



POLITICAL COMMUNICATION OF AGRARIAN REFORM: REPRESENTATION OF THE STATE AND THE PEOPLE IN THE CURRENT OF GLOBAL NEOLIBERALISM

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ABSTRACT

This article analyzes how state political communication constructs and legitimizes the discourse of agrarian reform within the framework of global neoliberalism. Using a Systematic Literature Review (SLR), the study synthesizes 32 peer-reviewed articles published between 2000 and 2025, selected based on thematic relevance, methodological rigor, and empirical contribution. The analysis identifies a consistent pattern of rhetorical commitment to agrarian justice alongside the material reproduction of land inequality. Specifically, the administrations of Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, Joko Widodo, and Prabowo Subianto have framed agrarian reform as a technocratic process centered on land certification, while avoiding direct confrontation with entrenched elite land ownership. This communication strategy, rooted in hegemonic discourse, has normalized structural exclusion and depoliticized land conflicts. Despite the proliferation of populist slogans, policy trajectories remain aligned with corporate and investor interests, marginalizing rural communities and Indigenous peoples. The study concludes that political communication in post-authoritarian Indonesia functions not merely as information dissemination but as an ideological instrument for maintaining elite consensus. For agrarian reform to be effective, it must be reclaimed as a political struggle grounded in participatory justice and grassroots mobilization. Without this shift, reform risks becoming an aesthetic performance rather than a transformative agenda.

Keywords: Agrarian reform, Political communication, Land inequality, Neoliberalism

1. INTRODUCTION

Since its proclamation of independence in 1945, Indonesia has envisioned agrarian reform as a cornerstone of justice and national sovereignty (Muttaqin, 2024). President Sukarno, echoing the aspirations of the founding fathers, sought to dismantle feudal land monopolies and redistribute agrarian resources to the people as a means to build a strong, just, and self-reliant nation (Kendall, 2022; Ong, 2022). However, this vision faced continuous obstructions, both politically and economically. Centuries of colonial domination had left the rural majority impoverished and dispossessed, and the early post-independence period did little to dismantle the structural inequality that characterized land ownership in Indonesia (Hartatik et al., 2025; White & Taylor, 2025).

Following the downfall of Sukarno, the ascendancy of Suharto's New Order regime marked a radical shift in Indonesia's economic and political orientation (Tirtosudarmo & Carey, 2022). The 1967 Foreign Investment Law and the introduction of various deregulation policies signaled the country's alignment with global neoliberal capitalism (Akçay, 2024; Lavery, 2024). Land reform efforts were abandoned in favor of capital-driven development strategies, where foreign investment and multinational interests were prioritized over equitable land distribution (Chen et al., 2024; Zhu & Jin, 2025). Consequently, vast tracts of agrarian resources were handed over to corporate interests, marginalizing small farmers and indigenous communities (Domingues & Sauer, 2023; Ioris, 2022).

The consequences of these neoliberal policies were multifaceted. While the economy witnessed growth applauded by the World Bank and IMF this development was exclusionary. Wealth was concentrated among a small economic elite, while the majority of rural citizens remained impoverished. The cost of agricultural inputs soared, yet farmgate prices stagnated. This imbalance eroded the bargaining power and sustainability of smallholder farming. Additionally, the massive exploitation of natural resources resulted in extensive environmental degradation, social dislocation, and a rise in urban poverty due to rural-urban migration (Javed et al., 2024).

Scholars have identified this pattern as a manifestation of neoliberal "accumulation by dispossession," a term coined by David Harvey et al, to describe the transfer of wealth from the marginalized to capitalist interests through policies such as

privatization, commodification, and deregulation (Lavinias et al., 2023). In Indonesia's case, political decisions regarding land governance were increasingly shaped by global financial interests rather than national welfare goals (Meckelburg & Wardana, 2024). Agrarian reform narratives once grounded in the ideals of justice and redistribution were reframed as mechanisms for market efficiency and investor certainty (Graddy-Lovelace et al., 2023).

Political communication has played a crucial role in legitimizing and reproducing these neoliberal agendas (Sellami et al., 2025). State narratives strategically frame land-related policies as inevitable outcomes of modernity and progress, sidelining grassroots struggles for land rights. Through national media and bureaucratic discourses, neoliberal agrarian reform is normalized, while structural violence and dispossession are obscured from public scrutiny (Navarrete-Cruz et al., 2023). This form of symbolic governance helps depoliticize land conflicts, presenting them as technical problems rather than socio-political crises (Davis & Müller, 2025).

This article seeks to analyze how the Indonesian state, through its political communication strategies, represents agrarian reform within the broader context of global neoliberalism. Specifically, it interrogates the discursive frameworks used by the state to present land policies as development imperatives while marginalizing alternative perspectives rooted in social justice and community-based ownership. The analysis aims to uncover the tensions between populist rhetoric and technocratic governance, revealing how communication shapes and legitimizes the political economy of land (Fox & Margalit, 2024). It is argued that political communication in Indonesia has functioned not merely as a tool of information dissemination, but as a mechanism of ideological reproduction (Ahmad, 2022). The state's framing of agrarian reform constructs legitimacy for policies that benefit capital accumulation, often at the expense of local communities. As such, public narratives surrounding land governance reflect the hegemonic logic of global capitalism, where the promise of "development" conceals deeper inequalities and exclusions (German, 2022; Rodrigues, 2024).

The issue of agrarian reform in Indonesia is not solely a matter of land redistribution but a battlefield of narratives between the people's demand for justice and the state's alignment with global capital. By situating agrarian reform within the matrix of political communication, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of

how state discourse operates as a tool of power. It calls for a reimagination of agrarian justice that centers on the voices of marginalized communities and reclaims reform from the clutches of neoliberal orthodoxy.

2. RESEARCH METHODE

This study employs a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) to analyze how political communication constructs and legitimizes the discourse of agrarian reform in Indonesia within the context of global neoliberalism (Yudhoyono et al., 2024). As a qualitative research method, SLR allows the researcher to systematically identify, evaluate, and synthesize relevant scholarly works in order to map the existing knowledge, uncover theoretical and empirical gaps, and identify recurring patterns, contradictions, and dominant narratives (Creswell, 2021). The review was guided by the central research question: How has political communication shaped the discourse of agrarian reform in Indonesia amid the rise of neoliberal political economy? To answer this, the study also examines how state narratives frame land reform in favor of market-oriented development, how communication strategies contribute to policy legitimization, and how alternative discourses particularly those emerging from grassroots resistance are represented or excluded in scholarly debates. The literature search was conducted between January and July 2025 using academic databases such as Scopus, Web of Science, ScienceDirect, and Google Scholar. Keywords included "agrarian reform," "political communication," "neoliberalism," "Indonesia," "land governance," "state discourse," "capitalism," and "agrarian justice." Boolean operators and search filters were applied to refine results, and manual screening of abstracts was performed to ensure thematic and methodological relevance. Inclusion criteria required that sources be peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2000 and 2025, written in English or Bahasa Indonesia, and addressing agrarian, communication, or policy issues in Indonesia or comparable Southeast Asian contexts. Excluded were non-academic sources (e.g., opinion pieces, blogs), technical agricultural studies without socio-political analysis, and works unrelated to communication or state discourse. From an initial pool of 78 articles, a final sample of 32 scholarly works was selected after removing duplicates and applying the inclusion criteria. Data

from these articles were extracted and coded thematically using a qualitative synthesis technique inspired by Khan (2024), which involves identifying and categorizing key themes such as framing strategies, representation of power actors, legitimacy construction, grassroots narratives, and theoretical perspectives including critical discourse analysis, hegemony theory, and postcolonial critiques (Khan, 2024). To ensure the quality of the selected articles, the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) checklist was adapted and applied, focusing on clarity of objectives, methodological rigor, theoretical grounding, empirical contribution, and relevance to the topic. Only those that met at least four of the five quality indicators were retained in the review matrix. Ethical considerations were observed by ensuring that all sources were properly cited and no original data involving human subjects were used, as the study relied solely on publicly available, secondary sources. Through this rigorous SLR approach, the study aims to generate a critical synthesis of how agrarian reform is communicated politically in Indonesia, revealing not only the alignment of state discourse with neoliberal agendas but also the marginalization of counter-narratives rooted in social justice and agrarian sovereignty.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The fall of Suharto's authoritarian-militaristic regime in 1998 signaled a turning point in Indonesia's political landscape. Reformasi, a national movement demanding democratic transformation, raised new hopes for a more just and inclusive development model. The momentum opened up political liberalization in the form of multi-party democracy, decentralization, and media freedom (Cowburn & Kerr, 2023). Yet, despite these progressive changes, the foundational economic paradigm that prioritized capital accumulation remained intact. The discourse of development continued to be shaped by market-centric logics, heavily influenced by domestic and foreign investors (Alawattage & Wickramasinghe, 2022). As a result, agrarian reform an issue central to the vision of social justice was largely marginalized in the early years of the post-authoritarian era. The reform movement succeeded in dismantling the political monopoly of the New Order, but failed to significantly

contest the dominance of neoliberal capitalism that continued to inform economic governance (Somers, 2022).

In the immediate aftermath of Reformasi, political attention was focused on constitutional amendments, law enforcement, and state reconfiguration. Land reform despite its historical urgency and constitutional basis remained in the background of national policy debates. It was only during the presidency of Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (SBY) that agrarian reform re-entered national discourse. Even so, promises to redistribute millions of hectares of land to landless farmers were never fully implemented during his two terms in office. This pattern of symbolic rather than structural reform reflects what scholars refer to as “discursive inclusion, material exclusion”, wherein reformist rhetoric is not matched by transformative action. The state’s communication strategies during this period were marked by ambiguity projecting commitment to equity while simultaneously safeguarding the interests of capital and elites (Al-Wahaibi, 2025).

The rise of Joko Widodo (Jokowi), a civilian and populist figure, in the 2014 presidential election reignited public expectations for genuine agrarian reform (Baker, 2023). His campaign platform, Nawacita, explicitly placed land reform at the core of the national development strategy. It invoked foundational values such as Pancasila and Trisakti, envisioning a sovereign, self-reliant, and dignified Indonesia. Under Nawacita’s strategic vision, agrarian reform was framed as a pathway to reduce inequality, empower the marginalized, and foster national unity. Jokowi’s speeches, including his 2017 address at the Tanwir Muhammadiyah forum in Ambon, emphasized agrarian justice as part of the government’s economic equity agenda. He outlined three key programs: land redistribution, financial inclusion, and human resource development. Central to this policy was the claim that 12.7 million hectares of land would be redistributed not by seizing assets from the wealthy, but by utilizing idle lands.

This technocratic framing of reform reveals a communicative contradiction. While the policy language signaled social justice, its operational logic avoided structural confrontation with elite land ownership. By insisting that reform would not conflict with large-scale landholders or corporations, the state effectively neutralized the redistributive potential of agrarian policy. This reflects what calls “neoliberal

exceptions,” where the state selectively applies regulatory measures to serve capital while preserving an image of equity (Adely, 2024). Jokowi’s agrarian narrative thus served more as a discursive legitimization of state authority than a material correction of land injustice. Political communication became a tool for managing expectations, constructing legitimacy, and mitigating resistance, rather than challenging the concentration of land ownership.

The empirical reality contradicts the rhetorical commitment to reform. Data from civil society organizations such as the Agrarian Reform Consortium (KPA), WALHI, and Komnas HAM consistently show a rising number of unresolved agrarian conflicts across the country. These conflicts often involve state-backed violence, criminalization of farmers, and corporate land grabs. Many communities that had won legal recognition over their land still found themselves unable to access or utilize it due to bureaucratic hurdles and elite resistance. The so-called agrarian reform program under Jokowi has been widely criticized as a mere “asset legalization” initiative focusing on the issuance of land certificates rather than redistributive justice. As a result, reform has failed to alter the underlying structures of inequality, instead reinforcing a system that benefits oligarchic power (Scharf, 2022).

A particularly striking example of public disillusionment emerged on September 24, 2024, during National Farmers Day. Thousands of peasants from across the country marched to the Ministry of Agrarian Affairs and Spatial Planning in Jakarta, demanding the realization of genuine agrarian reform in line with Article 33 of the 1945 Constitution and Law No. 5/1960 on Basic Agrarian Principles. These demonstrations underscored the widening gap between political promises and public experience. Farmers, laborers, fishers, and landless citizens voiced their frustration over the state’s failure to fulfill its redistributive pledges, viewing Jokowi’s Nawacita as a political maneuver rather than a transformative agenda. Their demands for a nine-million-hectare land redistribution program were met not with institutional reforms but with tokenistic solutions such as certificate distribution.

This tension between populist rhetoric and neoliberal governance is emblematic of Indonesia’s contemporary political economy. The strategic ambiguity in state

communication framing agrarian reform as both urgent and conflict-averse functions to sustain elite consensus while deflecting grassroots criticism. This phenomenon resonates with critical discourse studies that highlight how state narratives are deployed to construct hegemonic consent (Filimonov & Carpentier, 2023). Instead of facilitating redistribution, political communication in the post-Reformasi era has often operated to normalize inequality, delegitimize dissent, and redirect public debate from structural issues to administrative targets. In this context, agrarian reform becomes a performance an aesthetic of justice rather than a redistributive practice.

The analysis reveals that agrarian reform in Indonesia, while heavily featured in political communication, has been systematically emptied of its radical content. Jokowi's presidency, despite its inclusive rhetoric, maintained the dominance of capital in agrarian governance. Political communication served to manage dissent, legitimize policy stagnation, and simulate progress. The persistence of land inequality, unresolved agrarian conflicts, and elite domination signals a deeper crisis in Indonesia's democratic project (White et al., 2023). Genuine agrarian reform requires not only legislative frameworks or technical programs, but a reconfiguration of power relations and that, as history shows, cannot be achieved without confronting the vested interests of the ruling class.

The transition to the Prabowo Subianto administration has raised critical concerns about the future of agrarian reform and pro-people development in Indonesia (Asfar et al., 2025). Despite the rhetorical inclusion of agrarian reform in the *Asta Cita* the campaign blueprint of the Prabowo-Gibran presidential ticket the program remains ambiguous in both vision and execution. While agrarian reform is nominally listed as an instrument for achieving food, energy, and water sovereignty, its operationalization is reduced primarily to land certification schemes, which fall short of addressing structural land inequality. Certification may resolve administrative constraints for landholders, particularly among the rural poor, yet it fails to confront the broader political economy of land accumulation and the injustices experienced by landless farmers and indigenous communities. The regime's tendency to promote land titling over redistribution reflects a continuation of the

technocratic and market-oriented approach inherited from its predecessors, particularly the Jokowi administration.

This discursive pattern reveals a critical contradiction: the state's communication strategies emphasize justice and inclusion while reinforcing policies that sustain the status quo. In practice, structural redistribution of land remains politically sensitive and economically inconvenient for elite interests. The former government under Jokowi had already established a Task Force for Agrarian Conflict Resolution led by General (ret.) Moeldoko, which was widely criticized for its lack of transparency, legal authority, and measurable outcomes. As such, many perceived the initiative as symbolic rather than transformative. The new administration under Prabowo has yet to signal any departure from this superficial policy style. The absence of clear and firm policies on land redistribution, protection of customary land rights, or farmer empowerment raises doubts about the administration's political will to deliver on its agrarian justice promises.

Compounding this skepticism is the government's continuation of controversial national strategic projects (Proyek Strategis Nasional), such as the food estate program in Kalimantan and Papua. The replication of past development models characterized by top-down planning, corporate domination, and monocultural agricultural practices has sparked strong opposition from local communities, indigenous leaders, and civil society. In Papua, the food estate program was met with a formal rejection by the Papuan Church Council and indigenous pastors, citing concerns over customary land seizure, ecological degradation, and the social consequences of in-migration. These grievances illustrate how development projects that prioritize capital-intensive agribusiness not only marginalize local producers but also threaten the cultural and political autonomy of indigenous peoples. Such outcomes contradict the state's narrative of inclusive development and reveal the systemic violence embedded in neoliberal land governance.

The continuation of extractive policies in the mining and forestry sectors under Prabowo's leadership deepens the crisis of agrarian justice. According to JATAM (Mining Advocacy Network), there are over 8,000 mining permits covering more than 10.4 million hectares, many of which encroach on agricultural and customary lands. Auriga Nusantara further reports that deforestation in 2024 reached alarming

levels, with over 150,000 hectares lost within industrial concessions. These figures underscore the scale of dispossession and environmental destruction facing rural communities. Land loss, declining agricultural productivity, and ecological disasters such as flash floods and landslides disproportionately affect small farmers and exacerbate rural poverty. In many cases, resistance to these destructive projects is met with criminalization and state repression, facilitated by repressive legal instruments such as the Mining Law (Law No. 3/2020), the Omnibus Law (UU Cipta Kerja), and the Electronic Information and Transactions Law (UU ITE).

The political communication of the current regime presents itself as “pro-people,” but functions as a shield for corporate interests and elite continuity. The repeated use of populist rhetoric masks the realignment of state institutions with neoliberal development logics. Instead of pursuing redistributive justice, the government directs public attention toward formalistic achievements such as certificate handouts and “red-and-white cooperative” programs, without transforming the structural conditions of agrarian inequality. These narratives follow the logic of “simulacra of reform” wherein the appearance of justice substitutes for actual redistribution. The Prabowo administration’s development orientation remains anchored in the logic of capital expansion, which systematically marginalizes the rural poor, weakens ecological resilience, and entrenches oligarchic power structures (Ekayanta, 2024).

The future implications of this model are dire. Without significant shifts in political will and institutional frameworks, Indonesia is likely to witness the recurrence of large-scale agrarian conflicts, as experienced during the Jokowi era the highest in the country’s modern history (White et al., 2023). Continued displacement, ecological devastation, and legal impunity for corporate actors will not only undermine the credibility of the state but also threaten national cohesion. Agrarian reform cannot be achieved through technocratic governance alone. It requires redistributive policies, participatory planning, and the recognition of customary land rights as political, not merely legal, claims. This condition demands a re-politicization of the agrarian issue, where land is reclaimed as a public good rather than a commodified asset.

In this context, the role of civil society becomes central. The failure of formal politics to deliver agrarian justice underscores the need for a revitalized grassroots movement capable of articulating counter-narratives and mobilizing collective action. The hegemony of neoliberalism must be challenged through a reconstitution of power from below. Thus, any meaningful hope for agrarian justice under Prabowo's regime lies not in the state's political slogans but in the organized resistance of those dispossessed by development. The future of agrarian reform and of democracy itself depends on the ability of civil society to assert its voice, reclaim its space, and demand a just reordering of land, power, and ecology.

4. CONCLUSION

This study reveals that agrarian reform in Indonesia remains a fiercely contested political arena, shaped less by genuine redistributive intent and more by strategic communication that serves elite continuity. From the collapse of Suharto's authoritarian regime to the democratic reforms that followed, expectations of structural transformation in land governance have largely been replaced by a technocratic approach that prioritizes capital accumulation over social justice. Successive administrations, including those of Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono and Joko Widodo, have consistently deployed political rhetoric emphasizing equality and agrarian justice while avoiding substantive confrontation with deeply entrenched elite land ownership. Agrarian reform is rhetorically present yet materially absent a classic case of "discursive inclusion, material exclusion."

Under President Jokowi, the Nawacita platform elevated agrarian reform to the level of a national strategic vision. However, the failure to translate this vision into redistributive action combined with the use of land certification programs as symbolic gestures undermined public trust and failed to address the core problem of land inequality. Rather than challenging oligarchic power structures, state communication has functioned to legitimize inertia and manage dissent. Civil society organizations have consistently documented escalating agrarian conflicts, violence against rural communities, and systemic impunity for corporate land grabbing, all of which expose the gap between populist rhetoric and neoliberal governance.

The transition to Prabowo Subianto's presidency has so far not signaled a significant shift away from this paradigm. Although agrarian reform is nominally included in *Asta Cita*, the administration continues to rely on land certification schemes, as its predecessors did, while avoiding redistributive policies that could threaten elite interests. Moreover, the continuation of controversial megaprojects such as food estate programs and extractive industrial expansion in Papua and Kalimantan has intensified ecological degradation and deepened the marginalization of Indigenous and rural populations. As a result, the government's populist slogans ring hollow in the face of ongoing dispossession and the criminalization of dissent.

The findings of this study underscore the critical role of political communication, not only as a means of legitimizing state authority but also as a mechanism of hegemonic control. By framing agrarian reform as urgent while simultaneously avoiding conflict, the state maintains elite consensus while neutralizing transformative demands from below. Agrarian justice, as the evidence suggests, cannot be achieved through symbolic policies or technocratic solutions alone. What is required is a radical reconfiguration of power relations grounded in participatory politics, the protection of customary land rights, and the genuine redistribution of wealth and resources.

Ultimately, the future of agrarian reform in Indonesia depends not on state promises, but on the capacity of civil society to resist, mobilize, and reclaim control over land, ecology, and livelihoods. Without such grassroots assertion, agrarian reform risks remaining a performance an aesthetic of justice without substance. In the context of persistent inequality, ecological crisis, and authoritarian tendencies cloaked in the language of democracy, civil society must reframe the agrarian question not merely as a legal or economic issue, but as a political struggle for justice, sovereignty, and democratic renewal.

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