

From Hashtags to Symbols: Reading Protest Through a Semiotic Analysis of Digital Resistance in #TolakRUUTNI Movement on X

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Abstract

The digital landscape, particularly social media platforms, has developed from its initial function as a tool for interpersonal connectivity to resisting political discourse, where digital artworks are used to challenge state-imposed legal reforms. This research analyzes this shift through the lens of public resistance to the Draft Law on the Indonesian National Army (RUU TNI), specifically exploring the use of digital artworks with the hashtag #TolakRUUTNI on platform X as an instrument of collective Indonesian resistance movements. This research aims to examine the representation of resistance through digital art against state authority through Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis, which includes three levels of meaning: denotation, connotation, and myth. At the denotative level, the dominant visual themes include resistance to authority, the use of cartoon characters, animal symbolism, and textual elements in the artworks. Connotatively, these visuals function as a form of collective expression that shows resistance to power, criticism of state intimidation, and solidarity depicted through popular fictional characters. Mythologically, these artworks construct a narrative that positions civilians as heroic figures who fight militaristic authoritarianism, while describing the state as a repressive entity that echoes the power dynamics of the New Order era, particularly the military's dual function in both civil and political domains. Beyond serving aesthetic purposes, the digital artworks in this movement become a medium for generating resistance discourse, reshaping political engagement, and building solidarity among Indonesians through the X platform.

Keywords: artworks, semiotics, media, resistance

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Introduction

Since the reform era on May 21, 1998, which marked the end of Suharto's authoritarian New Order regime, a number of issues have emerged, especially during the Jokowi and Prabowo administrations that signal a decline in democratic values in this era. Democracy in Indonesia has faced challenges in recent years, with the Democracy Index showing a decline compared to five years ago (*The Global State of Democracy*, 2025). This decline can be seen in several aspects, ranging with access to justice in the legal system, declining election credibility, an ineffective parliament, and freedom of expression that often feels suppressed. The significant decline in democratic values has been amplified by the House of Representatives' ratification of the TNI Law, which expands the military's power into several areas of civilian life. The people are increasingly questioning the power of institutions that maintain democratic values and the ability of civil society to act as a check and balance on growing authoritarian tendencies. On March 20, 2025, the Indonesian House of Representatives (DPR) passed a revision to the Indonesian National Armed Forces Law (UU TNI) that extends retirement age and expands the involvement of active military personnel in civilian sectors such as ministries and state institutions without having to resign from their military positions (Nurani, 2025). This has caused massive public concern. Considering that the expansion of military positions in the civilian sectors had happened before during the New Order era under President Suharto's leadership, the public has pushed for this not to happen again, so the military's dual-function does not occur. However, it was this draft law that caused public anger, and it was this concern that ultimately led the Indonesian people to express their opposition to the draft that was being prepared by the House of Representatives at that time. Public disappointment was quickly expressed through the digital hashtag #TolakRUUTNI, a massive online protest movement on the social media platform X (formerly Twitter).

The public expressed their disagreement in various ways: from holding demonstrations at central and regional representative councils in many locations across Indonesia, to expressing their disappointment through opinion threads and voicing their views online, one of the form of the disagreement came through various forms of visual art, including graphic artwork that rich in symbols of resistance. Within lot of users shares their perspective, anger, and also protest and massive variety of discussion among X, some of artist using graphic arts as the shape of their response due to the public distrust, not only for the government, but also for the army and police who serve as the government tools to fight against the protest from public. Contents that is created during this agenda are positioned as the civils that is not agree and angry to the law that has been ratified. This kind of protest is not a new shape in emphasizing the stance and anger from public to the policy makers. It has also been found that the expressions reflect historical trauma from the past, particularly the May 1998 tragedy, when large-scale demonstrations led to the collapse of the Soeharto regime due to the power imbalance between the military and civilian power (Abdulgani-Knapp, 2008, p. 338; Azhari, 2024). In this situation, digital artwork is one way to express the resistance. Furthermore, in line with Groys' (2008) view, "An artist's negative reaction to repressive, state-organized power is something that almost goes without saying" (p. 122).

This research aims to know the role of graphic art in expressing the movement of protest from a policy maker, with the focus on #TolakRUUTNI tragedy shared on X. This review will examine the and content represented in the graphic arts, what the meaning between the objects, colors, or any shape placed into the graphic arts, the correlation between the content and the #TolakRUUTNI movement on X, and also why graphic art is a chosen by some people to show

resistance against the prejudice law. Semiotic and Critical Discourse Analysis would be used in this research to examine the meaning and role of the message from the graphic arts.

Methodology

This study uses qualitative research methods to analyse the meaning and social interpretation of digital art on X. According to Creswell (2017), qualitative research analyzes the interpretation and meaning of a social phenomenon from certain assumptions and perspectives. Therefore, this qualitative method helps in understanding how symbols and narratives in the in the digital movement #TolakRUUTNI on the X platform shapes political message and collective identity. To analyse cultural and communication products, such visual images, captions, and hashtags are the primary data source of this study. Moreover, the research uses secondary data such as international articles and journals.

To get the selected primary data, the study conducts the purposive sampling as the collection data process. Purposive sampling helps to select the data based on relevancy and characteristics that relate into social phenomenon. This purposive sampling assists the data to address research question (Taherdoost, 2016), which reveals the meaning of digital art resistance #TolakRUUTNI on X. This study uses selective criteria such as containing hashtag #TolakRUUTNI, digital art or illustrations, images, elements of resistance symbolic (military, civilians, resistance, protests, and historical trauma), and period of time in July 2025 during the peak of RUU TNI protest. Subsequently, the selected data is analysed using Roland Barthes' semiotics in three levels which are denotation, connotation, and myth. Through this process, the data are analysed closely and categorized into four discussions which are resistance to the apparatus, animals as the object of representation, fiction character involved, and artworks with dominant text.

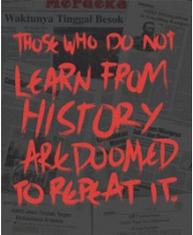
Findings & Analysis

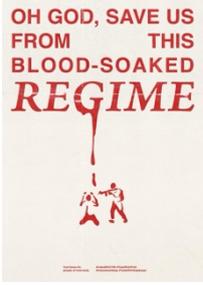
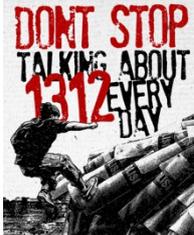
The analysis of 18 visual artworks posted under the hashtag #TolakRUUTNI on the X platform shows that public protests against the expansion of military power are not only verbal but also highly expressive visually. Using Roland Barthes' semiotic approach (1972) and O'Shaughnessy (2012) classification of visual meanings. According to Roland Barthes' semiotic approach, the analysis of each image can be categorized into three levels of meaning: "Denotation", "Connotation", and "Myth" (Gravells, 2017, p. 46). From the data found, we can analyze using Barthes' semiotics, which peels back a form from three levels: denotation, connotation, and myth.

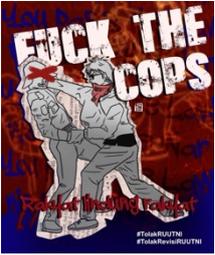
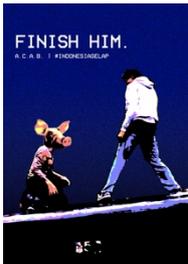
Denotation

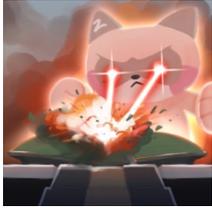
Denotation attempts to describe the content of an image without commentary, judgment, or evaluation. At this level, signs are as close to value neutrality as possible (O'Shaughnessy, 2012, p. 125). Based on the data, the signs observed were divided into four visual theme artworks: resistance to the apparatus, caricature/anime involved, animals as the object representation, and artworks with dominant text. However, it was found that some had multiple visual themes, which consisted of not just one theme, but two at the same time.

Table 1
Figures' Denotations of Artworks Under the #TolahRUUTNI Movement

Artwork	Visual Theme	Denotation
 <p>Artwork 1</p>	<p>Resistance to the apparatus</p>	<p>Text: “YOU PASS THE LAW, WE START THE WAR”, “1312”</p> <p>Visual: A person physically overpowering a zombified person in uniform on top of a vehicle. Below, there are many hands reaching upward, showing other zombified people in uniform trying to climb up or make an arrest. The background using bright red with speckled accents.</p>
 <p>Artwork 2</p>	<p>Resistance to the apparatus and animal as the object representation</p>	<p>Text: the truck says “POLIZOO”</p> <p>Visual: A masked person punches another figure with a pig head on top of a truck filled with pigs. A monkey is climbing nearby, and many other monkey figures are reaching up from below. The background using plain sharp red colour.</p>
 <p>Artwork 3</p>	<p>Artworks with dominant text</p>	<p>Text: “Those who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat it”</p> <p>Visual: A collage of old Indonesian newspaper front pages reporting on student protests and military actions covered with a slightly faded black layer. There is a text with red color above the newspaper</p>
 <p>Artwork 4</p>	<p>Animal as the object representation</p>	<p>Text: “Here Lies REFORMATION 1998–2025”, “They had come to a time when no one dared speak his mind... fierce, growling dogs roamed everywhere... and you had to watch your comrades torn to pieces after confessing to shocking crimes. George Orwell - Animal Farm”</p> <p>Visual: The image shows a group of pig-like figures representing powerful individuals dining around a table stained with blood. They are gathered in front of a tombstone. The color chosen in this picture is a gray gradient with blood-red spots on the dining table and glowing blue text.</p>

 <p>Artwork 5</p>	<p>Artworks with dominant text</p>	<p>Text: "OH GOD, SAVE US FROM THIS BLOOD-SOAKED REGIME" "God bless the people of Indonesia" "#TolakRUUTNI"</p> <p>Visual: A cream-colored poster with red lettering expresses a prayer to God to save the people from a bloody regime. There is an illustration of two figures below—one pointing a gun at a person who is kneeling. The letter "G" in "REGIME" looks like blood dripping onto them. Below, there is a hashtag and a prayer for the Indonesian people.</p>
 <p>Artwork 6</p>	<p>Use of Caricature or Pop-Culture Animation Styles</p>	<p>Text: "Some people deserve to burn, Mark."</p> <p>Visual: Two people in costumes are flying near a burning and partially destroyed dome-shaped green roofed building. One (dressed in red) says something to the other (dressed in blue). The scene shows smoke, fire, and destruction below them. Their expressions show tension.</p>
 <p>Artwork 7</p>	<p>Resistance to the apparatus and Use of Caricature or Pop-Culture Animation Styles</p>	<p>Text: "RIDER PUNCH FASCISTS", "#TolakRUUTNI"</p> <p>Visual: A masked superhero character wearing black with a red scarf strikes a man in a suit on top of a vehicle. Blood can be seen spurting from the blow. Below them, a group of figures in uniform raise their hands as if to intervene in the fight. The vehicle displays the Indonesian national emblem, the Garuda bird, which appears fragile and damaged.</p>
 <p>Artwork 8</p>	<p>Animal as the object representation</p>	<p>Text: "#TolakRUUTNI"</p> <p>Visual: Part of an arm in military uniform is holding a Garuda bird with a wound on its neck. The bird's body shows signs of bruising and has been shot several times. Also there is a gun barrel emitting smoke from its tip.</p>
 <p>Artwork 9</p>	<p>Resistance to the apparatus and</p>	<p>Text: "DON'T STOP TALKING ABOUT 1312 EVERY DAY", "1312"</p> <p>Visual: A man with a backpack and cuffed hands kicks a stack of shields marked "POLISI"/ "Police" in Indonesian. Greasy texture with a dominant light gray color, with black and white-theme objects and some text coloured in red.</p>

 <p>Artwork 10</p>	<p>Resistance to the apparatus and</p>	<p>Text: “YOU PASS THE LAW, WE START THE WAR.”</p> <p>Visual: A poster shows two men in a physical fight, with one man wearing a uniform being hit by another man wearing casual clothes. Behind them is a fire. This poster has a modern gradient effect and pattern.</p>
 <p>Artwork 11</p>	<p>Use of Caricature or Pop-Culture Animation Styles</p>	<p>Text: “Heh”</p> <p>Visual: A comic-style image shows a man smiling cynically while playing a flute. Below him, a figure in a robe stands amid glowing red energy, staring at a dome-shaped green-roofed building that is burning and cracked. Birds fly around the scene. The entire image is dark, with red and green as the dominant colors.</p>
 <p>Artwork 12</p>	<p>Resistance to the apparatus and</p>	<p>Text: “FUCK THE COPS”, “#TolakRUUTNI”, “#TolakRevisiUUTNI”</p> <p>Visual: It shows a character wearing a red scarf hitting someone with a pig’s head wearing a uniform. Both of them in comic style. The background shows flames and graffiti-like writing in faint red and dark blue colors.</p>
 <p>Artwork 13</p>	<p>Use of Caricature or Pop-Culture Animation Styles and resistance to the apparatus and</p>	<p>Text: -</p> <p>Visual: The image shows a real-life police vehicle with digitally added anime characters. One character in a white robe is punching another on top of the vehicle. Other characters look on from the corner of the vehicle, and there is a large bird figure. The background includes trees and a street sign.</p>
 <p>Artwork 14</p>	<p>Animal as the object representation and resistance to the apparatus and</p>	<p>Text: “FINISH HIM.”, “A.C.A.B. #INDONESIAGELAP”,</p> <p>Visual: A stylish poster shows a man wearing a hoodie standing next to a pig-faced humanoid figure crouching down, both of them appearing to be on top of a vehicle. The poster is dominated by a dark blue color with a noise gradient.</p>

 <p>Artwork 15</p>	<p>Use of Caricature or Pop-Culture Animation Styles</p>	<p>Text: -</p> <p>Visual: The image depicts a giant cartoon cat shooting red laser beams from its eyes, causing a large explosion on a dome-shaped green-roofed building. The cat looks angry, and the scene is filled with smoke, debris, and bright orange and blue colours.</p>
 <p>Artwork 16</p>	<p>Use of Caricature or Pop-Culture Animation Styles</p>	<p>Text:” WE WILL DEFEAT THEM!”, “Repost is Prohibited”</p> <p>Visual: The image features characters from the anime Demon Slayer in mid-air, launching an attack toward a dome-shaped, green-roofed building. There are visual effects showing impacts and explosions. The overall scene is colourful and dynamic, with some motion and action lines.</p>
 <p>Artwork 17</p>	<p>Animal as the object representation</p>	<p>Text: “KEEP BARKING AND BITING”</p> <p>Visual: The image shows a blue dog with its mouth biting a headless rat. The background is black, with repeating red and white text. The animal is depicted breaking a chain. The illustration style is bold and digitally created.</p>
 <p>Artwork 18</p>	<p>Animal as the object representation</p>	<p>Text: -</p> <p>Visual: a large blue dog in the center, with a radiant pattern behind its head. The dog is biting a red pig's head. Around them are many red headless-rats. The background is black with a subtle diamond-grid pattern and golden dots.</p>

Connotation

Connotation explores the associative meanings perceived by the audience in an image, encompassing a range of emotions and beliefs that vary depending on the individual's social background and cultural values (O'Shaughnessy, 2012, p. 126).

The artworks that appear show that there are many themes in the forms of resistance that appear in X, one of which is resistance to the authorities, which we can see visualized in a screenshot from a video of the #TolakRUUTNI demonstration showing civilians fighting with a policeman on top of a police truck. This can be seen in artworks 1, 2, 7, 10, 12, 13, 14, and similar representations can be found here. The use of heroic figures or fictional characters appears to represent the civils, as seen in Artworks 7 and 13, where they seem to be fighting the interests

of the people. This reflects how characters in fiction are often portrayed as representatives of the general public against various forms of oppression. A typical character is a portrayal, reflection or representation of a person, or a group of people tied to an institution, or an individual as part of an institution that exists in the real world (Nurgiyantoro, 2009, p. 190).

The pig's head itself, apart from being likened to an animal with negative connotations, since that Indonesia is a country with a muslim majority that is not friendly towards this animal, was used as a form of terror in the form of a pig's head being sent to the office of Tempo journalists, who often actively criticize government policies (Adyatama, 2025). The use of pig heads in this artwork represents those suspected of being responsible of act terror, which is government. The use of pig heads is also frequently found in artworks 2, 4, 12, and 14, which represent both the government and armed forces as supporters of the government. The use of headless rats also has the same reason as in artwork 17 and 18, which was a follow-up terror attack directed at the Tempo office shortly after the pig's head was sent.

The use of characters that are closely related to the lives of people in Indonesia, such as anime and other fictional caricatures, and are depicted as fighting for the same struggles as the public, this can also be seen in several artworks. According to Nugroho and Hendrastomo (2016), anime ... instilling the ideology of anime into society in the form of positive images. (p. 1). We can see the use of caricatures or fictional characters in artwork 6, 7, 11, 13, 15, and 16, starting with the use of Omni-man and Mark from the Invincible series, Kamen Rider RX from the Kamen Rider series, Wei Wuxian from the Mo Dao Zu Shi series, Gintoki and the Shinsengumi from the anime series Gintama, Hanini who is the mascot of ZEROBASEONE, and finally the scene featuring the 9 samurai from the anime Kimetsu No Yaiba. If we take a closer look, the creators of these fictional characters do not only come from certain communities such as anime enthusiasts, but also vary from communities who are enthusiastic about American cartoons, Japanese hero series, to Korean boy band mascots. It was found that the characters they consider positive share similar values with the creators of the artworks, which is why they are used to convey a message of resistance in their works.

The last one is the use of dark blue in many artworks such as 8, 12, 14, 17 and 18, which is called "resistance blue" color to emerge the resistance toward the government injustice laws. This color has also been widely used since February 2025 when there was a wave of demonstrations from Dark Indonesia, so in conveying rejection of things that the people disagree with, this color is often used.

Myth

According to Roland Barthes, myth is a secondary form of meaning in which connotations become internalised ideology (Barthes, 1972). The artwork under the hashtag #TolakRUUTNI not only depicts resistance but also constructs a myth of civil heroism in the face of the return of military authoritarianism. Through recurring symbols such as officers transformed into zombies, animal-faced elites, and familiar pop culture heroes, these images construct an ideological narrative that the current state is merely a corrupt shadow of the New Order regime. For instance, the pig's head figure, referencing past acts of intimidation towards critical journalists, depicting the state as a terrifying figure. The repetition of the color blue and the depiction of animals (pigs and rats) reinforce the mythological opposition: civilians versus the regime, heroes versus oppressors. These visuals function as ideological tools that reconstruct protests into a semiotic field of battle, where art becomes a metaphorical expression of collective trauma and a tool for political change.

Conclusion

This study shows that graphic artwork in the #TolakRUUTNI movement on platform X has become a powerful medium of resistance in Indonesia's digital protest landscape. Through semiotic analysis, it was found that these artworks can be grouped into four main denotative themes: direct resistance against the authorities, the use of animated/pop-culture symbols, animal representations, and the use of text as a dominant element. However, behind these visual displays lies a deeper ideological meaning, criticism of military power expansion, civil-state inequality, and the trauma of past violence. On a mythological level, this artwork portrays the government as the oppressor and the citizens as heroes. The narrative emphasizes that resistance is a legitimate act. Art is no longer merely an aesthetic expression, but rather a political visual discourse that builds collective awareness within society. This study demonstrates that digital visual art plays a crucial role in constructing alternative narratives that challenge power. In the future, further studies can explore the impact of this visualization on social movements and the political awareness of the wider community.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

The author declares that Grammarly, an AI-assisted writing software, was used in proofreading and refining the language used in the manuscript. The usage was limited to correcting grammatical and spelling errors and rephrasing statements for accuracy and clarity. The author further declares that, apart from Grammarly, no other AI or AI-assisted technologies have been used to generate content in writing the manuscript. The ideas, design, procedures, findings, analyses, and discussion are originally written and derived from careful and systematic conduct of the research.

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