

Power and Knowledge in Political Discourse: A Foucauldian Analysis of Prabowo Subianto's Statements in the 2024 Presidential Debate

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Abstract

The presidential debate serves not only as a platform for understanding the perspectives of the candidates but also as a medium for constructing public discourse. Beyond functioning as a space for political engagement and relational dynamics, debates can operate as instruments of truth production, often characterized by their openness and interpretative flexibility. This study focuses on the third presidential debate, specifically addressing the theme of defense and security. The primary aim is to analyze the discourse of Prabowo Subianto to determine whether his statements substantively address pressing social issues or merely function as rhetorical strategies within the context of political campaigning. Employing Michel Foucault's theory of critical discourse analysis and a qualitative descriptive method, this research identifies two key findings: (1) the articulation of power relations, and (2) the representation of knowledge in Prabowo Subianto's discourse. In response to the first research question, the analysis reveals that Prabowo's statements convey assertions of authority rooted in his position as Minister of Defense, shaping public perceptions of him as a resolute, militaristic figure capable of decisive leadership should he be elected President.

Keywords: Debate, Critical Discourse Analysis, Michel Foucault

A. Introduction

Debate is often perceived negatively by the general public. It is frequently associated with political image-building and accused of distorting factual information when not grounded in valid data. Furthermore, debate is sometimes seen as a source of social friction, potentially damaging interpersonal relationships. However, historically, debate has served as a forum for constructive dialogue aimed at resolving complex societal issues. In the field of education, debate is recognized as a powerful pedagogical method for fostering critical thinking, analytical reasoning, and argumentative skills. As Jones (in Woods, 1998) argues, debate is a valuable educational tool that helps individuals

refine their rhetorical and cognitive abilities—skills essential not only in academic contexts but also in professional and everyday life.

Zainal (citing John Stuart Mill, 1873) further emphasized that debate is a means of seeking truth, grounded in the freedom to articulate and defend arguments from various perspectives. Through debate, one not only defends their stance but also broadens their understanding of opposing viewpoints. In political settings, especially in leadership elections, debate serves as a vital medium for conveying candidates' visions and missions. It compels candidates not only to articulate persuasive rhetoric but also to demonstrate analytical depth and awareness of pressing national issues, providing the public with a benchmark to evaluate their leadership potential.

Prior to the 2024 presidential election in Indonesia, the General Elections Commission (KPU) organized a series of five structured presidential debates. These debates were designed to publicly showcase the visions and missions of the candidates and to inform Indonesian voters of each candidate's policy agenda. Each debate session focused on distinct thematic areas: the first session (12 December 2023) covered governance, law, human rights, anti-corruption, democracy, public services, and social harmony; the second (22 December 2023) addressed economic issues including grassroots and digital economy, taxation, trade, budgeting, and urban development; the third (7 January 2024) explored national defense, security, international relations, and geopolitics; the fourth (21 January 2024) covered sustainable development, natural resources, environment, energy, food, agrarian reform, indigenous communities, and rural development; and the fifth session (4 February 2024) focused on social welfare, culture, education, information technology, health, labor, human resources, and inclusion.

Each candidate strategically responded to these themes, offering solutions to unresolved national issues. The three presidential candidates were: Anies Baswedan (with running mate Muhammin Iskandar), Prabowo Subianto (with Gibran Rakabuming Raka), and Ganjar Pranowo (with Mahfud MD). Each candidate presented their vision and mission, seeking to convey their credibility and leadership qualities.

This study focuses particularly on the third debate session, which addressed national defense, security, international relations, and foreign policy—topics of pressing importance in Indonesia's current socio-political landscape. Siregar (2020) identified three major threats to national resilience: military/security threats, economic vulnerabilities, and ideological challenges. Concerns over Indonesia's defense capabilities, particularly in relation to neighboring countries such as Malaysia, highlight the urgency of this debate theme.

Security concerns also remain central, with increasing rates of criminal activity. Data from the National Criminal Information Center (PUSIKNAS) reports 434,768 criminal cases in 2023, with theft (63,355 cases), assault (51,312 cases), and sexual

crimes (49,007 cases) as the most prevalent. These alarming statistics underscore the importance of prioritizing domestic security in political discourse.

Furthermore, the debate on international relations is increasingly relevant given today's global interdependence. Positive diplomatic relations bring economic, technological, and humanitarian benefits and may also provide strategic protection in times of global conflict, such as in the case of Palestine and Israel. The ability to foster and maintain such relations is essential for national stability.

A key figure in this debate is Prabowo Subianto, a former military commander and Indonesia's current Minister of Defense. His remarks in the third debate session emphasized the constitutional duty to protect all Indonesian citizens, both at home and abroad. His statements reflect a strong nationalistic discourse, aligning with the historical narrative of patriotic sacrifice and state sovereignty.

This discourse is best examined through the lens of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), particularly drawing on the theoretical perspective of Michel Foucault. Foucault (1980) asserts that power is not merely hierarchical or repressive but is productive and dispersed throughout social relations. Power and knowledge are intrinsically connected, and discourse serves as the medium through which knowledge and authority are constructed and circulated. In Foucault's framework, political discourse—such as that found in presidential debates—is not just a reflection of ideology but an instrument that shapes and reproduces social reality.

Therefore, this study seeks to explore how power relations and knowledge representation are constructed through Prabowo Subianto's discourse in the third presidential debate. The application of Foucault's theory provides insight into how political authority, institutional legitimacy, and national ideology are embedded in language. By analyzing Prabowo's speech using Critical Discourse Analysis, this study aims to uncover the discursive strategies employed to construct leadership identity and national vision.

B. Method

This study adopts a qualitative descriptive method, which is appropriate for examining naturally occurring phenomena rather than controlled experimental conditions. The research seeks to explore and interpret meaning, emphasizing depth of understanding over statistical generalization. In line with this approach, data analysis is conducted inductively, moving from specific observations toward broader patterns and interpretations.

The primary focus of the study is the analysis of Prabowo Subianto's statements during the third Indonesian presidential debate. These statements are analyzed through the lens of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), specifically employing the theoretical

framework of Michel Foucault. Foucault's theory of discourse, power, and knowledge provides a foundation for examining how political narratives are constructed and how authority is reproduced through language.

To collect the data, the researcher employed the observational method (metode simak), as articulated by Sudaryanto (in Yohanes, 2024), which involves closely listening to and observing the language used in the research object—in this case, the recorded statements of Prabowo Subianto. The data were extracted from the official broadcast of the third presidential debate and documented using a note-taking technique (teknik catat) to ensure the accuracy and relevance of the selected discourse segments.

Following data collection, the utterances were categorized and interpreted using Foucault's concepts of discourse, particularly focusing on the interplay between power, knowledge, and social institutions. The analysis aimed to identify how these elements manifest in the candidate's rhetorical strategies and how they reflect broader political ideologies and power relations.

Through this methodological framework, the study provides a critical examination of political discourse, contributing to a deeper understanding of how language functions as a vehicle for power and governance in contemporary electoral contexts. This section analyzes selected statements made by Prabowo Subianto during the third Indonesian presidential debate in 2024. The discourse is examined through Michel Foucault's theory of power and knowledge, focusing on how Prabowo constructs his political authority and the ideological framework behind his narrative.

Data 01

Context

“We return to our foundation—our national goal as stated in the 1945 Constitution. It clearly asserts that our primary national objective is to protect all Indonesian people and the entire homeland. Hence, the primary function of the state is to protect, which means defense.” (Prabowo, minute 42:11)

Textual Analysis

This statement affirms the constitutional mandate that the state must prioritize national defense as a fundamental duty. Through Foucault's framework, this protectionist rhetoric reflects the diffusion of power through state apparatuses. The power described here is not merely institutional or military but discursive—it legitimizes state authority by invoking legal and historical narratives.

Coherence

By referring to the Constitution, Prabowo positions himself as the defender of foundational state values. The appeal to “protection” operates as a discursive strategy to legitimize his vision of leadership. Within Foucault’s concept of power, this represents a biopolitical function: the state assumes responsibility for the security and well-being of its citizens, shaping subjectivities through governance.

Data 02

Context

“Distant countries come to Indonesia to intervene, to divide us, and to steal our resources. Even after independence, we still face the challenge of having our natural wealth taken. Therefore, to become a prosperous and wealthy nation, our people must manage and safeguard our resources.” (Prabowo, minute 43:30)

Textual Analysis

Prabowo’s statement emphasizes national sovereignty over natural resources and critiques foreign interference, invoking historical and contemporary forms of colonialism and economic dependency. From Foucault’s standpoint, this discourse reveals the continuing power struggle between postcolonial states and global hegemonies. Power here is represented as pervasive, operating not through direct control but via economic systems and geopolitical pressures.

Coherence

This narrative constructs a sense of collective struggle and identity in opposition to external exploitation. Prabowo’s discourse contributes to a nationalist rhetoric that mobilizes historical memory as a tool of political persuasion. It aligns with Foucault’s view that discourse shapes perception and becomes a mechanism of power, framing reality and justifying future state action.

Data 03

Context

“A thousand friends are too few, but one enemy is too many. We must conduct good state politics. My fellow citizens, we must be determined to have a strong defense.” (Prabowo, minute 43:53)

Textual Analysis

This metaphorical assertion underscores the significance of diplomacy and strength in national policy. By urging both unity and defense readiness, Prabowo merges soft and hard power narratives. Foucault's theory interprets this as a subtle exercise of power, where norms of vigilance, discipline, and national cohesion are reinforced through discourse.

Coherence

The call for a “strong defense” functions as a disciplinary mechanism that extends beyond military structures. It reflects how power operates across social domains, normalizing behaviors and constructing expectations of loyalty and unity. In Foucault's framework, this is a manifestation of governmentality—the management of populations through discourses that appear neutral or moral.

Data 04

Context

“Our leadership on the global stage in international relations will be reflected and impacted by our success in managing our resources, eradicating poverty, and advancing technology to become an industrialized nation. That is what will lead us in the Global South.” (Prabowo, minute 01:05:29)

Textual Analysis

Here, Prabowo links domestic success to international legitimacy, asserting that global leadership is contingent on internal development. According to Foucault, such discourse reflects the productive nature of power: by defining developmental goals, it constructs ideals of citizenship, governance, and international recognition. It reveals how knowledge (e.g., economic and technological success) is instrumentalized as a source of legitimacy.

Coherence

The discourse constructs a linear vision of national progress where economic sovereignty and technological advancement lead to geopolitical power. This aligns with Foucault's notion of power/knowledge—where discourse not only describes reality but also prescribes actions and structures identity. Prabowo thus constructs a technocratic narrative that reinforces his political authority and global ambitions.

Data 05

Context

“Our leadership reflects and is impacted by our ability to manage wealth, eradicate poverty, and attain technological advancement. This will lead us to become a leading nation in the Global South.” (Prabowo, minute 23:57)

Textual Analysis

This restated assertion reinforces the narrative of developmental nationalism. Within Foucault's perspective, this can be seen as a reproduction of hegemonic discourse where knowledge about development and modernization becomes a tool of discipline and control. By framing success as measurable by economic and technological metrics, power manifests in how states categorize, regulate, and prioritize their goals.

Coherence

The statement illustrates how the nation is imagined as a rational, productive body. Power, in this sense, lies in the ability to define what counts as “success” and who gets to lead based on these criteria. Foucault's approach allows us to interpret this as more than rhetoric—it is an act of constructing governance through epistemic authority and socio-political aspirations.

Across all five data points, Prabowo Subianto's statements deploy nationalistic and developmental discourse that strategically blend historical memory, defense imperatives, and economic vision. In Foucault's framework, such discourse functions as a technology of power—shaping collective identity, justifying authority, and naturalizing state goals. Rather than merely describing policy positions, these statements reproduce a regime of truth about leadership, national strength, and sovereignty. Power, in this context, is not solely possessed; it is produced, circulated, and normalized through language and knowledge.

Data 06

Context

“The weak are always oppressed. We can see this in Gaza—they are always oppressed. We must not allow ourselves to be oppressed by other nations.” (Prabowo, minute 41:30)

In response to a moderator's question regarding the risks of foreign intervention due to increasing national debt, Prabowo asserted that Indonesia's foreign debt was among

the lowest and claimed that the country is respected globally. His statement links weakness with oppression, framing economic and geopolitical vulnerability as potential threats to sovereignty.

Textual Analysis

Through Foucault's lens, this statement illustrates how discourse operates as a form of power. By invoking oppression and referencing Gaza, Prabowo draws a parallel between international domination and the potential consequences of Indonesia's vulnerability. His rhetorical strategy constructs a nationalist discourse in which economic self-sufficiency equates to autonomy and dignity. Power, in this case, is exercised through the capacity to resist foreign control and maintain sovereignty—a discourse shaped by historical memory and global power asymmetries.

Coherence

This discourse portrays international debt not only as an economic issue but also as a political and moral one. Prabowo's narrative reinforces the idea that independence must be safeguarded not only through defense but also through economic resilience. In Foucauldian terms, this is a process of governmentality: managing the nation's image, debt, and diplomacy to maintain internal and external legitimacy. The statement serves to normalize the idea that strength and self-reliance are prerequisites for respect in global affairs.

Data 07

Context

“Defense is sacred to us. It concerns our survival. Do not mislead or provoke the people for personal ambition. That is the highest form of ethics for a leader.” (Prabowo, minute 02:04:41)

This statement was delivered in response to Anies Baswedan's criticism regarding the lack of transparency in defense spending. Prabowo refused to disclose data on the grounds of national security.

Textual Analysis

From Foucault's perspective, Prabowo constructs a discourse that sacralizes national defense, elevating it to a moral and untouchable domain. By framing defense as sacred and tied to survival, he legitimizes secrecy and asserts hierarchical knowledge control. This is a classic example of power being exerted through discourse: information

is restricted, not because it is irrelevant, but because it is deemed too important to be public—thus reinforcing the asymmetry between those who govern and those who are governed.

Coherence

This justification of secrecy reveals how power and knowledge are intertwined. By invoking ethics and survival, Prabowo frames his refusal as an act of responsibility rather than evasion. Foucault would interpret this as the exercise of power through the production of truth claims—truths that cannot be questioned because they are framed as protecting the collective good. Such discourse cultivates a political culture where authority is rarely challenged, and where public knowledge is contingent on elite discretion.

Data 08

Context

“We must strengthen our ideology—especially Pancasila, foster democracy, and protect human rights.” (Prabowo, minute 02:22:00)

This was Prabowo's response to criticisms about his past involvement in the military during the late New Order regime and alleged human rights violations. He framed his vision as one that prioritizes ideological renewal and democratic values.

Textual Analysis

This statement is rich in ideological repositioning. Prabowo attempts to displace the narrative of past authoritarianism by asserting a progressive commitment to Pancasila, democracy, and human rights. Through Foucault's framework, this can be understood as a reconfiguration of discourse: using dominant societal values to reconstruct one's political legitimacy. The discourse redefines his identity not as a relic of the past but as a reformist figure in tune with contemporary expectations of leadership.

Coherence

This narrative reflects Foucault's idea that power is not just repressive but productive—it produces identities, norms, and truths. By aligning with democratic ideals and human rights, Prabowo reconstructs his image through a discourse of moral and ideological transformation. The invocation of Pancasila and democracy also serves as a disciplining force, reinforcing collective identity while reasserting the state's moral high ground.

Data 09

Context

“During my presidency, I will prioritize strengthening cultural defense and the economy. These are my primary concerns.” (Prabowo, minute 01:43:12)

This was a response to Ganjar Pranowo’s criticism of Prabowo’s performance as Minister of Defense and the lack of progress in military procurement and infrastructure. Prabowo emphasized “cultural defense” as a strategic priority.

Textual Analysis

“Cultural defense” is an ambiguous yet powerful phrase. From a Foucauldian standpoint, this can be read as a tactic to broaden the scope of state control. Culture, when positioned as a domain requiring “defense,” becomes an arena where the state can justify surveillance, regulation, and ideological intervention. Economic priorities are similarly framed as essential for national stability, reinforcing the legitimacy of state power in managing both tangible and intangible resources.

Coherence

This discourse reveals how power operates through redefining what constitutes national security. By including culture and the economy under “defense,” Prabowo expands the domain of state intervention. This aligns with Foucault’s notion of biopolitics, where the state extends control over populations through governance not only of the body but also of values, identities, and social norms. The statement legitimizes state control in both the cultural and economic spheres, presenting leadership as a holistic form of protection.

Prabowo’s discourse across these four data sets illustrates how political rhetoric becomes a powerful tool for the construction and maintenance of authority. Drawing from Michel Foucault’s theory, these statements do not merely describe political intentions—they produce specific ways of thinking about leadership, defense, sovereignty, and national identity. Prabowo’s use of terms like sacred defense, cultural defense, and sovereign dignity constitutes a regime of truth that normalizes certain power structures while marginalizing dissenting views.

These findings affirm Foucault’s view that power is most effective when it is embedded in discourse—when it becomes invisible, internalized, and moralized. Prabowo’s discourse constructs the image of a protector-leader, one who safeguards the nation not only from military threats but also from ideological, economic, and cultural vulnerabilities. His narrative, while rooted in nationalistic ideals, operates as a subtle

strategy to consolidate authority, justify non-transparency, and frame governance as an ethical mission.

D. Conclusion

The analysis of the first research question reveals that Prabowo Subianto's discourse during the third presidential debate carries significant implications for the construction of power relations, especially when interpreted through Michel Foucault's perspective. Prabowo's statements are not merely political expressions; they are discursive instruments that shape public perception regarding state power, leadership, and national sovereignty.

Drawing from Foucault's notion that power is exercised through discourse and embedded within societal structures rather than merely possessed, Prabowo positions himself as a legitimate authority figure capable of managing national defense, economic autonomy, and foreign policy. His repeated references to national protection and resistance to foreign domination serve to construct a narrative of strength, sovereignty, and moral leadership. These discourses instill a sense of urgency and confidence among the public regarding national threats and the need for decisive governance. Nevertheless, a critical question arises: do these statements reflect a genuine strategic vision, or are they performative in nature—merely political rhetoric tailored for electoral advantage? The tension between campaign discourse and actual governance remains unresolved until post-election outcomes can be evaluated. Therefore, the discourse must be seen as part of a broader mechanism of power production that seeks to influence public consciousness and consolidate political legitimacy.

The second research question concerns how knowledge is constructed and represented in Prabowo's debate discourse, particularly concerning technology and youth development. Prabowo emphasizes the urgent need for Indonesia to advance in technological innovation and asserts that young people must be empowered to meet the demands of a competitive global environment. His proposal to establish technologically advanced schools and promote educational freedom reflects a vision of progress that aligns with national development narratives. From Foucault's framework, this discourse represents more than an educational policy; it is part of a broader knowledge-power system. The state, through such statements, becomes an agent that defines what counts as valuable knowledge and sets the conditions for how young citizens are formed as productive subjects. By emphasizing technological literacy, Prabowo is actively shaping a discourse that privileges modernization, innovation, and global competitiveness as central to national identity. This knowledge construction serves both ideological and practical functions—it fosters national pride while simultaneously legitimizing state control over educational and developmental frameworks. The promise of educational advancement thus becomes a form of governance that seeks to align individual aspirations with state objectives.

In conclusion, Prabowo's discourse illustrates the dual operation of power and knowledge: his leadership claims are articulated through strategic narratives of strength and sovereignty, while his educational vision reflects deeper mechanisms of subject formation and social control. The significance of these discourses will ultimately depend on their translation into concrete policy, determining whether they serve as tools for genuine empowerment or remain within the symbolic realm of political performance.

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