

Memes and the Indonesian 2024 Presidential Elections: Performative Politics in an Illiberal Setting

Ubaidillah Ubaidillah^a, Widjajanti M. Santoso^a, Nina Widyawati^a, Purwadi Purwadi^a, & Ana Windarsih^a

^aResearch Center for Society and Culture, National Research and Innovation Agency (BRIN), Indonesia

*corresponding author: ubaidillah@brin.go.id

Received: 27 August 2024 / Accepted: 18 April 2025 / Published: 29 April 2025

► Ubaidillah, U., Santoso, W. M., Widyawati, N., Purwadi, P., & Windarsih, A. (2025). Memes and the Indonesian 2024 presidential elections: Performative politics in an illiberal setting. *Advances in Southeast Asian Studies*, 18(1), 59-82.

Memes played a significant role in the 2024 Indonesian presidential election, particularly in shaping illiberal and elite discourse. This study focuses on Gibran Rakabuming Raka, the eldest son of President Joko Widodo (2014-2024) and, since October 2024, the 14th vice president of Indonesia, a controversial figure who benefited from illiberal law and politics. Using digital observation of Gibran's Instagram and X accounts, this study examines how his humorous engagement with digital-native language mobilizes voters while intensifying intergenerational political conflict. The findings suggest that memes have evolved beyond digital campaign tools to resignify elite legitimization in an illiberal state. Furthermore, this study argues that technology consumption patterns have replaced the traditional class-based division of 'people versus elites' in populist narratives, signaling a shift toward digital nativism in Indonesia. By questioning whether memes function as grassroots resistance or elite control mechanisms, this research contributes to broader discussions on digital politics in Southeast Asia.

Keywords: Elections; Illiberal; Indonesia; Meme; Performative Politics



INTRODUCTION

Using memes in political campaigns has become a global phenomenon, with politicians leveraging humor and simplicity to reach broader audiences, particularly younger generations (Anderau & Barbarrusa, 2024). In the United States, Donald Trump used memes to attack political opponents and promote his agenda (Praditya, 2018), while Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez utilized them to convey her political messages and engage with supporters (Rodriguez & Goretti, 2022). In the UK, Boris Johnson simplified complex political messages using memes, particularly during the Brexit campaign (Beck, 2024). Ukrainian President

Volodymyr Zelenskyy, drawing on his background as a comedian, has used memes as a political communication tool (Semotiuk & Shevchenko, 2022), while in France, Emmanuel Macron has used memes to attract young voters (Carrejo, 2017). In India, Narendra Modi has strategically employed memes to reinforce his image as a modern leader and to connect with young voters (Rankawat, 2023; Rastogi & Kashyap, 2019).

Moving to Southeast Asia, cases illustrate the use of memes in political movements. For example, the #MilkTeaAlliance exemplifies a transnational memescape that has expanded initial discussions on Taiwanese sovereignty and criticism of the Thai monarchy into a broader global struggle against authoritarianism (Schaffar & Praphakorn, 2021). Studies from Singapore indicate that memes serve as a tool for political participation, particularly among youth who are often apathetic or cynical toward politics (Ahmed & Masood, 2024). Observations of the 2014 and 2019 Indonesian presidential elections show that memes also serve as a tool for political mobilization (Duile & Tamma, 2021; Hanan, 2017; Rahardi & Amalia, 2019; Santosa et al., 2018). The presence of memes is closely tied to Indonesia's political elites (Baulch et al., 2022).

Initially associated with grassroots culture as a means to critique populist hypocrisy (Bratich, 2014; Mozdeika, 2023), memes are transforming into instruments of political performativity, often referred to as “memeing politics”, which means as a process of transforming political discourse or action into memes (Halversen & Weeks, 2023). In doing so, they successfully capture the attention of young people in their function as a native digital language (Chagas, 2023). In correspondence with recent research, this article examines the memes produced by Gibran Rakabuming Raka (hereafter Gibran), which illustrate explicit individual involvement in political campaigns. Gibran is the first son of ex-President Joko Widodo (2014-2024; hereafter Jokowi) and, since October 2024, the 14th vice president of Indonesia. His candidacy as vice president stirred controversy. However, unlike the two other candidates, Gibran utilized memes to engage Indonesian youth, who formed the majority of voters in the 2024 presidential election. Theoretically, memes are usually related to subversive counter-narratives. However, this article exhibits memes as mechanisms of elite-driven voter mobilization. By examining Indonesia's unique intersection of dynastic politics, youth digital nativism, and online engagement within an illiberal ecosystem, this study argues that Gibran's memes actively negotiate power dynamics and reconfigure them within illiberal settings. This approach goes beyond conventional discussions of memes as mere instruments of political legitimacy but instead positions them as performative acts embedded in the evolving structures of Indonesia's illiberal democracy.

Hence, this study contributes to the growing literature on memescape, performative politics, and illiberal political structures. Memescapes are the dynamic digital environments where memes circulate, evolve, and influence sociopolitical discourse (Wiggins & Bowers, 2015), while performative politics broadly refer to political actions, discourse, and strategies that emphasize spectacle, symbolism, and public performance rather than substantive policymaking (Leeker et al., 2017). Illiberal democracy is a government system that blends market liberalization with authoritarian policies, where nepotism, money politics, and political violence highlight the tension between market demands and state control (Bourchier, 2015; Hadiz, 2004). Gibran's candidacy reflects patterns associated with such a system. His candidacy began when the Constitutional Court (hereafter, MK) granted a lawsuit changing the minimum age

requirement for presidential and vice-presidential candidates as stipulated in Law Number 7 of 2007 concerning Elections. The ruling of this election law introduced an exception to the 40-year age minimum, allowing candidates who currently hold or have previously held positions obtained through general elections to qualify. This amendment enabled Gibran to run at the age of 36. The lawsuit concerning the age requirement was overseen by a panel led by Anwar Usman, Gibran's uncle, and was initiated by a student from Solo. The close personal ties among key figures involved in this constitutional process sparked public criticism over allegations of nepotism. Ultimately, Gibran was elected vice president alongside President Prabowo Subianto in the 2024 presidential election.

This article is based on data collected through digital observation. Data collection was conducted from early 2023, when the discourse surrounding Jokowi's potential successor began, until the presidential election in February 2024. The meme data were obtained from Gibran's X account (@gibran_tweet) and Instagram account (@gibran_rakabuming). Data on speech, talk shows, documentary films, and press releases were gathered from authoritative sources such as mass media, YouTube channels, official state agency websites, and prominent media sites. The analysis of meme data was performed using performative politics as a tool, guided by four main contextual gradations of discourse: 1) co-text, language, or direct internal text; 2) intertextual relationships between speech, text, genre, and discourse; 3) sociological/social variables outside the scope of language that indicated the situational dimension of the text; and 4) the broader historical socio-political context and its relationship to discursive practices (Titscher et al., 2000). With this analytical approach, we examine Gibran's memes as the primary text and the memes of Jokowi and his youngest son, Kaesang Pangarep (hereafter Kaesang), as contextual references. The memescape perspective enables a deeper analysis by positioning memes within the political ecosystem, revealing their intertextuality with other illiberal political phenomena. Jokowi effectively utilized social media by producing memes, controlling political discourse in Indonesia by deploying cyber troops and influencers, and attacking his critics (Sastramidjaja & Wijayanto, 2022; Tapsell, 2021). Gibran leveraged his father's success by using social media to produce memes highlighting his political position. When Gibran faced public criticism, Kaesang responded by creating memes that transformed negative sentiment into an advantage, ultimately helping him gain political support. However, Jokowi's regime was also highly disputed on social media towards the end of his administration.

The analysis of memes as texts is conducted within the context of the 2024 presidential election and the broader framework of Indonesia's political landscape. The first section presents memes as a framework for performativity and discursive power. The second section highlights intergenerational conflicts by analyzing memes produced by Jokowi, Gibran, and Kaesang, utilizing humor to attract the attention of young voters. The third section situates this phenomenon within the framework of illiberal politics, which exhibits ambivalence: on the one hand, the circulation of memes should foster more inclusive political participation, but on the other, they can also function as instruments for maintaining or reinforcing existing power structures. The conclusion wraps up this argument after looking at a neighboring country, indicating regional similarities.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS: PERFORMATIVITY AND DISCURSIVE POWER

Performative politics refers to political actions, gestures, or discourses that are primarily symbolic or theatrical, designed to shape public perception, reinforce identities, or mobilize support rather than achieve concrete policy outcomes (Couldry & Hepp, 2016; Glass & Rose-Redwood, 2014). It emphasizes the role of performance, rhetoric, and spectacle in political engagement. The concept of performativity emphasizes how authority, traditionally derived from external sources (e.g., institutions and societal norms), has shifted to internal or individual autonomy. This shift allows individuals and groups to actively construct and redefine their own identities through expressive acts, including the creation of memes. In this context, performativity suggests that identity is not fixed but continually shaped and reaffirmed through actions and expressions, which challenge traditional authority structures (Butler, 1997, 2010).

This article adopts the discursive approach developed by Wiggins (2019) and Wiggins and Bowers (2015), who build on Butler's (1997, 2010) theory of performativity to analyze memes as iterative, identity-constituting acts embedded in ideological practices. Wiggins (2019) demonstrates how memes operationalize Butler's concepts of performativity and resignification, processes through which repeated sharing and remixing of digital artifacts (re)construct meanings and identities. Performativity elevates memes from seemingly random and trivial expressions to meaningful ones. In this case, what is built is a significant process of creating meaning, even reshaping the meaning of existing texts. Related to that is the notion of resignification – a discursive strategy used to propose or refute arguments by contextualizing the internal logic of a text, not just linguistically but also visually or audibly (Butler, 1997, 2010). In memes, resignification operates through rapid de/recontextualization, where images, phrases, or symbols may be stripped of their original intent and imbued with new, often subversive, meanings through collective repetition and remix. The meaning of a text, similar to the identities above, is not fixed and is always in a process of construction. In addition, performatives function as texts that can be analyzed in relation to other texts (Butler, 1997).

Like Butler, Wiggins and Bowers (2015) treat the memescape as a public sphere where power circulates through discursive repetition. However, they extend this framework by foregrounding digital participation: Memes materialize as tools of collective meaning-making, where users simultaneously cite and subvert norms through platform-driven practices (e.g., algorithmic virality, remix culture). The memescape is grounded in structuration theory (Giddens, 1984), which Wiggins (2019) adapts to analyze meme dynamics, emphasizing the recursive relationship between structure (e.g., platform algorithms, cultural norms) and agency (users who create/share memes). This perspective argues that the existence of a meme is not merely coincidental but reflects the active involvement of agents who simultaneously utilize and reproduce structures recursively. When agents interact within the memescape – the environment where memes are created, shared, and transformed – they do more than create memes. They simultaneously shape and are shaped by the structures associated with those memes.

In this article, we conceptualize the memescape as a virtual, mental, and physical hybrid space where agents produce, reproduce, and consume memes. Accordingly,

memes circulating in public spaces, such as digital environments, contribute to the construction of identities, formed through repeated behavior, words, and actions. In the context of performative politics, the memescape also functions as a political arena where existing power relations are rendered visible, both through their discursive positioning and civil society's responses to them. We can uncover insights into digital illiberality by analyzing the interplay between structural constraints (e.g., algorithms, institutional power) and user agency. This framework allows us to critically examine memes produced by elite political actors without neglecting how marginalized groups reclaim memes as tools of resistance.

INTERGENERATIONAL CONFLICTS AND GIBRAN'S SELF-OTHERING

Memes and Indonesian Youth

When ex-President Jokowi, Gibran's father, recognized the power of social media to spread information and shape public discourse, he began to share his agenda and views on specific issues regularly. One of his unique approaches incorporated cartoon illustrations that consistently featured an orange cat as a visual element (such as in the National Doctor's Day congratulatory illustration shown in the upper left corner of Figure 1). This choice reflects careful monitoring of social media trends and popular topics among Indonesian youth (Nugraheny & Asril, 2022). Cats frequently appear in digital conversations, such as those moderated by the X account @kochengfs, a well-known platform facilitating discussions about cats among young people. By leveraging this familiar visual icon, Jokowi intended to build an emotional connection with younger audiences while strengthening his digital presence.

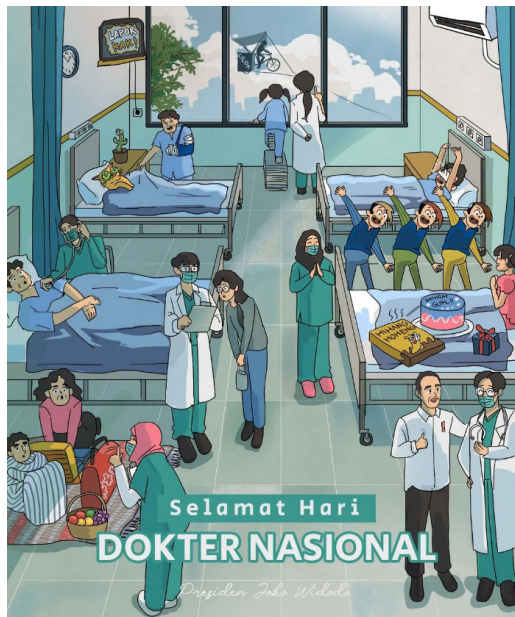


Figure 1. The National Doctor Day cartoon. (Widodo, 2022)

Virality has become crucial in public discourse and politics, as seen in Jokowi's adoption of the orange cat symbol from social media. Achieving virality involves a series of small, strategic actions that build up to create a significant impact. These small actions are interconnected through words and language, creating a chain of ideas – a narrative – that characterizes social movements (Jones, 2021). Social movements often begin with institutions or groups that lack power and gain momentum as more people join them. Like public demonstrations that bring cities to a halt, these movements depend on mass participation and collective momentum. Gibran harnesses the power of the masses by creating memes and adopting a mass segmentation strategy that helps him make them viral. This condition becomes evident in the characters and visual sources he uses for his memes, which resonate with the childhood experiences of Indonesian youth, such as Patrick Star from *SpongeBob SquarePants* (Figure 2), *Upin & Ipin* (Figure 3), and *Thomas & Friends* (Figure 4). In other words, he employs mass targeting by segmenting audiences based on age and their familiarity with childhood audio-visual media.



Figure 2, 3, and 4. Gibran's memes on his social media account. (Marendra, 2023; Putranto, 2023)

Based on a cartoon series with characters still regularly broadcast on Indonesian television, the three memes in Figures 2, 3, and 4 have a complex intertextual relationship. They are used as symbolic elements in Gibran's humorous self-representation, which sets him apart, although interdiscursively still connected to the older generation of politicians who tend to be stiff and solemn. A recent online survey revealed that many young Indonesians still hold negative perceptions of politics (Katadata Insight Center, 2023). The survey, which included 1005 respondents from across Indonesia, found that 42.8% of young people perceive politics as evil, while 8.8% think it is terrible. The survey also found that 31.3% of respondents believe corruption significantly influences these negative perceptions. The older generation of politicians is often considered responsible for the corruption problem. Because of this intergenerational conflict, it has become significant to catch the attention and persuade young Indonesians of one's 'innocence' – an act that is largely based on performative politics, as the figures above indicate.

Gibran uses humorous memes to distinguish himself from older generations of politicians. This technique, also known as *self-othering* (Chowdhury, 2022; Orkibi, 2022), is often used by marginalized groups to challenge those in power. However, unlike marginalized groups who deploy self-othering to resist authority,

Gibran uses it as a strategy to attain power from within the establishment. However, Gibran's memes share similarities with populist discourses that denounce the elite, foster a sense of shared identity, and utilize symbolic elements (Barát, 2018; Macaulay, 2019). By incorporating intergenerational tensions, Gibran's memes attempt to build a populist discourse. In a talk show hosted by Rosianna Silalahi, a prominent female journalist, in July 2023, Gibran commented on his profile picture:

Ada gak walikota, gubernur yang profile picture-nya seperti saya? Kalau yang sudah tua, pasti [mereka akan bilang]: Ini ngapain seperti itu? Harusnya pakai peci, terus kaya gini [salam namaste], Mas! (Is there a mayor [or] governor whose [social media] profile pictures are like mine? If [politicians] are old, that is for sure, [they'd say]: Why are you doing something like that? You should wear peci [a skull cap], then like this [namaste greeting], bro!). (KompasTV, 2023a)

He used this situation to explain why he chose a photo of Patrick Star with his own face edited onto it as his Instagram profile picture.

Gibran's populist message adopted intergenerational politics to adapt to the demographic composition of voters, which in 2024 was dominated by young people. Young people comprised 55% of the 204,807,222 registered voters. The electoral law stipulates that individuals must be at least 17 years old to be eligible to vote. According to data released by the General Election Commission, 55% of voters belong to Generations Z and Millennials, based on a generational breakdown of the electorate (Muhamad, 2023). Herein, Indonesia's recent presidential elections show a shift from Jokowi's 2014 and 2019 campaigns that emphasized social class politics. In terms of his appearance, Jokowi was known for wearing low-quality white shirts and black trousers, similar to those worn by low-level employees in the industry and offices. His campaign slogan was "*Jokowi adalah kita*. (Jokowi is us.)". Törnquist (2014) noted that, at that time, Jokowi's strategy represented a form of participatory populism. Gibran has followed in his father's footsteps, making textual modifications that focus on commodifying intergenerational sentiment. Age turned into an essential element in Gibran's political marketing strategy. To some extent, this aligned well with the strategies of those political elites who also support Jokowi and who widely circulated the statement that they now want to "give opportunities to young people" (Dirgantara & Maullana, 2024; Fauzi, 2023a). Conversely, the intergenerational narrative was also supported by famous religious authority Habib Lutfi bin Yahya, who has long supported Jokowi (Alatas, 2021; Anggrainy, 2023). Hence, Gibran's intergenerational politics eventually succeeded in aligning the political elite's strategies with the demographic composition of the 2024 presidential election.

Memeing Politics

Two factors make the resonance of Gibran's memes stronger than the strategies of the other two presidential candidates. The first is the historical context of the last two presidential elections, during which Jokowi benefited from the widespread circulation of supportive memes on social media (Hanan, 2017; Rahardi & Amalia, 2019; Santosa et al., 2018). The efficacy of memes as an expression of support cannot be

separated from the popularity of memes in Indonesia, which is the second factor that benefits Gibran's digital presence. The popularity of memes can be traced in the journey of the Meme & Rage Comic Indonesia (MRCI) page on Facebook since January 2013, which now has more than 5 million followers. MRCI has meanwhile expanded to X (@mrcipage), Instagram (@mrci.id), and TikTok (@mrci.tv), which is becoming increasingly popular. Meme & Rage Comic Indonesia is similar to the 9Gag site globally. The 9Gag site also features a special page for Indonesia alongside other thematic pages, including anime, sports, and gaming. These two meme sources convey how popular memes actually are among Indonesian youth. The existence of these meme producers is accompanied by the emergence of a culture of 'stealing memes', which is downloading memes that are considered interesting to use as resources in digital interactions among Indonesian youth.

Equivalent to a declaration of *memeing politics*, Gibran depicts memes as the right response in any situation. Rather than being merely the visual targets of political messaging, political elites like Gibran demonstrate how politicians can effectively use memes to engage with young Indonesians via social media. Gibran's meme in Figure 5 is more than telling: "*Saya selalu punya meme yang pas dalam segala situasi* (I always have a suitable meme for every occasion)".



Figure 5. Declaration of *memeing politics*. (Raka, 2023)

In Figure 5, Gibran presents himself as an alternative source of memes, always having "a suitable meme for every occasion". Consequently, he presents himself on social media as a politician and a source of content that entertains young people. These political and entertainment strategies then combine in the idea of 'joyful politics', which particularly informed the campaign strategy of the Prabowo-Gibran team. This strategy is conveyed by Arief Rosyid, one of their team leaders, in the following news:

We need to clarify that, in today's democratic era, everyone is equal. The president's children, doctors, business friends, and meatball traders are all the same. So, we should not discredit them. We are sure the friends present are here to convey the same (aspirations). Together, we, all professionals, are all young Indonesians who want Indonesia to progress and prosper, along with Mr. Prabowo and Mr. Gibran. One of them (our aspirations) is that we want to bring politics with cheerful politics. ... That's why young people get angry if one candidate is slandered, cursed, or sent hoaxes. They get angry. In the form of their anger, they convert it into a vote. That's why, thank God, our survey went up, and the other (candidates') went down. (Kompas.com, 2023)

Memes and intergenerational narratives have infused Indonesian youth with ideas of cheerful politics, which form part of a bigger picture of how politics is flexed and softened. This condition starkly contrasts the political style of the older generation, which emphasizes ceremonial rigidity, as symbolized in the profile photos of politicians' social media accounts wearing *peci* caps and displaying namaste greetings, as Gibran frequently mentioned in interviews. Despite their age, Anies Baswedan, Muhaimin Iskandar, Ganjar Pranowo, and Mahfud MD – the other four candidates – also innovatively presented themselves on social media. Anies Baswedan, for example, actively did live streaming via TikTok, and Ganjar Pranowo even asked for input from the public on the theme of the presidential candidate debate in X. Both candidates were present on social media as politicians. Yet, Gibran strategically positioned himself as part of the digital community by producing memes that can be 'stolen'.



Figure 6 and 7. Memes on stealing memes. (@cmewewewewe, 2024; @tanyarlfees, 2024)

In sum, Gibran shifted the political discourse from a conflict between the people and the elite to an intergenerational debate, emphasizing the role of young people as a major political force. In his cheerful politics strategy, he utilized memes as an effective communication tool to attract the attention of Indonesia's younger generation. He used memes to convey political messages in a relaxed, humorous, and easily shared way on social media. His approach made politics feel closer to the daily lives of Indonesia's

youth. In this way, Gibran attracted the younger generation's support by emphasizing his youth and drawing on their youth identity. He also created a more flexible and accessible political space within the social media ecosystem. This phenomenon, however, complicates the relationship between structure and agency. It questions the unequal political structure typically understood to produce memes as ideological tools through which marginalized groups or individuals voice resistance and attempt to challenge dominant power dynamics. Therefore, political memes are seen as a social media genre that uses incongruous humor to expose the contradictions, conflicts, and hypocrisy of populist politicians (Kristensen & Mortensen, 2021). However, this study reveals that memes become commodities and tools for those in power to gain more power. Gibran appropriated meme culture as a populist strategy while overlooking – or deliberately sidelining – its ideological roots as a form of marginal popular culture.

Memeing Gibran

The involvement of young politicians in electoral competition does not change the illiberal trend in Indonesia. This assumption is evident in how various organizations use democratic institutions to pursue undemocratic objectives. One such example is the Indonesian Solidarity Party (hereafter PSI), which claims to be a youth-oriented political party. The PSI was among the first political parties to endorse Gibran's candidacy despite its earlier support for Ganjar Pranowo's presidential bid. This sudden shift in political allegiance is noteworthy, especially since the party had previously pledged its support for Ganjar even before his political party, the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDIP), declared his candidacy. Moreover, Kaesang, Gibran's youngest brother, was appointed general chairman of PSI only two days after he registered as a party member. On 23 October 2023, PSI officially announced its support for the Prabowo-Gibran team in the 2024 presidential election. During this announcement, Kaesang made a series of memes supporting Prabowo and Gibran.



Figure 8. Memeing Prabowo and Gibran by Kaesang. (KompasTV, 2023b)

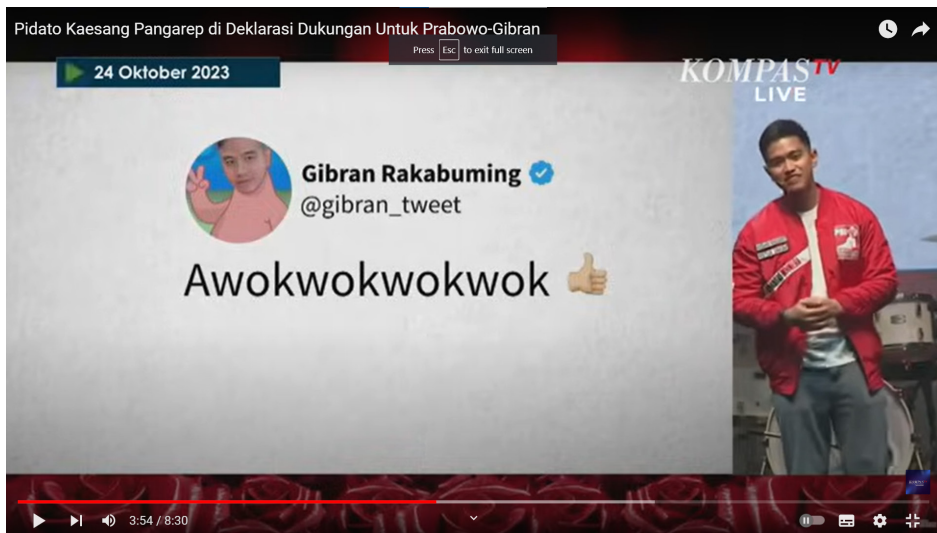


Figure 9. Memeing Prabowo and Gibran by Kaesang. (KompasTV, 2023b)

In Figures 8 and 9, Kaesang utilized memes featuring Prabowo and Gibran to bolster his speech in the narrative:

Kalau ada yang fitnah, jogetin aja. Kalau ada yang nyebar hoaks, yah kita senyumin saaja. Ojo nesu. Kalau perlu kasih jempol! (If someone is slandering, dance. If someone spreads hoaxes, smile at them. Do not be angry. If necessary, give them a thumbs up!)

Kaesang's speech exemplifies Wiggins' idea that memes can be used to present or challenge arguments through visual and verbal elements (Wiggins, 2019). However, Kaesang's speech used visuals and words to mock negative feedback by exposing it to false accusations and rumors while showing his support for Prabowo and Gibran. He employed intertextuality by using memes featuring Gibran and Prabowo to express his views amid the political turmoil. Additionally, his speech highlighted Gibran's transition from being a 'meme producer' to becoming an object and target of memes.

In her work, Butler discusses how people are liberated through resignification, legitimizing different forms of representation (Butler, 1997, 2010). However, since performativity is a process that values openness and continuous change (Leeker et al., 2017), dominant groups are able to twist texts to their advantage. We suggest that Gibran's use of memes and his populist discourse are examples of this dynamic. Gibran used the cultural experience and realm of marginalized groups to consolidate his power and promote his agenda.

The relationship between Gibran and Kaesang is not just that of siblings, but also reflects the intertwined political interests between election candidates and party leaders who play a central role in candidacy during an election. Allegations of nepotism became stronger when Kaesang, who had just joined PSI, was suddenly appointed chairman and immediately directed his party's support to the Prabowo-Gibran pair.

Since then, Jokowi has increasingly shown his closeness to PSI, as evidenced by his dinner with party cadres just days before the 2024 election, which appears to emphasize the political ties that benefit his family. Considering this series of political events during the election, memes need to be seen as a strategy to normalize dynastic politics, disguise institutional co-optation, and strengthen family dominance in Indonesia's democratic landscape.

MEME CULTURE IN ILLIBERAL SETTINGS

Democratic Backsliding, Dynastic Politics, and the Constitutional Court Controversy

This section starts with a discussion of the development of democracy during the era of Jokowi as the broader political backdrop for Gibran's use of memes. This context forms an essential part of the *memescape*. Gibran's involvement in meme culture is not an isolated phenomenon. Instead, it is shaped by existing political structures. Gibran benefited from the democratic backsliding in Indonesia during Jokowi's administration. Many scholars note that this condition arises from several factors indicating illiberal tendencies, such as partisan manipulation of key state institutions (Power, 2018), including law enforcement agencies (Siregar et al., 2020) and the mass media (Tapsell, 2020), as well as repression and criminalization of the opposition (Mietzner, 2018) through treason charges or the Electronic Information and Transactions (ITE) Law (Tapsell, 2019).

This democratic backsliding has occurred unevenly at the sub-national, sectoral, and contestation levels (Diprose et al., 2019). Indonesia's illiberal turn aligns with what Smith (2014, 2020) calls a thin typology, where democratic institutions are maintained but repurposed for undemocratic aims. The MK's decision to change the age requirement for presidential and vice-presidential candidates in the Election Law also falls within this typology.

The decision of the MK has sparked a debate about the prevalence of dynastic politics in Indonesia. The term "dynastic politics" carries two meanings in contemporary Indonesian politics. The first one refers to the emergence of discussions around Jokowi potentially seeking a third presidential term despite the constitutional limit of two terms. This speculation then led to the second meaning, which raises the issue of Jokowi's political dynasty.

The MK's decision stirred controversies as it enabled Gibran to run as a vice president candidate alongside Prabowo, the former defense minister in his cabinet. The controversy deepened when it became evident that the MK's chairman, Anwar Usman – who presided over the trial – was Gibran's uncle. This situation led to public criticism and ridicule. For instance, an unknown individual altered the MK's label on Google Maps to read *Mahkamah Keluarga*, or "Family Court" (Farisa, 2023), and an edited photo of the MK building circulated online with a similar caption (Figure 8). The title of the Constitutional Court (*Mahkamah Konstitusi*) was twisted to underline the importance of family relations.

Tempo, a weekly magazine well known for its investigative reporting, published an article discussing the political dynamics and lobbying that resulted in the decision allowing Gibran to run alongside Prabowo Subianto constitutionally. In this article,



Figure 10. Photo of the Constitutional Court Building edited to become Family Court. (Oesman, 2023)

Gibran is called the “Illegitimate Child of the Constitution” (Tempo, 2023). The whole process leading to the elections has been criticized as *Javanese Machiavellianism* (Sukidi, 2023) – the strategic use of political, business, and legal resources to benefit oneself, one’s family, and oligarchic networks. Although Sukidi (2023) does not explicitly name specific political figures, his critique symbolically points to the herein-discussed actors and their entanglements.

The controversy surrounding Gibran’s political career can be traced back to his victory in the Solo mayoral election of 2020. Jokowi had held the election at that time due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The public speculated that this decision paved the political path for Gibran and Jokowi’s son-in-law, Bobby Nasution, who was vying for power in Medan, North Sumatra. The Solo’s 2020 mayoral election was marked by controversies, particularly regarding Gibran’s candidacy against the independent pair Bagyo Wahyono-FX Suparjo (Bajo). Most political parties backed Gibran, while Bajo ran independently, gathering 63,028 ID cards as political endorsements despite allegations of unauthorized data collection from citizens (Syambudi, 2020).

Additionally, there were allegations that an Election Commission commissioner in Solo had distributed money to election officials to facilitate the verification of Bajo’s endorsements, allowing them to qualify as candidates. This situation was to prevent Gibran from running unopposed (Amali, 2020). Although these accusations were denied, the practice raised concerns about the integrity of the local election. Ultimately, Gibran won the election by a landslide with over 85% of the votes, while Bajo secured only about 15%, reinforcing suspicion of legitimacy issues behind the political process.

Money Politics, Corporate Networks, and Public Frustration

The illiberal political pattern in Indonesia is rooted in the logic of money politics and political violence (Hadiz, 2004). Money politics is not just a fraudulent way of using

money for power but also a complex intersection of money and politics that needs to be examined to expose its ambiguous and nuanced nature. This dynamic is vividly captured in the documentary *Sexy Killers*, released just before the 2019 presidential election. The film reveals the murky supply chains of Indonesia’s coal industry and the political interests behind the construction of coal-fired power plants. Among the companies involved are those with ties to powerful politicians. Gibran, for example, was a shareholder and commissioner in PT Rakabu Sejahtera, a company established by his father in 2009. This company is connected to PT Toba Sejahtera, owned by Luhut Binsar Pandjaitan, a key minister in Jokowi’s cabinet and shareholder in the conglomerate, which includes subsidiaries like PT Toba Bara active in the mining sector. Meanwhile, political violence is defined as violence closely related to the dynamics and struggle for political power within the framework of an illiberal democracy (Hadiz, 2004). In his article, Hadiz includes in this definition the violent acts committed by political actors, including ‘henchmen and thugs’, who previously operated under authoritarian regimes and are now adapting to formal democratic systems.

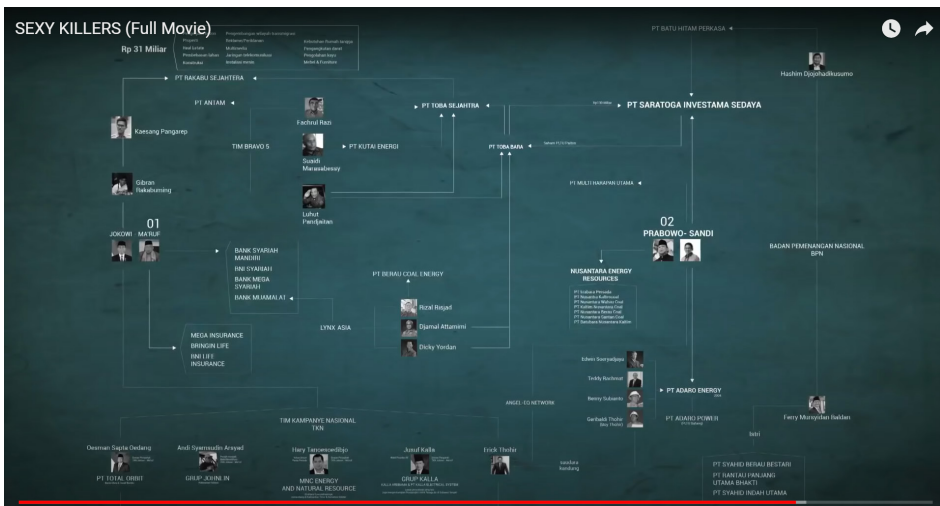


Figure 11. Network of politicians and entrepreneurs in the coal and Steam Power Plant industry in Indonesia. (Laksono & Suparta, 2019)

Regarding politics and money in Indonesia, we need to consider the increasing wealth of public officials during the COVID-19 pandemic. Even during these difficult times, officials like Gibran continued to amass wealth, with his net worth going from IDR 21.2 billion in 2020 to IDR 25.3 billion in 2021 and finally reaching IDR 26 billion in 2022 (Annur, 2023). This increase in wealth, coupled with the holding of regional elections, highlights the paradoxical nature of the restrictions imposed by Jokowi’s government during the pandemic. In 2021, Gibran was appointed mayor of Solo after winning the 2020 regional head election, which was held amidst the pandemic. This condition raised concerns over fairness. At the same time, pandemic restrictions worsened most people’s economic conditions; by contrast, public officials

experienced economic gains. This asymmetric nature of wealth accumulation has fueled tensions in public discourse.

Gibran has always been a subject of public debate due to his wealth. Even before the pandemic, his start-up company received an investment of IDR 71 billion from Alpha JWC Venture to expand *cedol* traditional beverage products in 2019 (Primadhyta, 2022). However, this investment came under national scrutiny after an academic accused Gibran and Kaesang of money laundering. The situation implicated a business relationship between Gibran and Kaesang and a company suspected of being involved in forest burning. The Corruption Eradication Commission initially investigated the case. However, it later stopped. On top of it, Gibran and Kaesang were not seen as state officials and, therefore, fell outside its jurisdiction (CNN Indonesia, 2022).

Under Gibran's governance, the region of Solo has received more money for infrastructure development than any other similar region in Indonesia, raising further questions about money politics and democratic inequality. Between 2021 and 2023, Solo has witnessed remarkable growth in infrastructure development with plans for 32 projects worth over IDR 2 trillion (Pahlevi, 2023). One example of transnational funding for infrastructure investment is the Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque. The United Arab Emirates has granted this Mosque to Indonesia, which shares similarities in architecture and name with the Grand Mosque (Fauzi, 2023b). Also, the Solo City Government has received grant funds worth IDR 236 billion (Zamani & Rusiana, 2022).

The advantages and achievements of Gibran, both as an individual and as the mayor, are opportunities that only a few people can get. The amount of money circulating in Gibran's involvement is unimaginable for most young Indonesians still struggling to meet their basic needs. According to Erick Thohir, the Minister of state-owned enterprises, as many as 81 million young Indonesians do not have a home (Rahayu & Pratama, 2023). This issue can be traced back to labor market transformations during President Megawati's administration and the regulations on outsourcing workers introduced through Law No. 13 of 2003 Article 64 concerning employment. This regulation was further intensified by the controversial Job Creation Law (Law No. 11 of 2020), which, although ruled unconstitutional in 2021 by the Constitutional Court, was reinstated in the form of government regulations under back then President Jokowi. These regulations further raised the levels of uncertainty for young people in their careers (Dwi, 2023). The memes in Figures 12 and 13 illustrate young people's frustration and hopelessness as they try to enter the job market. The prevalence of nepotism aggravates this problem. Job opportunities are believed to be limited to small exclusive circles known as *orang dalam* or "insiders". Gibran's perceived political and economic privilege has become emblematic of this "insider politics", pointing at the barriers faced by ordinary citizens. In the 2024 presidential debate, Anies Baswedan challenged this practice by lamenting that "*fenomena orang dalam ini menyebalkan* (this insider phenomenon is frustrating)" (Singgih & Ihsanuddin, 2023). Humorous memes serve as escapism for ordinary young people facing economic frustrations. However, for Gibran, they function as a political tool. The disparity in meme usage between ordinary youth and Gibran represents a form of symbolic political violence, as it may generate social jealousy. This

article argues that, despite all odds, Gibran’s humorous persona and strategic use of memes have contributed to his political advancement and furthered his prosperity.



Figure 12 and 13. Insider Memes. (Amarilisy, 2020)

Digital Populism: Memes, Media, and the Illiberal Turn in Southeast Asian Elections

To some extent, the public protests and political disputes that emerged after Gibran’s appointment as vice presidential candidate centered on the issue of dynastic politics, which exposed the advantages the MK’s and his father’s political decisions had created for him. However, during the 2024 presidential election campaigns, Gibran also faced insinuations that he was only chosen as the vice-presidential candidate due to family nepotism (Llewellyn, 2023). In a way, the humorous memes in Gibran’s performative self-othering strategy match the criteria of digital or techno-populism (De Blasio & Sorice, 2018). He produces memes that strip away the elements of asymmetric power relations associated with his origins. Memeing politics may appear trivial and playful, but it has a significant impact. The fact that Indonesian elite politicians have started using memes shows that they are aware of the advantage of using memes as tools for subduing the awareness of Indonesia’s young generation. These young people have faced economic turbulence in the labor market and welfare inequality. In memeing politics, these politicians compensate for these antics. Gibran’s meme appropriation shows that digital technology does not always amplify marginalized voices (see Hindman, 2009), and social media still benefits elite groups (see Schroeder, 2018).

The political events surrounding the 2024 presidential election in Indonesia are similar to those in the Philippines. Bongbong Marcos, the son of former Philippine president Ferdinand Marcos, has been paired with Sara Duterte, Rodrigo Duterte’s daughter, in the 2022 Philippine presidential election. This pair’s win is inextricably

linked to the legacy of the bulk of their parents' supporters while they were in power. Ferdinand Marcos has been regarded as a highly influential figure in Philippine politics (Dulay, 2020). However, his administration was characterized by crony capitalism (Manapat, 1991), which created a new elite of rent seekers by granting contracts, concessions, licenses, and monopolies (Hutchcroft, 1991). He also extended his rule after two terms in office by employing a martial law policy. Bongbong has inherited a smooth career, beginning with three straight years as governor of Illicos Norte and progressing to senator and congressman. In rural areas, Bongbong received assistance from the farming community.

Meanwhile, Sara inherited Duterte's popularity in the southern Philippines. Both Bongbong and Sara's approach is reported to be based on social media and influencers rather than a war of ideas or programs. Mendoza (2022) reports that Bongbong is heavily invested in building his digital presence on social media, especially on TikTok, due to its popularity among Filipinos before the 2022 presidential election. Social media contributes to distorting historical facts through disinformation that is insufficiently countered by fact checks because it involves a corrupt information ecosystem and society's authoritarian fantasies that benefit Bongbong (Ong, 2022). This comparison between the latest Indonesian and Philippine elections shows the increasing role of social media in navigating electoral victory. This article argues that digital culture compensates for the decay of the democratic system in these two Southeast Asian countries.

In Indonesia, two notable figures (Jokowi and Prabowo) show how mediated populism has transformed following the emergence of new media alongside traditional media. Jokowi's victory over Prabowo in the 2014 presidential election, influenced by the collaboration of both media types, was a significant example. Traditional Indonesian media in 2014 was alerted by the figure of Prabowo, a prominent figure in the military power of the New Order regime, which suppressed freedom of the press. They actively reported on Prabowo as a candidate who could threaten Indonesia's freedom of expression. In Indonesian history, Prabowo represents an opposing force to internet development in Indonesia, which became known as "a technology of freedom" (Hill & Sen, 2000). This article, however, shows that the development of the internet in Indonesia in the past twenty years, following the political reformation, has changed what was back then considered a technology of freedom into a technology of populism within a highly illiberal setting.

CONCLUSION

This article has demonstrated how Indonesia's 2024 election reflects the evolution of digital populism through the lens of memescapes and performativity, where elite political actors like Gibran Rakabuming Raka harness meme culture to simultaneously subvert traditional gatekeepers and reinforce illiberal power structures. His father, ex-President Jokowi, rose to power through positive coverage and comments on traditional and social media. In contrast, Prabowo was associated with the return of the New Order regime. The interaction between traditional and social media in the 2024 presidential election shows a different pattern. Gibran's candidacy as vice president next to Prabowo as president received critical coverage in the traditional

media because it was considered a scandal that threatened Indonesian democracy. This article showed, however, that digital media provided greater autonomy for Gibran to compensate for the traditional media deconsolidation. Digital technology has given access to more diverse actors who can surpass the authority of gatekeepers. Within an illiberal context, people would use this autonomy to create memes with discursive capabilities. Building on Wiggins' (2019) structuration approach to digital discourse and Butler's (2010) theory on performativity, we reveal a paradox in Gibran's case: While digital platforms ostensibly democratize political participation by enabling resignification practices (e.g., meme remixes), they also facilitate what Lim (2018) terms algorithmic legitimation, where elites co-opt grassroots aesthetics to naturalize dynastic politics.

Indonesia can be a fertile ground for studying digital populism, considering its political landscape is centered on individual domination. This phenomenon is deeply rooted in the nation's history, where the centrality of personal authority often characterizes leadership. From Indonesia's independence in 1945 until the reformation era in 1998, the highest executive figure had enormous power, often exceeding institutional frameworks, such as laws, regulations or democratic institutions. This historical precedent of person-based leadership continues to persist and thrive in the digital age, where political narratives are increasingly shaped by individual leaders leveraging social media platforms to build personal appeal and mobilize supporters. According to multiple scholarly reports, this illiberal pattern has continued under Jokowi's presidency. Gibran's vice-president candidacy is a product of that pattern.

This article finds that technology consumption patterns have effectively replaced the traditional social class division of people versus elites in populist narratives. The rise of digital populism in Indonesia has moved to nativism. During the 2024 Indonesian presidential election, the political narrative positioned young people as crucial change agents, emphasizing their potential to lead the nation toward a progressive future. This narrative utilizes the language and aesthetics of digital culture that aligns with the preferences and behavior of the younger generation of digital natives. By portraying young Indonesians as innovative and adaptable, this approach appeals to their aspirations and ideals. The memescape has significant credit for strengthening nativism in Indonesian digital populism.

In this respect, memes are uniquely positioned in digital communication, blending representation and performativity. As representations, memes objectify specific meanings, turning abstract ideas into tangible symbols. However, they also possess performative power, acting as agents of discourse that influence networks, amplify voices, and shape public perception. Drawing on Butler's concept of performativity, memes can be seen as dynamic subjects that reflect and create meaning. This dual role is evident in the case of Gibran, who strategically employs memes to advance his political agenda by exploiting intergenerational conflicts. In Indonesia's illiberal democracy, memes have shifted from their countercultural and subversive origins to tools of populist reinforcement. Rather than challenging entrenched power structures, they enable elites to craft populist narratives that mask undemocratic practices. Memes promote an inclusive image within a nepotistic system. Paradoxically, this approach mitigates social conflict while maintaining the status quo.



REFERENCES

- @cmewewewewe. (2024). Izin kan saya mencuri meme meme kalian Terima kasih [Allow me to steal your memes Thank you]. X.
- @tanyarfes. (2024). Drop meme yg kalian punya , ak mau mencurinya , thank youu >< [Drop the memes you have, I want to steal them, thank youu ><]. X.
- Ahmed, S., & Masood, M. (2024). Breaking barriers with memes: How memes bridge political cynicism to online political participation. *Social Media + Society*, 10(2). <https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051241261277>
- Alatas, I. F. (2021). *What is religious authority? Cultivating Islamic communities in Indonesia*. Princeton University Press.
- Amali, Z. (2020). Dugaan Komisioner KPU Solo bagi-bagi duit untuk mengamankan Bajo [Allegations that KPU Solo commissioners shared money to secure Bajo]. In *Dinasti Politik Keluarga Presiden Jokowi [Dynasty politics of President Jokowi's family]* (pp. 17–24). Tirta & Kurawal Foundation.
- Amarilisya, A. (2020). 10 Meme lucu “orang dalam” ini bikin fresh graduate senyum kecut [These 10 funny “insider” memes will make fresh graduates smile wryly]. *Brilio*. <https://www.brilio.net/ngakak/10-meme-lucu-orang-dalam-ini-bikin-fresh-graduate-senyum-kecut-200617b.html>
- Anderau, G., & Barbarrusa, D. (2024). The function of memes in political discourse. *Topoi*, 43(5), 1529–1546.
- Anggrainy, F. C. (2023). Habib Luthfi soal Gibran jadi cawapres: Pilihan Pak Prabowo tepat [Habib Luthfi regarding Gibran becoming vice presidential candidate: Pak Prabowo's choice was right]. *Detik.Com*. <https://news.detik.com/pemilu/d-7000644/habib-luthfi-soal-gibran-jadi-cawapres-pilihan-pak-prabowo-tepat>
- Annur, M. C. (2023). Digadang jadi cawapres Prabowo, berapa kekayaan Gibran Rakabuming? [Expected to be Prabowo's vice presidential candidate, how much is Gibran Rakabuming's net worth?]. *Katadata*. <https://databoks.katadata.co.id/ekonomi-makro/statistik/1d6e05883e6a0f5/digadang-jadi-cawapres-prabowo-berapa-kekayaan-gibran-rakabuming>
- Barát, E. (2018). Populist discourse and desire for social justice. In K. Hall & R. Barrett (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of language and sexuality*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190212926.013.72>
- Baulch, E., Matamoros-Fernández, A., & Suwana, F. (2022). Memetic persuasion and WhatsAppification in Indonesia's 2019 presidential election. *New Media & Society*, 26(5), 2473–2491.
- Beck, D. (2024). Humorous parodies of popular culture as strategy in Boris Johnson's populist communication. *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 26(3), 830–847.
- Bourchier, D. (2015). *Illiberal democracy in Indonesia*. Routledge.
- Bratich, J. (2014). Occupy all the dispositifs: Memes, media ecologies, and emergent bodies politic. *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies*, 11(1), 64–73.
- Butler, J. (1997). *Excitable speech: A politic of the performative* (1st ed.). Routledge.
- Butler, J. (2010). Performative agency. *Journal of Cultural Economy*, 3(2), 147–161.
- Carrejo, C. (2017). 17 French election memes to laugh about. *Bustle*. <https://www.bustle.com/p/17-french-election-memes-to-laugh-about-while-you-breathe-a-sigh-of-relief-56288>
- Chagas, V. (2023). Chapter 22: Memes as vernacular politics. In *Research handbook on visual politics* (pp. 298–309). Edward Elgar Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.4337/9781800376939.00031>
- Chowdhury, N. (2022). The affective-discursive ‘pruning’ of neoliberal selves: introducing the notion of self-othering. *Subjectivity*, 15(4), 205–222.
- CNN Indonesia. (2022). KPK setop laporan dugaan KKN yang seret Gibran dan Kaesang [KPK stops report on alleged KKN dragging Gibran and Kaesang]. *CNN Indonesia*. <https://www.cnnindonesia.com/nasional/20220819172437-12-836650/kpk-setop-laporan-dugaan-kkn-yang-seret-gibran-dan-kaesang>
- Couldry, N., & Hepp, A. (2016). *The mediated construction of reality*. Polity Press.
- De Blasio, E., & Sorice, M. (2018). Populism between direct democracy and the technological myth. *Palgrave Communications*, 4(1), 15.

- Diprose, R., McRae, D., & Hadiz, V. R. (2019). Two decades of reformasi in Indonesia: Its illiberal turn. *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 49(5), 691–712.
- Dirgantara, A., & Maullana, I. (2024). TKN sebut anak muda anggap Prabowo Pahlawan, sedangkan Gibran bisa cari solusi zaman “Now” [TKN said young people considering Prabowo as a hero, while Gibran can find solutions in the “Nowadays”]. *Kompas.Com*. <https://nasional.kompas.com/read/2024/02/17/07463641/tnk-sebut-anak-muda-anggap-prabowo-pahlawan-sedangkan-gibran-bisa-cari>
- Duile, T., & Tamma, S. (2021). Political language and fake news: Some considerations from the 2019 election in Indonesia. *Indonesia and the Malay World*, 49(143), 82–105.
- Dulay, D. G. C. (2020). *Traditional institutions and the political economy of the Philippines*. Duke University. <https://dukespace.lib.duke.edu/items/6344f127-9035-4d9b-89ef-7b8ee3c7f576>
- Dwi, A. (2023). Mengenal sistem kerja outsourcing yang dihidupkan Jokowi lewat perpu cipta kerja [Get to know the outsourcing work system that Jokowi has activated through the job creation perppu]. *Tempo*. <https://www.tempo.co/ekonomi/mengenal-sistem-kerja-outsourcing-yang-dihidupkan-jokowi-lewat-perpu-cipta-kerja-231442>
- Farisa, F. C. (2023). Bagaimana MK dipelesetkan jadi “Mahkamah Keluarga” di tengah gugatan usia capres-cawapres? [How was the Constitutional Court twisted into a “Family Court” amidst the lawsuits over the ages of presidential and vice presidential candidates?]. *Kompas.Com*. <https://nasional.kompas.com/read/2023/10/11/05150031/bagaimana-mk-dipelesetkan-jadi-mahkamah-keluarga-di-tengah-gugatan-usia?page=all%0A>
- Fauzi. (2023a). Nusron Wahid: KIM pilih Gibran untuk beri kesempatan ke anak muda [Nusron Wahid: KIM has chosen Gibran to give opportunities to young people]. *Antara*. <https://www.antaraneWS.com/berita/3799167/nusron-wahid-kim-pilih-gibran-untuk-beri-kesempatan-ke-anak-muda>
- Fauzi, H. (2023b). Kilas balik 2022, Masjid Raya Sheikh Zayed dan Persahabatan Indonesia - PEA [Flashback to 2022, Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque and Indonesian - UEA Friendship]. *Kemenag.go.id*. <https://kemenag.go.id/nasional/kilas-balik-2022-masjid-raya-sheikh-zayed-dan-persahabatan-indonesia-pea-yvnhvw>
- Giddens, A. (1984). *The constitution of society: Outline of theory of structuration*. Polity Press.
- Glass, M. R., & Rose-Redwood, R. (2014). *Performativity, politics, and the production of social space* (1st Ed.). Routledge.
- Hadiz, V. R. (2004). The rise of neo-Third Worldism? The Indonesian trajectory and the consolidation of illiberal democracy. *Third World Quarterly*, 25(1), 55–71.
- Halversen, A., & Weeks, B. E. (2023). Memeing politics: Understanding political meme creators, audiences, and consequences on social media. *Social Media and Society*, 9(4), 1–11.
- Hanan, H. (2017). *Meme culture sebagai kritik terhadap capres & cawapres pemilihan presiden 2014 di Twitter [Meme culture as critics toward presidential and vice 2014 presidential candidates in presidential election in Twitter]*. Airlangga University.
- Hill, D. T., & Sen, K. (2000). The internet in Indonesia's new democracy. *Democratization*, 7(1), 119–136.
- Hutchcroft, P. D. (1991). Oligarchs and cronies in the Philippine state the politics of patrimonial plunder. *World Politics*, 43(3), 414–450.
- Jones, R. H. (2021). Introduction: Are discourse analysts ‘essential workers’? In R. H. Jones (Ed.), *Viral discourse*. Cambridge University Press.
- Katadata Insight Center. (2023). Politik di mata anak muda [Politics in the eyes of young people]. https://cdn1.katadata.co.id/media/files/2023/11/15/2023_11_15-13_43_11_f6659cfe55beb220f147547a901e78a1.pdf
- Kompas.com. (2023). Tim Prabowo-Gibran: Politik riang gembira, kalau diserang dikit sambil nyinyir tak apa [Prabowo-Gibran team: Politics is joyful, if we are attacked a little while sneering, it's okay]. *Kompas.Com*.
- KompasTV. (2023a). Memiliki gaya komunikasi yang berbeda, siapa konsultan Gibran? [Having a different communication style, who is Gibran's consultant?]. *Kompas TV*.
- KompasTV. (2023b). Pidato Kaesang Pangarep di deklarasi dukungan untuk Prabowo-Gibran [Kaesang Pangarep's speech in the declaration of support for Prabowo-Gibran]. *Kompas TV*.
- Kristensen, N., & Mortensen, M. (2021). “Don't panic people! Trump will tweet the virus away”: Memes contesting and confirming populist political leaders during the COVID-19 crisis. *Information, Communication & Society*, 24(16), 2442–2458.

- Laksono, D. D., & Suparta, U. (2019). *Sexy killers* [Documentary].
- Leeker, M., Schipper, I., & Timon, B. (2017). Performativity, performance studies and digital cultures. In M. Leeker, I. Schipper, & B. Timon (Eds.), *Performing the digital: Performativity and performance studies in digital cultures* (pp. 9-18). transcript.
- Llewellyn, A. (2023). Indonesian leader's son brushes off 'nepo baby' tag in feted debate showing. *Al Jazeera*. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/12/23/indonesian-leaders-son-brushes-off-nepo-baby-tag-in-solid-debate-showing>
- Macaulay, M. (Ed.). (2019). *A short introduction to populism BT – Populist discourse: International perspectives*. Springer International Publishing.
- Manapat, R. (1991). *Some are smarter than others: The history of Marcos' crony' capitalism*. Aletheia Publications.
- Marendra, P. (2023). 5 foto profil medsos Gibran Rakabuming yang selalu unik, akui ingin tampil beda [5 Gibran Rakabuming's social media profile photos that are always unique, admits he wants to look different]. *Liputan6*. <https://www.liputan6.com/hot/read/5430759/5-foto-profil-medsos-gibran-rakabuming-yang-selalu-unik-akui-ingin-tampil-beda>
- Mendoza, M. E. H. (2022). Philippine elections 2022. *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, 44(3), 389–395.
- Mietzner, M. (2018). Fighting illiberalism with illiberalism: Islamist populism and democratic deconsolidation in Indonesia. *Pacific Affairs*, 91(2), 261–282.
- Mozdeika, L. (2023). Nudges, emojis, and memes: Mapping interpassivity theory onto digital civic culture. *Communication and Democracy*, 57(2), 252–274.
- Muhamad, N. (2023). KPU: Pemilih 2024 didominasi oleh kelompok Gen Z dan Millennial [KPU: 2024 voters dominated by Gen Z and Millennials]. *Katadata*. <https://databoks.katadata.co.id/politik/statistik/faf64350269d0c8/kpu-pemilih-pemilu-2024-didominasi-oleh-kelompok-gen-z-dan-milennial>
- Nugraheny, D. E., & Asril, S. (2022). Jadi kesayangan netizen, ternyata ini maksud “Kucing Oren” sering tampil di medsos Jokowi [Becoming a favorite of netizens, it turns out that this is the meaning of the “orange cat” that often appears on Jokowi's social media]. *Kompas.Com*. <https://nasional.kompas.com/read/2022/10/24/15270111/jadi-kesayangan-netizen-ternyata-ini-maksud-kucing-oren-sering-tampil-di?page=all>
- Oesman, D. W. (2023). Heboh plesetan mahkamah keluarga [Family Court Prank Sensation]. *MerdekaNews*. <https://m.merdekanews.co/read/24346/Heboh-Plesetan-Mahkamah-Keluarga>
- Ong, J. C. (2022). Philippine elections 2022: The dictator's son and the discourse around disinformation. *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, 44(3), 396–403.
- Orkibi, E. (2022). Self-othering to power: vilification, ridicule and moral claims in the Israeli right 'underdog' discourse. *Journal of Multicultural Discourses*, 17(2), 158–172.
- Pahlevi, R. (2023). Cek data: Benarkah Solo 'diguyur' proyek pemerintah karena Gibran? [Check the data: Is it true that Solo is “showered” with government projects because of Gibran?]. *Katadata*. <https://katadata.co.id/cek-data/653eff6ab3941/cek-data-benarkah-solo-diguyur-proyek-pemerintah-karena-gibran>
- Power, T. P. (2018). Jokowi's authoritarian turn and Indonesia's democratic decline. *Bulletin of Indonesian Economic Studies*, 54(3), 307–338.
- Praditya, M. D. (2018). Meme culture as political propaganda in the Donald Trump presidential campaign. *Center for Digital Society (CfDS)*, 24. <https://cfd.s.fisipol.ugm.ac.id/wp-content/uploads/sites/1423/2021/01/24-CfDS-Case-Study-Meme-Culture-as-Political-Propaganda-in-the-Donald-Trump-Presidential-Campaign.pdf>
- Primadhyta, S. (2022). Gibran soal suntikan dana bisnis es doger Rp. 71m: Biasa [Gibran regarding the IDR 71 billion ice goger business fund injection: Normal]. *CNN Indonesia*. <https://www.cnnindonesia.com/ekonomi/20220119092624-92-748454/gibran-soal-suntikan-dana-bisnis-es-doger-rp71m-biasa>
- Putranto, W. G. (2023). Foto profil nyleneh hingga cara komunikasi berbeda, Gibran akui punya konsultan politik [Gibran admits that he has an odd profile photo and a different way of communicating, he has a political consultant]. *Tribunnews*. <https://www.tribunnews.com/nasional/2023/07/28/foto-profil-nyleneh-hingga-cara-komunikasi-berbeda-gibran-akui-punya-konsultan-politik>
- Rahardi, H. R., & Amalia, R. M. (2019). Meme as political criticism towards 2019 Indonesian General Election: A critical discourse analysis. *Studies in English Language and Education*, 6(2), 239–250.

- Rahayu, I. R. S., & Pratama, M. M. (2023). 81 Juta Anak Muda Belum Punya Rumah, Erick Thohir Minta Kurangi Gaya Hidup [81 Million Young People Don't Have a Home, Erick Thohir Asks to Reduce Lifestyle]. *Kompas.Com*. <https://money.kompas.com/read/2023/08/08/191000326/81-juta-anak-muda-belum-punya-rumah-erick-thohir-minta-kurangi-gaya-hidup>
- Raka, G. R. (2023). Saya selalu punya meme yg pas dalam segala situasi [I always have the right meme for every situation]. X.
- Rankawat, V. (2023). Modi's digital diplomacy: A comprehensive analysis of social media as a political communication and governance tool. *International Journal of Political Science and Governance*, 5(2), 75–80.
- Rastogi, S., & Kashyap, S. (2019). Political memes and perceptions: A study of memes as a political communication tool in the Indian context. *Proceedings of the 5th World Conference on Media and Mass Communication*, 5(1), 35–48.
- Rodriguez, N. S., & Goretti, N. (2022). From hoops to hope: Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and political fandom on Twitter. *International Journal of Communication*, 16, 65–84.
- Santosa, H. P., Lestari, S. B., & Ayun, P. Q. (2018). The reception of memes as political information in the media. *E3S Web of Conferences*, 73, 14014.
- Sastramidjaja, Y., & Wijayanto. (2022). *Cyber troops, online manipulation of public opinion and co-optation of Indonesia's cybersphere*. https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/TRS7_22.pdf
- Schaffar, W., & Praphakorn, W. (2021). The #MilkTeaAlliance: A new transnational pro-democracy movement against Chinese-centered globalization? *Advances in Southeast Asian Studies*, 14(1), 5–16.
- Schroeder, R. (2018). *Social theory after the internet*. UCL Press.
- Semotiuk, O., & Shevchenko, V. (2022). To make fun of power: political cartoons and memes about President Zelensky. Quantitative and qualitative analysis. *European Journal of Humour Research*, 10(4), 82–98.
- Singgih, W., & Ihsanuddin. (2023). Anies: Fenomena orang dalam ini menyebalkan, negeri ini rusak [Anies: This insider phenomenon is frustrating, this country is broken]. *Kompas.Com*. <https://nasional.kompas.com/read/2023/12/12/21313151/anies-fenomena-orang-dalam-ini-menyebalkan-negeri-ini-rusak>
- Siregar, N. R., Raffiudin, S., & Noor, F. (2020). Democratic regression in Indonesia: Police and low-capacity democracy in Jokowi's administration (2014–2020). *Jurnal Ilmu Sosial Dan Ilmu Politik*, 26(2), 197–212.
- Smith, C. Q. (2014). Illiberal peace-building in hybrid political orders: managing violence during Indonesia's contested political transition. *Third World Quarterly*, 35(8), 1509–1528.
- Smith, C. Q. (2020). Liberal and illiberal peace-building in East Timor and Papua: establishing order in a democratising state. *Conflict, Security and Development*, 20(1), 39–70.
- Sukidi. (2023). Machiavelli Jawa [Javanese Machiavelli]. *Tempo*. <https://www.tempo.co/kolom/siapakah-machiavelli-jawa--819438>
- Syambudi, I. (2020). Pilkada Solo: Dugaan makelar KTP agar Gibran tak melawan kolom kosong [Solo Pilkada: Alleged KTP broker so Gibran doesn't run against empty column]. In *Dinasti Politik Keluarga Presiden Jokowi* (pp. 1–16). Tirto & Kurawal Foundation.
- Tapsell, R. (2019). Indonesia's policing of hoax news increasingly politicised. *ISEAS Perspective*, 75, 1–10.
- Tapsell, R. (2020). The media and democratic decline. In T. Power & E. Warburton (Eds.), *Democracy in Indonesia: From stagnation to regression?* (pp. 210–227). ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute.
- Tapsell, R. (2021). *How Jokowi won the internet: Influencers, buzzers and reducing opposition voices online*. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/resrep33994.10.pdf>
- Tempo. (2023). Demi demokrasi, Gibran seharusnya mundur sebagai cawapres [For the sake of democracy, Gibran should resign as vice president candidate]. *Majalah Tempo*.
- Titscher, S., Meyer, M., Wodak, R., & Vetter, E. (2000). *Methods of text and discourse analysis*. SAGE Publications.
- Törnquist, O. (2014). Stagnation or transformation in Indonesia? *Economic and Political Weekly*, 49(50), 25–27.
- Widodo, J. (2022). Terima kasih para dokter dan segenap tenaga kesehatan untuk pengabdian tanpa pamrih, juga keteguhan untuk berada di garis depan menghadapi pandemi [Thank you to the doctors and all health workers for your selfless devotion, as well as your determination]. Facebook.

Ubaidillah Ubaidillah, Widjajanti M. Santoso, Nina Widyawati, Purwadi Purwadi, & Ana Windarsih

- Wiggins, B. E. (2019). *The discursive power of memes in digital culture: Ideology, semiotics, & intertextuality*. Routledge
- Wiggins, B. E., & Bowers, G. B. (2015). Memes as genre: A structurational analysis of the memescape. *New Media & Society*, 17(11), 1886–1906.
- Zamani, L., & Rusiana, D. A. (2022). Dapat hibah Rp 236 miliar dari pemerintah UEA, Gibran: Alhamdulillah [Received a grant of IDR 236 billion from the UAE Government, Gibran: Thank God]. *Kompas.Com*. <https://regional.kompas.com/read/2022/12/30/085817878/dapat-hibah-rp-236-miliar-dari-pemerintah-uea-gibran-alhamdulillah>

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Ubaidillah Ubaidillah is a researcher at the Research Center for Society and Culture, National Research and Innovation Agency (BRIN), Indonesia. He focuses on how language interacts with culture and society, exploring its role in identity construction, self-promotion, self-othering, resistance, and (de)legitimization in various socio-cultural and spatiotemporal contexts.

► Contact: ubaidillah@brin.go.id

Widjajanti M. Santoso is a research professor at the Research Center for Society and Culture, National Research and Innovation Agency (BRIN), Indonesia. Her research focuses on sociology, media, and gender, with a keen interest in how theory and method evolve within local contexts.

► Contact: widjoo1@brin.go.id

Nina Widyawati is a senior researcher at the Research Center for Society and Culture, National Research and Innovation Agency (BRIN), Indonesia. Her research interests include media and minorities, disinformation, political communication, and comparative studies between Indonesia and Malaysia.

► Contact: ninao01@brin.go.id

Purwadi Purwadi is a researcher at the Research Center for Society and Culture, National Research and Innovation Agency (BRIN), Indonesia. His research covers new media, communication technology, digital society, cultural studies, and communication policy. He is also a communication practitioner with over a decade of experience.

► Contact: purwo15@brin.go.id

Ana Windarsih is a researcher at the Research Center for Society and Culture, National Research and Innovation Agency (BRIN), Indonesia. Her research experience spans mass and social media, with interests in digital society, media, and cultural identity.

► Contact: anawoo1@brin.go.id

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This study was supported by the Research Organization for Social Sciences and Humanities, National Research and Innovation Agency (BRIN), by Decree 7/III.7/HK/2024. BRIN's Social Humanities Ethics Commission approved Decree 415/KE.01/SK/05/2024. The research and manuscript preparation were carried out by Ubaidillah Ubaidillah, Widjajanti M. Santoso, Nina Widyawati, Purwadi Purwadi, and Ana Windarsih. Thank you to Athiqah Nur Alami,

Ph.D., Head of the Research Center for Politics at BRIN, for providing valuable advice for this article. Additionally, artificial intelligence tools (Grammarly and ChatGPT) were used with human oversight to refine the language in the article.

DISCLOSURE

The authors declare no conflict of interest.