights and Actual Capacity

When the space produced by citizens is reproduced by the state through the establishment of boundaries and territorialisation that exclude citizens, Ribot & Peluso's (2003) theory of access addresses the most concrete consequences experienced by citizens: the diminishing of their actual capacity to derive benefits from marine space, even though no formal restrictions have been imposed.

Long before development activities began, the Lifuleo community enjoyed open access. Seaweed farmers could choose their own cultivation sites, move to other locations when conditions

were unfavourable, and utilise marine areas based on local knowledge of currents, depths and seasons. This access was the result of collective practices that had been in place for decades. This study found that the community's ability to benefit from marine space has diminished through three mechanisms.

First, the presence of jetties and the movement of barges have created new, unwritten boundaries that the community can tangibly feel. Second, ecological conditions in the waters have changed. The discharge of engine cooling water into the sea has altered environmental conditions around the operational area, thereby reducing the productivity of seaweed cultivation and fish catches. Third, formal legitimisation through permits and regulations. These mechanisms are implemented through instruments that appear neutral but, in reality, perpetuate the dominance of those in positions of power. The government maintains that, provided all administrative requirements are met, the utilisation of marine space is deemed lawful. These three mechanisms operate through what Hall et al. (2013) term the 'powers of exclusion', which dictate who is permitted access and who is barred.

Actors backed by institutional authority are in a stronger position, whereas communities lacking equivalent formal instruments remain deeply vulnerable. This

situation is inextricably linked to what Ribot and Peluso term 'bundles of power', wherein those who control technology, capital and authority possess a greater capacity to utilise resources, regardless of prior occupancy. The state not only regulates access but also restricts and distributes it via an intricate network of power (Sikor & Lund, 2009). Through PLN, the state deploys extensive infrastructure, operational capacities that local communities cannot match, and the institutional legitimacy of being Indonesia's sole state-owned electricity provider. Ultimately, it is this concentration of capital, technology, and authority that places PLN in a dominant position to control the marine space historically utilised by local residents.

While the village government views community access as open in the absence of official restrictions, conditions on the ground tell a different story. The village head maintains that regulatory barriers do not exist and that residents should still be able to utilise the sea. However, as Ribot and Peluso demonstrate, access is not merely about the presence or absence of formal prohibitions, but rather whether the practical ability to derive benefits remains intact. Presently, that capacity continues to dwindle, compelling the community to avoid specific zones to prevent further disruption to their aquaculture operations.

A similar pattern was identified by Glaser et al. (2015) in the Spermonde Islands, where inequalities in access often operate beneath the formal surface, rendering the groups most dependent on resources the most vulnerable. These ecological shifts concretely illustrate how the community's capacity to derive benefits from their aquaculture areas is being eroded. The discharge of engine cooling water into the sea has altered local water conditions in Lifuleo, leaving seaweed crops vulnerable to disease and introducing severe uncertainty into harvest yields. As WALHI NTT noted:

> *Following the company's activities, waste has been discharged, making the seaweed increasingly vulnerable and unable to survive for long… when it does not grow well, productivity declines and it is the local community that will bear the brunt of the impact.* (Interview with Kelvin Wuran, Advocacy Officer at WALHI NTT, 24 April 2026).

Although appearances suggest that the community can still access the marine space, the area can no longer be productively utilised or yield comparable results. Ultimately, in Lifuleo, it is not only access and economic capacity that are disappearing, but also the local knowledge that has long formed the foundation of that capacity.

Actor Contestation and the Battle for Legitimacy in the Struggle for Marine Space in Lifuleo

As local knowledge and the capacity to access marine areas gradually erode, the question shifts from simply who can still utilise these waters to who actually holds the right to determine their future. Consequently, the spatial struggle in Lifuleo does not always manifest as open conflict, but rather unfolds as a contest over legitimacy among actors whose positions, resources, and capacities are deeply unequal.

For coastal communities, this struggle for space is felt tangibly through a decline in seaweed cultivation productivity, disruptions to fishing patterns caused by barge traffic, and displacement from the areas that have long formed the basis of their livelihoods. In contrast, the state and corporate entities view the marine space as an operational area utilised in accordance with applicable laws and permits. Consequently, they maintain that fulfilling all regulatory, permit, and administrative requirements leaves no valid basis for asserting that a spatial struggle is taking place.

This difference in perspectives on marine space is not merely a matter of conflicting viewpoints, but reflects an asymmetry in each actor's capacity to define the conditions of that space and produce institutionally

recognised truth. The contest over space in Lifuleo occurs amongst actors whose positions, resources and capacities are structurally unequal, generating a power configuration that determines who benefits and who bears the costs throughout the contestation process. Five key actors shape the dynamics of this marine spatial contestation: coastal communities (aquaculturists and fishermen), PLN/Timor-1 Coal-Fired Power Plant, the village government, the East Nusa Tenggara Marine and Fisheries Agency, and WALHI NTT, each possessing distinct interests, bases of legitimacy, and resources.

Based on Table 2, coastal communities occupy a defensive position within the Lifuleo marine contestation. Their primary interest is maintaining access to the marine spaces that have long sustained their livelihoods, rather than establishing new claims. Although their resources, such as local knowledge, empirical experience, and the capacity for collective action, constitute significant social capital, they lack recognised epistemic status within prevailing formal frameworks. Consequently, while the community's claims are historically and ecologically robust, they remain legally vulnerable because they lack administrative instruments recognised by the state.

Table 2. Mapping of Actors

Actor Mapping Identification			
No	**Stakeholder**	**Interest**	**Resource**
1.	Coastal communities (aquaculturists /fishermen)	• Preserving the marine environment as a means of livelihood • To combat the uncertainty and injustice felt as a result of changes to the marine environment • Preserving access to the marine environment as a shared space (common space) • Demanding recognition of the impacts they experience	• Local knowledge • First-hand experience • Dependence on the marine environment • Collective action (protests, blockades)
2.	Companies/ PLN (coal-fired power plants)	• Securing the use of marine space for operational purposes • Maintaining the legitimacy of activities through environmental quality standards	• Capital • Technology • Legal compliance (permits, AMDAL, Marine Spatial Planning Permit) • CSR Programme
3.	Village government	• Maintaining social stability and development at the local level • Avoiding conflicts that could disrupt development	• Local administrative authority • Formal legitimacy at village level • Access to policies and programmes
4.	Department of Marine Affairs and Fisheries	• Regulating and supervising the use of marine space in accordance with zoning • Enforces the licensing and regulatory system (KKPRL, RTRW) • Safeguarding the functions of marine areas (including conservation)	• Regulations (RTRW, KKPRL) • Licensing authority • Data and monitoring • Coordination with central government agencies
5.	WALHI NTT	• Advocating for the rights of coastal communities • Supporting communities, particularly in legal proceedings	• Advocacy and legal networks • Knowledge of environmental regulations • Capacity for community support • Access to the media and public spaces

Source: Compiled by the author

PLN, through the Timor-1 Coal-Fired Power Plant, occupies a structurally dominant position. Its primary interest is securing the utilisation of marine space to sustain its operations whilst maintaining the legitimacy of its activities through compliance with formally established environmental quality standards. PLN's resources extend beyond financial capital and technological capacity; more decisive is its dual legitimacy as both a corporate entity and a representative of the state implementing a National Strategic Project. From perspective, PLN is an actor that accumulates benefits from the marine space, whilst the socio-ecological costs of this accumulation are borne disproportionately by coastal communities.

Village governments find themselves in a structurally contradictory position. Ideally functioning as mediators to strengthen the community's standing against more dominant actors, they tend in practice to operate within a framework of formal validation. Consequently, an institution meant to serve as a democratic counterbalance ends up reproducing structural inequalities.

The Department of Marine Affairs and Fisheries acts as a regional regulatory body executing formal territorialisation functions by establishing boundaries, designating functional areas, and regulating spatial utilisation through permits. Its role is primarily normative;

while not directly engaged in the contest over spatial benefits, it establishes the regulatory framework that defines the structural positions of other actors.

WALHI NTT occupies an intermediary position. Rather than directly controlling space, it strengthens community capacity through advocacy, support, and linkage to the broader public sphere. Indeed, the alliance between the community and WALHI NTT functions as the sole structural mechanism actively reinforcing the position of the weaker party. WALHI NTT's presence demonstrates that spatial contestation encompasses not only economic interests, but also fundamental demands for justice and the recognition of rights.

The relationship that primarily dictates this contestation is that between PLN and the state, which do not operate as separate entities. As an instrument of the state functioning through corporate mechanisms, PLN fuses state authority with the interests of capital accumulation within a single entity. Consequently, when communities raise concerns regarding the operational impacts of the coal-fired power plant, they are confronting not merely an economic actor, but the state authority that underpins the project with legal, administrative, and institutional legitimacy.

This mapping of relationships reveals that the state, in partnership with PLN, occupies the most dominant

position in the Lifuleo marine contestation. This dominance stems less from financial capital or technological capacity than from PLN's unique capacity to operate a dual legitimacy regime encompassing both corporate and state authority. Ultimately, this institutional standing renders PLN virtually unchallengeable by the community, as any challenge can be readily deflected by invoking whichever of the two legitimacy regimes best serves corporate-state interests.

Conclusion

The struggle for marine space in Lifuleo stems from a clash between two concurrent yet conflicting processes. On the one hand, the coastal community in Lifuleo formally retains rights to the marine space; no explicit prohibition restricts their access, and the state rhetorically presents itself as the protector of the public interest through energy infrastructure development. On the other hand, the community's actual ability to derive benefits from the marine space continues to diminish. This is at the heart of the dynamics of the struggle over marine space in Lifuleo: the state is present not to protect the living space of its citizens, but to legitimise the process of its erosion.

This research found that the struggle over marine space in Lifuleo unfolds through three interlayered processes. The presence of the Timor-1 Coal-Fired Power

Plant socially and politically reconfigures marine space. The communal living space that the community had managed for over two decades has been transformed into an energy infrastructure space claimed in the name of national interest. This reconfiguration of space paves the way for the state to carry out territorialisation. Through the presence of PLN, the boundaries of marine space utilisation have been redrawn by altering the material conditions, without a single formal restriction that the community could challenge. As these new boundaries take effect, the coastal community's access to the marine space as a source of livelihood has also diminished—not because the space has physically disappeared, but because unequal power mechanisms have altered which parties are able to benefit from it. PLN, as a state-owned enterprise, operates under two regimes of legitimacy: corporate authority and state authority.

The community is not only confronted by the company as an economic actor, but also by the state authority that is supposed to be there to protect them. The state does not stand on the side of its citizens, but rather on the side of capital accumulation operating in the name of the state, making the contestation in Lifuleo appear distinct from typical conflicts over the use of space. The dynamics at play also relate to the question

of who is entitled to economic benefits from the productive space, and who bears the social and ecological costs. The coastal communities of Lifuleo bear a disproportionate share of these costs, whilst the narrative of the public interest continues to be used to legitimise processes that are, in fact, eroding their living space.

This research emphasises that communities should be taken into account and substantively involved in every process relating to their living spaces. When the state shapes the spaces of its citizens without considering what those citizens themselves will face, the result is not merely injustice in spatial governance, but a betrayal of the very mandate upon which the state's existence is founded.

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