

## Meme Culture and Social Critique: Representations of Politics, Religion, and Nationalism in Indonesian Cyberspace

Firayani<sup>□</sup>

UIN STS Jambi

e-mail: [firayani60@gmail.com](mailto:firayani60@gmail.com)

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### ABSTRACT

This study analyzes how meme culture in Indonesian cyberspace represents and critiques politics, religion and nationalism through multimodal visual expressions. Using a qualitative approach grounded in multimodal critical discourse analysis, the research examines symbolic structures, intertextual cues and discursive functions embedded within widely circulated memes. Findings indicate that political memes act as vernacular tools for challenging authority, expressing dissatisfaction with governance and constructing alternative political narratives. Religious memes blend sacred symbolism with humor, enabling youth to renegotiate moral expectations and religious identity within digital environments. Nationalistic memes simultaneously reinforce patriotic sentiment and critique institutional shortcomings, revealing ambivalent relationships between civic pride and political frustration. Across these domains, meme culture facilitates both playful political participation and antagonistic discourse, sometimes escalating polarization through humor mediated hostility. The integrated analysis demonstrates that memes operate as cultural artifacts that shape public interpretation of sociopolitical events by simplifying complex issues into accessible visual rhetoric. Memes thus function not only as entertainment but also as influential discursive instruments within Indonesia's digital public sphere. Future research should explore demographic variations in meme interpretation and the algorithmic dynamics that shape meme visibility in online platforms.

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### INTRODUCTION

Meme culture has emerged as one of the most influential forms of digital expression in the contemporary mediascape, functioning as a participatory language



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through which social critique, political commentary and cultural negotiation are articulated across global and local contexts. The expansion of meme practices in Indonesia mirrors a global trend where digital users employ humor, irony and visual remixing to respond to political events and ideological discourses, shaping new modes of public deliberation in cyberspace. Scholars note that memes have evolved into semiotic artifacts that circulate rapidly, carrying ideological leanings, emotional cues and narrative framings that influence public imaginaries (Wiggins, 2019). In Indonesia, the proliferation of political, religious and nationalist memes reflects not only shifts in communication patterns but also the intensifying contestation of meanings within digital political culture. This phenomenon aligns with Denisova's (2019) observation that memes constitute a dynamic medium of civic engagement that encodes social dynamics within easily disseminated visual forms.

The increasing relevance of memes in political discourse is evident in how Indonesian users remix images of public figures, events and cultural symbols into humorous or critical representations that stimulate public conversation. Political memes circulating during elections have been shown to contribute to the formation of collective opinions and participatory discussions that characterize digital democracy (Andriani, 2019). These forms of engagement parallel global patterns where meme circulation shapes political humor and critique, as seen in Baishya's (2021) analysis of memetic mockery directed at right wing political actors in India. Indonesian meme culture thus operates within a wider ecosystem of digital political expression, highlighting how humor mediated critique becomes instrumental in contesting authority and shaping perceptions of leadership, governance and national identity.

Religious memes also occupy a significant space in Indonesian digital environments, reflecting the complex entanglement of religion, popular culture and identity politics. Studies have shown that religiously themed memes may blend satire with doctrinal references, providing avenues for reinterpretation and negotiation of religious authority (Mustajab et al., 2018). Similar dynamics are observed globally, where religious memes merge sacred symbolism with pop cultural formats, producing hybrid narratives that challenge traditional discursive boundaries (Cannizzaro, 2016). In the Indonesian context, meme practices often intersect with *dakwah* digital, where religious influencers and ordinary users employ visuals and humor to convey moral messages, critique social behavior or reinforce communal norms (Sunaryanto, 2023). Such practices highlight how meme culture amplifies religious discourse while simultaneously opening spaces for dissent, reinterpretation and playful negotiations of morality.

Nationalism represents another domain strongly shaped by meme production in Indonesian cyberspace. Political communication during electoral cycles showcases how memes are used to express support for candidates, promote civic identification and reinforce nationalistic sentiments (Basuki, 2017). The mediatization of nationalism often occurs through symbol laden meme artifacts that depict national heroes, historical narratives or cultural pride, shaping public imagination in ways that reflect both unity and polarization. Similar trends can be identified globally, where memes contribute to the construction of imagined communities online by circulating semiotic markers that reinforce collective identities (Sulianta, 2024). In Indonesia, these nationalistic expressions coexist with satirical memes that challenge official narratives and critique political elites, demonstrating the multifunctionality of memes as instruments of both affirmation and resistance.

The circulation of memes related to politics, religion and nationalism also intersects with the broader challenge of digital polarization and online hostility. The rapid spread of meme based hate speech has been documented as a significant issue in Southeast Asian digital spaces, where visual humor is weaponized to target minority groups and reinforce exclusionary identities (Zamri et al., 2023). In Indonesia, similar patterns of derogatory memetic expressions emerge within political conflicts and ideological debates, contributing to the amplification of antagonism and othering (Margono et al., 2024). These findings resonate with Dafaure's (2020) analysis of the "great meme war," which describes the strategic use of memes to shape ideological battles and mobilize online communities in confrontational political struggles. Thus, while memes serve as tools for critique and creativity, they also carry risks associated with digitally mediated conflict.

Furthermore, the role of memes as narrative vehicles has become increasingly significant during socio political crises, including the COVID 19 pandemic. The work of de Saint Laurent et al. (2021) shows how pandemic related memes encode partial stories that represent political tensions, institutional mistrust and public sentiment. These insights parallel Indonesian conditions, where political crisis memes function as symbolic commentaries on state performance, civic responsibility and collective trauma. Memes also serve as forms of grassroots communication that articulate alternative readings of political events, enabling ordinary citizens to participate in shaping political narratives beyond institutional narratives (Ilham, 2017).

The interplay between meme culture and identity politics has further been documented in the Indonesian context, particularly concerning youth engagement. Imron (2019) argues that memes become instruments through which millennial and Gen Z users articulate identity positions, negotiate belonging and mobilize political participation. The rise of consumerist and influencer driven digital cultures enriches this landscape, as young users increasingly operate within pop culture hegemonies while shaping social critique through meme circulation (Karimalely, 2025). This generational shift underscores the emergence of memes as vernacular political tools that contribute to the shaping of contemporary ideological articulations.

Despite the growing literature on political communication, digital religion and online nationalism, there remain gaps in understanding how memes simultaneously represent and critique politics, religion and nationalism within the Indonesian socio digital environment. The first gap emerges in Andriani's (2019) study, which focused on political memes but did not examine their interconnectedness with religious or nationalistic narratives. The second gap lies in Mustajab et al. (2018), whose analysis of Islamic memes did not address how religious visual discourse intersects with political or nationalist imagery. The third gap appears in research by Zamri et al. (2023), which concentrated on hate speech in memes but did not explore the constructive or satirical functions of memes in political and religious critique. These gaps show that existing scholarship often isolates political, religious or nationalistic dimensions rather than analyzing their interwoven representations in Indonesian cyberspace.

The novelty of the present study lies in offering an integrated analysis of how memes represent politics, religion and nationalism simultaneously, highlighting cross cutting themes, symbolic patterns and ideological negotiations within Indonesian digital culture. This study contributes original insights by synthesizing memetic representations across three major domains of social critique and examining how users employ humor, symbolism and visual rhetoric to articulate complex socio political

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commentaries. Therefore, the aim of this research is to analyze how meme culture in Indonesia constructs, critiques and negotiates representations of politics, religion and nationalism through visual and narrative strategies that circulate widely in contemporary cyberspace.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This research employed a qualitative content analysis approach grounded in multimodal critical discourse analysis to investigate how memes construct representations of politics, religion and nationalism in Indonesian cyberspace. Following theoretical principles outlined in multimodal discourse scholarship, the study analyzed visual elements, textual captions, intertextual references and symbolic framings embedded within selected memes (Moussa et al., 2020). The method was chosen because memes constitute multimodal artifacts whose meanings emerge from the interaction between image, text and cultural context. This approach allows for the identification of ideological cues, rhetorical structures and narrative patterns that operate within meme circulation.

Data were collected from public social media platforms where memes related to national politics, religious debates and nationalist discourse frequently circulate. The selection of memes followed purposive sampling criteria, focusing on visuals that explicitly referenced political figures, religious symbols or national identity markers. The analytic procedure consisted of three stages: descriptive categorization of visual components, interpretive coding of discursive themes and critical examination of socio political meanings within Indonesian digital culture. The analysis integrated visual semiotics, discourse analysis and contextual interpretation to trace how humor, parody and symbolic exaggeration were used to critique power relations and articulate collective identities. This methodological design ensures depth in capturing the cultural significance and sociopolitical implications of memetic representations in the Indonesian online environment.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Political Semiotics and Power Negotiation in Indonesian Meme Culture**

Political memes in Indonesian cyberspace function as vernacular discourses through which citizens negotiate power relations, critique authority and construct alternative political narratives. The multimodal structure of memes allows political critique to be expressed through layered symbolism, intertextual references and humorous exaggerations that make complex political realities more accessible to the public. This aligns with Denisova's (2019) argument that memes operate as concise cultural texts that condense ideological meanings into shareable and easily recognizable formats. In Indonesia, memetic critique frequently targets political elites, controversial policies and electoral campaigns, allowing users to engage in acts of symbolic resistance through humor and satire. The resonance of political memes becomes particularly visible during election cycles, where supporters and opponents deploy images to affirm identity positions, delegitimize rivals and frame political events through emotionally charged humor (Andriani, 2019).

Visual and rhetorical techniques commonly employed in Indonesian political memes include caricature, irony, juxtaposition and symbolic distortion. These multimodal strategies enable citizens to expose contradictions in political communication and highlight perceived failures of governance. Scholars have noted that

memes function as semiotic weapons that destabilize official narratives by recontextualizing political events in humorous or critical ways (Wiggins, 2019). In the Indonesian context, this destabilization frequently occurs through the remixing of political figures' images into exaggerated poses or situational frames that reveal underlying tensions in public trust. The discursive power of such representations parallels global trends in memetic political critique, such as the widespread use of political humor targeting right wing nationalist movements documented by Baishya (2021). These forms of satire operate as a counterpublic discourse, enabling marginalized voices to participate in political conversations through accessible visual rhetoric.

Political memes also contribute to the reconfiguration of public opinion by shaping perceptions of leadership, credibility and institutional legitimacy. During moments of political crisis or controversy, memes often become sites where public frustration is articulated through sarcasm and symbolic inversion. This dynamic aligns with the findings of de Saint Laurent et al. (2021), who demonstrate that memes produced during sociopolitical emergencies can function as partial narratives that frame public sentiment and reflect collective anxieties. In Indonesia, similar patterns emerged during national crises, where memes circulated widely as citizens expressed concerns about governance failures, corruption and public accountability. Through the circulation of such visual commentaries, memes become a form of grassroots political communication that supplements and sometimes challenges institutional discourse.

Furthermore, political memes help create imagined collectivities in the digital sphere. Users who share similar ideological views often congregate within meme communities, reinforcing group identities and producing memetic narratives that reflect shared political visions. This pattern resonates with Sulianta's (2024) observation that digital interactions contribute to the formation of imagined communities in cyberspace. Memes thus operate not only as individual acts of expression but also as collective performances of identity, where political belonging is reinforced through humor and shared symbolic knowledge. In Indonesia, these dynamics contribute to the formation of distinct political subcultures, from nationalist meme groups to satirical communities that critique government authority.

Despite their humorous nature, political memes can also fuel polarization by amplifying antagonistic framings and reducing complex political issues into simplified dichotomies. Scholars have observed that memetic discourse may reinforce echo chambers where users engage primarily with content that reflects their ideological preferences (Margono et al., 2024). In Indonesian political meme culture, this phenomenon emerges when memes portraying opponents as incompetent, immoral or untrustworthy circulate widely, reinforcing stereotypes and deepening divisions within digital publics. While such memetic expressions offer valuable insights into public sentiment, they also challenge democratic deliberation by encouraging reductive interpretations of political conflict.

The duality of political memes as both democratic tools and instruments of polarization reflects the multifaceted nature of digital political communication. On one hand, political memes democratize participation by enabling ordinary users to articulate critique without institutional mediation. On the other hand, they can perpetuate disinformation, hostility or ideological rigidity. The present analysis highlights that Indonesian political memes contain intricate symbolic structures that reveal ongoing

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negotiations of power, legitimacy and civic identity in contemporary digital environments.

### **Religious Imagery, Nationalistic Narratives and the Intersections of Identity in Meme Circulation**

Religious memes represent a complex interplay between sacred texts, doctrinal teachings, humor and popular culture. In Indonesia, where religion is deeply embedded in socio cultural life, memes serve as mediating artifacts that reinterpret religious norms and comment on moral issues through accessible visual formats. This dynamic parallels Cannizzaro's (2016) view of digital semiosis, wherein memes function as signs that circulate within culturally grounded interpretive systems. Religious memes often combine Qur'anic references, Islamic iconography or depictions of religious figures with humorous captions that communicate moral critiques or social reminders. Such hybridization creates flexible spaces of meaning making that allow younger audiences to negotiate religious identity in relatable and contemporary ways (Mustajab et al., 2018).

These religious expressions also intersect with political discourses, particularly when memes address issues such as sectarian tensions, religious authority or state regulation of religious practices. Scholars observing global trends note that the blending of religious symbolism with political memes can intensify ideological conflict, as seen in similar studies of religious meme culture across Southeast Asia (Zamri et al., 2023). In Indonesia, the convergence of religion and politics in memes often reflects broader identity debates, where users navigate tensions between religiosity, civic duty and nationalism. This convergence underscores the role of memetic discourse in shaping public understanding of religious and political authority within contested sociocultural spaces (Imron, 2019).

Nationalistic memes further complicate these intersections by embedding symbols of national pride, historical memory and civic identity into humorous digital expressions. These memes frequently invoke national heroes, flags and patriotic slogans to evoke collective identification or critique the state from within nationalistic frameworks. Such practices mirror global tendencies in which memes serve to negotiate national identity through playful reimagining of collective symbols (Mortensen & Neumayer, 2021). In the Indonesian context, nationalism themed memes often appear during political campaigns, national holidays and sports events, reflecting the emotional intensity of collective belonging. These memes may critique political leaders while simultaneously reinforcing pride in national identity, demonstrating the ambivalent relationship between nationalism and political dissent (Hasfi et al., 2017).

To demonstrate the thematic relationships among political, religious and nationalistic memes, the following full grid table synthesizes key categories observed in Indonesian meme circulation.

**Tabel 1. Integrated Themes in Indonesian Political, Religious and Nationalistic Memes**

Theme Category	Representative Visual Elements	Discursive Function	Sociocultural Implication
Political Critique	Caricatures of politicians, policy symbols, parliamentary imagery	Satire, delegitimization of authority, public accountability critique	Reflects democratic participation and challenges to institutional legitimacy
Religious Commentary	Islamic iconography, Qur'anic phrases, religious figures	Moral reminders, doctrinal reinterpretation, critique of religious practices	Negotiates religious identity and authority in digital youth culture
Nationalistic Representation	Flags, national heroes, historical symbols	Collective identity reinforcement, patriotic sentiment	Strengthens imagined communities and civic solidarity
Identity Politics	Stereotypes, gendered imagery, cultural markers	Negotiation of belonging, resistance, social labeling	Highlights tensions around identity, marginalization and ideological conflict
Digital Morality	Humor around ethics, social norms, shared values	Behavioral critique, normative reinforcement	Shapes moral expectations in online communities

The table illustrates how Indonesian memes operate across interconnected domains that shape public discourse. Political memes often intersect with religious symbolism, while nationalistic memes incorporate political critique within patriotic framings. These overlapping representations show that meme culture cannot be understood through isolated categories; rather, it functions as a dynamic field where identities, beliefs and political sentiments interact through humor and visual rhetoric. This is consistent with Moussa et al.'s (2020) argument that memes represent tactical social actions capable of challenging or reinforcing sociopolitical structures. The Indonesian case confirms that memes play a central role in visualizing cultural negotiation and articulating collective anxieties within digital publics.

### **Memetic Contention, Digital Conflict, and the Cultural Politics of Indonesian Cyberspace**

The circulation of memes that address politics, religion and nationalism in Indonesian cyberspace reflects broader contestations over meaning, authority and identity within a rapidly evolving digital society. These memetic interactions often take the form of symbolic battles in which users engage in ideological struggle through humor, irony and visual shorthand. This pattern parallels what Dafaure (2020) described as the “great meme war,” a phenomenon where competing social groups weaponize memes to advance ideological agendas, delegitimize opponents and recruit supporters. In Indonesia, this memetic contention is evident in online confrontations between political camps, religious communities and nationalist groups, particularly during moments of heightened sociopolitical tension. Through such discursive clashes, memes become cultural weapons that simplify complex issues into emotionally charged symbols, enabling rapid mobilization of sentiment across digital publics.

The dynamic interplay between critique and conflict in meme circulation raises questions regarding the role of digital platforms in shaping public discourse. Margono et al. (2024) highlight how social media environments in Indonesia facilitate escalating hate speech as users remix disparaging images into dehumanizing or exclusionary

memes. The multimodal nature of memes enhances the persuasive force of such expressions because humor serves as a protective rhetorical shield that normalizes antagonism. This normalization contributes to the construction of “othering” narratives in which political opponents, religious minorities or ideological adversaries are visually framed as inferior or morally suspect, aligning with the mechanisms of digital hostility documented by Zamri et al. (2023). These patterns underscore the ambivalence of meme culture as both a participatory communicative form and a potential amplifier of prejudice and polarization.

Yet meme circulation in Indonesia does not only intensify conflict; it also encourages creative reinterpretation of contentious sociopolitical issues. Mortensen and Neumayer (2021) argue that memes facilitate “playful politics,” enabling users to engage in political reflection through humor rather than direct confrontation. In Indonesia, this playful mode of political participation manifests in memes that critique corruption, parody political promises or expose inconsistencies in public policy. Such humorous reflections help democratize political discourse by lowering barriers to engagement, allowing younger and less politically experienced users to participate in civic discussion. This aligns with the findings of Rakhmani et al. (2023), who observed that digital political practices during the pandemic relied on memetic improvisation to articulate frustration toward neoliberal governance. Memes therefore function simultaneously as outlets for emotional release and as tools for public reasoning.

Religion related memes also highlight the interplay between critique and conflict, as users reinterpret sacred teachings or moral expectations in ways that occasionally provoke backlash from more conservative audiences. Sunaryanto (2023) notes that religious memes can facilitate dakwah in innovative and accessible forms, yet the same techniques may trigger controversy when humor is perceived as disrespectful. This tension reflects broader anxieties about religious representation in digital spaces and the struggle over who holds authority to interpret doctrine. The incorporation of moral messaging, satire or symbolic parody in religious memes shows that Indonesian youth actively negotiate their religious identities in an environment where humor and piety coexist. These interactions illustrate the cultural fluidity that characterizes digital religion and demonstrate how memes allow for experimentation with religious meaning while also generating contestation among communities.

Nationalism themed memes, meanwhile, reveal how digital communities mobilize patriotic sentiments in ways that can either unify or divide. Basuki (2017) demonstrates that national identity is frequently expressed through dramatized political performances on social media, a finding that resonates with the memetic emphasis on heroism, historical symbolism and civic pride. Nationalistic memes often blend pride with critique, suggesting both attachment to national values and disillusionment with state institutions. This ambivalence reflects the complexity of Indonesian nationalism in the digital age, where users simultaneously celebrate cultural identity and call attention to governance failures. Such dual expressions mirror global trends in which digital nationalism is both affirming and contentious, highlighting the multifaceted nature of online identity politics (Literat & Van Den Berg, 2019).

Collectively, these findings underscore that Indonesian meme culture operates as a vibrant arena in which political, religious and nationalistic discourses collide, overlap and transform. Memes do not merely reflect public opinion; they actively shape it by offering interpretive frameworks through which users make sense of national events, moral dilemmas and ideological conflicts. The multimodal flexibility of memes enables

users to navigate the emotional and symbolic complexities of sociopolitical life while articulating critique in visually compelling forms. Building on existing scholarship, the present analysis reveals that Indonesian memes function as cultural barometers that register shifting social sentiments and highlight emerging tensions within digital publics. Their significance lies not only in their humor but also in their ability to negotiate meaning across competing ideological landscapes.

## CONCLUSION

This study concludes that meme culture in Indonesian cyberspace plays a central role in shaping social critique and negotiating representations of politics, religion and nationalism. Political memes provide humorous yet incisive avenues for challenging authority and articulating dissatisfaction with governance, while religious memes offer flexible spaces for negotiating identity, morality and doctrinal interpretation. Nationalistic memes simultaneously reinforce collective belonging and critique institutional shortcomings, revealing the complex and often ambivalent relationship between civic pride and political frustration. The analysis also shows that tension, humor and conflict intersect within memetic discourse, contributing to the formation of digital publics that actively participate in constructing sociopolitical meaning.

Based on these findings, it is recommended that future digital literacy education emphasize critical engagement with memetic content, helping users recognize ideological framings, symbolic manipulations and the potential risks of polarization embedded within meme practices. Scholars and educators should also explore strategies for fostering responsible meme creation that supports civic dialogue rather than hostility. Further research may examine how algorithmic patterns influence meme visibility, how different demographic groups interpret memetic symbols or how memetic discourse contributes to long term shifts in political and religious identity formation.

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