

BEYOND POLITICAL BRANDING: POLITICAL SILAT AS A CULTURAL FRAMEWORK FOR DIGITAL LEADERSHIP COMMUNICATION

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ABSTRACT

This article examines Prabowo Subianto's political strategy as represented through the *Total Politik* YouTube channel by analyzing the construction of political imagery and soft power practices within the framework of "political silat." In the context of Indonesia's evolving digital democracy, political legitimacy is increasingly shaped not only through institutional mechanisms but also through the ability to construct narratives, symbols, and public representations across digital platforms. This research employs a qualitative approach utilizing content analysis and political discourse analysis to investigate how Prabowo's political identity is produced and communicated through digital media. The data were derived from three major episodes of the *Total Politik* YouTube channel that extensively addressed Prabowo's political strategies and maneuvers during the 2024–2025 period. The findings indicate that Prabowo's political image is constructed through three interconnected dimensions: power reconciliation, cultural symbolism, and the moral discourse of nationalism. These dimensions illustrate a strategic transformation from a predominantly confrontational political orientation toward a soft power approach emphasizing negotiation, adaptability, and symbolic legitimacy. The study argues that "political silat" represents a culturally embedded model of power communication that combines firmness and flexibility in managing political relations. This research contributes to broader discussions on political communication, digital media, and the role of local cultural frameworks in understanding contemporary leadership strategies within democratic societies.

Keywords: Political Strategy; Prabowo Subianto; Political Silat; Soft Power; Digital Democracy; Political Communication

INTRODUCTION

The development of digital media has fundamentally transformed contemporary political communication by expanding the arena in which political actors construct public images, negotiate legitimacy, and shape political discourse. Unlike conventional media, digital platforms enable political messages to circulate rapidly while simultaneously encouraging public interaction, interpretation, and participation. Consequently, political communication is no longer limited to the dissemination of information but increasingly involves the production of narratives that influence public perception of political actors and institutions. Within this changing media landscape, YouTube has emerged as one of the most influential platforms for political communication because it combines

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audiovisual storytelling with interactive engagement, allowing political narratives to reach diverse audiences more effectively than traditional broadcasting media. In Indonesia, this transformation has stimulated the emergence of digital political channels that provide discussion, interpretation, and critical analysis of national political developments. Among these platforms, the Total Politik YouTube channel has become one of the most prominent forums for discussing contemporary Indonesian politics by presenting interviews, talk shows, and analytical commentaries on major political figures and strategic political events (DetikNews, 2018). Rather than functioning merely as a source of political information, the channel actively constructs political narratives that contribute to public understanding of leadership, coalition dynamics, and the exercise of political power in Indonesia.

Prabowo Subianto has long been recognized as one of the most influential figures in Indonesia's post-Reformasi political landscape because of his ability to maintain political relevance despite the country's rapidly changing political configuration. As a former senior military officer who later became the founder and chairman of the Gerindra Party, Prabowo has consistently participated in national political contests while simultaneously consolidating his position as one of Indonesia's principal political actors. Since 2004, his political career has been marked by repeated presidential campaigns, the expansion of Gerindra's political influence, and an enduring capacity to shape national political discourse despite experiencing electoral defeats (*IP24084 | Prabowo's Post-Election Diplomacy*, 2025). His political trajectory demonstrates that political influence in Indonesia is sustained not solely through electoral success but also through continuous adaptation to evolving political circumstances. Within Indonesia's multiparty presidential system, where coalition politics frequently transcend ideological boundaries, political actors are required to negotiate competing interests, establish strategic alliances, and continuously adjust their political strategies (Krismono, Supriyanto Abdi, & Syahmirwan, 2025). Such conditions have made political flexibility an essential element of political survival, enabling influential leaders such as Prabowo to preserve their position within an increasingly dynamic democratic environment (Aspinall & Berenschot, 2019).

Prabowo Subianto's political adaptability has frequently been described through the metaphor of "political silat," a term that refers to a political strategy characterized by flexibility, strategic calculation, and the ability to transform political confrontation into opportunities for cooperation. The expression was popularized in Indonesian political discourse to illustrate Prabowo's leadership style, particularly his capacity to navigate complex political circumstances without relying exclusively on direct political confrontation (CNN Indonesia, 2015). Rather than symbolizing inconsistency, *political silat* reflects a pragmatic approach that emphasizes timing, negotiation, and the strategic management of political relationships. This characteristic became increasingly visible following the 2019 presidential election when Prabowo accepted President Joko Widodo's invitation to join the cabinet as Minister of Defense, a decision that fundamentally altered Indonesia's political configuration while simultaneously reshaping public perceptions of

his political leadership (Total Politik, 2024). The same strategic approach continued to characterize Prabowo's political conduct in the lead-up to the 2024 presidential election through coalition building, reconciliation with former political rivals, and the cultivation of broad political alliances across ideological boundaries (Krismono, Supriyanto Abdi, & Syahmirwan, 2025). Consequently, *political silat* represents more than a popular political expression; it embodies a distinctive mode of political communication in which pragmatism, cultural symbolism, and strategic accommodation become essential instruments for preserving influence and reinforcing political legitimacy within Indonesia's contemporary democratic landscape.

The growing influence of digital media has transformed *political silat* from a political practice into a publicly mediated narrative that is continuously interpreted, reconstructed, and disseminated through online platforms. In this context, the Total Politik YouTube channel serves as an important discursive arena where Prabowo Subianto's political strategies are not merely reported but are systematically interpreted through interviews, expert discussions, and political commentaries. Several programs, including *Silat Menyatukan Jokowi–Prabowo*, *Prabowo Siapkan Panggung Silat: Siapa yang Dievaluasi*, *Siapa Pemain Cadangan di Saku Prabowo?*, and *Prabowo Peragakan Gaya Silat Saat Tegaskan Dirinya Tidak Korupsi Uang Negara*, frame Prabowo's political decisions as manifestations of strategic flexibility, coalition building, and symbolic leadership (Total Politik, 2024). Through these narratives, the channel consistently presents political events as broader representations of leadership rather than isolated political incidents. Consequently, audiences are encouraged to interpret Prabowo's political behaviour not only through his institutional role but also through the symbolic meanings embedded in the narratives constructed by digital media. This demonstrates that YouTube functions not simply as a medium for political communication but also as a space in which political legitimacy, leadership identity, and public perception are continuously negotiated through narrative construction and symbolic representation (DetikNews, 2018).

The representation of *political silat* through digital media also reflects the broader operation of soft power in contemporary political communication. Rather than relying on coercion or institutional authority, soft power enables political actors to cultivate public trust, legitimacy, and influence through persuasive narratives, symbolic performances, and cultural values. In the digital environment, this process is increasingly mediated by online platforms that continuously reproduce political images and disseminate them to wider audiences. The narratives presented by the Total Politik YouTube channel illustrate how Prabowo Subianto's political decisions are interpreted not merely as strategic calculations but also as manifestations of leadership, nationalism, reconciliation, and political maturity (Total Politik, 2024). These representations encourage audiences to perceive political flexibility as a leadership asset instead of a sign of inconsistency. Consequently, political legitimacy is constructed through repeated media narratives that frame particular political actions within culturally meaningful interpretations. In this

sense, digital media functions not only as an information platform but also as an instrument through which symbolic political resources are transformed into persuasive political influence, allowing political actors to strengthen their public image without depending exclusively on formal political authority.

Previous studies have examined Prabowo Subianto from diverse perspectives, including electoral competition, coalition politics, political leadership, and democratic consolidation in Indonesia. These studies generally explain how Prabowo has sustained his political influence through pragmatic coalition building, institutional adaptation, and strategic political negotiation within Indonesia's evolving democratic system (Aspinall & Berenschot, 2019). Other discussions focus on digital political communication by examining the growing role of online media in shaping political branding, influencing public opinion, and facilitating interactions between political elites and society (DetikNews, 2018). Meanwhile, political analyses disseminated through the Total Politik YouTube channel predominantly describe Prabowo's political manoeuvres as examples of strategic flexibility, reconciliation, and adaptive leadership (Total Politik, 2024). Although these studies provide valuable explanations regarding political leadership and digital political communication, they generally analyse these themes independently. As a result, insufficient attention has been given to how the metaphor of *political silat* is represented through digital media as a mechanism for constructing a digital soft power image, particularly within political narratives disseminated through YouTube.

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METHODS

This study employed a descriptive qualitative research design integrating content analysis and political discourse analysis to examine the representation of Prabowo Subianto's *political silat* as portrayed through the Total Politik YouTube channel. A

qualitative approach was selected because the study seeks to explore meanings, political narratives, and symbolic representations embedded within digital media rather than to measure relationships among variables quantitatively. Accordingly, the research focuses on understanding how political communication constructs particular interpretations of leadership, political strategy, and legitimacy within Indonesia's contemporary digital public sphere. The descriptive orientation enables the study to provide a systematic account of the narratives developed throughout the selected media content while simultaneously interpreting the political meanings underlying those narratives. Rather than treating political communication as a collection of isolated statements, this research views media discourse as a dynamic process through which political actors, symbolic expressions, and strategic messages interact to produce particular representations. Consequently, the qualitative descriptive design provides an appropriate methodological framework for examining how *political silat* is constructed, interpreted, and communicated through political discussions disseminated by the Total Politik YouTube channel.

Research Data and Sources

The primary data consisted of three podcast videos published on the Total Politik YouTube channel that explicitly discuss Prabowo Subianto's political strategy and the representation of his *political silat*. These videos were selected through purposive sampling, not to achieve numerical representation, but to obtain information-rich cases that directly address the research objectives. The selection was based on three principal criteria. First, each podcast focuses substantially on Prabowo Subianto as the central political actor rather than discussing broader national political issues. Second, the discussions explicitly examine political manoeuvres associated with coalition building, reconciliation, leadership strategy, and political communication, all of which constitute the core dimensions of *political silat* explored in this study. Third, the selected podcasts present in-depth analytical discussions involving political commentators and public intellectuals, thereby providing rich discursive material for examining how political narratives and symbolic representations are constructed within Indonesia's digital public sphere. Consequently, the selected videos were considered sufficient to capture the diversity and complexity of the political narratives relevant to the research questions rather than to achieve statistical generalisation.

Video	Main Topic	Reason for Selection
Video 1	<i>Silat Menyatukan Jokowi–Prabowo</i>	Focuses on political reconciliation and coalition building
Video 2	<i>Prabowo Siapkan Panggung Silat...</i>	Explores strategic political manoeuvres and leadership decisions
Video 3	<i>Prabowo Peragakan Gaya Silat...</i>	Examines symbolic political communication and public image construction

Data were collected through systematic documentation of the selected podcast videos. The researcher repeatedly observed each video to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the discussions before identifying relevant segments related to Prabowo Subianto's political strategy. Verbal narratives, key statements, political terminology, and symbolic expressions were subsequently transcribed and organised according to the objectives of the research. Simultaneously, visual and contextual elements, including the interaction among speakers, the sequence of political arguments, and the presentation of political issues, were documented to preserve the communicative context in which the narratives were produced. This iterative process enabled the researcher to become familiar with the overall structure of each discussion while ensuring that the collected data accurately represented the dominant themes appearing throughout the selected podcasts. Organising the data in this manner facilitated subsequent analytical procedures and ensured that every interpretation remained grounded in the original media content rather than isolated quotations or fragmented political statements.

The analysis was conducted in two complementary stages. The first stage employed content analysis to identify recurring themes, political issues, strategic narratives, and patterns of representation that emerged throughout the selected podcast discussions. This stage enabled the researcher to categorise the media content according to dominant topics associated with Prabowo Subianto's political strategies and public image. The second stage extended the analysis through political discourse analysis, focusing on how language, rhetorical choices, symbolic expressions, and communicative strategies constructed particular understandings of leadership and political legitimacy. Rather than analysing discourse solely at the linguistic level, this stage examined how political meanings were negotiated through interactions among speakers and subsequently presented to digital audiences. The integration of content analysis and discourse analysis allowed the research to move beyond identifying what was discussed toward explaining how political narratives were strategically constructed and how those narratives contributed to representing *political silat* as a form of political communication within Indonesia's contemporary democratic context.

Trustworthiness of the Study

To ensure the credibility of the findings, the analysis was conducted through repeated examination of the selected podcasts and continuous comparison among the identified themes, political narratives, and discursive patterns. Every interpretation was developed from the recorded discussions and evaluated within the broader communicative context in which the narratives were produced. The researcher also maintained consistency between the research objectives, analytical categories, and interpretation of the data throughout the analytical process. By combining content analysis with political discourse analysis, the study sought to strengthen the depth and consistency of interpretation while minimising subjective bias. Consequently, the findings presented in this research are grounded in systematic analysis of the selected

media content and reflect the political meanings emerging from the narratives disseminated through the Total Politik YouTube channel.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Political Silat as a Strategy of Political Adaptation

The analysis of the selected Total Politik podcasts indicates that the expression *political silat* is consistently employed as a narrative framework for explaining Prabowo Subianto's political adaptability within Indonesia's evolving power structure. Rather than functioning merely as a rhetorical metaphor, the discussions construct *political silat* as a practical political strategy through which leadership is exercised by balancing flexibility, strategic calculation, and situational awareness. The speakers repeatedly associate Prabowo's political decisions with the characteristics traditionally embedded in *pencak silat*, namely patience, precision, and the ability to respond to changing circumstances without relying on direct confrontation (Total Politik, 2024). Consequently, political manoeuvring is interpreted not as evidence of ideological inconsistency but as an indication of strategic maturity. Throughout the discussions, Prabowo is portrayed as a political actor capable of adjusting his political position according to changing configurations while preserving his long-term political objectives. This recurring narrative demonstrates that Total Politik consistently frames political adaptation as a legitimate leadership competence, thereby positioning *political silat* as an interpretative lens through which audiences are encouraged to understand Prabowo's political trajectory.

The representation of *political silat* is further strengthened through repeated references to Indonesian cultural traditions. Rather than separating politics from cultural identity, the discussions integrate the philosophy of *pencak silat* into contemporary political communication. As explained in the podcasts, *silat* is understood not merely as a martial art but as a philosophy emphasizing balance, patience, and intelligence in responding to complex situations. These cultural values are repeatedly connected to Prabowo's leadership style, particularly his capacity to negotiate political tensions without escalating conflict. This representation corresponds with Heryanto's observation that Indonesian political culture frequently incorporates traditional symbols as sources of political meaning and legitimacy (Heryanto, *Cultural Politics in Indonesia*, 2018). Within the analysed podcasts, however, these cultural references are not presented as abstract philosophical concepts but are actively employed to interpret Prabowo's contemporary political decisions. Consequently, the narratives position *political silat* as a culturally embedded political practice that allows strategic flexibility to be perceived as a legitimate and socially accepted form of political leadership rather than as political opportunism.

Another significant finding emerging from the analysed discussions concerns the relationship between *political silat* and symbolic political identity. The speakers repeatedly refer to Prabowo's long-standing association with the Indonesian Pencak Silat Association (IPSI) as evidence that his political image is closely connected with

Indonesian cultural heritage (Kompas, 2017). Rather than discussing IPSI solely as an organisational affiliation, the podcasts portray this connection as a symbolic resource that reinforces Prabowo's nationalist credentials and public legitimacy. His military background, combined with his visible engagement in cultural institutions, is represented as strengthening perceptions of discipline, patriotism, and commitment to national identity (Tempo, 2020). Within this narrative, *political silat* extends beyond strategic political manoeuvring and becomes an integral element of political image construction. The discussions therefore suggest that cultural symbolism functions alongside political strategy in shaping public perceptions of leadership. By continuously linking Prabowo's political behaviour with culturally respected values, Total Politik constructs an image of leadership that derives legitimacy not only from political performance but also from symbolic associations deeply embedded within Indonesian society.

The findings also demonstrate that the representation of *political silat* extends beyond cultural symbolism and intersects with the construction of political attraction through digital communication. Across the analysed podcasts, Prabowo is consistently portrayed as a leader who combines firmness with openness, strategic calculation with humility, and political authority with emotional accessibility. Such representations reflect the characteristics commonly associated with soft power, where influence is generated through attraction rather than coercion (Nye, 2004). Instead of emphasising his military past or political rivalry, the discussions repeatedly highlight Prabowo's relaxed public appearances, his willingness to engage in informal conversations, and his efforts to communicate messages of nationalism, unity, and inclusiveness through digital platforms, including Total Politik (YouTube Total Politik, 2024). These recurring narratives indicate that *political silat* is not represented merely as a mechanism for navigating political competition but also as a communicative strategy that strengthens public trust through symbolic interaction. Accordingly, the findings suggest that the construction of Prabowo's political image relies on the integration of cultural identity, strategic political behaviour, and digital communication, thereby laying the foundation for the emergence of his digital soft power image.

The analysis of the three selected discussions published by the Total Politik YouTube channel demonstrates that *political silat* functions as the dominant interpretative framework through which Prabowo Subianto's political behaviour is explained. Rather than portraying *silat* simply as a cultural metaphor, the speakers consistently employ the concept to interpret Prabowo's capacity to navigate political competition through flexibility, strategic calculation, and adaptive leadership. Across the discussions, *political silat* is associated with the ability to preserve political influence without relying on direct confrontation, reflecting a style of leadership that emphasizes negotiation, accommodation, and careful timing in responding to political change. This representation shifts the understanding of political manoeuvring away from opportunism and instead frames it as an expression of political intelligence rooted in Indonesian cultural traditions. As one discussion explains, *silat* represents "a philosophy of balance,

strategy, and wisdom," whose political translation lies in negotiation, adaptability, and conflict management rather than open hostility (Total Politik, 2024). Consequently, the podcasts consistently position Prabowo's political decisions within a culturally familiar framework that legitimises flexibility as an essential component of effective political leadership.

This cultural framing becomes increasingly evident when the discussions explain Prabowo's approach to coalition politics and elite negotiation. Rather than presenting political rivalry as a permanent condition, the speakers repeatedly describe Prabowo as a political actor who seeks to "embrace all sides" by incorporating former rivals into broader political cooperation (Total Politik, 2024). Within the philosophy of *pencak silat*, this strategy resembles the practice of redirecting an opponent's strength rather than confronting it directly, allowing conflicts to be transformed into opportunities for strengthening one's own position. The discussions therefore portray coalition building not merely as a pragmatic electoral strategy but as the practical application of cultural values emphasizing self-control, patience, and equilibrium. This representation encourages audiences to interpret Prabowo's political flexibility as an indicator of strategic maturity rather than ideological inconsistency. In doing so, Total Politik constructs a discourse in which political accommodation becomes an acceptable and even desirable leadership quality because it contributes to political stability while simultaneously expanding political influence.

The discussions further demonstrate that Prabowo's reconciliation with President Joko Widodo represents one of the clearest manifestations of *political silat* in practice. Following two highly competitive presidential elections, Prabowo's decision to join Jokowi's administration as Minister of Defense is consistently interpreted as an adaptive political response rather than a retreat from political competition. The speakers argue that this decision enabled Prabowo to remain politically relevant while simultaneously reducing the intensity of political polarization. As described in the discussion, entering the government transformed electoral defeat into a strategic opportunity by maintaining direct access to the centre of political power while neutralising potential political threats (Kompas, 2020). From the perspective of political communication, this narrative reframes reconciliation as a strategic achievement rather than a political compromise. Instead of interpreting coalition formation as evidence of weakened political commitment, the podcasts repeatedly portray reconciliation as a sophisticated leadership strategy capable of balancing competition with cooperation within Indonesia's democratic political environment.

Another important pattern emerging from the discussions concerns the construction of Prabowo's symbolic political identity through cultural institutions and military experience. The podcasts consistently associate his leadership style with discipline, hierarchy, and decisiveness while simultaneously emphasizing his close relationship with Indonesia's martial arts tradition. Rather than functioning solely as historical background, Prabowo's involvement in *pencak silat* organisations is represented as a symbolic

resource that strengthens his political legitimacy and nationalist image. The discussions argue that this combination of military discipline and cultural identity enables Prabowo to project authority without appearing excessively coercive. This interpretation is reinforced through interview evidence indicating that successful political leadership depends not only upon institutional authority but also upon the ability to cultivate public trust through cultural and humanistic approaches (Halim Rasyid, interview, July 24, 2025). Consequently, *political silat* is represented not only as a strategy for managing political competition but also as a symbolic mechanism through which political credibility is constructed and maintained within Indonesia's contemporary digital public sphere.

Soft Power and the Political Branding of Prabowo Subianto

In modern politics, power is no longer defined solely by coercive capacity or formal structures but also by the ability to shape public perception. This concept aligns with Joseph Nye's (2004) notion of *soft power*—the capacity to influence through attraction, values, and image rather than force. This framework is particularly relevant in analyzing Prabowo Subianto's political communication strategy, which has undergone a significant transformation in recent years. Whereas he was once associated with fiery, militant rhetoric, Prabowo now presents himself as a more humanistic, warm, and even humorous figure. This shift represents more than just a change in style; it reflects a new form of *political silat*—not a frontal assault, but the artful management of emotion and image to cultivate public sympathy (YouTube Total Politik, 2024).

Findings from an interview with Halim Rasyid, a member of the Gerindra Party, reinforce this interpretation. According to Halim, *soft power* in politics is the ability to influence without coercion, by emphasizing humanity and emotional closeness (Halim Rasyid, interview, July 24, 2025). He argues that an effective politician is not only one who designs programs but also one who demonstrates sincerity and consistency of character. Prabowo's communication strategy reflects this understanding: he consistently positions himself as a “father of the nation” figure—courteous, inclusive, and capable of embracing diverse social groups. This approach cannot be reduced to mere image-building; it serves as a *soft power* instrument that broadens his political support beyond partisan boundaries.

Social media has become the central arena for Prabowo's exercise of *soft power*. Through platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok, he reveals personal aspects of his life that were rarely visible in the past—joking with aides, calming supporters, and even dancing with citizens at campaign events. According to Halim Rasyid, such “non-political communication” strengthens public trust precisely because it highlights the authentic, human side of a politician. “People today trust what feels genuine more than eloquent rhetoric,” he explained (Halim Rasyid, interview, July 24, 2025). Within the framework of *political silat*, this strategy resembles the technique of evading and

redirecting an opponent's energy—lowering the intensity of political confrontation while expanding one's sphere of influence.

Moreover, Prabowo's use of *soft power* demonstrates his awareness of the digital society's growing sensitivity to authenticity and consistency. As Halim Rasyid notes, the greatest challenge for contemporary politicians is maintaining coherence between words and actions. "The public is now highly perceptive to inauthentic image-making," he remarked. Consequently, the success of Prabowo's *soft power* depends on behavioral continuity and sustained engagement beyond electoral cycles. This is evident in his participation in cultural events, humanitarian activities, and repeated emphasis on nationalism and unity in various public forums (Tempo, 2024). Thus, *soft power* emerges as an integral dimension of Prabowo's *political silat*—a cultural and communicative strategy that employs warmth, patience, and symbolic gestures as key instruments of influence in the digital political arena.

Theoretically, Prabowo's use of *soft power* can also be understood as a transformation from *military charisma* to *cultural charisma*. Aspinall and Mietzner (2019) argue that post-reform Indonesian politicians often rely on the personalization of power, combining charisma with symbolic values. Prabowo, who at the beginning of his career projected the stern image of a general, has successfully adapted that image into a symbol of firm yet compassionate leadership. This shift represents a form of *image silat*—a symbolic transformation designed to align with the spirit of the times. Just as a *pesilat* adapts their fighting style to the terrain, Prabowo has adjusted his political persona to fit the sensibilities of a digital society that is more emotional and more critical of authority.

Beyond personal image, Prabowo's *soft power* is reinforced through symbolic strategies rooted in national culture. For instance, he frequently wears the cream-colored safari suit and black *peci* cap in formal appearances—symbols that blend nationalism with modesty. As Heryanto (2018) notes, politicians use local cultural symbols as a representation of national identity, fostering familiarity and closeness with the public. Within the framework of *political silat*, such symbols serve as *opening moves*—softening the political arena before strategic action is taken.

However, as Halim Rasyid points out, *soft power* has a double edge: if not carefully managed, it can easily backfire. A single misstep or communication error on social media can undo years of carefully cultivated image (Halim Rasyid, interview, July 24, 2025). For this reason, Prabowo and his communication team appear to act with calculated caution, maintaining a delicate balance between spontaneity and narrative control. In *silat* terms, this resembles maintaining one's *kuda-kuda*—the stable stance that allows a fighter to anticipate and deflect counterattacks. Through such a balance, Prabowo has managed to keep his public reputation intact despite intense media scrutiny and political rivalry.

Prabowo's *soft power* strategy demonstrates that *political silat* takes place not only within elite circles but also in the realm of public perception. Power today is no longer measured solely by structural dominance but also by the capacity to inspire and reassure.

In his public interactions, Prabowo strives to project himself not as a “ruler,” but as a “protector of the nation.” Thus, *political silat* in the modern era has evolved from a battle of force to a battle of narratives—from physical confrontation to a contest of meaning. In this regard, Prabowo Subianto stands as one of Indonesia’s most skillful *silat* practitioners on the political stage (Aspinall & Berenschot, 2019: 45–46; Mietzner, 2019: 3–26).

In the context of post-reform Indonesian politics, adaptability has become the key to political endurance. Prabowo Subianto illustrates that power is sustained not merely through structural dominance but through an acute understanding of social dynamics and the ability to maintain equilibrium among competing forces. This strategy is clearly visible in the way he navigates relationships between the government, the oligarchy, and civil society. In a discussion on the *Total Politik* YouTube channel titled “*Prabowo Kumpulkan Naga-Naga, Buat Apa?*” (“Prabowo Gathers the Dragons—For What?”) (2024), political analyst Ferry Latuhihin highlighted Prabowo’s ability to reconcile the interests of major conglomerates with populist narratives. He strategically leverages the presence of these “economic dragons” to project stability while simultaneously securing the support of capitalist groups that drive the national economy (Habir and Negara 2025).

This approach reveals a distinctive paradox within Prabowo Subianto’s *political silat*: the fusion of hard and soft power, bridging populist appeal with elite pragmatism. Within Mietzner’s (2019) framework of *political hybridization*, such a strategy reflects a politician’s ability to perform dual roles—both as a representative of the people and as a mediator of oligarchic interests. Prabowo does not reject the presence of large-scale capital; rather, he manages it to remain symbolically under the control of the state. From a *silat* cultural perspective, this resembles the technique of *locking an opponent’s force*—channeling external power without losing self-control. By inviting major business figures into policy circles, Prabowo demonstrates his ability to “tame the dragons” without engaging in open confrontation (*Total Politik*, 2024).

On the other hand, this leadership style—emphasizing stability and unity—has raised concerns about the quality of Indonesia’s democracy. According to *Tempo* (2024), analysts have noted a trend of militarization within state-owned enterprises (BUMN) and government institutions, where key positions are increasingly occupied by active or retired military officers. This trend is seen as a form of *re-militarization* reminiscent of the New Order era, when power was maintained through structural loyalty rather than professional merit. Within the framework of *political silat*, such a phenomenon can be interpreted as an effort to strengthen internal defenses—to ensure the inner circle of power remains solid under a “single command.” While effective in the short term, this model risks eroding principles of meritocracy and public transparency.

Prabowo also faces a persistent dilemma between stability and democracy. Discussions on *Total Politik* (2024) highlight Indonesia’s declining democracy index, attributed to the concentration of power and the weakening of opposition roles. Some observers even argue that Prabowo’s administration has adopted a form of “soft

authoritarianism,” similar to the political models of Singapore or China, where economic efficiency is used to justify tighter political control. However, for Prabowo and his supporters, this approach represents a pragmatic version of *Indonesian realpolitik*—prioritizing order and development over endless political debate. In *silat* terms, it mirrors the principle of *subduing without harming*—maintaining stability without overt repression.

Meanwhile, populist policies such as the *Free Nutritious Meals Program* valued at IDR 25 trillion (*Total Politik*, 2024) illustrate how Prabowo employs *soft populism* to sustain moral legitimacy among lower-income citizens. Although criticized for its weak fiscal foundation, this policy reinforces his image as a leader concerned with public welfare (Ufen 2024). Within the context of *political silat*, such a move can be interpreted as an act of *opening empathetic space*, in which power manifests not merely through economic strength but through humanitarian gestures that nurture social trust. As Halim Rasyid emphasized in an interview (2025), *soft power* is most effective when it emerges from authenticity and consistency of action, rather than mere rhetoric.

However, Prabowo’s strategy in managing *soft power* alongside structural authority also faces significant challenges. Public trust can rapidly erode if policy transparency is not maintained. For instance, criticism regarding the decline in foreign direct investment (FDI) due to inconsistent regulations highlights issues of governance and legal certainty (*Total Politik*, 2024). In the philosophy of *silat*, even the slightest loss of balance can open a gap for an opponent to strike. In political terms, the loss of public credibility becomes the most dangerous point of vulnerability. Therefore, Prabowo’s *political silat* must continually adapt to the demands of accountability and openness that form the foundation of modern democracy.

Ultimately, the dynamics of power under Prabowo reveal a new pattern in Indonesian politics: one that is adaptive, symbolic, and cultural. He merges image-based *soft power* and nationalism with *hard power* rooted in military structures and economic networks. In this sense, Prabowo positions himself as a *silat* master who relies not only on the “muscle” of political strength but also on the subtlety of movement in maintaining balance among competing forces. As in *silat*, victory in politics is not achieved through the strongest attack, but through the ability to maintain rhythm, manage distance, and adjust one’s stance according to the changing terrain. Through a fusion of strategy, culture, and public communication, Prabowo Subianto has turned *political silat* from a mere metaphor into a tangible and influential style of governance in contemporary Indonesian democracy (Mietzner, 2019).

In the context of modern politics, power is no longer determined solely by physical domination or coercive structures, but by the ability to create a symbolic appeal that sustains social legitimacy. This concept is encapsulated in Joseph Nye’s (2004) notion of *soft power*—the capacity of an actor to influence others through the attractiveness of values, culture, and policy rather than coercion. Within contemporary Indonesian politics,

Prabowo Subianto stands out as a figure capable of articulating a distinctive form of *soft power*—one that combines nationalistic cultural symbols, the assertive tone of military communication, and emotional resonance rooted in Indonesian social values.

One of the most notable aspects of Prabowo's *soft power* is his ability to construct a transformed self-image—from a stern military officer to a paternalistic and empathetic political figure. This transformation is not merely an exercise in image-making, but a process of reconstructing his political narrative in the public sphere. In an interview with Halim Rasyid (2025), it was emphasized that the core strength of a politician's *soft power* lies in the “consistency and authenticity of behavior.” In this regard, Prabowo consciously utilizes public communication channels such as YouTube (*Total Politik*), social media platforms, and international forums to present a warmer and more reflective side of his personality. He often uses simple language, incorporates humor, and displays gestures of closeness with ordinary citizens—from market vendors to Islamic boarding school students (*santri*).

This style of communication reflects the principles of *political silat*, which emphasize flexibility and harmony. In *silat* philosophy, every movement is not intended to attack but to balance the opponent's energy. Similarly, Prabowo appears to balance his controversial past image with a new narrative of “service and nationalism.” This is evident in many of his political speeches that stress unity, loyalty, and compassion for the people. Thus, *soft power* serves not only as a communication tool but also as a mechanism of self-rehabilitation—one that strengthens a leader's moral legitimacy (Nye, 2011).

Moreover, Prabowo's *soft power* can also be observed through his use of national symbols and cultural expressions. He often appears in traditional attire, attends cultural events, and highlights the importance of *pencak silat* as a national heritage representing discipline, courage, and honor. During an IPSI (*Ikatan Pencak Silat Indonesia*) event, Prabowo remarked that “*silat* is not merely a martial art, but a philosophy of life about balance and respect” (CNN Indonesia, 2023). This statement demonstrates how he connects cultural values to his political narrative—turning *silat* into a symbol of nationalism and spirituality embedded in his leadership. Within the framework of *cultural politics*, this can be interpreted as an attempt to employ cultural heritage as an instrument of *soft power* for expanding symbolic influence (Heryanto, 2015).

Prabowo's *soft power* strategy also extends into the international sphere. As Minister of Defense, he actively builds Indonesia's image as a sovereign and peaceful nation—yet one that is modern and open to global cooperation. In his meetings with world leaders—including those from the United States, Russia, and China—Prabowo demonstrates a courteous yet assertive communication style, portraying Indonesia as a principled *middle power*. This diplomatic strategy strengthens Indonesia's position in regional politics and illustrates that *soft power* operates not only domestically but also as part of constructing global *political branding* (Kompas, 2024).

In domestic practice, Prabowo's use of *soft power* also serves as a mechanism for mitigating political conflict. By integrating his political opponents into the governing coalition, he projects a calm and inclusive leadership style. This aligns with the *Total Politik* (2024) discussion that described Prabowo as someone who "wants all political forces to sit at the same table." Such an approach represents a defensive *silat* principle—restraining rather than attacking—with the goal of creating stability. In the short term, this strategy effectively prevents social polarization; yet in the long run, it risks concentrating power in ways that may weaken democratic opposition dynamics.

Beyond symbols and rhetoric, Prabowo's *soft power* is also cultivated through visual representation in digital media. YouTube content such as "*Prabowo Siapkan Panggung Silat*" (*Total Politik*, 2024) portrays him as a leader who is both chivalrous and humble—blending military authority with paternal warmth. The visual aesthetics, heroic background music, and commentary from political analysts operate as narrative devices that shape an *imagined leadership persona*. Within the theory of *political communication*, such visual storytelling reinforces the *emotional attachment* between leader and audience, creating the perception that emotional closeness can substitute for the structural distance between the people and the elite (Coudry & Hepp, 2017).

However, as Halim Rasyid (2025) cautions, *soft power* is only effective when grounded in moral authenticity. Any dissonance between words and actions can be quickly perceived by the public as manipulation. In this sense, Prabowo's greatest challenge lies in maintaining credibility amid political and bureaucratic pressures. The Indonesian public has become increasingly discerning in evaluating leadership behavior; *soft power* devoid of sincerity may quickly turn into *soft backlash*—a loss of social trust that is difficult to recover. Therefore, the continuity of Prabowo's *political silat* will depend greatly on his ability to sustain equilibrium between symbolic strength and genuine integrity.

From a cultural perspective, Prabowo's *soft power* can ultimately be understood as a form of *silat batin*—the inner art of managing emotion, perception, and image to subdue without excluding. His leadership does not rely solely on coercive or structural power but creates a sphere of meaning where authority is exercised through language, symbols, and gesture. It is here that *political silat* finds its resonance as a distinctly Indonesian mode of power: gentle on the surface, strategic beneath, and always seeking harmony between strength and wisdom.

CONCLUSIONS

The findings of this study demonstrate that Prabowo Subianto's political strategy, as represented through the *Total Politik* YouTube channel, reflects a practical manifestation of what may be conceptualized as "political silat"—a political approach characterized by flexibility, strategic calculation, and adaptive capacity in responding to the shifting dynamics of national power. Prabowo's political trajectory illustrates that influence is not constructed solely through institutional authority, electoral strength, or

formal political structures, but also through the ability to interpret political opportunities, establish pragmatic alliances, and utilize cultural symbols as sources of legitimacy. The metaphor of silat provides an analytical framework for understanding how Prabowo transforms political confrontation into negotiation and reconciliation, presenting power as an art that requires a balance between firmness, patience, and adaptability. This strategy reflects an effort to integrate traditional cultural values with contemporary political practices, enabling Prabowo to maintain relevance within Indonesia's complex and continuously evolving political environment. Therefore, political silat represents not only a method of political maneuvering but also a cultural expression of leadership, negotiation, and power management in democratic politics.

Furthermore, this research highlights the crucial role of digital media, particularly the *Total Politik* YouTube channel, in shaping and circulating Prabowo Subianto's political image within Indonesia's contemporary digital public sphere. The channel operates as a discursive space where political narratives, communication strategies, and representations of leadership are constructed, negotiated, and contested among audiences. Through the strategic utilization of digital platforms, Prabowo's political communication demonstrates the application of soft power by emphasizing persuasion, symbolic representation, and narrative management rather than direct political confrontation. This phenomenon indicates that contemporary political competition is no longer limited to institutional arenas, electoral processes, or elite negotiations, but increasingly depends on the ability to produce, control, and distribute political narratives through digital networks. In this context, the study contributes to a broader understanding of the relationship between power, culture, and media in Indonesia's digital democracy. It reveals that political legitimacy in the modern era is shaped not only by political actions themselves but also by the capacity to construct meaningful representations of leadership within the expanding landscape of digital communication.

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