

The Ethics Scandal of Indonesia's Constitutional Court Chief Justice on Tempo Covers: A Peirce Semiotic Representation Study

Skandal Etika Ketua Mahkamah Konstitusi Indonesia di Sampul Tempo:
Studi Representasi Semiotika Peirce

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Abstract

This study examines how Tempo magazine represents the ethical scandal of the Chief Justice of the Constitutional Court through its October 22 and November 12, 2023 covers. Using a qualitative approach, the study integrates Peirce's semiotics and Stuart Hall's theory of representation to analyze how meaning is constructed and ideologically framed in visual media. The findings show that Tempo consistently constructs the scandal not as an isolated personal violation, but as a broader institutional crisis. This representation is produced through the interaction of judicial iconography, metaphors of rupture and collapse, and critical lexical framing. At the micro level, semiotic analysis reveals structured relations among signs that signify weakened judicial legitimacy. At the macro level, these sign patterns function as an encoding strategy that directs audiences toward a preferred reading in which judicial authority is delegitimized and linked to political dynasty. Furthermore, the study demonstrates that Tempo's visual representation operates as a counter-hegemonic discourse that challenges the normalization of dynastic politics and highlights tensions surrounding judicial independence. By integrating semiotic and representational approaches, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how media actively constructs political meaning and participates in broader ideological struggles.

Key words: Representation; Semiotic Analysis; Tempo Magazine

Abstrak

Penelitian ini mengkaji bagaimana Majalah Tempo merepresentasikan skandal etik Ketua Mahkamah Konstitusi melalui sampul edisi 22 Oktober dan 12 November 2023. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif, penelitian ini mengintegrasikan semiotika Peirce dan teori representasi Stuart Hall untuk menganalisis bagaimana makna dikonstruksi dan dibingkai secara ideologis dalam media visual. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa Tempo secara konsisten membingkai skandal tersebut bukan sebagai pelanggaran personal yang terpisah, melainkan sebagai krisis institusional yang lebih luas. Representasi ini dibentuk melalui interaksi antara ikonografi peradilan, metafora keretakan dan kehancuran, serta framing leksikal yang kritis. Pada tingkat mikro, analisis semiotika mengungkap relasi tanda yang terstruktur yang menandakan melemahnya legitimasi peradilan. Pada tingkat makro, pola tanda tersebut berfungsi sebagai strategi encoding yang mengarahkan audiens pada preferred reading yang mendelegitimasi otoritas yudisial serta mengaitkannya dengan praktik dinasti politik. Lebih lanjut, penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa representasi visual Tempo beroperasi sebagai wacana kontra-hegemonik yang menantang normalisasi dinasti politik serta menyoroti ketegangan terkait independensi peradilan. Dengan mengintegrasikan pendekatan semiotika dan representasi, penelitian ini memberikan kontribusi dalam memahami bagaimana media secara aktif membentuk makna politik dan terlibat dalam pertarungan ideologis yang lebih luas.

Kata kunci: Representasi; Analisis Semiotika; Majalah Tempo

INTRODUCTION

The controversy surrounding Constitutional Court Decision 90/PUU-XXI/2023 intensified public debate about judicial independence and conflicts of interest. Beyond legal argumentation, Indonesian political contestation is also fought through visual journalism, where magazine covers condense complex events into recognizable signs and evaluative judgments. This study examines how Tempo's cover illustrations transform the MK ethics scandal into a broader narrative about institutional crisis and dynastic power.

Tempo's covers have been repeatedly discussed in scholarly work as sites of satirical visual rhetoric and political critique (Fatiya & Nasution 2024). The cover design of Tempo magazine is able to illustrate current phenomena in society with satirical visual elements (Ambat & Lesmana 2025). The use of various visual

elements on the magazine cover is a distinctive feature that sets Tempo apart from other media (Nuzulia 2025).

Magazine covers are one of the strengths of magazines because they have such strong visual appeal (Danesi 2010a). Magazine covers also determine whether people are interested in buying or reading the magazine (Abrahamson and Prior-Miller 2015). According to Spiker (2015), there are two important roles of magazine covers: first, to convey a message about the stance of a media outlet, and second, to sell news. In addition, magazine covers also contain elements of criticism that are often directed at the government, thus opening up the possibility for discussion, interpretation, and assumptions about the meaning of the illustrations (Pramaskara 2022). These two covers were selected because they constitute Tempo's most explicit visual framing of the MK ethics scandal within the 2024 electoral context, combining judicial iconography (robe/gavel) with images of fracture and collapse that invite semiotic analysis. The corpus was delimited to Tempo's political-dynasty-related covers published between [October–November] 2023, from which these two editions uniquely foreground the chief justice's ethics scandal as the central theme.

The covers of Tempo magazine have sparked controversy several times (Nusa et al. 2016). It is not uncommon for these controversies to result in reports to the Press Council. An example is the case of Jokowi Mania reporting the Tempo magazine editorial team in 2019. This was triggered by Tempo magazine publishing an edition titled "Janji Tinggal Janji" (Promises Remain Promises) with a cover featuring an illustration of President Jokowi with a shadow resembling Pinocchio (Pramaskara 2022).

Analytically, Peirce's semiotics is employed to map how specific cover elements (images, colors, objects, typography) function as icons, indices, and symbols and produce interpretants about the event. Semiotics theory is used to explore the meaning of the two Tempo magazine covers. Peirce's semiotics (1940) is known for its triangle of meaning, consisting of sign/representamen, object, and interpretant. Representamen is something that performs representation, then the object is the reference of the representamen, and the interpretant is the interpretation by someone in a particular context (Danesi 2010a).

In addition, Hall's constructionist account of representation is then used to situate these interpretants within broader discursive struggles over power, legitimacy, and dynastic politics, clarifying how Tempo's covers do not merely depict reality but actively position audiences toward it. This integration enables the study to move from sign identification to ideological critique grounded in visual signification. According to Hall (2013), meaning is formed by the practice and work of representation. Representation itself is the process of producing meaning through verbal and nonverbal language. Representation is the process of producing meaning using language. Representation plays a fundamental role in how meaning is constructed and circulated within a cultural context. Meaning emerges through systems of language, symbols, and visual elements that function to stand for or convey particular objects, ideas, or realities.

This study integrates Peirce's semiotics and Hall's theory of representation due to their complementary analytical scopes. Peirce's framework enables micro-level analysis of signification through the relation of sign, object, and interpretant, while Hall's theory situates these meanings within broader structures of discourse, ideology, and power (Hall 2013). By combining both approaches, this study bridges micro-level semiotic processes with macro-level representational meanings, allowing a more comprehensive analysis of how Tempo's covers construct visual-political discourse.

Magazine covers can be understood as ideological sites that shape political meaning. Taylor and Pye (2019) show that visual representations construct political figures in relation to power, while Klumpp (2025) argues that media do not merely reflect reality but actively produce political meaning through visual communication. In line with this, Tseronis (2021) conceptualizes magazine covers as multimodal arguments that convey editorial positions in a persuasive manner.

In the Indonesian context, previous studies have examined Tempo magazine covers as forms of visual political criticism, particularly in relation to political dynasties and power relations. Fatiya and Nadya (2024) as well as Ihsan et al. (2023) show that these covers function as critiques of familial power consolidation and nepotistic practices.

However, these studies have not specifically addressed how judicial ethics scandals are represented as institutional crises, nor have they integrated Peircean semiotics with Hall's theory of representation to explain how visual meaning operates within broader relations of power and ideology.

This study analyzes two Tempo magazine covers published in October and November 2023 to examine the representation of the Constitutional Court Chief Justice's ethics scandal. By combining Peirce's semiotics and Hall's theory of representation, this study aims to identify dominant visual-verbal signs, map meaning relations, and explain how the scandal is framed as an institutional crisis. This study contributes to the field of visual journalism and to the broader global discourse on judicial legitimacy and democratic backsliding.

Based on this, these are three question for this study :

- RQ1: What dominant visual and typographic signs structure Tempo's representation of the MK ethics scandal in the October 22 and November 12, 2023 covers?"
- "RQ2: How do these signs operate in Peircean terms (icon/index/symbol; representamen-object-interpretant) to generate particular interpretants about judicial legitimacy and conflict of interest?"
- "RQ3: How does Tempo's representational practice (Hall) articulate the scandal as an institutional crisis connected to dynastic politics, and what ideological stance becomes salient through this articulation?"

METHODS

This study employs a qualitative research design grounded in a constructivist paradigm, in which meaning is understood as socially produced through sign systems and representational practices. Accordingly, the Tempo magazine covers are treated as visual-verbal texts that do not merely reflect political reality but actively construct it through semiotic resources and ideological positioning. It used Charles Sanders Peirce's (1940) semiotics theory with a triangle of meaning consisting of Representamen, Object, and Interpretant. This theory is useful for dissecting the meaning contained in the research objects, namely the covers of Tempo Magazine's October 22, 2023 edition entitled "Skandal Mahkamah Keluarga" and the November 12, 2023 edition entitled "Ugal-ugalan Paman Gibran".

These two covers were chosen because they raised the issue of the ethical scandal involving the chief justice of MK, contained graphic elements with implied messages, and were a response to the Constitutional Court's ruling on the age limit for presidential and vice-presidential candidates. These covers were selected purposively because they explicitly foreground the ethical controversy surrounding the Chief Justice of the Constitutional Court and visually link the event to broader debates about political dynasty and judicial legitimacy. The unit of analysis is the cover as a multimodal composition, segmented into analyzable sign units (e.g., depicted figures, objects, gestures, color palette, spatial arrangement, headline/subheadline, and typographic hierarchy).

Primary data comprise the visual and verbal components of the two selected covers (illustrations, layout, colors, headlines, and accompanying textual elements). Secondary data consist of contextual and scholarly sources (books and journal articles on semiotics and representation, legal and news documents related to the MK decision and MKMK ruling, and related media reports) used to clarify referential objects and socio-political context without replacing the semiotic evidence found on the covers themselves.

To enhance analytical rigor and reduce interpretive arbitrariness, this study employs both theoretical and data triangulation. Theoretical triangulation is conducted by integrating Peirce's semiotics, which focuses on micro-level sign relations, with Hall's theory of representation, which situates these meanings within broader socio-political discourses. Data triangulation is applied by systematically relating visual elements (figures, objects, colors, and spatial composition) to textual components (headlines and captions) as well as to relevant socio-political contexts surrounding the Constitutional Court decision in 2023. In addition, the analysis follows a step-by-step procedure, from sign identification and classification to interpretant construction, ensuring consistency across the two covers. Through these procedures, the interpretations are grounded in patterned sign relations and contextual references rather than relying solely on subjective judgment.

Data analysis was carried out by identifying signs, then classifying them into a trichotomy of signs, and finally describing the relationship between the representamen, object, and interpretant to find the meaning of the signs and representational practices (Kriyantono 2022). Analysis proceeded in five stages: (1) denotative description of each cover; (2) segmentation into sign units (visual objects, gestures, colors, textual elements); (3) Peircean classification of each unit as icon/index/symbol and as qualisign/sinsign/legisign; (4) construction of interpretants by relating representamen-object-interpretant in context; and (5) Hallian interpretation to explain Hall's theory of representation is applied to interpret how the assembled previously identified interpretants articulate are articulated within broader socio-political discourses. This involves mapping the Peircean interpretants onto the context of Indonesia's 2023 political situation, particularly debates on judicial independence and political dynasty. The analysis focuses on identifying the preferred reading encoded in the covers, namely how Tempo attempts to frame the ethics scandal not merely as an individual violation but as a structural issue related to dynastic power and institutional crisis. Through this step, micro-level semiotic findings are connected to macro-level ideological positions and power relations in media representation meanings.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

An analysis of the two Tempo magazine covers reveals a consistent pattern of representation in framing the MK ethics scandal. Both covers do not present the issue as a merely personal violation, but rather as a broader institutional crisis. This representation is constructed through the interaction of judicial iconography, metaphors of fracture and collapse, and critical lexical framing, which together guide the audience toward a preferred reading that questions judicial legitimacy while highlighting the influence of political dynasty. This representational pattern provides the basis for the more detailed discussion in the following sections.

The cover of Tempo Magazine, October 22, 2023 edition, entitled "Skandal Mahkamah Keluarga" was published after the Constitutional Court's decision regarding the age limit for presidential and vice presidential candidates on October 16, 2023. Therefore, this cover features an illustration of Constitutional Court Chief Justice Anwar Usman wearing a judge's robe and striking a gavel. There is also an illustration of cracks forming the face of someone resembling Gibran Rakabuming Raka, Anwar Usman's nephew. The title "Skandal Mahkamah Keluarga" gives the impression of family involvement in the legal scandal.

Figure 1. Tempo Magazine Covers



Source: Majalah.Tempo.co, 2023

The cover of the November 12, 2023 edition of Tempo magazine was published after Anwar Usman was dismissed by the Constitutional Court Honorary Council (MKMK) on November 8, 2023. This dismissal proved that Anwar Usman had abused his power as chief justice of the MK and was involved in a conflict of interest in paving the way for his nephew, Gibran, to run in the 2024 presidential election. Therefore, Tempo magazine published a cover titled "Ugal-ugalan Paman Gibran" with an illustration of Anwar Usman wearing a judge's robe and waving to Gibran standing on top of the ruins of a pillar.

1. Judicial Iconography

Figure 2. Judicial Iconography



Source: Majalah.Tempo.co, 2023

Across the two covers, judicial iconography plays a central role in constructing the representation of institutional authority. Rather than functioning as isolated visual details, the elements are interpreted in relation to one another to reveal broader patterns of meaning. The visual composition in both covers suggests that authority is not merely depicted, but actively constructed through a network of signs that interact and reinforce one another.

The judge's robe consistently appears as a dominant visual element, symbolizing the formal authority of the judiciary. Traditionally, the robe signifies neutrality, legality, and institutional legitimacy. However, in these covers, such conventional meanings are not reproduced uncritically. Instead, the robe becomes a site of reinterpretation, where its symbolic authority is destabilized through its visual context.

In the October cover, the robe is associated with a rigid and heavy posture, suggesting a burdened or compromised authority. The stiffness of the figure implies a lack of flexibility, which can be read as an inability of the institution to respond independently to political pressures. This rigidity transforms the robe from a symbol of stability into an indicator of constraint. This interpretation is further reinforced by the dark and muted color palette, which creates an atmosphere of opacity and tension. The use of subdued tones reduces visual clarity and openness, thereby symbolically limiting transparency within the institution. In this sense, color does not merely function as an aesthetic choice, but as a semiotic resource that shapes the viewer's perception of institutional conditions.

In contrast, the November cover introduces a more dynamic but unstable composition. The movement of the figure suggests action, but not necessarily control. Instead of signaling decisiveness, the instability implies unpredictability, which challenges the expectation that judicial authority should operate within clear procedural boundaries.

A key transformation appears in the representation of the gavel. The object resembles a carpenter's hammer rather than a judicial instrument, signaling a shift from legal authority to arbitrary action. This visual substitution is not incidental; it redefines the symbolic meaning of the tool itself, displacing its association with order and legality. The transformation of the gavel into a tool associated with manual labor suggests a symbolic degradation of judicial function. Rather than upholding justice, the instrument appears to enact force upon the institutional structure. This blurs the boundary between lawful decision-making and uncontrolled intervention, positioning judicial action as potentially destructive rather than protective.

Importantly, this transformation operates within a broader semiotic field. The hammer, the posture, and the color palette do not function independently, but interact to produce a coherent visual narrative. Through this interaction, authority is consistently framed as unstable and under pressure, rather than secure and legitimate. At the same time, the recurring use of dark and gray tones across both covers reinforces a sense of institutional decline and delegitimization. The repetition of these visual cues strengthens the continuity of meaning between the two covers, suggesting that the issue is not episodic, but structural.

Taken together, these elements do not merely depict judicial authority, but actively reconstruct it as unstable, compromised, and increasingly detached from its normative function within the legal system. The imagery thus produces a particular reading in which authority is no longer perceived as neutral, but as entangled within broader political dynamics. In this sense, the visual representation aligns with Hall's concept of representation, where meaning is constructed rather than reflected. The covers function as a site of meaning production, guiding the audience toward a preferred interpretation in which judicial authority is understood as contested, fragile, and subject to delegitimization.

2. Metaphors of Ruin

Figure 3. Methapors of Ruin



Source: Majalah.Tempo.co, 2023

The two covers mobilize visual metaphors of ruin to frame the issue not as an isolated event, but as a process of institutional deterioration (see Figure 2). What emerges is not a static depiction of damage, but a structured transformation in how breakdown is imagined and communicated. From a semiotic perspective, these metaphors operate as signs that guide interpretation toward a particular understanding of crisis.

A key feature of this construction lies in the shift of scale. The October cover introduces disruption at a micro level through the appearance of a crack. This visual element suggests that the problem begins within the structure itself, rather than from an external force. In Peirce's terms, the crack functions indexically, pointing to internal strain that is not directly visible but inferred through its manifestation.

The form of the crack is equally significant. Its resemblance to a human silhouette creates a visual bridge between structural damage and human involvement. As an iconic sign, this resemblance does not simply decorate the image; it redirects interpretation toward the idea that institutional instability is closely tied to the actions of specific actors. At this stage, however, the damage remains partial. The structure is fractured, but not yet destroyed. This condition produces an interpretive tension: the institution appears vulnerable, yet still operational. Such ambiguity is important, as it allows the metaphor to signal crisis without fully resolving its consequences.

The November cover moves beyond this ambiguity by presenting a qualitatively different image of destruction. The broken pillar no longer suggests pressure within the structure, but the failure of the structure itself. Unlike the crack, which indicates stress, the collapse of a pillar signifies the loss of foundational support. Within a cultural semiotic framework, the pillar operates as a symbol of stability, order, and endurance. Its destruction therefore carries a strong symbolic charge, as it reverses the expected meaning of the object. What is typically associated with strength is re-signified as evidence of fragility.

This shift from fracture to collapse also alters how agency is perceived. The presence of a political figure positioned above the damaged structure introduces a directional reading of power. Rather than being neutral, the image suggests that the process of breakdown is linked to the exercise of authority. In this sense, the sign operates indexically, pointing toward a relationship between political action and institutional consequence.

Seen together, the two covers construct a temporal sequence. The crack precedes the collapse, forming a visual logic in which early signs of instability evolve into systemic failure. Meaning here does not reside in a single image, but in the transition between them. This aligns with Peirce's triadic model, where interpretation develops through the relation between multiple signs rather than isolated elements. The repetition of destructive motifs across both covers further stabilizes this reading. Rather than offering alternative interpretations, the imagery converges on a consistent narrative of decline. This convergence limits ambiguity and strengthens what can be understood as a preferred interpretive direction. Ultimately, the metaphors of ruin function as more than illustrative devices. They organize how the crisis is perceived, moving the interpretation from a specific incident toward a broader structural problem. Through this visual strategy, institutional breakdown is not only depicted, but framed as inevitable and progressive.

In this sense, the covers construct a discourse in which the judiciary is no longer positioned as a stable pillar of governance, but as a structure undergoing erosion. The metaphors guide the audience toward an understanding of decline that is cumulative, systemic, and closely tied to the dynamics of power, consistent with the idea that meaning is actively produced through sign processes.

3. Lexical Framing

Figure 4. Lexical Framing



Source: Majalah.Tempo.co, 2023

The textual elements on the two covers play a crucial role in anchoring and directing the interpretation of the visual imagery. In the October edition, the headline “Skandal Mahkamah Keluarga” employs a formal and institutional tone. The use of the word “scandal” frames the issue within a broader discourse of ethical violation and public accountability, while the phrase “Mahkamah Keluarga” introduces a critical reinterpretation of the Constitutional Court as an institution entangled with familial and dynastic interests. This lexical construction shifts the focus from individual actors to the institutional level, suggesting that the problem is systemic rather than incidental.

In contrast, the November cover adopts a more direct and confrontational lexical strategy through the headline “Ugal-ugalan Paman Gibran.” The term “ugal-ugalan,” which connotes recklessness and lack of control, introduces a more colloquial and emotionally charged tone. Unlike the previous headline, which emphasizes institutional critique, this phrasing personalizes the issue by explicitly naming a political figure and framing their actions as excessive and improper. The use of kinship labeling (“paman”) further reinforces the narrative of political dynasty, connecting individual behavior to broader structures of familial power.

The shift from an institutional to a personalized lexical framing reflects a strategic transformation in how the issue is constructed across the two covers. While the October edition establishes the scandal as a systemic problem within the judiciary, the November edition intensifies the critique by attributing responsibility more directly to specific actors.

Importantly, these textual elements do not operate independently from the visuals. Instead, they function as anchoring devices that guide the audience’s interpretation of the imagery, limiting ambiguity and reinforcing a preferred reading. In this sense, the lexical framing works in conjunction with visual metaphors and iconography to construct a coherent visual-political discourse, in which the MK ethics scandal is framed as both a structural failure and a manifestation of dynastic power.

The textual elements in the two covers function as a crucial site for shaping meaning, directing how the visual imagery is interpreted. Rather than operating independently, the headlines work as anchoring devices that limit interpretive ambiguity and guide the audience toward a particular reading of the issue. In this sense, language becomes a key mechanism in the construction of representation.

The October headline, “Skandal Mahkamah Keluarga,” adopts a formal and institutional tone. The use of the word “skandal” situates the issue within a discourse of ethical violation and public accountability. At the same time, the phrase “Mahkamah Keluarga” introduces a semantic shift that redefines the Constitutional Court as an institution entangled with familial relations.

This lexical construction is significant because it moves beyond individual wrongdoing and instead frames the issue at the structural level. The choice of words does not merely describe an event; it reorganizes how the institution itself is understood. In Hall’s terms, this reflects how language participates in the production of meaning, rather than simply reflecting reality (Hall 2013).

From a semiotic perspective, the phrase “Mahkamah Keluarga” can be read as a symbolic sign, where its meaning is shaped by cultural associations with kinship, loyalty, and exclusivity. The combination of institutional terminology with familial language produces an interpretant that suggests a deviation from normative principles of neutrality and impartiality.

The lexical strategy in this headline thus establishes a critical framing in which the judiciary is positioned as structurally compromised. The emphasis is not on a single actor, but on the institutional condition itself. This creates a broader interpretive horizon, where the issue is perceived as systemic rather than incidental. In contrast, the November headline, “Ugal-ugalan Paman Gibran,” introduces a markedly different tone. The term “ugal-ugalan” carries strong connotations of recklessness and lack of control, shifting the discourse from formal critique to a more emotionally charged and evaluative register.

This lexical choice personalizes the issue by foregrounding a specific figure, while simultaneously intensifying the judgment attached to their actions. The use of “paman” further reinforces relational identity, connecting individual behavior to a network of familial power. Here, language operates not only to identify actors, but to situate them within a broader socio-political context.

In Hall’s framework, this shift represents a change in representational strategy—from an institutional framing to a personalized and moralized narrative (Hall 2013). Meaning is constructed through difference, where the second headline sharpens and intensifies the critique introduced in the first.

From Peirce’s perspective, the term “ugal-ugalan” functions symbolically, as its meaning relies on shared cultural understanding. However, it also carries an indexical dimension, pointing to perceived patterns of behavior that are interpreted as excessive or uncontrolled. This dual function strengthens its interpretive impact.

When read together, the two headlines reveal a clear progression in lexical framing. The October edition establishes the issue as a structural scandal, while the November edition narrows the focus toward

specific actors and their conduct. This shift does not replace the earlier framing, but builds upon it, creating a layered narrative.

Importantly, this progression reduces interpretive ambiguity by reinforcing a preferred meaning. The combination of institutional critique and personal attribution directs the audience toward a coherent understanding of the issue as both systemic and actor-driven. Language, in this sense, functions as a mechanism of discursive control. Ultimately, the lexical framing across the two covers does more than label events; it organizes how the audience makes sense of them. Through strategic word choices, the headlines construct a discourse in which the judicial institution is simultaneously depicted as structurally compromised and shaped by the actions of politically connected individuals.

In line with Hall's concept of representation, these textual elements do not simply reflect reality, but actively produce meaning by shaping how the issue is understood (Hall 2013). At the same time, within Peirce's semiotic model, the headlines operate as signs that generate interpretants aligned with a critical reading of institutional authority. Together, they form a coherent discursive framework that reinforces the broader narrative of delegitimization present across the two covers.

4. Representation of the Constitutional Court Chief Justice's Ethical Scandal

In Stuart Hall's theory of representation, the media does not function as a neutral mirror reflecting reality, but rather as an arena of meaning production where signs are actively encoded within a specific ideological framework (Hall 2013). Meaning is not inherently attached to objects, but is constructed through encoding practices that prioritize certain interpretations while marginalizing others. Within this framework, media texts function as structured signifying practices that guide the audience toward a specific "preferred reading."

On the covers of *Tempo*'s October 22 and November 12, 2023, issues, this process is evident through an encoding strategy that combines judicial iconography (robes, gavel) with metaphors of fracture and collapse (cracks, collapsing pillars). This patterned configuration of signs does not merely represent an ethical controversy, but constructs a preferred reading that the scandal constitutes a form of institutional collapse, not merely an individual transgression. Through this structured relationship of signs, the judiciary is framed as an institution that is fundamentally compromised.

The most crucial encoding strategy is evident in the substitution of the conventional judge's gavel with the destructive carpenter's sledgehammer. Within Hall's framework, this transformation functions not merely as a visual change but as a semiotic mechanism that actively directs the process of meaning-making. The judge's gavel, which conventionally signifies legal authority, rationality, and legitimate procedures, is replaced by a sledgehammer—an object culturally associated with destruction, violence, and non-procedural actions. This shift recodes meaning from the legal-institutional realm to the destructive-material realm, thereby altering the audience's interpretive framework regarding the judicial actions being represented.

In the encoding process, this code shift works to "lock in" meaning (fixing meaning) by limiting the decoding possibilities available to the audience. Rather than opening up interpretive space to suggest that the Constitutional Court's ruling is the result of legitimate legal deliberation, this representation effectively produces a preferred reading that the action is destructive, arbitrary, and deviates from the principles of justice. In other words, this strategy operates through sharp symbolic contrasts to steer the audience toward a dominant interpretation: the delegitimization of judicial authority.

Thus, the meaning of delegitimization does not emerge neutrally from the audience's reading but is already encoded within the sign's structure itself. This process demonstrates that the media not only convey reality but also control the interpretive horizon through strategic symbolic choices, thereby making the preferred reading of institutional damage dominant and difficult for readers to negotiate.

Furthermore, Gibran's visual positioning on both covers reinforces this encoding process. In the October issue, his presence is implied through a facial silhouette emerging from a crack, while in the November issue he is explicitly depicted standing atop the ruins of a pillar. This visual strategy produces a preferred reading in which Gibran is not merely associated with the events but positioned as an actor who benefits from the collapse of judicial integrity.

From a representational perspective, this configuration links political power with kinship relations, thereby shaping a discourse on the normalization of political dynasties. However, rather than reproducing such normalization, the representation constructed by *Tempo* functions as a counter-hegemonic visual discourse. By revealing the connection between judicial rulings and dynastic interests, this cover challenges the dominant ideological narrative that seeks to legitimize or naturalize such power relations.

The use of the metaphor of a collapsing pillar further reinforces this process of ideological encoding. The pillar, conventionally associated with stability and constitutional order, is re-signified as a sign of

institutional failure. This transformation of meaning directs the audience toward the understanding that the fundamental principles of the Constitutional Court have been undermined by political power interventions.

Beyond visual elements, lexical choices such as “Family Court,” “Uncle Gibran’s Recklessness,” and “Guerrilla-style intervention against constitutional judges” function as anchors that reinforce the preferred reading. These expressions do not merely describe events but actively shape meaning through the evaluative and critical content they contain.

The interaction between visual and verbal signs indicates that meaning is stabilized through a coordinated encoding process. In line with Hall (2013), this combination works to preclude alternative readings and steer the audience toward a dominant interpretation aligned with the media producer’s ideological stance.

In this context, Tempo’s cover cannot be understood as a neutral representation, but rather as an intervention in the ideological field. By framing the ethical scandal as a structural crisis linked to dynastic politics, the media outlet actively challenges the hegemonic discourse that seeks to normalize the relationship between legal power and family power.

Thus, the representation constructed by Tempo functions not only as a critique of a specific event but also as a broader ideological intervention. The cover operates as a counter-hegemonic discourse that challenges the normalization of political dynasties while simultaneously rearticulating the public’s understanding of institutional legitimacy.

Overall, this analysis demonstrates that the meaning of the Constitutional Court’s ethical scandal is produced through strategic encoding practices to generate a preferred reading of institutional delegitimization. By explicitly employing Hall’s framework, this study moves beyond descriptive media criticism toward a more rigorous cultural studies analysis, demonstrating how media texts actively construct and contest ideological meanings within the context of contemporary politics.

This study positions its findings in relation to previous research on media representation. Consistent with Taylor and Pye (2019), Klumpp (2025), and Tseronis (2021), it confirms that media functions as an ideological site of meaning production. Similarly, Fatiya and Nadya (2024) and Ihsan et al. (2023) demonstrate that media actively frames reality through symbolic construction.

However, unlike prior studies that tend to analyze visual or discursive elements separately, this research examines the interaction of judicial iconography, metaphors of ruin, and lexical framing as an integrated multimodal system. By combining Peirce’s semiotics with Hall’s theory of representation, this study shows how meaning is not only produced but also “fixed” through encoding strategies to generate a preferred reading.

The novelty of this study lies in its integration of Peirce’s semiotics and Hall’s representation theory to reveal how meaning is strategically encoded to direct audience interpretation. Through this approach, the study demonstrates how sign systems operate to produce a preferred reading of institutional delegitimization. In the Indonesian context, it further highlights how media representation functions as a counter-hegemonic discourse that challenges the normalization of Jokowi’s political dynasties.

CONCLUSION

The two Tempo covers construct the MK ethics scandal as an institutional crisis rather than a purely personal violation. The mapping of judicial iconography (robe, gavel/hammer) and metaphors of rupture (cracks, collapsed pillars) demonstrates how meaning is produced through structured relations among signs, revealing weakened constitutional integrity and contested judicial legitimacy.

These micro-level sign relations provide the analytical foundation for a broader interpretation using Stuart Hall’s theory of representation. The identified patterns show that meaning is not only constructed but strategically encoded to generate a preferred reading that delegitimizes judicial authority and links it to the influence of political dynasty. In this sense, the semiotic mapping directly supports the ideological critique by explaining how visual and verbal elements operate as a coherent system of signification.

Beyond this specific case, the study highlights the broader role of visual journalism as an active agent in shaping political reality. The Indonesian context demonstrates how media representation can function as a counter-hegemonic discourse that challenges the normalization of political dynasties while exposing tensions surrounding judicial independence. This suggests that in emerging democracies, visual media do not merely represent events but also serve as arenas of ideological contestation, shaping public perceptions of institutional legitimacy.

These findings show that magazine covers do not only function as aesthetic elements or promotions for the news inside, but more than that, they are discursive media that have the power to shape public understanding. Thus, Tempo magazine appears as a media outlet that plays a role in articulating criticism of

the legal ethics crisis and voicing the impact of political dynasties on democracy and the rule of law in Indonesia.

The main contribution of this study lies in demonstrating how a paired corpus of political magazine covers can discursively upscale an ethics violation into a narrative of institutional rupture, thereby linking judicial legitimacy to dynastic power through recurring ruin/fracture metaphors. Methodologically, the paper shows how Peircean sign mapping can be integrated with Hall's constructionist representation framework to connect micro-semiotic features with macro-political meaning.

This study acknowledges that qualitative semiotic analysis is inherently interpretive and involves a degree of subjectivity. Although systematic procedures and theoretical frameworks (Peirce and Hall) are applied to enhance analytical rigor, the findings remain one possible, theoretically grounded interpretation rather than a definitive meaning.

Future studies could triangulate interpretants by interviewing cover designers/editors to clarify production rationales and intertextual references, and by conducting reception analysis to examine whether readers' interpretants align with the preferred reading anchored by Tempo's headlines. Comparative corpus expansion (e.g., other outlets or additional Tempo editions) would also allow assessment of whether the 'institutional-ruin' metaphor is a stable representational pattern or a case-specific strategy.

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