

Mocking Laughter: The Political Humor of Indonesians Portrayed in Newspaper Cartoons

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Abstract

This study delves into the crucial role of political humor in Indonesian society by conducting a thorough analysis of newspaper cartoons through critical discourse analysis. Humor is a potent tool for expressing social commentary and political critique in a less confrontational manner. The study focuses on meticulously chosen cartoons published in major Indonesian newspapers, i.e. Kompas, to uncover the underlying political themes, satirical techniques, and social implications conveyed through humor. The study examines how these cartoons shape public discourse, challenge power structures, and influence public opinion. By thoroughly analyzing linguistic and visual elements, the study offers valuable insights into how political humor functions as a form of resistance, social commentary, and cultural expression in Indonesia. The findings provide a deeper understanding of the complex interplay between humor, politics, and society, highlighting how Indonesians use satire to navigate and negotiate their socio-political landscape. This study significantly contributes to the critical discourse analysis field by emphasizing the multifaceted role of political humor in shaping public discourse and fostering critical engagement within a specific cultural and political context in Indonesia.

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INTRODUCTION

Political humor has always played a crucial role in social commentary throughout history. It is an effective way of expressing dissent, calling out those in positions of power, and addressing political issues (Attardo, 1994; Feldman, 1995). Indonesia, a country with a vibrant political scene and a rich cultural heritage, uses political cartoons in newspapers as a unique platform for this type of humor (e.g. Nugraha, 2022; Surahmat, 2023; Triputra & Sugita, 2016; Weydmann & Großmann, 2020). These cartoons employ wit, satire, and artistic creativity to convey political messages and provide an essential medium for public discourse.

Utilizing humor as a mode of communication is a valuable approach to conveying opposing viewpoints without being confrontational or censored (Nugraha, 2020; Sen & Hill, 2007). When critiquing societal norms and questioning authority, political cartoons are an especially effective means of visually summarizing complex issues, making them a potent tool (Morgan, 2010; Young, 2017). Our examination will delve into selected cartoons featured in major Indonesian newspapers, analyzing how they shape public discourse, contest dominant narratives, and influence public opinion through linguistic and visual features.

Throughout history, political humor has been an important tool in societies across the globe (e.g. Echeverria, M., & Rodelo, 2023; Sonay, 2023; Stewart, 2015; Tsakona, 2009). Political cartoonists use satire, caricature, and visual metaphors to convey political messages and critique those in positions of power. These cartoons provide a succinct visual story combining language and imagery to tackle complex socio-political issues and inspire public reflection. In Indonesia, political humor in newspaper cartoons is a crucial way that individuals engage in political discussions and express their dissenting opinions.

Furthermore, a critical discourse analysis (hereafter CDA) (Fairclough, 2013; Weiss &

Wodak, 2007) approach is essential to fully understand the relationship between political humor, power dynamics, and social ideologies in newspaper cartoons. This approach uncovers the discursive practices that construct meaning, power relations, and social identities (Blommaert & Bulcaen, 2000). When analyzing political cartoons, it is crucial to scrutinize the language and the visual cues, symbolism, and cultural references used by cartoonists.

This study delves into the complex nature of political humor in Indonesian society and employs critical discourse analysis as a theoretical framework. By analyzing newspaper cartoons using this approach, we aim to expose the political themes, satirical techniques, and social implications that are intertwined within these amusing visual narratives. Through language and visual element examination, we can better understand how meaning, power relations, and ideologies are constructed within specific sociocultural contexts.

Several scholars have studied political humor in Indonesian society. Harun et al. (2015) and Rahman (2022) explored how political cartoons in Indonesia balance humor and politics. They showed how humor can serve as a way to critique society. Similarly, Hasanah & Hidayat (2020) investigated how political cartoons can shape public opinion during presidential elections. They found that humor can influence how voters see things. These studies show how important political humor is in Indonesia and suggest that more research is needed.

Indonesia's cultural and historical context also shapes how political humor is used in cartoons. Daniels (2007) and Ostrom (2007) have looked at how historical events, cultural traditions, and power dynamics influence the production and reception of political cartoons. Understanding these factors gives researchers a better picture of how humor can be used to resist, express culture, and comment on society in Indonesia.

This study aims to thoroughly comprehend the complex relationship between humor, politics, and society in the Indonesian context.

Our thorough analysis of the cultural, historical, and political factors that shape the creation and reception of political cartoons will unveil the underlying ideologies, power structures, and social tensions that arise through humor. Furthermore, this study emphasizes how political cartoons are a form of resistance, cultural expression, and social commentary, providing a nuanced perspective on how Indonesians navigate and negotiate their socio-political landscape. The research questions are: (1) how do linguistic and visual elements in newspaper cartoons contribute to constructing political satire and social critique in Indonesia; (2) what underlying political themes and social implications are conveyed through political humor in Indonesian newspaper cartoons; and (3) in what ways do Indonesian newspaper cartoons challenge power structures, shape public discourse, and influence public opinion?

METHODOLOGY

This study used CDA to analyze newspaper cartoons and study the role and importance of political humor in Indonesia. This section will discuss the research design, data collection, and data analysis procedures. First of all, the research design was qualitative, using CDA to examine the language and visual aspects of the cartoons. This approach allowed for a thorough examination of the social and political meanings conveyed in the cartoons and the discursive techniques used by cartoonists to create political satire.

Regarding the data collection, this study collected data from Kompas, a newspaper (<https://www.kompas.id/kategori/humor/kartun-humor>). A purposive sampling technique was used to select a diverse range of newspaper cartoons published within a specific period (from November 22nd, 2017, until July 18th, 2023), ensuring various socio-political themes and perspectives were included. These cartoons' original visual and textual formats were collected, capturing both the visual imagery and accompanying captions or dialogues.

Regarding the data analysis, the following steps were rigorously followed to analyse political humor in Indonesian newspaper cartoons: Firstly, the cartoons were thoroughly examined, with close attention paid to their visual elements, captions, dialogues, and contextual information. Secondly, the cartoons were transcribed and translated while preserving their original text and visual features. Thirdly, a meticulous linguistic analysis was conducted, scrutinizing the language used in the cartoons, including rhetorical devices, metaphors, puns, irony, and other linguistic features.

Fourthly, a comprehensive analysis of the visual elements of the cartoons was conducted, which included examining the symbols, caricatures, colour, composition, and visual metaphors used. Fifthly, the cartoons were evaluated in their broader socio-political context, which considered historical events, cultural references, and political circumstances. Sixthly, CDA was conducted, synthesizing the findings from the linguistic, visual, and contextual analyses. This step involved examining the power relations, ideologies, and social implications embedded within the cartoons, considering how they shape public discourse and influence public opinion. Finally, the researchers interpreted the findings and drew conclusive insights regarding the role and significance of political humor in Indonesian newspaper cartoons.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Linguistic and Visual Elements within Newspaper Cartoons

Indonesian newspaper cartoons skilfully utilize linguistic and visual elements to create incisive political satire and social critique. With rhetorical devices such as irony and puns (see Figure 1), metaphors (see Figure 2), and wordplay (see Figure 3), cartoonists can deliver their messages with maximum impact and brevity. Furthermore, visual elements such as symbols, caricatures, and visual metaphors amplify these cartoons' satirical content. By employing these visual cues, the cartoons effectively challenge and subvert dominant

cartoon is composed of two key components, namely linguistic and visual components. The first conversational unit in the linguistic component of the cartoon satirizes politicians who have harmed sports athletes. At the same time, the second relates to a case of money laundering by state officials. The phrase "*Pencucian Uang*" (money laundering) is a powerful tool used by cartoonists, and the cartoonist uses it in two different contexts. The first context is metaphorical, referring to the act of embezzlement committed by state officials.

In contrast, the second context is empirical, referring to the activity of laundering *Kepeng* during the royal era in Indonesia about 500 years ago. Despite the different historical and linguistic contexts, money laundering activities are used for corrupt acts. The cartoon's visual component comprises symbols, caricatures, and visual metaphors. The symbols used in Figure 3 are *Kepeng* coins and royal family clothing, which illustrate the existence of corrupt practices in the royal elite. The caricature in Figure 3 depicts an official suspected of money laundering, four ordinary people, and a figure of the royal family. The visual metaphor in Figure 3 illustrates the *Kepeng* washing activity on the riverbank by Denmas. In conclusion, the cartoonist's message is clear: "*Wah, kusut deh nigari ini, kalau masa depan dikuasai orang macam Denmas.*" (If people like Denmas control the future, we will be left with a mess).

Furthermore, cartoonists employed a variety of rhetorical devices and linguistic features with great expertise to create highly effective political humor (Attardo, 2001). The irony was a potent tool frequently used to draw attention to the glaring contradictions between political rhetoric and reality (Witek, 2022). Puns and wordplay were also deftly employed to add a touch of wit and provide clever commentary on political events or figures (Meibauer, 2019). Additionally, metaphors and analogies were employed with great skill to simplify complex political issues and make them more easily understandable for the audience. These linguistic techniques were crucial in generating humor,

capturing attention, and providing subtle yet effective critiques.

Symbols played a critical role in political satire and social critique cartoons, serving as powerful tools to convey meaning and ideas (Feldman, 2000). Cartoonists utilized symbols like scales of justice, dollar signs, and broken chains to represent corruption, inequality, and the erosion of justice with strategic intent. Caricatures were equally important in satirizing political figures, where their physical features or mannerisms were exaggerated to convey criticism. Furthermore, visual metaphors were employed to encapsulate complex political dynamics in a single image, allowing cartoonists to make poignant statements about power and society.

Cartoonists utilized visual juxtaposition and composition techniques to create intricate and thought-provoking cartoons (Boukes et al., 2015). With visual juxtaposition, they highlighted the contradictions and absurdities in politics by contrasting different elements within a single cartoon. In addition, they adeptly employed framing and positioning to direct attention to specific details and guide interpretation. These powerful visual strategies enhanced the effectiveness of political satire and bolstered the impact of social critique.

The cultural context of Indonesia had a significant impact on the cartoons, as evidenced by both the language and visuals. The cartoonists skilfully incorporated cultural references, traditional symbols, and local idioms to make the cartoons more relatable and engaging for the Indonesian audience. This incorporation was crucial in establishing a robust connection between political satire and the social realities experienced by the audience (Balakrishnan et al., 2019).

In sum, Indonesian newspaper cartoons ingeniously blend language and imagery to craft powerful political satire and convey social commentary. The cartoons cleverly employ various literary techniques, including irony, puns, metaphors, and wordplay, to add humor and depth to their linguistic content. Additionally, the use of symbols, caricatures, visual metaphors,

and composition techniques effectively heighten the visual impact of the cartoons and communicate nuanced messages. The cartoons ensure maximum relevance and resonance with the Indonesian audience by incorporating cultural references. Overall, the seamless integration of linguistic and visual elements masterfully engages the audience, stimulates critical thinking, and delivers incisive social critique within Indonesia's unique cultural and political context.

The Underlying Political Themes and Social Implications

The analysis conducted by the CDA on Indonesian newspaper cartoons reveals a wide range of political and social themes tackled by these cartoons. Corruption and power struggles (see Figure 4), religious tensions (see Figure 5), and social inequality and governance challenges (see Figure 6) are a few socio-political issues addressed through political humor. These cartoons provide a powerful platform for social commentary, easily satirizing and criticizing these problems. By drawing attention to the intricacies of Indonesian society, the cartoons highlight systemic issues and prompt society to reflect and actively work toward change.



Figure 4. Corruption as the Underlying Political Theme

The political cartoon “Cuma Ganti Penjajah” (Just Change the Occupiers) was published on April 9th, 2023, to expose corruption in Indonesia. The cartoon utilized both linguistic and visual components to convey

its message effectively. The linguistic portion featured three conversation sequences among four actors who discussed the poor quality of infrastructure in Indonesia. They openly criticized the government and project implementers for their lack of commitment and poor mentality. The visual component used caricatures, symbols, and metaphors to emphasize the message further. The caricatures depicted four young figures expressing dissatisfaction and criticism of the government's incompetence. The symbol of a potholed road represented the lack of optimized infrastructure development in Indonesia, while the actors' gestures and mimicry added to the overall theme of corruption. The cartoon was both explicit and implicit in portraying Indonesia's corrupt practices.



Figure 5. Religious Tensions as the Underlying Political Theme

Figure 5, a political cartoon, was published on April 30, 2023. The cartoonist used it to highlight the intersection of religious themes in political contexts. It consists of two main components: linguistic and visual. The linguistic component includes two conversational sequences between two speakers. In the first sequence, they greet each other during Eid. In the second sequence, they argue about their preferred presidential candidate. The visual components include caricatures and symbols. The caricatures depict two men with different haircuts. The first caricature symbolizes high social status, while the second represents low social status. They seem to get along during a religious moment but argue afterward. The cartoon explicitly and implicitly emphasizes Indonesia's complex intertwining of religious and political issues.

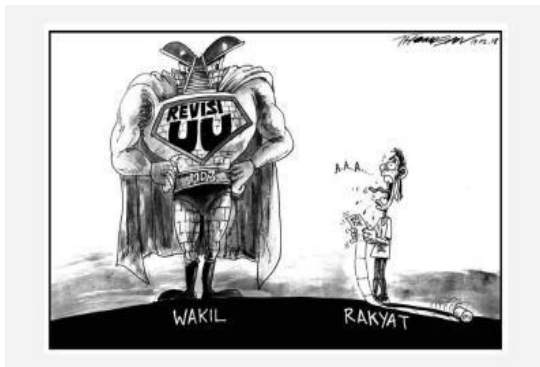


Figure 6. Governance Challenge's as the Underlying Political Theme

The publication of a political cartoon on February 14th, 2018, highlighted the challenges in government policy. The cartoon's linguistic and visual components both contribute to its message. The use of the words “*Revisi UU, Wakil, Rakyat, dan Kritik*” (Law Revision, Representatives, People, and Criticism) is a deliberate labelling of the caricature of a strong and tough Superman character with the head of the DPR-RI building, symbolizing the process of law revision conducted by the House of Representatives (DPR-RI). This caricature presents the institution as superpowered and powerful, whereas it is meant to represent the people. Meanwhile, the people are portrayed as small, skinny figures with no physical strength. The combination of linguistic and visual elements serves as a satire of the DPR's performance, which falls short of public expectations.

Moreover, analyzing Indonesian newspaper cartoons uncovers many political themes and social implications communicated through political humor. These cartoons address critical socio-political issues that are pertinent to Indonesian society. Corruption is a particularly salient theme, with cartoons portraying politicians, bureaucrats, and business leaders engaging in unethical behavior. These depictions illustrate politicians as self-centered and greedy, highlighting the detrimental effects of corruption on society (Droog & Burgers, 2023).

The cartoons frequently delve into power struggles and political dynamics. They portray politicians competing for positions of power,

engaging in backroom deals, and navigating intricate alliances. Through satire, the cartoons offer commentary on the power dynamics in the political landscape, exposing the tactics employed by politicians to gain and maintain control (Dyner, 2013).

In Indonesia, cartoons frequently illustrated the social consequences of religious tensions, a significant and intricate theme due to the country's diverse religious landscape. These cartoons explicitly displayed confrontations between different religious groups, condemned the politicization of religion, and scrutinized the role of religious figures in politics. Using humor, the cartoons aimed to enhance public consciousness about the deleterious effects of religious tensions on society and fostered a sense of tolerance and understanding (Dyner & Chovanec, 2021).

Political humor was a powerful tool to address social inequality and governance challenges. The stark contrast between the affluent and the underprivileged was highlighted through cartoons, bringing much-needed attention to the marginalized groups in society. These satirical illustrations also boldly scrutinized policies and practices that contributed to social injustice, demanding accountability from those in power. Additionally, bureaucratic inefficiency and the neglect of public needs were effectively ridiculed to convey the frustrations of the common person (Feldman, 2023).

Indonesian newspaper cartoons' political humor wielded a significant impact on society. Using humor to critique societal issues, the cartoons provided a crucial platform for marginalized and disempowered voices. They served as a reflection of the realities and challenges faced by Indonesian society, raising public awareness and shaping public opinion (Fuchs, 2010).

Furthermore, the cartoons played a pivotal role in driving social change by exposing corruption, power struggles, and social inequalities and demanding accountability, transparency, and justice (Hill, 2013). This role encouraged citizens to challenge the status quo, question existing power structures, and demand

reforms. The political humor in Indonesian newspaper cartoons was more than mere entertainment; it stimulated critical thinking, provoked engagement with socio-political issues, and advocated for change.

Overall, analyzing these cartoons revealed various political themes and social implications, including corruption, power struggles, religious tensions, social inequality, and governance challenges. Therefore, the cartoons offered a means of exposing and critiquing these issues, fostering public awareness, and shaping public opinion while advocating for social change. In short, the political humor in Indonesian newspaper cartoons played a significant role in influencing the socio-political landscape of Indonesia.

The Influence of Indonesian Newspaper Cartoons in Shaping Public Discourse and Public Opinion

Newspaper cartoons in Indonesia have become a powerful tool for challenging authority, shaping public opinion, and promoting open discussions on social and political issues. These cartoons offer a less confrontational and more accessible way for individuals to express their dissenting views and critique those in power (see Figure 7). Using humor to present political issues, these cartoons engage the public in critical reflection and encourage them to question power dynamics (see Figure 8). They also provide alternative narratives and perspectives on political events and figures (see Figure 9), helping diversify public discourse and promote a political awareness and engagement culture.

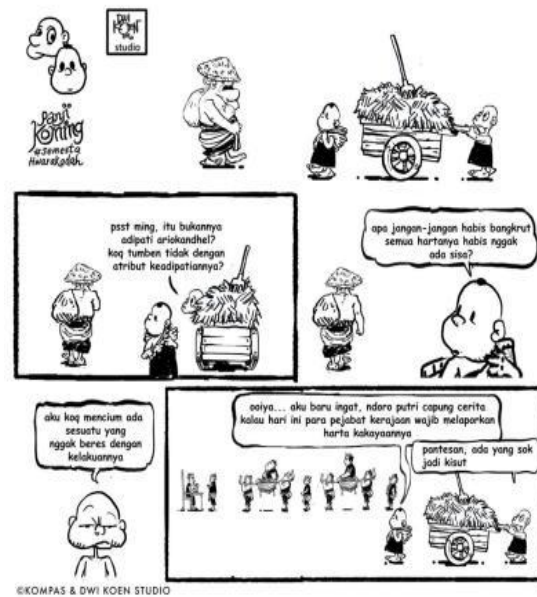


Figure 7. Provider of a Platform for Individuals to Critique

On March 5th, 2023, Figure 7 was published. The cartoonist used this piece to criticize the behaviour of politicians and other public officials. The cartoon has two main parts: linguistic and visual. The linguistic component includes two conversations between citizens about Adipati Ariokandhel and his strange behaviour. They are uncomfortable with his appearance as he is not wearing his royal attributes. One of the linguistic markers used is the phrase, "*Mencium ada sesuatu yang nggak beres*" (I smell something is wrong). It is used to signify the drama performed by the Adipati. At the end of the conversation, they say the duke is trying to hide his assets from wealth reporting activities. This cartoon satirizes the behaviour of public officials in Indonesia who like to look dirty during the wealth reporting period. The visual component includes caricatures, symbols, and visual metaphors to show a portrait of the political reality in Indonesia. This cartoon is a trigger for the public's collective consciousness to criticize public officials' contradictory and manipulative behaviour and lifestyle.



Figure 8. Engagement of the Public in Critical Reflection

On November 26, 2017, Figure 8 published a political cartoon to raise public awareness about the inequality of government policies. The cartoon had two main components: linguistic and visual. The linguistic part included three conversations involving three speakers discussing government policies regarding teacher performance allowances. Two speakers were ordinary people, while the third was a government official. The two ordinary speakers complained about the lower allowance for teachers compared to ordinary official employees. The third speaker, a regular department employee, felt offended and disagreed with the conversation between the two people, saying, “*Lha katanya guru kan pahlawan tanpa tanda jasa...*” (He said teachers are unsung heroes....)” The visual part of the cartoon included caricatures, symbols, and metaphors. The caricature had three actors, as mentioned earlier. The symbols included uniforms and gadgets department employees wore, representing their lifestyle. The visual metaphor was the mimic and gesture of the actors who contradicted each other while discussing the policy. The cartoon titled “*Guru Tiri*” explicitly and implicitly invites the public to reflect on and criticize policies that do not favour teachers in Indonesia.



Figure 9. Alternative Narratives and Perspectives on Political Events

The publication of Figure 9 on November 22, 2017, was a powerful display of a political cartoonist's ability to provide diverse perspectives on current political events. The cartoon's linguistic component features the word “KPK” (The Corruption Eradication Commission) attached to a microphone, while the visual component portrays a caricature of the main actor and a group of actors. The main actor, depicted as a corruption suspect, sits in a wheelchair with an anxious and scared expression as the KPK interviews him. Meanwhile, the other actors happily leave the main actor, waving their hands and whistling. The cartoon uses this visual metaphor to expose the corruption within a group of individuals willing to sacrifice one of their own to protect themselves. It also symbolizes the low morals and behaviours of state officials. This cartoon provides an alternative narrative and perspective on political events, revealing the drama created as a distraction.

Over and above that, Indonesian newspaper cartoons have proven to be a powerful tool in challenging power structures, shaping public discourse, and influencing public opinion within Indonesia. With their political humor, these cartoons have significantly promoted critical engagement and facilitated social change (Holbert et al., 2011; Piata, 2016).

One of how Indonesian newspaper cartoons have challenged power structures is by providing a platform for dissenting voices. These cartoons have exposed their flaws, hypocrisy, and

abuses of authority by satirizing politicians, bureaucrats, and other figures in power. They have created a space for public critique and held those in power accountable for their actions. This challenge to power structures has served as a form of resistance, encouraging citizens to question authority and promoting a culture of political awareness (Lalancette & Small, 2020).

Newspaper cartoons played a significant role in shaping public opinion and discourse in Indonesia. Using humor to tackle complex socio-political issues, they made these matters more accessible and engaging for a wider audience (Landreville, 2015). This way encouraged citizens to reflect on the state of their nation, consider alternative viewpoints, and question dominant narratives. As a result, a more diverse and robust public discourse was created, challenging prevailing ideologies and expanding the boundaries of acceptable political discourse.

Moreover, Indonesian newspaper cartoons influenced public opinion by satirizing political events and figures. They provided alternative narratives and perspectives which challenged mainstream media's portrayal of political actors. This alternative led to a critical lens through which citizens could view political developments, swaying public opinion (Putri, 2018). The cartoons exposed the shortcomings of those in power, raised awareness about social issues, and advocated for change (Lent, 2014).

In addition, newspaper cartoons fostered a sense of civic engagement and political participation. They encouraged citizens to engage in political processes through a non-confrontational approach actively. The cartoons empowered individuals to voice their concerns and contribute to shaping the socio-political landscape (Mahadian & Hashim, 2022; Wang & Feng, 2023). They inspired collective action, advocacy, and demands for reform, thus acting as a catalyst for social change. Thus, Indonesian newspaper cartoons played a crucial role in shaping public discourse, influencing public opinion, and fostering civic engagement and political participation.

In short, the cartoons published in Indonesian newspapers were a powerful means of

expressing dissent, critiquing authority, and promoting accountability. They effectively shaped public opinion by exposing the flaws of those in power, increasing awareness of social issues, and advocating for change. Through their encouragement of civic engagement and political participation, cartoons inspired citizens to shape Indonesia's socio-political landscape actively. As a result, they played a crucial role in challenging power structures, shaping public discourse, and contributing to significant socio-political change in Indonesia.

CONCLUSION

Through critical discourse analysis, this research has uncovered Indonesian newspaper cartoons' political and social implications and how linguistic and visual elements contribute to political satire and social critique. The cartoons address various political themes, including corruption, power struggles, religious tensions, social inequality, and governance challenges, critiquing societal issues and promoting social awareness. Using linguistic and visual devices, such as irony, puns, metaphors, symbols, caricatures, and cultural references, the cartoons challenge power structures, shape public discourse, and influence public opinion. They inspire civic engagement and political participation, empowering individuals to contribute to Indonesia's socio-political landscape actively.

However, this research has limitations, as it focused solely on newspaper cartoons, excluding other forms of political humor. Future research should explore these different media to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the broader landscape of political humor in Indonesia. Additionally, the analysis was limited to a specific period and selection of newspapers, which may have constrained the findings. Future research should consider expanding the scope to include a more extensive range of cartoons and a longitudinal analysis to capture the evolving nature of political humor over time.

In summary, recognizing the significant contribution of political humor through

newspaper cartoons is imperative in Indonesian society. Further exploration and analysis of the complex interplay between political humor, power dynamics, and social transformation are crucial to comprehend its influence on broader socio-political developments in Indonesia comprehensively.

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