

Silencing the Rational: Affective Publics and Power Imbalances in the Digital Discourse of Indonesia's Free Nutritious Meal Program¹

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Abstract

This study explores public participation in digital discourse related to Indonesia's Free Nutritious Meal (*Makan Bergizi Gratis/MBG*) program on the social media platform X. It examines a viral case published by Tempo on @tempodotco in X at 8 April 2026, wherein a high school student published an open letter to president requesting his free meal allocation be structurally redirected to improve teachers' welfare. This action subsequently subjected the student to severe digital intimidation. To understand how the emotional architecture of X facilitates participation while simultaneously enabling repression, this study employs a qualitative discourse analysis. Data were purposively collected from investigative news reports published on X, focusing on textual action frames and affective expressions. Grounded in the theories of affective publics (Papacharissi, 2015) and connective action (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012), the finding indicated that while students' personalized action frame temporarily mobilized organic public solidarity, this participatory space was rapidly co-opted by state-affiliated actors. Dominance actors bypassed rational deliberation by deploying affective delegitimization, injecting explicit threats to disable factual discourse. The study demonstrates that platform architectures consistently arm well-resourced state actors with the tools to suppress marginalized voices. Consequently, the public's discursive victory remains merely liminal. This study calls for an evaluation of platform governance policies to protect civil safety and freedom of expression.

Keywords: affective public, connective action, MBG (Free Nutritious Meals), political authority

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In the landscape of contemporary networked society, social media platform has shifted from being merely technical communication infrastructure to becoming a primary public space where the negotiation of values, identities, even public policy takes place. However, as an ecosystem that has undergone structural transformation, social media is never neutral. Its architecture actively conditions and directs users' social activities through mechanism of datafication, commodification, and algorithmic curation (Van Dijck et al., 2018). Activity on microblogging (Alhabash & Ma, 2017) platform like X, is now characterized by the instantaneous spreading information, context collapse, and extremely high interactions (Papacharissi, 2015).

In Indonesia, this dynamic is vividly apparent in the digital discourse surrounding the Free Nutritious Meal (*Makan Bergizi Gratis/MBG*) policy. Established to enhance human resources and prevent stunting, the program faced numerous structural and logistical hurdles during its implementation, ranging from disparities in nutritional quality to the heavy administrative burden placed on local school teachers. Consequently, discussions regarding *MBG* on X transformed into a highly turbulent and polarized discursive battleground, commodified into an attention asset that fuel sharp ideological divisions (Van Dijck et al., 2018). The clash became tangible when a high school student from Kudus published an open letter, which was later reported by Tempo as a news on X, rationally rejecting their *MBG* allocation to advocate for underpaid teachers. Instead of constructive policy deliberation, the student's connective action was countered with severe digital repression and intimidation from state-affiliated actors.

While existing literature often celebrates social media's ability to scale up connective action (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012), there is a critical need to examine how these platform

enable systemic repression by dominant actors. Therefore, this article aims to investigate the intersection of civic participation and affective delegitimization. Specifically, it seeks to address two research objectives, firstly is how marginalized citizens articulate connective action through digital logic and how state-affiliated actors utilize affective delegitimization to suppress these critical voices. Understanding this dynamic is essential to uncovering how structural power imbalances and digital authoritarianism are reproduced within contemporary Southeast Asia democracies.

Literature Review

Civic Participation Connective Action

The advent of digital media has structurally changed politics, shifting from organizationally collective action to digitally enabled connective action. Unlike traditional collective action which relies heavily on formal organizations and rigid collective identities, connective action operates through decentralized digital network based on the sharing of personalized action frames (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). These inclusive, easily adaptable ideas, empower marginalized citizens to articulate personal emotion that resonate rapidly with broader publics. Through these digital structures of storytelling, an isolated personal opinion can transform into an open signifier (Papacharissi, 2016) that invites widespread engagement, allowing marginalized group to overcome real-world structural constraints and claim civic semantic agency. However, recent case on civic participation indicate that this structure makes public movements highly precarious (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). The absence of the institutional protection provided by formal organisations leaves individual citizen participating in this connective movement frequently lose their resilience due to their loosely tide nature and become vulnerable to online harassment designed to silence alternative narratives.

Affective Publics and Emotional Architecture

As citizens share these personalized action frames, they convene affective publics (Papacharissi, 2015), networked public formations mobilized and connected not based on rigid formal ideological alignments, but through the alignment of sentiment or affective attunement (Papacharissi, 2015). To comprehend this dynamic, it is important to distinguish affect from mere emotion. Affect operates as a pre-emotive intensity that drives the urgency to act within ambient structures of feeling, where factual reporting and emotional blend together (Papacharissi, 2015).

On X, this theory operates through a potent combination of users' personal expression and the platform architecture, which acts as a modulator of collective emotion (Papacharissi, 2015). The utilization of technical features, such as retweets (Alhabash & Ma, 2017), hashtags, and mentions, provides a communicative infrastructure that is inherently phatic and rhythmic. Within this situation, the act of instantaneous, sequential retweeting functions as a networked chorus or a networked refrain (Papacharissi, 2016) capable of multiplying the visibility of a single opinion into a massive discursive wave. Furthermore, driven by the political economy datafication and commodification, platform algorithms inherently favor content that triggers public debates, which highlight disagreement between people's political beliefs.

Platform Governance and Digital Repression

While affective publics afford visibility to public or grassroots voices, they expose marginalized actors to severe discursive manipulation. In the context of Southeast Asia digital politics, state authorities increasingly deploy sophisticated modes of systemic suppression to exercise affective control (Papacharissi, 2015) within the network (Van Dijck et al., 2018). This situation marks the rise of digital authoritarianism, wherein the state reproduce repression not only through physical confrontation but by exploiting the structural asymmetries inherent in

platform architecture. Through the mobilization of state-affiliated actor, authorities utilize algorithmic amplification and comment spamming to vague the substance of public critique.

This mechanism operates through affective delegitimization. Instead of countering rational critiques with factual evidence, these state-affiliated actors inject intense emotional aggression and contextual distortion into the discourse to cause fear among public. The intensity of this affective threat functionally disables the actual fact, substituting it with an affective fact rooted in intimidation. Consequently, public attention is deliberately diverted, achieving informational suppression that restores the curated social order of state authority. Despite there are many studies that examine how state-affiliated actor working for the state, these studies mostly focus on macro-level political events, such as presidential election or large-scale orchestrated disinformation campaigns. There remains a gap in understanding the micro-level dynamics of affective delegitimization, specifically how these actors use localize intimidation to suppress individual, data-driven critiques from marginalized citizen, such as minor in everyday public policy discourse. By examine the digital repression surrounding *MBG*, this study illustrates that digital authoritarianism operates not only through mass propaganda, but also by using emotional attack to disrupt public movements. This highlights the urgent need for strong platform governance to protect citizens from state-affiliate actor affective repression.

Methods

Research Design and Data Sources

This study employs a qualitative discourse analysis to examine the discursive practices in digital spaces. Data were purposively collected from two specific news posted by *Tempo*, one of Indonesia mainstream media, on their X account, *@tempodotco*, titled “*Students Who*

Wrote to Prabowo Opposing the MBG Are Being Intimidated.” and “BGN Denies That Students in Kudus Were Intimidated by SPPG Employees.” which uploaded on April 8, 2026. These posts selected because they were uploaded on the exact same day, perfectly capturing a discursive contradiction between the reality of public repression and the state’s institutional denial.

Analytical Procedure

The analytical procedure contrast two opposing narrative textures, the rational, connective action initiated by the marginalized student against the affective delegitimization deployed by the government. This juxtaposition aims to map how platform features facilitate organic solidarity while simultaneously functioning as tools for hegemonic repression.

Ethical Considerations

Given that the primary subject of the intimidation is a minor, strict ethical protocols were applied. Although their identity mentioned in the news, the real name and specific private identifiers of the student have been entirely anonymized in this study to protect them against further doxxing or digital harassment.

Result and Discussion

The direct confrontation between citizen and the state in digital space within policy discourse is manifested in the case of a high school student from Kudus, Central Java. As reported by Tempo in their X account, @tempodotco, on April 8, 2026, the student exercised his digital semantic agency on X by writing an open letter to the President regarding the *MBG* program. This is the evident that the student constructed a powerful personalized action frame (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012) to voice a personal rejection of their food allocation. Rather than viewing the policy through the lens of absolute material food urgency for themselves, the student from Kudus offered an alternative

logic, they requested that the budget allocation for their *MBG* to be structurally reallocated to ensure the allowance and a decent living standard for underpaid public school teachers.

The student translated their personal rejection of the *MBG* allocation into a basic mathematic. Quoted directly from the Tempo investigation, the student logically articulating their stance by stating, *“Saat ini saya masih memiliki sekitar satu setengah tahun masa belajar di SMK. Jika dihitung secara sederhana, (18 bulan x 25 hari x Rp 15 ribu = Rp 6.750.000)”* (Shabrina, Pelajar yang Surati Prabowo Tolak MBG Mengalami Intimidasi, 2026) or "Currently I still have about one and a half years of study at the vocational school. If calculated simply, (18 months x 25 days x Rp 15,000 = Rp 6,750,000)". Their *MBG* allocation for the student is approximately \$375 for the remainder of their schooling. This number is considerably higher than the basic salary for teachers in public schools, which is lower than that.

Through this calculation, they proposed structural reallocation funds toward the allowance of underpaid teachers. They advocate this demand by stating, *"Jika memungkinkan, dana yang seharusnya dialokasikan untuk saya kiranya dapat dialihkan sebagai tambahan tunjangan bagi guru-guru saya"* (Shabrina, Pelajar yang Surati Prabowo Tolak MBG Mengalami Intimidasi, 2026) or "If possible, the funds that should be allocated to me could perhaps be redirected as additional allowances for my teachers". This specific data-driven demand functioned as an open signifier that resonated deeply with broader networked public. Because the issue of teachers' welfare is highly sensitive in Indonesia, the post instantly catalyzed a massive affective attunement (Papacharissi, 2015) among netizens. This situation were supported through X architecture, where retweets, likes, and replies act as affective modulators (Papacharissi, 2015) and launched digital networked refrain (Papacharissi, 2015) which demonstrated how a marginalized citizen could claim semantic agency and disrupt the state's curated narrative without requiring a formal institution or organization.

Figure 1

Headline News on @tempodotco, “Students Who Wrote to Prabowo Opposing the MBG Are Being Intimidated”



However, as this post gained high visibility on X, as shown in figure 1, it was abruptly intersected by severe discursive narration. The consequences following the aspiration being published, placed the student in a highly vulnerable and threatened position. As reported by Tempo in their X account, shown in figure 1, a state-affiliated actor who also an employee of Nutritional Fulfillment Service Unit (*Satuan Pelayanan Pemenuhan Gizi/SPPG*), the field-level implementing agency of the MBG policy, resorted to direct digital intimidation to suppress the student's voice. They sent direct messages to the student containing explicit physical threats and profanities stating in Javanese, “*Senggol di depanku sini. Berani DM aku apa tidak? Njing, anjing?*” (Shabrina, Pelajar yang Surati Prabowo Tolak MBG Mengalami Intimidasi, 2026) which has a meaning, “Fight me here in front of my face. Do you dare to DM me or not? You piece of a shit!”.

This chat are not merely expression of anger, they function as a release of pre-emotive intensity (Papacharissi, 2015) intended to dominate the discursive space (Papacharissi, 2016). The state-affiliated actor deliberately injected intense emotional aggression to violently disrupt

the connective continuity of the student's rational discourse. Importantly, instead of contest the mathematical calculation or the reality of underpaid teachers, they weaponizing emotion using intensity of the profanities, which functionally disabled the actual fact, substituting the logical premise of the debate with an affective fact rooted in fear, dominance, and aggression. This situation illustrates the micro-dynamics of digital authoritarianism, where online harassment spills over into the real life, resulting psychological pressure and administrative reprimands from authorities who felt their systemic narrative stability was disrupted by the students.

This asymmetry of power relation in X as platformized public sphere was finalized by the official response from the state actor itself, as shown in figure 2, which published by Tempo on their X account, @tempodotco, on the exact same day. The article was titled as "BGN Denies That Students in Kudus Were Intimidated by SPPG Employees", following the viral escalation of the student's intimidation case. The Head of the National Nutrition Agency (*Badan Gizi Nasional/BGN*), Dadan Hindayana, issued an institutional counter-narrative through the linked news report, firmly denying any acts of intimidation by their state-affiliator.

Figure 2

Headline News on @tempodotco at 8 April 2026, "BGN Denies That Students in Kudus Were Intimidated by SPPG Employees."



As documented by Tempo on this article, the state's refutation rested on four specific claims, declaring that an internal investigation found no evidence of intimidation, as shown on figure 3, isolating the student by claiming they were the only one in the school who rejected the program, and also weaponizing alternative quantitative data by highlighting that most of students agreed to continue *MBG* in a school-facilitated vote, and unilaterally concluding that the case had been resolved well (Shabrina, 2026).

Figure 3

Statement from Head of BGN, Dadan, denying the intimidation



From the political-economy perspective of digital media, this official refutation is not merely an ordinary bureaucratic denial, but a structured instrument of affective control designed to neutralize narrative disruption and restore the positive image of the strategic national program (Papacharissi, 2015; Van Dijck et al., 2018). By leveraging its institutional authority to delegitimize the student's opinion, specifically by utilizing voting statistics to frame the dissenting student as a mere anomaly and hastily declaring the problem resolved, the state effectively shut down the student semantic agency.

The denial produced by the Head of BGN demonstrates a systematic effort by the government to exercise hegemony over facts and monopolize discursive truth in the public sphere. By leveraging its institutional authority, the state attempted to re-curate (selection) the

empirical reality on the ground, injecting it back into the cyber network to silence the ripples of solidarity emanating from the public's connective action (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Van Dijck et al., 2018). Positioned as an opposition to the "state's version of facts," the student's testimony was delegitimized through semantic repression, effectively shutting down the student's agency while granting moral legitimacy for state-affiliated actor to continue their affective containment against similar critical opinions on X's timeline (Papacharissi, 2016).

This unilateral denial from state apparatuses did not de-escalate public sentiment; on the contrary, it triggered a new wave of distrust among discordant digital publics. Based on empirical data from gathered netizens' comments, the digital public responded to this silencing narrative by constructing radical assumptions regarding the nature of the ruling regime. Netizens openly linked the physical and administrative repression experienced by the student to the leadership characteristics of President Prabowo, as shown as figure 4. There was a strong tendency within the commentary section where the public suspected that the local intimidation was a direct manifestation or an implicit command originating from the apex of the power hierarchy (Papacharissi, 2015). Such statements demonstrate how a local case was discursively elevated to symbolize a new form of national authoritarianism.

Figure 4

A Few Comments on "Students Who Wrote to Prabowo Opposing the MBG Are Being Intimidated" Post



The structures of storytelling produced by these netizens' comments confirm the operation of affective attunement based on fear and political cynicism (Papacharissi, 2016). Netizens utilized X's architecture to mutually validate the assumption that the democratic space for ordinary citizens has undergone massive contraction. Through the platform's mechanism of datafication, comments harboring suspicions against President Prabowo and his regime gained high traction, as they triggered the emotional polarization favored by the commodification algorithm (Van Dijck et al., 2018). Consequently, instead of focusing on the substantive improvements of MBG program governance or the restructuring of honorary teachers' allowances, the digital discourse completely shifted into a stage for evaluating the moral character of power.

Ultimately, the contradiction of claims between the Head of BGN's statement, the suffering student in Kudus, and the speculative resistance from netizens confirms the liminal boundaries of citizen resistance in the digital age. Although social media architecture temporarily granted a fleeting discursive victory to the public through viral critiques and sharp oppositional comments, the material power of institutional state hegemony retains a latent capacity to limit the real-world impact of such movements. The official denial of intimidation forcibly severs the digital public's supply of empathy, while the escalation of cynical comments from netizens frequently ends up as mere emotional catharsis without providing concrete institutional protection for the victim in the real world. This case proves that under the shadow of state control and platform architecture, the freedom of expression for marginalized citizens is often recognized merely as a temporary digital residue before being entirely subdued by the physical machinery of structural power.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the digital contestation surrounding Indonesia's *MBG* program manifests as a platformized public sphere deeply entangled in asymmetric power relations. The architecture of social media actively conditions the formation of affective publics and inherently favors dominant state actors, arming them with emotional weapons to achieve informational suppression. The official deployment of affective control and localized intimidation proves that without formal institutional protections, the public's communicative victories on social media remain merely liminal and temporary before being disrupted and driven into stasis by the state's structural hegemony.

However, this study acknowledges certain limitations. Relying primarily on a single qualitative case study limits the broader generalizability of the finding across different policy contexts. Future research should expand this analytical framework to other algorithmic platforms, such as Tiktok or Instagram, to map how varied digital infrastructures facilitate or disrupt state affective control. Ultimately, this paper contributes to media studies in Southeast Asia by explicitly synthesizing micro-affective dynamics with platform structural power, calling for a comprehensive re-evaluation of digital platform governance to prioritize civil safety and protect the critical literacy of marginalized citizens from bureaucratic fear.

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