



# Media as a Political Tool: Comparative Study Between Indonesia and Saudi Arabia

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## Abstract

While media freedom is traditionally framed within a democracy-authoritarianism dichotomy, emerging patterns of digital control suggest that state-media interactions are becoming increasingly complex. This study addresses the background problem of how varied political regimes in Muslim-majority nations instrumentalize media to maintain legitimacy and manage public discourse. The primary research objective is to develop a cross-regime typology by comparing media control mechanisms in Indonesia, an electoral democracy, and Saudi Arabia, an absolute monarchy. Utilizing a qualitative comparative case study design, the methodology involves the thematic analysis of official legal frameworks, international press freedom reports, and digital archive data from 2019 to 2025. The key findings reveal that Indonesia employs "competitive digital manipulation," where democratic legal apparatuses like the ITE Law are weaponized for "soft" repression and self-censorship. Conversely, Saudi Arabia utilizes "legal-institutional control," relying on absolute monarchical authority and pervasive surveillance to systematically dismantle independent dissent. The findings imply that a state's "digital legal architecture" is a more significant predictor of media autonomy than formal regime labels. This research contributes to the field of political communication and democracy in a Muslim and Muslim majority country by providing a nuanced framework for understanding how power is consolidated through media in diverse institutional configurations, suggesting that democratic backsliding often manifests through the legalistic erosion of the digital public sphere.

**Keywords:** Media Instrumentalization, Political Communication, Digital Manipulation, Authoritarianism, Muslim Majority Nations, Indonesia, Saudi Arabia

## Introduction

Media has played a very crucial role in politics. It is a platform of communication between government and the public. All information from the government will be easily spread to the public through media. In addition to that, information will be transferred instantly, especially with the existence of internet. A lot of media has online platforms to spread the news quickly. Multimedia platforms have tremendously changed, including social media. They might be used as a political tool to influence public debates and election results (Wijayanto & Berenschot, 2024).



Contemporary scholars emphasized that media no longer function merely as channels of information but as political actors shaping agenda-setting, framing, and public deliberation. With the expansion of digital platforms, political communication has moved beyond traditional broadcasting to interactive and transnational spaces, transforming state–society relations and reconfiguring the boundaries between authority and public participation (Bennett & Pfetsch, 2018).

Scholarly debates often frame media freedom along a democracy–authoritarianism dichotomy. Democracies are assumed to sustain pluralistic media environments, while authoritarian regimes impose censorship and repression. However, emerging evidence complicates this binary perspective. Electoral democracies have experienced organized digital disinformation campaigns, while authoritarian systems have integrated sophisticated legal and technological mechanisms of control (Maerz, 2026).

In Muslim-majority countries, media and politics are dynamic because they exhibit wide variation in regime types, governance models, and media freedom structures (Octavianne et al., 2024). Islam remains the fastest-growing religion globally, and Muslim-majority societies are experiencing rapid demographic and technological transformation (Hackett, 2025). At the same time, many of these countries have witnessed political upheavals, authoritarian consolidation, and digital activism, making media a crucial arena of power struggle (Abdulrohim et al., 2025). It can be seen obviously that the visibility of conflicts and governance crises in the Middle East and Southeast Asia has been amplified by digital and satellite media networks, which shape global narratives about Islam, politics, and legitimacy.

The intersection of media and politics has long been a focal point in political communication research. Contemporary scholarship increasingly conceptualizes media not merely as passive conduits of information, but as active political actors capable of shaping agenda-setting, framing, and public deliberation (Bennett & Pfetsch, 2018; Wijayanto & Berenschot, 2024). Traditionally, literature has approached media-politics interactions through a rigid democracy-authoritarianism dichotomy. In this conventional paradigm, democratic systems are presumed to foster pluralistic, free media environments, whereas authoritarian regimes are characterized by strict censorship and state repression.

However, recent evidence complicates this binary perspective, revealing that media instrumentalization is a ubiquitous phenomenon that adapts to, rather than being strictly defined by regime types. Currently, existing literature tends to examine cases like Indonesia and Saudi Arabia in isolation, employing divergent theoretical frameworks. (Nurhayati et al., 2021) Studies on Indonesia predominantly situate the country within debates on democratic backsliding and electoral disinformation, highlighting the phenomenon of "competitive digital manipulation." (Yousef, 2024) Conversely, research on Saudi Arabia is heavily anchored in frameworks of authoritarian repression, emphasizing "legal-institutional control" and top-down technological surveillance. (Maerz, 2026)

While these isolated studies provide valuable insights into their respective national contexts, a synthesis of the literature reveals significant comparative gaps. First, comparative studies bridging Muslim-majority democracies and monarchies, specifically comparing Southeast Asia and the Middle East remain scarce. Second, by strictly segregating the study of democratization (Indonesia) from authoritarian control (Saudi Arabia), the current literature fails to adequately examine how distinct structural and institutional differences shape media-politics interactions within states that share similar religious-majority contexts. Third, there is a pronounced lack of cross-regional research that successfully integrates media systems theory with digital authoritarianism frameworks to assess the boundary conditions of political communication.

The advantages and novelty of this research lie precisely in bridging these identified gaps by developing a cross-regime typology of media instrumentalization. By placing Indonesia and Saudi Arabia in a direct comparative framework, this study argues and demonstrates that media instrumentalization transcends the traditional democratic-authoritarian divide. Rather than viewing media control solely as an authoritarian trait or disinformation solely as a democratic flaw, this research introduces an integrative theoretical approach. It asserts that while the use of media as a political tool is a shared constant, its specific mechanisms adapt to local institutional configurations, manifesting as competitive digital manipulation in Indonesia's electoral

environment and legal-institutional control in Saudi Arabia's monarchy. Ultimately, this comparative synthesis not only challenges the prevailing binary paradigms but also significantly advances the theoretical understanding of media dynamics in Muslim-majority states undergoing rapid digital transformation.

## Methods

### Research Design

This study employs a qualitative comparative case study design. A research design is a strategic plan or framework for conducting a research study that outlines the procedures for data collection and analysis to ensure the study is conducted systematically and rigorously (Yin, 2023). This specific design is chosen because it allows for an in-depth exploration of how the phenomenon of media instrumentalization adapts to distinct institutional configurations specifically contrasting a democratic system in Indonesia with an absolute monarchy in Saudi Arabia. By using a comparative approach, the research can identify unique boundary conditions and shared patterns of state-media interaction that a single case study might overlook, thereby providing a more robust theoretical contribution to political communication (Vliegthart et al., 2024).

### Data Sources

The research data was primarily sourced from qualitative, secondary document-based evidence. The sources encompass a diverse range of materials from both Indonesia and Saudi Arabia, including: (1) Official state policy documents and legal frameworks, such as Indonesia's Law on Information and Electronic Transactions (ITE Law) and Saudi Arabia's Basic Law of Governance; (2) Comprehensive annual assessments from reputable international watchdogs, specifically Reporters Without Borders (RSF) and Freedom House, spanning the 2019-2025 period; and (3) Scholarly books and peer-reviewed journal articles focusing on digital authoritarianism and media systems. These sources were selected based on their credibility and relevance to the research objectives, providing a stable and historically grounded basis for analysing state narratives and institutional control mechanisms without the risks of respondent reactivity (Flick, 2022).

### Data Collection and Procedure

The data were obtained through a systematic document retrieval process following a purposive sampling strategy. The researchers established a set of specific keywords related to "media control," "digital manipulation," "press censorship," and "political communication" to be searched across government databases, academic repositories, and international organization archives. The procedure involved: (1) Initial screening of documents to ensure they focused on the designated timeframe (2019-2025); (2) Categorizing retrieved materials into nation-specific datasets for Indonesia and Saudi Arabia; and (3) Systematic reading of the materials to extract segments that specifically illustrate the interaction between state power and media platforms. This structured procedure ensures that the data collected are compatible with the research objectives and provide sufficient depth to map cross-regime media instrumentalization (Saldaña & Omasta, 2017).

### Data Analysis

The analysis technique utilized in this study is a thematic analysis coupled with cross-case synthesis. The process involved several distinct steps: (1) Analysis involving the systematic review of document contents to find recurring patterns of media control; (2) In-depth analysis of each nation's specific data followed by a cross-regional comparison. The texts were carefully read line-by-line to identify the essence of every policy and incident. The analysis approach followed model categories, namely: (1) Choosing relevant texts from the documents; (2) Developing meaningful categories such as "competitive digital manipulation" and "legal-institutional control"; (3) Sorting the materials into these categories; and (4) Formulating conclusions based on the synthesized results. Categorizing the content of the documents produced a more in-depth and comprehensive analysis, allowing for the observation of emotional features and political language as crosscheck materials for the cases (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

## Findings

The empirical findings of this study reveal two distinct and contrasting models of media instrumentalization, each fundamentally shaped by the respective national legal frameworks and political systems of Indonesia and Saudi Arabia. Rather than operating in an institutional vacuum, state actors in both nations adapt their methods of narrative control to align with or exploit their prevailing governance structures.

In Indonesia, media instrumentalization occurs within a democratic framework but is structurally constrained by distinct legal-digital pressures. The primary legislative mechanism of this control is the Law on Information and Electronic Transactions (ITE Law), which has increasingly been weaponized as a tool for state-aligned soft repression. Empirical analysis of recent legal disputes reveals that Article 27 of the ITE Law, which criminalizes online defamation, is systematically utilized to target individuals for their digital expression and stifle public interest journalism. A prominent example of this legal weaponization is the case of Baiq Nuril Maknun, an honorary teacher who was paradoxically prosecuted and jailed for recording and sharing her superior's verbal sexual harassment, a miscarriage of justice widely documented by international media including the BBC (2019). The legacy of the Baiq Nuril case illustrates how the pervasive threat of defamation suits under the ITE Law discourages public criticism, creating a chilling effect that fosters widespread self-censorship.

Beyond these legislative constraints, the operational dimension of Indonesia's media model is defined by the strategic mobilization of "cybertroops" organized digital actors hired to manipulate public opinion during critical socio-political moments. As observed by Wijayanto and Berenschot (2024), these coordinated networks operate extensively across social media platforms to flood the digital space with pro-government propaganda, drown out critical voices, and artificially frame state narratives. This combination of restrictive digital laws and coordinated public opinion manipulation severely limits the quality of Indonesia's democracy. Consequently, Reporters Without Borders (RSF, 2024) ranks Indonesia 108th globally, classifying the country's media landscape as only "partly free" due to these persistent digital and legal hazards.

Conversely, Saudi Arabia exhibits a highly centralized, top-down model of legal-institutional control, wherein the media functions strictly as an ideological extension of state authority. The constitutional foundation for this absolute hegemony is codified in Article 39 of the 1992 Basic Law of Governance. This article explicitly mandates that all media outlets must "educate the nation and strengthen its unity," while strictly prohibiting any published acts that could lead to "sedition or division." This statutory framing provides the ruling monarchy with an absolute legal mandate to enforce sweeping, pre-emptive censorship and criminalize any independent political discourse that deviates from the state's narrative.

Operationally, this institutional control is sustained through state-of-the-art digital surveillance and severe physical consequences for dissent. The absolute threshold of this physical repression is epitomized by the 2018 extraterritorial assassination of prominent dissident journalist Jamal Khashoggi at the Saudi consulate in Istanbul. This high-profile incident stands as a stark data point illustrating the extreme risks faced by Saudi journalists and civil actors who attempt to cross the regime's red lines, effectively enforcing absolute self-censorship both domestically and abroad. Reflecting these totalizing legal and physical controls, Reporters Without Borders (RSF, 2024) ranks Saudi Arabia 166th globally, anchoring the Kingdom in the bottom tier of global information freedom as a "not free" media environment. To synthesize the institutional and operational differences between the two nations, Table 1 outlines the comparative dimensions of media instrumentalization and state control.

Table 1: Comparative Summary of Media as a Political Tool in Indonesia and Saudi Arabia

Feature/Country	Indonesia	Saudi Arabia
<b>Political Regime</b>	Democratic (Post-1998 <i>Reformasi</i> transition)	Absolute Monarchy (since 1932)
<b>Media Environment</b>	Dynamic, pluralistic, yet vulnerable to political pressure ("partly free").	Highly restricted, heavily censored, state-dominated ("not free").
<b>Press Freedom Index (RSF 2026)</b>	129 <sup>th</sup> out of 180 countries	176 <sup>th</sup> out of 180 countries
<b>Primary Legal Restraints</b>	Information and Electronic Transactions (ITE) Law (weaponized for defamation).	1992 Basic Law (Art. 39), 2011 Saudi Press Law, Anti-Cyber Crime Law.
<b>Right of Association</b>	Legalized; peaceful protests and civil society mobilization are common, though regulated (2013 Law on Mass Organizations).	Strictly prohibited; no freedom of assembly or labour unions; severe penal consequences for demonstrations.
<b>Mechanism of Media Control</b>	Competitive digital manipulation (legal instruments used to restrict marginalized voices within a democracy).	Legal-institutional control (absolute monarchical authority, top-down censorship, and physical repression).
<b>Notable Cases of Suppression</b>	AA Prabangsa (murdered), Baiq Nuril (criminalized under ITE Law).	Jamal Khashoggi (assassinated), Issa al-Nukhaifi (imprisoned), Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr (executed).

Ultimately, this comparative analysis illustrates that while media serves as a political tool in both contexts, the mechanisms of control differ fundamentally. Indonesia experiences "competitive digital manipulation," where legal instruments like the ITE Law are utilized within a democratic framework to restrict speech, leading to an environment categorized as "half free." Saudi Arabia, conversely, relies on absolute "legal-institutional control" and physical repression, utilizing its monarchical authority to entirely dismantle independent media infrastructure. While Indonesia's press freedom requires urgent structural reform to protect civil liberties, it remains significantly more permissive and dynamic than the rigidly controlled media environment of Saudi Arabia.

## Discussion

The media occupies a central position within the political and social architecture of modern states, possessing the capacity to precipitate significant societal shifts through its influence on public discourse. While the media functions as an essential apparatus for disseminating news, policies, and state narratives, its operational autonomy varies drastically across regimes. According to Lawrence (2019), the media traditionally fulfils five primary roles in political landscapes: acting as a watchdog that scrutinizes those in power; serving as an agent of empowerment to enlighten the masses; functioning as a nation-builder to foster unity and developmental progress; defending journalistic integrity against misinformation; and providing public entertainment.

Both Indonesia and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia are Muslim-majority nations experiencing a pervasive expansion of media presence across traditional, print, and digital platforms. However, their historical trajectories and institutional frameworks distinctly shape how media operates within their borders. In Indonesia, the post-1998 Reformasi era marked a profound transition in the country's socio-political and cultural landscape. Following the fall of Suharto's New Order regime, the mass media became less overtly politicized by the state and more heavily industrialized. While scholars debate whether media is the primary driver of political change or vice versa (Mukrimin, 2013), the media's function as a "watchdog" remains highly relevant in monitoring state activities (Curran & Morley, 2007).

Historically, both nations have espoused a model of "functional media," wherein the press is expected to contribute to national development and unity. In Indonesia, the concept of the "Pancasila press" was historically utilized to align media narratives with state ideology. Today, Indonesian media outlets operate as vital catalysts for public responsiveness and the development of civil society, despite lingering gaps between democratic rhetoric and the reality of press

freedom (Mietzner, 2020). Conversely, Saudi Arabia maintains one of the world's most restricted media environments, anchored in strict authoritarian frameworks. The Saudi government actively exercises direct censorship over both domestic and regional media, compelling journalists to practice rigorous self-censorship to avoid criticizing the royal family, religious authorities, or state policies. Article 39 of the 1992 Basic Law explicitly grants authorities the legal power to restrict freedom of expression to protect state principles, prevent sedition, and maintain national security. The official state policy dictates that the press should educate the masses and propagate government views. Consequently, independent media operations are virtually non-existent. For instance, the government has routinely suspended broadcasts of the Riyadh-based satellite provider and blocked politically sensitive websites, particularly those associated with the marginalized Shiite minority, to prevent dissent (Jones, 2017).

Despite these strict top-down controls, the rapid expansion of digital platforms has disrupted traditional information monopolies. Saudi citizens increasingly utilize the internet and platforms like Twitter to articulate political opinions, occasionally forcing traditional outlets to broaden their coverage. A prominent example of social media's political impact in the Kingdom is the #Women2Drive movement. Initiated by netizens and amplified by digital influencers globally, this campaign successfully leveraged digital platforms to mobilize public sentiment, ultimately pressuring the administration to reform its archaic laws prohibiting women from driving (Yousef, 2024).

In addition, a comparative assessment of the legal frameworks in Saudi Arabia and Indonesia reveals divergent approaches to media regulation and civil liberties. Saudi Arabia, functioning as an absolute monarchy ruled by the Saud family since 1932, inherently lacks democratic electoral mechanisms and enforces stringent limitations on political rights. According to Freedom House report in 2026, The Kingdom strictly controls domestic media content and heavily influences regional broadcasting, with the royal family holding majority shares in numerous regional news outlets. The Saudi Press Law, issued by royal decree in 2011, criminalizes criticism of the grand mufti, the Council of Senior Religious Scholars, and government officials. Violations result in severe fines and forced media closures (Simon, 2011).

Furthermore, online media is tightly regulated; any individual or entity operating a blog or news website must obtain a license from the Ministry of Information, and authorities continuously monitor digital activists. The 2018 prosecution of Issa al-Nukhaifi perfectly illustrates this dynamic. An activist critical of corruption and the government's intervention in Yemen, al-Nukhaifi was sentenced to seven years in prison following peaceful online activism, reflecting the state's aggressive criminalization of digital dissent (Amnesty International, 2017).

In contrast, Indonesia presents a more dynamic and pluralistic media environment, characterized by a transition of power through democratic elections (Sabarofek & Rahmawati, 2026). However, the regulatory landscape remains precarious. While licensing rules exist, thousands of broadcast stations operate informally. More concerning is the increasing use of legal instruments to restrict digital expression. The 2008 Information and Electronic Transactions Law (ITE Law), alongside its 2016 amendment, contains broad provisions against defamation and the distribution of content deemed contrary to "moral norms." The 2016 amendment notably introduced a "right to be forgotten" mechanism, allowing individuals to seek court orders to retroactively delete online information, raising concerns about potential censorship by powerful figures. Organizations like SAFEnet (Southeast Asia Freedom of Expression Network) notes that the ITE Law is frequently weaponized against anti-corruption activists and journalists, fostering a culture of self-censorship. The impact of the ITE Law is starkly demonstrated in the case of Baiq Nuril Mknun, an honorary teacher who recorded a conversation to document verbal sexual harassment by her superior. Rather than protecting the victim, the Mataram City Court initially processed a defamation counter-suit under Article 27 of the ITE Law, a profound miscarriage of justice that highlights how digital regulations can be manipulated to suppress marginalized voices (ICJR, 2017).

The right of association further underscores the divergence between the two nations. In Saudi Arabia, freedom of assembly is not legally recognized, and labour unions are prohibited. Political activists engaging in demonstrations face immediate detention or severe penal consequences. The aggressive suppression of the 2012 Shia protests, which culminated in the

execution of prominent dissident Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr and the prolonged detention of activists like Ali Mohammed al-Nimr, demonstrates the state's zero-tolerance policy for organized civil action (ADHRB, 2016). Conversely, peaceful protests and civil society mobilization are commonplace in Indonesia. Nevertheless, advocacy groups addressing sensitive topics such as minority rights, historical atrocities, or regional separatism, frequently encounter intimidation from both conservative hardline groups and state apparatuses. Furthermore, the 2013 Law on Mass Organizations requires civil society organizations to register with the government and align with the state ideology (Pancasila), illustrating a distinct form of institutional control within a democratic framework (Naila et al., 2024).

Furthermore, evaluating the operational reality of media in both countries requires examining international metrics and high-profile incidents of journalistic suppression. Indonesia's press freedom trajectory currently demonstrates stagnation due to persistent political pressure. (Abdulrohim et al., 2025). According to the 2026 World Press Freedom Index compiled by Reporters Without Borders (RSF), Indonesia ranked 129th out of 180 countries, indicating a lack of meaningful progression. Although the 1945 Constitution guarantees the right to freedom of expression, journalists remain vulnerable to localized violence and legal harassment. The 2009 premeditated murder of AA Prabangsa, a journalist for Radar Bali who was investigating local government corruption, underscores the physical risks associated with investigative reporting in Indonesia's decentralized political system (IFJ, 2019). Consequently, while Indonesia boasts a vibrant media landscape, it remains a "partly free" environment where the interpretation of legal norms can arbitrarily restrict press freedom.

In stark contrast, Saudi Arabia ranks 176th out of 180 countries on the RSF index (2026), reflecting an environment of systemic, institutionalized repression. The Saudi state apparatus maintains pervasive surveillance over journalists both domestically and internationally. The extraterritorial assassination of prominent journalist Jamal Khashoggi at the Saudi consulate in Istanbul in October 2018 represents the extreme limits of this authoritarian control (Tsourapas, 2019). Journalists or citizens who engage in political critique face immediate retaliation under anti-terrorism or cybercrime laws (ADHRB, 2024). Ultimately, this comparative analysis illustrates that while media serves as a political tool in both contexts, the mechanisms of control differ fundamentally. Indonesia experiences "competitive digital manipulation," where legal instruments like the ITE Law are utilized within a democratic framework to restrict speech, leading to an environment categorized as "half free." Saudi Arabia, conversely, relies on absolute "legal-institutional control" and physical repression, utilizing its monarchical authority to entirely dismantle independent media infrastructure. While Indonesia's press freedom requires urgent structural reform to protect civil liberties, it remains significantly more permissive and dynamic than the rigidly controlled media environment of Saudi Arabia.

In short, this research provides substantial theoretical and practical contributions to both academic scholarship and the broader society. Academically, it bridges a critical gap in political communication and media systems theory by moving beyond the traditional democracy-authoritarianism dichotomy. By introducing a cross-regime typology—specifically contrasting "competitive digital manipulation" in a democratic context with "legal-institutional control" in a monarchical one. Moreover, this study enriches the understanding of how media instrumentalization adapts to specific institutional configurations in Muslim-majority states. Practically, for the general public and civil society organizations, this research highlights the subtle and overt mechanisms of state control over information. By exposing how legal instruments like Indonesia's ITE Law can be weaponized to suppress marginalized voices in a democracy, the study empowers public advocacy for digital rights, legal reform, and press freedom. Furthermore, by documenting the extreme consequences of authoritarian surveillance in Saudi Arabia, it contributes to global human rights discourse, emphasizing the urgent need to protect journalistic integrity in the digital age. The explanation for these findings lies in the "boundary conditions" of political communication. In Indonesia, the state must maintain a democratic facade, hence the use of laws. In Saudi Arabia, the monarchy relies on absolute religious and political legitimacy, necessitating total control. The implication is significant: democratic institutions alone do not guarantee press freedom if the "digital legal architecture" remains repressive.

The authors recommend for future researchers to expand this cross-regime comparative model both intrinsically and extrinsically to build upon the theoretical framework established in this study. Extrinsically, scholars should incorporate additional Muslim-majority nations with varying degrees of democratic consolidation and authoritarianism—such as Turkey, Malaysia, or Iran to test the robustness and broader applicability of the "competitive digital manipulation" versus "legal-institutional control" typology. Intrinsically, future studies should pivot toward empirical audience-reception research, utilizing qualitative interviews or digital ethnography to investigate how citizens and marginalized groups actively navigate, subvert, or resist state-imposed digital narratives. Furthermore, subsequent research could critically examine the complicity or resistance of transnational technology corporations (e.g., Meta, X, TikTok) in responding to state censorship demands, thereby providing a more comprehensive understanding of the globalized digital ecosystem's impact on domestic press freedom.

## Conclusion

This study aimed to investigate the mechanisms through which media is instrumentalized as a political tool in two distinct Muslim-majority political systems: the electoral democracy of Indonesia and the absolute monarchy of Saudi Arabia. By challenging the traditional binary view of media freedom, the research sought to develop a cross-regime typology that explains how institutional structures rather than just regime type shape state-media interactions.

The main findings reveal that while media serves as a political instrument in both contexts, the operational strategies differ fundamentally. In Indonesia, the state employs "competitive digital manipulation," characterized by the weaponization of legal instruments like the ITE Law to foster self-censorship within a democratic framework. Conversely, Saudi Arabia exemplifies "legal-institutional control," utilizing absolute monarchical authority, stringent constitutional mandates (Article 39), and high-level digital surveillance to dismantle independent media infrastructure. These findings imply that for the field of political communication, the "digital legal architecture" of a state is a more accurate predictor of press freedom than formal democratic labels.

The significance of this study lies in its contribution of a novel comparative framework that bridges Southeast Asian and Middle Eastern media studies. It moves beyond isolated case studies to offer a nuanced understanding of how religious-majority contexts interact with varied governance structures to manage public discourse. However, the current study recognizes certain limitations, primarily its reliance on secondary document-based evidence and a limited timeframe (2019-2025). While these sources provided high-quality institutional data, they may not fully capture the real-time, lived experiences of journalists on the ground.

Based on these contributions, this study recommends that further research work should incorporate primary empirical data, such as in-depth interviews with digital activists and journalists in both regions, to explore grassroots resistance strategies. Additionally, expanding this typology to other hybrid regimes like Turkey or Malaysia would further test the robustness of the "competitive manipulation" model.

For practice and policy, it is recommended that Indonesian policymakers urgently reform the ambiguous clauses of the ITE Law to prevent its misuse against civil society. For the international community, there is a critical need to develop more sophisticated monitoring mechanisms for "soft" legal repression in developing democracies, ensuring that the existence of elections is not used as a facade for the systematic decay of press freedom.

## Ethics approval

The study was conducted in compliance with the Declaration of Helsinki

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### Competing interests

All the authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest.

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### Underlying data

Derived data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author on request.

### Declaration of artificial intelligence use

This study used artificial intelligence (AI) tools and methodologies in the following capacities:

1. Data analysis and modelling: Machine learning algorithm were used to analyze the dataset and predict outcomes. These were implemented using Google Gemini.
2. Manuscript writing support: AI-based language models, such as Google Gemini was employed to: a. Language refinement (improving grammar, sentence structure, and readability of the manuscript). b. Content summarization (assisting in summarizing findings and conclusions in a concise manner). c. Technical writing assistance (providing suggestions for structuring complex technical descriptions more effectively).
3. Simulation and forecasting: Predictive modelling and simulations were conducted using AI frameworks to validate research hypotheses.

We confirm that all AI-assisted processes were critically reviewed by the authors to ensure the integrity and reliability of the results. The final decisions and interpretations presented in this article were solely made by the authors.

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