



Historiography, Authoritarianism, and the Formation of Political Culture in Indonesia: Post-1965 Historiography and the Legacy of the New Order

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Article Info:

Article history:

Received: May 26, 2026

Revised: June 23, 2026

Accepted: June 25, 2026

Keywords:

Authoritarianism; Collective Memory; Historiography; Political Culture; 1965 Crisis

Abstract

Background: The 1965 political crisis marked a critical turning point in Indonesian history, shaping political culture and state-society relations. Although previous studies have examined political violence and regime consolidation, limited attention has been paid to how historiography normalized authoritarian values and political authority across generations.

Objective: This study aims to analyze how historical narratives surrounding the 1965 crisis contributed to the formation and persistence of authoritarian political culture in Indonesia.

Methods: This research employs a qualitative historical approach combined with historiographical analysis. Data were collected from historical archives, state narratives produced during the New Order period, historiographical literature, and scholarly works discussing political culture and authoritarian legacies in Indonesia. The data were analyzed using thematic discourse analysis to identify recurring political concepts embedded within official narratives.

Results: The findings indicate that post-1965 historiography functioned not merely as a form of historical interpretation but also as an instrument of political legitimization. Specifically, state-sanctioned educational materials, such as the mandatory school curriculum portraying the PKI as a national threat, and the compulsory screening of *Pengkhianatan G30S/PKI*, reinforced hierarchical political norms. Narratives emphasizing stability, national unity, and anti-communism contributed to the construction of hierarchical political relations and the limitation of political pluralism. Furthermore, these political ideas continued to influence public trust, political participation, and perceptions of authority even after the democratic transition that followed the fall of the New Order regime in 1998.

Conclusion: This study shows that historiography shapes political culture beyond regime change by sustaining authoritarian legacies through collective historical memory.

To cite this article: Yusron, I., Sunarti, L., & Pradjoko, D. (2026). Historiography, authoritarianism, and the formation of political culture in Indonesia: Post-1965 historiography and the legacy of the New Order. *Glosains: Jurnal Sains Global Indonesia*, 7(3), 1069–1078. <https://doi.org/10.59784/glosins.v7i3.811>

INTRODUCTION

The political crisis of 1965 represents one of the most transformative and contested events in modern Indonesian history (Zurbuchen, 2005). Beyond the transition of political leadership from Sukarno's administration to the New Order regime under Suharto, the crisis fundamentally altered institutional arrangements, state-society relations, and political legitimacy in Indonesia. The consequences of this historical episode extended far beyond regime change, influencing how authority, stability, and political participation were understood and practiced across subsequent generations.

For decades, scholarly discussions of the 1965 political crisis have primarily concentrated on political violence, military consolidation, institutional restructuring, and the emergence of authoritarian governance. Earlier studies largely focused on reconstructing historical events, identifying political actors, and explaining the dynamics surrounding the alleged coup attempt and subsequent mass violence. More recent scholarship has expanded these discussions by critically examining the role of state institutions and official historical narratives in shaping public understanding of the crisis. Revisionist scholars have challenged earlier interpretations by demonstrating the complexity of the political actors involved and highlighting how state-sponsored narratives contributed to the legitimization of political authority (Melvin, 2018; Robinson, 2018; Roosa, 2006).

While these studies have significantly enriched empirical understanding of the 1965 crisis, comparatively limited attention has been devoted to examining its long-term historiographical consequences and their influence on the formation of political culture. Historical narratives do not merely document past events; they also function as mechanisms through which societies construct legitimacy, authority, and collective political meaning (Kane, 2000). Historical interpretation, therefore, becomes an important site through which political values are normalized and reproduced over time.

From the perspective of historiography and the philosophy of history, political crises acquire significance not solely because of what occurred historically but also because of how those events are interpreted, institutionalized, and transmitted across generations. During the New Order period, official narratives concerning the 1965 crisis were disseminated extensively through educational institutions, public discourse, media channels, and state-controlled historical production. These narratives consistently emphasized concepts such as national stability, social order, anti-communism, and national unity. Over time, these discursive constructions contributed not only to legitimizing political authority but also to shaping broader political attitudes toward authority, participation, and dissent (Payne & Samhat, 2004).

The normalization of such narratives potentially contributed to the development of an authoritarian political culture characterized by hierarchical state–society relations, limited tolerance for political opposition, and depoliticized civic engagement. Political culture reflects enduring orientations toward political institutions and political participation that develop through historical and social processes (Almond & Verba, 2015; Corner, 2003; Pye & Verba, 2015). Within authoritarian settings, values emphasizing obedience, centralized authority, and political stability may become embedded not solely through coercive institutions but also through the internalization of historical narratives and collective memory (Neundorf & Pop-Eleches, 2020; Pernia, 2022).

Importantly, the collapse of authoritarian institutions does not automatically eliminate the narratives that supported them. Following Indonesia's democratic transition after the fall of the New Order regime in 1998, political reforms introduced electoral competition, decentralization, and greater civil liberties (Sutiyo & Maharjan, 2017). However, contemporary political developments continue to demonstrate patterns of elite dominance, public distrust of institutions, and recurring political discourses associated with ideological threats and social instability. These continuities suggest that historical narratives established during previous political periods may continue to influence political understanding even after institutional transformation has occurred.

Although previous historiographical scholarship has successfully challenged official interpretations of the 1965 crisis, fewer studies have explicitly examined how historiographical narratives themselves contribute to the long-term formation and persistence of authoritarian political culture in Indonesia. This gap is increasingly important for understanding how historical interpretation continues to shape democratic development and political consciousness within post-authoritarian societies.

Accordingly, this study addresses two research questions: (1) How did historiographical narratives surrounding the 1965 political crisis contribute to the formation of authoritarian political culture in Indonesia. (2) To what extent do these historical narratives continue to influence political understanding and political attitudes in post-New Order Indonesia.

The novelty of this study lies in its conceptual integration of historiographical analysis and political culture theory to examine narrative-based mechanisms of authoritarian persistence.

Unlike previous studies that have treated historical revision and political culture separately, this research positions historiography itself as an active political structure capable of shaping collective political consciousness beyond formal institutional boundaries. This conceptual contribution provides a new analytical framework for understanding authoritarian legacies in post-transitional societies, extending beyond the Indonesian case to offer comparative theoretical insights.

Three important gaps can be identified in the existing scholarship. First, while numerous studies have examined the political consequences of the 1965 crisis, few have systematically analyzed how historiographical narratives themselves functioned as mechanisms of political culture formation over extended periods. Second, previous research has largely treated historical narrative and political culture as separate analytical domains without sufficiently examining their dynamic interrelationship. Third, existing studies have not adequately explained how authoritarian political orientations persist beyond institutional democratic transition through discursive and historiographical channels. The present study directly addresses these gaps by integrating historiographical analysis with political culture theory to examine narrative mechanisms as long-term instruments of political socialization.

Based on these questions, this study aims to analyze the role of historiographical narratives in shaping authoritarian political culture and to examine the persistence of these historical constructions beyond institutional democratic transition. Employing a qualitative historical approach combined with historiographical analysis, this study contributes to broader debates concerning authoritarian legacies, collective memory, and the role of historical narratives in constructing political meaning.

By positioning historiography not merely as a process of recording historical events but also as a mechanism through which political authority and legitimacy are reproduced, this paper seeks to contribute to discussions concerning history, power, and political culture. The Indonesian experience provides an important case for understanding how authoritarian political ideas may persist beyond formal regime transformation and continue shaping democratic trajectories over time.

Literature Review

Historiography and Historical Narrative Construction

Historiography extends beyond the documentation of historical events and encompasses the processes through which historical knowledge is constructed, interpreted, and disseminated within society (Gramsci, 2020; McGregor, 2018). Historical narratives are not neutral representations of the past; rather, they reflect political interests, ideological frameworks, and institutional power relations that shape collective understanding. From the perspective of the philosophy of history, historiography functions as an interpretive practice that influences how societies conceptualize legitimacy, authority, and political identity (Pocock, 2011).

Scholars have emphasized that historical narratives have substantial political consequences because they establish frameworks through which political actors and institutions are evaluated. Historical interpretation, therefore, becomes closely associated with power relations and political legitimacy. According to Gramsci (2020), dominant political institutions sustain authority not solely through coercive mechanisms but also through cultural and intellectual leadership that normalizes particular ideas and values within society. Historical narratives may consequently operate as instruments through which political authority is legitimized and reproduced.

Within authoritarian contexts, state institutions frequently influence historical production to consolidate legitimacy and regulate political discourse (Lewis, 2013). Educational systems, official publications, media institutions, and commemorative practices function as channels through which dominant interpretations are institutionalized. Such processes contribute to the construction of collective memory that supports prevailing political arrangements and limits alternative understandings of historical events.

Indonesian historiography concerning the 1965 political crisis provides an important illustration of these dynamics. During the New Order period, state-sponsored interpretations portrayed the events primarily as a communist-led coup attempt that threatened national

stability. This narrative framework legitimized subsequent political consolidation while simultaneously delegitimizing competing political interpretations. Revisionist scholarship has since challenged these official narratives by demonstrating their constructed nature and highlighting the broader political interests embedded within historical interpretation.

Political Culture and Authoritarian Governance

Political culture refers to the shared orientations, values, beliefs, and attitudes that influence political behavior within a society (Dalton & Welzel, 2014; Touseef et al., 2023). Almond (2015) conceptualized political culture as patterns of political orientation that shape citizens' engagement with political institutions and processes. Political culture develops through long-term socialization processes involving educational systems, social institutions, historical experiences, and public discourse (Almond & Verba, 2015).

Authoritarian political culture generally emphasizes political stability, hierarchical authority, obedience to institutions, and limited political contestation (Fikrat, 2025). Unlike democratic political culture, which encourages participation, pluralism, and public deliberation, authoritarian political culture tends to prioritize order, centralized control, and institutional dominance. Such political orientations do not emerge exclusively through formal political institutions; they may also develop through cultural and discursive mechanisms operating over extended historical periods.

Scholars examining authoritarian governance argue that authoritarian systems sustain legitimacy not only through coercive instruments but also through ideological normalization. Political narratives emphasizing stability, national unity, and security frequently become mechanisms through which authoritarian institutions maintain social acceptance. Citizens may internalize political norms that discourage dissent while reinforcing obedience to centralized authority.

In Indonesia, the New Order administration represented an important example of authoritarian governance supported by institutional and discursive mechanisms. State institutions consistently promoted political narratives emphasizing social stability and developmental priorities while constraining political pluralism. Such discursive practices may have contributed to shaping broader political attitudes that extended beyond the formal authoritarian institutions themselves.

Authoritarian Legacy, Collective Memory, and Political Continuity

The persistence of political ideas following institutional transformation has become an important discussion within studies of authoritarian legacies and democratic transition. Research on post-authoritarian societies suggests that institutional democratization does not necessarily eliminate political norms and narratives established under earlier regimes. Political ideas embedded within collective memory frequently continue to influence contemporary political attitudes and public behavior (McGregor, 2018; Mietzner, 2018).

Collective memory refers to socially shared understandings of historical experiences that influence contemporary political identity and institutional legitimacy. Historical narratives transmitted through educational institutions, public discourse, and social interaction help shape collective memory across generations. Consequently, authoritarian political ideas may persist even after formal regime transformation has occurred.

Studies on post-authoritarian political development emphasize that political continuity often emerges through enduring historical narratives rather than institutional persistence alone. Elite dominance, distrust of political institutions, and limited civic participation may reflect deeper historical processes that influence political culture over time. Historical interpretation, therefore, becomes essential for understanding how past political experiences continue to shape contemporary democratic trajectories.

Within Indonesia's post-New Order context, democratization introduced significant institutional reforms, including decentralization, competitive elections, and expanded civil liberties. However, political discourse emphasizing stability, ideological threat, and centralized authority continues to emerge within contemporary political dynamics. Such continuities suggest that historical narratives established during earlier political periods may remain embedded within political consciousness beyond institutional democratization.

Drawing upon historiographical theory, political culture scholarship, and authoritarian legacy literature, this study positions historical narratives as important mechanisms contributing to the long-term formation of political culture. By integrating these theoretical perspectives, this research seeks to analyze how historiographical interpretations surrounding the 1965 political crisis contributed to the formation of authoritarian political culture and how these historical constructions continue to influence contemporary political understanding in Indonesia.

METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative historical approach combined with historiographical analysis to examine the relationship between historical narrative construction and the formation of authoritarian political culture in Indonesia. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because this research sought to interpret meanings embedded within historical narratives rather than measure causal relationships quantitatively. The study focused on understanding how interpretations surrounding the 1965 political crisis contributed to the normalization and persistence of political ideas associated with authoritarian governance.

The study adopted a historical-analytical design that emphasized the examination of historical discourse and its long-term implications for political understanding. Rather than treating the 1965 political crisis solely as a historical event, this research positioned historiography itself as an object of analysis through which political legitimacy and collective political meaning were constructed and reproduced over time.

Data Sources

This study utilized both primary and secondary data sources to strengthen analytical interpretation and ensure source triangulation.

Primary materials consisted of historical archives and official state narratives produced during and after the political transition period following 1965. These materials included newspaper archives, such as Kompas and military-affiliated publications during the New Order era, official government publications, historical educational materials disseminated during the New Order administration, and state-sponsored narratives concerning the 1965 political crisis.

Secondary materials consisted of academic books, journal articles, historiographical studies, and scholarly literature discussing Indonesian historiography, authoritarian political culture, collective memory, democratic transition, and authoritarian legacies. Priority was given to publications from the last ten years to maintain theoretical and empirical relevance.

Combining primary and secondary sources enabled interpretive triangulation and strengthened analytical validity concerning historical narrative formation and long-term political meaning production.

Data Collection Technique

Data collection was conducted through document analysis and systematic literature review procedures. Historical materials and historiographical scholarship were identified, reviewed, and categorized according to their relevance to the research objectives. The literature selection process focused on three analytical dimensions: 1) Historiographical interpretations concerning the 1965 political crisis. 2) Political culture and authoritarian governance theories. 3) Authoritarian legacy and collective memory studies within post-authoritarian societies. Historical materials were subsequently classified according to recurring political themes and narrative structures associated with political legitimacy, national stability, authority, anti-communism, national unity, and political participation.

Data Analysis Technique

Data analysis employed thematic discourse analysis combined with historiographical interpretation. Thematic discourse analysis was applied to identify recurring concepts embedded within historical narratives and official political discourse.

The analytical process consisted of four stages: 1) Historical source identification, involving the selection of relevant historical materials and historiographical literature. 2)

Narrative categorization, identifying recurring themes such as political stability, national unity, ideological threats, authority, and obedience. 3) Interpretative analysis, examining how these narratives contributed to legitimizing political authority and shaping political understanding. 4) Historical contextualization, connecting historical narrative construction with contemporary political attitudes and post-authoritarian political developments.

Historiographical interpretation was further employed to examine how political narratives extend beyond institutional periods and function as long-term structures shaping collective political consciousness.

Research Framework

This study assumes that historical narratives function not merely as representations of historical events but also as discursive mechanisms influencing political legitimacy and political culture formation. The analytical framework examined in this study can be summarized as follows:

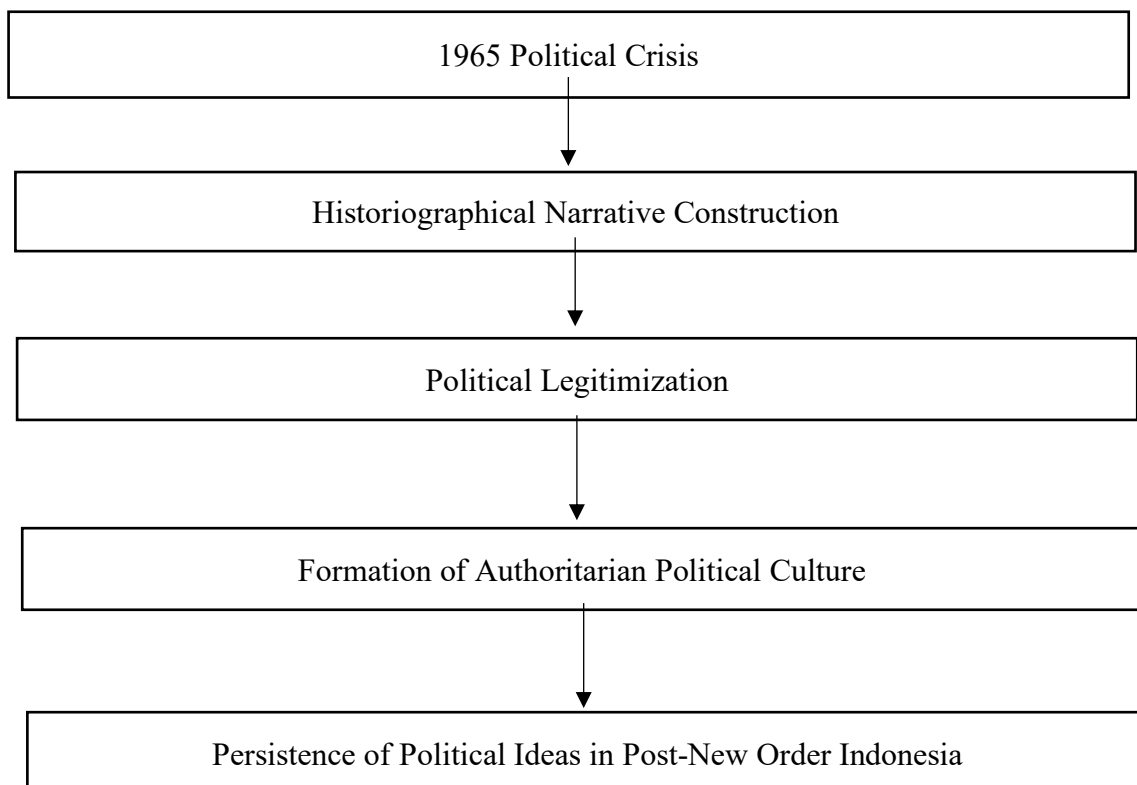


Figure 1. Analytical Framework

This framework provides a conceptual foundation for understanding how historical interpretation contributes to shaping political meaning beyond formal institutional transformation. The framework above illustrates the five-stage analytical pathway: (1) The 1965 Political Crisis as the historical triggering event; (2) Historiographical Narrative Construction through state-sponsored mechanisms; (3) Political Legitimization via institutional dissemination; (4) Formation of Authoritarian Political Culture through internalization; and (5) Persistence of Political Ideas in Post-New Order Indonesia through collective memory. Each stage is analytically distinct yet connected through discursive and socialization mechanisms examined in this study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Historiographical Construction and Political Legitimization after 1965

The findings indicate that historical narratives surrounding the 1965 political crisis functioned not solely as mechanisms of historical interpretation but also as instruments of political legitimization. During the New Order administration, official historical discourse consistently framed the events of 1965 through narratives emphasizing national salvation, political stability, and ideological protection.

Historical production extended beyond academic interpretation into broader mechanisms of political socialization. State-sponsored educational materials, public commemorative activities, and government-supported historical publications reinforced political frameworks associating authority with stability and political opposition with disorder.

One prominent example involved the dissemination of historical narratives through formal education and public media during the New Order administration. Official educational materials frequently portrayed the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) as an existential national threat, while state authority was positioned as the protector of national unity and political order. State-sponsored historical representations, including public commemorations and audiovisual materials such as *Pengkhianatan G30S/PKI*, contributed significantly to constructing collective political memory.

These findings suggest that historical narratives fulfilled dual functions. First, narratives provided legitimacy for political consolidation following regime transition. Second, narratives shaped broader societal perceptions regarding authority, acceptable political participation, and institutional legitimacy. The findings reinforce historiographical arguments emphasizing that political legitimacy may be reproduced not solely through institutional mechanisms but also through narrative institutionalization embedded within historical interpretation.

Narrative Internalization and the Formation of Authoritarian Political Culture

The findings indicate that authoritarian political culture developed not solely through institutional coercion but also through long-term processes of discursive normalization. Historical narratives emphasizing discipline, obedience, national stability, and centralized authority contributed to shaping political orientations extending beyond formal state institutions.

Political culture formation occurred through repeated exposure to historical interpretations disseminated across multiple social institutions, particularly educational systems, public discourse, and state-controlled communication channels. Through these mechanisms, political values became internalized and gradually embedded within broader patterns of political understanding. Several recurring narrative elements were identified as contributing factors to authoritarian political culture formation.

Table 1. Narrative Mechanisms and Political Consequences

Historical Element	Narrative	Political Constructed	Meaning	Potential Consequence	Political
Stability discourse		Authority associated with order		Reduced tolerance toward dissent	
Anti-communist narratives		Ideological perception	threat	Political mechanisms	exclusion
National unity rhetoric		Centralized legitimacy	political	Hierarchical relations	political
State-centered historical interpretation		Institutional dependence		Limited pluralism	political

Source: Developed by the authors based on historiographical analysis and previous studies (Melvin, 2018; Mietzner, 2018; Robinson, 2018; Roosa, 2006).

The findings demonstrate that political narratives functioned as mechanisms reinforcing hierarchical state society relations. Political participation became framed less as active civic engagement and more as support for institutional stability.

This process contributed to depoliticization, where citizens increasingly positioned political authority as the exclusive domain of institutional actors rather than participatory democratic processes. Consequently, authoritarian political culture emerged not merely through administrative structures but through long-term socialization processes embedded within historical understanding. These findings align with political culture scholarship emphasizing that political orientations develop gradually through historical experiences and social learning mechanisms.

Persistence of Historical Narratives in Post-New Order Indonesia

The transition toward democratic governance following the collapse of the New Order administration in 1998 introduced substantial institutional reforms, including electoral competition, decentralization, and expanded civil liberties. However, the findings suggest that institutional democratization did not entirely eliminate political narratives established during earlier political periods.

Several contemporary political patterns indicate continuity in political understanding shaped by earlier historical constructions. Public concerns regarding ideological threats, recurring emphasis on social stability, and patterns of elite political dominance illustrate the persistence of historical political ideas beyond formal regime transition.

The findings indicate that historical narratives continue influencing contemporary political attitudes through collective memory and long-term political socialization mechanisms. Historical interpretation functions not solely as remembrance of past events but also as an interpretive framework shaping perceptions regarding authority, legitimacy, and political participation.

These continuities suggest that democratization involves not only institutional reform but also broader transformation concerning political culture and historical understanding. Political ideas embedded within collective memory may continue influencing democratic practice despite changes in constitutional structures.

From a historiographical perspective, these findings reinforce arguments emphasizing that narratives operate as enduring structures of political meaning. Historical interpretation possesses the capacity to transcend institutional boundaries and influence political imagination across generations.

Discussion

The findings demonstrated that historiographical narratives surrounding the 1965 political crisis contributed to the formation of authoritarian political culture through mechanisms of legitimacy construction, political socialization, and collective memory formation. Historical interpretation functioned not merely as a retrospective explanation but also as an active political process that shaped societal understandings of authority and political participation.

This study extended previous scholarship on Indonesian historiography by emphasizing the relationship between narrative construction and long-term political culture formation. While previous studies had predominantly focused on reconstructing political events or institutional dynamics, this research highlighted the importance of examining historical narratives themselves as mechanisms that influenced political continuity.

The Indonesian experience illustrated that authoritarian legacies may persist beyond institutional transformation when historical narratives remain embedded in collective political understanding. Consequently, democratization should not be understood solely as an institutional transition but also as a broader process involving the reinterpretation of historical meaning and political memory. It is important to acknowledge that post-1998 democratic reforms also generated significant counter-narratives that challenged New Order historiography. The establishment of the National Commission on Human Rights (Komnas HAM) and its 2012 report, which acknowledged the 1965 events as gross human rights violations, represented an important institutional counter-narrative.

Civil society organizations, survivor testimonies, such as those collected by the International People's Tribunal in The Hague in 2016, and independent academic scholarship created alternative historical framings that contested official narratives. However, these counter-narratives faced significant resistance from political and military establishments, illustrating the durability of authoritarian narrative frameworks even within democratic settings. The coexistence of official narratives and counter-narratives in contemporary Indonesia reflects an ongoing historiographical contest over political meaning that has yet to be fully resolved (Hearman, 2018; McGregor, 2018).

CONCLUSION

This study examined how historiographical narratives surrounding the 1965 political crisis contributed to the formation of authoritarian political culture in Indonesia and explored the

persistence of these historical constructions beyond formal regime transition. The findings demonstrated that historical narratives functioned not merely as interpretations of past events but also as mechanisms through which political legitimacy, authority, and political meaning were institutionalized and reproduced over time.

The analysis indicated that post-1965 historical narratives emphasizing stability, national unity, ideological threats, and centralized authority contributed to shaping broader political orientations characterized by hierarchical state–society relations, limited political pluralism, and constrained political participation. These findings suggest that authoritarian political culture developed not solely through coercive institutions but also through long-term discursive processes embedded in historical interpretation and collective memory.

Furthermore, the findings revealed that institutional democratization following the collapse of the New Order regime in 1998 did not entirely eliminate political ideas established during earlier political periods. Historical narratives constructed under authoritarian governance continued to influence political understanding, perceptions of legitimacy, and public attitudes toward authority in contemporary Indonesia. This continuity demonstrated that political transformation extends beyond institutional reform and involves broader processes of historical reinterpretation and political-cultural change.

Theoretically, this study contributes to historiographical scholarship by positioning historical narratives as long-term political structures capable of shaping political culture beyond formal regime boundaries. The findings also contribute to discussions concerning authoritarian legacies and collective memory by emphasizing the enduring relationship between historical interpretation and political development.

Practically, this study highlights the importance of critical historiographical engagement in strengthening democratic development. Historical narratives influence not only how societies understand the past but also how political possibilities are imagined and negotiated within contemporary democratic contexts. Encouraging plural historical perspectives may therefore contribute to fostering more inclusive political participation and strengthening democratic resilience.

Future research should prioritize empirical studies examining the influence of historical narratives on the political attitudes and civic behaviors of Indonesian youth, particularly by investigating whether post-reform educational changes have meaningfully altered political orientations among generations educated after 1998.

Ultimately, the Indonesian experience demonstrates that historical narratives possess enduring political significance. Understanding authoritarian legacies therefore requires not only examining institutional transformation but also critically interrogating how historical meaning itself continues to shape political life across generations.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The authors express their sincere gratitude to the Faculty of Humanities, Universitas Indonesia, for providing academic support throughout this research. Appreciation is also extended to colleagues and reviewers whose constructive comments helped improve the quality of this manuscript. The authors declare that this research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

Yusron Ihza conceived the research idea, conducted data collection, performed the historiographical analysis, and prepared the manuscript. Linda Sunarti contributed to the conceptual framework, supervised the historical interpretation, and critically revised the manuscript. Didik Pradjoko contributed to the research design, validated the analysis, and reviewed the final version of the manuscript. All authors have read and approved the final manuscript and agree to be accountable for all aspects of the work.

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