



Populism in Indonesian Education Narratives: A Case Study and Its Implications

Susanto, Susanto¹, Bani Sudardi², Mahendra Wijaya³,
Sri Kusumo Habsari⁴

^{1,2,3,4} Universitas Sebelas Maret, Surakarta, Indonesia
susanto2001@student.uns.ac.id

Abstract. This study examines populist narratives embedded within President Joko Widodo's education policies in Indonesia, specifically focusing on the "Merdeka Belajar" (Freedom to Learn) curriculum and reforms in basic education. Employing A.J. Greimas's actantial model, the research analyzes how these policies construct narratives of empowerment for the "ordinary people" (students, lecturers) against perceived "elites" (bureaucracy, traditional systems). In basic education, policies like the zoning system and Kartu Indonesia Pintar (KIP) aim to democratize access and reduce inequality, but face resistance from established elites. In higher education, "Kampus Merdeka" seeks to align education with economic goals and empower academics, but grapples with limitations on academic freedom and anti-intellectualism. The study concludes that while Jokowi's policies hold potential for positive change, their success hinges on addressing challenges like systemic resistance, regional disparities, and the balance between populist aspirations and critical thinking. Recommendations include safeguarding academic freedom, addressing regional inequities, engaging stakeholders, and fostering a culture of innovation within the education system. The abstract should summarize the contents of the paper in short terms, i.e. 15–250 words.

Keywords: Populist narratives, Indonesian Education policies, Actantial model.

1 Introduction

In global political discourse, populism has emerged as a potent tool for mobilizing public sentiment and challenging established power dynamics. This distinctive narrative framework, characterized by its appeal to "the people" against a perceived corrupt elite, has been utilized across diverse political landscapes and historical periods. Understanding the underlying structure of populist narratives is crucial for comprehending their persuasive power and impact on political processes. As Mudde (1) articulate, "Populism is a thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite,' and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people

The relationship between populism and education is a complex and multifaceted one, with education serving as both a potential antidote to and a vehicle for populist senti-

ments. Research in various countries has highlighted the profound implications of populist ideologies on educational policies, practices, and outcomes, demonstrating how populist sentiments can shape curriculum design, pedagogical approaches, and the broader educational landscape (2–10).

In Indonesia, the rise of populism under President Joko Widodo's second term, marked by democratic backsliding and a surge in nationalist and Islamist sentiments, has raised significant concerns about its influence on educational policies and practices. This study aims to delve into the manifestation of populist narratives within the Indonesian education system, focusing specifically on the "Merdeka Belajar" (Freedom to Learn) curriculum launched during Jokowi's second term. To understand the underlying structure and persuasive power of these narratives, this research employed A.J. Greimas's semiotic model of actants, as outlined in "Introducing Relational Political Analysis: Political Semiotics as a Theory and Method (11)." This model provides a framework for analyzing how populist narratives are constructed, identifying the key actors (Subject, Object, Sender, Receiver, Helper, and Opponent), and examining how they interact to shape meaning and mobilize support.

By applying Greimas's model to the Indonesian context, we can gain deeper insights into how populist actors utilize educational narratives to advance their agendas. This includes analyzing how the Merdeka Belajar curriculum and related policies are framed, who the intended beneficiaries are, and how potential opponents or obstacles are portrayed. Furthermore, this approach allows us to examine the underlying values and ideologies that underpin these narratives, as well as their potential impact on educational practices, student outcomes, and the broader socio-political landscape.

This study seeks to shed light on the phenomenon of populist sentiment within the Merdeka Belajar curriculum in Indonesia, launched during Jokowi's second term characterized by democratic decline, new developmentalism, populist authoritarianism, and social cleavages dominated by hyper-nationalism and Islamism. The main objective is to uncover and critically analyze the populist sentiment present in the curriculum within this particular political and social milieu, utilizing Greimas's semiotic model to provide a nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the underlying narrative structures and their implications for Indonesian education.

2 Research Method

This study employed a qualitative research design, utilizing discourse analysis as the primary methodological framework to examine populist narratives within the Merdeka Belajar curriculum in Indonesia. The data were collected from a variety of sources, including policy documents outlining the curriculum's goals and implementation guidelines, detailed curriculum frameworks and learning materials, official speeches and statements from relevant stakeholders, and media coverage discussing the curriculum and its implementation.

The collected data were analysed using a combination of thematic analysis and Greimas's semiotic model of actants. Thematic analysis identified recurring patterns, themes, and key concepts within the data, providing a comprehensive understanding of

the dominant narratives surrounding the Merdeka Belajar curriculum. Greimas' model was applied to dissect the structure of these narratives, identifying the key actors (Subject, Object, Sender, Receiver, Helper, and Opponent) and examining how they interact to shape meaning and mobilize support. This provided insights into the roles played by various actors, the underlying motivations behind their actions, and the power dynamics at play within the educational context.

This study is expected to yield a detailed analysis of the populist narratives embedded within the Merdeka Belajar curriculum, identifying the key actors, themes, and rhetorical strategies employed. It assessed the potential impact of these narratives on educational policies, practices, and outcomes in Indonesia. Furthermore, it offered recommendations for policymakers and educators on how to navigate the challenges and opportunities presented by populism in the Indonesian educational context, ultimately contributing to the broader scholarly discourse on populism and education.

3 Finding and Discussion

3.1 Finding

Populism, characterized by the dichotomy between the 'ordinary people' and the 'elites', often manifests in policy frameworks that prioritize equity and accessibility, challenging established power structures. This study investigates the populist sentiments embedded within Indonesian education policies under President Joko Widodo (Jokowi), specifically focusing on his policies for basic education and higher education. By employing A.J. Greimas' actantial model, this research elucidates the narratives and dynamics of populism within these policies, providing insights into their implications for the Indonesian education system.

Jokowi's administration's education policies can be analyzed through the lens of populist rhetoric using Greimas' actantial scheme. This approach helps to understand how these policies are framed within a narrative that seeks to address the needs of "the people" while challenging "the elite" or other perceived adversaries. The actantial model comprises several roles—Subject, Object, Sender, Receiver, Helper, and Opponent—which can be used to decode the narrative structure and identify how these education policies fit within the populist discourse.

The Peraturan Menteri Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan Nomor 44 Tahun 2019, which concerns the New Student Admissions (PPDB) policy, is a prime example of populist rhetoric in action. This policy is the subject of the narrative, with the object being the creation of a fair and equitable education system, particularly focusing on access for local communities and marginalized groups. The sender in this context is the perceived inequality and injustice in the education system, where access to quality education has often been dictated by socioeconomic status or geographical location. The narrative frames these inequalities as challenges that must be addressed to serve "the people." The receiver is the Indonesian public, particularly those from marginalized and local communities who have been historically underserved by the education system. The policy empowers local governments, the helpers, by allowing them to implement and adapt the policy to suit regional needs, thereby enhancing local autonomy and resonating with

populist ideals of returning power to the people and away from centralized elites. The opponents in this narrative are the "elites" or entrenched systems that have benefited from centralized control and a lack of transparency, such as private interests or bureaucratic structures perceived as gatekeepers to quality education. The zoning policy challenges these structures by emphasizing local access and prioritizing community needs over elite preferences.

Another policy, the Surat Edaran Mendikbud Nomor 1 Tahun 2021, which involves the elimination of the National Examination (UN) during the COVID-19 pandemic, reflects a different dimension of populist rhetoric. In this context, the subject is the policy to eliminate the National Examination and replace it with school-based assessments to address the pressures faced by students and families during the pandemic. The object is to alleviate this pressure and ensure fairness in educational assessments during a time of crisis. The sender in this scenario is the global COVID-19 pandemic, which has created numerous challenges for the traditional education system, including increased inequalities and stress. These challenges are depicted as external threats that must be countered with bold, populist measures. The receiver of this policy is students and their families, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds who struggle with the lack of resources and support for online learning and examinations. Schools, as helpers, are empowered to tailor examinations and assessments to local contexts, reflecting populist values of local control and community-centered solutions. The opponent in this narrative is the uniform national exam system, seen as an elitist measure that disproportionately affects those with fewer resources. By canceling these exams, the policy frames itself as resisting an outdated, one-size-fits-all approach, challenging the bureaucracy that imposes rigid standards without considering local contexts.

The Program Indonesia Pintar (PIP), outlined in Peraturan Sekretaris Jenderal Kementerian Pendidikan, Kebudayaan, Riset, dan Teknologi Nomor 14 Tahun 2022, can also be analyzed within this framework. The subject of this narrative is the PIP, which provides financial assistance to students from economically disadvantaged families. The object is to directly benefit marginalized or economically disadvantaged groups by providing financial support and ensuring access to education. The sender is the socio-economic disparity and the concentration of educational opportunities among the privileged. The narrative frames these inequalities as obstacles that need to be dismantled to serve "the people." The receiver is students from low-income and vulnerable families who face barriers to accessing education due to financial constraints. Government agencies, both central and local, serve as helpers responsible for implementing, monitoring, and managing funds, aligning with the populist rhetoric of direct government intervention to deliver benefits to the people. The opponents here are market mechanisms, privatization, or any system that might divert resources away from the intended beneficiaries—ordinary citizens. The policy challenges these "opponents" by redistributing government funds directly to those most in need, bypassing traditional elites or intermediaries.

Furthermore, policies promoting Pancasila as the core philosophy in education, such as Permendikbud 3/2020 and the Profil Pelajar Pancasila, are central to Jokowi's populist educational rhetoric. In this case, the subject is the suite of policies that emphasize Pancasila values to strengthen national identity, unity, and civic loyalty among students.

The object is to cultivate a sense of national identity and unity through a curriculum grounded in Pancasila values. The sender is perceived external and internal threats to national identity, including globalization, terrorism, and fundamentalism, which are portrayed as forces that threaten Indonesia’s sovereignty and cultural integrity. The receiver is the Indonesian nation as a whole, particularly its youth, who are seen as the future custodians of national identity and unity. Educational programs that emphasize local wisdom, civic education, and national culture function as helpers in this narrative, serving as tools to build national pride and counter foreign or divisive influences. The opponents are global forces perceived as undermining national identity, as well as internal threats like terrorism and radicalism, which challenge the nation's unity and values.

These policy documents, when analyzed through Greimas' actantial model, reveal how various global and internal challenges are constructed as senders within a broader populist narrative. Challenges such as global economic pressures, the COVID-19 pandemic, Indonesia’s poor performance in PISA assessments, and the threats of terrorism and fundamentalism are portrayed as obstacles that necessitate a populist response. Policies, depicted as "subjects" in this narrative, aim to achieve "objects" that benefit "the people," such as educational equity, national pride, or economic resilience. These challenges are portrayed as opponents that threaten national progress and identity. By positioning themselves as helpers that facilitate solutions—such as empowering local governments, decentralizing educational assessments, or reinforcing Pancasila-based curricula—these policies emphasize a populist approach that prioritizes "the people" over elite interests.

In conclusion, Jokowi's education policies utilize populist rhetoric to frame the narrative of "the people" versus "the elites" and other adversaries, thereby mobilizing support for educational reforms. The populist framing of these policies as efforts to reclaim education for the people, promote social justice, enhance national identity, and resist global pressures is a strategic tool that resonates with public sentiment, reinforcing broader populist narratives in Indonesian governance.

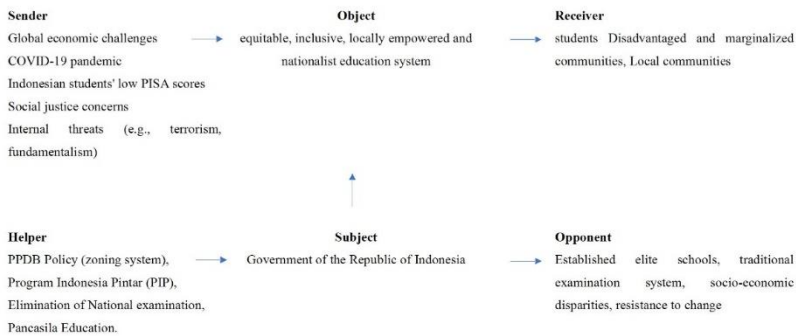


Fig. 1. Actantial Scheme for Merdeka Belajar Curriculum.

The analysis of Indonesia's "Merdeka Belajar" curriculum through Greimas' actantial scheme reveals a populist narrative where the government is positioned as the Subject aiming to create an equitable, inclusive, and nationalist education system (the Object) to benefit students, marginalized communities, and local populations (the Receiver). Motivated by global economic challenges, COVID-19 impacts, low PISA scores, social justice concerns, and internal threats like terrorism, the government employs strategies such as the zoning system (PPDB), financial assistance (PIP), elimination of national exams, and Pancasila Education to achieve its goals (the Helper). However, the government faces opposition from entrenched elites, socio-economic disparities, and resistance to change (the Opponent). This narrative casts the government as defending "the people" against "the elites" and emphasizes national pride and social justice, but it risks oversimplifying complex educational challenges and undermining academic freedom and critical thinking.

3.2 Discussion

The actantial scheme analysis, where the government is framed as the 'helper' addressing challenges like low PISA scores and socioeconomic disparities (the 'sender'), aligns closely with existing research on the intersection of populism and education policy in Indonesia. This framework reflects how populist narratives are strategically utilized by the government to justify reforms and galvanize public support. The depiction of the government as the 'helper' reinforces the populist strategy of casting the state as a defender of the "ordinary people" against various threats. This aligns with the findings of Aspinall & Mietzner [12], who note that populist leaders in Indonesia often present themselves as protectors of the people against corrupt elites and external pressures. Similarly, framing challenges like poor international rankings and economic inequalities as 'senders' of change mirrors the tactics described by Sari & Noor [13], which emphasizes how such perceived deficiencies in the education system are exploited to create urgency and support for new policies.

Furthermore, the strong emphasis on Pancasila values, civic education, and local wisdom within the "Merdeka Belajar" curriculum policies corresponds with the populist use of national identity and cultural pride as mobilizing tools. This echoes the observations of Hefner (2019) and McCargo (2019), who discuss how nationalism and identity politics are leveraged within Indonesian populism to build support and unity. However, while these elements can rally public sentiment, they also reveal a tendency toward centralizing power and potentially limiting academic freedom, reflecting broader concerns about authoritarian populism. This is consistent with the critiques from Mietzner [14] and Power [15] who caution that populist governance in Indonesia, even under a democratic guise, often involves restricting dissent and reinforcing state control.

The actantial scheme thus provides a structural lens through which to interpret the populist narratives embedded within Indonesia's "Merdeka Belajar" curriculum. It showcases how these narratives are strategically deployed to not only justify policy changes but also consolidate power and maintain political legitimacy. However, the analysis also points to the inherent risks of this approach, particularly the potential for oversimplifying complex educational issues and stifling critical discourse. As such,

while populist narratives can be potent tools for rallying support for educational reforms, they require careful scrutiny to avoid exacerbating power imbalances and curtailing intellectual freedom. Therefore, the challenge lies in ensuring that such policies genuinely foster an empowering, inclusive, and intellectually open educational environment that upholds democratic values.

4 Conclusion

Analyzing President Joko Widodo's education policies through the actantial model reveals a clear populist agenda aimed at democratizing education and challenging entrenched elites. The "Kampus Merdeka" (Independent Campus) initiative and various reforms in basic education, including the zoning system and Kartu Indonesia Pintar (KIP), illustrate Jokowi's dedication to improving access for ordinary people and reducing educational inequalities. These policies highlight principles of fairness and accessibility, aligning educational advancement with economic and technological progress, which resonates with populist ideals of empowerment and anti-elitism. However, the practical implementation of these policies encounters several obstacles, such as resistance from entrenched elites, limitations on academic freedom, and regional disparities. To address these challenges and ensure the success of the populist reforms, several measures are recommended: safeguarding academic freedom and critical inquiry by revising restrictive laws; addressing regional educational disparities through targeted investments and resources; involving various stakeholders in the reform process to build broad-based support; balancing pragmatic education goals with the promotion of critical thinking and holistic development; establishing robust mechanisms for policy monitoring and evaluation; and fostering a culture of innovation and adaptability within educational institutions. By addressing these recommendations, Indonesia can enhance the effectiveness of Jokowi's education policies and work towards a more equitable and dynamic education system.

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¹ If EquinOCS, our proceedings submission system, is used, then the disclaimer can be provided directly in the system.

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