On the Question of Authoritarian Authority and the Spectre of Authoritarianism in Mochtar Lubis' *Harimau! Harimau!*

Stanislaus Bayu Kusuma Wardhana & Valentinus Hari Gunawan
stbayuk@gmail.com
Independent Researcher & English Language Studies
Universitas Sanata Dharma, Yogyakarta

Abstract

For quite some time, 'authority' has been mistakenly understood as a form of power or violence. Hannah Arendt explains authority as a form of legitimacy that demands obedience through recognition, not coercion. Situations of uncertainty and fear often allow authority to transform into authoritarian domination. The Sumatran jungle in Lubis' *Harimau! Harimau!* is more than a physical arena; it represents a political landscape where fear, guilt, and survival converge in the construction of authority. This study examines how authoritarian authority is constructed, legitimized, and collapsed in the novel and explores how Lubis critiques the persistence of authoritarian political culture in Indonesia. Through a close reading method, the paper draws on Hannah Arendt's conception of authority. This paper argues that Wak Katok's authority is not natural and absolute but emerges through the discourse of the empty signifier that gathers fear, hope, and moral certainty into a single locus of leadership. *Harimau! Harimau!* indicates that authority is preserved by shared belief, collective fear, and symbolic representation. It provides a critique and reflection on obedience that is still practiced under regimes that demand it, and the remnants we can still feel today.

Keywords: authority; authoritarian domination; populism; harimau! harimau!

Introduction

The Indonesian government is under intense public scrutiny for its 'yes-man' culture. Such a statement appears detached from economic realities, overlooking how the fundamental determinants of everyday material conditions are dictated by currency fluctuations. As the notion of the rise of dollars (16/5): '*mau dolar berapa ribu kek, kan kalian di desa-desa nggak pakai dolar'* (no matter how high the dollar gets, people living in the villages do not use dollars anyway) (Pasaribu, 2026). The statement gained public interest, as it seemed to belittle the larger economic implications of currency depreciation by mentioning rural communities and the global economy. But that statement appears to be supported by political figures and intellectual circles

around Mr. President. This dynamic suggests that executive leadership can produce a charismatic spell that guards the leader's statements against public skepticism. This phenomenon leads to the critical question: what gives a leader's statement such authority that it is accepted at face value without critical judgment?

To get a grip on the question mentioned above, we might ask ourselves: what is authority? As we commonly think of it, it is often related to the power of commanding obedience. But Hannah Arendt separated authority from forms of violence. She argues that authority does not operate through violence or coercion (Arendt, 1961; Comparán, 2014, p. 65). Authority is gained through the recognition of legitimacy by the people who obey (Arendt, 1961, p. 93). If, she added, obedience ceases to be based on recognition of legitimate authority on the part of those who obey, or descends into personal loyalty, fear, and unquestioned submission to a leader, authority may slip into authoritarian domination. Then another question arises: how?

The rise of the tension between authority and authoritarianism has become increasingly relevant in today's political discourse, especially with the rise of *populist* leadership. This brings us to the idea of 'populism'. Gino Germani observed that populism is often "fused with some sort of authoritarianism, often under charismatic leadership" (Germani, 1978, p. 88). Populism creates a direct and unmediated relationship between the leader and the 'people'. The executive is presented as the representative of the people's will. In *Populism: What's in a Name?*, Laclau argues that is a 'political logic' not a specific ideology (Laclau, 2005). Laclau's understanding of populism is a discursive mechanism "constituting the very unity of the group," not as an ideology or a mobilization tactic for a pre-existing group (Laclau, 2018, pp. 72-73). This relationship may provide political legitimacy; it may also generate an environment in which criticism is perceived as opposition to the people themselves that blurs the line between democratic representation and autocratic personalization of power.

The deference to the leader as described above implies that the statements of the leader are often accepted without critical examination, which gives the impression that authority is 'unquestionable'. This tendency reflects a larger political culture where obedience and loyalty to a strong leadership are still highly valued. According to a recent study, Indonesia's democratic regression has been accompanied by the persistence of authoritarian nostalgia, especially a positive memory of the New Order regime that emphasizes economic prosperity and political stability while at the same time downplaying authoritarian practices (Kimura, Istania, Afrimadona, Imawan, & Ramadhan, 2024). This form of nostalgia correlates with greater support for military leaders and less support for democratic norms, indicating that the allure of strong leadership continues to shape political attitudes in contemporary Indonesia.

These contemporary anxieties are not unprecedented. They reflect long-standing political spheres diagnosed in Indonesian literature. Mochtar Lubis' *Harimau! Harimau!* (1975), a novel about a group of dammar collectors (*pendamar*) imprisoned in the Sumatran jungle, led by Wak Katok. Tigers hunt them, making survival a struggle. Fear and uncertainty reveal social tensions, hidden truths, and inner conflicts as they flee from the tiger. As the group faces despair, uncertainty, and internal conflict, leadership, obedience, legitimacy, and collective submission

become crucial.

Besides its narrative on survival, *Harimau! Harimau!* is also considered as one of Mochtar Lubis' most important works alongside several other works such as *Jalan Tak Ada Ujung* (1952) and *Senja di Jakarta* (1963). This novel is more than an adventure narrative. It is a depiction of human behavior, leadership, and social relations in crisis. Its relevance remains because it engages with questions of power, obedience, and collective action, themes that continue to resonate and have impact in contemporary social and political contexts. For this reason, this novel is still an important work in Indonesian literature and a valuable text to study the dynamics of power and its implications.

This paper attempts to examine two main questions through Lubis' *Harimau! Harimau!*, which are: 1) How is authoritarian authority constructed, legitimized, and collapsed in the novel? 2) How does the novel reveal the persistence of authoritarian tendencies in the Indonesian political context?

Previous studies have examined Mochtar Lubis' *Harimau! Harimau!* across diverse comparative, discursive, psychological, and sociological lenses. Hidayatullah (2023) analyzes masculine anxiety and hostile terrains with J.H. Patterson's *The Man-Eaters of Tsavo* in postcolonial and comparative persepectives and concludes that Lubis' novel, though post-independence origin, reproduces standard Western colonial narrative structures and heroic archetypes (Hidayatullah, 2023). Critical Discourse Studies using the Teun A. van Dijk study the power relations inside the novel, and the personal conflicts amongst the novel's characters to demonstrate the story as a symbolic criticism of repressive political structures (Rohmah & Hidayat, 2023). The external political critique is reinforced by literary psychology approaches that highlight the internal moral problems of the protagonists to claim that the tiger functions as psychological catalyst that reveals hidden sins, trauma, and human weakness (Salma & Hamdani, 2024). Finally, linking to the psychological spheres to the regional realities, Wijaya (2018) adopts a sociology of literature approach to who how the novel mirrors rural Sumatran society (Wijaya, 2018). However, fewer studies examine the novel specifically through the theoretical tension between authority and authoritarianism. It leaves a critical gap regarding how legitimate leadership degenerates into oppressive domination within the text's isolated environment.

Methodology

The research utilizes a qualitative methodology, with close reading as the primary technique for literary analysis. Close reading is utilized to analyze the construction, legitimization, and collapse of authority in Mochtar Lubis' *Harimau! Harimau!* (1975). The book that is used for this paper was published by Yayasan Obor Indonesia in 1992. The examination is based on Hannah Arendt's ideas on authority, taken from *Between Past and Future* (1961), which informs the understanding of the novel's depiction of legitimacy, obedience, and disintegration of authority. Ernesto Laclau's concept of populism and the empty signifier are also utilized as a complement to analyze the discursive formation of authority through symbolic figures that unify

collective identities and maintain social unity despite inherent contradictions.

The research is conducted in three phases: first, the research conducts a close textual analysis of the novel as the main source to identify narrative scenes, character interactions, and symbolic elements related to authority. Second, these textual findings are interpreted through Arendt's concept of authority, focusing on how it is constructed, legitimized, and collapsed. Third, Laclau's theory is utilized to analyze the role of symbolic representations in shaping collective identity and legitimizing power, thus uncovering the processes that influence characters' reaction to crisis. It additionally illustrates how the novel provides a critical examination of the enduring nature of authoritarian tendencies within the broader social and political contexts of Indonesia.

Results and Discussion

1. The Construction, Legitimation, and Collapse of Authoritarian Authority

This subchapter analyzes the evolution of Wak Katok's leadership, starting with the establishment of his authority, its transformation into authoritarian domination, and its collapse. Through Arendt's concept of authority, this section argues that authority does not emerge through coercion but is constructed through recognition. However, when such legitimacy is challenged, Wak Katok may rely on fear, manipulation, and control, which shows a fragile foundation of authoritarian power.

a. The Sacred Mask of Authority: The Myth-making of Wak Katok's Legitimacy

The narrative opens with Wak Katok asserting his legitimacy as a leader through a constellation of symbolic traits that produce trust and loyalty among the *pendamar*. His status as a 'religious figure', healer/black magic practitioner (*dukun*), and expert hunter gives him an image of moral and social superiority. In the beginning, Wak Katok's leadership is maintained through the acknowledgement from those who accept him as worthy of obedience.

Hannah Arendt, in *Between Past and Future* (1961) stated that authority is not how individuals become recognized as authoritative figures; authority depends not on coercion or violence but on recognition (Arendt, 1961, p. 93). Any power that needs coercion, or even persuasion, has already failed. Arendt illuminates authority in its purest form, but does not answer how one gains such a position. To understand this process of accumulation, we may consider Ernesto Laclau, who argues that political and social identities are never inherent; they are shaped through discourse. Some symbols become what he terms 'empty signifiers' (Laclau, 2018, p. 71). Empty signifiers are capable of representing multiple social demands of society, at times even contradictory. Here the empty signifiers are operating as critical nodal points around which collective identities organize.

In *Harimau! Harimau!*, Wak Katok does not possess authority simply because he is older or physically stronger than the others. His authority arises from the process by which he comes to signify many different things simultaneously: experience, religious morality, leadership, and protection. These meanings are not limited to the real features of Wak Katok. In this case, Wak

Katok is more than a person; he is a symbolic center. If they do not doubt his words, there is no need for *persuasion* or *coercion*. Wak Katok's authority automatically works because they have internalized the legitimization.

> *Mereka melihat Wak Katok merupakan salah seorang yang dituakan di kampung, yang dianggap seorang pemimpin yang disegani orang banyak. Mereka tak pernah meragukan kebenaran kata-kata dan perbuatannya.* (Lubis, 1992, p. 4)

Referring to Arendt, authority exists when people obey without critical judgment. This is because they see the authority figure as legitimate. In this view, authority relies on legitimacy, tradition, common belief, and voluntary recognition. This dynamic is clearly reflected in the dutiful behavior of the *pendamar*.

> *Wak Katok dihormati, disegani, dan malahan agak ditakuti, karena termashur ahli pencak, dan mahir sebagai dukun."* (Lubis, 1992, p. 5)

Ditakuti (feared) is a sacred, mystical awe at his empty signifier status as a man who can command ghosts and jinn. In the beginning (or most of the novel), Wak Katok rarely threatens anyone; *pendamar* obeys him. His words and judgments end arguments. Arendt defines authority as this. Wak Katok's legitimacy comes from these traditional institutions (*dukun, guru pencak silat,* and *pemburu*). This shows that Wak Katok legitimizes these existing cultural signs and incorporates them into his image.

b. Consolidating Hegemony Through Crisis

As uncertainty and fear intensify within the group, the relationship in the group shifts. Wak Katok increasingly depends on manipulation, coercion, and the silencing of questions. In this transformation, the novel shows the point at which authority loses its foundation in recognition and begins to operate through domination. The crises and the manufacture of threats help authoritarian figures to strengthen their power.

Against this existential threat, why do people identify with one character and not the other? Why do the group willingly give their agency to Wak Katok? Laclau argues that Political communities form symbolic centers. Empty signifiers are signs deliberately left unfilled regarding their meanings: nation, freedom, order, justice, and security. Because of this vagueness, people can project different expectations onto them. To consolidate power and legitimize legal shortcuts, populist actors deploy emptied terms as mentioned to construct a unified chain of equivalence (Laclau, 2000, p. 42).

In the novel, Wak Katok works like this because empty signifiers are vague; the *pendamar* can load different types of expectations. Here, he is no longer only a *pendamar*; he represents what the others (Buyung, Sanip, Sutan, Talib, Pak haji, and Pak Balam) project onto him. From this, we can say that they are not only following the flesh-and-blood (physical) man; they are following what Wak Katok's sacred mask symbolizes.

> *Sejak kecilnya Buyung telah mendengar cerita-cerita tentang kejagoan dan kebesaran Wak Katok. Karena itu dia sungguh merasa beruntung dapat ikut mendamar dalam rombongan Wak Katok, dan malahan diterima pula menjadi murid pencak dan ilmu sihirnya.* (Lubis, 1992, p. 9)

However, Laclau also argues that collective identities emerge through 'antagonism' when the inside collides with the outside. They need opposition to establish their limits. Communities require a 'constitutive outside' against which they may define their unity. Without the tiger, *pendamar* would be fragmented. The tiger makes a common antagonist. This common enemy allows Wak Katok to unify the group. The tiger is the constitutive outside: a threat that produces unity; then unity needs leadership, and leadership reinforces authority. The tiger establishes a radical binary: the human collective--*pendamar* (inside) versus the tiger (outside). This is why Wak Katok appears as a 'natural' leader.

> *"Awaskah, harimau itu dikirim oleh Tuhan untuk menghukum kita yang berdosa – awaslah harimau – dikirim Allah – awaslah harimau – akuilah dosa-dosa kalian – akuilah dosa-dosa kalian."* (Lubis, 1992, p. 102)

The constitutive outside paradoxically functions to unify the group. Their very survival is threatened by the common enemy, and this creates a strong demand for protection. This demand establishes what Laclau calls a *chain of equivalence* among the men with a central authority figure. Wak Katok exploits this structural weakness to consolidate his dominance and to suppress any democratic redistribution of respect within the group:

> *Wak Katok pun merasa senang dengan putusannya. Kini pimpinan direbutnya lebih tegas di tangannya. …. Akan tetapi kini, Wak Katok dapat melihat pada muka air mereka, juga dalam cahaya mata Pak Haji, bahwa mereka semua berterima kasih padanya atas ucapannya, dan sejak saat itu, mereka akan mengikuti pimpinannya tanpa bertanya-tanya.* (Lubis, 1992, p. 111)

> *Yang lainpun menerima kenyataan bahwa Wak Katok tak usah ikut mengusung, karena kini dialah yang menjadi pemimpin rombongan. Pemimpin usaha mereka menyelamatkan Pak Balam dan diri mereka semuanya. Karena itu dialah yang memegang senjata yang paling ampuh untuk menghadapi harimau. di tangan Wak Katoklah yang memegang kunci keselamatan hidup mereka. Karena itu tak terlintas sedikit juga dalam kepala mereka untuk membantah suruhan Wak Katok.* (Lubis, 1992, p. 117)

The *pendamar*, blinded by terror of the tiger, obey without questioning. The group rationalizes their subordination, so that the use of force is not needed yet for Wak Katok. From Arendt's lens, Wak Katok's possession of the musket is a key to their protection and maybe salvation, silencing any potential disagreement before it can be said, and reinforcing his status:

> *Wak Katok pun dengan sendirinya menganggap dirinya yang memberikan pimpinan dan*

> *perintah. Dia dengan sendirinya pula mengharapkan mereka akan mengikuti segala pimpinannya. Tak terpikirkan dalam kepalanya mereka akan mempunyai pikiran atau pandangan yang lain.* (Lubis, 1992, p. 117)

> *Wak Katoklah yang tahu bagaimana menyelamatkan mereka semuanya dari ancaman harimau.* (Lubis, 1992, p. 118)

The arrival of the constitutive outside does not, at first, weaken Wak Katok's authority; it strengthens it. Wak Katok stands as the barrier between the group and the predatory vacuum, reaching a point of ultimate discursive hegemony, transforming the *pendamar*'s cultural recognition into a desperate, unquestioning submission to him.

c. The Fall of the 'Untouchable': Legitimacy Collapse and the Descent into Violence

When the carefully manufactured image of Wak Katok was revealed, his authority collapsed. The revelation of his contradictions and his moral failures destroys the symbolic foundation that once supported his leadership. Wak Katok's authority collapses because the belief sustaining his legitimacy disappears. It is an illustration of Arendt's notion that authority can no longer survive once recognition and trust are replaced by distrust. Once Wak Katok's hidden sins begin to emerge. The symbolic picture and the real person no longer coincide; his authority begins to disintegrate.

> *Itulah perbuatan Wak Katok, kawanku yang amat karib, yang pertama, yang aku biarkan, dan aku pun tak kurang ikut memikul dosa-dosanya. Seperti ketika Wak Katok memperkosa istri Demang, kemudian membunuh Demang, istri dan tiga orang anaknya, dan merampas emas dan perak di rumah Demang.* (Lubis, 1992, p. 97)

Pak Balam's confessions deconstruct the *empty signifier*. Wak Katok is no longer a symbolic figure; he is reduced to a highly conflicted, worried man attempting to cover his previous sins:

> *Wak Katok duduk diam dengan air muka yang keras, dosa-dosanya telah diceritakan sebagian terbesar oleh Pak Balam. Dan tentang dosanya yang terakhir, dia yakin sekali tak seorang juga yang tahu, dan dia tak akan hendak menceritakannya kepada siapa pun juga.* (Lubis, 1992, p. 101)

Why did the collapse occur so quickly? Only when successfully uniting different social demands—the chain of equivalence—do the empty signifiers work. The contradictions include the following: the signifier loses its hegemonic position, the symbolic unity fractures, different interpretations emerge, different loyalties emerge, and the chain of equivalence dissolves. Wak Katok no longer represents bravery, morality, or leadership. He becomes just another flawed man.

Wak Katok tries a desperate political maneuver to stop this drift and retake total control, but he never modifies the crisis's meaning. He tries to pressure the other *pendamar* to confess their sins and attempts to co-opt Pak Balam's religious framing and use their guilt as a weapon

to maintain his position:

> *"Yang lain pun akan mengakui dosa-dosanya," kata Wak Katok, suaranya keras dan tajam, jika perlu aku paksa dengan ini," dan dia menggerakkan senapannya.* (Lubis, 1992, p. 132)

The shift from Arendtian authority to violence becomes complete at this point. Wak Katok realizes that the group's internal recognition is eroding and that his position alone is no longer sufficient to command. He has to use forceful physical coercion. This dynamic mirrors Arnedt's observation that authority relies on external bounds, while failing regimes often slip into arbitrary tyranny (Arendt, 1956, p. 408). Wak Katok steps out of the mantle of the legitimate leader into a desperate tyrant by using his musket against the *pendamar*. The double terrors of the Wak Katok's weapon inside and the tiger outside drive the *pendamar* to submit to his demands, but this submission is no longer voluntary; it is a calculation of raw survival.

> *Daya Sanip menguasai dirinya patah di bawah ancaman Wak Katok. Dia lalu bercerita. Semuanya diceritakannya. Tak ada satu pun yang ditahan-tahannya. Dan dalam bercerita mulai pula terasa kelegaan dalam hatinya. Akhirnya dia pun terlepas pula dari tekanan dosa-dosa yang selama ini melekat di jiwanya.* (Lubis, 1992, p. 133)

A hyper-awareness of this structural transition can be seen in Wak Katok's inner monologue. He is aware that the only way a 'failed king' whose myths have been destroyed can reclaim his empty signifier is by killing the tiger. He regrets not portraying the beast as a supernatural spirit, which would have justified his limits as a human in the context of a cosmic hierarchy.

> *Wak Katok pun tahu, bahwa tak ada yang lebih hina dan celaka dari seorang pemimpin yang gagal, dari seorang raja yang gagal, yang kelemahan-kelemahannya telah terbongkar dan tak berhasil pula membuktikan kekeramatan dirinya sendiri, yang selama ini dipuja-puja orang. Dia telah mengatakan, bahwa harimau itu adalah harimau biasa. Timbul sedikit rasa menyesal dalam dirinya, mengapa dia tidak mengatakan, bahwa harimau itu adalah harimau siluman.* (Lubis, 1992, p. 148)

This horrific death throes of a fallen hegemony are depicted in this section of the novel. Wak Katok's leadership degenerates into complete authoritarianism as a result of his rage against the tiger, *pendamar*, and his internal conflict. The shared belief that previously legitimized his position has been irreversibly destroyed by the coercion of a gun, leaving nothing behind.

> *Sedang dalam hatinya dia merasa takut. Ya, selamanya dia merasa takut. Orang mengatakan dia tukang silat yang ulung, pemburu yang mahir, dukun yang tinggi ilmunya, akan tetapi dalam hatinya dia selalu merasa takut, sejak dahulu, sejak waktu mudanya.* (Lubis, 1992, pp. 148-149)

> *Dia bukan saja takut menghadapi harimau yang kini datang semakin dekat ke tempatnya bersembunyi, akan tetapi dia pun tak kurang takutnya, nanti akan terbukti, di depan mata*

Sanip dan Buyung, jika gagal menembak. Bagaimana jika ketika melihat dan mendengar auman harimau, badannya jadi beku dan kaku? (Lubis, 1992, p. 151)

The tendency now shifts from authority to authoritarianism. Laclau does not examine authoritarianism as merely excessive authority, and Arendt never formulates a methodical theory of authoritarian political culture. When an empty signifier monopolizes legitimacy instead of allowing sources of judgment, authoritarianism results; one symbolic figure becomes the exclusive personification of morality, order, security, and truth. This monopolization encourages unquestioning obedience. Critical judgment is replaced by personal loyalty in the community.

Tiba-tiba Wak Katok berseru:
"Pergi kalian sekarang juga dari sini! Siapa yang tak pergi aku tembak!" Kelihatan benar pada mereka, bahwa Wak Katok tak dapat diajak berbicara lagi. Mereka akan ditembaknya. Biarpun sekali bertiga mereka melompat hendak merebut senapannya, akan tetapi salah seorang dari mereka pasti akan jadi korban. (Lubis, 1992, p. 193)

Authority is discursively constructed through symbolic processes. Drawing on Arendt and Laclau, in *Harimau! Harimau!*, Wak Katok serves as an empty signifier, signifying bravery, morality, leadership, and protection. *Pendamar* loyalty is based on symbolic projection. This symbolic investment collapses when his hidden sins are exposed, causing his authority to crumble and the collective identity it has supported to break apart. The novel reveals authoritarian political culture as a discursive process supported by symbolic predominance.

d. Birth of the Autonomous Subject: Overthrowing the Tyrant and Reclaiming Agency

From the analytical standpoint of Laclau, this climax illustrates a significant rearticulation of the *chain of equivalence*. The men understand that the unpredictable, gun-wielding tyrant in their midst poses a greater threat to their life than the tiger alone. Their desires for moral dignity, psychological relief, and safety come together to form a single, revolutionary political demand.

“Tak kusangka dia akan begitu,” kata Sanip, suaranya masih gemetar, dirinya masih dikuasai ketegangan yang amat sangat yang baru saja mereka alami.
“Sudah gila dia,” kata Buyung, “dan dia guru silat kita, dukun kita. Mengapa selama ini kita tidak tahu?” (Lubis, 1992, p. 198)

"Manteramu palsu," kata Buyung. (Lubis, 1992, p. 202)

The complete collapse of the empty signifier occurs a the textual moment in the novel. The men witness the extreme contingency of his mythic power as he is bound, crying, and deprived of his weapon. The leader that once held the group’s collective illusions of ‘divine’ protection is reduced to a pathetic mortal.

Kami sudah tak takut dan percaya lagi pada mantera dan jimat dan sihir Wak Katok. Takhyul yang palsu saja. (Lubis, 1992, p. 203)

> *"Tak ada gunanya Wak Katok diberi senjata. Waktu Wak Katok memegang senjata dan berkuasa, Wak Katok tak dapat memakainya untuk membunuh harimau, tapi Wak Katok sendiri yang jadi harimau" jawab Buyung.* (Lubis, 1992, p. 203)

After removing Wak Katok's sacred mask, Buyung becomes a new political subject in Laclau's terminology. His subaltern identity as a submissive follower no longer defines him; instead, he fills the discursive void left by the hegemon's collapse. Buyung does not aim to establish a new tyranny founded on mystical trickery.

> *Tetapi Wak Katok telah menipu orang banyak, Wak Katok katanya guru dan pemimpin, tapi Wak Katok telah memberi pelajaran palsu, mantera palsu, jimat palsu, pimpinan palsu. Dalam hati Wak Katok selama ini bukan manusia yang bersarang, tetapi harimau yang buas.* (Lubis, 1992, p. 206)

Collective unity, rational planning, and naked self-reliance, by confronting the tiger, take the remaining *pendamar* out of the dark ages of authoritarian superstition. The novel ends with a celebration of the death of the obedient subject and the birth of an enlightened, self-governing community that no longer needs an external myth to legitimize its internal unity.

2. The Spectre of Authoritarianism: Leadership, Obedience, and Political Culture

This section moves from the analysis of the individual of Wak Katok to the wider political implications of the novel. This section contends that, through the analysis of patterns of obedience, loyalty, and desire for strong leadership, *Harimau! Harimau!* is allegorical, pointing to deeper cultural and political tendencies that allow authoritarian forms of authority to flourish. Based on Arendt's theory of authority and Laclau's concept of populism, the novel is seen as a critique of the repeated temptation of authoritarian leadership.

Arendt warns that authority should never be confused with domination. It becomes 'dangerous' when people stop exercising judgment or when there is 'the loss of critical thinking.' The criticism is two-sided; not only the leader but also the readiness of regular people to give up their own judgment. Laclau considers how such dependence arises. It is for this reason that men seek symbolic assurance. Times of fear and uncertainty make communities seek out such a figure who can stand for order. They want unity, like the fact that *pendamar* fear the tiger. Wak Katok fills this goal. His authority seems natural but it is actually constructed. Thus, people engage in the construction of the authority that 'controls' them. From these we may summarize the process as follows:

> *Fear of crisis → Need for certainty → Construction of a symbolic leader → Recognition of legitimacy → Voluntary obedience → Dependence on one authority → Suppression of independent judgment → Authoritarian culture.*

In *Harimau! Harimau!*, Lubis identifies a political culture pattern in which power is personalized. Leadership is tied to charismatic individuals perceived as the only source of truth.

This kind of personalization encourages obedience on the grounds of symbolic validity instead of critical judgment. Thus, the novel critiques authoritarianism as a repeating propensity that, anytime collective fears are concentrated in a single authoritative personality, can reassert itself, rather than as a historical anomaly.

a. Authority and the Need for a Figure of Protection

The social conditions favor acceptance of strong leadership. Wak Katok's role as a leader is an example of how societies facing uncertainty may look for protection in the form of a powerful leader who promises order and direction. This subsection discusses how leaders might posit themselves as necessary representatives of shared interests, drawing on Laclau's conception of political representation in populism in the effort to turn personal authority into a symbol of safety and stability.

In the cultural matrix of paternalism and neo-patrimonialism, there is a deep-rooted willingness in Indonesian political culture to submit collectively to a strong leader. Within this context, authority is highly personalized. Culturally, the ruler is conceived of as a beneficient patriarch, a father figure who expects total obedience in exchange for total protection.

In Indonesian history, the tiger has manifested itself in sharp periods of socio-political dislocation such as the collapse of parliamentary democracy in the late 1950s or the hyperinflation and violent ideological battles of the mid-1960s. In the face of increased historical anxiety, the collective political imagination steps back, in search of a protector. In the novel, Wak Katok enters this systemic vacuum by gathering accumulating traditional signs of authority. This mirrors how Soekarno and Soeharto consolidated their respective hegemony and suppressed political dissents (Yuzuru, 2022, p. 104). Soekarno, for example was regarded by the majority of people as *Penyambung Lidah Rakyat* (The Spokesman of the People) and the empty signifier needed to unite a broken post-colonial society. President Soekarno also used the original 1945 Constitution from 1959 to 1966 as a tool to create his concept of democracy, which was called '*demokrasi terpimpin*'. His authoritarianism was also supported by an interpretation of Pancasila values that also emphasized consensus and harmony, but in reality, consolidated power in his own hands (Basari & Dwiki, 2026). Soeharto further consolidated his rule by casting himself as *Bapak Pembangunan* (The Father of Development), promising security, order, and economic stability to a society after the traumatic upheaval of 1965.

The longing for protecting father figure has not disappeared in contemporary Indonesia. This is seen in the political campaigns in modern Indonesia. During Prabowo's campaigns in 2014-2019 employed a classic populist strategy: constructing an antagonistic narrative of 'Rakyat vs. Elite,' and framing his military history as the ultimate barrier to external threats (*antek-antek asing*). Alatas stated that, 'all regimes whether democratic or authoritarian are oligarchic in nature. The essence of politics is such that decisions are taken for and not by the community' (Alatas, 1997, p. 3). His victorious campaign of 2024 running alongside Joko Widodo's son Gibran Rakabuming Raka (Aqshadigrama, 2025). Prabowo's image was converted from a patriotic-nationalist commander into the '*Gemoy*' (cute, cuddly) character. Prabowo's political campaign in modern politics masks the masculine image with an image that is closer to the modern people's

needs.

This image was the perfect empty signifier: it was intentionally vague and stripped of historical contradictions, allowing millions of you people could project their desire for continuity, generational participation, and emotional comfort. While populism is a necessary political logic, it risks degenerating into authoritarianism whenever a leader attempts to embody the 'people's will,' closing the open and contested democratic space (Hansen, 2018). In the same way that the *pendamar*s projected their expectations of survival onto Wak Katok, Indonesian voters participate in constructing a personalized symbolic protector, sacrificing critical historical judgment for subjective digital connection.

Drawing from the allegory, a figure might candidates him/herself by identifying the people's needs for his benefit to win the leader's seat. Through populist strategy as conducted by Prabowo, an authoritarian has the chance to manipulate or even rig the formal strife for the leader's seat. The president retains hyper-executive privileges like the unchecked prerogative reights to appoint cabinet ministers and to dominate legislature judicial appointments (Dramanda, Kabir, & Zakiran, 2024). The allegory of Wak Katok's masculinity, then, is not to be considered as a single truth: people's reception, which differs according to the era, is what matters most.

As critical judgement is missing from the population of current Indonesia, it is intriguing to problematize the situation from – as Laclau argued – the aspect of political identity. It is perhaps that modern people are moving toward a non-masculine image. Instant conformity in every aspect is what modern people seek, hence creating a pitfall of authoritarian authority with an AI cute figure for Indonesians to fall into.

b. The 'Silence' of Many

The novel shows that authoritarianism is not only made by the conduct of the leader but also by the submission and the absence of resistance. The second tier of Lubis' critique, from below, is directed against the cultural apparatus that supports dictatorship. Authoritarianism is never just about imposing terror from the top; it relies on systematic compliance, conformity, and self-silencing by the people. In the Indonesian context, this abandonment of independent judgment is historically captured by the cultural phenomenon of *Asal Bapak Senang* (As Long as Father is Happy) and abrupted by the sense of survival.

Under the *Asal Bapak Senang* political culture, the value of maintaining overt social harmony and obedience to hierarchical superiors outweighs the importance of the search for objective truth or ethical accountability. In *Harimau! Harimau!* this cultural characteristic is portrayed through the long-standing unthinking reverence of the *pendamar*s afforded Wak Katok. Their cultural indoctrination dictates they are not to question an older or a respected leader.

Even when the moral contradictions and secret sins of the leader start to be revealed, the first reaction of the group is paralyzing silence and psychological denial. They pick a collective

silence to preserve the idea of group unity. This is similar to the authoritarian regimes in Indonesia. Under the New Order, institutionalized violence was accompanied by a cultural enforcement of consensus (*musyawarah* and *mufakat*) that was often weaponized to crush opposition and reward submissive conformity. Turns out that a leader's preference is being mixed with the state's vision. By considering people's basic instinct that is to fulfil necessities, New Order is successful to orchestrated its cronies' businesses to exploit resources (people and nature) for its benefit. Authoritarianism means securing one's own economy as well; in the modern Indonesian situation, the current government replicates the same strategy.

As soon as Wak Katok perceives a loss of natural authority, he resorts to intimidation and force confessions from his followers. The *pendamar*'s submission to this weaponized surveillance is a demonstration of how easy a culture of naïve respect might become active complicity. Then, if the New Order enforced authority by physical detention and traditional obedience, today's Indonesia runs under a regime of 'Digital Feudalism and Algorithmic Enclaves'. The Indonesian digital public sphere is the new home of Arendt's main warning.

The modern version of the *pendamar*'s submissive silence is the systematic normalization of cyber troops, state-suspected political buzzers (*buzzer*), and digital thuggery. When ordinary citizens, journalists, and academics try to critically evaluate government policies, they are not met with democratic debate. Rather, the political campaign uses anonymous cyber armies to dox (*doxxing*), assassinate character, and intimidate via algorithms.

Moreover, the use of the elastic *UU ITE* (Electronic Information and Transactions Law) by the state to punish activists continues to create a climate of silent terror. Digital repression cultivates flight from critical judgment. Citizens are their own police, policing their speech in a comfortable, docile conformity with the dominant political narrative to avoid online harassment or legal punishment. Consent is manufactured by algorithmic exhaustion, reducing the democratic internet into a domain of enforced protective silence.

c. The Return of the 'Spectre': Authority beyond the Authoritarian Past

Harimau! Harimau! moves beyond its immediate narrative and historical context to confront the enduring possibilities of authoritarianism not only inside formal political regimes but as a social and cultural imagination. In showing the recurrent demand for unquestioned leadership, Lubis depicts the persistent struggle between legitimate authority and authoritarian rule in Indonesian society. The 'spectre' of authoritarianism is an ongoing danger because the underlying cultural urge for individualized, charismatic, and unchallengeable leadership can quickly reemerge when modern collective fears rise.

When the novel opens with a description of Wak Katok as an authoritative leader whose legitimacy is predicated on collective acknowledgement, it also demonstrates that this legitimacy is symbolically created. Wak Katok's panic represents the terror of a highly personalized system coming face-to-face with exposure. He understands that his power is contingent on playing a perfect, legendary role. In a political culture that prioritizes personal charm above transparent and accountable institutions, the leader becomes a 'failed king' the moment a crisis exposes his

underlying human limits.

Lubis uses the *pendamar*'s rebellion to draw a conceptual blueprint for how to overcome this cycle of dependency. The last group of men who have finally cast aside their submissive reliance on the leader and shift their focus toward their own readiness, they dismantle the psychological basis of the authoritarian culture. While the novel initially presents Wak Katok as a legitimate authority whose leadership is sustained through collective recognition, it reveals that such legitimacy is symbolically constructed. Wak Katok's panic represents the existential terror of a highly personalized regime facing exposure. He is acutely aware that his power rests on his ability to perform a flawless, mythic role. When a political culture privileges personal charisma over transparent, accountable institutions, the ruler becomes a 'failed king' the moment a crisis exposes his fundamental human limitations.

For today's Indonesia, this means overcoming the childish attraction of individualized populism. Soeharto's resignation in 1998 as president, and the amendment to rewrite the constitution should have changed everyting (Yuzuru, 2022, p. 99). But reality is the contrary. To banish the 'spectre' of authoritarianism, we need to reform our political culture: we need to reject the faked comfort of the digital 'cute' *Bapak*, we need to revive an independent civil society, and we need to protect the right to exercise critical, pluralistic independent thought. The persistence of authoritarian dynamics is rooted in the legacy of the New Order. According to Heryanto and Hadiz (2005), the capitalist oligarchy that emerged under the centralized state of Soeharto was able to rebuild itself after the democratic transition of 1998 (Heryanto & Hadiz, 2005, p. 270).

This literary work exposes the authoritarian political culture, showing how societies give a single figure too much symbolic authority, and how leadership becomes an object of unquestioned loyalty. In this process, Lubis advises against a political culture that gives precedence to personal authority over reflective, plural, and responsible leadership. This is a democratic lesson for 'post'-authoritarian Indonesia: real political emancipation and mature citizenship cannot be reached by replacing one charismatic father figure with another. To banish the spectre of authoritarianism forever, a society must change the structure. Instead, it must reject the infantile seduction of an unquestioned leader and construct a reflective public space based on rational solidarity, pluralism, institutional accountability, and the strong preservation of autonomous critical thought.

Conclusion

Harimau! Harimau! is not only a simple story of jungle survival, it is a complex political allegory that traces the authoritarian consolidation and the vulnerabilities that allow regimes to thrive across differen historical era. The first question highlights on the dynamics of authority inside the group. Wak Katok establishes his authority by transforming his persona into the empty signifier. He absorbs the group's projection for protection. The tiger works as the constitutive outside that strengthen his authority. But the exposure of Wak Katok's hidden sins leads this

authority to disintegrate and shift into violence by aiming his musket on his own people. When the empty signifier falls, the autonomous subjects arise by relying on collective readiness, not on a false savior. The second question takes these findings into a wider critique of Indonesian political culture that shows how authoritarianism is constructed from below by a cultural demands for protection, submissive silence, and the repression of independent thought. This has enabled the personalized regimes of the past and continues to haunt contemporary democracy where the empty signifier has transformed into affect-driven digital personas and where dissent is silenced by algorithmic conformity and digital intimidation.

Lubis' warning in essence is that the spectre of authoritarianism remains a structural risk as long as a society prefers the comfortable myths of charismatic leader over institutional responsibility. This paper argues that in order to banish the spectre of authoritarianism requires a shift from uncritical submission toward the awareness and the readiness of the surroundings. Political maturity demands a considered public sphere built on collective solidarity, pluralism, and the strong protection of autonomous critical thought.

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