

## From promoting harmony to spreading threats: the languages of digital security of Indonesian cyber police to create political stability

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### Abstract:

Recently, the Indonesian police has increased its security activities on social media. Not only taking action against digital crimes, they are also pro-active in monitoring social media by finding a new body namely a virtual police. They conduct socialization on what considered appropriate activities on the twitter. Furthermore, they also implement surveillance to the netizen's activities on twitter and release early warning to those who are considered as violating the law. In twitter, this function was conducted using their account namely @siberpolri which means Indonesian cyber police. Based on the digital ethnography on the twitter account of the Indonesian cyber police, this study tries to analyze the language used by the Indonesian police to create digital security. This research found that the Indonesian police use the following languages in their posts: first, promoting social harmony in digital public spaces; second, using jokes to divert the discussion away from the political problems to trivial things; third, encouraging the citizens not to criticize the power holders; fourth, creating a narrative of threats to netizens. This study argues that behind the language used, there is an underlying interest of the Indonesian police to create of political stability very much needed to support economic development. In this regards, the languages of digital security will be understood in the context of the ideology of neo developmentalism which is being carried out by President Joko Widodo. It is the ideology which was once used during the New Order era under authoritarian Suharto.

### Keywords:

**Digital Security, Political Stability, Indonesian Policy, Virtual Police**

### Introduction

Recent studies on the impact of social media on democracy in Indonesia show an alarming trend. Early conceptions of the internet, particularly during the 1998 Reformation, emphasized its potential to democratize political discourses by fostering alternative platforms for the freedom of speech. However, the contemporary reality of

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social media in Indonesia demonstrates a shift towards political co-optation by established power structures. This article investigates one of the Indonesian National Police's co-optation efforts by creating a virtual police force. This unit was established under the Indonesian National Police Criminal Investigation Division in 2021 with educational purposes on the Electronic Information and Transactions Law. The virtual police then issue warnings as an effort to protect the public from various types of cybercrime, especially the circulation of disinformation and hate speech (Prabandari et.al., 2021). In practice, this virtual police warns individuals or groups deemed to have violated the law.

The establishment of a virtual police unit in Indonesia represents a significant shift in the role and function of the police force. This transformation is further underscored by the proposed amendments to Law No. 2 of 2002 concerning the Indonesian National Police. It is noteworthy that the bills would grant police the authority to take action against online content, including blocking, disconnecting, and throttling access to the internet for reasons of domestic and national security. If these amendments are passed, they could provide legal justification for the state to engage in further digital repression. This phenomenon exemplifies the expanding reach of police authority into the realm of social media, effectively constituting an extension of state power in the digital sphere. This research investigates how Indonesian virtual police utilize the narrative of "harmony within society" in their social media interactions. Furthermore, the study aims to analyze the potential impact of such practices on democratic processes within Indonesia.

This research uses digital ethnography on the @CCICPolri account, the official account affiliated with the Virtual Police on X (formerly known as Twitter). It also examines this account's engagement with its audience on X. By focusing on textual analysis of the virtual police account, this research aims to investigate the linguistic techniques used by the account. This study identified four primary linguistic strategies employed by the Indonesian police in their digital communications. First, they seek to promote social harmony in digital public spaces. Second, they utilize humor to deflect discussions away from political issues and toward trivial matters. Third, they urge citizens not to criticize those in positions of authority. Fourth, they construct a narrative of threats to netizens. This study suggests that beneath these linguistic tactics lies an underlying interest of the Indonesian police in fostering political stability, which is necessary to support economic development. In this context, the language of digital security must be understood in the context of the ideology of neo-developmentalism, which is being carried out by President Joko Widodo. This ideology was previously employed during the New Order era under authoritarian Suharto.

This paper will be divided into five parts as follows. After the introductory part, the second part will provide a context of the growing trend of narrowing digital public space in Indonesia and the prior study on the Indonesian virtual police. The third section will present findings on the virtual police language in Indonesia. The fourth section will discuss what language means and explain what kind of ideology is hidden behind the language used. The fifth section explains the increasingly repressive character of Jokowi's regime. The conclusion of this article is presented in the last part of this article.

### **The narrowing digital public space in Indonesia**

The study of Indonesian virtual police activities is vital in order to understand the ways in which the digital public space has been co-opted and narrowed down in Indonesia following the Reformation era. It has been widely believed that as the Internet has developed, it has provided an increasing space for civil society to demand the rights that it is entitled to under the law. However, in Indonesia, the digital space has narrowed, which has the potential to threaten the rights of citizens in four different ways.

Firstly, online activism and government criticism have been criminalized under the Information and Electronic Transactions Law. Between the enactment of the law in 2008 and 2019, SAFEnet observed the initiation of 287 criminal cases against citizens, journalists, or activists. In 2019, there were 24 such cases (SAFEnet, 2020). In addition, the issue of intimidation of activists engaged in protests against the ratification of the Omnibus Law in 2021 provides a further example of the systematic weakening of social movements.

The second is the internet shutdown conducted by the Indonesian government. The Ministry of Communication and Information has terminated Internet connections three times, all in 2019. The first internet shutdown occurred on 22–24 May 2019, following civil protests arising – mainly in Jakarta – from the results of the 2019 presidential election, to prevent the spread of fake news and avoid unrest (Shalihah & Kurniawan, 2019). Interestingly, the disconnection was carried out in all regions of Indonesia, even though the demonstrations only took place in Jakarta. The second termination occurred in August 2019 in the Provinces of Papua and West Papua on the pretext of reducing tension that was rising at that time. The third termination took place on 23–29 September 2019, in Wamena and Jayapura, as riots took place again, and this was to prevent the conflict from spreading hoaxes (Briantika, 2020).

Third, intimidation in the form of cyber-attacks on pro-democracy activists in various forms, including hacking and surveillance of WhatsApp groups; telephone terror; hacking; and/or email surveillance. The wave of cyber attacks conducted against academics who rejected the revision of the KPK Law at the end of 2019 was the first and most massive such cyber attack in Indonesia; this case therefore became our focus of study, which we will explain in more detail in this article. However, there was a subsequent cyber attack that also caught the public attention against activist Ravio Patra in April 2020. Ravio is an activist who works as a representative of Indonesia in the Steering Committee of Open Government Partnership (SC OGP), a transcontinental initiative that fights for transparency in government. His commitment to transparency is reflected in the views he shares on social media. The attack came after he criticized a member of Executive Office of the President of the Republic of Indonesia, Billy Mambrasar, who was involved in a conflict of interest in government projects in Papua (Setyowati, 2020).

The socio-political phenomenon in Indonesia has demonstrated a clear shift in the role of the police force, particularly since the advent of the global pandemic. The narrowing of public space has led to an increased reliance on law enforcement, which has assumed a more prominent position in the socio-political landscape. In addition to their traditional role of ensuring public safety, the police are now also serving as a government support mechanism. To put it another way, the police are now engaged in the active promotion of government programs and policies. One noteworthy aspect pertains to the simultaneous regional elections conducted during the pandemic. Despite the police institution exhibiting the lowest public trust compared to other government

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institutions, the expansion of the police's authority represents an anomalous phenomenon. The establishment of virtual police units can be perceived as an effort by the state to co-opt the social media domain. The subsequent section will focus on the Indonesian police's co-option of the digital public sphere.

### **Policing the Digital Realm: A Threat to Democracy?**

The virtual police in Indonesia is anchored in the goal of building a clean, healthy, and productive cyber environment. This extension of the police into social media, which was prompted by the advent of the pandemic and the consequent surge in the use of technology, is viewed as a crucial measure to combat the proliferation of misinformation and violations of the ITE Law, particularly in the context of a global health crisis (Prabandari et al., 2021). Prior research has indicated that the establishment of a virtual police force is a necessary and beneficial development. Some scholars argue that individuals often fail to differentiate between expressing opinions and expressing hatred, which is why the advent of virtual police has been perceived as a potential solution to this problem (Sainul & Harwanto, 2021). Other researchers view the virtual police as a solution to the rise in cybercrime, emphasizing the unit's role in restorative justice (Ramadhanti et al., 2023).

Moreover, other scholars have identified the emergence of virtual police forces and the expansion of police authority as potential indications of a decline in democratic value. In alignment with prior research findings, Siregar et al. (2022) demonstrated that the police have a pivotal role in democratic decline. The utilization of vague legal clauses as a repressive instrument serves to elucidate how state power can be misapplied to silence opposition and consolidate state oligarchs. The reinforcement and enlargement of the police force's role in the digital sphere heightens the risk of the shrinking of public space and civil liberties. This research sheds light on a previously overlooked aspect of studies on virtual police and democratic regression, namely the use of narratives of community cohesion in their social media campaigns. This method of communication, which employs positive narratives, is also employed by other authoritarian state agencies, thereby reinforcing hegemony in society.

### **The languages of digital security**

#### ***Promoting social harmony***

Social harmony was one of the main narrative promoted by the Indonesian police on the twitter. The narrative of social harmony can be seen for instance from the following post:

Figure 1. Three @CCICPolri tweets that provide social harmony narratives



As an illustration, the aforementioned tweets place an emphasis on social harmony as a key element of their content narrative. In the aforementioned post (i), the author presents the argument that social media should be infused with a sense of peace to contribute to the well-being of society. As the tweet translated: “*We have to fill in the social media with coolness and serenity.*” The post garnered considerable attention, amassing a total of one thousand likes, 108 comments, and 232 retweets.

This is further corroborated by the aforementioned post (ii), which celebrates Indonesia's rich cultural and ethnic diversity, its spirit of togetherness, its peaceful nature, its natural beauty, and the strength of its national unity. The tweet in the picture (ii) is translated into: “*Indonesia is plurality. Indonesia is togetherness. Indonesia is peaceful. Indonesia is beautiful. Indonesia is unity.*” This tweet was liked by more than 1.300 accounts, commented by 111 accounts, and retweeted 428 times. We can find words such as togetherness, peacefulness, and unity, which are very important parts of harmony.

It can also be seen in the following post (iii): “*Please stay away from social media, and you will realize that the big issue only happens in the virtual world. Think. Reflect. It turns out that most of us still use social media for creating conflict.*” In the third post above, it can be seen that the police emphasize conflict avoidance, which, as Geertz and Suseno argue, is another important virtue in Javanese culture.

### ***Discouraging critics to power holders***

Besides promoting harmony, the virtual police also discourage the netizens from criticizing the power holders. It can be seen from the following post:

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Figure 2. Tweet (i) is a tweet from @CCICPolri that encourages people to exercise discernment in their criticism. Tweets (ii) and (iii) are public responses to the police tweet.



As evidenced by the aforementioned post, the virtual police have issued numerous warnings regarding the appropriate manner in which netizens should engage in online criticism. These warnings emphasize the importance of only expressing criticism of the government when one possesses a genuine belief in the accuracy of their critiques. For instance, the tweet depicted in the image (i) above states the following: *“Critic is legitimate. Don’t pretend to criticize when what you actually do is a slander. Don’t say it is a critic when actually it is a hoax. Don’t label your hate speech as a critic.”*

The question thus arises as to what the police intend by the term "correct critics." Unfortunately, there is no clear explanation for this question. Furthermore, when netizens inquired of the police regarding this matter in a column chat, they received no reply. It can be seen, for instance, in the following comments on figures (ii) and (iii).

In the image (iii), the account user wrote on January 4: *“If there is someone saying that I am single and I feel hurt, can it be considered as violating the law?”* There is no answer to the question. It also happens to the question from another account user on tweet (ii) who asked:

*“What’s the limitation? For example, if I criticize Anime a0t (Attack on Titan) in the current season, it may not be as good as the previous season because there are many bad CGI. If the studio is too sensitive, then it may be considered humiliating. Whether we get hurt or not depends fully on us, not others. If someone is too sensitive, all critics will be considered humiliation.”*

The police did not respond to the questions above. Thus, it can be easily concluded that the police did not encourage netizens to criticize the power holders.



### *Using jokes to divert political discussion*

Some posts also contain humor. This is, for instance, as follows:

Figure 3. Two examples of tweets from @CCICPolri that exhibit the use of humor



In the tweet (i) above, the Indonesian cyber police wrote: “*regret always come in the end. If it comes in the beginning, it is registration.*” More or less similar joke can be seen in the following post (ii): “*But if this is your wife’s birthday, don’t only give her words of congratulation. This is your wife, not a comments section.*”

The purpose of the joke above is not only to get close to the netizens with simple post and humors in one hand, but also to avoid political discussion on another hand.

### *Creating a narrative of threats to netizens*

Another narrative created by the Indonesian police was the narrative of threat. It can be seen in these two post shown in Figure 4. The picture (i) of the posting wrote: “*Sooner or later, your criminal traces (in the internet) will get a punishment it deserves.*” It was posted in 16 December 2020. Meanwhile, the picture (ii) said: “*Trust and believe, your criminal digital traces, sooner or later, will bring you and your family to regret. Together we create peace in 2021*”. It was posted in the 1<sup>st</sup> of January 2021. It was to no surprise that based on the survey by *Kompas* release in 5 April 2021, 34,3% of Indonesian public worried that the virtual police will threat freedom of expression (Maharani & Galih, 2021).

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Figure 4. Two examples of tweets from @CCICPolri that can be construed as a form of intimidation directed towards netizens, urging them to exercise caution with regard to their online activities and digital footprint.



(i)

(ii)

### The Ideology of Developmentalism and Political Stability

What explained the languages of digital security of the Indonesian police? This study argues that behind the language used, there is an underlying interest of the Indonesian police to create political stability very much needed to support economic development. As argued by Warburton (2016), new developmentalism has been the main ideology of Jokowi administration. In this ideology, the government focused merely on the development of infrastructure to boost economic development while neglecting other issues such as human rights and democracy.

The pursuit of political stability, which violates civil liberties, is also implemented in the Jokowi period. It was culturally legitimized by using slogan *NKRI harga mati* (NKRI is already final). NKRI refers to *Negara Kesatuan Republic Indonesia/Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia*. Those who are critical of the government were labeled as against NKRI. This can be seen in the following post:



Figure 5. The image (i) exemplifies the utilization of the identical two hashtags in tweets disseminated by @CCICPolri, whereas the image (ii) illustrates the deployment of similar tactics by virtual police entities in observance of National Awakening Day.



From the post above, it can be seen that under every post, there is a hashtag: #IndonesiaNegara Hukum (Indonesia is a state of law) and #PenegakanHukumDemiNKRI (Law enforcement for NKRI).

Besides the narrative of *NKRI harga mati*, another popular ideology used to culturally legitimize the threat to civil liberties during the current regime of Jokowi is Pancasila. Pancasila is the state ideology which was then narrowly used by the regime to repress its political opponents by labeling them as anti-Pancasila. This slogan is also used in the digital space by cyber police. It can be seen, for instance in this following post.

The post (ii) above was intended to celebrate Indonesian Awakening Day on 20 May. This day actually refers to the finding of Boedi Oetomo, one of the first modern organizations in the East Indies. This organization gave birth to the idea of nationalism, which then led to Indonesia's independence in 1945. However, the police narrowly interpreted it as Pancasila conveyed from the Eagle with five symbols on its chest, which refers to Pancasila.

### The Increasingly Repressive Character of Jokowi's Regime

As previously stated, the emphasis on political stability is accompanied by an increase in the practice of repression, which has a detrimental impact on democratic processes. Based on a survey from LP3ES in 2021 which found that 52.1% of citizens were afraid to express their opinions in public (Erdianto & Chaterine, 2021). In 2022, the Political Indicators indicate that the prevalence of fear associated with speaking out is 62.9% (Erdianto & Chaterine, 2021). This evidence demonstrates the detrimental impact of the repression on the democratic process. As documented by AJI, instances of

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digital attacks by journalists and media outlets were prevalent throughout 2020 and 2021. These types of digital attacks included 8 cases of doxing, 4 cases of hacking, and 2 cases of distributed denial-of-service (Nindita, 2021). There were also 37 Narasi TV crew members who were hacked when reporting critical news, and then their social media was blocked (Briantika, 2022). The site owned by Narasi also experienced distributed denial-of-service and also threats to their servers with the words "shut up or die".

In 2023, AJI Indonesia data shows that physical, verbal, terror, digital violence, sexual harassment, and lawsuits will still befall our journalists. The total number reached 89 cases, with victims of 83 individual journalists, 5 groups of journalists and 15 media (AJI, 2024). This number has increased compared to 2022 with 61 cases and 41 cases in 2021. In this statistic, there was a bomb attack on Papuan journalist Victor Mambor on January 23 2023. There was also a DDoS attack on the Multatuli project website because it reduced critical coverage of police institutions. DDOS is an abbreviation for Distributed Denial of Service, which is a technique for flooding website traffic.

In this regard, the Jokowi regime very much echoes the New Order period under Suharto. We can see this clearly at least if we refer to Mackie & Maclyntyre's clear three phases of the evolution of the political structure of the New Order (Mackie & Maclyntyre, 1994). The three phases began from 1965 to 1974, when the New Order was still carrying out political consolidation. In this short honeymoon period they were very warm to the press, to civil society. Political parties were left active until finally in 1971 they were reduced to two, forced to become just two because they were considered non-parties. As the regime grew stronger between 1974 and 1983, the situation became increasingly repressive, marking a second stage of evolution. The press and civil society were repressed. In the third stage of evolution, between 1983 and 1990, the party experienced its nadir, social control became tighter, and then the state became more repressive.

Here we remember that similar to the New Order era, initially Jokowi was present as a hope. He is considered to be part of society at large with the slogan "Jokowi is Us". He is considered not to be part of the oligarchic elite. Initially, this regime promised to resolve various problems of human rights violations in the past, protect civil liberties and further encourage the strengthening of democracy in general. But the honeymoon period soon ended.

Jokowi's regime began to carry out practices that set back democracy and returned Indonesia to the New Order era which can be divided into three phases. The first phase took place between 2016 and 2019. This phase was marked by signs that were not very visible except for political science students who were trained to examine the situation. For some political scientists, these signs are clear, including the initiation of development policies that focus too much on building physical infrastructure while ignoring the voices of citizens who protest and damage environmental sustainability. It seems true that the regime's policies favor the interests of oligarchs rather than the interests of citizens.

In this case, referring to Hadiz and Robison (2013), oligarchy can be interpreted as a system of power relations that allows the accumulation of wealth and authority in the hands of a small elite along with a set of mechanisms to maintain it. To smooth out the development agenda with a neo-new order style, the Jokowi regime carried out various other interventions to create political stability, including: carrying out various

interventions on political parties outside the government and then forcing them in various ways, both persuasive and repressive, to become part of the power. In this phase, illiberal methods were also used to suppress civil society with different views, for example by disbanding mass organizations such as Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (HTI).

Even though signs of Jokowi's authoritarianism are so strong and criticism has emerged from some critical groups of scientists and civil society activists, there have been almost no significant protests among society in general. Criticizing Jokowi openly at this stage will threaten to be framed as sarcastic or even "radicalist" which is also pejoratively referred to as *kadrun* aka desert lizard, *kampret*, anti-Pancasila and various other names.

The second phase happened between the end of 2019 and mid-2023. In this phase, there is increasingly solid oligarchic consolidation with the joining of Prabowo and Gerindra as part of the government, making the coalition in parliament reach more than 80% of the seats in the DPR, making the government capable of producing any policy. Also. In this period, we note the emergence of serious and massive protests from civil society against Jokowi's government. The main trigger for the protest was a series of problematic policies which not only did not involve the public in their formulation but more than that also killed important institutions which were the biological children of reform. One of the decline of institutions is the Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK) as the only credible institution to enforce the law against corrupt elites.

So when the KPK was weakened through revisions in September 2019, protests spread in various big cities in Indonesia. Hundreds of thousands of pupils, university students and activists took to the streets, academics issued petitions, various intellectual figures were also angry about this policy. The response to the various protests was unfortunately repression which resulted in hundreds of pupils and students being injured, and 2 students dying (Budi, 2019).

The revision of the Corruption Eradication Committee Law is just the beginning. Since then, unfortunately, various policies that harm the aspirations of citizens have continued to be issued, starting from the law on job creation, mineral and coal, to the Criminal Code which has been followed by widespread protests but has repeatedly been ignored. Instead of listening to public aspirations, the regime continues to practice repression in various forms, both physical and digital repression. Another policy that also did not involve public consultation was moving the capital, although the law was only passed in early 2022, the decision to move the capital was also announced in 2019.

As explained in the previous section, another thing that is worth noting in this second stage is the discourse on extending the President's term of office in various ways, starting from electing a three-term president to extending the presidential term. This is an attempt to create another policy that not only ignores the aspirations of citizens but also seriously violates the constitution. Ironically, even though in this second phase the protests have become so widespread, satisfaction with the President is still high, meaning the regime is still popular.

In this case, there are at least three factors that support the regime's popularity. First, a series of populist policies such as direct cash assistance were framed as the president's personal favors instead of being recognized as citizens' rights to a decent life as regulated in the constitution. Second, the use of massive campaigns on social media using cyber troops, especially in various problematic policies (Sastramidjaja & Wijayanto, 2022). Third, controlling conversations in digital public spaces by repressing critical voices on social media and mainstream media.

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The third phase takes place from the end of 2023 until today. An important marker of this new phase is the advancement of Gibran Rakabuming Raka through the decision of the Constitutional Court which has ethical problems as described previously. In this phase, what is taking place is not only oligarchy but dynastic politics. In this case, policy coercion is not only carried out to serve the interests of the oligarchy but also the interests of Jokowi and his family.

In this phase, protests became wider: not only from civil society but also political elites and political parties. This widening of actors involved in political protests is possible and cannot be separated from the electoral contestation in the 2024 election procession which is also currently underway. Jokowi left the political party of which he was a cadre: the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDIP), which had supported and supported him for various political positions ranging from mayor, governor, to president. Jokowi chose to support Prabowo, who was promoted by the Gerindra Party, who ran as a presidential candidate with Jokowi's son: Gibran Rakabuming Raka.

The denial of the constitution which gave birth to dynastic politics also received opposition from two political party groups: PDIP which supported Ganjar and Mahfud. In this case PDIP is in coalition with PPP and Perindo. The second group is the Nasdem Party, the Prosperous Justice Party and the National Awakening Party which supports the pair Anies Baswedan and Muhaimin Iskandar. It is worth noting that some people see this situation only as a repositioning among the oligarchic elite, but the author sees this as friction between the oligarchic elite.

This protest from the PDIP is worth highlighting because it then opened Pandora's box on many things, one of the most prominent being the admission from FX Rudi, the PDIP elite in Solo, that dynastic politics had indeed occurred since Gibran's nomination as mayor of Solo. It is worth noting that there Gibran was nominated as the PDIP mayoral candidate after violating the party's internal regulations which actually already had another candidate who was a cadre who had served for a long time and was born as a result of the internal mechanism of the Solo PDIP DPC. Previously, this dynastic politics had always been denied by both Gibran and Jokowi's supporters, including PDIP, but now it has become clear that there are indeed party rules that have been broken.

Apart from opposition carried out by political elites and political parties, protests are also widespread among civil society. One thing that needs to be noted is that discourse about impeachment has emerged from various groups, not from buzzers but from academics and civil society activists, such as Eep Saefullah Fatah, Syaiful Mujani, up to petitions<sup>100</sup>. Discussions about this have also become discussions in mainstream media such as Surya Paloh's Metro TV, which was previously difficult to imagine taking place when Nasdem and Surya were still so close to Jokowi. Interestingly, it was the president of BEM UGM who gave Jokowi the title of the most embarrassing UGM alumni which then led to terror directed at him.

### **Conclusion**

This article delves into the linguistic ground of the communication of the Indonesian cyber police, revealing the ideological underlying principles that shape their online presence. The analysis assumes that the language of the cyber police goes beyond the mere distribution of information and actively constructs a specific social reality for netizens. This constructed reality emphasizes social harmony, uses humor and jokes to

deflect the narratives, discourages criticism of power structures, and constructs a narrative of external threats that perpetually endanger Indonesian cyberspace.

Furthermore, the article argues that behind these superficial linguistic features lies a deeper agenda: the consolidation of political stability, which is seen as crucial for promoting economic development. This is consistent with the broader ideology of neo-developmentalism, which was first articulated by President Joko Widodo and which evokes the "New Order" era under the authoritarian leader Suharto. However, a contemporary interpretation of neo-developmentalism is legitimized through a narrow interpretation of nationalism ("NKRI Harga Mati") and Pancasila, which are Indonesia's founding principles.

Thus, the emphasis on political stability through cyber-police discourse cannot be separated from the broader context of the regime's increasing repression, which extends its reach into the digital public sphere. By analyzing the specific linguistic choices made by the cyber police, the article aims to illuminate the ideological project underway - the construction of a new tribal nationalism empowered by the regime that prioritizes stability and control over open dialogue and dissent.

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