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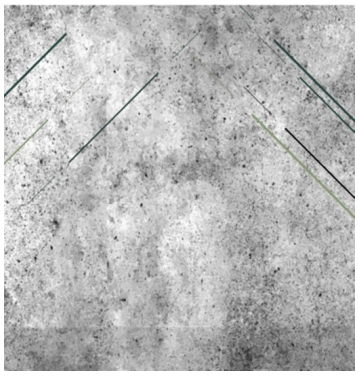
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When Criticism Becomes Disloyalty: Who Defines the Good Citizen?

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When Criticism Becomes Disloyalty: Who Defines the Good Citizen?

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Abstract

Contemporary political repression does not always operate through the overt prohibition of criticism. Criticism may continue to circulate, while critics are required to defend themselves before the substance of their claims receives a response. This article conceptualizes this process as moral gatekeeping, whereby the assessment of criticism begins to shift into an assessment of the critic's standing as a political participant whose claims merit a response. Using an interpretive documentary design, the study analyzes 33 documents and source records across three controversies in Indonesia in 2026: criticism of the Makan Bergizi Gratis (MBG) program, police reports following statements by Saiful Mujani, and foreign-agent labeling directed at journalists and civil-society actors. The findings show that substantive answerability and moral gatekeeping can coexist within the same controversy. In the MBG case, some responses addressed the substance of the criticism, while others made critics' credibility conditional or called their loyalty into question. The Saiful Mujani controversy demonstrates loyalty contestation accompanied by legal and reputational burdens, whereas foreign-agent labeling demonstrates civic exclusion by portraying domestic critics as serving external interests. Overall, the findings show that moral gatekeeping occurs when the assessment of criticism shifts toward the critic's civic standing, requiring critics to defend themselves before their claims receive a response. Criticism becomes disloyalty specifically when disagreement is recast as a question of allegiance. The article offers a middle-range framework that distinguishes changes in critics' civic standing from demonstrated consequences, while developing solidaristic criticism as a normative implication.

Keywords: Moral Gatekeeping; Political Criticism; Civic Standing; Political Repression; Indonesia.

Introduction

In classical models of repression, the relationship between power and criticism appears relatively straightforward: criticism emerges, the state suppresses it, and it subsequently disappears from public expression. Yet since the end of the Cold War, norms of freedom of expression have become increasingly institutionalized at the global level. As a result, contemporary regimes can no longer rely on overt prohibition without incurring significant reputational costs (Varol, 2014). Repression has therefore adapted: criticism may continue to circulate widely, while critics are subjected to pressures that weaken their standing before the substance of their criticism receives a response (Young, 2000). They may first be required to defend their competence, motives, or loyalty to the political community (Carlson et al., 2021; Egelhofer et al., 2021). Meanwhile, conventional indicators of freedom of expression tend to focus primarily on whether formal restrictions on expression are present.

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How criticism is delegitimized, however, depends on the institutional environment in which politics takes place. In Russia, restrictive NGO and treason laws introduced in 2012 expanded the state's capacity to impose legal burdens and attach stigma to civil-society organizations and activities associated with foreign actors (Van der Vet, 2018). By contrast, in Germany and Austria during the 2017 electoral period, delegitimation operated primarily through political rhetoric and attacks on media credibility (Egelhofer et al., 2021). Taken together, these cases show that both authoritarian and democratic regimes can discredit political criticism.

Related scholarship similarly shows how civility, evidentiary standards, legal pressure, and foreign-agent stigma can each constrain political criticism (Bardon et al., 2023; Parkhurst & Abeysinghe, 2016; Van der Vet, 2018; Zavyalova, 2025). Yet what remains insufficiently clear is when an assessment of the criticism itself becomes an assessment of the person who voices it. This article conceptualizes that process as moral gatekeeping. It occurs when critics are no longer answered only on the substance of their claims. They must also demonstrate that they are sufficiently competent, responsible, concerned, or loyal to be treated as political participants whose claims merit a response. In other words, what comes into question is no longer only whether the criticism is right or wrong, but also the critic's civic standing.

These judgments gain greater force when they are backed by resources that are not equally available to critics, such as access to legal procedures, institutional information, organizational capacity, or media visibility. As a result, the burden may shift from institutions having to answer criticism to critics having to defend themselves. The contribution of this article, therefore, is to specify a bounded mechanism that links judgments about speakers to inequalities in interpretive resources and to the displacement of answerability from institutions to citizens.

In Indonesia, the transition from the New Order to *Reformasi* did not automatically produce a fully consolidated democracy. Case's (2002) regional comparison of Indonesia's evolving pseudo-democracy provides a historical reference for the early post–New Order transition. Later studies place democratic regression within the electoral politics of the Jokowi presidency, including the use of state institutions against political opponents (Aspinall & Mietzner, 2019; Power, 2018; Warburton & Aspinall, 2019). Elections continued to structure political competition, but majoritarian support enabled democratic erosion while also constraining some executive initiatives (Mietzner, 2025). What this account leaves less clear is the extent to which citizens can still challenge power and expect their claims to receive a substantive response.

The cases examined here unfold under the administration of Prabowo Subianto, who took office in October 2024. As an initial point of context, Jaffrey and Warburton (2024) situate this transfer of power amid weakened checks on executive authority and declining electoral fairness. Civil society continues to exercise scrutiny and voice criticism, but the capacity of institutions and powerful actors to shape or delegitimize such criticism has also increased.

At the same time, public debate also unfolds within an unequal digital environment. Wijayanto et al. (2026) document how the capacity to shape meaning and public opinion is unevenly distributed. Certain actors can form temporary collaborations to amplify particular narratives or extend their influence. It is therefore important to examine not only whether citizens remain able to speak, but also the position they occupy when they challenge political power.

Within this context, the study analyzes 33 documents and source records across three controversies in 2026: criticism of the Makan Bergizi Gratis (MBG) program, police reports following statements by Saiful Mujani, and foreign-agent labeling directed at journalists and civil-society actors. The analysis proceeds at the level of public justificatory moves, rather than treating each controversy as having a single fixed outcome or seeking to estimate national prevalence. Any inference of moral gatekeeping therefore depends on evidence concerning both how criticism is classified and what consequences that classification produces. The article examines how standards of civility, evidence, constructiveness, experience, and loyalty are used to classify political criticism, and how those classifications shape critics' civic standing.

This article conceptualizes *moral gatekeeping* as a middle-range framework within interpretive political analysis. Not every judgment about a critic qualifies as moral gatekeeping.

The key analytical question is when such judgments begin to affect whether the critic remains recognized as a political participant whose claims warrant a substantive response. *Civic standing*, as used here, refers to recognition as a political participant whose claims are considered worthy of substantive engagement. It is analytically distinct from formal citizenship, the legal right to speak, and the substantive validity of the claim itself. The term "moral" refers instead to judgments concerning the speaker's worthiness, responsibility, or loyalty.

Gatekeeping theory began with White's (1950) analysis of how news was selected within editorial channels. Subsequent work extended gatekeeping beyond editors to individuals, algorithms, platforms, and post-publication interactions (Salonen et al., 2023; Wallace, 2018). Even as its scope expanded, however, the central analytical concern remained the circulation of information: what is selected, amplified, or constrained. The problem addressed here is different: criticism can remain publicly available while the political standing of the critic is placed in doubt. Moral gatekeeping thus identifies the critic's civic standing as the object of gatekeeping. Specifically, this relates to whether the critic continues to be treated as a legitimate political participant whose grievances deserve a response.

Prior research has already illuminated parts of this problem. A person may be harmed not only because an argument is rejected, but because their standing as a knower or as someone whose voice merits consideration is also diminished (Bailey, 2017; Fricker, 2007; Giladi, 2018). Moral gatekeeping may involve such forms of harm, but it goes further. The key distinction arises when judgments about the speaker begin to alter the speaker's civic standing as a participant in political life. Evidentiary demands alone do not constitute gatekeeping; the relevance and quality of evidence must still be assessed in context (Cairney & Oliver, 2017; Parkhurst & Abeysinghe, 2016). These judgments may acquire greater practical force when they are backed by legal, organizational, or digital infrastructures (Chaudhry, 2022; Earl et al., 2022; Smidt et al., 2021; Sombatpoonsiri et al., 2026; Zavyalova, 2025).

Because such judgments are often articulated through seemingly ordinary standards of evaluation, the analysis must also examine how civility, evidence, constructiveness, experience, and loyalty are mobilized in judging political criticism. These standards do not, by themselves, constitute a problem. Civility, for example, may refer to both politeness and an orientation toward the public good, while judgments about tone may be shaped by the speaker's social position (Bardon et al., 2023; Gubitz, 2022; Schaap & Tønder, 2025). The same caution applies to demands that criticism provide solutions. Identifying a problem and offering a solution are distinct forms of political claim-making (Benford & Snow, 2000).

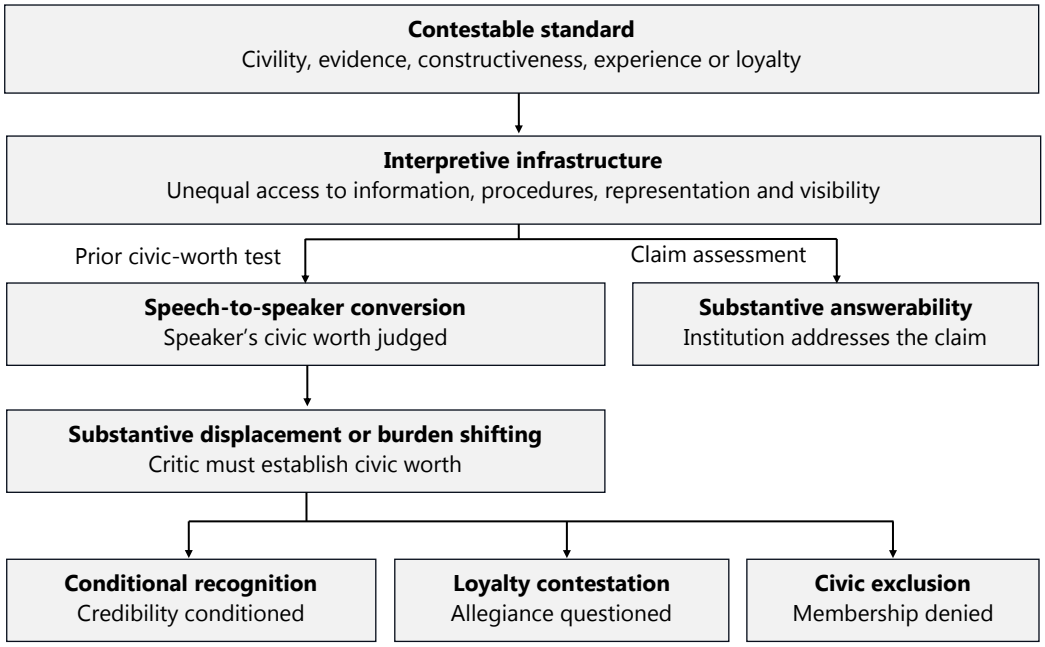
It follows that demands for better evidence or more defensible solutions are not, in themselves, instances of moral gatekeeping. The crucial issue is what these standards are made to do. Moral gatekeeping arises only when three conditions are present and mutually connected. First, *speech-to-speaker conversion*. This is the foundational move through which an assessment of criticism becomes an assessment of the critic's worthiness. Second, *asymmetric interpretive authority*. This does not mean that the actor making the judgment is necessarily right or possesses a privileged claim to meaning. It means that some actors command greater resources for making their judgments audible, repeatable, and consequential than the critics they assess. Third, *substantive displacement* or *burden shifting*, in which the burden of justification moves toward the critic, who must defend themselves even as the original political claim remains unresolved.

When the three conditions operate in conjunction, moral gatekeeping may reshape critics' civic standing in several distinct ways. First, *conditional recognition*: critics remain members of the political community, but their credibility is conditioned on whether they are seen as competent, proper, or sufficiently concerned. Second, *loyalty contestation*: critics continue to be treated as members of the political community, but their allegiance becomes an object of dispute. Third, *civic exclusion*: critics are cast as standing beyond the boundaries of the national political community. These are not successive stages of escalation, but analytically distinct forms of contesting civic standing.

It is important, however, to distinguish these outcome categories from consequences that are

actually supported by evidence. An accusation can establish that a classificatory attempt has occurred, but not that the classification was accepted by audiences or produced sanctions. Claims about downstream effects therefore require separate evidentiary support, as detailed in the Methods and Appendix B. Figure 1 summarizes the relationships among the elements of the framework while also identifying substantive answerability as an alternative pathway. Its arrows indicate analytical relations rather than temporal order or automatic causation.

Figure 1. Moral Gatekeeping and the Substantive Answerability Alternative



Source: Authors' conceptual framework. The three outcomes are alternatives. Assigning an outcome type does not establish uptake, sanction, or prevalence; those claims require separate evidence.

Method

This interpretive documentary study uses a theory-guided qualitative design to examine how political criticism is classified and how those classifications shape civic standing. Interpretive analysis treats meaning, categorization, and justification as constitutive of political action (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012). Rather than infer private intentions, the study reconstructs the public work performed by statements, visual signs, and institutional acts: how actors define an intervention as criticism, misinformation, insult, provocation, disloyalty, or foreign influence, and what consequences follow. Diagnostic analysis remains distinct from the later normative argument.

Three information-rich sites were selected purposively for analytical leverage rather than representativeness (Flyvbjerg, 2004): controversy over criticism of Makan Bergizi Gratis (MBG), police complaints following statements by Saiful Mujani, and foreign-agent labeling of journalists and civil-society actors. They differ in scale and evidentiary form. MBG is a nested contrast containing factual answerability, a source-qualified legal-civility intervention, and organized pro-program mobilization containing both policy-feedback and gatekeeping moves; Mujani is a bounded legal-organizational conflict; and the foreign-agent site is reconstructed principally through a third-party investigation. Comparison therefore operates at the level of public justificatory moves. The sites were selected to examine classifications directed at critics of incumbent policies, institutions, and political leadership. The design therefore does not test whether opposition actors employ the same mechanism against government supporters; the actor general applicability of moral gatekeeping remains a proposition for comparative research rather

than an empirical claim established here.

The audit comprises 33 consulted documents or source records. The original 23 documents consisted of eight on the MBG controversy, eleven on Mujani, and four on foreign-agent labeling. They were supplemented by ten pre-cutoff records of pro-MBG mobilization across six locations. The addendum preserved seven distinct evidence objects, including speeches, placards, banners, organizational acts, and rival instances of critical support. Sources were classified as CORE when they preserved language or action central to a finding; QUALIFIED CORE when such evidence had a material access or archival limitation; CORE CONTEXT when necessary for sequence, authority, consequences, or a rival interpretation; and CONTEXT when supplying background or circulation only. Materials without recoverable content, stable attribution, adequate provenance, or relevance were excluded. Appendix A identifies every record, evidence object, corpus role, and inferential use.

Source chains were audited so repetition would not masquerade as corroboration. Reposts of one speech, banner set, or official statement were treated as circulation of one evidence object. Original or official records were preferred; contemporaneous reporting established sequence, participants, or mediated statements when primary material was unavailable. Contested claims of institutionally facilitated mobilization were retained alongside rival accounts and were not coded as established state orchestration. Amnesty International's report was counted as one composite document, although its investigation examined 585 posts and interviewed 25 targeted participants and eight experts. MBG and Mujani were reconstructed mainly from directly consulted public documents; foreign-agent findings are attributed to Amnesty's corpus and were not independently reproduced.

The unit of analysis is the public justificatory move: a statement, sign, or institutional act specifying how criticism should be evaluated, what burden a critic must satisfy, or whether the critic retains political standing. For each move, the analysis reconstructed the initial criticism; separated substantive rebuttal from evaluation of the critic; identified the invoked standard and resource of interpretive authority; traced conversion from speech or position to civic worth; specified evidentiary, legal, reputational, experiential, or administrative burdens; reconstructed the implied good citizen; assessed consequences; tested the strongest rival interpretation; and stated a confidence limit. Cross-site comparison examined variation in object, standard, infrastructure, burden, civic model, outcome, consequence, and evidentiary strength. No numerical score was used because the framework evaluates relational configurations.

Inference was disciplined through consequence thresholds, rival interpretations, source-specific confidence labels, and ethical limits. A label establishes attempted classification; broader uptake supports discursive displacement; activated legal, organizational, reputational, or participation burdens support institutionally consequential gatekeeping. Factual correction, proportionate regulation of incitement or insult, critical support for a program, and scrutiny of foreign influence remained rival interpretations. Confidence is unequal: the later MBG legal-civility move is medium and source-qualified; Medan is medium-high but archive-qualified; the Jember placard is high for displayed text, not prevalence; Mujani is medium-high while proceedings remain unresolved; and foreign-agent labeling is strong within Amnesty's corpus but not independently reproduced. No interviews or direct interactions with targeted persons occurred. Only public material was analyzed, and stigmatizing allegations were reproduced only when necessary. Observation closed on 28 June 2026; later events fall outside the corpus. The article determines neither criminal liability nor payment, centralized coordination, state direction, or uniform motives without documentary evidence.

Table 1's confidence labels assess support for the narrow move-level inference, not prevalence, effect size, private motive, legality, or normative validity. High requires stably attributed language or action preserved in sufficient context, with no limitation material to the inference. An original record or a clearly attributed verbatim quotation in reporting can satisfy this condition; media transmission alone neither lowers confidence nor establishes independent corroboration. Medium-high indicates direct or independently supported evidence with a

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bounded unresolved issue material to the inference. Medium indicates reliance on indirect paraphrase, incomplete context, or a substantial rival interpretation that materially limits the inference, and supports only a qualified claim about attempted classification or burden activation.

Strong within an attributed composite corpus applies when a third-party investigation is systematic and internally triangulated but its underlying dataset was not independently reproduced. Source-qualified marks an unavailable initiating speech or evidence object; archive-qualified marks incomplete or dynamic preservation. Scope phrases, such as 'for displayed text,' limit the inference to the documented object. Appendix B gives the full decision rule, permitted inference, and excluded inference for each label.

Results

The Results section compares specific responses within each controversy rather than assigning a single label to each case. The MBG controversy contains several distinct forms of response: institutional information produces substantive answerability in one move, while legal-civility claims, experiential disqualification, and explicit loyalty judgments appear in others. The Saiful Mujani controversy provides a more institutionally consequential form of loyalty contestation, and foreign-agent labeling presents civic exclusion. These configurations are analytical positions, not stages in a universal escalation.

Geographic and Programmatic Adaptation

In February 2026, former Universitas Gadjah Mada student leader Tiyo Ardianto publicly questioned the financial arrangements of the Makan Bergizi Gratis (MBG) program. The circulated claim concerned the possibility that a partner kitchen, or Satuan Pelayanan Pemenuhan Gizi (SPPG), could receive as much as Rp1.8 billion annually, alongside suspicions of inflated ingredient costs and political ties in program ownership. Because the initiating video was not independently archived for this study, its precise wording is treated as mediated. The National Nutrition Agency (Badan Gizi Nasional, BGN), however, issued a direct response. It argued that Rp1.8 billion represented a maximum gross revenue calculation based on approximately Rp6 million per operating day over 313 days, not net profit, and emphasized omitted expenditures such as investment, operating costs, maintenance, depreciation, and business risk (Amin, 2026; Ayuningrum, 2026; Prameswari, 2026).

This first exchange establishes what moral gatekeeping is not. BGN possessed institutional standing and superior access to program accounting, but used that informational advantage to contest a numerical claim on its own terms. It did not require Tiyo first to prove that he was polite, loyal, morally responsible, or sufficiently constructive before addressing the figure, nor did it clearly convert limited evidence into a judgment about his civic worth. The rebuttal may not have resolved broader concerns about ownership or patronage, but it constituted substantive answerability: the institution supplied an alternative calculation and identified the costs it considered missing. Asymmetric authority is therefore insufficient by itself to establish gatekeeping.

A different classificatory register emerged in June, after public statements attributed to Tiyo extended beyond program finance and were described by complainants as concerning SPPG units and the President personally. Firdaus Oiwobo filed a report at the South Tangerang Police, registered as LP/B/1867/VI/2026/SPKT/POLRES TANGERANG SELATAN/POLDA METRO JAYA. Police confirmed that the report had been received and remained under investigation. In his public rationale, the complainant distinguished legitimate criticism from alleged false information, insult, and incitement, including an alleged appeal to abandon MBG and a derogatory characterization of SPPG personnel (iNews Jateng, 2026; Tristiawati, 2026). The classification thus moved from whether program criticism was accurate toward whether the speaker had crossed a legal and moral boundary of permissible criticism.

A separate public complaint (*pengaduan masyarakat*, or dumas) was subsequently submitted to the Criminal Investigation Agency by Garda Prabowo. Its representatives affirmed that citizens, including students, could criticize the government, but argued that criticism should be expressed properly, politely, and with moral responsibility. They characterized the speech at issue as personal degradation of the President rather than legitimate disagreement and stated that the complaint was intended to mark the boundary between criticism and insult (Fadilah, 2026). This intervention made a model of the proper critic explicit: educated, respectful, morally restrained, and unwilling to direct degrading language toward the President. It also activated institutional and reputational work for Tiyo, who had to respond not only to disputes over MBG but also to allegations concerning his manner, intentions, and respect for political office (Hidayat, 2026; Marwah, 2026).

This legal-civility move remains source-qualified. The complete speech objects underlying the June actions were unavailable in the audited corpus, leaving open the rival possibility that the complaints represented proportionate responses to actionable misinformation, insult, or incitement. The evidence establishes the stated civility standards and the burdens generated by one registered report and one separate dumas; it does not establish that valid MBG criticism was suppressed or that the complainants' standards were necessarily unreasonable. The move activates institutional burdens, but the inference that it imposes a prior test of civic worth remains qualified and its specific civic-standing outcome unresolved.

Before the 28 June corpus cutoff, pro-MBG mobilizations also revealed how a public program could generate an organized constituency around employment, supply chains, household savings, and local economic activity. Workers, farmers, suppliers, parents, and other participants defended continuation while also, in some actions, demanding evaluation and anti-corruption measures (Kementerian Sekretariat Negara Republik Indonesia, 2026; Noviansah, 2026; Suprayitno, 2026). These material and organizational stakes constitute policy feedback, not moral gatekeeping by themselves. They explain why a constituency formed; a separate critic-directed classification is required before support for the program becomes a judgment about civic standing.

That conversion appeared at a 19 June action in Medan. An orator addressed students at UI and UGM as socially elite and therefore unable to understand children attending school without food (B-One Indonesia, 2026; Nasution, 2026). The claim did not merely add experiential testimony to the policy debate. It made the students' social location a reason to discount their opposition before addressing its fiscal or administrative substance. The burden shifted accordingly: critics had to demonstrate proximity to hunger, concern for disadvantaged children, and sufficient social understanding before their objections could retain credibility. This move makes experience a gate on civic standing and instantiates conditional recognition, although the preserved video remains archive-qualified and no independent sanction against the students is established.

A more explicit loyalty conversion appeared at the Jember action on 20 June. An official local government account documented a placard reading “Anti MBG Penghianat Bangsa” [sic], alongside support for program continuation, presidential leadership, and action against disturbances to stability (PPID Kabupaten Jember, 2026). The displayed language converted opposition to a public program into national betrayal. Critics were no longer asked only to defend the policy merits of their position; they were placed under a burden to disprove disloyalty and affirm membership in the national political community. This is a conversion of policy disagreement into alleged betrayal within loyalty contestation. The evidence is strong for the displayed text and its event context, but does not establish general acceptance of the slogan, legal sanction, or the views of all pro-MBG participants.

Taken together, MBG is not a single boundary-only case. It is a within-site discriminating contrast among four moves: substantive answerability through BGN's factual rebuttal; a source-qualified legal-civility intervention; conditional recognition through experiential disqualification; and loyalty contestation through an explicit accusation of betrayal. The contrast also preserves a rival finding: program-linked constituencies can defend continuation while criticizing

implementation, so material dependence, mass participation, religious language, or support for the President cannot be treated as gatekeeping without evidence that the critic's competence, responsibility, or loyalty has become the object of judgment.

Saiful Mujani: Loyalty Contestation

At a public forum in Jakarta on 31 March 2026, political scientist Saiful Mujani argued that ordinary institutional channels had become ineffective for correcting President Prabowo Subianto. He connected this diagnosis to the governing coalition's political dominance and proposed that citizens consolidate to remove the president through civic action. In the same intervention, he distinguished the proposal from a coup and presented it as an effort to protect citizens and the country. Because the exact timestamp of the relevant passage remained unresolved at the corpus cutoff, the analysis relies on a narrow paraphrase cross-checked against a stable contemporaneous transcription (Nur, 2026; Sociocorner, 2026). This distinction between diagnosis and remedy is crucial: the controversy concerned not only Mujani's criticism of presidential leadership but also the political action he proposed in response.

The initial institutional uptake recoded the intervention through criminal responsibility. A report filed at Polda Metro Jaya by Robina Akbar was registered as LP/B/2428/IV/2026/SPKT/ POLDA METRO JAYA and invoked Article 246 of the Criminal Code concerning public incitement. By 10 April, police publicly acknowledged that two reports had been received and would be examined (Kausar, 2026a, 2026b). This shift did not by itself prove moral gatekeeping, because forceful calls for political action can legitimately attract legal scrutiny. It did, however, move the controversy away from the feasibility of Mujani's diagnosis and toward whether he bore legal responsibility for the possible conduct of others.

The civic meaning of that shift became clearer in statements by student and organizational complainants. Before and during its formal complaint, BEM KSI described the intervention as provocative and potentially unconstitutional and framed reporting it as a moral responsibility. Its representatives invoked national stability, the locally invoked ideal of *kondusivitas* (social and political order), integrity, unity, and the obligation to prevent statements that might divide society (Mayasari & Nur, 2026a, 2026b). These terms did more than identify a legal element. They presented the responsible citizen as one who preserves order and national cohesion and suggested that Mujani's political standing depended on whether his criticism conformed to those civic duties. The issue was no longer only whether his proposal was persuasive or lawful, but whether it was compatible with responsible membership in the political community.

The classificatory register intensified when Presidium Kebangsaan 08 pursued a Bareskrim report registered as LP/B/146/IV/2026/SPKT/Bareskrim Polri. The report invoked both incitement and alleged treason, while the complainant argued that freedom of expression had limits and that the speakers had crossed them (Abiyya, 2026; Rassat, 2026). This intensified the challenge to the critic’s allegiance: criticism of presidential leadership and advocacy of civic consolidation were moved toward a judgment about hostility to lawful authority and, in the sharper allegation, to the state itself. The article does not treat the allegation as legally established, nor does it infer that all complainants coordinated their actions. The analytical significance lies in the widening classificatory movement from controversial political speech to provocation, threat to unity, and suspected betrayal.

Counter-interpretations contested both the legal elements and the civic classification. The Institute for Criminal Justice Reform argued that controversial criticism or advocacy did not automatically satisfy the material requirements of incitement and urged police not to turn the complaints into a vehicle for silencing expression (Institute for Criminal Justice Reform, 2026). Mujani's legal team likewise argued that the reports failed to specify who had been incited and what unlawful act resulted (Kausar, 2026c). Yet the classifications had already become institutionally consequential. On 4 June, Mujani attended Polda Metro Jaya as a reported witness in relation to four Polda reports filed in April; separately reported Bareskrim actions remained institutionally distinct. Appearing for clarification, organizing legal representation, and publicly

defending the political and democratic status of his speech imposed legal, organizational, and reputational burdens regardless of the eventual legal outcome (Anugrahadi, 2026).

The strongest rival interpretation remains that a proposal to remove a president can properly be examined for incitement or public-order implications. The case therefore does not establish unlawful criminalization, Mujani's legal innocence, or a coordinated strategy of repression. It does, however, support a finding of institutionally consequential loyalty contestation. The speech was evaluated not only for its legal content but also through responsibility, stability, unity, and allegiance; those classifications were made consequential through complaint procedures, media amplification, and police clarification. Mujani remained an acknowledged member of the political community whose conduct and loyalty were disputed. The case did not primarily place him outside the national "we"; it regulated the terms under which a member could criticize and advocate political correction.

Foreign-Agent Labelling: Civic Exclusion

The third site differs in scale and evidentiary form. Amnesty International's 160-page investigation, Building Up Imaginary Enemies, examined the first eighteen months of the Prabowo administration, from October 2024 to April 2026. The report analyzed 585 social-media posts and drew on interviews with 25 targeted civil-society actors, journalists, and researchers, together with eight expert interviews. In this article's corpus, the report is treated as one composite source rather than as hundreds of separate documents, and its internal evidence is disaggregated into seven relevant clusters (Amnesty International, 2026a). Its central finding was a recurring repertoire in which critics were represented as paid, manipulated, or controlled by foreign interests.

According to Amnesty, this vocabulary was authorized from above through repeated rhetoric by the President and other senior officials. The report cites a BBC Indonesia count indicating that President Prabowo used related "foreign agent" or "foreign lackey" rhetoric 25 times in public speeches after taking office (Amnesty International, 2026a). Such rhetoric established a civic frame in which criticism could be interpreted not as an internal dispute over policy but as an externally directed threat to sovereignty. The classification did not require a specific demonstration that an organization had altered its conduct in exchange for foreign support. Instead, the existence of international relationships, funding, or solidarity could be made to carry the moral conclusion that the critic was not speaking from within the national community.

The campaign surrounding opposition to revisions of the Military Law illustrates how that frame acquired networked force. Amnesty's metadata analysis traced the earliest public postings of a video attacking three peaceful protesters, including KontraS activist Andrie Yunus, to accounts presenting themselves as Gerindra regional organizations. Between 17 and 19 March 2025, the same video was amplified by 31 accounts that appeared affiliated with 27 military units across several platforms. The content portrayed opponents of the revisions as instruments of foreign interests who sought to weaken the armed forces and the country (Amnesty International, 2026a). The underlying criticism concerned military expansion into civilian life, but it was displaced by an identity claim about who allegedly directed the protesters. The report's account affiliations and coordination findings are retained here as Amnesty's attributed forensic conclusions rather than independently verified ownership claims.

The campaign against Tempo shows the conversion and burden more clearly. Amnesty documented posts that used the outlet's participation in an international media-support fund as evidence that its journalism was controlled by foreign actors. The allegation converted a disclosed and potentially scrutinizable funding relationship into a conclusion about editorial allegiance without specifying a falsifiable connection between funding and particular reporting decisions (Amnesty International, 2026a). After Tempo experienced intimidation, further posts represented the incidents as staged performances designed to attract foreign sympathy and finance.

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At least seven anonymous accounts posted an identical graphic within a one-hour interval, accusing the outlet of manufacturing anti-government narratives for foreign donors (Amnesty International, 2026a, pp. 99–102). The burden was therefore structurally difficult to discharge: disclosure could be treated as proof of control, while denial or evidence of intimidation could be recoded as strategic victimhood.

Comparable consequences appeared across other targets. In the Raja Ampat controversy, Amnesty reported that an official accusation against Greenpeace was followed by coordinated foreign-agent labeling, while activist Iqbal Damanik described receiving anonymous threats (Amnesty International, 2026a). In the case of Andrie Yunus, the report documented post-incident disinformation claiming that an attack against him had been staged to obtain foreign support, and interviews described fear of joining protests, cooperating with civil-society organizations, or continuing critical reporting (Amnesty International, 2026a). These claims are kept analytically separate: the article does not argue that earlier labeling caused physical violence, that official speakers directed anonymous threats, or that every account was state-owned. The relevant consequence is the repeated reputational and participation burden created by diffuse accusations that targets had to answer without being given a stable evidentiary threshold.

Scrutiny of foreign influence is legitimate in principle. Governments and citizens may reasonably ask whether funding or external relationships affect domestic political activity. The distinguishing feature in the documented campaigns was the generic and often unfalsifiable movement from external connection to foreign control, combined with repeated amplification and the displacement of the policy claims that prompted criticism. The resulting classification did not merely regulate how acknowledged citizens should speak. It represented journalists, activists, and organizations as political outsiders whose interventions originated from interests external to the nation. On this evidence, foreign-agent labeling constitutes civic exclusion: a challenge to the critic's standing as a member of the national political "we" (Amnesty International, 2026a, 2026b).

Move-Level Cross-Site Variation

Table 1 compares six public justificatory configurations. MBG Move 1 supplies the substantive-answerability boundary; Move 2 remains source-qualified with its civic outcome unresolved; Move 3A illustrates conditional recognition; and Move 3B illustrates loyalty contestation. Mujani presents loyalty contestation with documented legal uptake, while the attributed foreign-agent findings present civic exclusion. Confidence and consequence remain specific to each move.

Table 1. Move-Level Variation in the Classification of Political Criticism

Move / case	Standard	Authority infrastructure	Conversion / burden	Outcome	Confidence and scope
MBG 1: BGN rebuttal	Evidence	Institutional data	No speaker conversion; institution supplies an alternative calculation	Substantive answerability	High for documented rebuttal
MBG 2: legal–civility	Civility / legality	Legal-organizational	Alleged speech → impropriety; legal and reputational defense	Civic outcome unresolved	Medium; source-qualified
MBG 3A: Medan	Experience / care	Experiential representation and organized visibility	Elite distance → inability to understand hunger; prove proximity and care	Conditional recognition	Medium-high; archive-qualified
MBG 3B: Jember	National loyalty	Associational-symbolic visibility	Anti-MBG position → betrayal; disprove disloyalty	Loyalty contestation	High for displayed text

Saiful Mujani	Order / unity / loyalty	Legal-organizational	Proposal → provocation, incitement, or alleged treason; defend legality and allegiance	Loyalty contestation	Medium-high; legal outcome unresolved
Foreign-agent labeling	National autonomy / authenticity	Networked-political	External ties → foreign control; recurrent authenticity defense	Civic exclusion	Strong within attributed Amnesty corpus; not independently reproduced

Source: Authors' interpretive analysis of the audited corpus. MBG mobilization evidence is limited to sources dated on or before 28 June 2026; foreign-agent findings are attributed to Amnesty International's documented corpus and are not independently reproduced by this study.

Note. Confidence labels assess support for the narrow row-level inference. They do not indicate prevalence, effect size, motive, legality, or normative validity. Source and archive qualifiers identify the stated access limit; see Appendix B for the decision rules.

Across these moves, a common mechanism becomes visible. A contestable standard, such as accuracy, propriety, experience, care, legality, responsibility, or national loyalty, acquires greater force when actors can mobilize institutional information, legal procedure, organizational platforms, experiential representation, media visibility, or coordinated digital repetition. Moral gatekeeping requires that infrastructure to support a conversion to civic worth that displaces the underlying institutional claim or transfers a burden of defense or identity repair to the critic. MBG Move 1 remains the necessary boundary: the same inequality of information can facilitate substantive response rather than speaker disqualification.

The outcomes differ in the object of judgment directed at civic standing. Conditional recognition is positively instantiated in the Medan move, where critics retain nominal membership but their credibility is conditioned on experiential proximity and demonstrated care. Loyalty contestation appears in both Jember and the Mujani controversy, but through different infrastructures and consequences: discursive-organizational in Jember and legal-organizational in Mujani. Civic exclusion, documented in the foreign-agent campaigns, challenges whether the speaker belongs within the political community at all. These are analytical distinctions at move level, not mandatory stages, prevalence estimates, or evidence of a coordinated national strategy.

Discussion

The comparison converges on one point. In moral gatekeeping, the operative question is not whether a piece of criticism was accurate, evidenced, or well-mannered. It is who holds the authority to convert an apparent defect in the criticism, such as an unproven number, an intemperate phrase, or an unwelcome proposal, into evidence against the speaker's civic standing. BGN answered Tiyo Ardianto's claim about SPPG revenue without asking whether he had earned the standing to be answered. Garda Prabowo, the Jember placard, and the complaints against Saiful Mujani did something different: each treated a contestable feature of criticism as grounds for reopening the speaker's civic worth.

The relevant asymmetry is therefore not access to information. BGN possessed greater informational resources than the critic and nevertheless used them to answer the claim. What matters is the capacity to convert a judgment about criticism into a judgment about the critic, and to make that judgment politically consequential.

That capacity has a specific anatomy: speech-to-speaker conversion, asymmetric interpretive authority, and substantive displacement. These are not empirical tendencies that moral gatekeeping happens to display more often than not. They are its constitutive conditions. Whereas gatekeeping scholarship since White (1950) has traced how editors, individuals, algorithms, platforms,

and post-publication actors select, circulate, or amplify information (Salonen et al., 2023; Wallace, 2018), moral gatekeeping places a different object at the gate: the critic's civic standing.

The mechanism exists only where all three conditions operate together. An assessment of the claim must be converted into an assessment of the claimant; an actor must possess greater capacity than the critic to make that conversion audible, repeatable, or institutionally salient; and the resulting burden of justification must shift toward the critic while the underlying claim remains substantively unresolved. Remove any one condition and what remains may be criticism, correction, disagreement, or legal scrutiny, but it is not moral gatekeeping. This is a categorical boundary for identifying the mechanism, even though the evidentiary strength and consequences of particular instances can vary.

It follows directly that not every demand for evidence, challenge to credibility, or request for a solution amounts to moral gatekeeping. Assessing the relevance and quality of evidence is compatible with treating the critic as a legitimate interlocutor throughout (Cairney & Oliver, 2017; Parkhurst & Abeysinghe, 2016). Identifying a problem and proposing a remedy are also distinct forms of political claim-making (Benford & Snow, 2000). A demand for a solution becomes relevant to moral gatekeeping only when failure to provide one is converted into a judgment about the critic's civic worth and used to displace the original claim. Political actors remain entitled to evaluate criticism. Institutions may correct false claims, citizens may demand evidence, and legal authorities may scrutinize allegedly unlawful speech. Where the three constitutive conditions do not jointly operate, the exchange falls outside moral gatekeeping as defined here.

The same boundary separates the framework from epistemic injustice. Epistemic harm can diminish a speaker's standing as a knower without placing in question that speaker's civic standing as a political participant whose claims warrant a response (Bailey, 2017; Fricker, 2007; Giladi, 2018). The sharpness of this boundary is where the framework gains analytical value against looser charges of "tone policing": it refuses to call every uncomfortable evidentiary or credibility demand gatekeeping, so that when the label is applied, it identifies a specific conversion in political standing.

Where the three conditions do operate together, conditional recognition, loyalty contestation, and civic exclusion identify three analytically distinct configurations through which civic standing is contested. They are not rungs on an escalation ladder. Conditional recognition makes credibility contingent on competence, propriety, experience, or care; loyalty contestation leaves membership intact while making allegiance disputable; civic exclusion represents the critic as standing outside the relevant political "we." Medan instantiated conditional recognition, Jember and the Mujani complaints instantiated loyalty contestation, and the attributed foreign-agent campaigns instantiated civic exclusion. None is a more advanced form of another, and nothing in the corpus establishes a necessary passage from one configuration to the next.

Nor are the standards through which these configurations are produced socially neutral. Existing work on civility shows that judgments of tone, propriety, and public-mindedness can be shaped by the identity and social position of the speaker (Bardon et al., 2023; Gubitz, 2022; Schaap & Tønder, 2025). Compressing the three configurations into a single scale of severity would erase both what is being contested, whether credibility, allegiance, or membership, and the different standards through which those contests are conducted.

Classifying a move as conditional recognition, loyalty contestation, or civic exclusion does not establish that the classification succeeded. A placard, police report, organizational statement, or foreign-agent post can classify a critic without demonstrating that audiences accepted the classification, that an institution imposed a sanction, or that the critic's standing was actually altered. These are categorically different empirical claims and require separate evidence. Jember provides high-confidence evidence that the language of betrayal was publicly displayed, not that it was generally accepted among pro-MBG participants. The foreign-agent findings are strong within Amnesty International's attributed corpus, not independently reproduced evidence of centralized state direction. Mujani's case documents legal uptake, appearance for clarification, legal defense, and reputational burden while leaving the outcome of the proceedings unresolved.

Research on legal procedures, organizational restrictions, and digital amplification shows how classificatory attacks can acquire practical costs before final sanctions occur (Chaudhry, 2022; Earl et al., 2022; Smidt et al., 2021; Sombatpoonsiri et al., 2026; Zavyalova, 2025), but those consequences must still be demonstrated rather than inferred from classification alone. Holding this line matters: attempted civic classification and demonstrated alteration of civic standing are categorically different empirical claims. The corpus establishes the former with variable and separately evidenced consequences.

The democratic significance of this mechanism becomes clearest in the Indonesian political setting examined here. Indonesia's post-authoritarian electoral order continues to contain political competition, public contestation, and organized civil society even as checks on executive power have weakened and democratic regression has deepened (Mietzner, 2025; Power, 2018; Warburton & Aspinall, 2019). Jaffrey and Warburton (2024, 2025) similarly situate the transition to the Prabowo administration within weakened institutional constraints while emphasizing that political and civic contestation has not disappeared.

The cases examined here show why the continued visibility of criticism is an insufficient measure of democratic openness. Criticism circulated, counter-interpretations remained available, and critics were not uniformly deprived of the formal capacity to speak. What varied was whether their claims received substantive engagement or whether competence, care, responsibility, propriety, or allegiance became conditions they first had to satisfy. Moral gatekeeping identifies a democratic problem that can persist even where criticism remains publicly visible: substantive answerability becomes conditional on the civic worth of the critic. The democratic question is not only whether citizens remain able to speak, but whether institutions and powerful actors can require them to establish their civic worth before their claims are treated as worthy of an answer.

What the framework does not establish should be stated as plainly as what it does. It does not establish the prevalence of moral gatekeeping across Indonesian political life, the private intentions or uniform motives of actors who invoked civility, order, responsibility, or loyalty, centralized coordination across the controversies, generalized audience acceptance of the classifications identified, or causal effects on voter behavior, public opinion, participation, or policy outcomes. Nor does the present design establish how frequently the mechanism occurs across regime types or whether democratic regression itself causes moral gatekeeping. The Method and Appendix B specify the evidentiary thresholds governing these distinctions. These are excluded inferences under the present design, rather than claims for which the evidence is merely incomplete.

Normative Implications

Solidaristic criticism is a normative implication of the analysis, grounded in the democratic value of equal civic standing. It is not a fourth outcome or a second mechanism established by the documentary evidence. Work on active solidarity and criticism within valued communities helps articulate its premise: attachment need not exclude internal challenge (Einwohner et al., 2021; Wright et al., 2022). Equal civic standing does not require institutions to agree with critics. It requires that claims remain answerable without the critic first having to establish competence, loyalty, or civic worth as a condition of receiving a substantive response.

This places the primary burden of answerability on institutions with greater access to information, procedures, and organizational capacity. They remain free to correct inaccurate claims, contest evidence, or reject allegations, but those responses should address the claim rather than substitute a judgment about the speaker for substantive engagement. Critics retain corresponding duties of accuracy and revision, and evidence exchange remains reciprocal (Oliver & Boaz, 2019). Reciprocity, however, does not erase asymmetry: actors with greater institutional capacity bear a greater responsibility to disclose relevant grounds and answer identifiable public claims.

In the Indonesian setting, gotong royong provides a locally resonant vocabulary for this distribution of responsibility. Its political meanings have never been fixed and have been repeatedly reshaped through state and social projects (Bowen, 1986; Suwignyo, 2019).

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Used normatively here, gotong royong does not demand conformity as proof of belonging. It names a shared responsibility to address public problems without making agreement a condition of civic membership or answerability (Schäfer et al., 2025; Walzer, 1987). Rights and due process remain the floor: hearing a claim does not validate it, criticism remains answerable to evidence, and solidarity cannot become another loyalty test.

Conclusion

Criticism does not have to be banned outright to be constrained. This article examined one way that happens: an assessment of what a critic says is converted into an assessment of who the critic is. Moral gatekeeping names that conversion. It requires three conditions together: an assessment of speech becomes an assessment of the speaker, some actors command greater capacity than others to make that judgment audible, repeatable, and consequential, and the burden of justification shifts to the critic while the original claim remains unresolved.

The three Indonesian cases examined here show both the mechanism and its limit. BGN's rebuttal of the MBG revenue claim shows that unequal access to information can also produce a direct answer rather than gatekeeping. Where gatekeeping did occur, it took different forms: conditional recognition through experiential disqualification in Medan, loyalty contestation through an explicit charge of betrayal in Jember and a prolonged legal dispute in which Saiful Mujani's allegiance was contested, and, in Amnesty International's documentation of foreign-agent labeling, civic exclusion: the classification of journalists and activists as standing outside the political community altogether. These are distinct configurations rather than stages of one escalation, and each requires its own evidence of consequences.

The corpus and its 28 June 2026 cutoff limit what can be claimed. The findings do not establish how common this mechanism is in Indonesian politics, whether it is coordinated, what motivated the actors involved, criminal guilt in any case discussed, or whether audiences accepted the classifications made. What they do offer is a way to separate an attempt to discredit a critic from its demonstrated effects, and both from ordinary, legitimate scrutiny of evidence or legality.

The normative implication is that criticism can stay visible and still go unanswered when critics are made to prove their standing first. Solidaristic criticism places the primary burden of answerability on institutions, since institutions hold the resources to answer public claims, without excusing critics from ordinary duties of accuracy or treating solidarity as a substitute for evidence.

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