

Between Welfare and Populism: A Critical Analysis Of The Free Nutritious Meal Program Under The Prabowo Subianto Administration

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Abstract

Social transformation is a fundamental process involving changes in social structures, patterns of interaction, cultural values, and societal institutions. This article critically analyzes the Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG) under the administration of Prabowo Subianto by positioning it at the intersection of social welfare policy and political populism. This study employs a qualitative approach using critical content analysis of government policy documents, academic literature, and reports from relevant institutions. The analysis focuses on how MBG simultaneously functions as an instrument of social investment and as a mechanism for constructing political legitimacy. The findings indicate that MBG displays characteristics of *welfare populism*, referring to a condition in which social policy operates not only as a mechanism for redistributing welfare but also as a means of building a direct symbolic relationship between the state and society. On the one hand, the program reflects a *social investment* paradigm oriented toward long-term human capital development through nutritional intervention. On the other hand, its implementation continues to face various challenges, including structural inequalities, concerns regarding fiscal sustainability, and the blurred boundary between welfare rationality and political calculation. This study contributes to the development of the literature on welfare populism and political legitimacy in the context of contemporary Indonesian democracy.

1. INTRODUCTION

Improving the quality of human resources is one of the principal prerequisites for achieving sustainable national development. Within the contemporary development paradigm, investment in health and nutrition is no longer viewed merely as a social policy, but as a development strategy with long-term implications for educational quality, economic productivity, and national competitiveness. Various studies have shown that poor nutritional conditions during childhood may hinder cognitive development, reduce educational attainment, and affect individuals' productive capacity in adulthood. Accordingly, nutritional intervention has increasingly been positioned as an integral component of the human development agenda oriented toward strengthening human capital (Salesman et al., 2024).

In the Indonesian context, nutritional problems remain one of the development challenges that have not yet been fully resolved. The 2024 Indonesian Nutritional Status Survey (SSGI) showed that the national prevalence of stunting declined from 21.5% in 2023 to 19.8% in 2024. This achievement

indicates progress, but it also shows that nearly one in five Indonesian children continues to experience growth impairment associated with chronic nutritional problems (Ministry of Health of the Republic of Indonesia, 2025). This condition confirms that improving nutritional status remains a strategic agenda requiring sustained and equitable policy intervention.

Against this background, the administration of Prabowo Subianto has positioned the Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG) as one of its national priority programs, designed to reach school students, young children, pregnant women, and breastfeeding mothers. The program is positioned as a strategic instrument for accelerating improvements in public nutrition while simultaneously supporting the human resource development agenda toward the vision of Golden Indonesia 2045. Several preliminary studies indicate that the program is constructed as a human development policy linking nutritional intervention with improvements in educational quality and long-term productivity (Agustini, 2025).

From the perspective of welfare policy, MBG has a strong normative foundation. Within the welfare-state tradition, the state is understood as having a responsibility to guarantee the fulfillment of citizens' basic needs. Given its broad coverage of beneficiaries and its nationwide design, MBG has the potential to become one of the largest social protection programs in the history of Indonesian welfare policy (Klein, 1991).

However, the position of MBG as a flagship program of the new administration also introduces a political dimension that cannot be overlooked. Since its introduction in the electoral arena, the program has been strongly associated with the leadership figure of Prabowo Subianto, raising questions regarding the relationship between social welfare objectives and political interests. In the context of electoral democracy, various studies have shown that welfare policies function not only as instruments of redistribution but may also serve as mechanisms for constructing political legitimacy and mobilizing public support (Kaltwasser & Zanotti, 2021).

The literature on contemporary populism explains that populism is a political logic that positions "the people" as the principal source of political legitimacy and constructs a dichotomy between the people and the elite. Policies that provide direct and readily perceived benefits to society may then be constructed as evidence of a leader's commitment to the people, while simultaneously serving as a medium for strengthening the political relationship between government and society. Under such conditions, the boundary between welfare policy and populist strategy becomes increasingly blurred (Mudde, 2004; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017).

Based on this background, this article aims to critically analyze the Free Nutritious Meal Program by positioning it at the intersection between the social welfare agenda and political populism. Specifically, the study seeks to answer three questions: (1) how are populist characteristics reflected in MBG; (2) how is the program constructed as a welfare policy; and (3) what are its political implications for government legitimacy? This study is expected to contribute theoretically to the development of scholarship on populism and welfare policy in contemporary Indonesia.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative approach oriented toward a critical analysis of public policy. The qualitative approach was selected because the study seeks to understand the meanings, constructions, and political logic embedded in the Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG), rather than to test causal relationships quantitatively. From this perspective, policy is understood not merely as a technocratic instrument, but also as a socio-political product shaped by values, interests, and power relations (Hani Subakti, 2020).

The study used a library research design, in which all analyzed data were derived from written documents. The data sources consisted of: (1) primary data, including official government documents, regulations, official speeches by state officials, and publications issued by institutions involved in the formulation of MBG; and (2) secondary data, including national and international scholarly journals, academic books, and research reports from research institutions discussing populism, the welfare state, social policy, and human resource development.

Data were collected through systematic documentation involving the identification, collection, and classification of relevant documents. All documents were selected based on their academic relevance and source credibility. The data were analyzed using content analysis with an interpretive-critical approach, which involved three stages: (1) data reduction, consisting of the selection of information relevant to the research focus; (2) data categorization into major themes such as populism, the welfare

state, social investment, and political legitimacy; and (3) data interpretation based on the predetermined theoretical framework.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the data, the study employed source triangulation by comparing information derived from government documents, academic literature, and research institution reports. In addition, the study applied the principle of an audit trail by systematically tracing the entire process of data collection and analysis, thereby ensuring that each finding could be academically accounted for.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

MBG as a Multidimensional Policy

The analysis shows that the Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG) under the administration of Prabowo Subianto cannot be understood solely as a technical policy in the field of nutrition. Formally, the program is designed as a national intervention to improve the health status of vulnerable groups, particularly school-age children, young children, pregnant women, and breastfeeding mothers, with the primary objective of reducing stunting and strengthening the quality of human resources.

An examination of policy documents and the program's communication construction reveals that MBG contains more complex layers of meaning. The program operates not only within a technocratic domain, but also as a representation of state presence that is packaged in a direct, easily understood, and tangible form for the public. The linkage of MBG to the vision of Golden Indonesia 2045 further expands its function into a broader national development narrative that integrates social, economic, and political dimensions within a single framework of development legitimacy.

At the implementation level, a number of structural problems have become visible since the early stages of implementation. The complexity of distribution across regions, disparities in local bureaucratic capacity, and coordination across levels of government indicate a considerable gap between policy design and operational realities. The very large scale of the program also carries significant fiscal consequences, raising questions regarding the sustainability of financing in the medium and long term (Orbawati et al., 2025).

MBG within the Framework of Welfare Populism

When analyzed through the perspective of populism, the Free Nutritious Meal Program reflects characteristics consistent with the logic of welfare populism, namely the use of welfare policy as a medium for constructing direct proximity between the state and society. The distribution of benefits that are immediate, visible, and readily experienced by citizens strengthens a political relationship that tends to minimize the role of intermediary institutions.

Within this framework, policy no longer functions solely as a response to social problems, but also as a mechanism for producing political legitimacy through the construction of symbolic proximity between the government and "the people." This relationship illustrates how populism operates not only through political rhetoric, but also through policy design that inherently carries a logic of direct alignment with popular interests. The association between MBG and the leadership figure of Prabowo Subianto further reinforces the populist dimension of the program, in which policy benefits are associated directly with the personal initiative of the leader rather than being perceived solely as the product of an institutional system (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017; Beasley-Murray, 2006).

MBG as a Social Investment Policy

At the same time, MBG can be positioned within the framework of modern welfare policy that has increasingly shifted toward a social investment approach. From this perspective, state expenditure on child nutrition is understood as a long-term investment in improving human quality. Interventions during the early stages of life are believed to have subsequent effects on cognitive capacity, productivity, and individual well-being in the future (Hemerijck et al., 2023).

Nevertheless, this approach raises conceptual concerns when confronted with the multidimensional complexity of stunting. Stunting is not solely associated with food intake, but is also closely related to sanitation, maternal education, access to healthcare, and household socioeconomic conditions. In this context, MBG tends to represent a simplification of a complex structural problem. Although school meal provision is important, it cannot serve as a single solution to nutritional problems rooted in structural poverty and unequal access to basic services.

Implications for Political Legitimacy

From a political perspective, MBG contributes to strengthening output legitimacy, namely legitimacy derived from policy performance that is directly experienced by the public. When policy benefits are tangibly accessible, public acceptance of the government tends to increase (Easton, 1965; Schmidt, 2013). However, within the framework of welfare populism, this mechanism is not entirely neutral because it opens space for social programs to be used as instruments for consolidating political support.

In this context, MBG demonstrates an ambivalence that cannot be overlooked. On the one hand, the program represents a welfare policy oriented toward improving the quality of human resources through a social investment approach. On the other hand, it operates within a broader political arena in which public policy intersects with the process of constructing governmental legitimacy. This ambivalence indicates that, in contemporary governance, the boundary between policy rationality and political calculation is increasingly difficult to separate in a clear and definitive manner.

4. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG) under the administration of Prabowo Subianto cannot be reduced solely to a welfare policy. Rather, the program operates within a more complex intersection of welfare-state logic, social investment rationality, and the dynamics of populism in contemporary democracy. MBG exhibits a dual character embedded in both its design and implementation: it functions as an instrument for improving the quality of human resources while simultaneously serving as a political medium for the production of governmental legitimacy.

From the perspective of welfare policy, MBG reflects a social investment rationale that positions nutritional intervention as a long-term investment in the development of human capital. Normatively, the program contributes to the human development agenda through improvements in nutritional status, reductions in stunting, and the strengthening of future generations' capacities. Nevertheless, the substantive achievements of the program cannot be separated from implementation challenges, particularly those related to institutional capacity, intergovernmental coordination, and infrastructure readiness, all of which continue to reveal structural limitations.

At the political level, MBG reflects a logic consistent with welfare populism, in which the distribution of direct and readily perceived benefits strengthens the symbolic relationship between the state and society. Welfare policy therefore functions not only as a mechanism of redistribution, but also as an instrument for producing output legitimacy, whereby public acceptance is constructed through visible and tangible policy performance.

The findings of this study affirm that public policy in the context of modern democracy cannot be understood exclusively through a technocratic approach. Public policy analysis must simultaneously consider both social and political dimensions in order to capture the complexity of policy realities more comprehensively. Future research employing a mixed-methods approach that combines document analysis with public perception surveys and field-based studies of policy implementation would be valuable for further strengthening and extending the findings of this study.

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