

Political Imaging, Power, and Legal Accountability: A Normative Analysis

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Received: July 23, 2025

Revised: August 27, 2025

Accepted: September 07, 2025

Published: September 25 2025

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Abstract: *Political imaging is an inseparable phenomenon from the dynamics of modern democracy in Indonesia. Through imaging, political actors seek to build public legitimacy in order to gain and maintain power. However, in practice, political imaging often exceeds the legal boundaries by adopting manipulative practices such as spreading hoaxes, vote buying, or misusing state facilities. This situation raises two fundamental questions: how the role of political imaging can be understood from the perspective of Indonesia's positive law, and what forms of legal accountability should apply when such practices contradict legal norms and the ethics of governance. This study aims to analyze the role of political imaging within the framework of positive law and examine mechanisms of legal accountability for such violations. The method employed is normative legal research using statutory and conceptual approaches, supported by an analysis of current phenomena such as the rise of public demonstrations expressing dissatisfaction with the discrepancy between political imagery and policy reality. The findings indicate that political imaging is legally legitimate as long as it complies with electoral regulations and the principles of clean governance. However, when misused, accountability may take the form of administrative, criminal, ethical, or political sanctions. Public demonstrations are thus interpreted as a form of social correction and political accountability exercised by the people, highlighting the importance of enforcing the rule of law to ensure that political imaging truly serves as a healthy democratic communication tool.*

Keywords: *Political Imaging; Power; Legal Accountability; Positive Law; Democracy; Public Demonstration*

INTRODUCTION

In contemporary political developments, political imaging occupies a strategic position as one of the key instruments to obtain and maintain power¹. Advances in information technology, mass media, and digital platforms have expanded the arena of political communication, so that political activity is no longer understood merely as a contest of ideas and policies, but also as a construction of image representation. Political actors, through sophisticated use of advertising, branding, and digital narratives, often seek to craft appealing personas that resonate emotionally with the public. This personalization of politics, while effective in mobilizing support, risks reducing complex policy debates into simplified slogans or symbolic

¹ Maria Silvya E. Wangga, Pertanggungjawaban Pidana Partai Politik sebagai Badan Hukum dalam Tindak Pidana Korupsi, INTEGRITAS, Vol. 4 No. 2, 2018, Page 255-278

gestures. Consequently, political orientation may gradually shift from substantive programs toward symbolic representation, where appearance, popularity, and perception management overshadow rational discourse and evidence-based policymaking. Such a transformation generates serious implications for democratic practice, as it can erode the foundations of deliberation, accountability, and citizen participation, leading to a form of democracy that is procedural in form but hollow in substance.

Conceptually, political imaging can be regarded as a legitimate form of political communication insofar as it aligns with positive law and political ethics. However, in practice, deviations often occur, such as the misuse of state facilities, covert campaigning, vote buying disguised as promotion, and the dissemination of misleading information (hoaxes). These practices raise juridical problems, as they create tension between the freedom of political expression and legal restrictions intended to safeguard the integrity of democracy. The situation becomes more complex when political imaging provokes public reactions in the form of demonstrations. Frequently, such protests emerge from the perception that those in power are more concerned with maintaining their image than implementing substantive public policies. This gives rise to juridical issues regarding the relationship between political imaging, legitimacy of power, and citizens' constitutional rights to express opinions in public.²

Within the framework of the rule of law (*rechtsstaat*), the principle that power must be subject to law is fundamental. Therefore, political imaging cannot be separated from the aspects of legality and legal accountability. A normative analysis is thus relevant to examine the extent to which Indonesia's positive law regulates political imaging practices and the mechanisms of legal accountability applicable to their violations. Accordingly, this discourse is not merely about political strategy, but also about the relationship between imaging, power, and the supremacy of law within a democratic system.

Based on this background, the article addresses two main problems. First, what role does political imaging play in the process of obtaining and maintaining power from the perspective of Indonesian positive law? Second, what forms of legal accountability apply to political imaging practices that contradict legal norms and the ethics of governance, particularly in relation to the emergence of public protests and demonstrations as societal responses? This study is expected to provide both theoretical and practical contributions in enriching the understanding of the interrelation between political imaging, legitimacy of power, law enforcement, and the dynamics of democracy in Indonesia.

METHODOLOGY

This research adopts a normative legal research method, which is primarily concerned with the systematic examination of positive legal norms, fundamental legal principles, and authoritative legal doctrines. The study aims to critically assess the position of political imaging within the framework of Indonesian law and to explore the forms of legal accountability that arise when such practices deviate from established legal norms and the ethical foundations of democracy.

² 1 Maria Silvya E. Wangga, Pertanggungjawaban Pidana Partai Politik sebagai Badan Hukum dalam Tindak Pidana Korupsi, INTEGRITAS, Vol. 4 No. 2, 2018, Page 255-278

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Political imaging is essentially a communication strategy employed by political actors to acquire and maintain power. Within the framework of modern democracy, such imaging often becomes a dominant

instrument, as it has the capacity to shape public perception through both mass media and digital platforms. This condition transforms politics from being merely an arena of contesting ideas and policies into a deliberate construction of images designed to generate legitimacy. Nevertheless, excessive or

manipulative imaging may give rise to serious concerns when the substance of policies fails to correspond with the image projected. Consequently, power that is attained predominantly through image-building becomes fragile and is susceptible to the erosion of legitimacy.³

Within the framework of the rule of law, every political activity, including political imaging, must remain subject to the prevailing legal norms. Statutory regulations particularly electoral law, administrative law, and criminal law are established not only to regulate the conduct of political actors but also to preserve the integrity of democratic processes⁴. These legal instruments are meant to draw clear boundaries, ensuring that image construction serves as a legitimate tool of political communication rather than as a means of deception or manipulation. In principle, adherence to such norms guarantees a fair contest of ideas and prevents the abuse of resources that could distort the democratic sphere.

In practice, however, a considerable gap persists between legal norms and their implementation. Political imaging is frequently carried out through practices that contradict democratic ethics, such as covert campaigning prior to the official election period, the misuse of state facilities for partisan purposes, or direct vote buying that commodifies citizens' political rights. The rapid rise of digital platforms has further expanded the scope of violations, as disinformation and fabricated narratives circulate widely with minimal accountability⁵. These unlawful methods do not merely violate technical regulations; they undermine the substantive spirit of democracy, which depends on informed consent and equal opportunity for political participation.

When such violations are not addressed with firm and consistent legal measures, public trust in both the law and governmental institutions becomes increasingly eroded. Citizens may begin to perceive the law as an instrument selectively enforced for the benefit of political elites rather than as a neutral framework safeguarding the public interest. This erosion of trust carries long-term consequences: apathy toward political participation, cynicism about institutional integrity, and the normalization of manipulation as an acceptable feature of political competition. Thus, the failure to regulate political imaging effectively transforms what should be a mechanism

³ Bambang Widjojanto, *Berkelahi Melawan Korupsi Tunaikan Janji Wakafkan Diri*, Malang: Intrans Publishing, 2016, Page. 38

⁴ Warren, K. (2019). *Administrative Law in the Political System: Law, Politics, and Regulatory Policy*. Routledge.

⁵ De Blasio, E., & Selva, D. (2021). Who is responsible for disinformation? European approaches to social platforms' accountability in the post-truth era. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 65(6), 825-846.

for democratic representation into a source of democratic fragility.

Legal accountability for manipulative political imaging can, in principle, be pursued through administrative, criminal, or ethical mechanisms⁶. Administrative sanctions may take the form of disqualification from candidacy, revocation of campaign rights, or fines imposed by electoral commissions. Criminal liability, on the other hand, arises when political actors engage in acts such as bribery, vote buying, or systematic disinformation campaigns that clearly violate statutory provisions. Ethical accountability is equally important,

as political parties and candidates are expected to uphold codes of conduct that emphasize honesty, transparency, and respect for the electorate⁷. These three dimensions together are designed to create a comprehensive system of checks and balances, ensuring that political imaging does not overstep its legitimate role within democracy.

Nevertheless, weak enforcement and oversight often drive citizens to channel their discontent through public demonstrations. In many cases, supervisory bodies such as electoral commissions or anti-corruption agencies lack the independence, resources, or political will to act decisively against violations. As a result, manipulative practices go unpunished, producing a sense of impunity among political elites. This condition fuels public frustration, as citizens witness a stark contrast between the legal ideals of accountability and the impunity observed in reality. Consequently, demonstrations emerge as an alternative arena for articulating grievances, reflecting the people's demand for justice beyond institutional channels.

The surge of protests in recent years reflects a widening disjunction between the images constructed by political elites and the policy realities experienced by society⁸. Political imaging often portrays leaders as reformist, transparent, and people-oriented, while the lived experiences of citizens ranging from persistent inequality, limited access to public services, and corruption scandals tell a different story. This gap between narrative and reality delegitimizes the carefully crafted images, reinforcing the perception that political communication is a tool of manipulation rather than representation. In such a context, demonstrations serve not only as a form of social control but also as an expression of the constitutional right of citizens to voice their opinions⁹. They become a corrective mechanism within democracy, exerting pressure on political elites to align symbolic representations with substantive governance outcomes. Ultimately, the persistence of demonstrations underscores the limits of legal accountability when enforcement is weak and when image politics dominates substantive policymaking. Public protest becomes both a symptom of institutional failure and a reminder that democracy rests on citizen participation, not merely on elite-managed representations.¹⁰

The implications of these conditions demonstrate that political imaging cannot be detached from legal

⁶ Whitfield, G. (2022). On the concept of political manipulation. *European Journal of Political Theory*, 21(4), 783-807.

⁷ Nnanta, N. E., & Innocent, E. O. (2014). Ethics, Accountability and Transparency in the Conduct of Election in Nigeria. *Arabian Journal of Business and Management Review (OMAN Chapter)*, 4(3), 21.

⁸ Mattoni, A., & Teune, S. (2014). Visions of protest. A media-historic perspective on images in social movements. *Sociology Compass*, 8(6), 876-887.

⁹ Sofwan, E., Sopiyan, M., & Fathurrahman, A. M. (2022). The application of the right to freedom of expression in demonstration based on principles of a democratic state. *Jurnal Civics: Media Kajian Kewarganegaraan*, 19(2), 310-319.

¹⁰ Carothers, T., & O'Donohue, A. (Eds.). (2019). *Democracies divided: The global challenge of political polarization*. Brookings Institution Press.

accountability and democratic ethics. When the law fails to regulate and monitor political imaging effectively, image-making devolves into a tool of manipulation that undermines the quality of democracy. Democracy, which should be grounded in accountability and substantive policymaking, risks being reduced to mere symbolic performance. As a result, political legitimacy becomes fragile, and public resistance in the form of demonstrations emerges as an inevitable consequence.

The Role of Political Imaging in the Process of Acquiring and Maintaining Power from the Perspective of Indonesian Positive Law

In the context of Indonesian politics, political imaging functions as a strategic instrument to secure public legitimacy, both during electoral stages and in efforts to maintain power. Indonesian positive law most notably the 1945 Constitution of the Republic of Indonesia, Law No. 7 of 2017 on General Elections, and Law No. 2 of 2011 on Political Parties normatively recognizes and regulates the space for political imaging in the form of political campaigns. These legal provisions affirm that political imaging constitutes a legitimate form of political communication, provided that it is carried out within the boundaries of the law¹¹. At the stage of acquiring power, political imaging serves to construct a favorable image of candidates or political parties before the public. Through this strategy, candidates are able to present their vision, mission, and policy programs, while also communicating the values they intend to uphold. Electoral regulations establish clear parameters regarding permissible forms of political imaging, such as public debates, political advertising, and face-to-face engagement. These legal boundaries are designed to prevent imaging practices from devolving into manipulative acts, such as vote buying, off-schedule campaigning, or the misuse of state resources.¹²

Meanwhile, in the context of maintaining power, political imaging serves to safeguard the political legitimacy of those in authority. Governments and public officials often construct their image through populist policies, the dissemination of development achievements, and symbolic presence within society.¹³ Juridically, such practices are constrained by the norms of administrative law and the principles of good governance, as stipulated in Law No. 30 of 2014 on Administrative Governance and Law No. 28 of 1999 on the Administration of a State Free from Corruption, Collusion, and Nepotism (KKN). Accordingly, the use of state facilities for the purpose of cultivating a personal or partisan image constitutes a violation of law. From the perspective of Indonesian positive law, political imaging remains legitimate insofar as it functions as an educational and transparent form of political communication that does not contravene legal norms¹⁴. However, when political imaging is carried out in manipulative ways such as through the dissemination of disinformation, covert campaigning, or the exploitation of state facilities it falls within the scope of administrative and criminal sanctions as regulated under the Election Law and other relevant legal provisions¹⁵. Thus, political imaging holds a central role in both acquiring and maintaining political power,

¹¹ McNair, B. (2017). *An introduction to political communication*. Routledge.

¹² Ira Aryanti Rasyi Lubis dan Ridwan Fauzi Rabbani, Pencitraan dan Identitas Politik bagi Masyarakat, *Jurnal of Digital Communication Science*, Vol. 1 No. 1, 2023, Page. 41-55

¹³ Kotwas, M., & Kubik, J. (2019). Symbolic thickening of public culture and the rise of right-wing populism in Poland. *East European Politics and Societies*, 33(2), 435-471.

¹⁴ Strassler, K. (2020). *Demanding images: Democracy, mediation, and the image-event in Indonesia*. Duke University Press.

¹⁵ Aidah, Nur Lailatul, Sindy Rochmadian dan Usna Maliha. "Politik Identitas Dalam Pemilu Dan Pengaruhnya Terhadap Demokrasi Di Indonesia", *Sosio Yustisia: Jurnal Hukum dan Perubahan Sosial*, Vol. 3 No. 1 (2023): 117-136.



yet its legality is determined by compliance with the applicable legal framework. Indonesian positive law operates as a regulatory instrument to ensure that political imaging does not devolve into a tool of manipulation, but instead remains consistent with the principles of accountable and substantive democracy.

Forms of Legal Accountability for Political Imaging Practices that Contravene Legal Norms and the Ethics of Governance

Political imaging practices that deviate from legal boundaries not only generate normative concerns but also directly undermine the legitimacy of power¹⁶. From the perspective of Indonesian positive law, accountability for manipulative political imaging may be pursued through several mechanisms: administrative, criminal, ethical, and political. *First*, in the

administrative realm, Law No. 7 of 2017 on General Elections empowers the Election Supervisory Agency (Bawaslu) to sanction violations of political imaging, including by issuing warnings, cancelling campaign activities, or disqualifying candidates. Such measures serve both preventive and repressive functions, ensuring that political imaging does not become an instrument of public manipulation. *Second*, in the criminal sphere, serious violations such as vote buying, the dissemination of false information (hoaxes), or smear campaigns may be subject to criminal sanctions under both the Election Law and the Indonesian Criminal Code (KUHP). The enforcement of criminal law is crucial to creating a deterrent effect and upholding justice in political competition¹⁷. *Third*, in the ethical domain, public officials and political actors are bound by codes of ethics enforced by institutions such as the Election Organizers Honorary Council (DKPP), political parties, and internal regulations of state institutions. The use of state facilities for personal or partisan image-building, even if not criminal in nature, may constitute an ethical violation¹⁸. *Fourth*, in the political and social domains, accountability extends beyond formal mechanisms to substantive forms of public control. When political imaging diverges too far from the realities of public policy, societal trust in government diminishes¹⁹. This has been evident in waves of protests and demonstrations, such as those in 2019–2020 against the revision of the Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK) Law and the enactment of the Omnibus Law on Job Creation, which reflected public dissatisfaction with the gap between the reformist and pro-people image projected by the government and the perceived anti-popular policies enacted.²⁰

Accordingly, demonstrations may be understood as a form of political accountability exercised directly by the people against political actors who fail to align their constructed image with policy reality. Such protests are consistent with Article 28E of the 1945 Constitution, which guarantees the freedom of expression and

¹⁶ Benhabib, S. (Ed.). (2021). *Democracy and difference: Contesting the boundaries of the political*. Princeton University Press.

¹⁷ Lande, R. H., & Davis, J. P. (2011). Comparative deterrence from private enforcement and criminal enforcement of the US antitrust laws. *BYU L. Rev.*, 315.

¹⁸ McKelvey, F., DeJong, S., & Frenzel, J. (2023). Memes, scenes and# ELXN2019s: How partisans make memes during elections. *New Media & Society*, 25(7), 1626-1647.

¹⁹ Hetherington, M. J., & Husser, J. A. (2012). How trust matters: The changing political relevance of political trust. *American Journal of Political Science*, 56(2), 312-325.

²⁰ Wahyudi Sunarwan dan Sains Pieter Surlia, Strategi Pencitraan Politik Capres Jokowi Melalui Instagram: Sebuah Analisis Konten Kualitatif, *INTELEKTIVA*, Vol. 3 No. 1, 2021, Page. 18-33



association as part of the system of checks and balances in a democratic order.²¹ Therefore, legal accountability for manipulative political imaging should not be reduced to a mere technical-legal issue but must also be understood as an essential component in safeguarding the quality of democracy. Positive law must be enforced consistently to prevent imaging from degenerating into a tool of power manipulation, while public demonstrations should be recognized as both indicators of dissatisfaction and legitimate corrective mechanisms within a democratic system.²²

CONCLUSIONS

First, political imaging plays a central role in the process of acquiring and maintaining power in Indonesia. From the perspective of positive law, political imaging is recognized as a legitimate form of political communication, provided it is carried out within the boundaries of the law, as stipulated in Law No. 7 of 2017 on General Elections, the Law on Political Parties, and administrative legal norms. However, in practice, political imaging often exceeds legal limits through manipulative strategies such as the dissemination of disinformation, vote buying, and the misuse of state resources. This condition underscores the necessity of consistent law enforcement to prevent political imaging from becoming merely an instrument of public manipulation rather than a vehicle for healthy democratic communication. Second, legal accountability for manipulative political imaging may be pursued through administrative, criminal, ethical, and political mechanisms. Indonesian positive law has established instruments to address such violations, ranging from administrative sanctions and criminal penalties to ethical judgments. Yet, weak implementation often renders these mechanisms ineffective, thereby creating space for social correction through protests and demonstrations. The emergence of demonstrations as a public response reflects the gap between the political image constructed by elites and the reality of public policy. Accordingly, legal accountability for political imaging must be understood not only as a technical-legal matter but also as an integral part of substantive democracy that ensures political legitimacy remains rooted in public trust.

To prevent political imaging from degenerating into a tool of power manipulation, there must be stronger regulation and consistent enforcement by the General Elections Commission (KPU), the Election Supervisory Agency (Bawaslu), and law enforcement authorities, particularly in monitoring digital campaigns. Political parties and political actors should utilize imaging as a means of public education grounded in concrete policy programs rather than mere populist symbolism. At the same time, society must strengthen its political literacy to develop a more critical perspective toward political imaging, while demonstrations as a form of social control should continue to be exercised peacefully and constitutionally. Furthermore, the academic community should advance interdisciplinary studies on political imaging, media, and law, thereby contributing to practical improvements in the quality of democracy in Indonesia.

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²¹ Dian Ariyani Surya, Ali Noerzaman dan Usni, Politik Identitas Dibalik Panggung Pilkadaes, *INDEPENDEN: Jurnal Politik Indonesia dan Global*, Vol. 2 No. 2, 2021, Page. 1-35

²² Nur Kholis Majid, Dinamika Politik Identitas Di Indonesia Dalam Perspektif Pancasila, *Jurnal Media Akademika*, Vol. 3 N0. 3, 2025, Page. 1-14



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IPSO JURE JOURNAL

IPSO JURE

Journal

Vol.2. No.8, September 2025

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.62872/31ywgh57>

E-ISSN : 3032-7644

<https://nawalaeducation.com/index.php/IJJ/>

Wangga, Maria Silvy E. "Pertanggungjawaban Pidana Partai Politik sebagai Badan Hukum dalam Tindak Pidana Korupsi." INTEGRITAS, Vol. 4 No. 2 (2018): 255-278.

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