
Presence Politics Amid Disaster: Analyzing the Image Communication of Public Officials in the Handling of the 2025 West Sumatra Flood Disaster

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ABSTRACT

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The 2025 West Sumatra flood and landslide disaster resulted in significant material damage, loss of life, and large-scale displacement. Beyond its humanitarian impact, the disaster also became a dynamic arena of political communication, where the on-site presence of public officials received extensive media exposure. This situation raises critical questions regarding the intersection between genuine crisis management efforts and symbolic image construction in moments of emergency. This study analyzes the political communication strategies of public officials during the 2025 West Sumatra flood and landslide disaster, with particular emphasis on image construction through physical presence at disaster locations. Employing a framing analysis approach, the research examines how verbal statements, visual imagery, and symbolic gestures are constructed and amplified within media coverage and official communication platforms. The data were collected from national news outlets, official government press releases, and social media posts of public officials during the emergency response and early recovery phases. The findings reveal that the officials' presence at disaster sites functions not only as an administrative indicator of responsiveness but also as a symbolic performance of leadership, empathy, and crisis competence. Visual depictions—such as interacting with victims, inspecting damage, and coordinating with relief teams—serve as strategic communicative acts reinforcing narratives of care and authority. Furthermore, media framing tends to prioritize these symbolic elements over in-depth evaluation of policy effectiveness or disaster management outcomes. This pattern suggests that, in crisis contexts, political communication plays a substantial role in shaping public legitimacy, emotional resonance, and perceptions of governance performance. Ultimately, the study underscores the need to critically assess how symbolic representation can both strengthen public trust and potentially overshadow substantive policy accountability in disaster response settings.

INTRODUCTION

The end of 2025 marked an escalation in the intensity and impact of flooding in Sumatra. The National Disaster Management Agency (BNPB) recorded flash floods and landslides in West Sumatra, North Sumatra, and Nanggroe Aceh Darussalam, causing trillions of rupiah in material losses, hundreds of deaths, and the displacement of hundreds of thousands of residents (BNPB, 2025). This situation is inextricably linked to global climate change, which has resulted in extreme rainfall patterns, exacerbated by deforestation and land conversion in the upper reaches of Sumatra's major rivers (Gardell & Verbeek, 2024). The island's geographical location—crossed by the Bukit Barisan mountain range with its complex watershed system—further accentuates the region's vulnerability to hydrometeorological disasters (Muharomah & Setiawan, 2022).

In the context of contemporary disaster governance and mitigation, disasters are no longer understood solely as natural events requiring technical–administrative responses but also as moments of crisis fraught with political dimensions (Gardell & Verbeek, 2024); (Boin, Hart, Stern, Stern, & Sundelius, 2017). Disasters test the legitimacy of governments, with public expectations of leadership sharply heightened and public spaces becoming arenas for meaningful struggles between the state and citizens (Oliver & Reeves, 2015). Amid the uncertainty and panic caused by disasters, the presence of the state represented by public officials becomes a symbolic marker of the government’s concern, competence, and commitment to protecting its citizens. Thus, disasters are not merely a moment for mobilizing material resources but also a strategic arena for constructing political narratives and negotiating public trust (Cutter, Gall, & Rubin, 2025).

Amid this situation, a new phenomenon has emerged: the presence of public officials at disaster sites, often accompanied by intensive documentation and dissemination through mass media and social media platforms. This practice goes beyond the need for disaster management coordination and instead represents an effort to construct an image through visibility politics—a politics of visibility that positions the bodies of public officials as symbols of the state’s presence (Lalancette & Raynauld, 2019). Visits to disaster sites, interactions with victims, and documented aid distribution are all part of a political communication repertoire aimed at building positive perceptions of officials’ responsiveness and empathy (Sherritt, Nejadgholi, Aivaliotis, Mslmani, & Amini, 2025). However, this practice also raises critical questions about the authenticity, effectiveness, and ethical implications of image building amid public distress, particularly when documented official presence distracts from the recovery efforts needed by disaster victims (Seeger & Padgett, 2010).

Crisis communication and disaster management studies have long been entrenched in Indonesian public policy and political communication literature. Similarly, the phenomenon of political image building has been discussed in various studies. However, most research still focuses on image building for electoral purposes (Ilyas & Maimun, 2021);(Fadeli, Wardhani, & Setiawan, 2022). A study by Abhipraya et al. (2020) examined the image building of officials in the context of handling the COVID-19 pandemic. Several studies have also addressed institutional image building efforts within disaster management contexts (Diaz, Azmi, Salsabila, Meitana, & Zebua, 2024). Nonetheless, studies specifically examining the symbolic dimension of public officials’ presence at disaster sites remain relatively limited.

This reveals a gap that could be addressed by research utilizing political communication and media framing as analytical lenses for understanding the presence of public officials during disasters. This study examines how the presence and activities of public officials at disaster sites are covered and reported, ultimately influencing public perceptions and assessments of the crisis situation, crisis management, and the performance and quality of leadership in executing these efforts. This research contributes to the study of Indonesian political communication and mass media, particularly in the context of post-disaster crises. It also enriches knowledge of disaster management in the era of climate and ecological crises, which have the potential to increase the frequency of hydrometeorological disasters such as those encountered in Sumatra.

METHOD

This research employs a qualitative method with a case study of the handling of the West Sumatra flood disaster during the first week of the emergency response and initial recovery phase (November 25–December 2, 2025). This approach allows for analysis of the interaction of meaning, symbols, and narratives within the dynamics of political actors, mass media, and audiences in a disaster crisis situation, as well as their relationship to political legitimacy and existing power structures. The relatively short period was chosen to capture the immediate reactions of officials in the aftermath of the disaster. If the period were longer, there is concern that these reactions would have been influenced by public responses to the image-making. The same applies to mass media coverage, which, after December 2, tends to focus more on the public's reaction to the image-making.

The research subjects consisted of social media posts and mass media coverage relating to the presence, statements, and actions of public officials at disaster sites. The authors collected data from national online media reports, official government press releases, visual documentation, and social media posts from verified accounts of public officials. The data were analyzed using Entman's approach, following the flow of problem identification, causal attribution, moral evaluation, and proposed solutions.

This research has limitations because it relies on data from media and official channels, thus not capturing the perceptions of the public directly affected by the disaster on the ground. The focus on a single case also limits the generalizability of the findings, although it still contributes to understanding political communication practices in crisis contexts in Indonesia.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Research findings indicate a common pattern of communication among public officials at disaster sites that places physical presence as a key element of image building. In the 2025 West Sumatra flood response, officials' presence at evacuation centers and aid posts was presented as evidence of the government's concern and direct involvement. Interactions with victims—through dialogue, aid distribution, or empathetic gestures such as placing a hand on a shoulder, embracing, or hugging—also became part of the communication repertoire that reinforced a public official's responsive and humane image. Visual representations, such as photos of officials wearing field vests or standing in puddles, reinforced this narrative and transformed administrative actions into political messages easily recognized by the public.

On Sunday, November 30—five days after the floods began to hit West Sumatra—Coordinating Minister for Food Affairs and Chairman of the National Mandate Party (Partai Amanat Nasional, PAN), Zulkifli Hasan, posted two videos on his official Instagram account (@zulhasan). The first video shows Zulkifli inspecting the disaster site in Padang with Padang Mayor Fadly Amran. Zulkifli is seen approaching, speaking with, and embracing victims who lost their homes and family members due to the disaster. In the same video, while holding a child affected by the flood, Zulkifli stated that he had directly requested the central government to expedite the delivery of aid to the disaster victims. In a second video, which quickly went viral on social media, Zulkifli is shown carrying a sack of rice while greeting residents watching from the roadside. He again hugs a child, saying, “Keep your spirits up.” Zulkifli also expressed his shock at the scale and impact of the flooding that devastated the village he visited. The video's caption reads, “Amidst the floodwaters that have swallowed up all traces of life, we are reminded once again of how fragile everything is.”

A similar pattern was demonstrated by Zulkifli's daughter and PAN politician, the President's Special Envoy for Tourism, Zita Anjani. On November 30, Zita uploaded four photos and videos of her visit to disaster sites in Padang, West Sumatra—including the Koto Tengah District and the Air Bening Landfill—on her official Instagram account (@zitaanjani). Like Zulkifli, Zita's posts show her visiting the homes of disaster-affected residents, greeting them, and helping to transport aid for distribution. In one video, Zita is seen assisting the search and rescue team and local residents in cleaning the floor of a house covered in mud after being inundated by floodwaters. "I want to ensure that no one is left behind. This is an emergency situation, and the safety of residents is a priority," Zita said in a written statement on December 1, 2025.

Image building is not limited to politicians in the executive branch. Also on November 30, Verrell Bramasta—a member of the Indonesian House of Representatives (Dewan Perwakilan Rakyat Republik Indonesia, DPR-RI) for the 2024–2029 term and another PAN politician—went viral on social media when a post on his official Instagram account (@bramastavr1) showed him inspecting a disaster site in Padang and interacting with residents while wearing a tactical vest (initially thought to be a bulletproof vest). A photo of him crouching and pointing at the flash flood flowing through the village became a viral meme on X and Instagram. In addition to the meme, similar to Zulkifli's documentary repertoire, the actor and model was seen engaging in dialogue with residents and showing the camera the impact of the disaster on the village landscape he visited.

The three politicians who visited the disaster site were all from the National Mandate Party (PAN). This was no coincidence, as allegations recently emerged that their visit coincided with a personal agenda—namely attending the wedding reception of the daughter of Arisal Aziz, a member of the House of Representatives (DPR) from PAN—which also took place in Padang (Mardianti, 2025). This allegation was reinforced by visual documentation showing Zulkifli Hasan, Verrell Bramasta, and other PAN cadres such as Eko Hendro Purnomo (member of Commission VI of the DPR) and Surya Utama (member of Commission IX of the DPR) posing with the bride and groom. These images gave rise to interpretations that the visit to the disaster site was linked to non-disaster-related interests

Ahmad Yohan, Deputy Chairman of Commission IV of the House of Representatives from the National Mandate Party (PAN) faction, confirmed that Zulkifli Hasan, Verrell Bramasta, and several PAN cadres attended the wedding of Arisal Aziz's daughter. However, he rejected the notion that their visit was merely a publicity stunt. He stated that, despite the wedding, PAN politicians were still directly involved in monitoring the flood situation (Mardianti, 2025).

Initial media coverage of Zulkifli Hasan's visit tended to be positive. A Liputan6.com report on December 1 specifically highlighted Zulkifli's action of carrying a sack of aid rice himself, with the headline "Coordinating Minister for Food Zulkifli Hasan Carries Rice Aid for Disaster Victims" (Gideon, 2025). Meanwhile, a Detik report, also on December 1, highlighted Zulkifli's statement promising to double the amount of food aid (Lubis, 2025). Detik's report emphasized that Zulkifli's visit demonstrated the government's commitment to "ensuring emergency response and meeting the basic needs of affected communities.

Zita Anjani's visit to Koto Tengah also garnered positive coverage. Rmol.id highlighted Zita's statement in a news article headlined "Zita Anjani Ensures Residents Get a Decent Emergency Life" (Laturrakhmi, Oktaviani, & Kriyantono, 2023). The article, published on

December 2, emphasized Zita's actions in ensuring that the evacuation process, aid distribution, and emergency needs of residents were swift and well-targeted.

Verrell Bramasta did not receive the same positive coverage that Zulkifli and Zita experienced. Coverage of Verrell's visit to Padang focused more on the tactical vest he wore than on his activities at the disaster site (Dirgantara & Akbar, 2025; Muliawati, 2025). Much of the reporting centered on Verrell's clarification of his clothing choices. In one report, Verrell denied allegations that he was wearing a bulletproof vest. Furthermore, he stated that his reason for wearing a tactical vest was to make it easier for him to carry necessities such as "drinking water and cash to share" (Ulmer, Sellnow, & Seeger, 2020).

The presence of officials at the 2025 West Sumatra disaster site cannot be understood as a mere administrative response but rather as a communication practice operating within the logic of representation, legitimacy, and the management of public perception. In the context of a crisis, the presence of officials signifies an attempt to renegotiate authority and public trust amid structural uncertainty (Gardell & Verbeek, 2024).

In media reporting, the dominant framing pattern is one of empathy and concern, displayed through an emphasis on emotional closeness between officials and the public, sympathetic gestures, personal interactions, and narratives that highlight compassion and uplifting speech. Theoretically, this pattern aligns with the concept of emotional governance, where emotions become a source of political legitimacy in crisis situations (Richards, 2007). The empathy displayed by public officials functions as a symbolic mechanism to calm public anxiety while strengthening the perception that the state is present in a humane manner. However, media-mediated empathy also has the potential to be reduced to a visual commodity, where victims' suffering becomes the backdrop for producing the official's public image (Chouliaraki, 2013).

The second framing is the leadership and rapid response framing, which positions officials as central figures in crisis management. The physical presence of officials is portrayed as evidence of the state's agility in assessing the situation and making decisions. Crisis communication literature shows that leadership signals play a crucial role in building public trust, especially when formal institutions are perceived as slow or ineffective (Sellnow & Seeger, 2020). Furthermore, this framing tends to shift public attention from systemic evaluations of structural disaster preparedness—including budgets, facilities, and institutional readiness—to personal assessments of individual officials' performance, which in the long run can hinder policy accountability.

Framing the legitimacy of policy and state authority complements the previous two patterns. The presence of officials is linked to government commitment, cross-agency coordination, and the aid distribution process, thereby affirming claims that the state continues to function amid crisis. From a legitimacy perspective, this practice reflects an effort to maintain output legitimacy through the representation of concrete actions, even though input legitimacy—the participation and voices of affected citizens—remains relatively invisible in media coverage (Birkland, 2016).

The political significance of the presence of officials at disaster sites lies in their symbolic function. According to (Seeger & Griffin Padgett, 2010), the physical presence of officials serves as a visual substitute to compensate for the absence of the state. In crisis situations, this action gains substantial political weight because it becomes the public's primary reference point for assessing the state's commitment and capacity. However, physical presence is also

vulnerable to delegitimization, particularly when the public perceives a discrepancy between the performance of presence and the reality of disaster management on the ground.

The relationship between imagery, media framing, and public perception demonstrates the dynamics of co-production of meaning. Political actors engage in self-framing through statements, visuals, and performativity, while the media select and emphasize specific aspects according to news logic and novelty value. In the context of the 2025 West Sumatra disaster, this co-production produced a framing that initially tended to be affirmative but could shift to a more critical and distant tone when visual symbols or contextual factors surrounding officials' presence triggered public controversy. This underscores that image-making efforts in a crisis cannot be entirely controlled but are continually negotiated in the public sphere (Entman, 1993).

The presence of officials as a symbolic communication practice can also be interpreted through the perspective of political performativity. The presence, gestures, and interactions of officials constitute a political ritual designed to be seen and interpreted by audiences, as explained by (Alexander, 2002). This ritual reproduces the narrative of a present and caring state, yet at the same time normalizes visibility politics rather than encouraging more substantive policy discourse (Lalancette & Raynauld, 2019).

The implications of these findings for disaster accountability and governance are ambivalent. On one hand, the image of presence can heighten public attention and accelerate initial responses. On the other hand, the dominance of symbolic framing has the potential to obscure critical assessments of the structural roots of disasters, the effectiveness of mitigation policies, and disparities in social vulnerability. In the long term, this practice risks reinforcing the personalization of power in democratic systems, where legitimacy rests more on symbolic performance than on policy outcomes (Daloz, 2009). This can contribute to asymmetric representation namely, the imbalance between the visibility of state actors and the representation of the experiences and demands of affected citizens (Saward, 2017); (Gismar, 2021).

CONCLUSION

There are three dominant framing patterns in the communication of officials present at disaster sites: empathy and concern, leadership and rapid response, and state legitimacy and authority. The presence of officials, interactions with disaster victims, sympathetic gestures, encouraging remarks, and promises of assistance are all efforts to construct political meaning regarding the state's leadership and control during emergency situations. This research shows how the mass media tends to emphasize the symbolic dimension of officials' presence rather than prioritizing an evaluation of disaster management policies. This dynamic can have a dual impact: it can foster a sense of security and public trust, yet it also has the potential to obscure demands for accountability and substantive representation from affected groups.

The study's limitations lie in its reliance on media data and official channels, which prevented it from directly capturing the perceptions of disaster-affected residents. The focus on a single case also limits the generalizability of the findings. A combination of framing analysis with public reception studies, a comparative approach across multiple disaster cases, and post-crisis policy analysis is needed to more comprehensively assess the extent to which

officials' image-building communication correlates with improvements in disaster governance and the quality of political representation.

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