

Negotiating Social Criticism in the Post New Order Press: A Study of Timun Comic Strip in *Kompas* Newspaper

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Abstract

This article examines the comic strip “Timun,” published in the *Kompas* newspaper, as a form of social critique in post-New Order Indonesian press. It explores how the visual representations in the strip articulate subtle forms of satire on social and political conditions in contemporary Indonesia. Through a visual semiotic analysis of selected strips, the article demonstrates that Timun uses satirical and ironic situations to reflect tensions in society while simultaneously negotiating within the editorial policies of mainstream media. Rather than conveying direct political critique, the strip operates through what can be described as “visual negotiation,” where humor becomes a strategy for expressing dissent in a moderated form. These findings suggest that comic strips in mainstream newspapers function not only as entertainment but also as cultural products in which social critique can emerge in subtle and negotiated ways.

Keywords: visual semiotics, negotiated criticism, Timun comic strips

Negosiasi Kritik Sosial di Pers Pasca-Orde Baru: Studi Komik Setrip Timun di Surat Kabar Kompas

Abstrak

Artikel ini mengkaji komik setrip “Timun”, yang diterbitkan di surat kabar Kompas, sebagai bentuk kritik sosial dalam media cetak Indonesia pasca Orde Baru. Artikel ini mengeksplorasi bagaimana representasi visual dalam komik setrip tersebut mengartikulasikan bentuk-bentuk satire yang halus terhadap kondisi sosial dan politik di Indonesia kontemporer. Melalui analisis semiotik visual dari beberapa komik strip terpilih, artikel ini menunjukkan bahwa Timun menggunakan situasi satir dan ironis untuk merefleksikan ketegangan di masyarakat sekaligus bernegosiasi dalam kebijakan editorial media arus utama. Alih-alih menyampaikan kritik politik langsung, komik tersebut beroperasi melalui apa yang dapat digambarkan sebagai “negosiasi visual,” di mana humor menjadi strategi untuk mengekspresikan perbedaan pendapat dalam bentuk yang dimoderasi. Temuan ini menunjukkan bahwa komik strip di surat kabar arus utama berfungsi tidak hanya sebagai hiburan tetapi juga sebagai produk budaya di mana kritik sosial dapat muncul dengan cara yang halus dan dinegosiasikan.

Kata Kunci: semiotika visual, negosiasi kritik, komik setrip Timun

Introduction

Social criticism can be understood as a discursive practice aimed at identifying and challenging unjust power relations and deviations from socially established norms. Within the framework of cultural studies and critical theory, cultural texts are not merely interpreted as forms of entertainment, but as sites of ideological struggle where social meanings are continuously produced, negotiated, and contested.¹ From this perspective, media functions as an important arena in which power relations are both reproduced and resisted through representational practices. This theoretical foundation is essential to understand how visual media, such as comics, serves as a strategic medium for social critique due to their accessible and humorous nature.

The significant research interest in the critical social perspective within visual media is evident in studies across Southeast Asia. John A. Lent explore how cartoons were historically utilized as political satire to bypass authoritarian regimes and repressive social conditions.² Similarly, Mahamood emphasizes that in contexts like Malaysia, cartoons became an essential “underground” form of expression when conventional media channels were suppressed.³ In Indonesia, a similar trend is evident in the works of Rahmat Riyadi and Misrad,⁴ whose works sharply convey social commentary in the post-New Order era, signaling a shift in how visual narratives engage with contemporary social issues.

From a social criticism perspective,⁵ visual structure is crucial because

¹ Stuart Hall, ed., *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (London: Sage/The Open University, 1997); John Fiske, *Understanding Popular Culture*, 2nd ed (London: Routledge, 2011).

² John A. Lent, “Animation in Southeast Asia,” *Media Asia* 26, no. 4 (January 1999): 192–95, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01296612.1999.11726593>.

³ Mulyadi Mahamood, “The Development of Malay Editorial Cartoons,” *Asian Journal of Social Science* 25, no. 1 (1997): 37–58, <https://doi.org/10.1163/030382497x00031>.

⁴ Rahmat Riyadi, *Parodi Negeri Kami: 38 Tahun Timun Di Kompas*, 2 vols. (Jakarta: Penerbit Buku Kompas, 2023); Rizkyanoor Rizkyanoor, Sri Astuty, and Lalita Hanief, “Analisis Semiotika Representasi Kritik Sosial atas Kebijakan Pemerintah Indonesia pada Mice Cartoon,” *MetaCommunication: Journal of Communication Studies* 2, no. 2 (2017): 53–82.

⁵ Alice Iliescu, “The Comic Strip – A Weapon for Social Criticism,” *IRREGULAR* 1, no. 1 (2016).

images do not merely illustrate the text, instead they function as a primary semiotic resource that conveys ideological meaning. They operate as a system of signs that reflect or challenge social hierarchies. This is particularly evident in the format of comic strips, which differs from broader comic forms, because of its limited space, the comic strip relies heavily on a dense visual grammar to articulate critique. This is why characters' gestures, facial expressions, and visual props like envelopes, jackets, are imbued with significant political meaning. This shows that social criticism in comic strips is not only contained in the text, but also in the visualization of the images⁶. Furthermore, protest cartoons, as studied by Totry and Medzini,⁷ are used in public demonstrations and become a tool of political communication in countries where people view visualization as a direct message rather than textual content. An example is the character Handala created by the Palestinian political cartoonist Naji Al-Ali, who is said to be an icon of resistance in the Arab world. In Indonesia, comic strips such as "Panji Koming" often contain criticisms of corruption, bureaucracy, and social inequality.⁸

The historical trajectory of Indonesian comic strips reflects a shift from mere entertainment to a sophisticated medium for indirect social criticism. Previous studies have extensively documented this evolution,⁹ particularly how iconic strips such as "Panji Koming,"¹⁰ "Doyok dan Ali Oncom," "Timun,"¹¹ "Mang Ohle,"¹² and "Pak Bei"¹³ utilized character representation and visual symbols to navigate the restrictive environments of the past.¹⁴ Ac-

⁶ Iliescu, "The Comic Strip – A Weapon for Social Criticism."

⁷ Mary Totry and Arnon Medzini, "The Use of Cartoons in Popular Protests that Focus on Geographic, Social, Economic and Political Issues," *European Journal of Geography* 4, no. 1 (2013): 22–35.

⁸ Muhammad Nashir Setiawan, *Menakar Panji Koming: Tafsiran Komik Karya Dwi Koendoro Pada Masa Reformasi 1998* (Jakarta: Penerbit Buku Kompas, 2002).

⁹ Seno Gumira Ajidarma, *Ngobrolin Komik* (Yogyakarta: Pabrik Tulisan, 2021).

¹⁰ Setiawan, *Menakar Panji Koming*.

¹¹ Riyadi, *Parodi Negeri Kami*.

¹² Seno Gumira Ajidarma, *Antara Tawa Dan Bahaya: Kartun Dalam Politik Humor* (Jakarta: Kepustakaan Populer Gramedia, 2012).

¹³ Masdi, *Pak Bei Sok Tahu* (Jakarta: Kepustakaan Populer Gramedia, 2012).

¹⁴ Tri Pujiati, Seli Nirwani, and Yasir Mubarak, "Representation of Social Criticism of Indonesian People's Life Phenomena through Comic Strip: A Semiotic Approach," *Proceedings of the 1st International Conference on*

ording to Mubarok, this has been proven to make the comics more engaging and more meaningful.¹⁵

As a long-standing entertainment medium, the New Order regime previously tightly controlled symbolic spaces through censorship, propaganda, both narrative and visual,¹⁶ and the hegemony of a single narrative.¹⁷ The reform era marked a phase of deconstruction of these various elements, which were considered the sole authority in the production of meaning. David Hill and Krishna Sen noted that after the reforms, Indonesian media experienced an “explosion of freedom,” triggering an increase in the diversity of public discourse.¹⁸ Everything seemed to become critical, eventually becoming an arena filled with opposing voices, as media reform policies opened up more space for such articulation. Consequently, transition into the reform era brought a new set of challenges for comic strips positioned within institutional outlets, where the newly found freedom had to be balanced with the structural logic of the media industry.

While political cartoons in Indonesia have been widely researched, a significant research gap remains in the analysis of how critical voices in comic strips are negotiated within the specific scope of the socially responsible press as exemplified by *Kompas*.¹⁹ Unlike previous literature that focuses on overt political satire, this study offers novelty by dissecting the subtle mechanisms

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- ¹⁵ Muchammad Bilal Mubarok, Moch Fakrurroji, and Betty Tresnawaty, “Komik Strip Sebagai Sarana Kritik Sosial,” *ANNABA : Jurnal Ilmu Jurnalistik* 6, no. 1 (2021): 23–44.
- ¹⁶ Wijaya Herlambang, *Kekerasan budaya pasca 1965: bagaimana Orde Baru melegitimasi anti-komunisme melalui sastra dan film*, Cetakan kedua (Serpong, Tangerang Selatan: Marjin Kiri, 2014).
- ¹⁷ Budi Irawanto, *Film, ideologi, dan militer: hegemoni militer dalam sinema Indonesia : analisis semiotik terhadap Enam Djam di Jogja, Janur Kuning, dan Serangan Fajar*, 2nd ed. Tomi Wibisono, with Eros Djarot (Yogyakarta: Warning Books bekerjasama dengan Insist Press, 2017).
- ¹⁸ David T. Hill and Krishna Sen, eds., *Politics and the Media in Twenty-First Century Indonesia: Decade of Democracy* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203840429>.
- ¹⁹ Fred S. Siebert, Theodore Peterson, and Wilbur Schramm, *Four Theories of the Press: The Authoritarian, Libertarian, Social Responsibility, and Soviet Communist Concepts of What the Press Should Be and Do* (Freeport, N.Y: Books for Libraries Press, 1973); Tjipta Lesmana, *20 TAHUN KOMPAS: Profil Pers Indonesia Dewasa Ini* (Jakarta: Erwin Rika Press, 1985).

of social criticism negotiation in “Timun.” To fill this gap, this article uses the theoretical framework of visual semiotics from Machin and Mayr to deconstruct the meaning behind the symbols in the comic strip. The structure of this article is then followed by an explanation of the methodology and an in-depth analysis of selected comic strips to gain reflection on the strategy of social criticism negotiation in the contemporary public sphere.

Research Methods

This study employed a qualitative design with a descriptive analytical approach. This approach was chosen because it focuses on exploring hidden meanings in the negotiation of social criticism through the comic strip “Timun.” Using Machin and Mayr’s visual semiotic analysis,²⁰ the study attempts to examine how the symbols in the comic strip are negotiated to convey subtle social criticism within the mainstream media space. As its source material, this study used the “Timun” comic strip published in the *Kompas* newspaper between 2014 and 2018. Two images from the comic strip from this period were purposively selected based on the visual narrative of the text, representing crucial political issues relevant to the discussion.²¹

The analysis procedure was conducted through two main stages: the first stage was an analysis of denotation and connotation in elements such as iconography, setting, and salience. Second, linking these visual-text findings to the socio-political context and media editorial constraints to uncover socio-ideological conclusions from the critical negotiation strategies employed by the “Timun” comic strip. In this regard, the researcher also recognizes the role of interpretation in this analysis. To maintain objectivity, the interpretation process is always based on visual data and contextualized with documented sources related to the events discussed. Therefore, the results of this research represent a series of dialectics between the data and the surrounding social context.

Indonesian Comics Post-Reformation

The post-reformation period marked a significant shift in the Indonesian media landscape, particularly following the revocation of restrictive

²⁰ David Machin and Andrea Mayr, *How to Do Critical Discourse Analysis: A Multimodal Introduction* (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2012).

²¹ Michael Quinn Patton, *Qualitative Research & Evaluation Methods*, 3rd ed. (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2010).

press regulations in 1998. Fiona Robertson-Snape notes this change opened up greater space for the media to be critical and play a more active role in addressing socio-political issues, particularly in exposing corrupt practices.²² The media were no longer entirely under state control, although they continued to operate within a political-economic structure rife with vested interests. However, she also emphasized the existence of structural obstacles that hinder the optimal implementation of this role, such as journalists' lack of experience in investigative reporting and the prevalence of corruption within the bureaucratic system, which at that time was often fueled by low salary structures.²³



Figure 1. Source: *Merdeka*, November 21 1998.

This phenomenon was highlighted by Kees van Dijk,²⁴ who explained that the practice of Corruption, Collusion, and Nepotism (KKN) had become a central characteristic of the New Order regime and continued into the early phase of the Reformation. Corruption was not merely individual deviant behavior, but rather part of a system of power that supported political stability through patronage networks between economic and political elites. Collusion and nepotism reinforced the dominance of ruling families and cronies, even after Suharto stepped down. Vedi R. Hadiz added that many old power net-

²² Fiona Robertson-Snape, "Corruption, Collusion and Nepotism in Indonesia," *Third World Quarterly* 20, no. 3 (June 1999): 589–602, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436599913703>.

²³ Adang Budiman, Amanda Roan, and Victor J. Callan, "Rationalizing Ideologies, Social Identities and Corruption Among Civil Servants in Indonesia During the Suharto Era," *Journal of Business Ethics* 116, no. 1 (August 2013): 139–49, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-012-1451-y>.

²⁴ C. (Kees) van Dijk, *A Country in Despair: Indonesia between 1997 and 2000* (Leiden: Brill, 2001).

works persisted and even adapted to the new democratic structure.²⁵ While formal reforms did occur, old authoritarian practices often emerged in more covert forms.

Doran Lee also noted that despite increased political participation and decentralization, Indonesia still faced serious challenges such as identity politics, religious and ethnic conflicts, and the return of oligarchic tendencies.²⁶ Indonesian democracy, he argued, still had to grapple with the legacy of traditional power and the emergence of new styles of authoritarianism. This led authors such as Lambsdorff and Savage to conclude that the restoration of political and economic stability in post-New Order Indonesia was not a quick process, given the persistent systemic legacies of the previous era.²⁷

In this context, comics and cartoon strips, which in the previous era were primarily produced as light entertainment, began to show new tendencies as a medium for social reflection and political critique. This change was inextricably linked to the post-reform socio-political situation, marked by the rise of anti-corruption discourse, the dismantling of authoritarianism, and the emergence of new tensions such as identity-based conflicts, decentralization of power, and political polarization. As part of print media, comic strips also underwent a repositioning of their function. They were no longer merely filling empty space or providing humor but began to function as a means of articulating opinions and interpreting social situations. In this more open media landscape, comic strips also gained the opportunity to respond to real-world events through concise, symbolic, and easily accessible visual language.

Furthermore, based on this, it can be assumed that the emergence of comic strips that later became critical and dared to speak out against the events around them was due to the positioning of satirical cartoons that liked to criticize in the post-New Order era, which was a new and popular genre in the Indonesian comic landscape. This can be understood as part of the changing cultural formation in Indonesian society. If during the New Order era cartoons and comics tended to be limited to the function of light humor and entertain-

²⁵ Vedi R. Hadiz, "Retrieving the Past for the Future? Indonesia and the New Order Legacy," *Asian Journal of Social Science* 28, no. 2 (2000): 11–33, <https://doi.org/10.1163/030382400X00037>.

²⁶ Doreen Lee, "The Legacies of the Reformasi Movement in Indonesia," *Current History* 117, no. 800 (2025): 222–28.

²⁷ Johann Graf Lambsdorff, "Corruption and Rent-Seeking," *Public Choice* 113, no. 1/2 (2002): 97–125, <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1020320327526>; Paul Savage, "Indonesia : A Nation in Crisis," *Reports on an Asia 2000 Seminar* 23 (December 1998): 19.

ment that was considered political, then after the reformation a new tendency emerged to then position cartoons as a medium of satire and social criticism. With reference to Raymond Williams,²⁸ this phenomenon can be categorized as an emerging culture, namely a form of cultural practice that emerged after previously being suppressed by the dominant structure during the New Order era, where cartoons at that time were not free to voice criticism related to the socio-political conditions in Indonesia and were more limited to conveying humor or if there was criticism, referring to GM Sudarta, it was more of a “whisper”.²⁹

Inevitably, this gave rise to new hope amidst the sluggish Indonesian comics industry, amidst the influx of imported comics that became popular reading material at the time. Critical cartoons, in this case, seemed to offer a new perspective and serve as an antidote to the stagnation in the local comics world. However, this situation also presented a dilemma for comic strips that existed within the mainstream media space, such as the Timun comic strip.

The Timun comic strip’s position in this context was essentially liminal, in a space between its birth and circulation in a more open post-reform landscape marked by the rise of expressive critical voices. On the other hand, Timun was also intertwined with Kompas, a mainstream media outlet with institutional interests, journalistic ethics, and the need to negotiate with the state. This situation ultimately placed Timun in an ambivalent position: it could not fully speak out as loudly as other cartoons that emerged in the post-New Order era, but it also could not return to the total silencing experienced by comics in the previous era. The criticism that was then articulated through Timun tended to appear in the form of sarcasm that was subtly, symbolic and implicit, as if whispering and then moving to represent the conditions at that time.

About “Timun,” *Kompas*, and “Rasa” Journalism

The idea for what later became the comic strip “Timun” emerged on January 27, 1985. Rahmat Riyadi, the cartoonist behind “Timun,” was asked by Dwi Koendoro, a colleague at *Kompas* who worked on documentary films, to accompany him in the *Kompas Sunday* edition with another comic strip.

²⁸ Raymond Williams, *Culture* (London: Fontana, 1981).

²⁹ G. M. Sudarta, *Reformasi: Sejak Tumbangnya Orde Baru Sampai Lahirnya Reformasi Dalam Kartun* (Jakarta: Penerbit Harian Kompas, 2000).

“Timun” later became one of the comic strips that are still published in *Kompas* daily to this day.³⁰

The title “Timun” itself—the word *timun* (or *ketimun*) typically denotes cucumber in Indonesian—is not chosen without specific intent. Riyadi explained that the title was chosen because it was easy to remember and accepted by a wide range of readers at the time.³¹ He also stated that “Timun” was used to avoid personification, as he considered using a person’s name to be quite sensitive and risky. Furthermore, the rounded and unrealistic shape of the word aligns with his style as a journalist, who wants to express his views and critiques related to phenomena, while still using humor that evokes laughter. This also aligns with *Kompas*’ positioning as a mainstream newspaper that needs to prioritize stability and avoid risky forms of direct confrontation.³²

Referring to the above perspective, it is undeniable that the general attitude of “Timun” as a comic strip is closely related to the newspaper it occupies, *Kompas*. In this regard, it must be noted that *Kompas* is a mainstream newspaper designed not only as a media institution but also as a profit-driven corporation. This complex position of *Kompas* makes its journalism prone to self-censorship of content deemed too harsh or disruptive to the stability of state power. This practice of self-censorship, according to Wijayanto, is referred to as “*rasa* journalism.”³³ where *rasa* is defined as an emotional state, such as happiness or sadness. *Rasa* can appear in letters, poems, or speeches, indicating the indirect or implied meaning of words that are important in communication and social interaction. This is closely linked to the Javanese cultural context, where journalism and Indonesian political culture are intertwined. *Rasa* journalism, then, refers to the practice in which journalists use their *perasaan*, or gut-instinct, to navigate state repression.

This is deeply internalized in *Kompas* journalism, where its journalists are steadfast in upholding this stance. There are roughly three reasons behind *Kompas*’s journalistic practices. The first is the bitter experience of the news-

³⁰ Ignatius Nawa Tunggal, “Setia Di Jalur Pengabdian Humor,” *Kompas.Id* (Indonesia), February 25, 2023, <https://www.kompas.id/artikel/setia-di-jalur-pengabdian-humor>.

³¹ Aditia Muara Padiatra, “Wawancara dengan Pak Rahmat Riyadi,” (Depok, West Java, Indonesia), July 3, 2025.

³² Padiatra, “Wawancara dengan Pak Rahmat Riyadi.”

³³ Wijayanto, “Old Practice in a New Era: Rasa as the Basis of Self-Censorship in Kompas Daily Newspaper,” *GSTF Journal on Media & Communications* 2, no. 2 (November 2015), <https://doi.org/10.7603/s40874-014-0019-0>.

paper being banned by the authorities between January 21 and February 5, 1978.³⁴ Although *Kompas* was able to re-emerge on February 6, 1978, it was also required to sign a contract with the New Order regime at the time, which included: (1) no more articles related to the president's family and wealth, (2) no longer questioning the military's dual function (political and security functions), (3) no longer writing about issues related to ethnicity, religion, race, and inter-group relations (*suku, agama, ras, dan antargolongan*, commonly referred to as *SARA* in Indonesia), and (4) no articles that could incite social conflict.³⁵

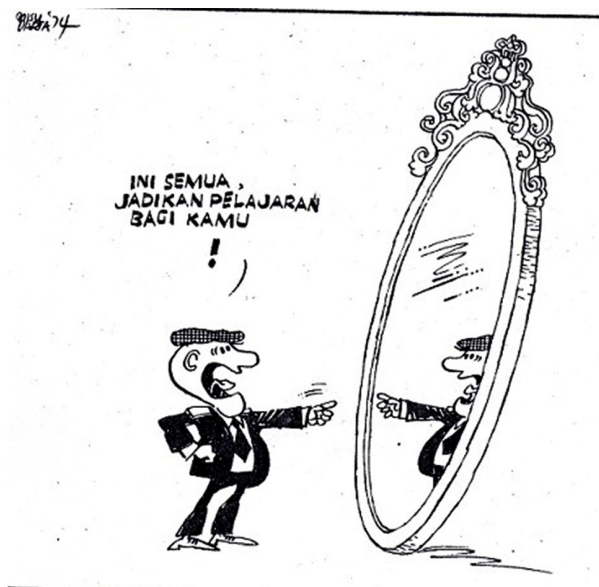


Figure 2. Source : *Kompas*, January 19 1974

This traumatic experience prompted *Kompas* to reflect on its journalistic practices, particularly regarding the intertwining of power. The second reason is the positioning of journalists from *Kompas* who come from minority groups, where the founder and first generation are Catholics in terms of religion and some of them are of Chinese ethnicity,³⁶ which makes them need to be self-aware and careful. The third reason is economic. The implicit rationale

³⁴ Jimmy S. Harianto, "Hari-hari Seusai 'Kompas' Dibredel via Telepon," *kompas.id*, February 6, 2022, <https://www.kompas.id/artikel/kompas-dibreidel-via-telpon-wartawan-tetap-liputan>.

³⁵ Harianto, "Hari-hari Seusai 'Kompas' Dibredel via Telepon."

³⁶ St Sularto, *Syukur tiada akhir: jejak langkah Jakob Oetama*, Edisi revisi (Jakarta: Penerbit Buku Kompas, 2015).

behind this practice of “*rasa journalism*” is that *Kompas* needed to survive during various regimes, such as the New Order and the Reformation eras. By surviving, *Kompas* could secure its economic interests and maintain its close ties to those in power. *Kompas* hoped to be protected from the majority in Indonesia. This was also closely related to the livelihoods of the ethnic minorities within the media institution.³⁷ This necessitated *Kompas* need to negotiate with those in power and foster sustainable relationships over time. Within mainstream media like *Kompas*, “Timun” emerged, inevitably adhering to the editorial policies of the newspaper it worked for in order to remain active and published.

However, if we examine it from another perspective, this situation did not necessarily diminish the critical potential of the “Timun” comic strip. Rather, it was within these constraints that discursive creativity flourished. Cartoonists in this case learn to use indirect representation strategies, such as personification, or allegory and certain visual symbols to convey their social messages.³⁸ In this practice, comic strips can then function as an alternative articulation space that works liminally, where criticism is not erased, but is framed in such a way that it can live in the mainstream media space.

Comic Analysis 1



Figure 3. Source: *Kompas*, October 26, 2014

Drawing on the visual analysis method of Machin and Mayr,³⁹ which examines several aspects, namely iconography, attributes, setting, and salience (prominence), we can observe several visualizations, such as the presence

³⁷ Wijayanto, “Old Practice in a New Era.”

³⁸ G. M. Sudarta, *Berteriak Dalam Bisikan* (Jakarta: Penerbit Buku Kompas, 2018).

³⁹ Machin and Mayr, *How to Do Critical Discourse Analysis*.

of a stone, interpreted as a symbol of mass violence or collective aggression and social punishment. The absence of a clearly visualized perpetrator, with only the stone projectile itself, suggests that this is violence without an agent. Violence is presented as a collective and anonymous phenomenon, with the source of the violence not personally identifiable.

In the panel, Timun—the titular character—is seen running in pain after being hit by a stone, which author interprets as representing the ordinary people who become victims of the conflict. Timun is depicted with a small body and a large head, in keeping with the cartoonist Rahmat Riyadi's characteristic depictions. His eyes are closed and wide open, and his mouth is agape. The forward-leaning, hunched posture, as if falling, suggests a defensive movement. There is no visualization of a counterattack. This then constructs the character's meaning as a passive subject who then suffers the impact of the chaotic situation. Timun, the character, as a representation of the people, is visualized as trying to defend or defend rather than attack. This visualization can be interpreted as meaning that in this conflict, those who ultimately suffer most are not the perpetrators, but rather the common people who are usually affected by the conflict.

Timun's clothing is depicted through minimalist, neutral-colored strokes without specific attributes of group identity, which strategically reinforces his visualization as a generic figure representing society at large. In visual studies, the use of neutral or simplified strokes often functions as a symbol of purity and moral neutrality, allowing the character to transcend specific socio-political affiliations.⁴⁰ This simplicity ensures that Timun's experiences of suffering are not perceived as the struggle of a particular marginalized group, but as a universal human condition. As argued by McCloud in his concept of masking, where the more cartoony or simplified a face and its attributes are, the more people can identify with that character.⁴¹ This further strengthens Timun's position as a moral subject who is not tied to a particular political identity.

Furthermore, regarding the setting, the minimalist backdrop, visualized in the form of soil and grass, can be interpreted as a generic or general setting. The lack of spatial detail also eliminates a concrete social context. The absence of schools, homes, or offices associated with specific institutions suggests that the conflict can be represented as a phenomenon not tied to a specific social

⁴⁰ Faber Birren, *The Symbolism of Color* (Secaucus, N.J.: Citadel Press, 1988).

⁴¹ Scott McCloud, *Understanding comics = Memahami komik* (Jakarta: Kepustakaan Populer Gramedia, 2022).

space. Furthermore, the abstract visualization allows for a deeper narrative, allowing readers to connect the events to various situations in Indonesia.

In terms of salience, the large number of stones thrown from one side to the other, the emphatic lines that then emerge, accompanied by the almost identical repetition of panels 1 through 3, and the depiction of the character, Timun, screaming and crying with her mouth wide open, allow the audience to interpret this as a depiction of intense, relentless, and painful social conflict, affecting not only the perpetrators but also the general public and Indonesia as a nation. Furthermore, this visual repetition can also be read as a rhetorical strategy. The positioning of repeated visual elements can build a sense of intensity and normalization. Repetitive violence becomes a seemingly ordinary and ongoing phenomenon.

The graphic style in this comic is comical rather than realistic. This low-level visual modality is characterized by the absence of realistic anatomical details, such as the absence of blood, and the simplified body shapes. With this modality, violence is not presented directly but rather symbolically. This allows violent events to be represented without creating a frightening or horrific effect yet still conveys the meaning of suffering.

On the other hand, in terms of point of view, there are no points of view that seem to be at the extremes of above and below, which then creates a relatively equal visual relationship between the reader and Timun. With this parallel perspective, the reader is then positioned not as the more powerful party, but rather as an observer on equal footing with Timun. However, the character's position as a constant target of stone pelts still creates an unequal power relationship between Timun, the character in the panel, and the unseen force, who is throwing stones at each other.

The four panels themselves form a coherent visual sequence: panel 1 shows the beginning of the attack, panel 2 shows the character's verbal reaction, panel 3 recaptures the suffering, and panel 4 shows a more collapsed and resigned body position. According to McCloud, the sequence of panels itself creates a temporality that ultimately shapes the narrative.⁴² In this comic, time is depicted as a continuous series of suffering, with no subsequent panels indicating a resolution or cessation of the violence. This reinforces the visual meaning of the unresolved conflict, where the visuals do not offer a solution but merely depict a repetitive process. Based on these four aspects, the primary visual meaning constructed in the comic strip is a representation of the suffering caused by political polarization. Timun, in this case, is represented

⁴² McCloud, *Understanding comics = Memahami komik*.

as a subject without group attributes, an ordinary citizen in a generic space, and subject to projectiles from various directions. Upon further examination, the visuals do not depict the conflict as a clear arena of battle between two parties, but rather as a situation where ordinary citizens find themselves at the center of a vortex of violence.

This comic strip is closely related to events occurring at the time, when polarization occurred between two camps, Jokowi and Prabowo, which then escalated through social media, which in this case served as a political echo chamber for the feud between the two camps. In line with this, symbolic violence, hoaxes, and attacks on identity intensified, leading to mass mobilization in public spaces, which then had the potential to escalate into real conflict. In this context, public fears arose that Indonesian democracy was shifting toward confrontation and political tribalism. The Timun comic strip then in this case narrates the anxiety of the situation symbolically through scenes of several panels which were then published with several scenes, namely residents throwing stones at each other, the main character, who in this case is represented by Timun, is afraid and avoids it, and his lament in the last panel expresses the strip's narrative gist: "Oh... My Indonesia...."

Kompas itself has historically been a middle-class media outlet promoting stability and civic ethics. This ideology ultimately shaped the *habitus* of *Kompas* readers, who are predominantly urban middle-class and anxious about conflict and chaos. This is evident in the social practice of the Timun comic strip, which not only portrays reality but also reinforces the norm that political conflict is a manifestation of "public immaturity." In this regard, the "Timun" comic strip can also be read as a medium within a long tradition of Indonesian media morality, attempting to re-orient the public toward a narrative of unity amidst the loss of a sense of togetherness and growing hostility among citizens due to political polarization. Furthermore, *Kompas* strategically positions itself as an ideological medium. Its critique is directed at the public, not the political elite directly. This allows *Kompas* to appear neutral, despite disseminating certain values and ideologies. Fundamentally, the social critique represented by this comic strip is not directed at the state or government, but rather at the people caught in political polarization. Thus, this comic presents social criticism that focuses on public behavior and the condition of social relations post-election.

Comic Analysis 2:



Figure 4. Source: *Kompas*, May 6, 2018

When “Timun” is analyzed through Machin and Mayr’s framework, which examined several aspects such as iconography, attributes, setting, and salience, several interesting aspects emerged, such as *Kampret*, depicted as a black bat hanging from a branch, and *Cebong*, depicted as a black tadpole swimming in water. In this context, the position of the iconographic meaning confirms the stereotypical media representation at the time, positioning *Kampret* as the pro-Pra-bowo camp, and *Cebong* as the pro-Jokowi camp.⁴³ However, if we further examine how these representations were framed, these two figures are not depicted in aggressive positions, but rather in a relaxed dialogue. On the other hand, the use of jet black on both characters also suggests that they are equally dark, creating the impression that, although they come from different habitats, they share a visual uniformity. In the author’s view, this is a depiction strategy of the “Timun” comic strip cartoonist, who negates any claim to superior truth by either side. No character is depicted as brighter, larger, or more visually dominant. Thus, through the visualization of the comic strip, the logic of binary opposition that positions one side as right and the other as wrong is rejected. Furthermore, the dark color can also be interpreted as meaning that the two characters are not sacred actors voicing a single truth but are equally part of a political game.

In terms of attributes, both are depicted with wide smiles and round eyes, rather than aggressive expressions. This visual attribute ultimately dampens the political identity, which is usually full of anger and heated conflict. This

⁴³ Ahmad Irfan Fauzi, “Penetrasi Politik Identitas Melalui Media Sosial: Studi Terbentuknya Identitas Politik ‘Kampret’ Dan ‘Cebong’ Di Indonesia,” *Journal of Politics and Policy* 4, no. 2 (December 2022), <https://doi.org/10.21776/ub.jppol.2022.004.02.05>.

can also be interpreted as a depiction strategy by comic strip cartoonists to de-escalate the conflict and shift political events into the realm of humor. Upon closer examination, these visual attributes work to neutralize the meaning of conflict and replace it with coexistence.

The position of the hanging *kampret* (bat) and the swimming *cebong* (tadpole) also depicts different worlds, with the *kampret* predominantly inhabiting the terrestrial world and the *cebong* predominantly aquatic. This narrates the visual code of habitat differences, which can also be interpreted as differences in political identity. However, despite their different habitats, both *kampret* and *cebong* are depicted interacting peacefully, a message emphasized by “Timun,” which also reflects the moderate values upheld by *Kompas*.

In terms of setting, the river and trees are also interpreted as natural spaces rather than political ones, that symbolize a realm outside of institutional and bureaucratic control.⁴⁴ In visual discourse, natural elements often represent “the commons” or a state of primordial freedom that stands in contrast to the structured, often oppressive, urban or institutional environments.. This is interpreted as a symbolic positioning of criticism, which suggests that political conflict is not natural, but rather carefully created by humans and based on self-interest. Furthermore, the neutral setting, devoid of formal political symbols such as parliament buildings, flags, or party attributes, reinforces the narrative and indirectly shifts the political conflict from the institutional sphere to a more universal symbolic space. This simultaneously removes the heated and rife political context explicitly and strengthens the existing metaphor.

In the salience position, the most prominent and captured in the comic strip are the wide smiles of the two characters, the *cebong* and *kampret*. These are clearly visible due to their large size and contrasting colors, where white teeth meet the jet-black bodies of both. This can then be interpreted as social cohesion or harmony, where the nuances of friendship are strongly visible rather than conflict or hostility. On the other hand, the third panel, which focuses on the statement “we must not be pitched by netizens” through its dominant text placement, becomes a social critique launched by “Timun” against the polarized society at that time. This sentence is prominently placed in large print, and its central position makes it the center of the moral message in the visual composition. With this strategy, the primary meaning then lies not in the identity of the *kampret* or *cebong* itself, but rather in the warning against falling into the logic of divide and rule.

⁴⁴ Lucia Impelluso, *Nature and Its Symbols* (Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2005).

Through the visualization depicted in the “Timun” comic strip, *kampret* and *cebong* is not presented as two opposing sides, but as two figures who recognize that they can be exploited by the conflict. In this case, the visuals work in harmony with the text to construct an alternative discourse, where political hostility is not inevitable but can be negotiated through critical awareness. At its core, “Timun” reflects a broader social structure, namely identity politics, which has developed since 2014, when conflicts based on ethnicity, race, and religion (SARA) emerged, causing public unrest and fragmentation, such as the breakdown of family relationships, friendships, and communities. The use of animal symbols, such as *kampret* and *cebong*, is also narrated as a weapon of delegitimization to attack political opponents from opposing sides. In practice, this comic presents social criticism by positioning ordinary people as victims of the ongoing polarization narrative, by then presenting *kampret* and *cebong*, which are represented accurately, the Timun comic strip in this case wants to show that political conflict is not something that is essential, but the result of construction based on certain interests.

At the Crossroads: Negotiations between Expression and Industrial Logic

Within the framework of popular culture, comic strips, particularly those found in mainstream media, are not merely a medium of entertainment or a form of artistic visualization. They are also part of a cultural production system that operates within an industrial logic, in this case the media.⁴⁵ In this context, their position as products is intended for regular (daily or weekly) and mass consumption, and are distributed through media institutions with vested interests, both economic and political. Therefore, comic strips occupy an ambivalent position: on the one hand, they serve as a space for the critical articulation of ideas and expression, but on the other, they also exist within a production network that must comply with power relations in the form of market demands and editorial policies.

As part of this intertwining of ideas and networks of interests, comic strips emerge, addressing and possessing characters that are close to the everyday lives of their readers. Its concise format, simple visuals, and narratives that often highlight situations close to the lives of ordinary people make it a medium easily accessible to various social strata.⁴⁶ In this context, comic

⁴⁵ Charles Hatfield and Bart Beaty, eds., *Comics Studies: A Guidebook*, London: Rutgers University Press, 2020.

⁴⁶ McCloud, *Understanding comics = Memahami komik*.

strips can serve as a cultural communication medium, bridging personal experiences with broader social issues. These phenomena, ranging from politics, economics, to morality, can be conveyed in a lighthearted manner, without the need for rigid, standardized language. While their existence is inextricably linked to their production and circulation within the media industry, this is precisely what creates problems.

As part of the print media ecosystem, comic strips are bound by production rhythms, specific visual standards, and editorial policies established by the publishing institution. Ultimately, they are not completely free and autonomous works, but rather productions that must meet various technical and ideological requirements for continued publication. Therefore, the critical space afforded to cartoonists is always a negotiated balance between their personal desires as creators and the structural constraints imposed by the media they work for.

Further exploring this through the context of political economy reveals that the relationship between comic strips and the media that hosts them is inextricably linked to market logic. Modern mass media, as businesses, rely on circulation and reader loyalty. Comic strips, while not directly generating revenue like advertising, nonetheless foster an emotional attachment to their newspapers. Their regular presence creates a connection between identity and consumption habits. In post-reform Indonesian society, this concept of market logic becomes relevant, as press liberalization opens up broader space while simultaneously intensifying market competition. The media no longer confronts solely the state, but also, in this case, the market, as a system-forming entity. Comic strips must adapt to these new dynamics, requiring not only political security but also commercial relevance. This market logic is reflected in the selection of themes considered close to readers' experiences, such as traffic jams, domestic or village disputes, rising prices of basic necessities, or the behavior of political elites. These themes allow for resonance between individual experiences and broader social structures. However, overly sensitive issues or those that have the potential to trigger social conflict tend to be avoided in order to maintain the stability and sustainability of the media.

However, if we examine this from another perspective, this condition does not necessarily diminish the critical potential of comic strips. Rather, it is within these limitations that discursive creativity flourishes. Cartoonists, in this case, learn to use indirect representational strategies, such as personification, allegory, and certain visual symbols to convey their social messages.⁴⁷ In this practice, comic strips can function as an alternative articulation space

⁴⁷ Sudarta, *Berteriak Dalam Bisikan*.

that operates in a liminal manner, where they are clear enough for readers to understand, but vague enough not to violate the regulatory boundaries set by the media institutions that oversee them.

Conclusion

Based on the discussion above, “Timun” can be understood as a form of popular culture that utilizes humor and satire as a medium for social reflection. However, this study concludes that this strategy is the core of negotiating social criticism between creative expression and the structural logic of the media industry. The findings also indicate that negotiations are achieved by pivoting away from confrontational or sensitive themes that might trigger conflict. Instead, the criticism is negotiated into a subtle strategy by depicting everyday life theme to ensure the comic remains politically secure yet commercially relevant.

Ultimately, the negotiation posed in this paper reveals that “Timun” is not a fully autonomous artwork, but a negotiated cultural product. It navigates the crossroads by fulfilling the industry’s demand for stability while maintaining its role as a medium for social criticism. This also reveals that in the post reform press landscape, satire operates through a form of visual negotiations, allowing social critique to persist within the boundaries of institutional logic. Further scholarly inquiry is encouraged to explore the potential divergence in negotiation strategies between traditional print media and digital-native ecosystems, such as *webtoon* and *Instagram*. Investigating these platforms would elucidate whether the institutional constraints observed in legacy press remain pervasive, or if the decentralized nature of digital spheres fosters a more autonomous and radical form of visual satire. Such comparative analysis is vital to mapping the evolving dichotomy between creative agency and structural logic in the contemporary digital public sphere.

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Declaration of the Use of Generative AI

The author used Gemini and Grammarly Pro solely to polish the English grammar and improve the readability of the text. The author reviewed and edited the final output and takes full responsibility for the content of the article.

Author Contribution

The first and corresponding author, Aditia Muara Padiatra, is the main author of the text, bearer of the main idea, research design, data collection, and the primary analysis. The second author, Faruk Tripoli, and the third author, Dian Arymami, contributed to the conceptual validation and provided critical guidance for the final editing of the text to ensure its comprehensibility.

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