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## Indications of manufactured incompetence: Neopatrimonial governance and public service erosion in Indonesia's Free Nutritious Meal Program

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### ABSTRACT

The implementation of welfare policies in developing nations is frequently reduced to state capacity deficits. In contrast, this study argues that incompetence can be actively reproduced as a governance strategy. Employing Critical Policy Analysis and an evidence grading framework, this article examines the governance pathologies of Indonesia's Free Nutritious Meal (Makan Bergizi Gratis/MBG) program during its early implementation phase (2024–2026). While some dysfunctions stem from rushed implementation, the findings identify a deeper structural anomaly: massive fiscal allocations accompanied by relaxed institutional oversight. The study advances Manufactured Incompetence as its core proposition, with two key theoretical contributions. First is the Asymmetric Governance Paradox, characterized by an inverted accountability anomaly where heavily funded programs operate under loose discretionary boundaries. Second is the synthesized Neopatrimonial Governance Loop model, which illustrates how populist narrative shielding (Discursive Insulation) creates permissive conditions for local Institutional Capture, ultimately driving the systemic reproduction of incompetence. Early empirical signals—particularly service quality deficits and educational disruptions—provide suggestive support for these operational mechanisms. These findings yield a critical interpretation: in neopatrimonial ecosystems, governance pathologies are not merely passive failures, but functional instruments for power preservation. Disrupting this cycle requires the institutionalization of real-time preventive audits and the enforcement of mandatory merit-based standards.

**Keywords:** neopatrimonialism; manufactured incompetence; institutional capture; asymmetric governance; critical policy analysis; school feeding program.

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RESEARCH & PUBLISHING



## 1. INTRODUCTION

More than two decades after the democratic transition, Indonesia's bureaucratic architecture continues to exhibit anomalies in its state capacity building efforts. Theoretically, the state has failed to escape the shadow of patrimonialism, where power structures remain persistently controlled by patronage relations and clientelist networks (Aspinall & Berenschot, 2019). This condition creates acute structural vulnerabilities; the formulation and execution of public policies are highly susceptible to distortion by what is analytically observed as extractive elite interests (Hadiz & Robison, 2013). Consequently, instead of establishing an independent and merit-based bureaucracy. The narrative of state modernization often operates merely as an illusion of new developmentalism that obscures institutional reform stagnation and the decline of governance rationality (Warburton, 2016).

In the contemporary governance landscape, elite rent-seeking no longer operates exclusively within heavily monitored traditional extractive sectors, but has increasingly shifted toward the hijacking of massive social assistance programs. Welfare-labeled policies enjoy nearly absolute political protection, fortified by strong moral sentiments, such as the narrative of "saving the nation's children's nutrition." Consequently, anyone criticizing its governance can easily be delegitimized as being anti-public welfare (Mas'udi & Winanti, 2020). This shift turns the welfare arena—which this study analytically interprets as a potentially predatory arena—into an environment that borrows and expands upon the logic of 'disorder as political instrument' (Chabal & Daloz, 1999). It serves as the safest and most effective instrument to perpetuate patronage distribution under a populist umbrella.

The tension between technocratic rationality and extractive interests reaches its climax in the implementation of flagship policies, one of which is the Free Nutritious Meal Program (Program Makan Bergizi Gratis/MBG) for the 2024–2026 period. An analysis of the 2024–2026 State Budget (APBN) fiscal posture released by the Ministry of Finance indicates a reallocation of priorities that significantly suppresses the proportion of the regular education sector budget. As a national priority program, the MBG experienced a drastic fiscal allocation escalation, projected to surge to approximately Rp335 trillion by 2026 (Kementerian Keuangan Republik Indonesia, 2025). This massive budget volume presents a striking governance anomaly when juxtaposed with other basic service sectors; the budget for revitalizing tens of thousands of severely damaged classroom infrastructures is capped at only around Rp120 trillion for 2024–2026 (Kementerian Keuangan Republik Indonesia, 2024, 2025). This allocative disparity aligns with the trajectory of the political economy of education in Indonesia, where investments in essential infrastructure are frequently overshadowed by populist policies oriented toward short-term electoral returns (Rosser, 2023). This massive and unequal decentralized fiscal allocation is executed through a pattern of rushed implementation. This policy acceleration prioritizes symbolic outputs over institutional readiness and is conducted without adequate monitoring instruments. This governance style, which often sacrifices accountability (Bland, 2020), ultimately breeds dynamics that this study interprets as triggers for systemic vulnerability.

This anomaly is most evident in the procurement architecture. The establishment of the Nutrition Fulfillment Service Unit (Satuan Pelayanan Pemenuhan Gizi/SPPG) at the regional level, which holds discretion over the logistics supply chain, carries a high risk of repeating the pattern where decentralization precisely becomes a rent-seeking arena for local elites, or local capture (Berenschot & Mulder, 2019). Although oversight authorities such as the Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK) and the Financial Transaction Reports and Analysis Center (PPATK) have issued early warnings regarding monitoring blind spots and indications of mark-ups, these preventive interventions are often blunted. This dynamic, which several recent studies link to the institutional weakening of law enforcement capacity, results in technocratic warnings failing to translate into effective countermeasures (Butt, 2023).

Why do the governance anomalies within Indonesia's MBG program demand rigorous global analytical attention? Comparatively, the implementation failures of School Feeding Programs (SFPs) are indeed common phenomena across developing nations. In India through the Mid-Day Meal Scheme (Sahai, 2014) or in Nigeria with the National Home-Grown School Feeding Program (NHGSFP) (Ogidi et al., 2025), incompetence and corruption are generally understood as system failures, rather than strategic governance designs, stemming from the state's low capacity to oversee vast administrative systems. Diverging from this general pattern, this article demonstrates that in the case of the MBG, incompetence does not merely emerge as a system failure; rather, in this preliminary analytical reading, it can be interpreted as an indication of an architectural design that is potentially reproduced systemically.

This article does not deny that the massive scale of the program, wide geographic span of control, and rushed implementation inherently generate genuine coordination problems and administrative weaknesses. In many comparative cases, these factors even serve as the dominant explanations for the failure of large-scale policy implementation. However, reducing the series of anomalies in MBG governance solely to an administrative bottleneck risks ignoring the political-economy dimensions operating beneath the surface. The failure of prevention in these early implementation stages cannot be understood purely as procedural inefficiency. The phenomenon of engaging logistics partners without meritocratic track records in the MBG program potentially reflects the practice of strategic ignorance, where state apparatuses appear to tolerate the technical inadequacy of vendors as long as patronage distribution continues (McGoey, 2019). Such procurement practices are classic pathologies in neopatrimonial bureaucracies, where state contracts are distributed not based on market efficiency, but as commodities to maintain the loyalty of political factions (Kenny, 2017). Without structural intervention, the SPPG ecosystem carries a strong risk of transforming into an extractive rent-seeking arena, where institutions tend to function to serve political settlements (Khan, 2010). In this context, incompetence is not merely understood as a pure system failure, but as a condition that is likely reproduced and maintained because it functionally serves the neopatrimonial ecosystem.

Based on this rationalization, this article seeks to dissect the pathology of MBG governance through one primary conceptual framework, namely Manufactured Incompetence—where incompetence does not merely occur as a policy residue, but operates as part of a governance strategy within a neopatrimonial context. This core concept operates through two key mechanisms. First, this article identifies the occurrence of an Asymmetric Governance Paradox, a condition where monitoring leniency is systematically granted to capital-intensive programs. This condition aligns with the thesis that institutional oversight weakness is not always accidental, but rather an institutional weakness by design to facilitate elite discretionary flexibility (Levitsky & Murillo, 2009). Second, the article argues that this paradox is shielded by Discursive Insulation, where the regime utilizes populist moralistic narratives to delegitimize technocratic critiques (Mietzner, 2020). The Indonesian case provides early empirical support for this theoretical trajectory. The interaction between these mechanisms ultimately culminates in what this study formulates as the Neopatrimonial Governance Loop—a self-sustaining cycle that reproduces incompetence for the sake of rent distribution stability.

Given that this study evaluates the early implementation phase (2024–early 2026), where forensic financial and contract data are inherently obscured by the opacity of rent architecture, the analysis is conducted through a Critical Policy Analysis framework. To maintain empirical precision, this research employs an Evidence Grading method. Through this approach, peer-reviewed academic literature is used exclusively to build the analytical framework, while institutional reports (KPK/PPATK) and journalistic investigations are proportionately positioned not as causal truths, but as empirical indicators of structural dysfunction symptoms. This study strategically traces proxy indicators, consisting of fiscal policy documents (as structural evidence), institutional reports (as formal warning signals), and journalistic sources (as indicative field indicators). These proxy indicators range from the relaxation of vendor qualification prescriptions

to the delegation of technical nutritional feasibility tests to school institutions as empirical manifestations of macro-design flaws. Through the use of these indicators, this article offers a preliminary critical interpretation to shift the understanding of the function of incompetence in public policy governance. As a methodological limitation, this framework is not intended to establish definitive causal relationships, but to identify indicative patterns and early signals that open the possibility for further structural readings. The subsequent sections of this article will comprehensively discuss the theoretical framework, followed by the operationalization of the research method. It will then sequentially dissect the anatomy of the asymmetric governance paradox and the operation of engineered incompetence in the field, before advancing a theoretical synthesis and policy implications.

## **2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND ANALYTICAL POSITIONING**

Analyzing the governance pathology within the Free Nutritious Meal (Makan Bergizi Gratis/MBG) program requires an interdisciplinary approach that integrates political sociology, organizational theory, and public policy studies. This section establishes the conceptual foundation to offer an analytical reading of how neopatrimonial power structures appear to mediate incompetence and secure their interests through discursive insulation mechanisms.

### **2.1. State of the Art: Governance Pathology in Welfare Programs**

Globally, the implementation of Universal Free School Meals (UFSM) in developing nations consistently collides with governance problems. Recent comparative studies (2021–2026) document how India's Mid-Day Meal Scheme is distorted by beneficiary data manipulation and logistics supply chain leakages. Meanwhile, the Home-Grown School Feeding Program in Nigeria and several African countries frequently fall into the clientelistic dynamics of vendor allocation. Even in Brazil, the PNAE (Programa Nacional de Alimentação Escolar) remains susceptible to local capture, where decentralized funds are informally controlled by predatory elites at the municipal level (Sidaner et al., 2013).

Responding to these governance anomalies, mainstream public policy studies generally position bureaucratic incompetence and implementation failures purely as the residue of state capacity deficits. In this orthodox view, execution capacity is directly proportional to bureaucratic autonomy (Fukuyama, 2013). Thus, incompetence is viewed as the absence of technical prerequisites necessitating capacity-building interventions (Grindle, 2004).

Conversely, political sociology and institutional political economy literature have shifted this debate into the political realm. Various critical studies map how institutional dysfunction is rooted in the domination of formal institutions by informal clientelism networks (Aspinall & Berenschot, 2019). Furthermore, institutions that appear technocratically incompetent can, in fact, function exceptionally well in distributing rents to maintain the balance of political factions (Khan, 2010). Although this literature successfully maps variations in implementation pathologies, most still stop at descriptive explanations. They have not explicitly conceptualized incompetence as a variable that is potentially produced strategically. Consequently, an analytical void exists regarding how incompetence can be actively operated as part of a governance strategy.

### **2.2. Theoretical Novelty: Manufactured Incompetence as the Core Concept**

Filling this void, this study proposes the core concept of Manufactured Incompetence. Expanding upon the logic of "disorder as political instrument" (Chabal & Daloz, 1999), this article advances the critical interpretation that, within the MBG context, the weakening of technocratic standards is potentially not a mere administrative accident. This includes indications ranging from the absence of meritocratic certifications for vendors to the delegation of quality control functions to schools.

Classical organizational theory, through the Peter Principle, argues that within a hierarchy, individuals tend to be promoted until they reach their maximum level of incompetence (Peter & Hull, 1969). However, within a patronage ecosystem, this analysis proposes that this phenomenon undergoes a mutation. Manufactured Incompetence suggests that deploying underqualified actors minimizes resistance to budget manipulation. This effectively relaxes governance constraints imposed by strict professional standards. Within this framework, each conceptual element is not assumed to be a verified empirical fact, but rather an analytical category operationalized through proxy indicators with varying degrees of evidentiary strength.

### **2.3. Operational and Legitimacy Mechanisms**

For Manufactured Incompetence to operate, this theoretical framework identifies two derivative mechanisms working structurally and discursively:

#### **2.3.1. Asymmetric Governance Paradox (Structural Mechanism)**

This is a condition where oversight leniency is systematically granted to capital-intensive programs. This leniency facilitates vulnerability in resource control. In the literature, this is often associated with phenomena such as institutional capture, where decentralized implementing units (such as the SPPG) can potentially be hijacked by local rent-seeking networks through the monopolization of technical regulations (Carpenter & Moss, 2014).

#### **2.3.2. Discursive Insulation (Legitimation Mechanism)**

The structural distortion above requires a shield from public scrutiny. Utilizing the instruments of symbolic politics (Edelman, 1964), the regime constructs populist moralistic narratives—such as "Stunting Emergency" or "Saving the Golden Generation"—to delegitimize technocratic critiques (Mietzner, 2020). Discursive Insulation creates a rhetorical shield that isolates policies from data-driven accountability demands. Consequently, formal audit mechanisms and objective evaluations are frequently neutralized or dismissed as bureaucratic impediments rather than necessary safeguards.

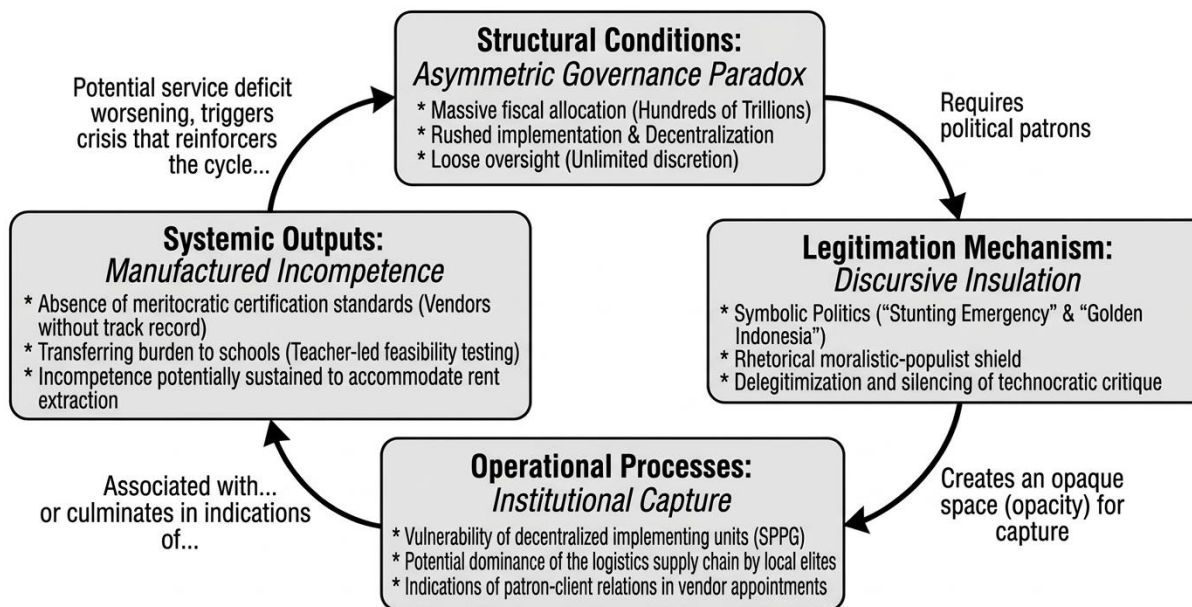
The dynamic interaction between the core concept (Manufactured Incompetence) and its two supporting mechanisms (structural and discursive) ultimately forms a closed cycle. In this study, the synthesis of these three elements is formulated as the Neopatrimonial Governance Loop—an ecosystem where governance dysfunction is independently reproduced to maintain the stability of patronage distribution.

#### **2.3.3. Analytical Positioning: Acknowledging Alternative Explanations and Claim Limitations**

As a study grounded in Critical Policy Analysis, it is essential to affirm the scope and epistemic limitations of this framework. This study seriously considers and acknowledges the validity of mainstream alternative explanations. The mega-project scale of the MBG, spanning a vast geographic area and executed through rushed implementation, will inherently spawn state capacity problems. These include administrative weaknesses, coordination failures, and pure logistical inefficiencies. In many respects, these capacity constraints remain the highly rational primary explanation for the program's early-phase failures.

However, this article argues that concluding the analysis solely on the narrative of "technical capacity failure" is insufficient to encapsulate the entirety of the governance anomalies occurring. The administrative emergency resulting from rushed implementation does not exist neutrally. Instead, logistical panic and the pretext of 'program acceleration' precisely become highly effective enabling conditions. This environment provides strong political justification for relaxing audit procedures and rationalizing the appointment of non-meritocratic vendors. Ultimately, this creates permissive conditions for rent extraction.

Through proxy indicators and early warning signals, this theoretical framework is designed not to prove a definitive and comprehensive causal relationship that every MBG failure is the result of a neopatrimonial design conspiracy. In this context, this article explicitly distinguishes among suggestive evidence (early signals), indicative patterns (emerging patterns), and confirmed causal evidence. The analysis is strictly focused on the first two categories. Instead, this hierarchical framework is utilized as an indicative analytical lens to identify extractive patterns beginning to take root in the field (See Figure 1).



**Figure 1 Conceptual Model of Neopatrimonial Governance Loop in MBG Implementation.**

### 3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

#### 3.1. Research Design

This study employs a Critical Policy Analysis design. It adopts an interdisciplinary qualitative approach integrating public administration, political sociology, and governance studies. Departing from traditional policy analysis, which tends to focus solely on evaluating managerial efficiency, this design allows the researcher to unpack the power relations, resource distribution motives, and patronage structures underlying policy formulation and implementation (Fischer et al., 2015). Consequently, the MBG policy is not treated as a neutral technocratic instrument, but is analyzed as a product of structural interactions susceptible to extractive dynamics (Bacchi, 2009).

#### 3.2. Empirical Anchor and Data Sources

To maintain strict analytical boundaries and address demands for methodological rigor (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018), this study categorizes its database into two primary analytical strata. The first stratum comprises peer-reviewed academic literature, serving exclusively as a theoretical foundation and conceptual baseline. The second stratum consists of empirical field data. To test the theoretical framework, this study triangulates secondary data collected from 2024 to early 2026. These data encompass macro-fiscal documents (Financial Notes/State Budgets), state oversight institutional reports (KPK and PPATK), and Corruption Risk Assessments. To mitigate bias, journalistic sources are purposively selected from mainstream investigative reports verified by the

independent Press Council, which document the execution of the Nutrition Fulfillment Service Units (*Satuan Pelayanan Pemenuhan Gizi/SPPG*) at the regional level.

Responding to the necessity of separating evidence types, this study applies strict source weighting. State documents and audit reports are treated as structural evidence, while journalistic reports and field findings are positioned exclusively as early warning signals, rather than definitive causal evidence. The analysis integrates several micro-illustrations (regional-level mini-cases), such as the shifting of the administrative burden for food feasibility testing to schools, serving as empirical anchors. These regional case illustrations are not intended for statistical generalization, but act as heuristic devices to dissect how governance mechanisms operate at the micro-level. The selection of case illustrations does not aim to claim absolute causality; rather, it facilitates *causal process observation* in a limited sense—tracking indicative sequences among indicators to map concerning patterns, not to establish confirmed causal relationships.

### 3.3. Conceptual Operationalization and Evidence Grading

The primary challenge in investigating latent governance phenomena is the risk of slipping into unfounded normative claims. To mitigate this, the research constructs a conceptual operationalization matrix equipped with an *Evidence Grading* system. Adapted from the logic of process tracing (Beach & Pedersen, 2019), this study consciously distinguishes three levels of inference: suggestive evidence (*early signals*), indicative patterns (*emerging patterns*), and confirmed causal evidence. Aligning with the boundaries of Critical Policy Analysis during a program's initial phase, this study operates strictly at the levels of suggestive evidence and indicative patterns.

Within this classification: (1) Primary Evidence refers to official fiscal/regulatory documents; (2) Indicative Evidence pertains to investigative reports and actor profiles that reveal field patterns but require ongoing triangulation; and (3) Discursive Evidence encompasses the construction of official state narratives. Each evidence category is utilized solely to support commensurate claims: primary evidence underpins structural identification, indicative evidence supports pattern reading, and discursive evidence anchors legitimacy analysis. This system is applied strictly to identify early indications and potential patterns of the *Asymmetric Governance Paradox*, *Institutional Capture*, and *Discursive Insulation*, culminating in the core concept of *Manufactured Incompetence*. Operationalization details are outlined in Table 1.

**Table 1. Conceptual Operationalization and Evidence Grading**

| Theoretical Concept (Hierarchy)                            | Empirical Indicator of MBG  | Data Source & Evidence Grading  | Inference Logic   |
|--|---|---|---|
| <b>Structural Mechanism: Asymmetric Governance Paradox</b> | Fiscal allocation disparity (MBG IDR 335 trillion vs. School Infrastructure) coupled with relaxed procurement discretion. | Primary Evidence: Macro-fiscal documents (Kemeterian Keuangan Republik Indonesia, 2024, 2025) containing Financial Notes/State Budgets and procurement regulations. | Indicates a structural anomaly where a heavily funded program is granted broad discretion, inversely proportional to the strict efficiency demanded of standard basic services. |
| <b>Vulnerability Condition: Institutional Capture</b>      | Appointment of SPPG partners/vendors via non-tender processes and local actor affiliations within the SPPG ecosystem.     | Indicative Evidence: Mapping of SPPG managerial actor profiles, KPK prevention reports, and credible journalistic investigations.                                   | Serves as an early signal ( <i>indicative pattern</i> ) of potential public authority appropriation by local/private actors to monopolize resource access.                      |
| <b>Legitimation Mechanism: Discursive Insulation</b>       | Repetition of "Stunting Emergency" and "Golden Generation" discourses,  | Discursive Evidence: Discourse analysis on state officials' speech  | Demonstrates the use of moral/crisis narratives to silence and delegitimize   |

|   |   |  |   |
|---|---|--|---|
|   | alongside the stigmatization of governance critiques.   | transcripts and official BGN releases.   | technocratic accountability demands.  |
| <b>Core Concept (Output):<br/>Manufactured Incompetence</b> | Indications of logistics vendors operating massively with relaxed or absent formal nutritional/sanitation feasibility certifications. | Primary & Indicative Evidence: Cross-referencing vendor qualification regulations with preliminary field findings. | Offers a critical interpretation that relaxing technical standards potentially correlates with conditions facilitating extractive practices.                              |
| <b>Macro-Synthesis: Neopatrimonial Governance Loop</b>      | Interaction among fiscal disparity, local vendor monopolies, logistical incompetence, and "Golden Generation" narratives.             | Meta-Analysis of integrated Primary, Indicative, and Discursive Evidence.  | Provides a concluding theoretical framework that governance dysfunction is not a random failure, but a cycle reproducing incompetence to preserve patronage distribution. |

**Source:** Data compiled and analyzed by the author from 2024-2026 budget documents, institutional reports, journalistic sources, and field cases.

The application of this evidence grading ensures that the analytical process remains calibrated to verifiable data. Through this design, the research not only maintains consistency between the theoretical framework and empirical findings but also transparently limits its claims: it does not judge this phenomenon as a fully finalized causal conspiracy, but rather presents it as a *structural warning* grounded in strong indicative evidence.

#### 4. EMPIRICAL FINDINGS AND ANALYTICAL DISCUSSION

This section dissects the governance mechanisms of the Free Nutritious Meal (Makan Bergizi Gratis/MBG) program through the integration of empirical data and theoretical frameworks. The analysis is directed toward unraveling indications of the gap between policy narratives and the realities of institutional governance in the field. This discussion culminates in the analytical development of the Manufactured Incompetence concept as the primary proposition, facilitated by both structural and discursive instruments.

##### 4.1. Weighing Alternative Explanations: Rushed Implementation and State Capacity

Before applying a critical analytical lens, it is crucial to proportionally acknowledge the validity of mainstream technocratic explanations. Reports regarding vendor unpreparedness and supply chain disarray in the early phases of the MBG are highly rational when read as manifestations of state capacity problems and the constraints of rushed implementation. A logistical scale that simultaneously covers tens of thousands of distribution points within a short timeframe inherently creates an administrative shock, inter-agency coordination weaknesses, and scale effects.

However, reducing all these pathologies solely to "capacity failure" risks obscuring their political-economy dimensions. Utilizing the instruments of Critical Policy Analysis, the administrative emergency resulting from this rushed implementation is instead positioned as an enabling condition. These failures do not operate in a vacuum; rather, they exist within a structure susceptible to exploiting them to relax oversight and expand discretion in resource allocation.

##### 4.2. Symbolic Politics: Discursive Insulation Through the "Golden Indonesia" Narrative

In managing these administrative shocks, policy implementation requires a shield of legitimacy. In the case of the MBG, legitimacy is constructed through symbolic politics (Edelman, 1964), where discourses of "Golden Indonesia 2045" (Indonesia Emas 2045) and "Stunting Emergency" (Darurat Stunting) are intensively produced. Based on official discursive evidence, a pattern emerges that tends to delegitimize critiques of the program's governance.

This phenomenon aligns with the thesis of welfare populism (Weyland, 2020), where regimes utilize welfare policies to build personalistic ties with voters. As a discursive illustration, rhetoric threatening exclusion for critical voices has been recorded, exemplified by a public official's statement that those who disagree "do not need to come close" or "should not join the government" (Tempo, 2025). This moralistic narrative tends to forge a binary demarcation between "saviors of the generation" and "enemies of the people," which serves as Discursive Insulation. This discursive isolation elevates the MBG to a sacred position, contributing to the reduction of demands for technocratic accountability, frequently reframing them as mere issues of morality.

#### **4.3. Structural Mechanism: Asymmetric Governance Paradox**

All the dynamics above are made possible by an anomaly in the policy architecture, conceptualized in this study as the Asymmetric Governance Paradox. This paradox refers to a structural condition where a capital-intensive populist program is granted broad discretionary oversight leniency, while conventional essential sectors remain locked in extreme bureaucratic rigidity.

Primary evidence of this structural anomaly is reflected in fiscal allocation disparities. The MBG budget, which discretionarily surged to an estimated IDR 335 trillion (Kementerian Keuangan Republik Indonesia, 2025), stands in stark contrast to the stagnant budget for revitalizing damaged classroom infrastructure, hovering around IDR 14.57 trillion (Kemendikdasmen, 2026). This asymmetry offers suggestive empirical support for the argument that oversight rationality is inversely proportional to the electoral/patronage urgency of a program—a dynamic frequently associated in the literature with efforts to maintain political settlements (Slater, 2010).

#### **4.4. Indications of Manufactured Incompetence and Decentralization Vulnerability**

Sheltered behind Discursive Insulation, execution at the grassroots level exhibits vulnerabilities indicative of neopatrimonial patterns. A Corruption Risk Assessment estimates significant potential inefficiencies (ICW, 2025), aligning with PPATK mitigation signals regarding transaction vulnerabilities within the MBG ecosystem (PPATK, 2026). Although holding the status of early warnings rather than final audit findings, these structural data are sufficient to identify the presence of oversight blind spots.

This vulnerability is increasingly evident in the decentralized structure of the Nutrition Fulfillment Service Units (Satuan Pelayanan Pemenuhan Gizi/SPPG). Based on indicative journalistic reports, indications of engaging vendors without food logistics track records—often affiliated with local political volunteers—serve as empirical anchors for interpreting the Manufactured Incompetence concept. Through a critical lens, the relaxation of managerial competency standards operates functionally; this condition minimizes administrative hurdles, thereby ensuring the smooth and sustained distribution of patronage at the local level (Pritchett et al., 2013).

Within this indicative framework, the escalation of MBG food poisoning cases (Batamtimes, 2026) can be read as one manifestation of the risks stemming from these relaxed standards, although it cannot be directly claimed as a verified causal relationship. Furthermore, transferring the quality control burden to educators lacking sanitation expertise (organoleptic testing) (Media Indonesia, 2025) serves as an indicative signal of vulnerability to Institutional Capture. SPPG institutions are prone to losing their technocratic autonomy and potentially being subjugated by the interests of local extractive networks (Khan, 2010).

#### **4.5. Synthesis: The Indicative Model of the Neopatrimonial Governance Loop**

As an analytical synthesis mapping how the concepts above interact, this article formulates this pattern into the indicative model of the Neopatrimonial Governance Loop. This model is not

intended as a deterministic causal representation, but rather as an analytical abstraction mapping the indicative linkages among mechanisms. The model illustrates the circulation of governance vulnerability through interconnected stages: First, Launching a morally framed policy (Populist Narrative). Second, Utilizing narratives to stigmatize technocratic critique (Discursive Insulation). Third, Granting excessive discretion without symmetrical oversight (Asymmetric Paradox). Fourth, Facilitating the potential hijacking of procurement procedures by local actors (Institutional Capture). Fifth, Engaging and maintaining underqualified actors to secure access to resource distribution (Manufactured Incompetence).

Diverging from linear models that view incompetence (such as a food quality crisis) purely as the endpoint of administrative failure, this synthesis offers a critical reading that such failures risk becoming a cycle. When a crisis occurs, the system frequently responds not with radical meritocratic evaluation, but through the reproduction of Discursive Insulation to protect the ecosystem.

Through the discipline of evidence grading, this discussion does not intend to establish absolute conspiratorial causality, but rather to present a well-founded structural warning. This indicative mapping asserts that the architecture of massive-scale populist policies in developing nations harbors inherent vulnerabilities and remains highly susceptible to capture and engineered weakening if not safeguarded by symmetrical and transparent institutional designs.

## **5. SYSTEMIC IMPACT: EARLY SIGNALS OF PUBLIC SERVICE EROSION**

This section serves as a bridge between theoretical constructs and empirical realities, demonstrating how the previously formulated mechanisms manifest in early implementation practices. The logical consequence of operationalizing extractive governance is no longer confined to the realm of abstract theoretical probability. Instead, observations of the trial and initial implementation phases of the Free Nutritious Meal (Makan Bergizi Gratis/MBG) program during the 2024–2026 period have revealed early signals of significant public service erosion.

Utilizing proxy indicators through the observation of early signals is a valid analytical approach to map the trajectory of policy failure in its initial phase, before institutional dysfunction entrenches itself as permanent damage. Therefore, presenting data at this phase is crucial to provide indicative support that the Neopatrimonial Governance Loop is beginning to materialize at the grassroots level.

### **5.1. Service Quality Deficits and Public Health Threats**

Through a critical reading, one suggestive signal of Manufactured Incompetence within the Nutrition Fulfillment Service Unit (Satuan Pelayanan Pemenuhan Gizi/SPPG) ecosystem is the crisis in food logistics quality and safety standards. The appointment of catering vendors and raw material suppliers, indicated to be based on local patronage—rather than nutritional and sanitation feasibility certifications from health authorities—is associated with declining program output quality.

Initial field reports indicate an escalation of mass food poisoning incidents affecting beneficiary students. Several credible journalistic reports (Batamtimes, 2026; Kontan, 2025) report a substantial number of cases, although exact figures require further epidemiological verification. While a portion of these operational crises can be rationally explained as scale effects of rushed implementation, investigative findings documenting the distribution of portions below the Recommended Dietary Allowance (RDA/AKG) and the use of sub-standard raw materials offer an indicative pattern aligning with this study's theoretical framework. These findings strengthen the proposition that when the SPPG transforms into an extractive rent-seeking arena, the primary orientation of local vendor networks is prone to shift from fulfilling basic public rights toward maximizing profit margins.

## **5.2. Disruption of Institutional Functions in the Education Sector**

Beyond impacting nutritional targets, the vulnerability to Institutional Capture within the MBG procurement system also triggers spillover effects, disrupting essential functions in the education sector. The SPPG's failure to provide standardized and independent quality control mechanisms has forced educational institutions to shoulder accountability burdens outside their jurisdiction.

The most glaring indicator of this disruption is the emergence of informal instructions or the shifting of administrative burdens onto educators to conduct "organoleptic testing" (acting as food tasters before distribution to students) (Media Indonesia, 2025). This condition aligns with Lipsky's (2010) thesis on street-level bureaucracy, where frontline workers—in this case, teachers—are frequently forced to act as 'bumpers' and bear the brunt of blame-shifting resulting from macro-policy design failures by central elites.

This practice not only erodes instructional hours that should be dedicated to pedagogical activities but also structurally transfers health risks and legal responsibilities from underqualified vendors to schools. Consequently, this illustrates how macro-governance pathologies not only produce service deficits but also distort the roles of other public institutions through systemic risk-shifting mechanisms.

## **5.3. Indicative Alignment of Empirical Patterns with the Governance Model**

Various red flags recorded in public reports, media monitoring, and oversight platforms (such as the Detak MBG initiative and KPK/PPATK prevention interventions) serve as proxy verification instruments. Distribution delays, food quality deviating significantly from technical specifications, and administrative confusion at the elementary school level are unlikely to be isolated technical errors.

As asserted by Andrews et al. (2017), massive-scale policy implementation failures often stem from the state's manifestation of isomorphic mimicry—pretending to possess capacity to accommodate informal political interests. In alignment with this, these early indications are consistent with the indicative patterns of an operating Neopatrimonial Governance Loop.

The populist narratives continuously reproduced through Discursive Insulation by public officials are increasingly insufficient to mask the reality of ballooning inefficiencies in the field. When this discursive protection confronts widespread operational grievances, the oversight anomaly within the Asymmetric Governance Paradox becomes increasingly difficult to justify technocratically. The fact that massive funding flows continue to be channeled into a system yielding sub-standard outputs provides indicative support for the analytical interpretation that this ecosystem operates with a high tolerance for incompetence to maintain the smooth circulation of rents.

In other words, the identified empirical patterns resonate strongly with the explanatory logic of the proposed model. These initial empirical findings are explicitly not designed to validate absolute deterministic causality. Instead, identifying these patterns strengthens the explanatory power of the Neopatrimonial Governance Loop, while simultaneously delivering an evidence-based early warning regarding the potential for massive-scale public service erosion if this policy architecture is not urgently reformed.

## **6. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **6.1. Conclusion**

This study is grounded in the premise that governance vulnerabilities in the implementation of the Free Nutritious Meal (Makan Bergizi Gratis/MBG) program are not merely the products of administrative inefficiency or individual moral failure. Instead, these vulnerabilities can be interpreted as indicative of institutional design failure. Although some operational

dysfunctions are inextricably linked to technical constraints caused by rushed implementation and scale effects, a critical policy analysis of macro-fiscal data and early operational indications highlights two central theoretical contributions.

First, the empirical findings provide indicative support for the presence of the Asymmetric Governance Paradox, characterized by systemically inverted accountability. Massive fiscal flows for the MBG are accompanied by relaxed institutional oversight, standing in stark contrast to the rigid audits imposed on the regular basic education sector. Second, this anomaly resonates with the dynamics of the Neopatrimonial Governance Loop—a cycle wherein Discursive Insulation creates permissive conditions for Institutional Capture, ultimately materializing Manufactured Incompetence through patronage-based vendor appointments. Together, these two findings broaden the debate on policy failure, elevating it from a mere capacity issue to a question of power design in public governance.

Without fundamental institutional reform, massive-scale welfare policy designs in developing nations risk transforming into rent-extraction arenas that structurally reproduce inequalities in the distribution of public benefits. These findings offer a critical reading that governance pathologies do not necessarily reflect passive state failure; rather, they can functionally operate as mechanisms for the reproduction of power itself.

## **6.2. Policy Recommendations**

To interrupt the vulnerability cycle of the Neopatrimonial Governance Loop and prevent the escalation of systemic inefficiency, this research recommends two levels of policy intervention. Although these governance pathologies are rooted in neopatrimonial political structures, the intervention to dismantle them must begin with the institutional consolidation of technocratic instruments. Therefore, both recommendations directly target the two primary sources of vulnerability.

### **6.2.1. Macro Intervention: Integrated Real-Time Preventive Audits**

The central government must redefine its fiscal oversight architecture by institutionalizing a real-time preventive audit system. This mechanism requires the direct integration of procurement data among the National Nutrition Agency (BGN), the Ministry of Finance, and independent oversight institutions prior to fund disbursement. Decentralized budgets must be ring-fenced by an early warning system that automatically suspends disbursements if pricing or vendor profile anomalies are detected, serving as a mitigation measure to narrow rent-extraction loopholes (Rose-Ackerman & Palifka, 2016).

### **6.2.2. Micro Intervention: Mandatory Merit-Standard Certification**

Relevant authorities must enforce legally binding, merit-based qualification standards (mandatory merit-standards) for all SPPG entities and vendors. Nutritional feasibility certification, verified sanitation track records, and business ownership profile transparency must be absolute prerequisites to mitigate the risk of Manufactured Incompetence. Furthermore, a strict prohibition should be enacted against offloading quality control functions (such as organoleptic testing) onto educators, ensuring that food safety responsibilities are fully returned to health entities and professional vendors.

The implementation of these two intervention layers represents a good enough governance approach (Grindle, 2004), acting as a pragmatic step to strengthen institutional resilience amid the pressures of political patronage.

### **6.2.3. Research Limitations and Future Agenda**

This study acknowledges specific boundaries that must be underlined. First, regarding temporal demarcation, this research is exclusively a critical evaluation of the governance

architecture during the early implementation phase (2024–2026). Consequently, it does not present a clinical evaluation regarding nutritional impact or stunting reduction rates.

Second, regarding evidentiary limitations, operational dysfunction indications are strictly positioned as proxy indicators. The lack of access to forensic contract data means that the precise mapping of clientelist networks cannot yet be definitively verified. Therefore, the findings in this study are not intended to establish absolute causal relationships, but rather to identify early structural patterns and systemic vulnerabilities. Through these boundaries, the utilized approach is more appropriately positioned epistemically as an analytical early warning framework rather than a tool for causal verification.

As an early warning system, these findings open avenues for future research agendas. Future studies will require quantitative political economy approaches and network analysis to map the concentration of vendor ownership at the regional level. This study is expected not only to contribute to the theoretical development of neopatrimonial governance but also to open new empirical pathways for examining how governance vulnerabilities emerge not merely as failures, but as identifiable processes originating from the very inception of policy implementation.

### **Ethical Approval**

This study is based on a critical policy analysis of publicly available secondary data, macro-fiscal documents, and media reports. Therefore, ethical approval from an Institutional Review Board (IRB) was not required.

### **Informed Consent Statement**

Not applicable, as this research did not involve human participants or primary data collection requiring informed consent.

### **Authors' Contributions**

Conceptualization, A.B.S., T.B., A.K.; methodology, A.B.S., T.B., A.K.; validation, A.B.S., T.B., A.K.; formal analysis, A.B.S., T.B., A.K.; resources, A.B.S., T.B., A.K.; writing – original draft preparation, A.B.S., T.B., A.K.; writing – review and editing, A.B.S., T.B., A.K.

### **Disclosure Statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

### **Data Availability Statement**

The data analyzed in this study are derived from publicly available documents, government fiscal notes, and credible journalistic reports cited within the text.

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