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Semantic Change and Statecraft: Reconfiguring 'Reformasi' in Indonesian Legislative and Media Discourse

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ABSTRACT: This article investigates the semantic evolution of reformasi in Indonesian political discourse from 1998 to 2025. Originally a rallying cry for democratic transformation following the fall of Suharto's New Order, reformasi has increasingly been used to legitimize bureaucratic and technocratic governance. The study applies diachronic embedding analysis to two corpora: legislative transcripts (DPR RI) and Indonesian news articles, spanning five political eras. Preprocessing included lemmatization, tokenization, and multi word expression normalization. Static word embeddings (SGNS) were aligned using Orthogonal Procrustes, and contextual embeddings from IndoBERT were clustered and compared across time slices. Semantic drift was measured through cosine displacement, Jaccard similarity of nearest neighbors, and Jensen–Shannon divergence of contextual clusters. Significant semantic shifts were identified around key political events such as the 2004 direct presidential election, the 2017 UU Ormas, and the 2020 Omnibus Law. Findings reveal that reformasi has drifted from a term associated with democratic rupture to one embedded in administrative discourse. In legislative corpora, it now co occurs with terms like birokrasi, efisiensi, and ASN, while public discourse maintains traces of its original ideological charge. This shift indicates the broader repurposing of political language in post authoritarian governance. The study contributes to computational linguistics and political discourse analysis by demonstrating how embedding based methods can uncover ideological realignments encoded in language. It underscores the value of semantic tracking in transitional democracies and offers a replicable framework for analyzing discursive transformations.

Keywords: Reformasi; Semantic Change; Indonesian Political Discourse; Diachronic Embeddings; Democratic Backsliding; Language And Ideology.

INTRODUCTION

The fall of Suharto's New Order regime in May 1998 marked a pivotal transformation in Indonesian political history. Central to this shift was the emergence of the term reformasi, which

encapsulated the aspirations of a broad based movement demanding systemic change, political transparency, and democratization. From the outset, reformasi operated as a rallying cry, galvanizing a diverse coalition of civil society actors, students, and opposition figures. It signified more than political transition it became a symbol of national reckoning and ideological rebirth. In the ensuing decades, however, this term has undergone profound semantic shifts, reflecting the evolving ideological and institutional landscape of Indonesian governance.

Initially imbued with notions of rupture and democratization, reformasi quickly permeated formal political rhetoric, institutional frameworks, and media discourse. Scholars such as Azra (as cited in Seeth, 2021) have emphasized the cultural and intellectual roots of this term, highlighting how Islamic academic figures contributed to its democratizing ethos. Through their discourse and advocacy, reformasi was cast not only as a political demand but as a cultural movement, signaling a deeper public consciousness toward democratic governance. Yet, as the post authoritarian state matured, the meanings ascribed to reformasi began to fragment and realign with varying ideological and policy agendas.

The ability of political actors to harness reformasi for strategic ends underscores the power of political language in post authoritarian settings. Language in this context does not merely describe; it performs and constructs political reality. Marszałek–Kawa & Wawrzyński (2018) argue that political narratives, when anchored in historical memory, shape and reflect public expectations of democracy. However, these narratives can also be manipulated to justify deviations from democratic norms, revealing a complex relationship between language, legitimacy, and governance. As democratic ideals become embedded in institutional rhetoric, terms like reformasi risk semantic dilution, especially when employed without substantive change.

Across Southeast Asia, the term "reform" has similarly been instrumentalized by regimes seeking to maintain control while projecting change. Arifin et al. (2022) observe that in such contexts, reform becomes both a policy direction and a discursive tool. In Indonesia, successive administrations from post Suharto technocrats to contemporary populists have recast reformasi to suit administrative, infrastructural, and even security objectives. This dual function as both transformative ideal and bureaucratic mechanism reveals the term's discursive elasticity and its vulnerability to ideological repurposing.

Presidential administrations have played a key role in this semantic evolution. As Berenschot & Masduki (2023) illustrate, under Joko Widodo, reformasi has been invoked in the context of infrastructure development and public service improvement. By framing these initiatives as part of the reformasi legacy, the term is decoupled from its original oppositional stance and reembedded within state building rhetoric. Legislative discourse similarly reflects this shift: reformasi increasingly collocates with terms like birokrasi, efisiensi, and ASN, suggesting a transition from ideological to technocratic application. These trends necessitate closer scrutiny of the ways in which reform language legitimizes state agendas while potentially obscuring democratic deficits.

To systematically track this lexical transformation, scholars have turned to discourse analysis and computational methods. Filipi & Wittig (2022) note the value of critical discourse analysis for unpacking the ideological undercurrents in political language, especially where historical terms are recontextualized. Similarly, Blühdorn & Butzlaff (2020) propose narrative theory as a framework for understanding how such terms acquire new meanings through collective memory and institutional discourse. These frameworks are complemented by computational approaches that enable large scale analysis of language trends over time.

Recent advances in computational linguistics have made it possible to quantify semantic change using techniques such as natural language processing, word embeddings, and topic modeling. Masduki (2022) emphasizes the utility of these tools for revealing subtle shifts in meaning, especially within politically charged vocabularies like reformasi. Through diachronic corpora analysis and contextual modeling (e.g., IndoBERT embeddings), researchers can identify changes in word associations, semantic neighbors, and usage patterns. These approaches not only enhance interpretive depth but also bridge qualitative and quantitative traditions in political discourse analysis.

The present study situates itself at this intersection, applying both static and contextual embedding models to trace the diachronic semantics of reformasi from 1998 to 2025. It draws upon legislative transcripts and news corpora, capturing how the term's meaning has evolved across different political regimes and communicative registers. By aligning these semantic shifts with major policy events such as the 2004 direct presidential elections, the 2017 Mass Organization Law (UU Ormas), and the 2020 Omnibus Law the analysis provides insight into the political functions and discursive trajectories of reformasi. The study posits that reformasi's semantic drift mirrors broader shifts in Indonesia's post authoritarian ideology, from oppositional activism to managerial governance.

METHOD

Corpus Compilation

This study employs a two pronged corpus approach: (1) legislative documents from the Risalah Rapat DPR RI (1998–2025), and (2) media texts from the Leipzig Indonesian News Corpus (1998–2024). These sources are selected to capture discourse from both institutional and public spheres. The corpora are chronologically segmented into five political slices 1998–2004, 2004–2014, 2014–2019, 2019–2024, and 2024–2025 to enable diachronic comparison aligned with Indonesia's political regimes.

Preprocessing and Normalization

To ensure compatibility with diachronic semantic analysis, preprocessing follows established protocols (Periti et al., 2022; Schlechtweg et al., 2019). This includes lowercasing, punctuation removal, and diacritic normalization. Tokenization is performed using an Indonesian specific

parser to handle affixes and compounding structures. Multi word expressions (e.g., reformasi birokrasi) are standardized across time slices. Temporal metadata (e.g., year, document type) is preserved for alignment and sampling. Context insensitive stop word removal is adjusted across periods to account for evolving language usage. Each corpus slice contains at least 200 instances of reformasi to ensure statistical reliability.

Semantic Modeling

Static Embeddings (SGNS)

For each time slice, static word embeddings are trained using Skip Gram with Negative Sampling (SGNS). The embeddings represent the word reformasi based on its distributional context within that period. Embeddings are then aligned using Orthogonal Procrustes to facilitate cross temporal comparison (Gruppi et al., 2022; Hamilton et al., 2016). Semantic drift is quantified through cosine displacement and Jaccard index of nearest neighbors.

Contextual Embeddings (IndoBERT)

Complementing the static model, contextual embeddings are derived using IndoBERT. Each occurrence of reformasi is extracted as a 768 dimensional token vector. These vectors are clustered via k means and density based algorithms. Semantic change is measured via Jensen–Shannon divergence across cluster distributions (Dubossarsky et al., 2019). This approach enables detection of subtle context dependent shifts, especially for polysemous uses of reformasi.

Significance Testing and Change Detection

To assess the reliability of observed semantic shifts, we apply bootstrapping for confidence intervals and Bayesian Online Change Point Detection (BOCPD) to locate temporal breakpoints. KWIC (Keyword in Context) analysis is used to validate and illustrate model outputs with textual evidence. Anchoring events such as the 2004 presidential election, the 2017 UU Ormas, and the 2020 Omnibus Law are aligned with detected change points to contextualize lexical shifts.

Comparative Evaluation of Methods

This study evaluates both static and contextual approaches for semantic change detection. Static SGNS offers interpretability and computational efficiency but lacks sensitivity to context. Contextual BERT embeddings provide richer semantic granularity, particularly for politically loaded and polysemous terms (Shoemark et al., 2019). Methodological trade offs are analyzed in terms of their performance on Indonesian political discourse.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Semantic Displacement

To quantify semantic change, we calculated cosine displacement of *reformasi* across five diachronic slices. Results showed clear shifts between 2004, 2014, and 2020. Cosine displacement increased sharply post 2014, suggesting an acceleration in semantic drift. Bootstrap confidence intervals (CI) confirmed statistical robustness of these shifts (Hamilton et al., 2016; Suwignyo, 2023). Visualization via t SNE projections illustrated the vector drift path of *reformasi* through 2D semantic space. The earlier cluster (1998–2004) remained proximal to terms like *demokrasi*, *mahasiswa*, and *orba*, while later clusters (2019–2025) gravitated toward *birokrasi*, *ASN*, and *digitalisasi*.

Table 1. Nearest Neighbors of *Reformasi* per Time Slice

Time Slice	Nearest Neighbors
1998–2004	demokrasi, mahasiswa, orba, perubahan
2004–2014	partai, birokrasi, transparansi, hukum
2014–2019	ASN, efisiensi, pelayanan, meritokrasi
2019–2024	RPJMN, pengawasan, administrasi, kinerja
2024–2025	evaluasi, digitalisasi, birokrasi, transformasi

Neighbor Set Shifts

Table 1 reveals major neighbor transitions for *reformasi*. Between 1998–2004 and 2024–2025, the Jaccard similarity index dropped to 0.29 indicative of strong lexical repurposing (Harrigian & Dredze, 2022). Early terms were ideologically oriented, while later neighbors reflected bureaucratic administrative terminology. Validation against key political events e.g., the 2017 UU Ormas and 2020 Omnibus Law suggests correlation between policy discourse and semantic shifts (McKenzie et al., 2016).

Contextual Cluster Drift

Using IndoBERT, we extracted contextual embeddings of *reformasi* and applied k means clustering (k=4). Jensen–Shannon divergence showed increasing distributional spread over time, especially between 1998–2004 and 2019–2025. These results indicate polysemous proliferation: *reformasi* developed from a singular ideological referent to multiple bureaucratic, administrative, and policy centered uses. DBSCAN highlighted cluster density reduction in later periods, signaling semantic fragmentation (Brunelle & Kirby, 2016).

Change Points and Anchoring Events

Bayesian Online Change Point Detection (BOCPD) identified 2004, 2017, and 2020 as significant inflection years. These correlate with Indonesia's first direct presidential election, the enactment of the UU Ormas, and the passing of the Omnibus Law. Overlaying linguistic timelines with

political milestones showed aligned peaks in displacement metrics. Additional metadata e.g., DPR debates, journalistic framing supported these interpretations (Julul et al., 2020). KWIC samples further illustrated semantic realignments: e.g., in 1999, *reformasi* was used to oppose *orde baru*, while in 2024 it was invoked to justify civil service digitalization.

Table 2. Semantic Change Points Anchored to Political Events

Change Point	Year	Political Event
CP1	2004	First Direct Presidential Election
CP2	2017	Mass Organization Law (UU Ormas)
CP3	2020	Omnibus Law (UU Cipta Kerja)

The semantic evolution of *reformasi* from a symbol of democratic rupture to a tool of bureaucratic legitimacy encapsulates Indonesia's broader ideological shifts in the post authoritarian era. This drift is not merely linguistic it is deeply political, revealing how language becomes entangled with institutional power, historical narratives, and regime legitimation. As Karolewski (2020) and Sevcik (2022) argue, semantic drift in post authoritarian regimes often reflects how language is strategically manipulated to align with emerging political objectives and reshape public perception. In the Indonesian context, *reformasi* has undergone a dramatic transformation: from contesting power to consolidating it, from symbolizing resistance to institutionalizing control. The term is increasingly deployed by the state not to challenge but to reinforce institutional authority, lending rhetorical legitimacy to governance mechanisms that may diverge significantly from the term's original democratic ethos.

This semantic shift mirrors global patterns in which reformist language becomes performative and depoliticized. As Bisarya & Rogers (2023) and Gofen (2024) emphasize, such transformations in political language can simultaneously mask and facilitate democratic backsliding. In Indonesia, the continued evocation of the 1998 *reformasi* spirit by political elites cloaks technocratic and procedural reforms in a moral vocabulary inherited from popular democratic struggle. These rhetorical acts serve to obscure the widening gap between state actions and democratic accountability. The result is what may be termed semantic dilution *reformasi* no longer signifies rupture, revolution, or people's sovereignty; instead, it becomes associated with administrative routines, institutional restructuring, and managerial efficiency. No longer a rallying cry, *reformasi* is now often invoked to justify policy continuity and institutional inertia.

The strategic repurposing of *reformasi* language reflects how regimes construct political legitimacy through selective memory and calculated redefinition. As Bauer (2023) and Bermeo (2016) note, reform narratives frequently serve as discursive instruments used to justify elite consolidation, often under the guise of modernization, national development, or technocratic rationality. In Indonesia's case, the Jokowi administration has actively embedded *reformasi* within frameworks of digitalization, public service delivery, and bureaucratic reform. These narratives, while projecting continuity with the spirit of 1998, in fact reposition *reformasi* as a tool for centralizing state control and limiting the scope of political dissent. Terms such as *ASN*, *efisiensi*, and *transformasi* increasingly

dominate the co occurrence landscape of *reformasi*, symbolizing the rebranding of democratization into technocratic discipline. Such rhetorical strategies, though seemingly benign, subtly yet powerfully redefine the limits of legitimate opposition and contestation in Indonesia's political arena.

This process has profound implications for democratic discourse. As Wolkenstein (2021) and Pevehouse & Glenn (2024) argue, semantic dilution undermines the clarity and force of democratization language. When a term like *reformasi* becomes elastic enough to encompass any state led initiative, irrespective of public participation or transparency, it erodes public trust and narrows the boundaries of political imagination. Citizens may increasingly perceive reformist discourse as disingenuous, leading to apathy, cynicism, and disengagement from political processes. In this way, language becomes both a mirror and a mechanism: it reflects the retreat from substantive democracy while simultaneously facilitating that retreat through rhetorical depoliticization.

Nevertheless, linguistic analysis provides a method of resistance and a tool for democratic renewal. By systematically tracing semantic shifts across registers and time periods, scholars can uncover moments of ideological reconfiguration and identify sites of contestation. As Leonard (2024) and Weiss (2022) observe, shifts in political language often anticipate legal or institutional transformations. In this study, diachronic embedding models reveal that while *reformasi* has become bureaucratized in elite registers, it still retains ideological resonance in media discourse and in earlier corpora. This finding suggests a persistent undercurrent of discursive pluralism a condition in which multiple meanings coexist and compete within the same linguistic terrain.

Moreover, the endurance of alternative semantic clusters associated with *reformasi* particularly in public discourse and historical references signals the resilience of democratic memory. Piotrowska (2024) and Gidron et al. (2023) highlight the importance of linguistic multiplicity in sustaining democratic culture. Even under semantic drift, politically charged terms can serve as vessels for ideological resistance and civic reawakening. The malleability of *reformasi*, though susceptible to co optation, also grants it the potential for reactivation and reinvention in future democratic projects. Rather than signaling the death of meaning, semantic drift may also mark the beginning of new struggles over meaning.

In conclusion, *reformasi*'s semantic journey reveals the ongoing tension between democratic aspiration and bureaucratic appropriation in Indonesia's post authoritarian discourse. It demonstrates how language, ideology, and governance coevolve how political terms are not static descriptors but dynamic instruments of power, persuasion, and resistance. The discursive fate of *reformasi* exemplifies the broader struggle over political memory, legitimacy, and the boundaries of civic engagement. Continued linguistic vigilance, supported by critical and computational methods alike, is essential to preserving the emancipatory potential embedded in post authoritarian vocabularies and ensuring their relevance for future democratic aspirations.

CONCLUSION

The semantic transformation of reformasi over the span of nearly three decades reflects a profound shift in Indonesia's political landscape. Once emblematic of democratic rupture and the people's call for radical institutional change, reformasi has been discursively reoriented toward bureaucratic rationality and technocratic governance. Through diachronic embedding analysis, this study has demonstrated how reformasi has evolved semantically from a rallying cry for reform to a legitimizing tool for state driven development and administrative restructuring.

The findings reveal that this shift is neither incidental nor isolated. It corresponds closely with political milestones such as the 2004 direct presidential election, the 2017 UU Ormas, and the 2020 Omnibus Law, each of which marked significant inflection points in how reform was understood and enacted. Static and contextual embedding models, combined with change point detection and neighbor analysis, show a trajectory of increasing semantic displacement, neighbor drift, and contextual polysemy. Importantly, this trajectory highlights the redefinition of reformasi not just in language but in function as a discursive mechanism that helps consolidate, rather than contest, state authority.

Despite this drift, the semantic memory of reformasi persists in public and media discourse, revealing opportunities for discursive contestation. The multiplicity of meanings associated with the term, especially in earlier time slices and across non elite registers, indicates that reformasi remains a site of ideological struggle. Its malleability while exploited for state legitimacy also allows for reappropriation by civil society actors and reformist movements aiming to reclaim its original democratic ethos.

The contribution of this study is twofold. Empirically, it offers a comprehensive model for tracking semantic change in political discourse using static and contextual embeddings. Theoretically, it situates linguistic change within the broader frame of post authoritarian legitimacy building, offering insights into how political vocabularies evolve alongside governance practices. By foregrounding reformasi as both a linguistic and ideological construct, the study reveals the dynamic interplay between discourse, memory, and power.

Future research might explore the transregional parallels of such shifts in other post authoritarian or hybrid regimes, investigating how terms like reform, democracy, or freedom undergo similar semantic reconfigurations. As language continues to shape, reflect, and obscure the contours of governance, semantic analysis remains a crucial lens for interrogating political transformation in the 21st century.

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