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Analysis of The Impact of Fuel Subsidies on Political Stability and The Legitimacy of The Indonesian Government

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Abstract

This research examines the relationship between Indonesia's fuel subsidy policy and the legitimacy of government authority amid the ASEAN energy crisis. While several ASEAN countries experienced significant fuel price increases following global energy price volatility, Indonesia maintained relatively stable domestic fuel prices through substantial state intervention and energy subsidies. This study employs a qualitative descriptive-analytical approach based on secondary data collected from government policy documents, official statements, reports from international institutions, academic publications, and relevant media sources covering the 2022–2026 period. The data are analyzed from a political sociology perspective, particularly Weber's concept of legitimacy and Skocpol's perspective on the state's role in controlling essential resources. The findings show that fuel subsidies function beyond their economic role of protecting purchasing power and controlling inflation. They also operate as a mechanism of state-society relations by demonstrating the government's capacity to respond to citizens' basic material needs during an external economic crisis. This responsiveness can contribute to public acceptance and reinforce the perceived legitimacy of government authority. Nevertheless, the policy creates a tension between short-term social and political stability and long-term fiscal sustainability, particularly due to inefficient targeting and the risk of public dependence. The study therefore argues that fuel subsidies should be understood as both an economic intervention and a political instrument through which the state manages social stability, distributes essential resources, and maintains political legitimacy during periods of crisis.

Keywords:* *Subsidy politics, Legitimacy of power, Fuel prices, Energy crisis, Political sociology

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Introduction

The global energy crisis that has gripped the world in recent years has significantly affected energy policies in various countries, including those in Southeast Asia. Surging global oil prices, supply chain disruptions, and geopolitical tensions such as the Russia-Ukraine war have prompted many ASEAN countries to adjust fuel prices in response to international market fluctuations. (Sunanda et al., 2025). Countries such as Thailand, the Philippines, and Malaysia experienced substantial increases in fuel prices, placing pressure on household purchasing power and creating potential social tensions. (Fitrady et al., 2026). In contrast, Indonesia maintained relatively stable fuel prices through extensive government intervention and energy subsidies. The Indonesian government allocated Rp502.4 trillion for energy subsidies in the 2023 State Budget. (Agus Fitriadi et al., 2026). This intervention enabled the government to maintain the price of Pertalite at Rp10,000 per liter and illustrates the state's capacity to intervene directly in the management of essential resources.

Fuel subsidies in Indonesia are not a new policy instrument. Historically, they have been used to maintain economic stability, protect household purchasing power, and reduce the impact of global energy price fluctuations on domestic consumers. Bank Indonesia reported that core inflation declined to 2.5% in 2023 amid global economic uncertainty. However, the importance of fuel subsidies cannot be understood exclusively through economic indicators. From a political sociology perspective, subsidies also represent a form of state-society interaction because they determine how the state responds to citizens' material needs. Stable fuel prices may create perceptions that the government is responsive and capable of protecting citizens from external economic pressures. This relationship is relevant to public acceptance of government policy, as reflected in (Halkam et al., 2026), which reported a 75% satisfaction rate with energy policies. These figures are used in this study as an indication of public policy satisfaction rather than as direct evidence of a causal relationship between subsidies and political legitimacy. (Hermawan et al., 2026).

Nevertheless, fuel subsidies also generate important political-economic dilemmas. The large fiscal burden associated with subsidies can reduce resources available for other public priorities. At the same time, imperfect targeting may allow benefits to reach groups not intended as primary recipients by the policy. The (Widodo et al., 2026) has highlighted the distributional inefficiencies associated with fuel subsidies in Indonesia. In addition, prolonged reliance on subsidies may create public dependency and make future policy reform politically difficult. At the ASEAN level, Indonesia's approach differs from countries that have adopted alternative strategies for managing energy prices and subsidy reform, demonstrating that responses to energy crises are shaped not only by economic considerations but also by institutional capacity and political choices. (Dr. K. Janardhanudu, 2026).

Previous studies have predominantly examined fuel subsidies from economic and fiscal perspectives. (Weber, 2002) emphasize the fiscal consequences and market distortions associated with fuel subsidies, while the World Bank highlights problems of inefficient allocation and recommends gradual reform. From an energy-transition perspective, the (Hidayatno et al., 2025) identifies fossil fuel subsidies as a potential barrier to investment in cleaner energy. At the regional level, the (Foo et al., 2021) examines differences in ASEAN energy policies, including the Philippines' use of social compensation mechanisms during subsidy reform. These studies provide important explanations of the economic and policy consequences of fuel subsidies. However, they do not sufficiently explain how subsidy policies may function as mechanisms for constructing political legitimacy during a regional energy crisis.

The political dimension of fuel subsidies examines the relationship between resource distribution and social legitimacy and discusses subsidies and political patronage in the Indonesian context. (Thorbecke, 2025) Further, it demonstrates a relationship between fuel subsidies and electoral support in rural Indonesia. However, these studies do not adequately explain the contemporary relationship between fuel price stabilization and political legitimacy during the ASEAN energy crisis. This study therefore employs (Weber, 2002) concept of legitimacy perspective on state capacity to establish a more explicit analytical framework.

Weber's concept of legitimacy is important because it allows this study to examine why citizens may accept the exercise of state authority. In the context of fuel subsidies, the state does not merely possess formal authority to regulate energy resources; it demonstrates that authority through concrete policies that directly affect citizens' everyday lives. When government intervention successfully protects citizens from sudden increases in fuel prices, citizens may perceive the state as responsive and capable of fulfilling important social responsibilities. Thus, the analysis does not assume that subsidies automatically create legitimacy. Instead, it examines how the material outcomes of state intervention may contribute to public acceptance of government authority.

Skocpol's perspective complements Weber by directing attention to the state as an institution capable of formulating and implementing policies independently in response to social and economic pressures. Fuel subsidies demonstrate this capacity because the government mobilizes public resources to regulate an essential commodity during an external crisis. The combination of Weber's legitimacy perspective and Skocpol's emphasis on state capacity therefore provides an analytical framework for examining two connected dimensions: how the state exercises its capacity to manage essential resources and how the consequences of that intervention may influence the acceptance of political authority.

Although the economic and historical literature is extensive, a research gap remains concerning the integration of fuel subsidies, state capacity, and political legitimacy during the ASEAN energy crisis. Economic studies tend to focus on fiscal costs, market distortions, and subsidy efficiency, while political studies have emphasized patronage, electoral support, or historical patterns of resource distribution (Thorbecke, 2025). Meanwhile, comparative ASEAN studies have examined policy divergence but have not sufficiently connected those differences to the construction of government legitimacy. There is therefore limited understanding of how hybrid political-economic interventions, particularly fuel subsidies, can simultaneously maintain social stability and reinforce perceptions of legitimate state authority (Kumar, 2026).

This study addresses this gap by examining fuel subsidies as both an economic policy and a political instrument. The novelty of the study lies in integrating Weber's theory of legitimacy and Skocpol's perspective on state capacity with a comparative analysis of fuel policy during the ASEAN energy crisis. (Hadiz, 2011). Rather than treating fuel subsidies solely as a mechanism for controlling prices, this study analyzes how the state's ability to stabilize an essential commodity may influence state-society relations and contribute to political legitimacy. The ASEAN comparison further provides a broader context for understanding why different forms of state intervention produce different social and political implications.

Based on this framework, the study aims to examine the political role of fuel subsidies in Indonesia in building and maintaining the legitimacy of government authority amid the ASEAN energy crisis. It also seeks to understand how the state's management of essential energy resources contributes to social stability and how Indonesia's approach differs from those adopted by other ASEAN countries. (A. Fauzi et al., 2018). The study is expected to contribute to political sociology by extending the analysis of Weberian legitimacy to material public policy and by demonstrating how state capacity and policy outcomes can influence the relationship between government authority and society. (Atha & Gregory Ajima Onah, 2026). Practically, the findings may provide insights for policymakers seeking to balance social protection, political legitimacy, fiscal sustainability, and long-term energy reform.

Methods

This study adopts a qualitative paradigm through a descriptive-analytical design, focusing on an in-depth understanding of fuel price stability in Indonesia amid the ASEAN regional energy crisis and its implications for subsidy policy, social stability, and the legitimacy of state authority. The qualitative approach is used to interpret public policy and the relationship between state intervention and society through the lens of political sociology. The study uses secondary data collected from 2022 to 2026. The data include official government documents such as the State Budget (APBN), energy subsidy regulations, and statements issued by relevant ministries. Supplementary sources include publications from international institutions, peer-reviewed journal articles, and credible media reports on the ASEAN energy crisis, fuel prices, and subsidy policies. Data were purposively selected based on thematic relevance, source credibility, and alignment with the period and research objectives.

Data collection was conducted through documentary research involving the identification, screening, comparison, and interpretation of relevant documents and literature. Data analysis follows an interactive qualitative model consisting of data reduction, data display, and conclusion verification. The analytical process was conducted iteratively to identify patterns, relationships, and meanings within the collected data. The analysis is framed within political sociology, with particular emphasis on Weber's theory of legitimacy and Skocpol's perspective on state capacity and the management of essential resources. Weber's framework is used to examine how government policy outcomes may contribute to public acceptance of political authority. In contrast, Skocpol's perspective is used to analyze the state's institutional capacity to mobilize resources and implement intervention during an external crisis. A comparative approach involving other ASEAN countries is also incorporated to strengthen the interpretation of Indonesia's policy choices.

Data validity is ensured through source triangulation by comparing information from government documents, international institutions, academic publications, and other credible sources. This approach is intended to produce a coherent interpretation of the relationship between fuel subsidy policy, state intervention, social stability, and political legitimacy.

Result and Discussion

Fuel Price Stability, State Intervention, and Social Acceptance

Research findings indicate that the stability of fuel prices in Indonesia amid the ASEAN energy crisis was closely associated with government intervention through energy subsidy schemes. The government consistently allocated subsidy funds through the state budget to maintain affordable fuel prices despite volatility in global oil prices. (Fitriaty & Saputra, 2022). This strategy distinguishes Indonesia from several ASEAN countries where domestic fuel prices were more directly exposed to international market fluctuations. The significance of this intervention cannot be understood solely from the perspective of price stabilization. From a sociological perspective, acceptance of fuel subsidies is closely tied to fuel's status as an essential resource in everyday life. Fuel prices influence transportation costs, the distribution of goods, household expenditure, and the prices of other basic commodities (Hasan, 2026). Consequently, sudden increases in fuel prices can be experienced by citizens not merely as changes in an economic indicator but as a direct threat to their everyday livelihoods. Citizens can therefore interpret government intervention that limits these increases as a form of protection against external economic uncertainty.

The tendency of Indonesian society to accept subsidies more readily than purely market-based fuel pricing can also be understood through the principle of distributive expectations. Citizens may expect the state to intervene when the price of an essential commodity rises sharply, particularly when the increase is associated with external factors beyond their control (A. M. Fauzi et al., 2025). In this context, the state is perceived not simply as a regulator but as a provider of protection and social security. Subsidies can therefore create a perception of reciprocity: citizens accept the authority of the state, while the state demonstrates its capacity to protect citizens' economic interests.

This does not mean that Indonesian society uniformly supports subsidies or rejects market mechanisms. Rather, acceptance may depend on how citizens perceive the policy's fairness, effectiveness, and consequences. (Samudra et al., 2026). Subsidies are more likely to be socially accepted when their benefits are visible and directly affect household economic security. Conversely, public acceptance may weaken when citizens perceive that subsidies are poorly targeted, benefit wealthier groups, or create excessive fiscal burdens. Therefore, the sociological significance of subsidies lies in how they shape citizens' perceptions of fairness, protection, and the state's responsibility to society.

This finding can be connected to Weber's concept of legitimacy. The state possesses formal authority to formulate energy policies, but the acceptance of that authority can also be influenced by the effectiveness of public policies (Mares & Carnes, 2009). When government intervention produces tangible benefits, such as relatively stable fuel prices, citizens may perceive state authority as more responsive and meaningful. Subsidies therefore provide a concrete arena in which formal authority is translated into everyday policy outcomes.

At the same time, the study identifies a significant trade-off. Large subsidy allocations can place pressure on the state budget and potentially reduce fiscal space for sectors such as education, health, and infrastructure. The targeting of subsidies also remains problematic because some benefits may reach groups that are not economically vulnerable. (Skocpol, 2015). This demonstrates that social acceptance of subsidies must be considered alongside questions of distributive justice and fiscal sustainability.

Comparative Analysis of ASEAN Fuel Policies and Political Legitimacy

The comparison with ASEAN countries demonstrates that different approaches to fuel price management reflect differences in state capacity, institutional arrangements, and political priorities. Indonesia has relied heavily on state intervention to stabilize domestic fuel prices, while other ASEAN countries have implemented different combinations of market adjustment, subsidy reform, and social compensation (Febrianti et al., 2025). The study's comparison indicates that the political consequences of these approaches cannot be separated from their social consequences. Where fuel prices are allowed to adjust more directly to international market conditions, households may experience stronger short-term economic pressures. Governments using this approach may therefore need to compensate affected groups through targeted social assistance. In contrast, Indonesia's broader fuel subsidy intervention allows the state to absorb a larger proportion of external price shocks (Rahmadi et al., 2021).

This difference demonstrates why the statement that regimes relying on market logic are more vulnerable to social instability should not be understood as a universal causal claim. Rather, the political effect depends on the specific policy instruments and social protection mechanisms adopted by each country. The Philippines, for example, represents a case in which social compensation measures accompanied subsidy reform. This illustrates that governments can reduce generalized subsidies while maintaining social protection through targeted interventions. Indonesia's approach differs because fuel price stability itself becomes a highly visible form of state intervention. The government's role is experienced directly by citizens through the price they pay for fuel. Consequently, subsidy policy can become politically meaningful because it provides citizens with a tangible representation of state responsiveness. From Skocpol's perspective, this comparison also demonstrates differences in state capacity. The ability to allocate substantial public resources, regulate energy prices, and implement subsidy programs reflects the state's institutional capacity to respond to external economic pressures (Hm et al., 2026). However, state capacity does not automatically translate into legitimacy. Weber's framework helps explain the second dimension: the political significance of state capacity depends partly on whether citizens perceive the exercise of that capacity as beneficial, appropriate, and responsive to their needs.

Therefore, the ASEAN comparison strengthens the argument that energy policy is political in nature (Saidi, 2024). Decisions concerning subsidies, market pricing, and social compensation determine how economic burdens are distributed between the state, households, and other social groups. Fuel policy is consequently not merely a technical response to international oil prices but also a mechanism through which governments manage social expectations and political relationships.

Fuel Subsidies as a Mechanism of Political Legitimacy

From a political sociology perspective, Indonesia's fuel subsidy scheme can be analyzed as part of the state's strategy for maintaining the legitimacy of its authority. Stable fuel prices demonstrate the government's capacity to meet citizens' basic needs, while the policy's visible benefits may contribute to public trust and acceptance. The relationship between subsidies and legitimacy, however, should not be interpreted as automatic (Dermoredjo et al., 2025). Subsidies can contribute to legitimacy when citizens perceive the policy as effective and fair. If citizens believe that the policy primarily benefits wealthy groups or imposes excessive costs on the state, the legitimacy effect may weaken. The political value of subsidies therefore depends on the relationship between policy performance and public perceptions.

This interpretation develops the argument of Wicaksono et al. (2025) concerning resource distribution and legitimacy. While Ross emphasizes the use of resources to maintain political stability, the present study focuses more specifically on the everyday material experience of fuel price stabilization during a regional energy crisis. Similarly, Abimanyu & Imansyah’s (discussion of political patronage provides a historical basis for understanding the political role of subsidies, while this study emphasizes their contemporary function as a mechanism of state responsiveness. The findings also indicate that subsidies can contribute to social consensus. By reducing the immediate economic pressure associated with fuel price increases, the government may reduce potential sources of dissatisfaction. However, this should not be interpreted as evidence that subsidies eliminate political opposition. Instead, subsidies can reduce one source of social pressure by addressing a material concern that directly affects everyday life.

The Legitimacy Fiscal Sustainability Dilemma

The findings reveal a central dilemma between maintaining political legitimacy and ensuring fiscal sustainability. In the short term, fuel subsidies can protect household purchasing power, reduce social pressure, and demonstrate government responsiveness. In the long term, however, excessive subsidy expenditure may reduce fiscal flexibility and create dependency. This dilemma is particularly important from a Weberian perspective because legitimacy depends not only on the existence of formal authority but also on the perceived rationality and effectiveness of its exercise. A policy that is initially perceived as protective may become politically problematic if its fiscal consequences become excessive or if citizens perceive its distribution as unfair (Ardian et al., 2023).

Skocpol's perspective further emphasizes that state capacity involves the ability to mobilize resources and implement policies, but sustainable state capacity requires that those resources remain available for future policy objectives (Acobera, 2026). Consequently, the challenge for Indonesia is not simply whether to maintain or remove subsidies but how to transform a broad subsidy system into a more targeted and sustainable form of social protection.

Policy Implications

The findings suggest that fuel subsidy reform should combine social protection with greater targeting. The government can improve subsidy distribution through digital identification and beneficiary-verification mechanisms, including systems such as MyPertamina for fuel distribution and the Data Terpadu Kesejahteraan Sosial (DTKS) for identifying eligible vulnerable households (Primadewi & Firmansyah, 2025). Such mechanisms can reduce the possibility that broad subsidies disproportionately benefit higher-income groups. Second, reducing dependence on fossil-fuel subsidies requires gradual diversification of energy sources and continued development of renewable energy (Taufani et al., 2022). Third, transparency and public communication should accompany subsidy reform so that citizens understand why policy changes are necessary and how vulnerable groups will be protected.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that fuel subsidies operate simultaneously as economic, social, and political instruments. Their significance lies not only in stabilizing fuel prices but also in shaping the relationship between citizens and the state. Through visible intervention in an essential resource, the government demonstrates institutional capacity and responsiveness, which may contribute to the acceptance of political authority. (Ross, 2013). However, this legitimacy-building function is sustainable only when subsidy policy is sufficiently targeted, fiscally responsible, and perceived as fair.

Conclusion

This study concludes that fuel price stability in Indonesia during the ASEAN energy crisis was strongly associated with state intervention through energy subsidy schemes. The findings demonstrate that fuel subsidies operate beyond their economic function of protecting purchasing power and controlling inflation. From a political sociology perspective, subsidies also function as a mechanism of state-society relations because they demonstrate the government's capacity to respond to citizens' basic material needs during periods of external economic uncertainty. The analysis using Weber's theory of legitimacy indicates that government authority may gain greater acceptance when citizens experience concrete, beneficial policy outcomes. Fuel price stability can therefore contribute to perceptions of government responsiveness and strengthen political legitimacy, although subsidies do not automatically produce legitimacy. Their political effect depends on perceptions of effectiveness, fairness, and the distribution of benefits. Meanwhile, Skocpol's perspective demonstrates that subsidy policy reflects the state's institutional capacity to mobilize public resources and intervene in the management of essential commodities during a crisis.

The ASEAN comparison further demonstrates that energy policy reflects different choices concerning the distribution of economic burdens between governments and citizens. Indonesia's relatively strong state intervention contrasts with approaches that rely more heavily on market adjustment or combine subsidy reform with targeted social compensation. These differences show that fuel policy is not merely an economic decision but also a political decision concerning social protection, state responsibility, and political legitimacy. Nevertheless, the policy faces a fundamental dilemma between short-term political and social stability and long-term fiscal sustainability. Broad subsidies may protect citizens from sudden price increases but can also create fiscal pressure, inefficient distribution, and public dependency. Therefore, future subsidy reform should prioritize more precise targeting rather than abrupt withdrawal. The government should improve targeting through digital distribution and beneficiary verification mechanisms such as MyPertamina and the Data Terpadu Kesejahteraan Sosial (DTKS), while also improving transparency and public communication. In the long term, subsidy reform should be accompanied by energy diversification and the development of renewable energy so that social protection does not depend excessively on fossil-fuel subsidies. These measures are important not only for fiscal sustainability but also for maintaining public trust and the legitimacy of government authority.

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