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A Comparison of Prabowo Subianto's Political Rhetoric on Human Rights Issues in the Presidential Candidate Debates of the 2019 and 2024 General Elections

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ABSTRACT

This study compares the political rhetoric of Prabowo Subianto in the presidential candidate debates of the 2019 and 2024 elections concerning Human Rights (HAM) issues, using Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic theory. The findings reveal a significant shift from assertive and formal rhetoric in 2019 to a more relaxed and humorous style in 2024. This transformation was influenced by semiotic dimensions, including clothing choices, verbal and non-verbal expressions, and the individuals seated in the supporters' row, all of which reinforced the shift in Prabowo's rhetoric between the 2019 and 2024 presidential debates. This study affirms the importance of rhetorical analysis that not only focuses on words but also takes into account the surrounding semiotic context.

Keyword:

Prabowo Subianto, human rights, political communication, 2019 and 2024 presidential candidate debates, rhetoric.

INTRODUCTION

A debate is one component of the presidential election (*pilpres*) process in Indonesia, serving as an opportunity for candidates to present themselves to voters (Parandaru, 2024). Through debates, voters can directly evaluate the rhetorical skills of candidates as they articulate their visions and missions, and respond to issues and problems facing Indonesia. With effective rhetoric, a debate can become a means of persuading voters (Mubarak, 2024). Thus, both verbal and non-verbal rhetoric play a crucial role in politics, particularly in

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propaganda, campaigns, and candidate debates (Martha, 2010). In practice, debates address various themes and issues in Indonesia, one of which is Human Rights (HAM). This is inseparable from the many unresolved minor and major human rights violations, leaving many victims without justice (Pratama, 2019).

One political figure frequently associated with human rights issues in Indonesian public discourse is Prabowo Subianto. This association primarily refers to allegations of his involvement in the forced disappearance of activists on the eve of the 1998 Reform (*Reformasi*), when he served as Commander of the Army Strategic Reserve Command. Although the matter has never been adjudicated through an *ad hoc* human rights tribunal, the issue has continued to be a part of public and electoral political debate every time Prabowo runs for the presidency (Rufaidah et al., 2024; CNN Indonesia, 2024).

Notably, in the 2024 presidential debate, Prabowo demonstrated a different approach compared to 2019, particularly in terms of his political rhetoric. Whereas in the 2019 presidential election (*Pilpres*) Prabowo tended to appear with rhetoric that was assertive, serious, rigid, and emotional, in the 2024 presidential debate he tended to present himself as more relaxed and humorous, as evidenced by the dancing and symbolic gestures he frequently displayed (Mao, 2024). His narratives were often interspersed with jokes that lightened the atmosphere, combined with rhetoric emphasizing continuity of development and peace (Ramadhani et al., 2024). This contrasts with Prabowo's rhetoric in the 2019 presidential debate, which remained closely associated with his military character — assertive, somewhat aggressive, and relatively rigid.

This rhetorical shift had an impact on how Prabowo addressed the issue of human rights violations. The significant change can be observed directly in the debates, particularly on the topic of HAM, between 2019 and 2024. In the 2024 presidential debate, Prabowo employed his new political rhetoric when responding to Ganjar Pranowo's question about his responsibility regarding missing persons. Prabowo responded: "The fact is that the people who were once detained, who supposedly I abducted, are now on my side, defending me, ladies and gentlemen" (Kompas TV, 2023, 1:28:00). This stands in contrast to Prabowo's attitude and manner in the 2019 presidential debate, which was highly formal and rigid, with no unique responses that might have made the atmosphere more relaxed, unlike in 2024. In the 2019 debate, Prabowo conveyed a predominantly serious impression (TVOneNews, 2019).

The shift in Prabowo's rhetoric in the 2024 presidential debate cannot be analyzed through the lens of rhetoric alone; it was also influenced by various supporting factors, both direct and indirect. To understand this process of change, it is necessary to view it from a broader perspective — not merely focusing on words uttered on the debate stage, but also considering the symbols that "communicate" around the stage and that play a role in shaping Prabowo's rhetoric. Therefore, a semiotic perspective is required to understand how signs produce meaning or messages (Short, 2007).

Although several studies have examined the rhetoric of Prabowo Subianto in presidential candidate debates, most have focused on a single election period or emphasized verbal rhetoric alone. To date, there remains limited comparative research analyzing changes in Prabowo's rhetoric across election periods, particularly in response to human rights issues, which have consistently been attached to his political image. Yet the comparison between the 2019 and 2024 presidential elections is important for understanding how changing political

contexts and the candidate's positioning affect communication strategies and meaning-making in public debates. Based on these considerations, this study aims to analyze and compare the political rhetoric of Prabowo Subianto in the presidential candidate debates of the 2019 and 2024 elections regarding human rights issues, using Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic approach. Accordingly, the research question is formulated as follows: How does Prabowo Subianto's rhetoric on Human Rights issues in the presidential candidate debates of the 2019 and 2024 elections compare?

METHODS

This study employs a qualitative method to explore and understand social phenomena in depth, with a focus on meaning, interpretation, and social construction (Creswell, 2014). The objective is to understand and analyze a comparison of Prabowo Subianto's political rhetoric in the 2019 and 2024 presidential candidate debates concerning human rights issues. Research data were collected from both primary and secondary sources. Primary data consisted of documentation of the first debate in the 2019 and 2024 presidential elections on the theme of human rights. Secondary data consisted of a literature review obtained through books, journals, and related news articles. In analyzing the issues, this study employs the semiotic theory advanced by Charles Sanders Peirce. Fundamentally, this theory explains that a "sign" carries a particular value and meaning that functions in conveying a message through the mechanism of *semiosis*, which is a triadic process between sign, object, and interpretant that can uncover meaning from a sign (Short, 2007). In his theory, Peirce also identifies three types of signs: icon, index, and symbol (Short, 2007). To delimit the scope of the study, the analysis specifically focuses only on the first debate of the 2019 and 2024 presidential elections, particularly on the human rights issue.

Given that this study examines the interconnection between two main aspects — rhetoric and semiotics — while the analysis places greater emphasis on semiotics, rhetoric nonetheless remains the primary foundation for analyzing the semiotic factors present. Semiotic analysis will be carried out as Prabowo produces rhetoric during the debate on human rights issues, adjusted to the context and conditions of each debate. The researcher then analyzes the semiotic factors that emerge alongside that rhetoric. The analytical procedure follows several stages. First, the researcher identified debate segments that directly addressed human rights issues. Second, the researcher classified verbal and non-verbal signs that appeared into the categories of representamen, object, and interpretant. Third, these signs were further analyzed to determine their type — as icon, index, or symbol — in order to reveal the meaning that shapes the candidate's rhetoric.

The study's validity was maintained through source triangulation by comparing debate data with academic literature and mainstream media coverage. Additionally, interpretive consistency was preserved by systematically applying Peirce's semiotic analytical framework to both debate periods, thereby enabling a comparable and methodologically accountable analysis. The selection of the first debate as the focus of analysis was based on the consideration that the initial debate represents the moment of forming the candidate's primary impression before the public — where rhetorical and symbolic strategies are typically displayed in their most deliberate and representative form.

RESULT AND DISCUSSIONS

The issue of human rights violations is certainly not new for Prabowo; the matter has repeatedly surfaced on the eve of presidential elections since he first became a candidate. The prolonged nature of the case has led to fluctuations in intensity. The issue of Prabowo's human rights violations does not always arise in every presidential debate, even though this unresolved case should be a primary concern for the public. This is due to various backgrounds and circumstances that have contributed to this situation, which have ultimately driven changes in Prabowo's debate rhetoric, reinforced by semiotic dimensions that surrounded and shaped that rhetorical shift.

General Overview of the 2019 and 2024 Presidential Candidate Debates

In the 2019 presidential debate on the human rights issue, Prabowo extensively employed narratives criticizing the enforcement of human rights under the Jokowi administration. As seen in the following rhetoric:

Prabowo: "We wish to ask: you have been governing for more than four years, and what we find is a sense among the people that things are sometimes one-sided. For example, if a regional head or governor who supports candidate pair number one makes a declaration of support, that is fine, but a village head in East Java who declares his support for us is now being arrested. I think this is unfair treatment, and in my view a violation of human rights, because expressing an opinion is guaranteed by the Constitution, sir. Actually, anyone is entitled to express support for whomever they wish. I think this is something we ask you to consider — perhaps some of your subordinates have gone too far." (TVOneNews, 2019, 27:32–28:36).

With a loud and assertive tone of voice and a serious facial expression, Prabowo directed criticism at Jokowi with various examples drawn from the community — including the discriminatory treatment of a village head who had declared his support for Prabowo and was then arrested, whereas the reverse would not have happened (Maharani, 2019). Jokowi denied the accusations, stating that Indonesia is a law-governed state and that if similar situations arise, they should be reported. This narrative was delivered by Jokowi in a low tone of voice but with a serious facial expression, as seen in the following rhetoric:

Jokowi: "Do not make such accusations, Mr. Prabowo. Because we are a state under the rule of law — there are legal procedures, legal mechanisms that can be applied. If there is evidence, simply bring it to the law enforcement authorities. We should not be so hasty in making statements. For example, Mr. Prabowo's campaign spokesperson allegedly suffered abuse — his face badly bruised — then a joint press conference was held, and in the end, what happened? It turned out to be plastic surgery. This is a state under the rule of law. If there is evidence, please proceed through the legal mechanism, report with the evidence available. It is quite simple! Why must we make such accusations?" (TVOneNews, 2019, 28:45–29:47).

The debate unfolded in sessions two and three, which were question-and-answer sessions based on questions from panelists. The debate as a whole comprised six sessions. In the first session, each candidate pair (*paslon*) was given the opportunity to present their vision and mission in accordance with the debate theme. In sessions two and three, the

moderator delivered questions from the panelists, with each *paslon* receiving one question per theme discussed, followed by a mandatory response to the other *paslon*'s answer. In sessions four and five, the *paslon* took turns directly posing questions to and answering one another. Finally, in session six, each *paslon* delivered a closing statement as a summary and final message (BBC News Indonesia, 2019).

There were technical differences between the first debates of the 2019 and 2024 presidential elections. In the 2019 debate, the presidential and vice-presidential candidate pairs appeared together on the debate stage. By contrast, in the 2024 debate, only the presidential candidates appeared on stage without their running mates. A difference was also evident in how the human rights issue was addressed. In the 2019 presidential debate, there was no discussion of Prabowo's past human rights violations. The debates focused more on the future vision and mission for human rights enforcement, with Prabowo directing criticism at the human rights enforcement track record of the Jokowi administration, as seen in the exchange above. In contrast, in the 2024 presidential debate there was a moment when Prabowo received a direct question regarding the resolution of past gross human rights violations, pointing specifically to him as someone who had once been involved in a human rights case. The question was posed by Ganjar Pranowo, as follows:

Ganjar: "There are twelve cases of gross human rights violations that have been identified, ranging from the events of 1965, mysterious shootings, Talangsari, forced disappearances, and Wamena. And I would like to remind you that in 2009, the DPR issued four recommendations to the president at that time: first, the establishment of an *ad hoc* human rights tribunal; second, the locating of 13 victims of forced disappearances; third, the provision of compensation and rehabilitation; and fourth, the ratification of the International Convention Against Forced Disappearances as a preventive measure. My questions are twofold: if you were in that position, would you establish a human rights tribunal and act on the DPR's recommendations? And second — out there, many mothers are waiting. Can you help them find where the graves of the disappeared are, so that they may pay their respects?" (Kompas TV, 2023, 1:25:42–1:26:30).

Ganjar posed the questions with a serious facial expression and a firm yet low tone of voice, addressing the core of the issue directly. In response, Prabowo answered in a loud and assertive tone with a serious facial expression, reinforced by a narrative that he was not entirely at fault and that he considered the case "already resolved." This was further strengthened by the presence of human rights activists as supporters, clearly visible from the audience's vantage point watching the debate both on television and via YouTube's Kompas TV channel, as seen in the following rhetoric:

Prabowo: "Mr. Ganjar, you mentioned 2009 just now — so that was many years ago. And that matter was actually handled by your Vice President. So what more can you ask of me? I have answered this many times — there are digital records of me answering it every year. Whenever my poll numbers rise, I am asked about it again. Go ask the Chief of Police how many people went missing in Jakarta *this year!* There are bodies that were found just a few days ago, and so forth. Come on, Mas Ganjar. So, as I said — I firmly believe that I am someone who has strongly defended Human Rights. The fact is that the people who were once detained — the political prisoners who allegedly I abducted — are now on my side, defending

me, ladies and gentlemen. So, do not politicize the HAM issue, Mas Ganjar. That, I believe, is my answer." (Kompas TV, 2023, 1:26:45–1:28:27).

This debate exchange occurred in sessions four and five, when the presidential candidates had the opportunity to directly pose questions to one another. Unlike the 2019 debate, in the equivalent session no question was raised that touched on Prabowo's past human rights record. The debate was fundamentally divided into six sessions. In the first session, each presidential candidate was given the opportunity to present their vision, mission, and programs. In sessions two and three, the candidates were given the opportunity to answer questions from panelists through the moderator; in this session, candidates were also permitted to respond to statements made by other candidates. In sessions four and five, the candidates had the opportunity to directly pose questions to and answer one another. Finally, in session six, each presidential candidate delivered their closing statement (CNN Indonesia, 2023).

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Differences in the socio-political backdrop between the 2019 and 2024 presidential debates influenced the course of the debates, particularly regarding Prabowo's rhetoric. In the 2019 presidential election, Prabowo, who was in the opposition, tended to employ rhetoric grounded in criticism of human rights enforcement under the Jokowi government. However, in the 2024 presidential election, Prabowo appeared to occupy a position resembling an incumbent, as reflected in the narrative emphasis he conveyed — such as continuity, carrying forward existing programs, and praising the previous government's achievements (Utama, 2023). Furthermore, Prabowo chose Gibran, Jokowi's eldest son, as his running mate. Despite controversy, the Constitutional Court (*Mahkamah Konstitusi/MK*) permitted candidates under the age of 40 to run as presidential or vice-presidential candidates, provided they currently hold or have previously held a regional head position (BBC News Indonesia, 2023). This situation further reinforced the perception that Prabowo represented a continuation of Jokowi's government, while strengthening Anies and Ganjar's position as attacking opponents and rendering Prabowo more defensive in posture. In addition to the socio-political context and choice of running mate, semiotics also played an important role in shaping the differences in how Prabowo employed rhetoric throughout the debate. Accordingly, the debate on human rights is not always perceived in the same way, because there were changes in the delivery of messages, the political context, and the semiotic elements employed.

In responding to Ganjar's question about the resolution of past human rights violations, several semiotic messages reinforced Prabowo's rhetoric. The first message concerns the individuals seated in Prabowo's supporters' row. They did not merely occupy a position as supporters; rather, they served as a symbol of Prabowo's strength in constructing rhetoric to counter Ganjar's question. This was reinforced by Prabowo's reference to political prisoners who were once detained and are now on his side offering support (Kompas TV, 2023, 1:28:00). This narrative was delivered simultaneously as Prabowo stood facing the individuals in question — namely Budiman Sudjatmiko and Andi Arief. They did not directly communicate to validate Prabowo's argument, but their presence constituted a symbolic reply to Prabowo's response on the issue of human rights violations attributed to him.

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

Andi Arief himself appears on the list of activists abducted during the 1998 unrest. On March 27, 1998, upon the order of Major Bambang, Captain Fauzani was requested to apprehend Andi Arief, who was at his brother's home at the time; he was brought to headquarters and held in an underground cell (Adryamarthanino & Nailufar, 2021). The presence of Budiman Sudjatmiko and Andi Arief in Prabowo's supporters' row at the 2024 presidential debate can be interpreted as a symbolic strategy in responding to the issue of past human rights violations. Both figures are publicly known as activists with links to the political events of 1998 and the discourse on human rights violations (Adryamarthanino & Nailufar, 2021; Tempo.co., 2023). Within the framework of Peirce's semiotics, these figures function as symbolic signs whose meaning is constructed through social and historical understanding developed in the public sphere.

Prabowo's choice of attire in the debates also functions as a symbolic sign. In the 2019 presidential debate, the use of a black suit, red tie, and black *peci* (traditional cap) reinforced Prabowo's image as an assertive, formal, and authoritative military figure, in alignment with the rhetoric he delivered during that period (Ludvianto & Arifani, 2020). Conversely, in the 2024 presidential debate, a light-blue casual-style shirt can be interpreted as an effort to represent a more relaxed and down-to-earth image. For Prabowo, the color blue is understood as a symbol of calm and peace, and is associated with efforts to create a more psychologically soothing impression (CNN Indonesia, 2023). In semiotic terms, this attire becomes a symbolic sign whose meaning is formed through social and cultural convention, where casual shirts are frequently understood as a representation of closeness with the community (Toding et al., 2024). This difference indicates a shift in visual strategy that is consistent with the change in Prabowo's political positioning between the 2019 and 2024 elections.

Prabowo's rhetoric in the 2019 and 2024 presidential debates was also marked by differences in verbal and non-verbal expression. In 2019, his assertive and formal speaking style reinforced his position as an opposition figure critical of the Jokowi government, particularly on human rights issues that were perceived as not having been substantively addressed (Komnas HAM Republik Indonesia, 2019). Meanwhile, in the 2024 election, verbal expressions such as defensive statements and the use of a loud tone can be understood as a form of self-defense against issues once again raised by political opponents. According to the Executive Director of Aljabar Strategic, Arifki Chaniago, the use of certain rhetorical styles — such as the expression "come on Mas Ganjar" — functions as a rhetorical strategy to attract public attention through the element of a gimmick in the debate (CNBC Indonesia, 2023). From a semiotic perspective, these verbal and non-verbal expressions function as symbolic signs whose meaning is constructed through social convention. Nonetheless, those meanings cannot be assumed to be uniformly understood by the audience, given that semiotics is interpretive in nature and heavily dependent on the social context and political position of the viewer. The research findings indicate that the signs appearing in the 2019 and 2024 presidential debates — particularly on the human rights issue — were dominated by symbolic signs. This dominance is closely connected to the nature of symbols, whose meaning is constructed through social and cultural convention, making them relatively easy to employ for conveying political messages. This affirms that the rhetoric of political debates is not built merely

through verbal argumentation, but also through the management of visual symbols and accompanying non-verbal expressions.

CONCLUSION

From a comparison of both debate periods, it can be understood that the evolving socio-political conditions and the background of the candidate pairs exerted a strong influence on the course of the presidential debates, particularly regarding the raising of human rights violation issues involving Prabowo. As a result, discussion of Prabowo's human rights violations has frequently varied and has not always been brought up in every presidential debate period. This is due to the political and pragmatic considerations of each candidate, which have driven changes in Prabowo's debate rhetoric — changes that can be analyzed more deeply through the semiotic dimensions surrounding them.

The differences in Prabowo's rhetoric between the 2019 and 2024 presidential debates on the human rights issue were quite significant. In 2019, Prabowo presented himself in a more formal and assertive manner, mounting an offensive against Jokowi, who was the incumbent at the time. In 2024, by contrast, Prabowo appeared more relaxed and humorous, frequently exploiting visual symbols to reinforce his new public image. This change is inseparable from the differing socio-political conditions between the 2019 and 2024 elections, including Prabowo's position within Indonesia's political landscape. Theoretically, this study makes a contribution to the field of political communication by affirming that rhetorical analysis cannot be separated from the symbolic and semiotic context that surrounds it. By integrating rhetorical theory with Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotics, this study demonstrates that the meaning of political rhetoric is not only shaped by the structure of verbal argumentation, but also by visual signs, gestures, the configuration of the stage, and symbolic actors present in the political communication event. These findings expand the existing approach to political debate analysis — which has tended to focus on the linguistic dimension or persuasion alone — by offering a more contextual and multidimensional analytical framework. In practical terms, the findings of this study hold implications for the conduct of political debates and the communication strategies of candidates' campaigns. The findings show that the management of visual symbols, the choice of attire, the configuration of supporters, and the use of verbal and non-verbal expressions play a significant role in shaping public perception of sensitive issues such as human rights. Political debates, therefore, need not only to be understood as arenas for the exchange of ideas, but also as spaces of symbolic communication that influence voters' assessments. For candidates and their campaign teams, an understanding of this semiotic dimension can serve as an important strategy in building a political image and responding to controversial issues more effectively.

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