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# Murals as Social Criticism: Movements of Resistance and Urban Liberation Against the Authoritarian of Regimes

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## Abstract

The Economist Intelligence Unit's report (EIU) shows that the democracy index score in Indonesia has decreased in the last 5 years, and that number could decrease even more when the state makes society an object of conflict in which public criticism is threatened and silenced. There is an unfavorable relationship between power and society in the state process. Art in the concept of urban society is understood as a medium of awareness and liberation. Public awareness will give birth to a critical culture in identifying injustice and how to change it. Muralism is a form of criticism movement due to the disappointment and dissatisfaction of the Indonesian people towards the performance of the State and the power of authoritarianism in the midst of social, health and economic crises due to the Covid-19 pandemic. This thought movement was carried out through mural writing on the walls as a form of intellectual resistance to the authoritarian style of power and its policies which were far from the expectations of the people. This study uses a qualitative method with a phenomenological approach. The results of the study show that the freedom of expression carried out by urban communities through mural writing, graffiti, satire is always responded to by repressive actions by the authorities, ranging from arrests, silencing, deletion of murals, hacking social media, doxing, verbative intimidation, and other forms of threats. This condition turned into a curse for the style of authoritarianism. Currently, various vices and crimes of power are starting to be revealed, such as corruption, pandemics becoming business projects, tax smuggling by state officials, acts of violence, human rights violations, sexual harassment by state officials and others. This became a prolonged dark spot and became the basis of community resistance to make fundamental changes to the condition of the State.

**Keywords:** Mural, Social Criticism, Social Movement, Authoritarianism

## 1. Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has many implications for a country, one of which is a setback in the democratic process which previously did not appear to be a new polemic in the midst of a pandemic. For example, a number of countries have banned civil liberties, threatened freedom of expression, and failed to carry out democratic accountability due to the pandemic. Globally, Indonesia is ranked 64 out of 167 with a score of 6.3%. This means that Indonesia is included in the category of flawed democracy or imperfect democracy.

The Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) report shows that the democracy index score in Indonesia has decreased in the last 5 to 10 years, and that number could fall even worse when the harmonization of society with the state is disrupted by the authoritarian style of power with anti-criticism actions. Looking at several studies conducted by three main reports, namely the 2020 The Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) Indonesia Democracy Index 2019, and the 2021 Democracy Report, the three reports show that the quality of democracy has shown a significant reduction that does not only touch aspects of civil liberties and pluralism, but also the declining function of government.

Indonesia's democracy index score previously peaked at 7.03 in 2015. However, the score had to drop to 6.97% in 2016. The country's democracy index score fell again to 6.39% in 2017 and 2018 Indonesia's democracy index score had increased to 6.48% in 2019, but fell again this year. The indicators of democracy in Indonesia can be seen as follows:

Table 1: Indicator of Indonesia's democracy index

Indicators	Before (in a matter of points)	Difference (in percentage)	After (in point)
The election process and pluralism	6,92	Up by 14,45%	7,92
Government functions	7,5	-	7,5
Political participation	5,56	Up by 9,89%	6,11
Political culture	5,63	Down by 22,2%	4,38
Civil liberties	7,06	Down by 20,82%	5,59

Source: The Economist 2010-2020

Freedom of expression directly or through information technology media is the right of every individual since birth which has been guaranteed by the constitution, including forms of public expression through murals or street art. Mural is a street visual art that serves as a forum for the community to express ideas. The murals in this study are more of an attempt to convey critical ideas about the political system or power. In this context, it can be understood that the urban community's thinking raises many alternative thoughts to respond to a developing issue. That freedom is then restricted either directly or virtually on social media is a form of excessive action.

In the context of this research, art and politics cross paths in the social process of society, not finding a harmonious meeting point. The over-interpretation is also shown by the authoritarian power through the apparatus, which then takes action against all murals with deletion and threats of laws regarding violating public order. This reaction arises because of an imbalance in dealing with social problems in the community, so that the creation of mural art is interpreted as a form of violation and crime. Historically, murals are one of the critical attitudes of urban society towards the power and condition of the political system in Indonesia.

This case is in accordance with the theory of Deaux and Wrigtsman (1993), weapons affect the acts of aggression of the apparatus in taking action against something that is considered contradictory. Weapons are not only because of their function to make aggression effective and efficient, but also because of their presence which can influence the aggressive behavior of the apparatus themselves.

According to Berkowitz and LePage (in Sarwono, 1997) anger requires certain stimulants and inducements to become real aggressive behavior, and weapons can be a trigger for the aggressiveness of the apparatus in limiting freedom of expression or opinion. The anger occurred when criticism made by urban communities

through murals occurred throughout Java, which was considered the center of power. This shows the authoritarian style of power.

Power and law, practically become two entities that interweave themselves very closely together, where law is made and ratified by power consciousness which is always trying to break through to easily engineered loopholes so that law is felt more as a tool of rulers, rather than as control of power (Philippe Nonet). & Selznick, 1978: 4).

The way an artist or muralist engages in politics is by using himself as a vehicle for social catharsis or a form of releasing emotions, complaints, and disappointments due to bad social conditions. This is a new political style, which we can call the term daily politics carried out by the community to exercise control over power.

The urban community movement through murals is part of a new social movement that concentrates on contemporary issues, which clearly seeks social change. This movement is an attempt to convey social criticism of power. However, the community movement through murals as a social critique brought by muralists is more concerned with aspects of the power of intimidation. State power here is referred to as the paradox of institutional position. The state has a large space to maintain security ( human rights protector ), but the nature of this privilege often causes the elements of authority and power to be interpreted unilaterally and misused, resulting in forms of violations in which law enforcement officers in the second scenario can become human rights violators or new atrocities.

Castells (1983) describes that the focus in the urban society movement has gone beyond the transformation of production, communication, and counter-government (the state); however, this is an effort to change social when the urban society movement is able to produce opposition to the dominant structure, or in other words change the meaning of the city's social structure ( urban meaning ) and produce a utopian reactive condition in society.

According to Marx, the state does not serve the interests of society, but only serves the interests of the oligarchic class by becoming an instrument of power to maintain their position. Marx assumed that the existence of the state was caused by a fundamental lie that was hidden from society. The state is also accused of carrying out the hegemony of repressive power to force its people to submissive. Hegemony is always related to the arrangement of state power as a dictatorial class.

The aims and values of this movement are essentially universal, that is, they are directed at providing protection and maintaining human living conditions in a better direction. Mural art in urban society is understood as a medium of awareness and liberation. Paulo Preire revealed that artistic expression is essentially a form of education to society in a more meaningful way. Preire also emphasized that public awareness will give birth to a critical culture in identifying injustice in the midst of social life and a critical attitude in trying to change conditions for the better.

## **2. Method**

The approach to this research is to use a phenomenological approach that according to Husserl the phenomenon is everything that in a certain way has appeared to be in the human consciousness. Whether in the form of something real or design or in the form of reality or ideas (Delfagauw, 1988: 195). According to Husserl, the goal of phenomenology is to return in its own reality (Abidin, 2002:7). The purpose of phenomenology also wants to clarify a person's life in everyday life in accordance with the situation experienced. How they were arrested, silenced, threatened for daring to criticize state power.

Phenomenology attempts to manifest itself to observers by describing symptoms. Symptoms here mean symptoms that can be seen directly by observation based on five senses (external symptoms) and symptoms that are almost able to be felt, experienced, thought or imagined by researchers without the need for empirical reference (internal symptoms) (Abidin, 2002: 6).

### 3. Results and Discussion

#### 3.1. *Mural as Social Critic*

Murals are one of the artists' efforts to create discourse from the messages they convey visually in public spaces. Discourse itself can be explained as a practical language formed from general assumptions (Abercrombie, et al., 2010; Mills, 2003).

Artworks are born from the dialectical results of society towards a social phenomenon that exists in the surrounding environment. Mural in this concept is a medium in voicing ideas and ideas as a communication strategy in presenting various social dimensions (Wicandra, 2005: 129).

Mural is a form of street art, becoming a medium of communication that is quite often used by the public in conveying messages, hopes and criticisms to parties who have certain privileges or powers. Murals have deeper meanings and messages, are related to the historical context of the murals themselves and become a cartactical vehicle for muralists or other artists who better understand the nature of murals.

Regarding the terminology of murals as acts of vandalism, damaging scenery or unauthorized or violating the law of public order, it is certainly a paradox. Technical arguments are possessed by the official power as a form of anti-criticism response to the urban community movement. This condition is inversely proportional to the group that has the privilege of using billboards and media strategies, while people who do not have privileges and clogged delivery rooms decide to use murals as an effective aspiration channel.

In ethics and licensing regarding placement in public spaces, it can be seen from several dimensions. If it is related to the ethical dimension, of course, ideally public property cannot be used without permission. However, this becomes a paradox when viewed from the dimension of resistance, such as being against ethics, being considered to pollute walls, damage public facilities and others. Because his name is also social criticism and becomes a symbol of resistance, urban society should not seek approval from power.

Mural art that is growing widely, almost entirely mural critical of the course of power as well as cumulative turmoil, one of which is due to the COVID-19 pandemic crisis two years ago, which created many vulnerabilities high in the community, and social inequality that occurred to have an impact on the social conditions of small communities.

Mural art is a public message from the point of anxiety, uncertainty, resignation, disappointment about current living conditions. That resignation is expressed through the writing on the wall and hopes that there is a new miracle and God's love that is needed at this time, rather than certainty from the government or the State. Although some of the mural expressions were directed to God, the authorities still responded repressively because they were considered provocateurs. They did not provide solutions to the conditions of hunger, daily needs, food, social assistance but instead silenced and arrested the muralists. There are several similar murals that were removed by the authorities.

Table 2: Context Mural

No	Context Mural	Action
1.	“God I'm Hungry!!”	Removed by the authorities due to the use of the exclamation mark symbol which seems provocative
2.	"The Real Plague Is Hunger"	Removed by the authorities under the pretext of multiple interpretation messages and destroying the beauty of public spaces.
3.	“Poor People Don't Get Sick”	Removed by the authorities for disturbing public order and not having a permit
4.	"Corruptors Embraced, Little People Beaten"	Removed by the authorities.
5.	“We Live In A City Where Murals Are Considered a Crime and Corruption Are Considered Cultural”	Removed by the authorities for disturbing public order and not having a permit.
6.	"Activities are limited to the point that people forget they need a mouthful of rice" “#Help us Government of god”	Removed by the authorities.

In the mural world, conveying social criticism is one of the efforts or ways to carry out its normative function as a means of social control in society. Delivering social criticism to the community through the media of street walls, has a meaning as a way of how the position of the mural in conveying the voice of social criticism. The public's thoughts are conveyed as a bridge to connect the government and power as well as one way to make *visual art* media, in this case murals, a vehicle for social criticism.

### 3.2. Movement of Resistance Against Authoritarianism

Urban society has great social power, and the form of that social power is social movement. The urban community movement raises strategic issues in urban areas as the main issue by involving all elements of social class in society. The study of urban movement is not a question and explanation of victory or defeat in the context of conflict. However, furthermore, the urban society movement has contributed to making social change from small level to structural policy.

Tarrow states that social movements are collective opposition/resistance by people who have the same solidarity and goals in a continuous process of interaction with elites, opponents and authorities (Quah & Sales, 2000: 236).

Social movements express people's collective efforts to demand social equality and justice and reflect people's struggles to defend their identities and cultural heritages. Social movements and collective action have become a universal force of historical institutions and actions in society. Therefore, social movements and social actions do not just appear in society, but appear along with a conflict concerning issues of inequality, instability, domination, silencing of freedom and social injustice.

Authoritarianism leads to conflict and social disintegration in society. Power seeks to control all aspects of people's lives. Authoritarianism goes against the natural human desire to be free. People living under the shadow

of government repression are like a ticking time bomb that will one day explode. As soon as the momentum arrived, the pent-up desire exploded out of control.

How is the resistance of people or groups who are powerless against the domination of the ruling party such as workers, farmers, small traders, join together with artists, muralists, students, regardless of class and class to fight, criticize power groups.

These groups come together to create conversations that represent criticism of the power of authoritarianism to plan strategies by forming resistance through mural art. Various murals were made secretly to avoid threats and arrests by the authorities. Most of the murals on the walls are done at night to avoid the original identity of the creator. This urban community movement is carried out on street walls, under bridges, shops, traditional markets, traffic intersections, or strategic places where many people pass. The goal is nothing more than to get attention and response from the State regarding current social problems. Looking for the best solution for the unstable condition in society. However, the facts on the ground, that the response was not an improvement, but rather abolition, arrests, threats, acts of violence, intimidation and repression were actually shown by the apparatus.

Scott (1990) explains that there are three models of domination that give rise to different forms of resistance. The three forms of domination include: (1) Material Domination; (2) Status Domination; and (3) Ideological Domination.

In the results in the field of material domination, it is explained that the practice of domination appears in the form of deprivation of intellectual rights of opinion, physical violence that injures the body, removal of murals that are considered criminal, arrests of students, muralists, and so on. While in status domination, the practice of domination appears in forms such as committing human rights violations, violating privileges, humiliating, and carrying out attacks on one's dignity. Whereas in ideological domination, the practice of domination appears in the form of privileges from the rulers against groups that are pro-ruler and carry out verbatim resistance to small communities who criticize and resist. Provision of positions for groups that are pro and maintain a feudalistic culture within the body of power to continue in power.

The democratic system guarantees the people's freedom of expression, in the context of murals, people move within the context of fairness and are not carried out by destroying public facilities, violence, intimidation and anarchism. But the mural movement is still considered a criminal effort and resistance to the State. Indeed, openness or democracy in Indonesia cannot guarantee stability.

For example, the mural "God, I'm Hungry" is a form of public expression through writing on the wall as the last hope due to the death of justice and the death of the conscience of corrupt state officials in the midst of a pandemic. Small communities live in the midst of uncertainty, authoritarian style of power, feudalistic culture, authoritarian law domination and use of violence in the relationship between the State and its people. God's miracle is the last hope of society in waiting for their destiny and changes in social conditions for the better.

Indonesia's poor democracy index in 2020-2021 is a warning due to authoritarianism's excessive control over social processes in society. The strengthening of psychological obedience to those in authority and power in the political, economic order gives a new direction of cruelty. What is considered not to be subject to the will or interests of power becomes an enemy of the State. All state equipment and equipment have been controlled and submitted according to the interests of power. People who become subordinate groups only have three choices between pros, cons or apathy towards state conditions.

The death of democracy will eventually become a social explosion. The murals that were previously written on the city walls will be rewritten on the tombstones of power due to the failure to maintain the harmony of the nation. The mural that contains complaints, hope to God is a small piece of people's despair in facing the problems in their lives. God's intervention in the hope of society to get a better life Indonesian people are known

as religious people who are the most patient in accepting all problems. Try to get back up and not live too long in sadness.

The miracle of God comes by revealing the real form or face of the real power, how can it not be that the official state institutions, state legal institutions are proven to have deliberately violated many laws. Sexual harassment, rape, intimidation, physical violence, corruption, racism, murder, corruption in aid of the Covid-19 pandemic, human rights violations, and other violations. This condition explains that the element of power is a bad example and a story of a decline in morals, ethics and civilization of power. Not only the index of democracy, but the index of humanity and social justice is far from the expectations of the Indonesian people.

The community resistance movement through murals is only limited to conveying their thoughts, ideas and viewpoints to criticize power. Mural art does not contain messages to indoctrinate or force the public to agree with the thoughts of muralists, artists, artists who convey visually on street walls, but through this mural it seeks to invite people to reflect, think, ask what is wrong with our country, invite the community to seek answers together about the various upheavals that often occur. When state institutions, state institutions or power are no longer a hope for society, the best hope is the hope from God.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The urban community movement through murals is part of a new social movement that concentrates on contemporary issues, which clearly seeks social change. This movement is an attempt to convey social criticism of power that is not institutionally against the law or carried out in structured ways.

The urban community movement through street art or murals is an effort to convey thoughts, ideas and points of view to criticize the hegemony of power over all basic problems in people's lives. In making murals, it is not created constantly, but adjusts to the factual and actual conditions that occur. So that the mural does not contain a message to bring hatred, hostility or invite the division of community groups. Artists, muralists, artists, and other community groups only try to invite people to think again, clear their hearts, seek answers together about problems that are never finished and only make it difficult for small people from the dirty behavior of authoritarianism. Encouraging all social strata of small communities with minimal resources to stand up and wait for God's miracle to complete and change social conditions to be better than before.

#### **5. Recommendation**

Form the research that has been conducted by author about related parties regarding this social movement, the recommendation that will be given include :

##### *5.1. The Government/Office Stakeholders*

- a. The government needs to open the insight and knowledge to develop the scientific discussions related to common interests, especially criticism from the community should be handled with calmly and openly. Government services to the community is part of the mandate of the law, to educate the people of Indonesia with the mind or the idea of intellectual civilized and socially just.
- b. Improving the professionalism of the bureaucracy and realizing sense of the humanity of state apparatus especially in dealing with the diverse forms of community pluralism.
- c. In the context of a democracy, the people are the structures most powerful power. So the aspirations and the voice of the people be a part of the course of government. The government can not impose his point of view against the people, especially the limit and remove the voice of the people in relation to the state.

##### *5.2. Social movements, Groups, Group, Community other*

- a. Every improvement effort requires the path and the way it should be regardless of the action-violence, crime, criminality, terror and actions that pose negative aspects.
- b. Educate the public in general through the importance of the value of the criticism that was built with good thoughts, ideas, one of them is through line art. The art of giving a manner different that the



purpose of criticism is no longer on the result, but the process and the substance of which is easily accepted and does not lose its essence despite the distance and time that happened a long time ago.

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