SOUTHEAST ASIAN LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE STUDIES (SALLS)

Mass Depoliticization in NKAL in the Novel Bungkam Suara: A Study of Jurgen Habermas's Legitimation Crisis

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ABSTRACT
A policy may be established through the rulers' manufacture of consent, rendering it irrational and non-objective and harming citizens. This study aims to reveal the mass depoliticization carried out by the NKAL government in J.S. Khairen's novel Bungkam Suara as a reflection of social reality, depicting systematic and often invisible intervention with significant effects. A descriptive qualitative method is used to focus on the narrative, description, and interpretation of indications of manipulation, including characters' behavior, through Jürgen Habermas's theory of legitimation crisis. Reading and note-taking techniques are used to collect data in the form of words, phrases, sentences, and paragraphs, classified into three categories: manipulation through the manufacture of consent, the formation of civic privatism, and the emergence of mass loyalty. The data are then analyzed and interpreted through these three Habermasian concepts. The study's contribution lies in showing how the relationship among the manufacture of consent, civic privatism, and mass loyalty forms an integrated sequence leading to mass depoliticization. The findings indicate that (1) the NKAL government manufactures consent by creating the illusion of freedom in the public sphere to control discourse; (2) extensive digital surveillance generates structured fear that triggers civic privatism, causing citizens to withdraw from public discourse; and (3) restrictions on economic independence create dependency that weakens critical reasoning, thereby fostering passive loyalty and advancing mass depoliticization in support of absolute political legitimacy.

Keywords: Bungkam Suara; mass depoliticization; Jurgen Hubermas; legitimation crisis

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Introduction

An ideal power structure is characterized by openness and transparency, enabling citizens to participate actively in evaluating proposed policies. Habermas (1988, p. 4) argues that, ideally, policy should be grounded in social integration, whereby people participate in and consciously agree to established values and norms. Their involvement in a discursive public sphere is crucial to preventing the administrative system from operating authoritarianly in order to perpetuate one-sided interests. In this regard, Habermas (1988, p. 105) emphasizes that a government policy cannot be considered legitimate without truth claims being tested, justified, and rationally discussed by the public (discursive justification).

In reality, however, those in authority often create artificial consent by distorting public discourse, ultimately leading to a legitimation crisis. Understanding the crisis described by Habermas requires engagement with related literature. Castells (2009, p. 10), for example, argues that power in the modern era is maintained not through physical repression alone, but by manipulating communication networks to construct meaning and control public perceptions. As a result, public participation loses its rational autonomy because public narratives are designed to secure the rulers' agenda. Herman and Chomsky (2008, p. 2) reinforce this point by explaining that power operates through the manufacture of consent and the filtering of communication channels, undermining the essence of objective discourse. Thus, a legitimation crisis can arise from power that systematically manufactures consent through communication networks in order to control society.

In the real world, this phenomenon can be seen in policy-making in Indonesia, where opportunities for citizen participation are reduced to mere formalities. The 2020 Annual Report of LBH Jakarta notes that the drafting of the Job Creation Law took place behind closed doors without the participation of civil society. Rather than opening space for rational dialogue, those in power used digital channels to construct public opinion suggesting that the controversial regulation had been collectively approved. An investigative report by Tempo (2020) documented the use of paid influencers to manufacture support for the Job Creation Omnibus Law bill.

Unilateral government decisions made without public involvement are represented not only in real life but also in literary works. Damono (1978, pp. 1–2) states that literary works are connected to the social conditions of the communities in which they emerge. This connection means that the phenomena represented in literature often resemble aspects of the author's social context. According to Eagleton (as cited in Faruk, 2017, p. 44), a novel can combine social facts and fictional imagination in a complex narrative. The discussion of the Job Creation Law therefore provides a contextual lens through which to understand the social dynamics represented in a novel.

One novel that presents these social dynamics is Bungkam Suara by J.S. Khairen (2023), selected as the material object of this study. The novel portrays life in a highly modern country called NKAL (Negara Kesatuan Adat Lemunesia). Yet the government uses its advanced technology to control citizens' perceptions and legitimize its power. One way the government deprives citizens of their right to participate in policy decisions is through the formation of civic privatism. This process fosters mass loyalty and ultimately produces mass depoliticization.

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These issues are not the only ones represented in NKAL's government. Previous studies have examined the novel from several perspectives. Rifqi (2023) and Yulina (2023), for example, discuss various forms of crime in the novel. Yanti (2023), J. S. Prasetyo (2025), and W. T. Prasetyo (2025) examine ideology, conflict, and power relations between the government and families. In contrast, Awa (2024) and Jemadin (2026) approach the novel through communication, identifying links between politics and communication in the legitimation of power. Nugroho (2026) examines the distortion and reduction of communication in the public sphere by the government. These studies address crime, power relations, and communication manipulation, but do not investigate in depth the consequences that follow when the government manufactures public consent. This study seeks to address that gap by examining how civic privatism emerges after consent has been manufactured and how it subsequently produces mass loyalty. The relationship among these three factors suggests a contribution: understanding mass depoliticization and the resulting legitimation crisis in NKAL in Bungkam Suara. The study offers a perspective in which domination is visible not only through physical repression but also through less visible mechanisms formed through discourse, facilities, and habits that affect citizens' psychology and critical faculties. It also integrates Habermas's theory of legitimation crisis with social dynamics represented in contemporary literature.

Methods

This study employs a descriptive qualitative method. Drawing on Denzin and Lincoln (2019, p. 3), qualitative research focuses on understanding processes and meanings. Abrams's (1953, p. 8) mimetic approach is used to examine how real-world social dynamics are represented fictionally in literature. This approach is combined with Habermas's theory of legitimation crisis to analyze how mass depoliticization occurs in Bungkam Suara.

The material object of this study is Bungkam Suara, a novel by J.S. Khairen. The 366-page novel is a bestseller at Gramedia and is also sold by other bookstores and digital marketplaces. Its accessible plot and complex social dynamics have contributed to its popularity. It was selected over other novels because it depicts advanced technology being used to legitimize power, a theme relevant to contemporary circumstances in which those in authority can readily access and control citizens' thoughts. Through close reading, the primary data were collected as phrases, words, and sentences in narration or dialogue that indicate the manipulation of public policy, including intensive surveillance, silencing that produces mass fear, and unilateral government decisions. Supporting data were drawn from Habermas's works, relevant previous studies, and factual news reports about the manufacture of consent in the public sphere. These sources support the mimetic approach by enabling comparison between factual and fictional phenomena.

The researcher read, recorded, and interpreted the meanings of the novel's text. Reading and note-taking were used to collect data. The primary-data collection proceeded as follows: (1) Bungkam Suara by J.S. Khairen was read carefully and in full twice, using heuristic and hermeneutic readings; (2) relevant data were marked, including phrases, words, sentences, and paragraphs in narration and dialogue, according to specific indicators in the novel. The first indicator, the mechanism for manufacturing consent, covered passages showing policy manipulation by the government or an illusion of freedom. The second, the formation of civic privatism, referred to narratives of

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structured fear resulting from extensive surveillance. The third, the emergence of mass loyalty, was identified through passages showing resignation, loss of political awareness, and citizen dependency caused by restrictions on economic independence. (3) The collected data were classified and numbered according to the discussion categories: the mechanism for manufacturing consent, the formation of civic privatism, and the emergence of mass loyalty and achievement of mass depoliticization. Where a passage related to more than one indicator, it was assigned to the category representing its primary cause, with cross-references added to make the causal sequence of mass depoliticization consistent and traceable. (4) The data were analyzed and interpreted using Habermas's theory of legitimation crisis.

Result

This section presents the analysis of mass depoliticization in NKAL in J.S. Khairen's Bungkam Suara. Using Abrams's mimetic approach and Habermas's theory of legitimation crisis, the study examines passages from the novel to demonstrate a structured and interconnected mechanism of domination. The discussion follows three conceptual stages that present mass depoliticization as a cause-and-effect process. First, it identifies government interventions that manufacture consent through advanced technology. The effects of this manufactured consent indirectly generate psychological repression, leading to the second finding: the formation of civic privatism, through which citizens withdraw from social activity. This withdrawal and social isolation ultimately lead to the third finding: the unconscious formation of mass loyalty and the resulting depoliticization of NKAL's population. Together, the three findings show mass depoliticization as the outcome of a structured power pattern whose causal elements are inseparable.

The Mechanism of Manufacturing Consent

Manufacturing consent can be understood as a new form of repression in an era of advanced technology, used by those in power to subdue public critical awareness through information manipulation and artificial consent. Habermas (1988, p. 36) emphasizes that this practice forms part of a legitimation process intended to create diffuse mass loyalty. It misleads citizens' active or critical participation so that they align with the appearance of majority consent. However, Habermas (1988, p. 70) notes that this practice is risky because, if exposed publicly, it can undermine the legitimacy that power has constructed.

Table 1. The Mechanism of Manufacturing Consent

No.	Manufactured Message	Actual Reality
11	"This is Free Speech Day... Every citizen is free to speak... Its purpose is to achieve justice for all people" (Khairen, 2023, p. vii).	"People fight one another... This is Free Speech Day. Resentment, hatred, and anger roam freely" (Khairen, 2023, p. vii).

Source: Author (2026)

The social conditions in NKAL's public sphere suggest a contradiction between the declaration of freedom and its actual effects. The government establishes "Free Speech Day," ostensibly to curb hate speech and physical violence on every other day. The policy appears to be a positive government effort to preserve peace and unity. At the same time, however, its underlying purpose is to restrict freedom of expression on the remaining days. This is reinforced by the kingdom's absolute laws, which appear to protect citizens when hate speech and physical violence occur outside "Free Speech Day." The day is also

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used to divide citizens: offenses suppressed for 364 days are released on that single day. Citizens are therefore harmed by a policy that restricts their participatory rights. The law works against them and fuels conflict among citizens while strengthening the government's legitimacy. In line with Habermas's argument, the engineered "Free Speech Day" indirectly creates passive mass loyalty.

The Formation of Civic Privatism

The civic-privatist mentality among NKAL's population is an important condition deliberately shaped by the government. It emerges when manufactured consent is accepted and enacted in social reality without criticism or rebellion. Habermas (1988, p. 75) explains that civic privatism occurs when people gradually withdraw from public discourse and redirect their attention toward private interests, careers, consumption, or entertainment. In Bungkam Suara, NKAL citizens' withdrawal from public discourse is not spontaneous; rather, it is compelled by fear generated through pervasive digital surveillance. The data below illustrate this through depictions of surveillance and its consequences.

Table 2. The Formation of Civic Privatism

No	Forms of Supervision	Facts and Consequences
2.1	... CCTV. Langsung terpantau di Istana Kerajaan. Berangkat, kerja atau sekolah, pulang, diam. Itu saja aktivitas orang-orang di distrik ini. Harus patuh, menurut, jalani hidup. Tak boleh ada aneh-aneh (Khairen, 2023, hal. 1).	Orang-orang takut karena gerak-gerik mereka terekam CCTV (Khairen, 2023, hal. 1).
	... Undang-undang pasti bekerja, Kepolisian Kerajaan pasti turun tangan. Bahkan di kasus-kasus tertentu... Kerajaan pun akan turun (Khairen, 2023, hal. 16).	Gerbong kelas rendahan ini isinya pekerja kasar semua. Mereka berangkat entah ke mana, untuk bekerja dan hasilnya untuk makan hari besok... Sekeras apa juga mereka bekerja, takkan pernah naik status jadi orang kaya,.. Mereka benar-benar tak paham bahwa sistem di bangsa inilah yang membuat mereka begitu (Khairen, 2023, hal. 11).

Source: Author (2026)

Technological progress can make citizens' lives easier, but governments often use it as an instrument of power. The data above suggest that CCTV is ostensibly intended to ensure security and peace, while its implicit purpose is to constrain rebellion. This is reinforced by laws and narratives suggesting that the kingdom can intervene at any time. Extensive surveillance and arbitrary actions by the kingdom shape people's mentality and perceptions, particularly among lower social groups, directing them to focus on work. The narrative depicts lower-class citizens as preoccupied with making ends meet rather than thinking about or resisting the government, which could make their lives even harder. This supports Habermas's argument that civic privatism can be produced by structured fear.

The Emergence of Mass Loyalty and the Achievement of Mass Depoliticization

Civic privatism, deeply rooted in NKAL, ultimately produces citizens' blind obedience to the ruler's policies. Habermas (1988, p. 46) argues that power remains

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secure when diffuse mass loyalty develops and people obey in silence. Such obedience allows the government to pass manipulative policies unilaterally without the threat of public resistance. In this context, Habermas (1988, p. 37) states that a legitimation process relying solely on artificial obedience is evidence of structural depoliticization in the public sphere.

Table 3

The Emergence of Mass Loyalty and the Achievement of Mass Depoliticization

No	Social Conditions	Facts
3.1	Resignation or obedience (mass loyalty)	Berangkat, kerja atau sekolah, pulang, diam. Itu saja aktivitas orang-orang di distrik ini. Harus patuh, menurut, jalani hidup. Tak boleh ada aneh-aneh (Khairen, 2023, hal. 1).
3.2	Loss of political consciousness (depoliticization of the masses)	Gerbong kelas rendahan ini isinya pekerja kasar semua. Mereka berangkat entah ke mana, untuk bekerja dan hasilnnya untuk makan hari besok... Mereka benar-benar tak paham bahwa sistem di bangsa inilah yang membuat mereka begitu (Khairen, 2023, hal. 11).
3.3	Structural dependencies (Mass loyalty and mass depoliticization)	Kemajuan itu terasa dan terlihat canggih. Namun sisi buruknya, orang-orang tak lagi bisa bertani atau beternak di rumah mereka... Semuanya telah diatur dan tertata rapi, hanya boleh dikelola oleh orang-orang dan perusahaan tertentu (Khairen, 2023, hal. 22).

Source: Author (2026)

The NKAL regime's ability to perpetuate its power rests on restricting citizens' economic independence through policies enabled by advanced technology. The novel's narrative reveals a policy contradiction: technological progress, which should create prosperity, is instead used to deprive citizens of their autonomy to farm and raise livestock independently. The monopolization of resources by a small elite creates structural dependency, forcing citizens into passive daily routines without participation in public discourse. As a result, lower-class citizens become preoccupied with survival and eventually lose their political reasoning. They do not recognize that their poverty and suffering are products of the NKAL system's design. From a Habermasian perspective, this depiction of poverty and suffering is not an individual failing but a representation of mass depoliticization. To keep structural oppression hidden and prevent rebellion, the NKAL government takes control of the public sphere through extensive surveillance and arbitrary laws. This generates civic privatism: given how difficult life already is, citizens feel that confronting the government would only make it more complicated. Over time, this becomes a habit; structural economic pressure weakens citizens' critical faculties, enabling the regime to cultivate passive mass loyalty. Thus, mass depoliticization in NKAL is not accidental but the result of systematic government engineering designed to conceal a legitimation crisis and ensure that exploitative policies can be implemented without social resistance.

Conclusion

This study concludes that mass depoliticization the loss of political awareness and critical capacity among NKAL's citizens in J.S. Khairen's Bungkam Suara is the result of systematic regime construction. Instead of opening an objective space for public discourse, the government uses advanced technology and policy instruments to create an

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illusion of freedom through the manufacture of consent. This manipulation of public discourse operates implicitly to mislead citizens' rational awareness and align them with artificial consent designed to secure a one-sided agenda and legitimize the rulers.

The success of this manufactured consent directly produces psychological repression, leading to the second finding: the formation of civic privatism. Extensive surveillance, protected by manipulative laws, generates structured fear in society, gradually causing citizens to withdraw from political matters in the public sphere. This withdrawal and social isolation reduce active participation, shifting citizens' priorities toward obedience and day-to-day survival.

The entrenchment of civic privatism ultimately leads to passive mass loyalty. This condition is intensified by rulers' restrictions on economic independence, which generate structural dependency and weaken citizens' willingness to rebel against or oppose political policies. Society's inability to recognize systemic oppression defines mass depoliticization. Through Habermas's theory of legitimation crisis, the causal relationship among the manufacture of consent, civic privatism, and mass loyalty can be understood as an integrated sequence that suppresses social resistance and preserves the stability of NKAL's government. This study may also open new avenues for examining the integration of technology and dominant power in modern life, both in the real world and in contemporary literature.

Declaration

Author Contribution

Conceptualization: M.N.R.P.N. and R.P.; Methodology: M.N.R.P.N.; Investigation: M.N.R.P.N.; Data curation: M.N.R.P.N.; Formal analysis: M.N.R.P.N.; Validation: R.P.; Visualization: M.N.R.P.N.; Writing – original draft: M.N.R.P.N.; Writing – review and editing: M.N.R.P.N. and R.P.; Supervision: R.P.

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Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no financial or non-financial competing interests relevant to this work.

Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Manuscript Preparation Process

During the preparation of this revised manuscript, the authors used a generative AI tool to assist with language editing and with drafting passages of the revision in response to the reviewers' comments. The data collection and coding were carried out by the authors. After using this tool, the authors reviewed and edited the content as needed and take full responsibility for the published article.

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