

Public Trust and Political Forgiveness in Indonesia: A Critical Ethical Analysis Post-2025 National Protests

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ABSTRAK

Artikel ini mengkaji paradoks etika yang melandasi krisis kepercayaan publik dalam demokrasi Indonesia pasca protes nasional tahun 2025 terkait kebijakan tunjangan perumahan anggota DPR. Protes tersebut mencerminkan resistensi moral yang kuat terhadap ketidakadilan di tengah tekanan sosial-ekonomi, namun meredanya kemarahan publik secara cepat setelah pencabutan kebijakan menunjukkan pola pemaafan kolektif yang melemahkan tuntutan akuntabilitas etis. Penelitian ini bertujuan merumuskan pemaafan sebagai kategori etika kritis dalam politik Indonesia. Penelitian ini berbentuk studi pustaka dengan pendekatan kualitatif-deskriptif dan analisis wacana kritis. Penelitian ini memadukan teori keadilan distributif John Rawls, etika kebajikan Alasdair MacIntyre, dan etika diskursus Jürgen Habermas untuk membaca krisis kepercayaan sebagai persoalan legitimasi moral, bukan sekadar kegagalan kebijakan. Analisis menunjukkan bahwa pemaafan berfungsi secara ambivalen: di satu sisi, menjaga harmoni sosial dan stabilitas politik, namun di sisi lain menormalkan pelanggaran etika elit. Artikel ini mengusulkan konsep etika pemaafan kritis sebagai paradigma pemulihan kepercayaan publik yang menuntut refleksi, komunikasi, dan pertanggungjawaban moral.

Kata kunci: etika politik; kepercayaan publik; budaya pemaafan; akuntabilitas moral; demokrasi Indonesia

ABSTRACT

This article examines the ethical paradox underlying the crisis of public trust in Indonesian democracy that followed the 2025 nationwide protests over the housing allowance policy for members of the House of Representatives (DPR). The protests reflected strong moral resistance to injustice amidst socio-economic pressures. Still, the rapid easing of public anger after the policy's revocation suggests a pattern of collective forgiveness that undermines demands for ethical accountability. This Research aims to define forgiveness as a critical ethical category in Indonesian politics. This study utilises a qualitative-descriptive literature review and critical discourse analysis. It combines John Rawls's theory of distributive justice, Alasdair MacIntyre's virtue ethics, and Jürgen Habermas's discourse ethics to interpret the crisis of trust as a question of moral legitimacy rather than simply a policy failure. The analysis demonstrates that forgiveness operates ambivalently: on the one hand, it maintains social harmony and political stability, while on the other, it normalises elite ethical violations. This article proposes a critical ethics of forgiveness as a paradigm for restoring public trust, one that demands reflection, communication, and moral accountability.

Keywords: political ethics; public trust; culture of forgiveness; moral accountability; Indonesian democracy



INTRODUCTION

The nationwide protests that erupted in Indonesia in August 2025 over a housing allowance policy for members of the House of Representatives marked a critical juncture in the relationship between the elite and the people (Lamb, 2025). Although administratively valid, the policy sparked widespread outrage because it was perceived as undermining the public's sense of justice amid mounting economic pressures and social inequality. Interestingly, however, this outrage subsided quickly after the government revoked the policy and issued an apology. This phenomenon highlights a distinctive moral character of Indonesian society: quick to anger yet equally quick to forgive. From a political ethics perspective, this illustrates the paradox of public morality in Indonesia, a tension between harmony and accountability, between reconciliation and justice.

The crisis of public trust arising from the 2025 protests is not a singular event but a manifestation of deeper political and ethical issues. Pierre Rosanvallon refers to this as "a crisis of legitimacy," the tension between formal democratic procedures and citizens' sense of moral justice (Rosanvallon, 2008). The people, as citizens, demand justice as part of the sovereignty they possess and as a form of counter-legitimacy against the policies adopted (Rasmussen, 2023). In the Indonesian context, this tension is complicated by a paternalistic, collectivist social culture, in which the values of harmony and cooperation often prioritize stability over moral criticism. A strong tradition of collective forgiveness, as understood in Indonesian culture, reinforces social solidarity but can also weaken mechanisms for moral oversight over power.

Theoretically, this phenomenon challenges the Western political ethics framework, which is dominated by procedural rationality. John Rawls, in *A Theory of Justice*, emphasizes the principle of distributive justice, which requires that public policies benefit the most vulnerable groups (Rawls, 1999). Justice is not limited to equality in the legal and social spheres alone but encompasses justice in a broader democracy grounded in education, the economy, and other rights to life (Freeman, 2018). Alasdair MacIntyre, in *After Virtue*, reminds us that public morality must be rooted in community practices and virtues, rather than in mere formal rules (MacIntyre, 2007). Debates in the realm of ideological conflict, community practices, and virtues are always at odds with formal rules that are more conservative and narrow-minded, pitted against the liberal and universal currents of the community (Schlueter, 2015). Meanwhile, Jürgen Habermas asserts that the legitimacy of power can only be achieved through rational, participatory communication (Habermas, 1996). Democracy must be carried

out by the people, through delegates or individuals chosen by the people who are experts in their fields, to convey the people's aspirations (Febriani et al., 2024). However, in the context of Southeast Asian societies, this rationality interacts with a cultural ethos that places harmony and forgiveness as primary moral values.

The phenomenon of society quickly forgiving political elites after a crisis demonstrates how a culture of forgiveness functions as an ambivalent social mechanism, calming conflicts while simultaneously normalizing ethical violations of power. A cross-cultural study by Worthington and colleagues found that Asian societies perceive forgiveness as a strategy for maintaining social relationships, rather than merely an individual moral act (Ho & Worthington Jr, 2020). Similarly, research by Christiany Suwartono and colleagues found that Indonesians' level of forgiveness regarding various issues is higher than that of sustained hatred and differs from that in Western cultures, particularly those in Europe (Suwartono et al., 2007). Research conducted by Ni Made Taganing Kurniati and colleagues revealed that Indonesian society has a collective awareness that granting forgiveness and pardon is a common practice, whether in relations with fellow citizens or with the government. This is intended to foster emotional bonds and to resolve an issue ethically (Kurniati et al., 2020). Given this cultural context, forgiveness in Indonesian politics must be critically analyzed as part of a broader, more impactful system of public ethics.

Although the various studies mentioned above have discussed forgiveness in the context of social psychology and Indonesian culture, research specifically linking forgiveness to the dynamics of political ethics and to the relationship between the public and the ruling elite remains relatively limited. Most existing research focuses on forgiveness as an individual psychological process or as a social practice in interpersonal relationships and thus has not yet extensively explored how the culture of forgiveness operates within the political sphere and influences society's response to ethical violations by political elites. Furthermore, many of the theoretical frameworks used in forgiveness studies still draw heavily on Western perspectives that tend to emphasize individual moral dimensions, thus failing to fully account for forgiveness practices in societies with a collectivist moral orientation, such as Indonesia. Therefore, this article seeks to fill this gap by analyzing how a culture of forgiveness operates within the Indonesian political context, particularly in responding to crises of ethical governance and the dynamics of public protest. Thus, this study not only extends the study of forgiveness from social psychology to political ethics but also provides a more contextual understanding of the relationship among the culture of forgiveness, political accountability, and public responses to the ruling elite.

This study begins with an analytical question: why does the practice of forgiveness in Indonesia's paternalistic democracy often yield social stability without strengthening political accountability? Specifically, this study examines how the ethics of forgiveness in Indonesian society shape the relationship between civil society and the political elite, particularly in post-crisis situations or following public protests such as the 2025 national protests. To answer this question, this article integrates three main theoretical frameworks in political philosophy and public ethics: John Rawls's theory of justice, Alasdair MacIntyre's virtue ethics, and Jürgen Habermas's theory of communicative action. By integrating these three perspectives, this study proposes a critical ethics of forgiveness. This normative framework seeks to balance the strong orientation toward social harmony in Eastern culture with the greater emphasis on moral accountability in Western political ethics. Thus, this approach offers a new way to understand how the practice of forgiveness can be reconstructed to function not only as a mechanism for social reconciliation but also as an ethical foundation for strengthening accountability in the relationship between power and civil society.

This research demonstrates its novelty by integrating Asian cultural dimensions into the theory of global political ethics. While Western theories tend to emphasize rationality and procedural justice, this study offers a new paradigm rooted in collective morality and reflective forgiveness. Thus, political ethics is no longer understood merely as a set of rational norms, but also as a transformative moral practice rooted in culture, capable of influencing governments from an ethical perspective to bring about regulatory and policy changes that are more beneficial and impactful for the people. On the other hand, it can enrich the discourse on political ethics in Indonesia and open space for ethical reform in public policy.

The August 2025 protests were selected as the case study in this research because they were among the first national protest mobilizations to emerge at the beginning of the new administration's term. Unlike previous waves of protests, which generally focused on specific economic policies or legislation, this protest explicitly raised demands related to political ethics, leadership integrity, and government accountability. This indicates a shift in focus from mere policy criticism to criticism of political practices and norms deemed deviant. Furthermore, the scale of participation, encompassing diverse societal groups, from students and civil society organizations to digital communities, makes this event a relevant case study of new dynamics in expressing public dissatisfaction within contemporary democratic spaces. Therefore, the August 2025 Protests are a significant case for analyzing shifts in protest patterns and narratives in the current political context.

ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

Political ethics is a branch of moral philosophy that examines the interrelationship between power, responsibility, and moral legitimacy in the practice of governance. Aristotle, in *Politics*, asserts that the goal of politics is *eudaimonia*, that is, the common good (*bonum commune*), which can only be achieved if rulers act based on moral virtue (Aristotle, 1877). In the modern context, Alasdair MacIntyre expands on Aristotle's ideas by emphasizing that political virtue can only be understood within the horizon of social practice, that is, the moral traditions and communal narratives that shape the meaning of political action (MacIntyre, 2007). Therefore, for MacIntyre, political morality is not determined solely by formal rules or legal structures, but by the moral customs lived out collectively by the political community.

Meanwhile, John Rawls, in *A Theory of Justice*, offers a paradigm of distributive justice that requires every public policy to be measured by the extent to which it benefits the most vulnerable (Rawls, 1999). Rawls's theory holds that justice is the primary virtue of social institutions. This principle emphasizes two things: first, equality in basic freedoms; and second, that social inequalities are legitimate only if they benefit the less fortunate (*the difference principle*). However, in the context of Southeast Asian countries still shaped by hierarchical social relations and a paternalistic culture, the principle of distributive justice often clashes with a moral orientation that prioritizes social harmony and balance over confronting inequality.

Jürgen Habermas subsequently introduced a new dimension to modern political ethics through his *Theory of Communicative Action and Discourse Ethics* (Habermas, 1996). According to him, the legitimacy of power cannot be derived solely from election results or legal authority, but from the quality of rational and participatory public communication. Every political policy must be tested through public discourse free of power's domination, so that the resulting decisions have a mutually acceptable moral foundation. Within this framework, a crisis of public trust arises when the space for political communication is distorted, for example, through the manipulation of information or monological communication from the elite to the people.

Although the three theories above provide a strong foundation for modern political ethics, all three stem from a Western rationalist horizon that emphasizes moral individualism and procedural justice. In Asian societies, this framework often does not fully align with a collectivist moral orientation that prioritizes harmony and reconciliation. Values such as cooperation (*gotong royong*) and harmoniousness (*rukun*) in Indonesian culture demonstrate

that public morality does not always operate within a corrective logic, as in the Rawlsian paradigm, but rather within a logic of relational restoration. In other words, when a violation of political ethics occurs, the community's focus is more on restoring social unity than on the moral punishment of the perpetrator.

Cross-cultural studies on forgiveness reinforce this distinction. Everett L. Worthington Jr. found that in collectivist cultures, forgiveness is more often interpreted as a social strategy to maintain relational cohesion rather than as an expression of individual morality (Ho & Worthington Jr, 2020; Joo et al., 2019). Meanwhile, research by Joo and colleagues indicates that East and Southeast Asian societies, particularly Japan, view forgiveness as a rational decision to avoid social disharmony rather than as an emotional transformation, as emphasized in Western traditions, particularly in the United States (Joo et al., 2019). This means that forgiveness functions as a social mechanism for regulating power relations and maintaining political stability, especially when moral conflicts involve state elites.

In addition to theoretical frameworks of political ethics heavily influenced by Western thinkers such as John Rawls, Alasdair MacIntyre, and Jürgen Habermas, several thinkers in Southeast Asia offer important perspectives on the dynamics of political ethics in postcolonial societies. Chaiwat Satha-Anand, a political philosopher from Thailand, emphasizes that political morality in Asia must be understood through the concepts of active nonviolence and reconciliatory ethics, in which maintaining social peace is often prioritized over retributive justice mechanisms (Satha-Anand, 2017). This perspective suggests that, in many Southeast Asian political contexts, social stability and reconciliation are highly significant normative values for addressing political conflicts and violations of the ethics of power. Similar findings are also evident in the research by Bee Piang Tan and colleagues on the political ethics of Malaysian society, which shows that values of mutual respect, collective responsibility, and social concern, instilled through educational practices and social culture, foster a tendency toward social forgiveness of state failures as a means of maintaining stability (Tan et al., 2018). In the Philippines, Mark R. Thompson notes that the strong influence of Catholic traditions and the value of reconciliation also shape the public's tendency to forgive moral transgressions by political elites, provided there is a public expression of remorse (Thompson, 2023). These various perspectives indicate that the practice of forgiveness in Southeast Asia is not merely a cultural phenomenon but also part of a political ethical structure that shapes the relationship between society and power. Therefore, integrating these regional perspectives is crucial for complementing the theoretical framework of political ethics, which has long been dominated by Western approaches, while also providing a more contextualized analytical foundation for

understanding the dynamics of forgiveness, political stability, and accountability in Indonesian democracy.

Pierre Rosanvallon introduced the concept of "*counter-democracy*" to describe a new dynamic between the people and the state, in which the public no longer merely votes but also monitors and demands accountability (Rosanvallon, 2008). However, in the Southeast Asian context, this mechanism often weakens as it is supplanted by a politics of forgiveness, where the public negotiates their disappointment through the morality of harmony. The relationship between the people and the rulers is bound not by a rational contract but by paternalistic symbols of trust and respect. Consequently, public accountability is often moral in nature, rather than institutional. This phenomenon is evident in the Indonesian context following the protests in late August and continuing into early September 2025, in which public trust was restored not through structural reforms but through symbolic gestures and narratives of elite forgiveness.

This study proposes the concept of critical forgiveness ethics, a political ethical framework that combines Asian values of social harmony with Western principles of moral accountability. This ethics rejects the dichotomy between forgiveness and justice. Forgiveness should not be understood as an ethical concession, but as a reflective process aimed at restoring moral justice. In the context of postcolonial democracies such as Indonesia, critical ethics of forgiveness enables forgiveness to become a transformative social act, forgiving while demanding accountability. Thus, this opens space for a morally grounded democracy, where harmony does not negate criticism and justice does not erase humanity.

This study operationalizes several theoretical frameworks to analyze the dynamics of the ethics of forgiveness in the relationship between society and the political elite following the 2025 national process. First, John Rawls's theory of justice is used to assess the dimensions of justice in policy practices and political actions that underlie the emergence of protests, particularly through the concepts of distributive justice and the principle of "justice as fairness." This framework helps explain how policies perceived as unjust can trigger demands for accountability and shape the government's moral legitimacy in public eyes. Second, Alasdair MacIntyre's virtue ethics is employed to analyze the practice of forgiveness within the moral traditions and social practices that have evolved within society. From this perspective, forgiveness is understood not merely as an individual moral choice but as a practice rooted in collective values, social harmony, and communitarian relationships that shape society's response to ethical violations in political life.

Furthermore, Jürgen Habermas's theory of communicative action is employed to assess the quality of political communication between elites and the public in responding to the legitimacy crisis. Through the lens of communicative rationality, this study examines the extent to which political communication processes, whether through public spaces, the media, or official government statements, meet the principles of transparency, deliberative dialogue, and openness to criticism in efforts to reconstruct public trust. Additionally, the perspectives of Southeast Asian thinkers are employed to understand the cultural contexts that shape forgiveness practices across regional societies. Concepts of reconciliatory ethics, the value of social harmony, and the tendency toward forgiveness in the relationship between society and the state indicate that forgiveness practices in this region are not merely individual psychological phenomena but also part of a political-ethical structure that shapes the dynamics of social stability and accountability within Indonesian democracy.

The three theoretical frameworks used in this study are not treated as standalone approaches but are synthesized as complementary analytical lenses to examine the same phenomenon from different dimensions. John Rawls's theory of justice is employed to analyze the normative dimensions of policies and political actions, particularly regarding the principles of distributive justice and the moral legitimacy of policies that underlie public protests. Meanwhile, Alasdair MacIntyre's virtue ethics is used to understand the socio-cultural practices that shape public responses to violations of political ethics, including the tendency toward a culture of forgiveness within a communitarian moral tradition. Jürgen Habermas's theory of communicative action is employed to assess the quality of political communication between elites and the public in the public sphere, particularly in the process of reconstructing public trust through dialogue, transparency, and deliberative practices. Thus, these three theories operate in a complementary manner. Rawls examines the justice dimension of policies, MacIntyre analyzes the underlying social moral practices, and Habermas evaluates the quality of political communication that bridges the relationship between power and society.

The integration of these three perspectives forms the basis for developing the concept of critical ethics of forgiveness. This normative framework views forgiveness not merely as a mechanism for social reconciliation but also as a process that continues to require moral accountability and rational public communication. Within this framework, forgiveness is not understood as a passive acceptance of abuses of power, but rather as an ethical practice that requires acknowledgment of wrongdoing, public accountability, and an open dialogue process between the state and society. To ensure this concept can be applied in empirical analysis, this

study operationalizes the ethics of critical forgiveness through several indicators identified in the research data, as shown in the following table.

Dimensions of Analysis	Theoretical Framework	Analysis Indicators	Focus on the Data
Policy Justice	Rawls	Public perceptions of the fairness or unfairness of policies; demands for redistribution or policy corrections	Protest narratives, public demands, and criticism of government policies
Moral practice of forgiveness	MacIntyre	Narratives of forgiveness, social reconciliation, or the reintegration of political elites	Public statements, cultural discourse on social harmony
Political communication	Habermas	Government transparency, public dialogue, and admission of mistakes by the elite	Official government statements, public debates, media discourse
Critical forgiveness	Synthesis of the three theories	The existence of demands for accountability alongside the discourse of reconciliation, forgiveness, accompanied by moral conditions	Narratives that demand accountability while opening space for reconciliation

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative approach using *Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)*, a method developed by Norman Fairclough. This approach was chosen because it enables analysis of the relationship among language, power, and social practices within political discourse (Fairclough, 2013; Miles et al., 2013). The research data consists of public policy documents, official government statements, and online media reports that address the August 2025 national protests and the public response to them. Media data collection took place between August and October 2025, the period during which the protests occurred, the policy was revoked, and discourses of reconciliation and public forgiveness emerged in the public sphere.

Data collection was conducted using *purposive sampling*, with the following inclusion criteria: (1) documents or news articles that explicitly discuss the housing allowance policy for members of the House of Representatives and the accompanying public protests; (2) containing statements by political elites, government responses, or public opinion regarding issues of accountability and apologies; and (3) published by national media with broad reach and editorial credibility. Meanwhile, exclusion criteria include news items that merely mention the

protest events in passing without providing analysis or discursive narratives regarding political accountability and public reconciliation. Based on these criteria, this study analyzes several texts, including online news reports, official government statements, and public comments, that represent the dominant discourse in the public sphere.

Data analysis was conducted using Fairclough's three-dimensional *critical discourse analysis* framework, namely text analysis, discursive practices, and social practices. In the text analysis phase, this study identified word choices, moral metaphors, and narrative structures used in discourse regarding protests, political apologies, and public responses. The discursive practices stage focuses on how this discourse is produced and circulated through the media, including how political elites and government institutions frame events as administrative policy issues or as moral issues demanding accountability. The social practices stage is used to link this discourse to broader cultural and political structures, particularly the culture of forgiveness in Indonesian society and the dynamics of moral legitimacy in democracy.

To strengthen interpretive validity, this study employs source triangulation and hermeneutic reflection in its analysis. Triangulation is achieved by comparing various types of data, policy documents, media coverage, and public statements to ensure consistency in the patterns of discourse being analyzed. Additionally, the analysis process is supplemented by reflexive memoing, which involves the researcher's reflective note-taking during data coding and interpretation (Creswell & Poth, 2017). These reflective memos document the interpretation process, identify potential interpretive biases, and maintain transparency in hermeneutic analysis, which is inherently interpretive. This hermeneutic analysis is grounded in Hans-Georg Gadamer's interpretive-hermeneutic approach, which emphasizes the importance of *Verstehen* (understanding) over mere explanation. In this way, every public statement is read as a moral text reflecting the interaction between cultural values and political ethics.

Nevertheless, this study has several methodological limitations. It primarily relies on publicly available media and official documents, so it cannot fully access internal government documents or the decision-making processes behind the policies being protested. Furthermore, the study's focus on public discourse analysis means it does not directly measure the public's psychological attitudes; rather, it analyzes discursive representations of forgiveness and accountability in the public sphere. Nevertheless, this approach remains relevant for understanding how practices of forgiveness and political legitimacy are shaped through the discourse circulating in society.

Analysis Phase	Focus of Analysis	Analysis Techniques	Theoretical Framework
1. Data Collection and Selection	Identifying policy documents, official government statements, and media reports discussing public protests and the House of Representatives' housing allowance policy	Purposive sampling with predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria	Providing an empirical basis for analyzing political discourse regarding accountability and forgiveness
2. Thematic Coding (Text Analysis)	Identifying keywords, moral metaphors, and narrative patterns that emerge in the text (e.g., apology, responsibility, stability, reconciliation)	Open coding and thematic categorization of media texts and policy documents	Using Alasdair MacIntyre's perspective to analyze moral practices within a socio-cultural context
3. Analysis of Discursive Practices	Analyzing how discourse is produced, disseminated, and exchanged among political actors, the media, and the public	Analysis of media framing, intertextuality, and discursive legitimation strategies	Using Jürgen Habermas's theory of deliberative communication to assess the quality of political communication
4. Analysis of Social Practices	Connecting discourse to broader social and cultural structures, including the value of forgiveness in society	Hermeneutic interpretation of political and cultural contexts	Using John Rawls's framework of justice to assess the justice aspects of policy
5. Interpretive Synthesis	Integrating findings from the three levels of analysis to understand the dynamics of the ethics of forgiveness in the Indonesian political context	Triangulation of sources, reflexive note-taking, and philosophical interpretation	Developing a concept of critical ethics of forgiveness as a synthesis of justice, community moral practices, and public communication

(Table of Data Analysis Stages)

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Dynamics of Discourse on the Crisis of Trust and Political Forgiveness Following the 2025 National Protests

A discourse analysis of policy documents and public news coverage indicates that the decision to increase housing allowances for members of the House of Representatives in mid-2025 was the primary trigger for the erosion of public trust in the political elite's moral integrity. In official statements, the policy was framed as an "adjustment to legislators' operational needs," but the general public rejected this narrative. Social media data analyzed by Kompas

Research and Development during the period of August 16–26, 2025, showed that over 88.9% of protest posts expressed negative sentiment following the policy announcement, indicating an outburst of dissatisfaction rooted in moral concerns rather than economic ones (Krisdamarjati, 2025). This public response highlights the tension between formal legitimacy and moral legitimacy. Although administratively valid, the policy was deemed contrary to Rawlsian principles of distributive justice, which prioritize the most vulnerable groups (Rawls, 1999).

Several analyses were conducted of national media reports, official government statements, and viral social media posts from August to September 2025. These data were selected using purposive sampling based on criteria relevant to the increase in housing allowances for members of the House of Representatives and the government's response to public criticism. The analysis was conducted using the three-dimensional Critical Discourse Analysis approach developed by Norman Fairclough, which encompasses analysis at the levels of text, discursive practices, and social practices.

The analysis results indicate that the crisis of public trust that emerged following the national protests was not only produced by the substance of the policy, which was perceived as unfair, but also by the dynamics of discourse unfolding in the public sphere. In various media reports and official statements, policy conflicts were often framed through narratives of stability and reconciliation that emphasized the importance of maintaining social harmony. This narrative indirectly shapes the perception that political conflicts can be resolved through symbolic mechanisms such as apologies or limited policy revisions, without the need for a more in-depth process of political accountability.

To demonstrate how this discourse operates linguistically, here are representative quotes from the analyzed corpus.

"The government urges the public to maintain national stability and not prolong the controversy surrounding this subsidy policy." (National media, 2025)(Alfin, 2025).

"If this policy causes public uproar, we apologize and will conduct a comprehensive evaluation." (Joint Statement by the President, House of Representatives Leadership, and Political Parties)(Kantor Staf Presiden, 2025).

"We are disappointed, but what matters now is that the government has apologized and withdrawn the policy." (Public comment in the media, 2025)(Muhamad, 2025).

At the linguistic level, the analysis reveals the use of specific vocabulary that emphasizes social stability over political accountability. Words such as stability, evaluation, and controversy serve as discursive strategies to frame the conflict as an immediate problem to

be resolved. This choice of vocabulary shifts the focus from policy criticism to efforts to maintain social order.

From a modal perspective, the use of phrases such as "will conduct an evaluation" or "must maintain stability" indicates a moderate, normative form of commitment. This modality does not explicitly acknowledge institutional errors but emphasizes a relatively limited administrative response. Meanwhile, an analysis of transitivity reveals that in many media statements, the actions causing the conflict are presented impersonally, for example, as "the policy caused unrest" rather than "the government caused unrest." Such structures linguistically obscure the political actors responsible for the policy.

The emerging crisis of public trust stems not merely from material policies but from the elite's moral failure to interpret public responsibility. The government's discourse on social justice fails to counter the perception of moral injustice, which, from MacIntyre's perspective, amounts to the loss of the "narrative of shared virtue" in political practice (MacIntyre, 2007). A more intriguing phenomenon emerged in the post-policy-revocation phase, when the government rescinded the decision and issued a public apology. A significant shift occurred in society as both the Government and the House of Representatives (DPR) announced policy changes regarding council members' allowances and addressed public demands (Yunanto, 2025).

"On behalf of all members and the leadership of the House of Representatives (DPR RI), we apologize if we have not yet fully fulfilled our duties as representatives of the people," said Puan Maharani, Speaker of the House of Representatives (DPR RI) (Rahmawati, 2025).

This rapid shift reflects the social character of Indonesian society, which values harmony and forgiveness. Text analysis of public statements reveals that the words "apology," "forgiveness," and "sincere acceptance" became dominant themes following the protests. This phenomenon reflects a collectivist moral orientation that prioritizes social stability above all else, even at the expense of structural reform.

From the perspective of MacIntyre's practical ethics, this tendency can be interpreted as a form of communitarian virtue ethics, wherein society seeks to preserve a shared narrative of virtue through social reconciliation (MacIntyre, 2007). However, from a public ethics perspective, collective forgiveness without establishing accountability risks normalizing moral deviations. This finding indicates that the ethos of forgiveness in Indonesian society serves a dual function: as a mechanism for social stabilization and, simultaneously, as a delay of

political-ethical reform. In other words, forgiveness can become "conservative moral capital" that hinders the emergence of critical accountability practices.

An analysis of government communication discourse during the crisis reveals the dominance of justificatory rhetoric over moral reflection, as evidenced by the president's speech broadcast by the government, which still provides space for justification and calls for harmony across all segments of society (Humas Sekretariat Kabinet, 2025). Within Habermas's framework of discourse ethics, this signifies non-deliberative political communication, where decisions are conveyed monologically rather than as the result of dialogue (Habermas, 1996). Consequently, the government's corrective actions (such as policy revocation and apologies) are remedial rather than transformative. Public legitimacy is also restored through paternalistic symbols (such as a wise leader acknowledging mistakes) rather than through rational participation.

The findings also indicate that a paternalistic pattern remains the underlying structure of the relationship between the people and the government in Indonesia. In public discourse analysis, the government is often described as a "father of the nation," a "wise leader," or a "protector of the people." Since the new administration took office in late 2024, populist policies have emerged that directly engage the people, accompanied by the consolidation of the political elite (Gammon, 2025). This narrative demonstrates that the moral authority of the elite is more personal than institutional. Within the framework of Asian political philosophy, this pattern represents *a moral hierarchy* in which public trust is directed toward figures rather than systems. It is based on populist political policies (Ufen, 2024). Consequently, public ethical oversight becomes weak because it relies on the integrity of individual leaders rather than on transparent institutional mechanisms.

Other findings reveal a tension between a culture of forgiveness and *counter-democratic* practices, as noted by Rosanvallon (Rosanvallon, 2008). In Indonesian public discourse, acts of protest are often viewed as threats to harmony rather than as forms of moral participation. Consequently, the space for ethical criticism of power becomes narrow, while the practice of collective forgiveness reinforces the status *quo*. Thus, the culture of political forgiveness in Indonesia can serve both as a moral soft power that stabilizes democracy and as a cultural brake on institutional reform. This disparity reflects a public moral orientation that prioritizes harmony over correction. From Rawls's perspective, such a situation reflects a deficit of public reason, in which moral arguments are not fully formed by rational consideration but by affective and cultural values (Rawls, 1993).

Nevertheless, the phenomenon of public forgiveness is not entirely negative. Hermeneutic analysis suggests that forgiveness possesses reconciliatory potential that can serve as a source of moral energy for democracy. Jacques Derrida, in *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*, asserts that true forgiveness is not leniency toward wrongdoing, but an ethical act that opens the possibility for moral transformation (Derrida, 2003). In the Indonesian context, public forgiveness toward the elite can be interpreted as a collective will to continue political life without violence. However, for forgiveness to possess true ethical value, it must be accompanied by reflection and a moral commitment to rectifying flawed political structures.

These findings then lead to the formulation of a critical ethics of forgiveness, a political ethics that positions forgiveness as a moral act contingent upon accountability. Within this framework, forgiving does not mean forgetting, but rather remembering to improve. Critical ethics of forgiveness rejects two extremes: moral nihilism (which disregards wrongdoing) and rigid legalism (which rejects reconciliation). This ethics synthesizes Eastern empathetic morality with Western normative rationality, thereby making forgiveness a means of ethical transformation rather than merely a symbol of harmony.

Overall, the findings of this study indicate that the 2025 public trust crisis in Indonesia cannot be understood solely through an economic or institutional-political lens, but rather through the complex interplay among cultural structures, public morality, and political communication. A strong culture of forgiveness has served as a pillar of social stability while simultaneously acting as an obstacle to public ethical reform. The concept of critical ethics of forgiveness proposed in this study serves to balance these two poles by upholding the value of social harmony without sacrificing the principles of justice and moral responsibility. Thus, Indonesian democracy can evolve into a system that is not merely procedural, but also reflective and morally grounded.

The elaboration of the empirical findings above provides an initial picture of the dynamics of discourse emerging in the public and political elite's responses to the analyzed policy controversies. However, to better understand the meaning and normative implications of these findings, an analysis is required that systematically links them to this study's theoretical framework. Therefore, the following section will analyze and interpret the findings using the operationalization scheme for the concepts explained in the analytical framework section. Gradually, the findings regarding policy injustice will be examined through the perspective of distributive justice as formulated by John Rawls; the social practices of forgiveness emerging in public responses will be analyzed through the framework of communitarian virtue ethics by Alasdair MacIntyre; while the quality of political communication evident in media discourse

and official statements will be evaluated using the concept of communicative rationality by Jürgen Habermas. Through this approach, the three theories are not treated separately but as complementary analytical lenses for examining the normative, social, and communicative dimensions of the political phenomena under study.

Analysis and Interpretation of Findings

The crisis of public trust that occurred in Indonesia in 2025 reflects what Pierre Rosanvallon calls "*a crisis of legitimacy*," namely, the tension between the formal procedures of democracy and citizens' sense of moral justice (Rosanvallon, 2008). Although the controversial DPR allowance policy was legally valid, the public deemed it unethical because it contradicted the principle of social justice. This is where a fundamental distinction between legal legitimacy and moral legitimacy emerges. These two forms of legitimacy are defined as follows: *the first* is grounded in administrative procedures, while *the second* is rooted in the public's perception of justice and appropriateness. In this context, democracy relies not only on electoral mechanisms but also on the moral sensitivity of those in power toward substantive justice.

From Rawls's perspective, this crisis indicates a failure to apply the principle of *difference*, which holds that every social policy must benefit the most vulnerable group (Rawls, 1999). The government may argue that the increase in benefits is an operational adjustment. Still, to the public facing economic pressures, the policy appears to violate the principle of moral equality (Afifah, 2025). In Rawlsian terms, this creates an unjust inequality because the policy's benefits are actually enjoyed by groups that already possess social privilege. Thus, this crisis of public trust is not merely a result of an economic deficit, but a form of *moral dissonance* between the elite and the public.

Furthermore, from the perspective of MacIntyre's practical ethics, this crisis reveals the loss of political *telos*, that is, a moral orientation toward the common good (MacIntyre, 2007). When political practice loses its moral compass, it becomes trapped in the instrumentalization of power. In the context of the 2025 protests, the political elite appears to operate within a technocratic horizon, justifying policies on the grounds of efficiency. Meanwhile, the public responds with a moral horizon demanding justice. The tension between these two horizons produces deep moral dissonance. According to MacIntyre, public morality can only be restored if politics is returned to its fundamental function: as a practice of social virtue rather than an arena of interest calculation (MacIntyre, 2007).

However, the phenomenon of Indonesian society's swift forgiveness of the government reveals a distinctive moral dimension: society judges wrongdoing not merely through the lens of procedural rationality but also through the perpetrator's intentions and moral gestures. In Indonesia's paternalistic political culture, a public apology is often viewed as sufficient moral atonement to restore legitimacy. This phenomenon reflects the strength of harmony values in society, in which forgiveness serves as a social mechanism to defuse conflict. Within this framework, public morality is rooted in social virtues such as patience, empathy, and harmony, which risk weakening public ethical discipline in the face of power.

In Habermas's view, this phenomenon reveals a *deliberative deficit* in political communication (Habermas, 1996). The communication process between the government and the people during the 2025 crisis was more monologue-based, with the government speaking and the people listening. Yet, democratic legitimacy demands *communicative action*, that is, genuine two-way communication that is rational and free from domination (Habermas, 1996). When public communication becomes merely a tool for persuasion rather than dialogue, moral rationality loses its place. A public that forgives the elite without reflective participation ultimately reinforces a paternalistic structure that hinders the formation of autonomous moral opinions.

However, when viewed more critically, this culture of forgiveness can become a form of *moral bypassing*, a process in which moral wrongs are bypassed without institutional resolution. In this context, forgiveness serves as a substitute for justice. This contradicts the principles of modern public ethics, which demand objective accountability rather than mere subjective acknowledgment. Political morality, when trapped within paternalistic relations, will always position the ruler as a moral figure who cannot be rationally criticized. In the Indonesian context, this explains why unethical political practices can persist even though the public initially rejected them vehemently. Nevertheless, completely rejecting the culture of forgiveness is also unrealistic. Philosophically, forgiveness holds profound moral value. Jacques Derrida argues that true forgiveness is an unconditional ethical act, not a social transaction, but rather the opening of space for new moral possibilities (Derrida, 2003). In the Indonesian context, public forgiveness can be understood as an expression of collective humanity seeking to avoid social disintegration. Thus, the task of political ethics is not to reject forgiveness, but to guide forgiveness so that it is reflective and morally productive.

From this synthesis emerges the concept of critical ethics of forgiveness, a framework of political ethics that seeks to integrate the value of social harmony with the principle of moral accountability. This ethic demands that forgiveness not become a substitute for justice, but

rather a bridge toward ethical reform. In the ethics of critical forgiveness, granting forgiveness also entails demanding improvement; accepting forgiveness means committing to moral transformation. This ethics seeks to uphold a balance between two extremes in state politics and governance: endless social vengeance and moral leniency without accountability. At the very least, the proposed critical ethics of forgiveness rests on three main pillars. *First*, reflective forgiveness, which is forgiveness accompanied by moral awareness and rational evaluation of wrongdoing. *Second*, moral accountability, the obligation of political elites to follow public forgiveness with institutional reform. *Third*, deliberative communication, that is, a public sphere that allows the discourse of forgiveness to serve as a means of collective ethical learning rather than merely a symbolic ritual (Habermas, 1996). With these three pillars, forgiveness ceases to be an instrument of the ruling class but becomes a moral source for a democratic society.

In the context of postcolonial Southeast Asian democracy, this concept also serves as a corrective to Western rationality's biases. While modern political ethics theories (Rawls and Habermas) tend to emphasize individual autonomy and procedural justice, the critical ethics of forgiveness adds an affective and relational dimension characteristic of Eastern culture (Sen, 2009). This ethical concept does not reject rationality; rather, it humanizes it through empathy. It rejects the view that public morality must always be confrontational; rather, it proposes a rational model of reconciliation that balances the demands of justice with a sense of humanity. This discussion underscores that the future of Indonesian democracy depends on society and the government's ability to balance two major moral forces: justice and forgiveness. Democracy without forgiveness fosters social resentment, but forgiveness without justice fosters ethical negligence. Critical ethics of forgiveness emerges as a synthesis between the two, serving as a political ethics rooted in local culture yet oriented toward universal responsibility. By positioning forgiveness as a reflective and transformative moral act, Indonesia can develop a democratic model that is not only stable but also ethically dignified.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the crisis of public trust in political policies is not only related to issues of distributive justice but is also influenced by the dynamics of discourse that shape how society understands and responds to political conflicts within a democratic public sphere. Through critical discourse analysis of media texts, official government statements, and public responses, this study finds that narratives of stability and reconciliation that emerge in

political communication help normalize policy conflicts through symbolic mechanisms such as apologies and limited policy revisions. In a social context shaped by communitarian values and a culture of forgiveness, these mechanisms can quickly alleviate political tensions. Yet, they can also risk diminishing public pressure for more substantive institutional accountability. These findings demonstrate that the relationship between distributive justice, social practices of forgiveness, and communicative rationality does not operate in isolation but rather interacts to shape political legitimacy and the boundaries of public criticism of power. Based on this analysis, this study proposes the concept of critical ethics of forgiveness as a normative framework that positions political forgiveness not merely as a mechanism for social reconciliation, but as a moral practice that continues to demand policy transparency, institutional reflection, and a deliberative public sphere of communication. Thus, the main contribution of this study lies in its effort to bridge political ethics, critical discourse analysis, and political culture studies to explain how the practice of forgiveness can function both as a source of social stability and as a challenge to the strengthening of democratic accountability.

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