

Investigating Leadership Styles at the National Level and Their Impact on Education Policy: An Opportunist Authoritarian Perspective

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Abstract: The purpose of the current study is to investigate leadership styles at the national level and their impact on education policy from the perspective of opportunistic authoritarian leadership in two Southeast Asian countries (Indonesia and Singapore). To achieve the study objective, content analysis was used. The results confirmed that although opportunistic authoritarian leadership can have a negative impact on the organization, however, this leadership style maintains security, order and team performance. Moreover, this leadership style provides advantages in terms of efficiency and consistency due to its nature of creating a climate of certainty, tight control, and quick execution. Under opportunistic authoritarian leadership, the leaders of both countries maintained various educational policies and impacted on economic growth and sustainable human resource development. The theoretical and practical implications of the findings are discussed. Limitations and future research opportunities are suggested.

Keywords: Leadership, opportunistic authoritarian, national level, education policy, Indonesia, Singapore, content analysis

INTRODUCTION

Democratic backsliding is a global phenomenon that happens to countries or states that already in the phase of democracy but experienced setbacks in carrying out its ideology and democratic practices. Mietzner (2016) uses a different term to explain democratic backsliding as ‘democratic consolidation’ which defines as a process in which democracies gradually lose their quality over time, and which may or may not lead to a full democratic reversal (Paquita et al., 2021). Aspinall and Mietzner (2019) points that democratic decline has similar meaning

as backsliding, recession, or deconsolidation which refers to a situation where the quality of democracy has declined (or is declining) from a previously achieved level (Pambudi & Gunawan, 2019; Prestiadi et al., 2019).

According to Carothers and Press (2022), in fact, democratic backsliding conditions can be categorized into three types, namely grievance-fueled illiberalism, opportunistic authoritarianism, and entrenched-interest revanchism. Grievance-fueled illiberalism means a condition where the leader of the country gives suggestions or statements indicating that the people are not doing well under the political system that is in power and the people need that leader to be able to get them out of that condition. Opportunistic authoritarianism that these leaders gain their power through regular elections in their countries but abuse that power to remain in power for a long time (Argadinata & Gunawan, 2019; Bafadal et al., 2020). While entrenched-interest revanchism means the entrenched interest groups uses military army to be staying in power.

Our study focusses on the second type of democratic backsliding, namely the opportunistic authoritarian by trying to use the comparison between President Suharto, the second president of Indonesia, and Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, the first prime minister of Singapore. The two leaders are chosen because they are suitable as a description of the practice of opportunistic authoritarianism where they were always elected through regular elections held in their countries, led for quite a long time, namely for 30 years for Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, especially for President Suharto for 32 years, and lead in an authoritarian style by getting rid of opposition parties who are felt to threaten their power (Firdausi, 2020).

Hence, our study investigates the leadership styles at the national level and its impact on education policy, particularly from the opportunistic authoritarian perspective of the two leaders (Indonesia and Singapore). Our study extends previous studies that focus on the city/district and school levels (Bafadal et al., 2021; Kusumaningrum et al., 2020; Pambudi & Gunawan, 2020) by investigating the leadership styles at the national level (Imron et al., 2020; Sumarsono et al., 2019). The results contribute to a deeper understanding of how national leadership influences education policy at the school level. Moreover, our study contributes to the development of theories on national leadership and its impact on education policy in schools.

METHODS

To achieve the objectives of the current study, content analysis was used by synthesizing papers and/or documents related to the subject of the current study. Content analysis is one of the qualitative research methods used to explore the meaning and reasoning

behind communication (verbal, visual, and symbolic) in social discourse (Wardani & Gunawan, 2023). This technique uses an empirical descriptive approach to explore the themes of uploaded, posted content, along with the results of social interactions that occur in the findings of a document. Content analysis aims to collect and identify concepts and/or categories of data from a document (Gunawan et al., 2023), review variables and conceptual constructs, measure sentiment, and identify links between behavior and social processes, in general.

The data sources of content analysis in this study are documents generated from research results on existing (published) content in books, journals, report documents, and news. This data source is in the form of text, images, graphics, or other media related to the observed data. Data is collected, analyzed, and transformed into valuable information. It can be used to understand specific patterns and trends for integrity, relevance, and distinctiveness. Content analysis in this study also involves semantic analysis, which is about the meaning contained in the content (Krisnafitriana et al., 2023). Semantic analysis is an important part of content analysis. Semantic analysis can provide insights into how people interact and understand the observed content. When data has been obtained and analyzed, it can be used to draw conclusions related to the information obtained from the data. With this method, theoretical arguments can be built and demonstrated, or hypotheses can be confirmed or refuted.

For the content analysis, we refer to the following six steps. First, goal identification, the current study aims to explore the opportunistic authoritarian leadership style at the national level in two countries (Indonesia and Singapore). Second, context development, this involves familiarizing ourselves with the topics and passages to be investigated. Each text must be understood and its context must not be overlooked. Third, document collection, this is the method used to collect and analyze information (i.e., document analysis). Fourth, data analysis, once the data is obtained, it must be analyzed. This is the process of deriving meaningful information from the data obtained. It involves various data analysis techniques such as word categorization analysis and corpus analysis. Fifth, data presentation, once the data is obtained and analyzed, we present the final results. This can be a report of the findings and conclusions of the analyzed documents based on consultation procedures and information that can be understood by others. Sixth, evaluation of results, after the data is presented, in this step we confirm the findings that include the process of obtaining results in accordance with the original objectives (in the first step). This allows researchers to take certain steps to improve subsequent results.

RESULTS

A Slight Story of President Suharto and Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew

The transfer of power from Indonesia's first president, President Sukarno, to its second president, President Suharto, took place in 1966 (as acting president). It was then that President Suharto's era of power in leading Indonesia began. It was not until 1968 that President Suharto was officially appointed as Indonesia's second president. President Suharto's ideology at the time remained the same as when he first gained full power from President Sukarno (Aspinall, 2005).

Although President Suharto was known for his 'iron fist in a silk sheath' leadership style, many policies at the beginning of his reign were aimed at improving Indonesia's condition after President Sukarno left it. High inflation of up to 500% and uncontrolled prices of necessities goods were well controlled during his era (Indonesia-Investments, 2020). Apart from that, the policy of controlling population through the Family Planning Program was very successful so that Indonesia won an award and became an example for other countries in controlling the rate of population growth.

On the other hand, Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew (also known as LKY) served from 1959-1990 as the first Prime Minister of Singapore. Prime Minister LKY was also the founder of the most dominant party in Singapore, namely the People's Action Party (PAP) and known as the founding father of Singapore and had been successfully turned Singapore into a rich and modern country. During his reign as prime minister, Singapore experienced many rapid developments. Singapore whom was a nation without natural resources now become an international trade hub where many shipments transit there. During its 30 years of leadership, Prime Minister LKY managed to increase Singapore's average income by 100 times. In 1990, when Prime Minister LKY stepped down as prime minister, Singapore's GDP reached \$14,000 (Macrotrends, 2023).

One of the most important things that Prime Minister LKY has implemented in Singapore is that he managed to bring Singapore to be one of the countries with the cleanest corruption practices in the world. Even though it leads in an authoritarian style, Prime Minister LKY ensures that corrupt practices do not take part in his policies. According to Transparency International, in 2022, Singapore ranks 5th as a country that is clean from corrupt practices (CPIB, 2023).

An Opportunist Authoritarian

President Suharto and Prime Minister LKY are chosen as description of opportunistic authoritarian characters. Both President Suharto and Prime Minister LKY were elected as leaders through legitimate channels, never gave grievance suggestions to their people, never

made promises in their countries, and instead they only carried out their responsibilities as leaders (Muhaimin, 2015). However, behind all this there is a ‘toxic leadership’ side in their leadership which has received a lot of criticism, such as they will not hesitate to get rid of parties that are at odds with them or seen as threatening their power, and hold full control of the mass media in their country (AHRC, 2011; Isnaeni, 2015; Said, 2016).

Carothers and Press (2022) identify the three types in democratic backsliding, and both President Suharto and Prime Minister LKY fit in the second category, opportunist authoritarian. Both were in power for 30 years, especially President Suharto who was in power for 32 years before finally resigning on May 21st, 1998. Neither of them used grievance statements to attract the sympathy of their people. Instead, they demonstrated that they were successful in building their country with their authoritarian style. In addition, elections were held regularly in Indonesia and Singapore, and the party that carried the two presidents always won the election. Furthermore, the way they treat their opposition tends to be the same.

On the other hand, Prime Minister LKY tends to hold more full control over all mass media, both print and electronic. However, behind the similarities in their authoritarian leadership styles, there are several things that differentiate the two. Both leaders use authoritarian as their way to control the state, but the end result is completely different (Isnaeni, 2015). Prime Minister LKY left his position as prime minister of Singapore in 1990 because he wanted a regeneration of leaders, although in the end Singapore is currently led by his son, Lee Hsien Loong. In addition, when Prime Minister LKY left Singapore, it was already in a prosperous and advanced state. In contrast to Singapore, President Suharto left his post as president of Indonesia when Indonesia was hit by a financial crisis and forced his successors to work hard to improve the economic and political situation.

Impact on Education Policy – Indonesia under the Leadership of President Suharto

Improving the quality of education during President Suharto’s era tended to dutifully implement World Bank policies. Our study found five important education policies during President Suharto’s reign. First, EBTANAS (*Evaluasi Belajar Tahap Akhir Nasional*, Evaluation of National Final Stage Learning) and UMPTN (*Ujian Masuk Perguruan Tinggi Negeri*, State University Entrance Examination), which became the selection of students’ intellectual uniformity (Kemdikbud, 2020). The purpose of EBTANAS is to control, evaluate, and develop the quality of education at the primary school, junior high school, and senior high school levels (Suwarta, 2019). In implementing EBTANAS, schools coordinate with the central government. Students are declared to have passed EBTANAS if they achieve an average score for all subjects tested of at least six, although there are scores below three. The

exam is conducted once in a school year, at the end of the school year. UMPTN is a selection for students to be admitted to public universities. In this selection system, selection based on exam groups consisting of three groups, namely Science (IPA, *Ilmu Pengetahuan Alam*), Social Studies (IPS, *Ilmu Pengetahuan Sosial*), and Mixed (IPC, *Ilmu Pengetahuan Campuran*) was introduced (Zubaidah, 2022). This system is the longest lasting public university entrance selection system, from 1989 to 2001 (13 years).

Second, centralized education. During the reign of President Suharto, education in Indonesia recognized four curricula, namely the 1968, 1975, 1984 and 1994 Curricula. The curriculum upheld uniformity of output among students and they were expected to be skilled, virtuous, and guided by religion and the values of Pancasila (Ardanawati, 2019). Due to its centralized nature, the curriculum during President Soeharto's administration preferred to impose ideas from the center to the regions. It was assumed that the implementers of education, namely teachers in schools, would automatically understand the purpose of implementing the current curriculum.

Third, the eradication of illiteracy. The fact that many people were still illiterate was responded to by President Suharto's administration with the declaration of illiteracy eradication on August 16, 1978. The technique was the formation of learning groups (*kelompok belajar, kejar*) (Jessica et al., 2017). Kejar is an introduction to letters and numbers program for illiterate communities aged 10-45 years. The goal is that they will be able to read and write Latin letters and numbers. In the 1978 census, out of a total population of 80 million, Indonesia still had 39.1% illiterate people. However, in the 1980 census, the percentage dropped to 28.8% and in the 1990 census, it shrank to 15.9% (Kemdikbud, 2018).

Fourth, 9-year compulsory education (*wajib belajar 9 tahun*). Efforts to implement 9 years of compulsory education in the 7-15 age group began when the Declaration of 9 Years of Compulsory Basic Education was inaugurated on May 2, 1994. This policy was strengthened by the issuance of Presidential Instruction Number 1 of 1994 concerning the Implementation of Compulsory Basic Education. This program requires every child aged 8 years to obtain basic education. Development in the education sector through the compulsory education program was expected to reduce the number of illiterate Indonesians. The success of the 9-year compulsory education program was marked by the achievement of the target participation rate in 2008 of 95% (Abrar, 2012). This program is a very important thing for the life of the nation, because this program is closely related to efforts to improve the quality of Indonesian people through education.

Fifth, the construction of the Presidential Instruction Elementary School (*Sekolah Dasar Instruksi Presiden*, SD Inpres). The SD Inpres program is for remote and isolated areas in various parts of Indonesia. This program includes the construction of school buildings equipped with the provision of teachers, books, and other supporting learning facilities. This policy is to expand and equalize learning opportunities for children of primary school age, around 7-12 years old. The objectives of SD Inpres include realizing the ideals of the nation, one of which is the 9-year compulsory education program. In addition, SD Inpres is one of the breakthroughs to improve the quality of human resources, especially in rural areas. The success of President Suharto's education policy prompted UNESCO to award President Suharto the Avicenna Award on June 19, 1993, the first president in the world to receive this award (Tempo, 1993).

Impact on Education Policy – Singapore under the Leadership of Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew

Singapore in the historical record is a poor country, no economy, very few skills, cottage industry, small population and no resources (Syakrani et al., 2022). Investment is made through education. Our study found five important education policies during the reign of Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew. First, the bilingual policy. Singapore has four official languages: Malay, Mandarin, Tamil and English, while the national language is Malay. Singapore promotes a dual language teaching system from primary school. English is used as the primary language of instruction in schools and universities (Bokhorst-Heng & Caeon, 2009). Most students learn one of the three official languages (or, specifically, another government-sanctioned language) as a second language, based on their officially registered ethnic group.

Second, the teaching profession. Teaching in Singapore is a respected and valued profession. This image is built by the government through a rigorous recruitment process and the provision of generous salaries, allowances and bonuses for teachers. Teacher income in Singapore is high. The maximum salary that a secondary school teacher can receive is even twice the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of Singapore (NCEE, 2020). One of the success factors in producing quality teachers is the strong communication between the National Institute of Education (NIE) and stakeholders, such as the Ministry of Education and schools in designing effective teaching practice activities for prospective teachers. Practical activities or field experiences during the teacher education period are the best opportunities for prospective teachers to develop into quality teachers.

Third, the relevance between universities, research, innovation and enterprise. Singapore has foresighted the strategic value of research. Singapore promotes professional

learning and encourages schools to interact with the government (Looi et al., 2011). This policy has had a significant impact on emphasizing the priority areas of research, research grants, education, and sustainable program development. Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew believed that universities will have value if they contribute to knowledge (Tan et al., 2017). Hence, he developed the NIE as an autonomous institution with the aim of developing knowledge and human capital.

Fourth, science and mathematics education. Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew had a view on the importance of students receiving STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) education since 1966, to maintain excellence in modern science and technology. Alongside English as the primary language, the sciences and mathematics are positioned as the foundation of education to promote productive education (Tan et al., 2017). Education should instill knowledge and a spirit of curiosity and inquiry to generate innovation and foster knowledge-based industries (Plate, 2013). This is evidenced by a professional and knowledge-based workforce.

Fifth, technology and innovation. An important milestone of technological innovation in Singapore was Singapore's Masterplans for ICT in Education launched in 1997, which involved building technological infrastructure in schools, teaching innovation, and developing active learning. This had an impact on Singapore's progress from the early industrialization of the labour-intensive economy (1960), restructuring of the capital-intensive economy (1980), the new industrial economy (1990), to the intensive phase of the global economy and diversification (2000) (Tan et al., 2017). The program is in line with authentic lessons on 21st century pedagogy comprising collaboration skills, problem solving, inquiry, thinking, and ICT skills (Lee et al., 2008).

DISCUSSION

Our study highlights the opportunistic authoritarian leadership style at the national level in two countries, Indonesia and Singapore. While several studies have found that authoritarian leadership has a negative impact on educational organizations (Aviantono, 2023; Suriagiri, 2021; Wahyuni et al., 2022), however, we note that at the national level, this leadership style has advantages. Most authoritarian leadership styles provide advantages in terms of efficiency and consistency. This is due to its nature of creating a climate of certainty, tight control, and quick execution. It tends to fit situations that require a high degree of certainty, such as emergency situations or long-standing organizational ineffectiveness. With this leadership style, the leader can determine quick changes according to the situation (Nurabadi et al., 2021; Wardani et al., 2020). Authoritarian leaders are also able to facilitate communication among

their members, as there is a clear scope of command. Thus, team members tend to know what is required in a given situation without having to test the boundaries.

This can promote safety, order and team performance (Pratiwi et al., 2020; Taftania et al., 2020). Authoritarian leaders tend to motivate their members by ensuring that they understand what is expected of them (Sumarsono et al., 2021). Since there are rewards for achievement, members tend to be more energized in achieving goals. Authoritarian leaders are also able to provide a fast and precise state of service and carry out work with high effectiveness and accuracy. Finally, authoritarian leaders can be reliable and effective leaders, focusing on goals and objectives (Faizah et al., 2020; Sukawati et al., 2020). We believe that the leadership style applied by a leader is adapted to the situation and conditions of his time and will continue to evolve along with the demands of the times and the development of society. Situational leadership theory asserts that a leader's leadership style will vary, depending on the level of readiness and maturity of his followers (Hersey et al., 1996; Sultoni & Gunawan, 2023). Not all leadership styles can be applied to all situations.

Leaders who use an opportunistic authoritarian leadership style tend to emphasize high employee commitment and initiative to increase productivity and success (Budiarti et al., 2020; Miroj et al., 2020). They also guide and support their staff to achieve the best results. Opportunistically oriented leaders also pay attention to each follower's response and tend to provide positive reinforcement to increase motivation (Ubaidillah et al., 2023). In general, an opportunistic authoritarian leadership style is suitable for situations that demand high professionalism, commitment, and the ability to take initiative (Arafik et al., 2023; Prayoga et al., 2023). By exercising more intensive control and responding quickly to problems, leaders can increase productivity and overall levels of job satisfaction. This means that leaders are leaders who maintain one-way communication, are follower-commitment based, and tend to have a confident leadership style (Hadi et al., 2021).

Our study offers several theoretical implications. First, indeed authoritarian leadership can encourage people to act based on fear and pressure, with a lack of participation and care (Prestiadi et al., 2020; Sobri et al., 2022). However, we note that opportunistic authoritarian leadership results in quick decision-making, more consistency with the leader's views and vision, efficient programming, risk control, and high levels of performance. Second, this leadership style tends to be exercised in high-pressure organizations, in less stable organizational situations, and when the organization needs a quick and precise decision to achieve the vision and accelerate work. Third, this leadership style will be more effective if

there is a balance between discipline imposed on subordinates and compromise with subordinates.

In addition, there are several practical implications of our study. First, at the leadership level of educational organizations, educational leaders have the task of helping to develop and maintain an organizational culture that is useful especially for maintaining effective leadership behaviors. Authoritarian leadership is a leadership style that emphasizes authority, control, order and supervision, and uniform discipline. This leadership style is very effective for certain purposes in emergencies (Nasikhah et al., 2024; Saputra et al., 2019), but if excessive or inappropriate, this leadership behavior can lead to injustice and power imbalance. Second, authoritarian leadership in educational organizational settings is important for improving performance, but this practice can reduce the creativity and innovation that may occur among staff and teachers (Nulchakim et al., 2024; Sul-toni et al., 2023; Zulkarnain et al., 2020). Therefore, it is important for educational managers to understand the behaviors of authoritarian leadership and find the right balance between authority and collaboration.

This can create a conducive organizational culture, where every member of the organization feels supported, cooperates with each other, and has reasonable access to welfare and resources (Anggraeni et al., 2024; Pertiwi et al., 2018). Thirdly, lack of control over authoritarians can make organizations unstable, lower productivity, and cause long-term damage to the overall working environment. Therefore, it is important for educational managers to develop more humble leadership in educational organizations and provide the necessary encouragement and resources to help staff achieve educational goals. Humble leadership, which refers to the leader's efforts to build personal relationships and trust with followers (Bafadal et al., 2023; Nurabadi et al., 2023; Schein & Schein, 2018), can be an avenue and option for educational leaders in displaying their leadership behaviors. In addition, instructional leadership, which refers to influencing teachers' classroom practices (Gunawan et al., 2021; Hsieh et al., 2023b), is a leadership style that should be implemented in schools (Hsieh et al., 2023a, 2024).

Despite the reliability of our methods, there are some limitations worth noting. Firstly, the limitations in the review are related to the selection and evaluation process of the papers we used as review subjects in our study. Our study did not conduct a literature review on specifically indexed papers, such as Scopus, Google Scholar, or DOAJ. Hence, further studies are recommended to extend the current study by conducting literature review studies on indexed papers (Gunawan et al., 2023), for example in Scopus, Google Scholar, or DOAJ. Second, we acknowledge that the current study did not pre-evaluate the papers (Andriningrum

& Gunawan, 2018; Krisnafitriana et al., 2023) so our conclusions need to be revalidated, hence, future studies are advised to pre-evaluate to improve the accuracy and relevance of the analysis results.

CONCLUSION

Under the opportunistic authoritarian leadership of President Suharto, Indonesia experienced significant development, growing in the business sector, expanding education provision, improving the health situation, and reducing poverty. The manifestation of his leadership was highly restrictive policies with little room for public participation in decision-making mechanisms (Sukawati et al., 2020). However, it is noteworthy that his popular policies came close to creating Indonesia's sustainable economic development. On the other hand, Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, is considered responsible for Singapore's economic progress and development. Basically, he used authoritarian leadership to establish certain values to promote economic development, education, and public services. Singapore is a thriving country thanks to his leadership. Despite some concerns, he has helped Singapore achieve a high level of prosperity and become a booming economic sector.

At the school level, authoritarian leadership is a leadership style that encourages staff and teachers to follow the orders of their school manager without questioning the underlying reasons or goals (Kusumaningrum et al., 2018; Zulkarnain, 2017). This can have both negative and positive impacts for educational organizations (Prastiawan et al., 2019, 2020). On the positive side, authoritarian leadership usually brings clarity and efficiency to the organization because participating members know clearly the direction they should take and not too much time is spent seeking approval for every action to be taken. This can speed up the policy process needed in education (Imron et al., 2021; Ubaidillah et al., 2020). On the negative side, a strict authoritarian leadership style can reduce the variability and creativity that organizational members can bring. Authoritarian leadership style can also lead to frustration and job dissatisfaction, which can affect members' commitment to the organization. This leads to educational rule-making that lacks responsiveness and cannot anticipate the dynamic needs of the education market.

Elsewhere, the educational culture implemented by authoritarian leaders can be at odds with the rule of law and ethics, so educational rules and standards can be ineffective and unfair. This can also have a negative impact by increasing educational disparities between individuals in society. In essence, authoritarian leadership can have a variety of good and bad impacts on policy-making in educational organizations (Gunawan, 2017; Imron et al., 2021). However, to

support optimal educational performance, it is important to seek a leadership style that can exert authority in a way that is responsive, equitable and in favor of legal and ethical values.

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