



Democracy, Elections, And Populism in Indonesia from The Perspective of Friedrich Nietzsche's Existentialism

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ABSTRACT

This research aims to analyze how populism weakens democratic practices in Indonesia and formulate solutions to keep democracy healthy. With Friedrich Nietzsche's existentialism perspective, this research highlights the importance of individual freedom and responsibility in choosing qualified leaders. The research uses a legal method with a legislative and philosophical approach. The results show that Indonesian democracy, which is synonymous with the division of power between the executive, legislative, and judicial branches, is often distorted by the influence of populism. Elections held every five years to elect people's representatives and executive leaders at various levels are often used by political elites for their interests by exploiting people's emotions through rhetoric and identity politics. This condition is rooted in the criteria for nominating leaders in Law No. 7/2017, which opens space for the emergence of populism and obscures the purpose of democracy "of the people, by the people, and for the people". To overcome this, the research recommends revising the regulation by adding competency criteria based on the State Civil Apparatus (ASN) merit system for prospective executive leaders. This strategy is a practical implementation of existentialism in legal politics to maintain the quality of democracy while strengthening political education for the community.

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INTRODUCTION

Democracy in Indonesia is an important foundation for society's political and social life. Since the 1998 reforms, Indonesia has experienced a transition from an authoritarian system to a more open democracy and according to data from the Central Bureau of Statistics (BPS), Indonesia's Democracy Index reached 79.51% nationally, indicating the high enthusiasm of the people in participating in the democratic process (BPS, 2024). The importance of democracy in the Indonesian context lies not only in the election mechanism but also in strengthening the values of justice, human rights, and public participation. In Friedrich Nietzsche's view, democracy can be seen as an arena where individuals struggle to find the meaning and purpose of their lives despite often being trapped in values determined by the majority.

As stipulated in Law No. 7/2017 on General Elections, general elections serve as a means to express the people's will and are a key pillar in a democratic system. In the Indonesian context, general elections are about electing leaders and a moment of reflection for the people to evaluate government performance and propose changes. According to the General Election Commission (KPU), the 2019 general election recorded

more than 190 million registered voters, which shows that people have high political awareness (KPU, 2019). However, the challenges faced in Indonesia's general elections are not few, ranging from the practice of money politics to disinformation that can influence voters' decisions. Within the framework of Nietzsche's existentialism, elections can manifest the will of individuals who strive to create new values amidst the current populism that often obscures minority voices.

The rise of populism in Indonesian politics is an interesting phenomenon to analyze. Populism is often defined as a political approach prioritizing people's voices. However, in practice, it often leads to the simplification of complex issues and the neglect of minority groups. For example, in the 2014 and 2019 presidential elections, we witnessed the emergence of populist figures who managed to attract public attention with simple rhetoric and ambitious promises. Data from the Kompas R & D survey shows that 90% of respondents feel that the vision and mission of the presidential candidate they will vote for needs to be presented because the vision and mission is one of the tools to monitor the performance of the government they will lead. However, only 33.93% claimed to be informed and understand the candidate's vision and mission (Kompas R & D, 2019). In this context, Nietzsche reminds us of the dangers of values set by the masses, which can lead to nihilism and loss of meaning in political life. Candidates' visions and missions that prioritize common sense and logic can be defeated by the emotions of the masses played by candidates.

In addition, Nietzsche's existentialism emphasizes individuals' importance in creating meaning and purpose. In politics, this means that every voter should be able to think critically and not just go with the flow of populism. In the Indonesian context, where populism often emphasizes emotion and rhetoric, people need to develop a deeper political awareness. Data from Transparency International shows that Indonesia scored 34 on a scale of 100, ranking 115th out of 180 countries in the 2023 Corruption Perception Index, indicating that the challenges in realizing a healthy democracy are still enormous (Transparency International, 2023). In Nietzsche's view, individuals must dare to go against the grain and create new values that are more authentic and meaningful.

This background illustrates the complex dynamics between democracy, elections, and populism in Indonesia. From the perspective of Nietzsche's existentialism, we are reminded to be part of the majority and question and create deeper values for ourselves and society. Understanding this context provides an opportunity to be more critical in facing the challenges in Indonesia's democratic system. This research aims to answer the main problems related to how populism can weaken the practice of democracy in Indonesia and find solutions so that democracy does not fall under the influence of populism. By referring to the existentialism point of view, this research is expected to provide a more in-depth perspective in formulating steps to maintain the sustainability of a healthy democracy in Indonesia.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study is legal research that uses both a statutory and philosophical approach. The statutory approach analyzes legal norms relevant to the problem under study by reviewing various applicable laws and regulations (Marzuki, 2010). Meanwhile, the philosophical approach is applied to deeply understand legal concepts, including the principles underlying these legal norms (Soekanto & Mamudji, 2001). The combination of these two approaches aims to provide a comprehensive understanding, not only from a normative perspective but also from the perspective of the values of justice and morality in law. The research was conducted systematically using qualitative primary and secondary legal materials analysis

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Basic Concepts of Democracy, Elections, Populism and Existentialism

Democracy is a system of government in which political power is vested in the people, which can be expressed through elections and participation in decision-making. According to Dahl, democracy gives individuals the right to participate in the political process, either directly or through elected representatives. The basic principles of democracy include freedom of speech, human rights, equality before the law, and separation of powers (Dahl, 1991). In Indonesia, these principles are recognized in the 1945 Constitution, which emphasizes the importance of popular sovereignty and the protection of human rights as an integral part of a democratic system of government.

In Indonesia, democracy is realized through general elections, in which citizens vote to elect their representatives in the legislature, executive, and other public offices. General elections in Indonesia are regulated by law and conducted periodically to ensure government accountability. Under Law No. 7/2017, elections are held to directly elect members of the House of Representatives (DPR), the Regional Representatives Council (DPD), and the president and vice president. This process is an integral part of the democratic system in Indonesia, providing an opportunity for the people to be actively involved in determining the direction of government policy and electing their leaders.

General elections in Indonesia are characterized by populism. Populism is a political approach that claims to represent the voice of ordinary people and often opposes political and economic elites. According to

Mudde and Kaltwasser, populism can be understood as an ideology that divides society into two opposing groups: "pure people" and 'corrupt elites' (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). The main characteristics of populism include anti-elite rhetoric, an emphasis on popular sovereignty, and symbols that the people easily understand. In the Indonesian context, populism often appears in political campaigns, where prospective leaders try to attract attention with promises that directly touch people's needs and aspirations.

One perspective that criticizes populism is existentialism. Existentialism is a school of philosophy that emphasizes the importance of the individual and subjective experience in determining the meaning of life. It focuses on individual freedom, choice, and responsibility in the face of the absurdity of life. Existentialism rejects the deterministic view that assumes that external factors predetermine human life. In the political context, existentialism can be used to understand how individuals interact with social and political systems and how they express their freedom and choices within a democratic framework. Individuals should not just passively submit to the political choices presented to them.

Friedrich Nietzsche, one of the major figures in existentialism, proposed the idea of the will to power as the basic motivation for human action. Nietzsche also criticized traditional morality and emphasized the importance of an individualized search for meaning. In the context of democracy and populism, Nietzsche's thought can provide a new perspective on how individuals interact with power and social structures. He argued that individuals should take risks and create their values rather than just following the norm. This is relevant in the Indonesian political context, where people are often trapped in choices determined by political elites.

The Relationship between Democracy, Elections and Populism

One of the biggest challenges in implementing democracy in Indonesia is the high degree of political fragmentation. With so many registered political parties and different candidates, voters are often confused about which one to choose. This fragmentation not only creates confusion but also has the potential to cause political instability, with government coalitions often lacking solidity. In addition, the influence of social media in the electoral process poses another challenge. On the one hand, social media provides a platform for people to voice their opinions. However, on the other hand, the spread of inaccurate information, fake news, and shallow rhetorical jargon from candidates can influence voters' perceptions. With around 61.8% of Indonesia's population active on social media (We Are Social & Hootsuite, 2021), manipulation of information can undermine election integrity.

The many choices and the crowded social media have resulted in a condition where candidates compete to win the people's votes in various ways, including absurd ways. In this context, populism positions ordinary people at odds with the political elite, between the "powerless" and the "oppressor". Populist candidates usually use simple and direct rhetoric and promise to fight for the interests of ordinary people. They mock and stand up to the elites in favor of the interests of ordinary people, even though they are part of the elites.

The impact of populism on voter choice in Indonesia is significant, especially in the context of elections. Research shows that populism, which often offers simple solutions to complex problems, attracts voters who feel marginalized by the existing political system. A survey by Saiful Mujani Research and Consulting (SMRC) indicates that around 60% of voters believe that candidates with a populist approach better understand and represent their interests (Jati, 2023). In addition, religious populism also plays an important role in elections, as seen in the DKI Jakarta gubernatorial election between 2007 and 2017, where populism was used to convey Islamic political aspirations (Budiman et al., 2022). This phenomenon reflects political stagnation and a lack of democratic oversight, which allows populist candidates to utilize identity narratives to attract voters (Rahmawati, 2018). Thus, populism in Indonesia reflects dissatisfaction with the existing system and becomes a strategic tool in political contestation.

Populism also creates extreme polarization in society. When populist candidates claim to be the "voice of the people" and attack other political elites, it deepens divisions between groups in society. In the 2019 election, for example, identity politics wrapped in rhetoric used by some presidential/vice presidential candidates created tensions between supporters and opponents, leading to protests and discontent among the public (Ardipandanto, 2020). This shows that while populism can deliver popular votes to candidates, it also negatively affects social cohesion.

The Link between Populism and Existentialism

In Friedrich Nietzsche's existentialism context, the search for meaning is at the core of the human experience. Nietzsche argues that individuals must create meaning in a world without inherent meaning, especially after the "death of God", which signifies the loss of absolute values (Sasan, 2023). In his view, this search for meaning is personal and has social and political implications. In a political context, individuals often seek meaning and purpose through their choices, which can create complex social dynamics (Rizal & Kharis, 2022).

However, the phenomenon of populism often hinders this search for meaning. Populism, with its rhetoric emphasizing the voice of the people and the struggle against elites, often offers false promises to people who feel marginalized. While seemingly promising, these promises are often based less on accountable realities and more on attention-grabbing narratives (Hontvári, 2023). In this sense, populism can be seen as an

attempt to give meaning to individuals and groups who feel disoriented but in ways that are not always rational or logical (Eustice-Corwin, 2020).

Nietzsche also warned that creating new values without deeply understanding their origins and meaning can establish arbitrary and superficial values (Hontvári, 2023). In this context, populism can manifest as an undirected search for meaning, where the moral values espoused often lack a solid foundation and can lead to the abandonment of common sense (Jan-Erik, 2018). Thus, although populism seeks to provide meaning to society, it can also worsen the existential condition of individuals by offering insubstantial and often misleading solutions (Rizal & Kharis, 2022).

In conclusion, the search for meaning in the context of Nietzsche's existentialism is highly relevant to current political dynamics. Populism, while attempting to give meaning to marginalized communities, often fails to offer real and sustainable solutions, resulting in the creation of unfounded and potentially harmful values. Therefore, it is important for individuals to remain critical in evaluating the promises offered by populism and to continuously seek deeper and authentic meaning in their life experiences (Sasan, 2023; Rizal & Kharis, 2022).

Friedrich Nietzsche's Viewpoint of Existentialism

The concept of Will to Power is one of the central ideas in Friedrich Nietzsche's philosophy. In Nietzsche's view, the Will to Power is not simply a desire to dominate others but a fundamental drive within every individual to reach their highest potential, overcome limitations, and create new values. Nietzsche argues that life is a struggle for power and recognition, where individuals must struggle against external and internal forces to realize themselves (Nietzsche, 2006) fully.

The relevance of the will-to-power concept in the Indonesian political context can be seen through competition among leaders and political parties. In general elections, candidates not only compete in terms of programs and visions but also terms of image and social influence. The growing phenomenon of populism in Indonesia shows that many leaders use emotional approaches and strong rhetoric to attract the people's attention, creating a strong emotional bond between leaders and their followers (Nadzir & Rastati, 2020; Saputra, 2023). This approach reflects how power is gained through rational policies, social influence, and the ability to evoke public emotions.

Social media, as a tool to build image and attract votes, has also become an important aspect of Indonesian politics. Research shows that political parties and their leaders increasingly adopt social media logic to manage political issues and build public image (Nadzir & Rastati, 2020; Ahmad, 2023). In this context, the power of leader charisma becomes very relevant, where leaders who can utilize social media well can strengthen their position in political competition (Nadzir & Rastati, 2020; Saputra, 2023). This shows that in Indonesian politics, Will to Power is related to formal power and the ability to influence and shape public opinion through various communication channels.

Indonesia's political structure is often influenced by patronage and oligarchy, where power is shared based on personal relationships and interests rather than ideology or policy platforms (Aspinall, 2015; Slater, 2018). Leaders often seek to maintain their position by building strategic alliances and using populism to attract support. This creates an environment where power can be maintained through social and political manipulation, reflecting the essence of the Will to Power proposed by Nietzsche, where power and influence become the primary goals in social and political interactions.

Political identity and social dynamics also play a role in shaping the behavior of political leaders and parties. Research shows that identity politics in Indonesia often exacerbates intolerance between groups, which leaders can use to consolidate their power (Pramono, 2023). By capitalizing on ethnic and religious differences, leaders can create a strong support base, although this often comes with the risk of social conflict. Will to Power in this context, therefore, encompasses not only the quest for power but also how that power is managed and sustained in a complex social context.

Overall, the relevance of Will to Power in Indonesian politics is evident in how leaders compete for votes, use various strategies to build image and influence, and maintain power in political structures often dominated by patronage and oligarchy. This approach reflects the complex and layered power dynamics in Indonesia's emerging democratic context.

However, Indonesia does not belong to a handful of political elites who try to maintain their power at all costs. Indonesia belongs to all Indonesians. Will to Power can also be seen in how people organize themselves to fight for their rights and interests. Nietzsche described Will to Power as a fundamental drive encouraging individuals to unleash their potential and overcome others in a competitive context (Roswantoro, 2020). Social movements such as #ReformasiDikorupsi and #SaveKPK are examples of how individuals and groups seek to change existing power structures to achieve justice and transparency and to fight for their rights. In the Indonesian context, where corruption and abuse of power are major issues, Will to Power is an impetus for people to unite and fight against injustice.

Nietzsche is also famous for his critique of traditional morality, which he sees as a product of weakness and conformity. In his view, morality based on conventional values often inhibits individuals from pursuing their true potential. He argued that those in power often use existing morality to manipulate those who are weak. Those with "master morality" manipulate those with "slave morality" (Nietzsche, 2017). In the context of Indonesian politics, this critique is relevant when considering how traditional values and social norms often influence the behavior of voters and potential leaders.

For example, in general elections, many aspiring leaders capitalize on society's strongly held religious and cultural values to attract support. This often poses a moral dilemma for voters who want to vote based on performance and vision but are trapped in traditional norms that require them to vote based on religious or ethnic affiliation. This is what Nietzsche challenged people to break, to have a "master morality" instead of a "slave morality".

Individual freedom in the context of elections in Indonesia is also often hampered by various factors, including social pressure, cultural norms, and political influence. This phenomenon is evident in elections, where people often feel compelled to vote for certain candidates rather than based on their desires and values. Populism, which often prioritizes the majority vote, can ignore minority voices and reduce individuals' freedom of choice (Budiman et al., 2022; Sihidi et al., 2020). In this context, populism in Indonesia often uses identity politics narratives that can reinforce societal polarization (Herianto & Wijanarko, 2022; Jati, 2023).

For example, in the 2019 election, many voters felt trapped between two main candidates with very different political views. Surveys showed that most voters felt they did not have a good choice and were forced to vote for the candidate they least supported (Sihidi et al., 2020). This suggests that while the democratic system provides the opportunity to vote, individual freedom of choice is hampered by political dynamics. The organization of elections that are not fully independent and neutral, as well as the practice of money politics, also contribute to the limited freedom of voters (Irawan, 2024; Sutini, 2023).

In conclusion, from Nietzsche's existentialist perspective, there is always a conflict between the will of power and the ruler and the people. This conflict is still exacerbated by the manipulation of populism to utilize the "slave morality" of most of the people. However, the principle to remember in democracy is that the state belongs to the people, not to a handful of elites. Therefore, elections must be optimized so that people get the closest to perfection instead of being presented with choices that benefit the elite.

Merit System as the Practice of Existentialism in Democracy in Indonesia

On the one hand, democracy in Indonesia, as a form of government that gives power to the people, has experienced various dynamics since the 1998 reform. Since the 1998 reform, the people have gained the freedom to choose their leaders with a one-person vote scheme. Elections have become the main means for people to express their will as widely as possible. However, is it true that the Indonesian people have gained the widest possible freedom to choose their future leaders with the one-person, one-vote scheme?

On the other hand, there is a view of existentialism by Friedrich Nietzsche that serves as a reminder for Indonesians to be active voters in elections. This view emphasizes the individual's importance and the will's power in determining their fate through elections. Only by electing good leaders can the fate of the nation and state change for the better. The fate of the Indonesian people can only be changed by their own will to change. People must fight for their destiny, protect themselves from the tricks of political elites that often take the form of populism, and dare to transcend outdated traditional values to obtain a better future for the nation. This is the Will of Power that people should have in the context of elections.

Nietzsche's existentialist view is right to criticize the one person, one vote pattern, which has given the widest possible freedom to the people but still controls the people towards the interests of certain political elites. This criticism is aimed at the candidates for leaders who are presented to the people to be elected in elections through parties or independents. These candidates are often of dubious competence in government affairs. These candidates play on people's emotions rather than highlighting their competence. They result from an agreement as clearly expressed in article 169 and articles 221-224 of Law No. 7/2017. They are chosen not because of their abilities but because of the agreement of the political parties. So, how can the people get good leaders, if the proposed candidates are only the result of an agreement between political parties, and do not have clear indicators of competence as government leaders. How can problems in the state's life be quickly resolved, if the candidates for leaders only get votes based on populism.

Therefore, the author suggests a merit system in the selection of candidates for leaders in executive institutions as an effort to optimize general elections. Changes need to be made to laws and regulations related to candidate requirements, especially in executive institutions, namely the president, vice president, and regional heads, namely article 169 and articles 221-224 of Law Number 7/2017. These changes emphasize the importance of work experience in the government, both central and regional government, for a sufficient period before being nominated by a political party or running independently as a candidate for president, vice president, and regional head.

The changes referred to by the author are as follows: First, only State Civil Apparatus (ASN) who have held positions in the field of government as Regional Secretary or Assistant Regional Secretary by Law Number 20 of 2023 concerning State Civil Apparatus can be nominated as candidates for regional heads. If the candidate is a regency/city head, they must have experience as Regional Secretary or Assistant Regional Secretary at the regency/city level. If the candidate is a provincial head, he/she must have experience as a Regional or Assistant Regional Secretary at the provincial level. Second, only ASNs who have been regents/deputy regents/mayors/deputy mayors for several periods can be nominated by parties or run for governor/deputy governor candidates.

Third, only ASNs who have been governors/deputy governors for several periods can be nominated by parties or run as presidential/vice presidential candidates. Fourth, the president, vice president, and regional head positions are career paths for ASNs. This means that the public can also become candidates for president, vice president, and regional head if they follow the ASN career path and promotion by Law Number 20 of 2023. Finally, ASNs who have completed their normal duties as regional heads, presidents, or vice presidents can be re-elected once again as candidates for regional heads, presidents, or vice presidents for the same position or return to duty as ASN as *widyaiswara* functional officials responsible for regenerating candidates for the leadership of executive institutions, until retirement age.

Thus, the president, vice president, or regional head position continues ASN's career. Anyone who wants to become a leader in the executive branch must pursue a career in the ASN merit system scheme within a certain period and can only be elected by the people through elections. The application of the merit system to candidates for president, vice president, and candidates for regional heads can provide several advantages, including candidates for leaders of executive institutions whom the people will elect can be ensured to have sufficient experience in the field of government, the balance between the legislature and the executive is getting better. The legislature can be filled from various backgrounds of ability, juxtaposed with executive institutions that require professionalism in the field of government and can save the APBN and APBD budgets because the leaders of executive institutions elected by the people do not need too many experts to assist.

CONCLUSION

General elections are a means of expressing the will of the people in the context of democracy in Indonesia. In this 5-year democratic party, the people choose candidates for leaders in the executive and legislative institutions. However, this democratic party is often tainted by the existence of candidates who are purely the result of political party agreements. This condition raises strong doubts about the competence of these candidates to be elected as leaders of the central and regional governments. The candidates offered, especially for the executive branch, are of questionable competence. However, because there is no other choice, the people can only choose based on the rhetoric of the candidates' vision and mission and identity politics. This is when democracy falls into populism.

As introduced by Friedrich Nietzsche, existentialism proposes individuals' freedom and full responsibility in all their decisions, including in the state's life. The nomination of leaders of executive institutions based on political party agreements limits the freedom of the people as individuals to obtain quality-tested choices. People are forced to choose candidates not because of their competence but because of rhetoric that disguises certain benefits for political parties.

Therefore, changes in the laws and regulations are needed, especially Article 169 and Articles 221-224 of Law Number 7 Year 2017, related to the criteria for presidential, vice presidential, and regional head candidates nominated by parties and independents. The change in question is the addition of a requirement for proven competence in the field of government through the ASN merit system for these candidates. With the addition of this requirement, the competence of candidates for the leadership of executive institutions can be accounted for, parties can only carry candidates for executive institutions who have experience in managing the government, and the people get a choice of qualified candidates for leaders, not just playing populist issues through their rhetoric and identity politics.

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