

Democratic and Transformational Leadership of Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono in the Dynamics of Modern Indonesian Politics

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Abstract: This article aims to conduct an in-depth analysis of Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono's (SBY) leadership practices during his presidency (2004–2014), highlighting how his character, leadership style, policy implementation, and responses to the nation's various challenges influenced the direction of Indonesia's national development. The research employs a descriptive qualitative case study method by analyzing literature sources, government documents, state policies, and relevant academic studies. The findings show that SBY's leadership was characterized by a democratic-participatory model with a charismatic touch, guiding Indonesia through critical periods such as major natural disasters, global economic changes, and challenges in consolidating democracy. The use of soft diplomacy, political consensus, and transparent governance became hallmarks of the SBY era, accompanied by bureaucratic reform efforts, social innovation, and community involvement in policy-making. This article also discusses the major achievements of SBY's administration, responses to criticism, and the leadership legacy as a model for future national leaders.

Keywords: Democracy; Leadership; Participatory; Political Transition; Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono.

1. Introduction

Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (SBY) served as the President of the Republic Indonesia from 2004 to 2014, marking a new chapter in the nation's political history as the first president elected directly by the people. The direct presidential election reflected the maturity of Indonesia's post-reform democratic system and reinforced SBY's legitimacy in navigating the complex political, economic, and social dynamics of the era (Rahmah et al., 2024). His leadership period has become an important reference for understanding how participatory and democratic leadership models are implemented in developing countries facing significant structural and cultural challenges (Murtiana, 2024).

SBY's administration operated amid a national political constellation characterized by various challenges, including corruption issues, bureaucratic reform, social conflicts, and global economic pressures—particularly the 2008 financial crisis, which significantly affected national economic stability. Additionally, high rates of unemployment and poverty became central concerns of his social policy agenda, which included innovative initiatives such as Direct Cash Assistance (BLT) and the National Health Insurance Program (BPJS) aimed at improving the overall welfare of Indonesian citizens (Ministry of PANRB, 2014; Suetha, 2021).

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Although rooted in his military background, SBY's leadership style evolved into a democratic and charismatic approach, demonstrating significant adaptation in government governance. His participatory method and extensive public communication were considered effective in fostering political consensus and mitigating potential social conflict in a highly diverse society. He was also known for emphasizing transparency and accountability as foundational principles in building a clean and reform-oriented government (FISIPOL UGM, 2025).

In the sphere of international relations, SBY's foreign policy doctrine known as "*Million Friends, Zero Enemy*" emphasized Indonesia's role as a nation promoting peaceful diplomacy and global cooperation. The protection of Indonesian migrant workers (TKI) abroad, particularly in countries such as Malaysia, was one of the key social and diplomatic issues prioritized during his leadership (Murtiana, 2024; Suetha, 2021). This protective commitment reflects a leadership sensitivity toward vulnerable citizen groups while strengthening Indonesia's image as a state upholding social justice.

Despite various achievements, SBY's leadership also drew criticism, particularly regarding slow policy decision-making in certain sectors, the persistence of corruption in several levels of government, and disparities in regional development. Nevertheless, his leadership is widely recognized as having significantly contributed to national stability and sustainable economic development through inclusive and humanistic approaches (Prianto, 2023; Suetha, 2021).

Based on this background, this study aims to comprehensively examine the characteristics, leadership style, strategic policies, and challenges faced by Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono during his presidency. This analysis is expected to enrich academic discourse on effective leadership models in developing countries and provide insight into governance dynamics within a consolidating democratic context (Rahmah et al., 2024).

2. Research Method

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach using a case study design, aimed at understanding and describing Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono's leadership during his presidency (2004–2014) in its natural context without manipulating variables (Sugiyono, 2018). Data were collected through literature review, including books, journal articles, government reports, and policy documents relevant to SBY's leadership, and analyzed using content analysis procedures—comprising data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. To maintain validity and reliability, triangulation was applied by comparing various sources and utilizing transformational and democratic leadership theories as the conceptual framework. This method allows for a deeper exploration of leadership characteristics, strategic policies, and SBY's situational responses to challenges in national development and democratic consolidation.

3. Results and Discussion

Results

Based on content analysis of the collected literature and documents, several key findings regarding SBY's leadership during his presidency were identified, focusing on leadership characteristics, strategic policy implementation, and responses to socio-political and economic challenges.

Democratic, Charismatic, and Participatory Leadership Style

SBY prioritizes a leadership style that combines democratic and charismatic elements, with an emphasis on open dialogue and two-way communication with various groups, including the public, political elites, and government officials. The consensus-based approach applied helps create strong agreements and reduces conflict between political groups. Rahmah et al. (2024) state that SBY's success in maintaining political stability is inseparable from a leadership style that is capable of motivating and inspiring his colleagues to collectively implement reforms and strengthen democracy. SBY's charismatic character also plays an important role in building a positive public image and reinforcing the legitimacy of his administration. This leadership approach closely aligns with the transformational leadership theory introduced by Bass and Riggio (2020), in which leaders are expected to motivate change and innovation through idealized influence, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration.

Implementation of Progressive and Sustainable Socio-Economic Policies

SBY initiated and implemented various strategic policies aimed at strengthening the economy and improving public welfare. Through programs such as Direct Cash Assistance (BLT), BPJS Health, and various policies protecting Indonesian Workers (TKI) abroad, the government sought to address poverty and social inequality more effectively. The "Triple Track" strategy, which integrates economic growth (pro-growth), job creation (pro-job), and poverty alleviation (pro-poor), was considered successful in maintaining stability and accelerating national economic growth with an average growth rate of 5-6% per year (Ministry of Administrative and Bureaucratic Reform, 2014; Suetha, 2021). In addition, the focus on infrastructure development and bureaucratic reform had a positive impact on improving the quality of public services and government efficiency (Murtiana, 2024).

Adaptive Strategies in Responding to Political and Economic Challenges

In facing various external and internal pressures such as the 2008 global economic crisis, rising fuel prices, and criticism of the slow eradication of corruption and bureaucratic reform, SBY demonstrated resilience and leadership adaptability. Through strategic public communication and inclusive policies, he was able to maintain political stability and uphold social cohesion. Marpaung (2024) evaluates SBY's leadership as an adaptive leadership model that balances the need for reform with social stability, in line with the concept of adaptive leadership (Heifetz et al., 2019). The internal and external diplomacy carried out by SBY

successfully minimized the likelihood of socio-political conflicts that could threaten the consolidation of democracy in Indonesia.

Discussion

These findings strongly reinforce that Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono's (SBY) leadership is a tangible manifestation of a democratic and transformational leadership model that successfully advanced and stabilized Indonesia in the post-New Order era. SBY did not only serve as an ordinary government administrator but also as a visionary capable of inspiring change through effective communication and high-ethical political practices. His charismatic character and ability to build harmonious interpersonal relationships with various political groups and the broader society have been key factors in maintaining national stability and strengthening democratic institutions (Bass & Riggio, 2020; Rahmah et al., 2024). A leadership approach that emphasizes dialogue, consensus deliberation, and public involvement opens up wide space for integrated participation, which positively contributes to national policy-making, ensuring that various policies are well-received by societal elements while avoiding sharp polarization (Moulaert et al., 2017).

SBY's administration was very notable for strategic policies that promoted inclusive development and social justice. The social programs initiated, such as Direct Cash Assistance, BPJS Health, and the protection of the rights of Indonesian workers abroad, demonstrated the government's commitment to vulnerable communities and broadened access to basic services more evenly (Suetha, 2021; Prianto, 2023). The "Triple Track Strategy" model, which combines economic development, job creation, and poverty alleviation, is a policy innovation that is highly relevant to the development needs of developing countries like Indonesia. This strategy also managed to maintain stable economic growth, with increased investment and a significant reduction in poverty across various regions.

Furthermore, SBY's resilience and flexibility in facing crisis pressures and uncertainties, both globally, such as the 2008 global financial crisis, and domestically, reflect an adaptive and pragmatic leadership capable of balancing the need for rapid change with long-term socio-political stability. SBY's leadership is a tangible example of the adaptive leadership theory developed by Heifetz et al. (2019), where a leader must be able to manage emerging changes and tensions with flexible strategies without losing the direction and core values of the nation. SBY's strength in navigating these political dynamics also demonstrates mastery of internal and external diplomacy, which helps maintain national cohesion and state integrity during a vulnerable democratic transition period.

However, SBY's leadership was not free from criticism and controversy. Some of the main issues that drew public and academic attention were the slow handling of corruption cases that were still rampant during his administration, regional conflicts that had not been fully resolved, as well as criticism regarding the handling of several human rights violation cases (KPPOD, 2025; Marpaung, 2024).

In addition, there were certain policies, such as the decision to raise fuel prices, which sparked waves of protests and significant dissatisfaction among the public (Suetha, 2021). These criticisms indicate that, in addition to many achievements, there remain major challenges that must be addressed to realize bureaucratic and governmental reforms that are truly clean and equitable.

SBY's leadership legacy is reflected not only in economic and political achievements but also in the establishment of a government culture that is transparent, accountable, and upholds public participation as a fundamental pillar of democracy. In this way, SBY leaves a substantial leadership imprint on the development of democracy and clean governance in Indonesia. Considering Indonesia's historical context, which was once plagued by authoritarian regimes, this achievement marks an important milestone in the consolidation of democracy and the improvement of state governance quality (Rahmah et al., 2024; Marpaung, 2024).

Overall, SBY's leadership demonstrates that a democratic and transformational model with a strong charismatic character is essential to drive sustainable structural change and maintain a balance between the needs of the people and the stability of the state in the context of complex national development. These findings serve as an important foundation for further understanding the development of national leadership in Indonesia and other developing countries facing similar challenges (Murniarti, 2014).

4. Conclusion

Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono is one of the examples of national leaders in Indonesia's modern democratic era who was able to transform the country's transition from a high-risk status to a stage of democratic consolidation and sustainable economic growth. His democratic-participatory leadership model, along with the resilience, toughness, and innovative policy-making, serves as an important reference for the study of leadership in developing countries. Social, economic, and political challenges were addressed by SBY through consensus, inclusive policies, and effective public communication strategies. His most significant legacy is not only in the form of social and economic policy infrastructure but also in a governance culture that upholds participation, ethics, transparency, and protection of the people. This model is worthy of being a theoretical and practical reference for the next generation of leaders in building an inclusive, adaptive, and just Indonesia.

5. Suggestion

For academics and researchers, the results of this study are expected to serve as a foundation for developing further research on democratic and transformational leadership models in Indonesia, especially through comparative studies of other national leaders in the context of developing countries and democratic transitions in Southeast Asia.

For the government and current leaders, the example of SBY's leadership can serve as an inspiration to transform in thinking, behaving, and acting as a visionary, flexible leader who is based on the values of democracy, public dialogue, and political ethics that enable effective responses to the challenges of the digital era, globalization, and the high demands for government accountability.

For the public and younger generations, the results of this study are expected to build awareness that effective leadership does not only depend on the length of time in power, but also on the quality of vision, moral integrity, communication skills, and exemplary conduct in creating real and sustainable change for the nation.

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