






# Co-Optation of Political Elites in Public Spaces (A Semiotic Study of Building Colors Ahead of the Regional Election in Tomohon/Manado)

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**Abstract.** Partai Golkar, including North Sulawesi, was the ruling party during the New Order regime. However, after the New Order regime collapsed in 1998, almost 184 new political parties emerged. The electoral system was changed to an open one, where citizens can choose legislative and executive candidates. After 10 years of the Partai Demokrat ruling North Sulawesi Province, since 2015, the PDIP, with its red party color, has been in power in this province. The emergence of new political parties has made each party compete for votes, and because Christianity is the majority religion and the Christian Evangelical Church in Minahasa is the oldest and largest church, it inevitably becomes a bone of contention for the political elite. The church, which is supposed to be a neutral and independent institution, has changed because the church elite began to enter politics and use religious symbols to attract its congregation. Facing the 2024 elections, almost all public spaces in Tomohon City and Manado are painted red. Citizens unite to articulate their interests and form discursive opinions and common will. This research will analyze the phenomenon using Peirce's semiotic analysis. Data is collected through a focus group discussion with four resource persons in North Minahasa. The conclusion is that using red is an elite co-optation in the public sphere to win certain political parties. Painting red on school buildings and churches violates the Election Law. In addition to the use of church symbols and the allowance of church elites who are candidates for the legislature or executive to conduct campaign activities in the church or in worship services, it has the potential to create jealousy and trigger conflict between people.

**Keywords:** Political Co-Optation, Public Space, Tomohon Manado, Church Elite, GMIM

## 1 Introduction

The Indonesian government officially recognizes six religions: Islam, Catholicism, Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Confucianism [1]. Additionally, there are hundreds of traditional beliefs among various communities, such as Kaharingan in Kalimantan, Laroma in Minahasa, Marapu in Sumba, Sunda Wiwitan in Kuningan, and Kejawen in Central Java, among others. This diversity is a unique characteristic of

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Indonesia, as, in addition to religious and spiritual beliefs, the country is home to a wide variety of ethnicities, races, and cultures spread across more than 17,000 islands. This ethnic, racial, and cultural diversity makes Indonesia rich in plurality, often referred to as a pluralistic and multicultural society [2], [3]. Pluralism represents society's recognition of human dignity, fostering mutual acceptance and coexistence among individuals from different cultural backgrounds.

North Sulawesi is a province where Christianity is the dominant religion, with 1,703,824 adherents. Data from 2022 shows that Protestants make up 62.95% of the population, followed by Muslims at 31.80%, Hindus at 0.49%, Buddhists at 0.14%, Catholics at 0.04%, and Confucians at 0.02% [4].

During Suharto's regime (1966–1998), the government only allowed three political parties to operate: Partai Persatuan Pembangunan (PPP), Golkar, and Partai Demokrasi Indonesia (PDI). However, the presence of these three political parties did not reflect true democracy, as the fundamental principle of democracy is the people's sovereignty. With the end of the New Order regime in 1998, democratic avenues expanded significantly. Various political parties emerged as a manifestation of the Reformation era. A total of 184 new political parties were established following the collapse of the New Order regime.

This emergence of new political parties was driven by the realization of equal political rights for all citizens, allowing them to establish political organizations freely [5]. There was an attempt to revive ideological experimentation in the early reformation era by reintroducing the romanticism of political ideologies or political streams associated with liberal democracy. Consequently, several parties emerged that sought to align themselves with major historical political parties, using ideological political foundations as their political capital. [6]

In 2005, for the first time, the people of North Sulawesi Province had the opportunity to elect their leader directly. Sinyo Harry Sarundajang won the election from the Partai Demokrat, who served as Governor of North Sulawesi for two terms until 2015. However, in the 2016 regional elections, Partai Demokrasi Indonesia Perjuangan (hereinafter referred to as PDIP) secured victory. The PDIP candidates, Olly Dondokambey and Steven Kandou, were elected as Governor and Deputy Governor with 647,253 votes or 51.47 percent. This pair defeated Benny Mamoto - David Bobihu from Golkar and the Partai Keadilan Sejahtera (PKS), who garnered 31 percent or 389,463 votes, and Maya Rumatir - Glenny Kairupan from the Partai Demokrat and Gerindra, who received 17.85 percent or 222,233 votes suara. [7]

In the 2020 regional elections, the PDIP candidates Dondokambey and Kandou again secured victory in North Sulawesi, winning 821,503 votes. In Tomohon, they achieved an overwhelming victory with 44,935 votes. PDIP won seven out of eight regional head elections in this election. The seven seats secured by PDIP included the Governor and Deputy Governor of North Sulawesi, the Mayor and Deputy Mayor of Manado, Tomohon, and Bitung, as well as the Regent and Deputy Regent of North Minahasa, South Minahasa, and South Bolaang Mongondow. The only area where PDIP was defeated was East Bolaang Mongondow, where Partai Nasdem won [7].

A prominent survey institution, Saiful Mujani Research and Consulting, released polling results from March 2020 to April 2023. The findings revealed that support for

PDIP in North Sulawesi reached 66%. The PDIP-backed presidential candidate, Ganjar Pranowo, was projected to achieve a landslide victory in North Sulawesi Province. The party, symbolized by the white-nosed bull, has several affiliated wings, including Relawan Perjuangan Demokrasi (Repdem), Baitul Muslimin Indonesia (Bamusi), Taruna Merah Putih (TMP), Banteng Muda Indonesia (BMI), and Gerakan Nelayan Tani Indonesia (GANTI). These PDIP-affiliated groups have established a presence in nearly all districts and cities across North Sulawesi, functioning as key mobilizers for gathering support. [7]

The political landscape leading up to the 2024 elections is becoming increasingly dynamic, with all parties striving to secure votes. Golkar, which once dominated during Suharto's New Order era, is attempting to reclaim its influence. The party's chairman has expressed a commitment to "turning North Sulawesi yellow again". He has urged party members to work in unison to restore the province as a stronghold for Golkar [8]. Meanwhile, Gerindra remains highly optimistic about its legislative candidates, predicting they will secure up to 60% of the votes by leveraging a primordial issue—the Minahasan lineage of its presidential candidate, Prabowo, whose mother bore the Maengkom-Sigar surname.

Tomohon is one of three cities and 14 regencies in North Sulawesi. According to the 2020 Population Census released by the Badan Pusat Statistik (BPS), Tomohon has a population of 100,587. Based on 2020 data from the Ministry of Home Affairs, the majority of Tomohon's residents are Christians, numbering 73,784, followed by Catholics with 23,533, Muslims with 3,779, Buddhists with 78, Hindus with 29, and others with 8. As of 2019, Tomohon had 70 Protestant churches, 18 Catholic churches, three mosques, and one vihara [4].

The Christian majority has led to Tomohon being known as the "City of a Thousand Churches," with the most significant and oldest being the Christian Evangelical Church in Minahasa (GMIM). There are approximately 1,100 GMIM churches throughout North Sulawesi, with GMIM congregants accounting for about 45% of the province's religious population. Data from 2018 indicates that GMIM adherents in North Sulawesi number approximately 795,809, nearly reaching one million. GMIM follows the Calvinist tradition, one of Indonesia's oldest Christian denominations, which has existed since 1934. The Calvinist tradition is part of the Dutch Reformed Church (Nederland Hervormd Kerk) introduced by the VOC. The Calvinist structure is characterized by a synodal governance model, where elders make decisions collectively rather than by a single leader. [9]

Currently, the city of Tomohon is led by Mayor Carroll Joram Azarias Senduk for the 2021–2024 term. Before assuming office as mayor, Carroll Senduk, a member of Partai Demokrasi Indonesia Perjuangan (PDIP), was known as a pastor at the Christian Evangelical Church in Minahasa (GMIM) Kakaskasen Tomohon from 2009 to 2017, in addition to being an entrepreneur. With approximately three and a half months remaining until the General and Regional Elections on February 14, 2024, the political climate in North Sulawesi is intensifying. Political parties are mobilizing their machinery to secure votes. The significant number of GMIM congregants has prompted political parties to engage with GMIM church elites actively.

Numerous building facades have been painted red across nearly all corners of Tomohon and Manado. Various public facilities, such as churches, schools, markets, sidewalks, and other structures, have also been coated in red. This phenomenon represents the co-optation of political elites in public spaces and has the potential to generate dissatisfaction and spark conflict within society. The widespread use of red in public buildings aligns with Habermas's interpretation of public space, which suggests that public spaces enable citizens to gather, articulate their interests, and form discursive opinions and collective will. [10]

Given this context, this study aims to examine the political elite co-optation of public buildings in Tomohon and Manado. The research question is formulated as follows: How does the co-optation of political elites manifest in public buildings in Tomohon and Manado ahead of the 2024 Regional Elections? The study explores the extent and implications of political elite co-optation in public spaces within these cities.

According to Charles Sanders Peirce, this research employs semiotics, which is the formal doctrine of signs. Semiotic analysis aims to uncover the meaning of signs, including hidden messages embedded within texts, advertisements, and news content. Peirce's semiotic framework consists of three primary elements, known as the Triangle Meaning Theory. Peirce's triadic model, illustrates the three main components that form a sign: representamen (something that represents something else), object (what is being represented), and interpretant (an individual's interpretation of the sign). [11]

Research related to the theme of semiotics itself has been widely conducted, especially to find the meaning of something invisible to the eye [11]. while research on political communication has entered into many genres, ranging from politics and the young generation, politics on social media, and political bureaucracy [12], [13], [14], [15]

## 2 Research Method

This study employs a qualitative descriptive research method, which, according to Creswell, follows traditional methods of conducting social research. A qualitative research approach allows researchers to explore a phenomenon from perspectives that may differ from those previously studied [16]. Additionally, qualitative research seeks to understand how individuals perceive, interpret, or describe the social world. This understanding is derived from their social interactions [17].

Thus, qualitative research is an approach that involves specific methods to interpret, analyze, and understand an ongoing phenomenon. In this case, it is used to analyze public buildings painted red in Tomohon. This study adopts a case study method and applies semiotic analysis based on Charles S. Peirce's framework. According to Peirce, as cited in Sobur, semiotics is the formal doctrine of signs. Semiotic analysis aims to uncover the meaning behind signs, including hidden messages embedded in texts, advertisements, and news.

Primary data collection was conducted through visual analysis of various buildings in Tomohon and Manado. Additionally, secondary data collection involved reviewing academic journals, research studies, books, and other online sources.

### 3 Results and Discussions



**Fig. 1.** GMIM IV Elementary School Tomohon

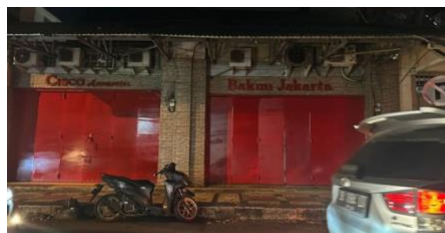
Figure 1. above shows a GMIM elementary school building painted red, with a red-and-white separator visible outside. Based on Peirce's semiotic theory, the representamen or signifier in this image is the elementary school GMIM IV school building. The object, or what is being represented, is the red color on the left and right walls, despite the presence of red and white paint on a section symbolizing the national flag of Indonesia. So, what does this image represent?

Law Number 7 of 2017, Article 280, Point H, on Prohibitions in Campaigns, explicitly states that election organizers, participants, and campaigners are prohibited from using government facilities, places of worship, and educational institutions for campaigning. Although GMIM IV elementary school falls under the jurisdiction of the Christian Evangelical Church in Minahasa, it is fundamentally an institution dedicated to teaching and learning. Therefore, it should not be used as a campaign venue.

If the red-and-white color scheme is intended to symbolize the Indonesian national flag, a more appropriate expression of nationalism would be to display red-and-white banners or flags rather than painting nearly the entire school building red. In Tomohon and Manado, many public space facades are painted red. The color red is strongly associated with the ruling PDIP, potentially creating brand awareness among the public. An example of this is a market and shopfront in Manado, whose exterior is entirely painted blood-red, as shown in the following images of the market and retail buildings.



**Fig. 2.** Market in Manado



**Fig. 3.** Noodle Shop in Manado

How does an educational institution that should be neutral become co-opted by political elites? This phenomenon indicates a close relationship between the GMIM

church and political elites. As a religious institution, GMIM is supposed to be autonomous, independent, and neutral, meaning it should not take sides with any political party or candidate. However, the current reality shows that a group of GMIM pastors is involved, covertly or openly, in practical politics to expand the church's influence.

According to Kumayas, the history of the Christian Evangelical Church in Minahasa (GMIM) can be categorized into three historical periods. The first is the pioneering period, followed by the establishment period, and finally, the period of controversy. During the pioneering period, GMIM clearly delineated boundaries and established strict regulations that positioned the church as an independent institution, serving as the voice of the people's aspirations while contributing critical thought. At this stage, the church firmly ruled out involvement in practical politics, emphasizing that its role should remain purely in ministry [18].

The second period, the establishment era, saw church leadership strengthen the institution by building service bases in education, social work, and healthcare. Presently, GMIM operates hundreds of elementary and secondary schools, a higher education institution, and five hospitals spread across various regions, including Manado, Kalooran Amurang in South Minahasa, and Sonder, among others. The fall of the New Order regime led to the emergence of numerous political parties, which subsequently affected GMIM. The transition to an open proportional electoral system—where legislative and executive candidates are directly elected by the people—gave greater significance to each vote. According to Kumayas, this shift marks GMIM's entry into the era of controversy, characterized by the church's and its pastors' involvement in political parties. Many GMIM pastors have run for legislative and executive positions despite lacking the necessary political experience, knowledge, and competence. However, as spiritual leaders, pastors are highly respected by their congregations, who regard them as representatives of God on earth, making their influence significant. The involvement of pastors in politics has sparked controversy. Supporters argue that political engagement is a form of ministry, allowing the church to advocate for its interests and oversee government institutions. Conversely, critics uphold the principle that GMIM, as a church institution, must remain independent and neutral, prohibiting involvement in practical politics. The proliferation of political parties following the fall of the New Order was accompanied by an increasing number of pastors entering politics, leading to violations of church regulations. Official church guidelines stipulate that any pastor intending to engage in politics must first obtain the approval of the church council. Furthermore, once officially registered as a legislative candidate, the pastor must step down and take a leave from church duties. Additionally, they cannot campaign within the church or during worship services. However, in practice, through special lobbying, some pastor candidates have continued to be active within the church [18].

The involvement of church elites in practical politics has compromised GMIM's perceived neutrality, independence, and autonomy. This is evidenced, among other things, by the case of elementary school GMIM IV and the increasing number of church buildings painted in red. Meanwhile, political parties have exploited this trend by recruiting pastors into their ranks to expand and strengthen their political networks. The

Minahasan Christian community's perception of the church's loss of neutrality and autonomy has been explored. Result of the research the church, as an institution, should not engage in practical political activities, and this also applies to church elites. As spiritual leaders, they must refrain from joining political parties to uphold the purity of doctrine, the universality of the church, and its societal role. If left unchecked, there is no guarantee that politically active pastors will not drag the church into politics or bring religious identities into the political arena [9].

Furthermore, the involvement of church elites in political parties has implications for national stability. This is because such individuals are often driven more by personal interests rather than religious values, ethics, and morals by the church's calling. In many cases, they use religion as a political vehicle to gain power, employing religious symbols to garner support and votes from congregants. This politicization of religion can escalate tensions and potentially trigger conflicts of interest between different religious groups. Seeds of conflict and dissatisfaction have already emerged, as seen in the 2017 Non-Cash Food Assistance (BPNT) distribution amounting to IDR 110,000 per month through the Family Welfare Card. This assistance was intended to purchase rice or eggs at designated stores to meet food needs. Additionally, there was the Prosperous Rice Program (Rastra) program, which provided 10 kg of medium-quality rice per month per beneficiary. However, as GMIM congregants predominantly received these benefits, they sparked envy among members of other churches and religious communities.

The following discussion will focus on the fourth image, which depicts a road separator painted in red and white.



**Fig. 4.** Separator in Tomohon

From Peirce's semiotic theory, the representamen or signifier in this image is the road separator and gate. The object or what it represents is the red color on the foundation of the gate, as well as the red and white colors, which are the symbols of the national flag of the Republic of Indonesia. What is represented by the image above?

Regarding zebra crossings, almost all countries have used black and white colors. Black and white zebra crossings were first introduced in Indonesia when the country was preparing to host the 1962 Asian Games. The use of black and white underwent a long trial process. For example, in England in 1951, separators were initially painted blue and yellow, then changed to yellow and black. However, the yellow and black colors were deemed ineffective as traffic accidents still frequently occurred. Eventually, it was decided that zebra crossings and separators should be painted black and white to

improve visibility for drivers. This means that the decision to paint separators in black and white was based on studies and research that were later implemented in all countries. The main consideration behind this decision was ensuring driver safety and making it easier for them to see, especially at night.

Is painting separators in red and white justified by traffic regulations? A similar incident occurred near Taman Mini Indonesia Indah, where road separators were painted in multiple colors ahead of the 2018 Asian Games. However, due to widespread protests, the separators were repainted to their original black and white colors within two days. According to the Jakarta Government, restoring them to black and white was based on safety considerations. There are specific regulations regarding road markings, which must be adhered to, as they serve aesthetic purposes and ensure safety [19].

Reflecting on the case of colorful road dividers in Jakarta, the Tomohon City Government could take this as a reference. Using red and white as road separators may also be considered a form of insult to the national symbol. According to Article 35 of the Constitution of the Republic of Indonesia, the national flag is Red and White (Sang Merah Putih). Thus, painting the flag's colors on road separators, which are placed on the ground, stepped on, and covered in road dust, can be seen as disrespecting the national symbol. The painting of separators and gates in red within public spaces is also a form of forced power projection through building colors, creating brand awareness among the public. Since the ruling party's color is red, this act benefits a particular political party, especially considering that the General Election is only 3.5 months away.



Fig. 5. Colorful Divider in DKI

#### 4 Conclusions and Suggestions

Partai Golkar dominated North Sulawesi during the New Order regime. Subsequently, Partai Demokrat also held power in North Sulawesi for 10 years. However, since 2015,

Partai Demokrasi Indonesia Perjuangan (PDIP) has been in power in the region. Tomohon City is one of three cities and 14 regencies in North Sulawesi. The dominance of Christianity has earned Tomohon the nickname "The City of a Thousand Churches", with the most significant and oldest church being GMIM (Christian Evangelical Church in Minahasa). Consequently, GMIM has become a strategic target for political parties seeking to expand and strengthen their networks. Political parties have actively approached church elites, particularly after the fall of the New Order, which led to the emergence of hundreds of new political parties and a shift to an open proportional election system.

As the 2024 General Election and Regional Elections approach, many public buildings and spaces in Tomohon and Manado have been painted red. For instance, GMIM IV Elementary School, which belongs to GMIM, has been painted red. However, schools are educational institutions where the teaching and learning process takes place and are prohibited from being used for campaigning, as stipulated in Election Law Number 7 of 2017. Therefore, school buildings should not be utilized for political campaigns, whether directly or indirectly.

Market and shopping areas in Manado also have their exterior facades painted in deep red. Additionally, road separators in Tomohon, which were originally black and white, have been repainted in red and white—colors that symbolize the national flag of the Republic of Indonesia. The use of red and white on road separators can be considered disrespectful toward the national symbol, as these separators are located on the ground, stepped on by pedestrians, and covered in road dust. The use of red paint on various buildings and public spaces represents an imposition of power through architectural colors, creating brand awareness among the public. This is likely to occur because PDIP, which is closely associated with the color red, is currently in power in North Sulawesi, particularly in Tomohon and Manado.

The political elite's co-optation of public spaces by painting them red is a strategy to secure victory for PDIP. Painting school buildings under GMIM's administration in red signifies a close connection between the GMIM church and the political elite. This indicates that church leaders are leveraging religion as a political vehicle to gain power, using religious symbols to attract the sympathy and votes of their congregation. The fall of the New Order saw many pastors become involved in partisan politics, including GMIM pastors who ran for executive and legislative positions despite lacking sufficient political experience, knowledge, and competence. As spiritual leaders, pastors are regarded by church members as representatives of God on Earth, making them highly respected figures whose instructions are followed by their congregations.

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