

TONE POLICING DISSENT: A CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF THE INDONESIAN GOVERNMENT'S WEAPONIZATION OF CIVILITY (2023–2026)

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ABSTRACT

How Indonesians criticize is not uniform. It varies by region, local culture, and individual personality. That variety is the baseline. This paper examines what happens when criticism reaches the government, and what the government does with it.

The language of criticism is itself a method of expression. Public officials in Indonesia tend to ignore and downplay criticism toward policy or a problem by labeling the method of criticism as unlawful, unethical, or misinformation. That move deflects from the criticism itself. This study uses qualitative critical discourse analysis through Fairclough's socio-cultural practice model, focusing on statements from government officials between 2023 and 2026.

The writer observes cases of criticism raised by the younger generation, as a form of disappointment toward government policy or the status quo. That frustration shapes the language used, sometimes pushing against the boundaries of formal decorum. In the age of social media, these posts reach wide audiences, and certain cases go viral or hit national news. How government officials react to criticism matters. It is the primary mechanism for addressing public concern. "If you want to criticize, do it ethically," said one government minister in reaction to death threats received by a critic that went viral.

This paper examines several cases where criticism of the government ends up with retaliation, intimidation, or ridicule from officials toward the critics, resulting in the total dismissal of the original criticism. Qualitatively, this points to a consistent pattern in how officials tend to handle negative feedback.

Keywords: *Critical Discourse Analysis, Critics, Unethical, Government, Deflection.*

ABSTRAK

Indonesia memiliki budaya untuk kritik yang cukup luas, dari segi budaya lokal, dari geografis, wilayah, dan sifat karakter individual. Bagaimana kita menyuarakan kritik akan berbeda dari setiap kriteria, sebagaimana orang Indonesia mengekspresikan kebebasan berpendapat. Bahasa kritik juga merepresentasikan sebuah bentuk ekspresi, terutama kritik terhadap pemerintah.

Penelitian ini menganalisis bagaimana secara etika, pejabat di Indonesia bersikap acuh, dan merendahkan kritik terhadap kebijakan atau masalah, dengan melabelkan metode kritiknya sebagai tidak taat hukum, tidak etis, atau misinformasi. Ini menjadi pengalihan dari kritik pemerintah Indonesia sendiri. Penelitian ini akan berfokus pada analisis kualitatif menggunakan critical discourse analysis dengan perspektif socio-cultural dari Norman Fairclough. Penelitian ini akan berfokus pada pernyataan dari pejabat negara antara 2023-2026.

Penulis melakukan observasi dimana kritik yang disuarakan dari generasi muda sebagai bentuk kekecewaan terhadap kebijakan pemerintah atau situasinya, yang menyebabkan kata-kata yang digunakan mungkin mendekati batas etika. Di zaman sosial media ini, postingan media sosial bisa terbuka untuk umum, dan beberapa bisa viral, sampai ke level berita nasional. Bagaimana pejabat negara bereaksi terhadap kritik sangat krusial dalam mendengar dan menyikapi keresahan masyarakat.

Dalam penelitian ini, penulis akan mengambil beberapa contoh dimana kritik ke pemerintah dan kebijakannya dibalas dengan intimidasi, atau ejekan dari pejabat pemerintah kepada sumber kritik, yang pada akhirnya berujung pada pengabaian total terhadap substansi kritik itu sendiri sejak awal. Secara kualitatif, hal ini menunjukkan bagaimana sejumlah pejabat atau elemen pemerintahan cenderung merespons umpan balik negatif maupun kritik.

Kata kunci: *Analisis Wacana Kritik, tidak etis, pemerintah, pengalihan.*

Research Question

"How does the Indonesian Government (2023–2026) weaponize the discourse of ethics and politeness to deflect public criticism, as analyzed through Fairclough's three-dimensional framework?"

METHODOLOGY

This paper uses Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) developed by Norman Fairclough (1995) to examine the relationship between language and power. CDA sits at the intersection of critical theory and linguistics. It demonstrates how language functions in creating and maintaining unequal power relationships, and considers how to reflect on these processes in order to resist them.

CDA has become a widespread area of discourse analysis, to the extent that it is sometimes treated as synonymous with discourse analysis itself, especially when compared to approaches like conversation analysis that examine language differently. This paper focuses on the weaponization of ethics as a strategy to defer responsibility. Using Fairclough's three-dimensional model, the analysis connects the micro-analysis of official statements (Textual) to the macro-analysis of Indonesian political hegemony (Socio-Cultural). The aim is to interpret and analyze statements from government officials, specifically how they invoke language and courtesy to deflect from criticism and maintain the status quo.

The methodology looks at how public officials in Indonesia react to criticism about problems in the country. Officials do not simply ignore criticism. They actively deflect by arguing for politeness or proper manner the moment a criticism is raised. Qualitative research is conducted to analyze speech and responses from government officials, taking into consideration the intent and social impact of each response.

Theoretical Framework

Fairclough (1995) defines discourse (language) as inseparable from society. Discourse is a social process. It changes over time, evolving along with the people who use it, and forms as a reflection of society. Critical analysis, Fairclough argues, requires multi-disciplinary examination: to see the broader context of what is said, what it means, and how it affects people. Fairclough (2012) suggests that critical analysis identify a "social wrong" and bring forth its impact on society. Social wrong refers to anything perceivably unjust: oppression, discrimination, harm. Critical Discourse Analysis works to expose the social wrong as an effort to correct it.

In political communication, language is not neutral. It functions as a tool for territorial control, self-legitimization, and the delegitimization of the political "other" (Chilton, 2004). Expressions of ridicule, such as labeling dissenters as uneducated or foolish, are strategic linguistic moves designed to disqualify the critic's right to participate in the public sphere, preserving the regime's status quo.

Tone policing is the practice of redirecting attention from the content of a dissenting message to the manner in which it is delivered. Derald Wing Sue (2010) identifies it as a tactic that shifts responsibility away from the person being criticized and onto the emotional register of the person raising the concern. A critic who is "too angry," "too crude," or "too unfiltered" becomes ineligible for a real response. The message gets discarded not on its merits but on its packaging.

Iris Marion Young (1996) makes clear why this is a political problem. The expectation that dissent must arrive in calm, formal, "rational" language favors those already fluent in dominant political registers, typically those already inside the power structure, and filters out voices whose speech reflects urgency or frustration. When an official says "criticize us, but do it properly," they are not opening a door. They are deciding who gets to walk through it.

Herbert Marcuse (1965) calls this dynamic "repressive tolerance." Requiring civil, measured dissent within a system that does not structurally respond to dissent is not openness. It is how a system absorbs criticism's pressure without changing. Applied to the Indonesian cases here, officials calling for "ethical criticism" are not setting a civic standard. They are pulling a switch that turns off the obligation to engage with criticism's content the moment its delivery becomes the topic.

Fairclough (1993) identifies three dimensions for analyzing discourse: Socio-cultural, Discourse, and Textual. This paper applies them deductively, macro to micro, working from the socio-cultural level down to specific textual evidence.

Socio-Cultural

The socio-cultural level elaborates the ideology and hegemony of the discourse. The writer uses this macro level to identify common themes and identifiers across each statement from government officials, outlining the overall ideological culture of the subject analyzed. Fairclough argues that this level focuses on a social wrong, something perceivably harmful or less than moral. The basis for that judgment can be subjective, defined in each paper based on the writer's perspective, but remains a necessary justification (Fairclough, 2003).

Discourse

This dimension focuses on the social practices connecting social structures and events. It examines who the actors are, what they said, and how that relates to the other dimensions. The message is analyzed based on how it is produced (social media post, announcement, press conference), distributed (online or offline), and consumed.

Textual

This dimension focuses on specific statements and evidence. Textual analysis cannot stand alone. Without connection to the other dimensions, it cannot reach ideology. But used alongside socio-cultural and discourse analysis, it deepens the research. It drills into the specific vocabulary used and how that vocabulary shapes narrative. Every word in a speech or press release carries meaning, context, and intention.

BACKGROUND

"Indonesians are very friendly and polite" is a sentiment often echoed by visitors to the archipelago. As Franz Magnis-Suseno (1981) argues, politeness is a foundational pillar of the Indonesian social engine, driven by the principles of Rukun (Harmony) and Hormat (Respect). It is expected in every facet of life, from local markets to the highest government proceedings. Decorum is the bare minimum expectation for public participation. Those who fail to apply it are met not just with ire, but with social and political disqualification.

Social media has become the modern public sphere, a concept pioneered by Jürgen Habermas. Within this space, the freedom to express ideas, protected in Indonesia under UUD 1945 Article 28, is the primary mechanism for holding power accountable: "Kemerdekaan berserikat dan berkumpul, mengeluarkan pikiran dengan lisan dan tulisan dan sebagainya ditetapkan dengan Undang-undang"

For a democracy to function, the government and its officials must engage in what Habermas (1984) defines as communicative action, where the goal is mutual understanding and consensus rather than the exercise of dominance. As Iris Marion Young (2000) emphasizes in her theory of Communicative Democracy, the state's legitimacy rests on its ability to listen to all voices, even those that are disorderly or unfiltered. When officials listen and address concerns clearly, they validate the public sphere as a space of rational debate. When they deflect through tone policing, they break the democratic contract.

The Digital Civility Index published by Microsoft (2021) shows a clear contradiction: Indonesian netizens ranked among the least civil in Southeast Asia, scoring lowest on the online civility scale in the region. The same study found that Indonesian adults and teenagers were the most reactive respondents on Instagram, responding quickly to issues but often in ways that other users flagged as uncivil. A culture that values politeness, producing some of the most reactive online behavior in the region.

Criticism and aspirations from the public come in different forms. Through the growth of social media and the expanding democratic space Indonesians have experienced, met with frustrations about the status quo and a lack of government responsiveness, the language of criticism has grown more expressive. That expression, whether or not it fits formal norms, is the exercise of a right. This paper looks at how government officials weaponize the format and language of that expression to push back against it, deflecting from substance by targeting style.

ANALYSIS

Socio-Cultural Dimension

Government officials in Indonesia weaponize ethics and politeness to deflect from criticism and dissent. The method: take a criticism, cherry-pick one element, usually the tone or phrasing, and use it to discard the rest. From 2023 to 2026, public dissent is consistently met with ridicule and shutdown.

This pattern serves three functions:

1. Avoiding responsibility for government failings.
2. Delegitimizing those who criticize.
3. Maintaining the existing power structure by limiting the feedback loop the government is required to address.

Discourse Dimension

Common identifiers across the statements from officials:

- **Unilateral Space:** The environment is set up where dialogue cannot occur. Statements are made in public settings with one-way communication. The official speaks, no one else has the floor. There is no chance of rebuttal or clarification. The statement lands as fact without any chance of being contested.
- **Polarization:** Government officials tend to exaggerate statements to rally their own supporters, making it easier to label dissenting voices as "the enemy" rather than acknowledging their concern. This polarization is intentional. It creates a "with us or against us" frame where criticism is treated as opposition rather than feedback.

Textual Dimension (Micro)

The cases below are grouped by subject, drilling into the specific words and language each official used.

1. Ahmad Sahroni

Ahmad Sahroni entered politics in 2013 as a member of the NasDem Party. He won a seat in the Indonesian House of Representatives (DPR RI) for the Jakarta III electoral district in the 2014 election. From 2019 to 2024, he served as Deputy Chairman of Commission III, which covers law, human rights, and security. In November 2021, Jakarta Governor Anies Baswedan appointed him as Executive Chair for the 2022 Formula E Championship.

Sahroni, as a DPR member from the ruling coalition, called demands to disband the DPR "tolol". This came in response to a growing public movement over the legislative body's use of public funds, with citizens pushing for transparency and accountability on member incentives. The organized public had released a "17+8" list of reform demands. Sahroni's response was to ridicule the movement. The backlash that followed got him removed from Commission III.

The statement was made during a working visit to the North Sumatra Regional Police on August 22, 2025: *"Mental manusia yang begitu adalah mental orang tertolol sedunia. Catat nih, orang yang cuma bilang bubarin DPR itu adalah orang tolol sedunia. Kenapa? Kita nih memang orang semua pintar semua? Enggak bodoh semua kita."*

"Makin banyak orang tolol yang bangga akan ketololannya." tulis
Ahmad Sahroni di akun instagram pribadinya
@ahmadsahroni88, seperti yang dikutip oleh **Tempo.co**
(27/8/2025).

(Gambar 1. Tangkapan layar dalam media sosial instagram pribadi Sahroni yang diterbitkan oleh Tempo.co pada tanggal 27 Agustus 2025)

Socio-Cultural

#BubarkanDPR is a direct call to dissolve the legislature. For Sahroni, a sitting member, that is not an abstract political debate. It is a threat to his position. His response was not to address why the public felt that way, but to mark the entire movement as stupid. That move dismisses the grievance and reframes any institutional challenge to the DPR as something only an idiot would want. When criticism hits close to an official's identity or role, the instinct is to attack the critic rather than engage the concern. This case fits that pattern exactly.

Discourse

The statement came during a media interaction at a police office in North Sumatra. There is no opposing platform. The media asks, the official answers, and the statement lands as a declaration without space for rebuttal. Sahroni did not hold a debate or a forum. He spoke once, in a setting that confers institutional authority by association, and the statement went out as fact. One-directional delivery in an institutional context, no mechanism for the public to respond in the same moment. All three cases in this paper share that structure.

Textual

"Tolol" appears twice in quick succession: "tertolol sedunia" then "orang tolol sedunia". The repetition is deliberate. It makes the label stick. The phrasing "Kita nih memang orang semua pintar semua? Enggak bodoh semua kita" looks like self-deprecation on the surface, but functions as a redirect. It pulls the conversation away from what DPR did wrong and toward a general "we're all human" framing, which dissolves the specific accountability demand into something vague and unanswerable. The actual grievance, public funds, transparency, reform, never gets addressed.

2. Arinal Djunaidi

In 2023, Arinal Djunaidi, the governor of Lampung, came to national attention over his reaction to criticism about the lack of proper roads in his province. The criticism came from Bima Yudho Saputro, who posted on TikTok under the title "Why Lampung is not developing." What followed was a phone call from Arinal Djunaidi to Bima's parents. The family reported being told they had failed to educate their son. Family members also reported intimidation through occasional visits from local government officials, without clear context or purpose. Bima's parents were called to a meeting with the local regent, where they were told Bima should not post content that "cornered" Lampung as a province.

"Jadi cara menyampaikannya itu, udahlah saya enggak mau komentar itu,"
kata Arinal.

(Gambar 2. Cuplikan wawancara Arinal Djunaidi, yang diterbitkan oleh Solo Tribun News pada tanggal 17 April 2023.)

Socio-Cultural

As governor of Lampung, Arinal Djunaidi held de facto authority over the province. The criticism from Bima was seen as a personal attack on his identity, image, and authority. He could not defend the roads. He could not address the development gap on its merits. What he could do was pressure the source to go quiet.

The intimidation was directed not at Bima himself but at his parents, a move that invokes family responsibility and social shame rather than political argument. The local regent meeting repeated the same message: Bima should know his place. That is enforcement of hierarchy through social pressure, not governance.

Discourse

Arinal Djunaidi did not call a press conference. He did not issue a public statement. He called the family. That choice of channel is what the discourse analysis turns on. The message was produced privately, distributed through a single closed conversation, and consumed only by the people in that room. Then the family went public. The calculation was that a private call would suppress the content without creating a public record he would have to defend.

When the family went public, Arinal's response was to deny wrongdoing without denying the call took place. That non-denial confirmed enough of the family's account to make the pressure legible while giving him no direct quote to be held to. Distribution of the governor's message was ultimately done for him, by the family, by media, by public outrage, in a form he never controlled. A quiet pressure campaign became national news.

Textual

Unlike the Sahroni and Luhut cases, there is no recorded direct quote from Arinal Djunaidi to analyze here. The phone call to Bima's parents was never made public by the governor, and no transcript or recording exists. What we have is the family's account, verified by Bima's legal counsel and reported by Tribun News (2023): the governor called, expressed irritation, and told the parents they had failed to educate their son. A separate meeting was held with the local regent, where the family was told Bima should not post content that cornered Lampung as a province.

The absence of a direct quote is not a gap in the analysis. It is part of it. Arinal chose the private channel precisely because a public statement would have forced him to address the roads, the development gap, and the criticism on its merits. By keeping the pressure off the record, he could respond to the critic without ever having to respond to the criticism. The message received by the family, stop posting, know your place, your son embarrassed us, does not engage with a single factual claim Bima made. It redirects the entire conversation toward conduct, family honor, and regional loyalty. That is tone policing in its most direct form: delivered privately, deniably, and aimed at the source rather than the substance.

That this case had to be reconstructed through family testimony and legal verification also tells us how officials in this position manage accountability. Sahroni and Luhut made statements they knew would be recorded. Arinal did not. The strategy differs, but the outcome is the same. The criticism is buried.

3. Luhut Binsar Panjaitan, M.P.A.

A TNI General (HOR) (Ret.), Luhut Binsar Panjaitan served as Coordinating Minister for Maritime Affairs and Investment of the Republic of Indonesia. He entered the Working Cabinet in July 2016 and was reappointed in the Advanced Indonesia Cabinet for 2019–2024 under President Joko Widodo and Vice President Ma'ruf Amin. Previously, he served as Chief of Staff of the President from December 31, 2014 to September 2, 2015. On August 12, 2015, President Joko Widodo appointed him as Coordinating Minister for Political, Legal, and Security Affairs, then moved him to Coordinating Minister for Maritime Affairs in the second Working Cabinet reshuffle on July 27, 2016 (Alfin et al., 2021). He is also Chairman of the National Economic Council (DEN) and was appointed by President Prabowo Subianto as Special Advisor to the President for Digitalization and Government Technology (CNN Indonesia, 2025).

"Ah itu apasih. Kita itu harus kompak, gitu aja sekarang. Ini keadaan dunia begini, ribut-ribut begitu kan kampungan itu," kata Luhut di Istana Kepresidenan, Jakarta, Senin (5/5/2025).

"Kita harus fokus bagaimana mendukung pemerintahan dengan baik," imbuhnya.

(Gambar 3. Cuplikan Artikel Analisis Ekonomi. Tangkapan layar artikel berjudul "Prospek Ekonomi Digital 2026" yang diterbitkan oleh Kompas.com pada 15 Maret 2026.)

Socio-Cultural

Luhut's position in Indonesian political culture is unusual. He is not an elected official, but carries the informal authority of a long-serving insider across multiple administrations, with a military background that adds a layer of hierarchy to his public posture. When he calls a public movement "kampungan," that word carries a specific class and cultural charge. It does not just mean uneducated. It marks someone as not belonging in serious political conversation: provincial, unrefined, out of their depth. From someone with Luhut's profile, the word functions as a social verdict, not just an insult. It places the impeachment movement outside the circle of legitimate political actors.

"Kita harus kompak" works alongside this. It constructs a singular national identity, the government's agenda, and positions anything outside it as a disruption. Dissent becomes disloyalty. What Luhut does at the socio-cultural level is reinforce a hierarchy where loyalty to the administration reads as intelligence and maturity, while calls for accountability read as backwardness. This mirrors the Javanese concept of Rukun (harmony) that Magnis-Suseno (1981) describes, where maintaining surface unity takes precedence over addressing underlying conflict. The criticism disappears, the critic is discredited, and the status quo holds.

DISCOURSE

Luhut made this statement on February 19, 2025, during a public appearance responding to the growing movement calling for the Vice President's impeachment. The format was a press statement, one direction, no floor for questions from the movement's supporters. His platform at the time, as Chairman of the National Economic Council (DEN), gave the statement institutional weight even though DEN has no legislative or judicial role in an impeachment process. Luhut has no formal authority over whether Gibran stays or goes, but he used his platform to shut down the conversation anyway. The message reached both his natural audience, political and business elite, and the younger demographic driving the impeachment movement. The result was a clash, not a dialogue. "Kita harus kompak" landed as a demand for silence dressed up as a call for unity.

TEXTUAL

On February 19, 2025, as the impeachment movement grew, Luhut responded by calling it "kampungan." *Kampungan* is not only derogatory. It signals a lack of progressive thinking, being stuck in an older time. By using it, Luhut also positions himself as the higher authority, one entitled to veto any criticism from that party. According to the Kamus Besar Bahasa Indonesia (KBBI), *kampungan* carries negative connotations and a derisive meaning: backward from modernization, old-fashioned, uneducated.

In the same statement, Luhut immediately called for "kita harus kompak," meaning we must be unified. That framing pushes for a single agenda and identity, the government's, where any voice beyond it becomes the enemy. The one-way monologue that delivers this also fits the discourse-level analysis of distribution. It prevents any rebuttal. The one-sided statement sets a definition of reality that others can only accept or be cast outside of.

CONCLUSION

Indonesia's constitution guarantees the freedom of expression. Criticism of the government is not a privilege granted by officials; it is a right. But the three cases analyzed here point to a consistent pattern in how that right is received between 2023 and 2026: criticism is not engaged on its substance. It is judged on its form, and once the form is found wanting, the substance is dropped.

That is the mechanism of weaponization the Research Question asks about. Through Fairclough's three-dimensional framework, we can trace how it operates at each level. At the socio-cultural level, officials draw on Indonesia's deep cultural norms of *Rukun* and *Hormat*, harmony and respect, to establish that criticism delivered in anger, crude language, or public confrontation is by definition illegitimate. At the discourse level, the statements are made in one-directional settings: press appearances, police office visits, public declarations with no rebuttal platform. The format forecloses dialogue. At the textual level, specific word choices—"tolol," "kampungan," "tidak bisa mendidik anak"—do not address the content of any grievance. They disqualify the person raising it.

Three strategies appear across the cases:

1. **Ad Hominem:** Attacking the critic's intelligence or class.
2. **Recontextualization:** Reframing the criticism as a personal attack or a threat to stability rather than a policy concern.
3. **Private Intimidation:** Arinal Djunaidi's call to Bima's parents, which kept the pressure off the record while still sending a message.

What connects all three is that none of them engage with the original complaint. The goal is not to answer criticism. It is to make the cost of raising it high enough that it stops.

A government that only accepts feedback in the form it approves is not accepting feedback. It is managing its own image. By Fairclough's own standard, naming that clearly is the first step toward correcting it.

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