

## Displaying Pirate Flags in Indonesia's 80th Independence Celebrations: A Critical Discourse Analysis

Muntaha Muntaha

English Education, FAB, UIN RMS Surakarta, Indonesia  
muntaha@staff.uinsaid.ac.id

### Abstract

The public display of the pirate's "skull-and-crossbones" flag during Indonesia's 80th Independence Day celebrations represent a visually and politically provocative departure from the conventional use of the national red-and-white emblem. This symbolic substitution not only challenges state-sanctioned rituals of commemoration but also invites scrutiny of how citizens negotiate meanings of nationalism in a shifting socio-political landscape. This study employs Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to explore the layered social meanings, power relations, and identity negotiations embedded in this act. Data were collected from news of online media reports, social media posts, and public commentary circulating between 15 July and 18 August 2025, capturing the period leading up to the official celebrations. The analysis focuses on three key dimensions: (1) the discursive framing of the pirate flag in news and social media; (2) the recontextualization of global pirate iconography within Indonesian socio-political debates; and (3) the role of digital platforms in amplifying and transforming the symbolic act into a broader site of ideological contestation. Findings reveal a deeply polarized interpretive field. Supporters frame the gesture as a creative and non-violent mode of resistance, drawing on humor, satire, and visual disruption to challenge dominant power structures; detractors view it as offensive, unpatriotic, and potentially destabilizing to national unity.

**Keywords:** Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), pirate flag protest, Indonesian nationalism, political symbolism, social media discourse

### INTRODUCTION

National symbols, particularly flags, play a central role in shaping collective memory, legitimizing state authority, and constructing narratives of unity (Bankov, 2021). In Indonesia, the red-and-white flag (*Sang Saka Merah Putih*) is deeply embedded in the nation's political and cultural imagination. It symbolizes independence, sacrifice, and the spirit of national struggle, and its display during annual Independence Day celebrations is a state-sanctioned ritual that reaffirms loyalty to the Republic (Neundorf, et al. 2024). Public participation in flag-raising ceremonies reflects not only civic pride but also the consolidation of national identity through symbolic performance (Sadowski, 2021).

Against this backdrop, the appearance of pirate flags bearing the skull-and-crossbones during the 80th Independence Day celebrations in 2025 marked a striking disruption to normative patriotic practice. The pirate flag, globally associated with rebellion, lawlessness, and anti-establishment identity, represents a visual and ideological departure from the official emblem of national unity. Its public display generated widespread debate across Indonesia, amplified through both mainstream and social media platforms. While some regarded the act as humorous or creative satire, others interpreted

it as offensive, unpatriotic, or even treasonous. This divergence of interpretations reflects broader anxieties about governance, inequality, corruption, and the legitimacy of political elites in contemporary Indonesia.

The phenomenon also illustrates how digital communication technologies reshape the visibility and circulation of symbolic acts. Images of pirate flags quickly went viral, sparking meme cultures, hashtag campaigns, and polarized discussions online. These discursive exchanges reveal not only the contested nature of national identity but also the growing role of digital publics in redefining symbolic politics in Southeast Asia.

This study situates the pirate flag display within the broader field of discourse studies, employing Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to investigate how meaning, power, and identity are negotiated through competing interpretations (Fairclough, 2023). By focusing on the ways in which symbols are recontextualized in response to political climates, this research sheds light on how alternative symbolic expressions disrupt dominant narratives of nationalism, offering insights into mediated dissent and the fluidity of Indonesian national identity in the digital age.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### ***National Symbols and the Politics of Commemoration***

National symbols such as flags, anthems, and monuments serve as powerful instruments for reinforcing collective identity and legitimizing political authority. Billig's (1995) notion of "banal nationalism" emphasizes how everyday symbolic practices, including the display of national flags, reproduce national identity in subtle yet pervasive ways (Deakin & Thurnell-Read, 2025). In Indonesia, the red-and-white flag is not merely a marker of statehood but also a symbol of historical struggle and collective sacrifice, particularly during Independence Day commemorations. Ritualized flag-raising ceremonies during national holidays are intended to foster unity, patriotism, and loyalty to the Republic. Yet, scholars have noted that the meaning of national symbols is never fixed; they remain open to reinterpretation, contestation, and even subversion (Hintz & Quatrini, 2021).

### ***Pirate Iconography and Global Symbolism***

The pirate flag, commonly represented by the skull-and-crossbones or the "Jolly Roger," has long been associated with rebellion, danger, and lawlessness. Beyond its maritime origins, scholars argue that pirate iconography has been reappropriated in popular culture and protest movements as a symbol of anti-establishment sentiment (Piercy, 2013). In contemporary global contexts, the pirate flag is often invoked ironically to critique authority, expose hypocrisy, or express cultural disillusionment. Its use in protests and satire reflects what Gradinaru (2018) describe as the floating signifier—a symbol that acquires meaning through political struggle. Within Indonesia, the pirate flag's sudden appearance in Independence Day celebrations represents not only a visual disruption of patriotic ritual but also a localized adaptation of global protest imagery.

### ***Critical Discourse Analysis and Symbolic Politics***

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) provides a theoretical and methodological lens for examining how symbols and language construct, maintain, and challenge power relations (Fairclough, 2023; van Dijk, 2015). CDA highlights how discursive practices both reproduce hegemonic ideologies and open spaces for resistance. Recent studies have

extended CDA to visual and multimodal discourse, emphasizing how images and symbols carry ideological weight (Ademilokun, & Olateju, 2016). Research on flags, monuments, and national rituals has shown how these semiotic resources are used to naturalize state authority while simultaneously becoming sites of contestation (Wodak et al., 2009). This approach is particularly useful for analyzing the pirate flag phenomenon, as it allows an exploration of how meanings are negotiated, resisted, and recontextualized within specific socio-political climates.

### ***Social Media, Mediated Dissent, and National Identity in Indonesia***

The role of digital platforms in shaping public discourse around nationalism and protest is increasingly significant in Southeast Asia. Studies on mediated dissent highlight how online platforms amplify symbolic disruptions and enable alternative narratives to circulate beyond state control (Lim, 2023; Sinpeng, 2020). In Indonesia, social media has become a critical arena for negotiating political legitimacy, exposing corruption, and mobilizing symbolic resistance (Molaei, 2015). Viral imagery—such as memes and hashtag campaigns—has the capacity to transform isolated acts into national conversations, producing new forms of political engagement (Idrus, et al., 2024). The polarized responses to the pirate flag’s display during Independence Day thus illustrate the entanglement of symbolic politics with Indonesia’s digital public sphere.

### ***Research Gap***

While previous studies have examined national symbols, pirate iconography, and mediated dissent in separate contexts, little scholarship has explored how global protest symbols are recontextualized within Southeast Asian independence rituals. Moreover, few studies have employed CDA to analyze how competing discourses around alternative symbols reveal tensions in contemporary national identity. This study addresses this gap by investigating the pirate flag phenomenon during Indonesia’s 80th Independence Day celebrations, contributing to scholarship on symbolic politics, mediated dissent, and the dynamics of nationalism in digital democracies.

## **RESEARCH METHOD**

This study adopts a qualitative research design informed by the principles of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). CDA is particularly suited for examining how symbols, texts, and discourses reproduce or challenge relations of power and ideology (Fairclough, 2023; van Dijk, 2015). Since the raising of pirate flags during Indonesia’s 80th Independence Day celebrations constitute a symbolic disruption of official patriotic ritual, CDA provides a framework to interrogate how this phenomenon was framed, interpreted, and contested across different media platforms.

Data were collected from 15 July to 18 August 2025, covering the period immediately before and during the Independence Day celebrations. The corpus consists of three main sources: 1) Online News Reports – Articles from national and regional Indonesian news outlets that reported on the pirate flag phenomenon. 2) Social Media Posts – Viral images, memes, hashtags, and user-generated content shared on platforms such as Twitter (X), Instagram, and Facebook. Selection focused on posts with high engagement (likes, shares, comments) with hashtags (#JollyRoger17an, #OnePiecelndonesia, #HUT80Indonesia, #KemerdekaanRakyat #DirgahayuIndonesiaMerdeka, #SuaraRakyat). 3) Public Commentary – Readers’

comments in online news portals, replies to viral social media posts, and opinion pieces reflecting diverse public responses. The dataset was purposively sampled to capture discourses from both mainstream media and grassroots digital publics. A total of 40 news articles, 120 social media posts, and approximately 500 user comments formed the analytical corpus.

The analysis followed Fairclough's (2023) three-dimensional CDA framework, consisting of: 1) Textual Analysis – Examining linguistic and visual features of texts (e.g., headlines, captions, memes, imagery of the pirate flag). 2) Discursive Practice – Investigating how texts were produced, circulated, and consumed, particularly how mainstream and digital media framed the pirate flag incident. 3) Social Practice – Situating discourses within broader socio-political contexts, including debates on corruption, inequality, legitimacy of political elites, and the role of digital publics in Indonesia. Attention was given to discursive strategies such as humor, satire, moral condemnation, patriotic appeals, and accusations of disloyalty. Recontextualization of pirate symbolism from global protest culture into Indonesian independence rituals was treated as a central analytical theme.

Data Analysis Procedures: 1) Step 1: Data Familiarization – Reading, categorizing, and coding texts for recurring themes and narrative frames. 2) Step 2: Coding – Using open coding to identify discursive frames (e.g., pirate flag as protest, as disrespect, as satire). 3) Step 3: Comparative Analysis – Contrasting media representations with user-generated discourses to highlight convergences and divergences. 4) Step 4: Interpretation – Linking findings to broader symbolic politics and mediated dissent in Indonesia.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

### *Competing Discursive Frames of the Pirate Flag*

The analysis reveals two dominant and competing frames in both mainstream and social media. First is protest frame. Supporters interpreted the pirate flag as a non-violent symbolic act of dissent. Discourses in this frame used humor, irony, and satire to criticize corruption, socio-economic inequality, and the perceived moral bankruptcy of political elites. For instance, one viral meme depicted the pirate flag alongside the phrase "*at least pirates share their loot*", a sarcastic comparison to Indonesia's political elite. Second is disloyalty frame. Opponents condemned the flag as a violation of patriotic decorum and an affront to the sacrifices of Indonesia's founding heroes. News articles frequently used terms such as "insult," "treason," and "lack of respect," framing the act as dangerous to national unity. Public comments often invoked moral obligations to honor the *Merah Putih* as the singular legitimate emblem of independence.

These competing discourses illustrate the contested nature of national symbols. As Billig's (1995) concept of *banal nationalism* suggests, the everyday use of national symbols is often unquestioned; however, when disrupted, it triggers strong emotional and political reactions. The pirate flag operates as a *floating signifier* (Deakin & Thurnell-Read, 2025), acquiring divergent meanings depending on ideological positioning—either as a tool of critique or as a marker of disloyalty.

### *Recontextualization of Pirate Iconography in Indonesian Politics*

The pirate flag, historically associated with rebellion and lawlessness, was recontextualized in Indonesian discourse to articulate disillusionment with governance. Supporters equated pirates' anti-establishment image with resistance against corrupt systems, while detractors emphasized its association with illegitimacy and chaos. For example, several online commentaries connected the flag to economic frustrations, framing the act as a metaphor for how citizens feel "robbed" by elites. In contrast, state-aligned media emphasized that the pirate symbol was foreign, thereby delegitimizing its use in Indonesian patriotic rituals. This recontextualization underscores how global protest symbols can be localized within national debates. It resonates with Smith (2017) argument that national symbols are dynamic and open to reinterpretation. In Indonesia's case, the pirate flag becomes a visual shorthand for political critique, reflecting growing dissatisfaction with inequality and corruption. At the same time, the backlash reveals attempts by dominant discourses to preserve the sanctity of official nationalism and prevent symbolic fragmentation.



*Figure 1: Raising Strawhat pirate flag in front of presidential palace*

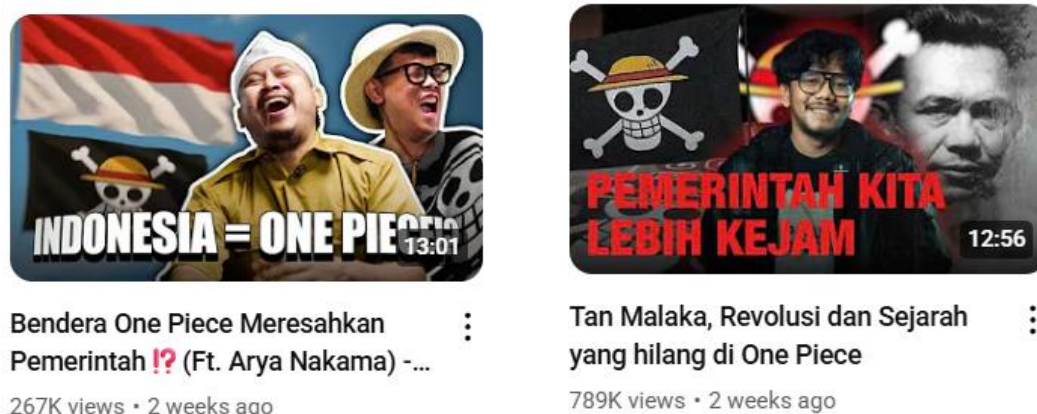
For example: A young man raises the "Strawhat pirate" flag (from *One Piece*) in front of Indonesia's Presidential Palace as seen in figure 1. The quote reads: "*Merdeka bukan hanya bebas dari penjajah, tapi bebas dari penindasan yang dibungkus peraturan.*" ("Independence is not only freedom from colonizers, but freedom from oppression disguised as regulations."). The location (Istana Merdeka) positions the act as a direct challenge to state authority and official nationalism. The pirate flag recontextualizes global popular culture as a vehicle for local dissent. Pirates symbolize resistance to authority and freedom outside state law. The text explicitly critiques state power, reframing "oppression" as hidden in bureaucratic rules rather than foreign domination. Positions nationalism as incomplete if it does not liberate citizens from internal injustice, not only external colonialism.

#### *Social Media as Amplifier of Symbolic Contestation*

Social media played a crucial role in amplifying and polarizing the discourse. Viral posts featuring pirate flags quickly circulated on Twitter (X), Instagram, and Facebook,



sparkling waves of meme-making and hashtag activism. Supportive users repurposed the pirate flag into humorous formats. The interactive nature of these platforms facilitated rapid reframing: the same image of a pirate flag could be celebrated as satire in one context and condemned as treason in another. Comment threads demonstrated intense polarization, often reflecting broader ideological divides in Indonesian society. This finding reflects Lim's (2023) notion of "many clicks but little sticks," where symbolic disruptions online spark short-term attention but also reveal long-standing fractures in the political sphere. The pirate flag became a catalyst for discursive struggle, with social media functioning as both a democratizing space for dissent and a battleground for moral-patriotic condemnation.



*Figure 2: YouTube video posts by some famous youtubers*

For example, on image 1 (figure 2): "Bendera One Piece Meresahkan Pemerintah !? (Ft. Arya Nakama)". It shows two men are laughing, placed against the Indonesian red-and-white flag and the One-Piece pirate flag. Text overlay: "INDONESIA = ONE PIECE". The phrase "meresahkan pemerintah" ("disturbing the government") frames the pirate flag controversy as a threat to state authority. The equation Indonesia = One Piece positions the nation as a site of adventure, resistance, and collective solidarity—values associated with the manga. The image of laughing figures mocks the seriousness of state reactions, undermining official discourses that criminalize the flag's display. This thumbnail suggests that government power is fragile if it can be unsettled by a fictional pirate flag. It positions citizens as empowered agents of satire. By blending Indonesian nationalism (red-and-white) with global fandom culture (One Piece), it reimagines belonging in hybrid cultural terms.

Another example is on image 2 (figure 2). It shows a speaker is positioned in front of the *One-Piece* pirate flag, with Tan Malaka (Indonesian revolutionary figure) in the background. Text overlay: "PEMERINTAH KITA LEBIH KEJAM" ("Our government is crueller"). The comparison "lebih kejam" (crueller) makes a sharp critique of the state, positioning it as worse than historical oppression or fictional authoritarianism in *One Piece*. Invoking Tan Malaka links contemporary dissent with Indonesia's revolutionary past, suggesting continuity in the struggle against oppressive power. *One Piece* becomes a framework for re-narrating national history and critiquing state governance. The video positions citizens as heirs to revolutionary ideals while casting the state as betraying those

ideals. Suggests official history is incomplete or suppressed (“sejarah yang hilang”), and popular culture can recover forgotten revolutionary discourses.

*Symbolic Politics and the Fluidity of National Identity*

Across discourses, the pirate flag highlighted tensions in how Indonesians conceptualize national identity. For some, national belonging is flexible, allowing for satire and critique within patriotic expression. For others, identity is rigidly tied to state symbols, with the red-and-white flag considered non-negotiable. This contestation demonstrates the fluid and negotiates nature of nationalism in Indonesia’s digital era. As Udenze (2022) argue, national identity is not fixed but constantly reconstructed through discourse. The pirate flag episode shows how ordinary citizens use symbolic disruptions to question authority and renegotiate the meanings of patriotism. At the same time, dominant institutions and actors attempt to reassert hegemonic narratives, illustrating the constant tension between symbolic subversion and official nationalism.



Figure 3: Raising pirate flag under red-and-white flag

For example: The pirate flag and red-and-white flag are placed together, with the text: “*One Piece & Indonesia: Fiksi di Manga, Nyata di Nusantara.*” (“Fiction in manga, reality in the archipelago”) as can be seen in figure 3. This action suggests that ideas of rebellion, freedom, and solidarity from manga (*One Piece*) resonate strongly with Indonesian socio-political conditions. This Japanese fictional symbol becomes a real political signifier in Indonesia. This demonstrates globalization of discourse and how popular culture is re-appropriated locally. It also emphasizes that alternative imaginaries of freedom (pirates as heroes) are more inspiring than official state narratives of independence. In this context, citizens negotiate belonging not only through national history but through transnational pop culture identities.

The findings show that the pirate flag display became a site of symbolic politics where competing discourses about loyalty, dissent, and belonging converged. The CDA revealed not only the polarized interpretations of the act but also how global symbols are

reappropriated in local struggles. Social media amplified these discourses, turning a localized act of symbolic disruption into a nationwide debate. This contributes to broader understandings of how mediated dissent and symbolic contestation shape the ongoing negotiation of national identity in contemporary Indonesia.

## CONCLUSION

The display of pirate flags during Indonesia's 80th Independence Day celebrations constituted a striking symbolic disruption of established patriotic rituals. Through Critical Discourse Analysis, this study has shown how the act generated competing discourses: one framing the pirate flag as a legitimate expression of dissent, satire, and creative critique, and another condemning it as a violation of loyalty and national unity. The analysis also revealed the recontextualization of pirate iconography within Indonesian political debates, where global protest symbolism was localized to articulate frustrations over corruption, inequality, and the perceived erosion of national ideals. Social media played a central role in amplifying these discourses, enabling rapid circulation, meme-making, and polarization.

Taken together, the findings highlight the fluidity of national identity in contemporary Indonesia. Far from being a fixed or universally accepted construct, nationalism emerges as a contested and negotiated discourse, shaped by symbolic politics, mediated dissent, and the everyday struggles of citizens to make sense of their political environment. The pirate flag incident underscores how alternative symbols can destabilize hegemonic narratives and open up spaces for reimagining belonging and legitimacy in a rapidly changing socio-political climate.

## REFERENCES

- Ademilokun, M. and Olateju, M. (2016). A Multimodal Discourse Analysis of Some Visual Images in the Political Rally Discourse of 2011 Electioneering Campaigns in Southwestern Nigeria. *International Journal of Society, Culture & Language*, 4(1 (Special Issue on African Cultures and Languages)), 1-19.
- Bankov, K. (2021). Flags, Identity, Memory: From Nationalisms to the Post-truth Uses of Collective Symbols. In *Flags, Color, and the Legal Narrative: Public Memory, Identity, and Critique* (pp. 173-189). Cham: Springer International Publishing.
- Deakin, R., & Thurnell-Read, T. (2025). The last of England: Banal nationalism and communities of loss in British pub closure media narratives. *The British Journal of Sociology*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-4446.13220>
- Fairclough, N. (2023). Critical discourse analysis. In *The Routledge handbook of discourse analysis* (pp. 11-22). Routledge.
- Gradinaru, C. (2018). GIFs as floating signifiers. *Σημειωτική-Sign Systems Studies*, 46(2-3), 294-318.



- Hintz, L., & Quatrini, A. L. (2021). Subversive Celebrations: Holidays as Sites of Minority Identity Contestation in Repressive Regimes. *Nationalities Papers*, 49(2), 289–307. <https://doi.org/10.1017/nps.2020.43>
- Lim, M. (2023). From activist media to algorithmic politics: The Internet, social media, and civil society in Southeast Asia. In *Routledge handbook of civil and uncivil society in Southeast Asia* (pp. 25-44). Routledge.
- Molaei, H. (2015). Discursive opportunity structure and the contribution of social media to the success of social movements in Indonesia. *Information, Communication & Society*, 18(1), 94-108. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2014.934388>
- Neundorf, A., Nazrullaeva, E., Northmore-Ball, K., Tertychnaya, K., & Kim, W. (2024). Varieties of Indoctrination: The Politicization of Education and the Media around the World. *Perspectives on Politics*, 22(3), 771–798. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592723002967>
- Piercy, J. (2013). *Symbols: A universal language*. Michael O'Mara Books.
- Sadowski, M. M. (2021). Fluttering the past in the present. The role of flags in the contemporary society: Law, politics, identity and memory. In *Flags, Color, and the Legal Narrative: Public Memory, Identity, and Critique* (pp. 85-101). Cham: Springer International Publishing.
- Sinpeng, A. (2020). Digital media, political authoritarianism, and Internet controls in Southeast Asia. *Media, Culture & Society*, 42(1), 25-39. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443719884052>
- Smith, A. D. (2017). Interpretations of national identity. In *Modern Roots* (pp. 21-42). Routledge.
- Udenze, S. (2022). Constructing identity and communality on a social media platform: an exploration of# igbotwitter tweets. *Journal Communication Spectrum: Capturing New Perspectives in Communication*, 12(1), 11-28. <https://doi.org/10.36782/jcs.v11i2.2120>
- Van Dijk, T. A. (2015). Critical discourse analysis. *The handbook of discourse analysis*, 466-485.