

# The Influence of Language in Forming Political Identity in Indonesia

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## Abstract

Language plays a significant role in shaping political identity in Indonesia from the colonial period to the reform era. The use of language in politics, campaigns, and social media shows how language shapes political narratives and mobilizes support. Language policy faces challenges in managing linguistic diversity while maintaining social and political stability. This study aims to analyze the role of language in Indonesian politics and its impact on political identity and social cohesion. This study uses a qualitative approach by collecting data from various relevant sources, such as previous research results. The collected data is then processed through qualitative analysis to find research results. The results of this study found that language plays a significant role in building political identity and mobilizing support in Indonesia. The use of Indonesian and regional languages creates a balance between national unity and local identity. Social media and political campaigns use language to influence public opinion and strengthen political narratives. Language policies that are inclusive and responsive to linguistic diversity can support social cohesion and equitable national development. This study provides insight into the importance of language in the dynamics of Indonesian politics and offers recommendations for more inclusive policies.

*Keywords:* Language, Political Identity, Linguistics.

## A. INTRODUCTION

Language plays a very important role in human life, not only as a means of communication but also as an element that shapes individual and group identity. In Indonesia, a country known for its ethnic and cultural diversity, language plays a crucial role in creating and maintaining political identity. With more than 700 regional languages spoken throughout the Indonesian archipelago, this linguistic complexity influences political dynamics at both the local and national levels (Fisher et al., 2020).

From the colonial era to the reform era, language has been a strategic tool in consolidating power and shaping political identity. During the colonial era, the use of Dutch by the indigenous elite not only created social distance between the rulers and the common people but also influenced the structure of political power. After independence, Indonesian was chosen as the national language to unite various ethnic and linguistic groups into a single national unity. However, this process did not immediately eliminate the important role of regional languages in local politics (Ahmed, 2021).

During the New Order era, Indonesian was increasingly strengthened as a symbol of nationalism and a tool of political control. The government implemented policies that prioritized the use of Indonesian in education, media, and public administration. This aimed to strengthen national identity and reduce the potential

for ethnic and regional conflict. However, this policy also faces challenges, especially from ethnic groups who feel that their language and culture are being marginalized (Kosim et al., 2023).

The entry of the reform era brought significant changes to Indonesia's political landscape. Decentralization of power provides space for local governments to develop policies that are more responsive to local needs, including in terms of language. In several regions, the use of regional languages in administration and education has been revived as an effort to strengthen local identity and increase community political participation. This phenomenon shows that language is still an important factor in the formation of political identity at the local level (Talitha et al., 2020).

In addition, globalization and the development of information technology have opened up new space for language to influence politics. Social media, for example, has become a new arena where language is used to build political identity and mobilize support. The use of regional languages in political campaigns on social media is an effective strategy to attract sympathy and support from certain ethnic groups. On the other hand, Indonesian remains the main tool for conveying national political messages (Tankosić & Dovchin, 2023).

Indonesia's multicultural and multilingual context also influences political dynamics between ethnic groups. Language becomes a tool for negotiating power and articulating political interests. In some regions, ethnic and language-based identity politics are still sensitive issues that can trigger conflict. However, language can also be a tool for reconciliation and social cohesion if used inclusively and with respect for diversity (Zein et al., 2020).

In this context, research on the influence of language in the formation of political identity in Indonesia becomes very relevant. Understanding how language is used and manipulated in political contexts can provide important insights into the dynamics of power and identity in this highly diverse country. This research can also contribute to formulating policies that are more inclusive and responsive to Indonesia's linguistic and cultural diversity.

With this background, this research aims to explore the role of language in the formation of political identity in Indonesia, with a focus on how language is used in various political contexts, both at the local and national levels. This research is expected to provide a deeper understanding of the relationship between language and politics in Indonesia and its implications for more inclusive and equitable national development.

## **B. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **1. Political Identity**

In terms of timeline, social scientists began to show interest in identity politics in the 1970s, particularly in the United States, when they confronted issues related to minorities, gender, feminism, race, ethnicity, and other marginalized and persecuted social groups. Over time, the range of identity politics expanded to encompass religion, beliefs, and various cultural connections (Cerezo et al., 2020). In Indonesia,

identity politics is more connected to issues of ethnicity, religion, ideology, and local interests, typically represented by elites with their own articulations. The regional expansion movement is one manifestation of this identity politics. Issues of justice and regional development are central to their political discourse, though determining whether these concerns are genuine or driven by the ambitions of local elites to become leaders is a complex matter (Ibrahim et al., 2024).

The intensification of identity politics at the local level aligns with the politics of decentralization. Following the implementation of Law No. 22/1999, the identity politics movement has become increasingly evident. Numerous local and national political figures deliberately leverage this issue in power distribution. In the provinces of Riau, Central Kalimantan, West Kalimantan, and Irian Jaya, it is apparent how political actors utilize this issue when engaging with other political entities (Khan & Syrett, 2022). Consequently, the politicization of identity by local elites in these four regions is crafted to enable those initially excluded from power centers to gain and wield power. Naturally, the way the identity politics project operates in these regions manifests in various forms (Mietzner, 2020). Firstly, identity politics serves as the foundation for local elites' struggles in the context of regional expansion in West Kalimantan and Irian Jaya. Secondly, efforts are made to transform identity politics into a political entity with the aim of controlling regional governments and influencing leadership changes (Fukuyama, 2020). In Gerry Van Klinken's terms, it is called local elites who take over the entire structure of local political institutions. This happens in the provinces of Riau, Central Kalimantan, West Kalimantan, and Irian Jaya. Third, ethnic politics is used to question 'us and them', 'me' and 'you', to its extreme form of 'Java' and 'outside Java', 'Islam' and 'Christian' (Maulana et al., 2021).

Theoretically, Lukmantoro defines identity politics as prioritizing the interests of group members who share a common identity or characteristics, whether based on race, ethnicity, gender, or religion. Identity politics is another expression of the politics of difference. It involves political actions aimed at channeling aspirations to influence policies and control the distribution of values deemed valuable, ultimately seeking self-determination based on primordial ties (Huckle & Silva, 2020). In the ethnic context, identity politics manifests in efforts to incorporate values into regional regulations, separate governmental areas, pursue special autonomy, and even in the emergence of separatist movements. In the religious context, identity politics is seen in various efforts to integrate religious values into policy-making, such as the introduction of sharia regulations and attempts to make a city synonymous with a particular religion (Yimenu, 2023).

In subsequent developments, identity politics was co-opted by the majority group to establish dominance. Using identity politics to consolidate power by exacerbating differences and fostering conflict has not gone without sharp criticism (Abdurrakhman & Pradita, 2022). Identity politics tends to reinforce the notion of an essentialist wholeness based on primordial identification of certain social groups. Agnes Heller defines identity politics as a concept and political movement that emphasizes difference as a primary political category. Despite sharing a common

ideology and goals within any community, it is undeniable that individuals possess their own personalities and identities (Drousioti, 2022).

In general, the theory of identity politics and various research findings indicate that two main factors make ethnicity and religion significant and influential in the political process. First, when ethnicity and religion are at stake, there is a need to maintain or defend the identity of a group (Boyer et al., 2022). Second, when the political process is competitive, identity groups face off against each other without a clear dominant group, making it uncertain who will emerge victorious. General elections, including regional elections, are political processes where various factors such as identity are at play. It then depends on how the involved actors manage issues like ethnicity and religion, which are at stake (Charness & Chen, 2020).

### **C. METHOD**

This research will be conducted using a qualitative approach. Through this approach, research data will be obtained from various good sources such as research results and previous studies that are still relevant to the content of the research. The use of a qualitative approach allows for a deep understanding of how language is used in the political context in Indonesia, as well as its impact on political identity, social cohesion, and national development. When the research data has been successfully collected, the data will be processed immediately so that the results of this research can be found. The results of this analysis are expected to provide comprehensive insights into the role and impact of language in the dynamics of Indonesian politics, as well as offer policy recommendations that are inclusive and responsive to linguistic diversity in this country (Nartin et al., 2024).

### **D. RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

#### **1. Language and Political Identity in Indonesia**

Language has played a very important role in Indonesian politics from the colonial period to the reform era. During the colonial period, the use of Dutch by the native elite not only created a social distance between the rulers and the common people but also became a symbol of status and power. Dutch was used as a tool to control information and limit access to knowledge to certain groups (Kuitenbrouwer, 2022). The elite who mastered Dutch had advantages in terms of education and access to prestigious jobs, which in turn strengthened their position in the colonial power structure. Meanwhile, regional languages remained the main means of communication among the common people, emphasizing differences in social class and political power.

After Indonesia's independence, Indonesian was chosen as the national language to unite the various ethnic and linguistic groups spread throughout the archipelago. The choice of Indonesian as the national language cannot be separated from its important role in the independence movement. The independence leaders realized that the use of a single national language that could be accepted by all ethnic groups would be an effective tool for building a strong national identity and

overcoming ethnic divisions. Indonesian, which is derived from Malay, was considered a neutral choice and was acceptable to the majority of the Indonesian population. This policy succeeded in creating a stronger national unity and reducing the potential for ethnic conflict that could arise due to language differences.

However, although Indonesian have succeeded in uniting various ethnic groups, regional languages still play an important role in local politics. In many regions, regional languages are used as a tool to maintain local cultural and political identity. Regional languages are not only a symbol of ethnic pride, but also a tool to articulate local political interests. In some regions, the use of regional languages in government administration and education has been revived as an effort to strengthen local identity and increase community political participation. The use of regional languages shows that although Indonesian has become the national language, regional languages still have a significant influence on local politics.

Globalization and the development of information technology have had a significant impact on the use of language in politics and political identity in Indonesia. Advances in communication technology, such as the internet and social media, have opened up new spaces for language to influence politics. Social media, for example, has become a new arena where language is used to build political identity and mobilize support (Fitriati & Rata, 2021). The use of regional languages in political campaigns on social media is an effective strategy to attract sympathy and support from certain ethnic groups. On the other hand, Indonesian remains the main tool for conveying national political messages. The influence of globalization is also seen in the adoption of foreign terms and concepts in Indonesian political discourse, which reflects Indonesia's interaction with the international world.

Thus, language plays a complex role in shaping political identity in Indonesia. From the colonial period to the reform era, language has been used as a powerful political tool to control power, build national identity, and maintain local identities. In the context of globalization, language continues to adapt and evolve, reflecting changing political and social dynamics. Understanding how language is used in the context of Indonesian politics provides important insights into the dynamics of power and identity in this highly diverse country. Further research on the role of language in Indonesian politics can make valuable contributions to formulating policies that are more inclusive and responsive to Indonesia's linguistic and cultural diversity.

## **2. Dynamics of Language Policy in a Political Context**

During the New Order era, language policy in Indonesia was directed at strengthening national identity and consolidating political power. The Soeharto government strongly emphasized the use of Indonesian as a tool to build national unity. This policy was manifested through various educational programs that required the use of Indonesian as the language of instruction in schools (Wahyuningtyas et al., 2021). The mass media were also required to use Indonesian in their broadcasts and publications. The aim was to erode ethnic and linguistic differences that could trigger conflict and to strengthen a homogeneous national

identity. This policy, although successful in creating stronger national unity, also had a negative impact on regional languages, which began to be marginalized and lost their function in everyday life.

After the reform era, Indonesia entered a period of decentralization that brought significant changes to language policy. Decentralization gave greater authority to regional governments to regulate and manage local affairs, including language policy. Many regional governments began to revive the use of regional languages in public administration and education as an effort to strengthen local identity and increase the political participation of the community. This can be seen from various initiatives that support the teaching of regional languages in schools and the use of regional languages in official regional government events. These changes reflect the recognition of the importance of linguistic and cultural diversity in building an inclusive and democratic society.

The role of government in language regulation remains important despite decentralization. Central government policies still influence how language is used in political and social contexts. The central government continues to promote the use of Indonesian as the official language of the country and the primary means of communication in government affairs, education, and the mass media. However, on the other hand, there is also support for the preservation of regional languages through various cultural and educational programs. Language regulation by the central government seeks to balance the need to maintain national unity with respect for regional cultural and linguistic diversity. This reflects the complex dynamics of language policy in Indonesia, where there is an effort to harmonize national interests with local interests.

Language in education and public administration also plays an important role in shaping political identity in Indonesia. The use of Indonesian as the language of instruction in schools ensures that young people have adequate communication skills in the national language, which is essential for their participation in political and social life at the national level (Wicaksono, 2020). However, in many regions, the teaching of regional languages is also introduced to maintain local cultural identity and support pluralism. In public administration, the use of Indonesian as the official language ensures consistency and efficiency in communication between governments and the community. However, in some regions, regional languages are also used in everyday communication between the government and the community to increase the participation and engagement of local citizens.

Thus, the dynamics of language policy in the context of Indonesian politics show how language policy can influence political identity at various levels. From the centralistic policies of the New Order that emphasized national unity to the decentralization policies that recognized the importance of local identities, the role of language in Indonesian politics has continued to evolve. The government plays a key role in regulating the use of language, both at the national and local levels, intending to create an inclusive and diverse society. Language policies in education and public administration also show how language can be used as a tool to strengthen political

identity and community participation in political life. Further research on the dynamics of language policy could provide deeper insights into the relationship between language, identity, and politics in Indonesia.

### **3. Language as a Tool of Political Mobilization**

In today's digital era, social media has become an important platform for politicians and activists to build political identities and mobilize support. The use of language on social media is very strategic and plays an important role in influencing public perception. The language used on social media tends to be more informal and personal, allowing politicians to communicate directly with their constituents (Hong & Kim, 2021). For example, the use of colloquial language and local dialects in posts or tweets can create a sense of closeness and authenticity, which is very effective in attracting sympathy and support. Politicians often use social media to convey political messages, comment on current issues, and respond quickly to developments, thus building a political narrative that can be accepted by various groups in society.

Political campaigns are an arena where the use of language plays a very significant role. The strategy of using language in political campaigns is carefully designed to influence voters and win support. The language used in campaign slogans, speeches, and advertisements is often simple, strong, and easy to remember, to ensure that the message being conveyed can be well received by a wide audience. For example, the use of phrases containing promises of change, justice, and progress are often used to attract voter sympathy. In addition, politicians also use language that reflects the values and aspirations of their target groups, such as young people, certain ethnic groups, or religious communities, to create strong emotional bonds and gain support from these groups.

Language also plays an important role in public discourse and can influence the formation of political identity. Public discourse constructed through mass media, public discussions, and political debates is often influenced by the language used. The language used in public discourse can create and reinforce certain narratives that define the political identity of certain groups. For example, the use of terms related to nationalism, pluralism, or reform can shape public perceptions of the political issues being discussed. The language used in public discourse can also influence how the public understands and responds to proposed political policies. Therefore, the control and manipulation of language in public discourse becomes an important tool for politicians and opinion leaders to influence public opinion and shape political identity.

The use of language to manipulate ethnic sentiment in a political context is also a common phenomenon in Indonesia. In a multi-ethnic society like Indonesia, language can be used to mobilize ethnic support or, conversely, to create ethnic tension. Politicians or certain interest groups sometimes use language laden with ethnic sentiment to manipulate public emotions and perceptions. For example, the use of terms containing ethnic stereotypes or prejudices can be used to trigger feelings of injustice or marginalization among certain ethnic groups. Conversely, language that

is inclusive and respectful of ethnic diversity can be used to promote social cohesion and reduce the potential for ethnic conflict. The use of language in this context shows how language can be a very effective tool in political mobilization, for both positive and negative purposes.

Language plays a complex and multifaceted role in political mobilization. The use of language on social media, in political campaigns, public discourse, and the manipulation of ethnic sentiments all demonstrate how language can be used to construct political identities and mobilize support. A deeper understanding of the role of language in political mobilization is essential for politicians, activists, and policymakers to design effective communication strategies and manage political dynamics in diverse societies. Further research on the use of language in political contexts can provide valuable insights into how language can be used to build more inclusive and democratic societies.

#### **4. Challenges and Opportunities in Language Policy**

Managing linguistic diversity in Indonesia is a complex and multifaceted challenge, given that the country has over 700 regional languages spoken by various ethnic groups. This linguistic diversity reflects Indonesia's rich culture but also poses challenges in terms of language policy. One of the main challenges is how to maintain regional languages that are threatened with extinction due to the dominance of Indonesian as the national language (Kambo & Yani, 2024). Regional languages are often marginalized in formal education and mass media, leading to a decline in the number of speakers and knowledge of these languages. The impact of the loss of regional languages is not only on the linguistic aspect but also on the cultural and social identity of the speaking community, which can affect political stability at the local and national levels.

Language plays an important role in creating social cohesion and reducing the potential for conflict in Indonesia. As the main means of communication, language can build bridges between different ethnic and cultural groups. The use of Indonesian as the language of instruction in schools and the mass media has helped create a strong national identity and increased a sense of togetherness among Indonesian citizens. However, on the other hand, the importance of regional languages cannot be ignored. Regional languages can strengthen local identity and a sense of community pride, which in turn can increase community participation in local political and development processes. A wise language policy needs to pay attention to the balance between the use of Indonesian for national cohesion and the preservation of regional languages to strengthen local identity.

Inclusiveness in language policy is a great opportunity to formulate policies that are responsive to the linguistic diversity in Indonesia. An inclusive language policy should include recognition and support for regional languages, both in the education system and in public administration. Teaching regional languages in schools, for example, not only helps preserve the language but also enriches children's education with knowledge of their local culture. In addition, the use of regional



languages in public administration can increase the accessibility of government services for communities that may not be fluent in Indonesian. Inclusiveness in language policy also means providing a platform for all ethnic groups to participate in political and social discourse, ensuring that voices from all levels of society are heard and considered.

The role of language in national development is very significant, especially in creating a just and sustainable society. Language as the main means of communication can facilitate the dissemination of information that is important for development, such as education, health, and economic policies. The language used in development communication must be understandable to all levels of society to ensure that they can actively participate in the development process. The use of Indonesian as the national language has helped disseminate development information throughout the country, but the inclusion of regional languages is also important to reach more remote communities and ensure that they are not left behind in the development process. Thus, a good language policy can support inclusive, equitable, and sustainable national development.

Overall, the challenges and opportunities in language policy in Indonesia reflect the complex dynamics between the need to maintain national unity and the importance of recognizing and supporting linguistic diversity. Addressing the challenges of linguistic diversity requires policies that are sensitive to the cultural and social identities of Indonesia's various communities. At the same time, opportunities to formulate inclusive language policies can support social cohesion, reduce the potential for conflict, and ensure that all citizens have the opportunity to participate in national development. In this context, language serves not only as a means of communication but also as a foundation for strong political and social identities and an important instrument for equitable and sustainable development. Ongoing research and dialogue on language policy will be essential to developing the most effective and responsive approaches to linguistic diversity in Indonesia.

## **E. CONCLUSION**

Language plays a very significant role in the formation of political identity and mobilization of support in Indonesia. From the colonial era to the reform era, the use of language in political contexts has experienced various dynamics, from enforcing the national language to creating unity to preserving regional languages to strengthen local identity. In the digital and globalization era, social media and political campaigns use language to build effective political narratives, while public discourse and ethnic sentiment are also influenced by the choice of language used. Language policy in Indonesia faces major challenges in managing the rich linguistic diversity while maintaining political and social stability. However, these challenges also bring opportunities to formulate policies that are inclusive and responsive to diversity. By promoting Indonesian as a tool for national unification and supporting the preservation of regional languages, language policy can play a key role in creating social cohesion, reducing the potential for conflict, and supporting equitable and

sustainable national development. In this context, language is not only a means of communication but also a foundation for strong political identity and participation in Indonesia.

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