

# Investigating Jokowi's Populist Strategy for 2024 Indonesian Presidential Election: An Inquiry into Discourse and Politics

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## ABSTRACT

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*Keywords:*

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pragmatic populism,  
semiotic behavior,  
symbolic populism.

Political discourse has had a long history as carried out under the western tradition of rhetoric since antiquity. It has also been applicable to the politics in the eastern contexts, including Indonesia. An issue that is prevalent in Indonesia at the moment is populism as an excess of democracy. Thus, there have been questions whether during President Joko Widodo's administration, populism in Indonesia has grown to authoritarianism, or another bent feudalistic, populism. On such an account, this paper is to analyze one strand of discourse studies of politics focusing on the public statements of President Jokowi in ahead of the 2024 Presidential Election in Indonesia. So, the analysis is focused on the micro level behaviors being grasped through some verbal expressions and actions against the background of multimodal discourse analysis of some obvious semiotic resources in the context of the overturned pre-existing practices of the 2024 Presidential election. President Jokowi displayed some semiotic behaviors of being "*mencla-mencla*" (destructively inconsistent) and "*tipu-tipu*" (destructively deceptive) that are definitely constitutive of destructive politics. Under van Dijk's critical discourse analysis such obvious behaviors show the reproduction of political power and abuse.

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## INTRODUCTION

Political discourse has been meticulously done since antiquity. This was reflected in the western tradition of rhetoric which dealt with public orators to make use of language as a means of persuasion (Chilton, 2007, ix). Along with that, Cicero regarded that cultivating the power of speech was the duty of citizens. There are two broad strands in the study of politics and in the discourse studies of politics. On one hand, politics is viewed as a struggle for power; and, on the other hand, politics is also viewed as cooperation, practices and institutions for resolving clashes of interest in many things (Chilton, 2007, 3). In the tradition of western political thought there was a link between language and politics when Aristotle talked about the importance of cultivating human capacity for speech (Chilton, 2007, 4). So, in line with that, pursuing politics was done through language. Thus, the language is considered to be constitutive of politics.

Most scholars doing political discourse analysis are linguists and discourse analysts (see, e.g., Chilton 1985, 1988; Geis 1987; Wilson 1990, 1991; Wodak, 1991; Wodak & Menz 1990). Van Dijk proposes a broader scope of political discourse analysis (PDA) not only on the people who use the language, but also all participants who are involved in the political process. Another, but overlapping way of delimiting the object of study is by focusing on the nature of the activities or practices being accomplished by political text and talk rather than only on the nature of its participants.

In the spirit of contemporary approaches in critical discourse analysis (CDA), this would mean that critical-political discourse analysis deals especially with the reproduction of political power, power abuse or domination through political discourse, including the various forms of resistance or counter-power against such forms of discursive dominance (van Dijk, 2015). In critical studies of discourse, distinction may be identified as being at the micro and macro level. The micro-level of the social order is grasped as some kind of linguistic actions, i.e. verbal interactions, communicative acts of the subject, the speaker and whose language habits are under study. Whereas the macro-level may be observed as some kinds of registers, as found for instance, in institutional settings and events, political verbal interactions in a parliament, etc. The macro- and the micro- levels of the social order (including intermediary “meso-levels”) are unified in everyday speech interactions.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

This study focuses on populism within the context of Indonesian Presidential elections in 2024. Populism, in its ideal definition, is a political approach that strives to appeal to ordinary people who feel that their concerns are disregarded by established elite groups (Mudde, 2004;

Müller, 2016). However, it doesn't necessarily happen due to the interests of the elites who are struggling for, or to maintain, power. In appealing to the ordinary people, the elites may do it indirectly by way of symbolic populism. It is "the use of symbols, narratives, and cultural references by populist movements or leaders to create a sense of unity among "the people" while distinguishing them from "the elite" or "outsiders" (Laclau, 2005) Laclau further contends that "unlike traditional populism, which might focus on specific policy proposals or direct appeals to economic or social grievances, symbolic populism operates more through the use of cultural symbols, myths, and identity politics. It often involves the evocation of national pride, cultural heritage, or religious identity to mobilize support (Laclau, 2005). In such a condition, the elites may fall into the use of populism pragmatically, in which they use populism rhetorically in order to communicate with a wider audience and gain more support from them, but this type of leader stands in between "the people" and "the elite." Even worse, the elites may use populism to control the populace, which is called authoritarianism populism.

Authoritarian populism is a political ideology that combines populist rhetoric, which often pits "the people" against a perceived corrupt elite, with authoritarian governance that emphasizes strong centralized control, often at the expense of democratic norms and individual freedoms. It typically involves a charismatic leader who claims to represent the will of the people, often undermining institutions and checks and balances in the name of this mandate. (Hall, 1985)

In countries where feudal powers are still latent, authoritarian populism may take its feudalistic form. Feudal populism blends elements of populism with a hierarchical, quasi-feudal structure. This might involve a strong leader or elite group that asserts control over a largely disempowered populace, with a promise to protect and provide for them.

## **METHOD**

This study is done within the scope CDA as focusing on the way socio-political power is enacted, reproduced, legitimated, and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context ahead of the 2024 Indonesian presidential election (cf. van Dijk, 2015, p. 466). In line with van Dijk's focus on social cognition which mediates part of the micro- and macro levels of the social order through power. Therefore, following van Dijk (2015, p. 467) this research is set out to focus on the following: a. Social problems and political issues vested in the public statements of President Jokowi in the social and political context ahead of the 2024 Indonesian Presidential Election. b. Multidisciplinary methods of analysis, cross-discipline of discourse studies and relevant methods in humanities and social sciences including multimodal discourse studies. c. Explanation rather than description of the object of investigation in terms of the properties of

social interactions. d. Focus on the ways the object of investigation enacted, reproduced, or challenged relations of power ahead of the 2024 Indonesian Presidential Election.

In this study, the micro-level of the social order is to focus on some kind of linguistic actions enacted by Jokowi to reveal the kind of populism he is practicing. Van Dijk posited that such utterances are language uses at the communicative and interactional micro-levels of the social structure in some specific situation related to the Indonesian 2024 Presidential Election, and at the same time may also enact and be a constituent part of the Indonesian socio-political practices or the production of power at the macro-levels (cf. p. 68). That such level distinctions may be relatively grasped as the object of investigations may feature the semantic macrostructures (topic) but also the semantic microstructures as vested in the utterances in particular. These macro- and micro-levels of the social order (including the meso-levels) are unified in the object of investigation.

Pertaining to the above concepts, this study, therefore, eclectically adopts some of the following ways as proposed by van Dijk (ps. 467-469) in order to arrive at a unified critical analysis bridging the macro- and micro- gaps: a. The actor of the utterances is a member of some socio-political groups; and the groups may act through their members. b. Social acts of the speaker are group actions and social processes, i.e. the reproduction of particular socio-political practices. c. The situations are constitutive of social structure. d. Language use by the social actor embodies both personal and social cognition. The objects of investigation are Jokowi's verbal as well as visual 'statements' that are reported in the media.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The Presidential Election (Pilpres) is deemed to be the main foundation in formulating the policy direction and vision of the country. The 2024 presidential election in Indonesia is to determine the course of government for the following five years. This moment involves all levels of society, demanding policies and leadership capable of guiding the country through the complex challenges of the contemporary era.

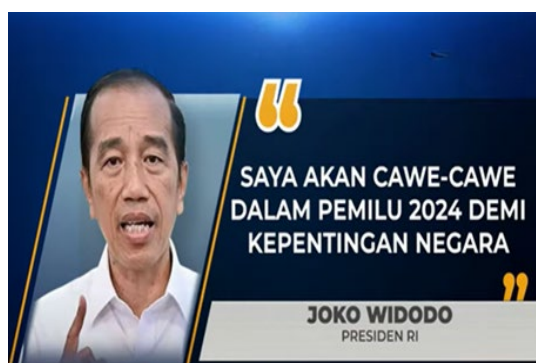
Budiman (2024), legal content writer, gave a critical outlook that Politics that should be subordinate to the law, in reality worked the other way round. Politic was executed at the expense of violating the guardrails of the law. Political determination and arrogance have deteriorated the guardrail power of the law. The abuse of power pertaining to the constitution was tolerated. Some legal precautions against potential abuse of power were ignored. The guardrails of the law were interpreted and violated for the interest of the ruling elites.

This research focuses on the public statements of President Jokowi viz-a-viz his socio-political conduct ahead of the 2024 Presidential Election. In the cases that public statements of Jokowi were inaccessible, the researchers used visual data.

### Jokowi's Pragmatic Populism: Playing with Words

The data shows that being a populist leader, he falls into using populism pragmatically. It can be seen from his public statements and actions. In *Kamus Besar Bahasa Indonesia* the word “*cawe-cawe*” means “*ikut membantu mengerjakan membereskan, merampungkan; ikut menangani* (help to do, tidy up, finish); help to handle; <https://kbbi.web.id/cawe-cawe>). However, in the media in general “*cawe-cawe*” is often interpretively understood as “interfere with”; so are in the minds of most politicians. As a case in point, Deputy General Chairman of the Democratic Party, Benny K Harman stated that Jokowi as head of the state had to be neutral, not interfering. The 10th and 12th Vice President Jusuf Kalla in the beginning had advised Jokowi not to get too involved in the 2024 politics. Jusuf Kalla supported Jokowi's meddling in the 2024 Election if it were only for the sake of the nation and state, aiming to ensure that democracy would run honestly and fairly (Merdeka.com, 2023). Again, the statement was meant to show that he had worked for the people, and he wanted people to be sure that he did the ‘cawe-cawe’ for the future of the nation, for people's sake. In short, making a term have a positive meaning was one of his populist strategies to gain support from the public.

Despite the fact that Jokowi argued that he would be interfering for the sake of the nation and state, guaranteeing that the existing state of development would continue in the course of the change of the national leadership, no wonder that Jokowi's statement did really spark political temperature.



**Figure 1. Jokowi interfered for the state interests**



**Figure 2. Jokowi denied meddling in the 2024 political election**

Prior to this event, 4 months earlier – in October 2023, conversely the President also stated his standpoint that he was to refrain from carrying out a campaign and, instead, would have supported whosoever would run as presidential and vice-presidential candidates. Such discrepancies of public statements as uttered by top rank national leaders undoubtedly raised public confusion. Pertaining to such perplexing inconsistencies, Koencoro, professor of psychology

– Gajah Mada University (Kompas.tv, 2024), criticized Jokowi's deceptively inconsistent conducts as being "*mencla-mencle*" (deceptively inconsistent). Koencoro also criticized the defending justifications and lies made by the Jokowi administration. Political communication expert Antonius Benny Susetyo (Marzuki, 2024) said that President Joko Widodo no longer shows his attitude as a statesman. As head of state, Jokowi should be neutral, fair and applicable to all. Marianus (in Manafe, 2024) argued that Jokowi did not act as a true statesman. He no longer has public ethics in himself as a public official in implementing democracy through his words and actions.

Undoubtedly most people wondered about the truth of the President's public statements as he gave way to a series of unusual practices such as the decree issued by the Constitution Court giving way to the General Election Committee, of which unveiled the red carpet for his own elder son to be a running mate as vice presidential candidate. Furthermore, Panda Nababan (Total Politik, 2023) stated Jokowi's cunningly twisted politicking that: "There has never been a political game like this ... lack of candor; inflation of a lie... liable to twist... accusing things in term of drama", moments full of "*tipu-tipu kampung*" (village trickeries). Thus, Jokowi wanted to give a positive meaning to the word 'cawe-cawe' while his critics use the standard definition. Thus, he appeals to the public actually pragmatically to win the candidates he backed up.

### **Jokowi's Authoritarian Populism: Playing with Power**

It is safe to say that Jokowi's populism falls into the category of authoritarian populism. This is because he practices a pragmatic population, shows authoritarian leadership, uses symbolic messages for his hidden agenda, and actually possesses a feudalistic mindset. Authoritarian populism refers to a political style in which leaders claim to represent the will of the people against elites while simultaneously employing authoritarian tactics, such as the suppression of opposition, the reduction of civil liberties, and the centralization of power (Kaltwasser, Taggart, Espejo, and Ostiguy, 2017). Thus, populism pertains to the occurrences of an unbalanced power relationship between the people vs the elite.

Triwibowo & Martha (UNPAR.AC.ID, 2022) differentiate two types of leaders: ideal populist leader and ideal pragmatic leaders. The former uses populism as a political strategy to achieve goals by representing himself as part of the people who are fighting against the elite; while the latter tends to use populism rhetorically in order to communicate with a wider audience and gain more support from them, but this type of leader stands in between the "the people" and "the elite". Mietzner (2009, as cited in UNPAR.AC.ID, 2022), exemplified the use of pragmatic populism by the Fifth President of the Republic of Indonesia - Soesilo Bambang Yudhoyono (SBY) – in the form of direct cash economic subsidies ahead of the presidential election in order to improve his positive image which had previously declined.



Figure 3. Populism and symbolism



Figure 4. Jokowi handing over food aid in Salatiga

Jokowi, on the other hand, is deemed to be a populist leader because of his non-elite background, his more “people-oriented” personality, and his policies which focused primarily on the common people (Zaqia, 2024). Jokowi has been considered to be a leader who pays attention to the people. His actions of giving away things to the people was like a habit done by the society, for example, during Independence Day celebration of the nation. There were from people to people. As seen in Fig. 3 Jokowi gave away 2 bicycles as a gift to 2 people who had successfully mentioned Pancasila after the event in which Jokowi had distributed social assistance at Gudang Bulog Purwomartani, Sleman, January 29, 2024. Similar activity was also done at Bantul Regency (January 30, 2024). The next 2 days, the same activities were also successively done at Klaten and Sukoharjo (CNN Indonesia, 2024). However, notice that a symbolic sign of “2” that refers to presidential and vice-presidential candidate 02 was used in these activities. Traces of Jokowi’s populism was also seen in Fig. 4 when he handed over food aids in Salatiga.

Triwibowo & Martha (UNPAR.AC.ID, 2022) and Zaskia (2024) identified that Jokowi tended to practice pragmatic populism. Through populism Jokowi represented himself and maintained as part of “the people”, but through pragmatism, he also gained support from “the elite”. In conducting pragmatic populism, President Jokowi, according to Coordinator of the Kontras Working Body, Dimas Bagus, was attempting to cover up his administration from public supervision and intervention. As such was exemplified by the process of making laws and strategic policies which involved minimal public participation (Koran Madura, 2023). Zaskia (May 28) stated that a pragmatic leader can be populist in rhetoric, but elitist in reality. In the same vein, it may not be doubted as seen in Fig. 5<sup>a, b</sup> that Jokowi displayed some authoritarian characteristic as seen while giving an orientation speech in front of district heads.

In the same vein, Ubedillah Badrun, sociologist, (Ramadan & Ihsanuddin, 2024) also pointed out that Jokowi represented an authoritarian leader built through a populist process.

He was said to have come from the lower-class society, from the gutters (Fig. 6), then felt that he was chosen by the majority of the nation and in that way he could do anything he wished.

Badrun showed some cases of Jokowi's authoritarian practices in 2019 when the government and the Parliament insisted on ratifying the revision of the Corruption Eradication Commission Law (UU KPK) despite protests from students and academics. Badrun stated that academics were also ignored again when the government and the DPR insisted on passing the Job Creation Bill which was widely protested by students and workers. Finally, he mentioned the Constitutional Court's decision Number 90 of 2023 which opened the door for President Joko Widodo's eldest son, Gibran Rakabuming, to run as a vice-presidential candidate even though he was not old enough. However, Jokowi is so subtle in showing his authority. Jokowi was fond of puzzling the public to show that a president was just like common people. As seen in Figure 7, President Joko Widodo accompanied by Defense Minister Prabowo Subianto, one of the presidential candidates in the 2024 Presidential Election, were standing against a backdrop of uniformed military personnels and aircraft on January 24, 2024. Wearing the same military attire, a navy-blue jacket and cap, the multimodality of such an appearance showed off authority and shared goal. Given Prabowo's presence, who had previously contested presidential elections and was a prominent political figure, this moment could be pivotal in shaping public opinion and electoral dynamics.



Figure 5. Showing his authoritarian style of leadership in front of district heads



Figure 6. Jokowi entering the gutter



**Figure 7. Jokowi stating that President is allowed to campaign and take sides**



**Figure 8. Jokowi clarifying the statement**

Upon answering a reporter's question about the President's role ahead of the approaching event of the 2024 Presidential Election, President Jokowi was stating that "*Presiden itu boleh ... kampanye presiden itu boleh memihak*" (President is allowed to carry out a campaign and take sides). He wanted to show the public that a president has the same rights as the public. There is no special treatment for a president. However, in view of one of the principles of perceptual organization, the semiotic features of "proximity" (vide Chandler, 2007, p. 151), the figure of Jokowi and that of Prabowo being juxtaposed with each other showed off a nuance of authority; thus, sending a message that nobody was to mess around with the incoming Presidential Election. Thus, it shows that he was just like everybody else, but at the same time he had the military support behind him.

Obviously, later on February 26, 2024 President Jokowi justified his previous public statement that he had the right to carry out a campaign and take sides based on Law no. 7 of 2017 (General Election) article 299 stating that the president and his vice president have the right to carry out a campaign; furthermore, article 281 stating that in carrying out a campaign, they are not to use state facilities and are in a position of leave outside the state's responsibility (see Fig. 8). The public statement "*Presiden itu boleh ... kampanye, presiden boleh ... memihak*" ("A president is allowed ... to carry out a campaign and take sides") in response to the reporter's question (in Fig. 7) was not without its precedence. Conversely, it was evident throughout 2023 that Jokowi also stated that he was not to carry out a campaign (and take sides). As a case in point, as seen in Fig. 9, President Joko Widodo gave a public statement in response to journalist' question at the Limapuluh Toll Gate, Batubara Regency, North Sumatra Province, Wednesday (Feb. 7, 2024) that he was not to carry out a campaign.

Some people would see him as inconsistent, but some others see him as trying to protect the national interests when he needed to. He said a few months back that he would not carry out a campaign. Yet, when he said that a president had the right to do a campaign, he was sending a message that the situation was pressing so that he could use his authority to intervene in the election.



**Figure 9. Jokowi confirms not to campaign in the 2024 election feudalistic populism: playing with symbolism**

Ahead of the 2024 Presidential Election, President Joko Widodo did not explicitly indicate the pair of candidates he supported. However, most people could easily grasp that Jokowi supported the 0-2 candidates' pair, the presidential candidate Prabowo and his eldest son, Gibran Rakabuming Raka, the vice presidential candidate. Jokowi also showed symbolic traces of his choice of the 0-2 candidates pair when he worked for a week at the Agung building, Yogyakarta, and made a working visit to DIY - Special Region of Yogyakarta - and Central Java, on January 26 to February 1, 2024 (see also Fig. 3).



**Figure 10. Jokowi enjoying meatball together with Prabowo**

Symbolically, Jokowi's political agenda (partisanship) was increasingly obvious in the public spotlight, especially when he enjoyed meatballs with Prabowo Subianto at Bakso Vendor during his visit to Magelang, Central Java, Jan 29, 2024. UI Political Observer, Hurriyah responded to Jokowi who did not openly convey his support; but was close and intense with Prabowo. According to Hurriyah, Jokowi played Javanese symbolic politics and maneuvered and exploited his position as President.

Finally, Jokowi's use of Javanese symbolism was to win the public's belief that he and finally his family members were the ones who could build the country. He wanted to make sure that people would elect Prabowo Subianto, who was made known as the one who would continue

his programs, and at the same time his son as the vice president. A lot of his supporters saw it as a genuine intention, while some others saw it as his effort to make him and his family stay in power.



**Figure 11. Jokowi wearing Surakarta's court dress**

**Source: Espos News, 2023**

To some, his choice of wearing Surakarta's court dress was a symbol of his will to keep his family in power. Gunawan (2023, Feb. 23) even saw it as a danger. "Awas, Bahaya Laten Feodalisme! Membangun kerajaan keluarga atas nama demokrasi" [Beware of latent Feudalism! Building a kingdom in the name of democracy] (ibid.). This was because Indonesia has recurring experience on the President's, or people around the president's, effort to build such a system. Historian G.J Resink called the Old Order as the 'Vorstenlandse Republik' or the Palace Republic, where Sukarno positioned himself as Waliyul Amri, the Mouthpiece of the People, the Great Fisherman, the Supreme Commander, His Majesty, the Great Leader of the Revolution, and so on. Soeharto during the New Order also identified himself as a 'Prabu', the name for a Javanese King. So, when he stepped down from power, he called himself Lengser Keprabon, or Prabu who stepped down from the kingdom. Therefore, it is only natural when the public now suspects that there has been a big scenario being built by Jokowi to perpetuate power by forming a family kingdom.

## **CONCLUSION**

Jokowi's rise to power is a compelling story of an ordinary individual who, through his simplicity and down-to-earth approach, won the hearts of the public. Starting from a small city, Surakarta, he was seen as a promise to the nation that was already fed up with leaders coming from the elites. He was a future national leader who could represent the struggles and hopes of ordinary people. Clenching the leadership in Surakarta for two periods, he rose up to win the election to be the governor of Jakarta, the capital city of the nation. Soon after, before he even

finished his first term as the governor of Jakarta, he stepped up for the presidential election and won the rivalry with the retired Lieutenant General Prabowo Subianto, former son in law of the New Order Regime leader, the late, retired General Suharto. His journey from being a "nobody" to the presidency resonated with those seeking a leader who understood their daily challenges. Early on, his populism appeared to be grounded in the ideals of transparency, accessibility, and people-centered policies.

However, over time, the initial optimism surrounding Jokowi's populism began to wane. His presidency, once thought to be driven by idealism, started to reveal a shift toward a more pragmatic and power-oriented approach. The simplicity that once defined his image became overshadowed by political maneuvers aimed at accumulating and consolidating power. As he sought to expand his influence, Jokowi's use of populism appeared to be more of a tool for maintaining control rather than driving the reforms many had hoped for.

In this transformation, Jokowi's leadership style became increasingly pragmatic, often reflecting feudalistic traits commonly associated with traditional political elites. His use of symbolic gestures and calculated moves became a key aspect of his strategy to maintain mass appeal while navigating the political landscape. This pragmatic and sometimes feudalistic populism suggests that while Jokowi's rise was initially seen as a promising leader for the people. However, his leadership has evolved into something more complex, where power dynamics and symbolism play significant roles in shaping his presidency.

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