

Countering Patriarchy Hegemony: The Political Leadership of Megawati Soekarnoputri and Margaret Thatcher

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Abstract

The dominance of male leadership in politics indicates that patriarchal hegemony by the media is deeply entrenched in various layers of society. Women who enter political leadership are considered subordinates of men. Such dominant patriarchal hegemony has undermined and suppressed women's leadership in the political sphere. This article aims to discuss how Megawati Soekarnoputri in Indonesia and Margaret Thatcher in the United Kingdom emerged against the patriarchal hegemony entrenched in the political systems of their respective countries. We applied a qualitative approach and desk study as a research method, as well as Gramsci's concept of counter-hegemony. The analysis shows that there were three primary issues that Megawati and Thatcher opposed: (1) dependence on men in building political careers, (2) weak female leadership, and (3) the expectation for women to be obedient. By opposing these issues, these two women leaders could stand out in their respective political arena.

Keywords: Megawati, Margaret Thatcher, Counter-Hegemony, Hegemonic Patriarchy

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Introduction

The patriarchal system is hegemonic and prevalent in all aspects of society, including in politics (Intentilia, 2020), reflected in the dominance of men over women in this field (Pramono, 2013). Research conducted by Pramono (2013) also found that women are positioned as subordinate to men and are considered incompetent to participate in politics. This hegemonic oppression has been going on for a long time and is perpetuated by society, even by women, as the repressed group itself (Intentilia, 2020). The patriarchal hegemony in political arenas could inhibit women's participation. The lack of women's representation in politics will hinder progress in overcoming equality problems and in achieving equal access to political, economic, and social rights.

This deeply entrenched patriarchal system dominates almost every country, which can be seen from the low participation of women in politics (Idrus et al., 2023). Although many countries have made revolutionary progress in civil and social rights, women are still underrepresented in leadership positions. In the UN Women's Report on "Progress on the Sustainable Development Goals" (2023), women occupy top executive positions in only 31 out of 196 countries. Women's participation in parliament is only considered complementary, which indicates no gender equality in politics. The hegemony excluded and even considered women subordinate to men (Intentilia, 2020).

The low participation of women in politics is caused by many factors, one of which is the social construction. Langford & MacKinnon (2000) in Cavazza &



Pacilli (2021) explain that the pattern applies to both genders. According to traditional gender role descriptions, women are portrayed as weak, dependent on men, unfit for work, obedient, emotionally inclined, and unable to think logically. This contrasts with men, who are constructed as competent beings, have high self-confidence, and are independent and rational (Intentilia, 2020). This social construction then causes women to be unsuitable for working in the political world, which is often considered to be “scary” and full of dangers and challenges. The existing social construction believes that women’s nature is only in domestic affairs.

Another reason for the low participation of women in political leadership is due to the stigma and stereotypes surrounding politics, which is often considered a masculine, violent, and

manipulative occupation (Cavazza & Pacilli, 2021). Cavazza & Pacilli (2021) also state that according to traditional gender constructions, men are better suited to work as leaders and be in the public sphere, so politics is deemed a man’s job. Women who want a political career must struggle with this stereotypes and access is difficult for them. The constructs and stigmas formed and attached to women and men are not easily shifted. The construction has been accepted by society and reproduced repeatedly. When women or men violate the construction, then they will be called an aberration. As a result, women’s participation in politics is low, and women who have been in politics are always described as “not a woman” (masculine) because they do not follow existing social constructions.



In constructing the male-dominated hegemony, dominant groups need a tool to preserve their values. Gramsci (1971) in Idrus et al. (2023) argue that mass media can be one of the tools dominant groups use to spread and propagate their values to repress a particular group. This is because the media plays an important role in shaping public opinion. Most mass media that are still dominated by patriarchal ideology tend to perpetuate negative social constructions regarding women. Instead of being neutral, the media adheres to toxic traditional gender roles when depicting female political figures.

In addition to mass media, religion also plays an important role in shaping public opinion in Indonesia, including Islam, which says that only men can become Khalifah, imams, or leaders. This belief indirectly affects how

society sees female figures in politics and discriminate against women, resulting in their low participation (Intentilia, 2020).

Even though it is often said that politics is a man's playground, some women can break this bias, such as Megawati and Thatcher, who will be discussed in this article. Megawati was selected because she was the first female president in Indonesia, and Thatcher was England's first female prime minister. In this paper, we focus on the news online about Megawati's leadership from 1987 until the present day and when she was president from 2001-2004. The period of observations on Thatcher is from 1947 to 1990, during which she was UK Prime Minister from 1979 to 1990.

Based on the explanation above, we focus on how Megawati and Thatcher fought gender bias toward women in the



political sector. This paper uses qualitative methods, specifically literature and media study. Data was collected from journals, books, and online articles related to this topic. Data from online news articles focus on public opinions about Megawati and Thatcher during their leadership. We applied the theory of counter-hegemony proposed by Gramsci as an analysis tool. According to Gramsci, counter-hegemony is questioning the current dominant knowledge, challenging the disordered understanding of the dominant groups, and replacing the weakness of such hegemony using new values. This research aims to discover the real form of counter-hegemonic actions by Megawati and Margaret Thatcher in their political process. We also traced the new values brought by Megawati and Thatcher when they became the first female leaders of their respective countries.

Resistance by Megawati Soekarnoputri and Margaret Thatcher to Gender-Biased Perceptions

The doubt toward women's leadership is a manifestation of patriarchal hegemony. Megawati Soekarnoputri and Margaret Thatcher were present as tangible symbols of resistance to that. We identified at least three perceptions of women's leadership that Megawati and Thatcher opposed, namely (1) dependence on men in careers, (2) the perceived weakness of women's leadership, and (3) the expectation of women to be obedient. These three topics were selected because they are common discourses to stereotypes of women's leadership in politics (Cavazza & Pacilli, 2021). This stereotype is perpetuated by the media, with negative perceptions reaching more than 80% in reporting female politicians in both



advanced and developing democracies³.

Dependence on Men in Careers

Politics is known as the “men’s world,” so women are considered less capable of building a career on that path. Women are described as individuals with maternal traits more suited for domestic or private work (Idrus et al., 2023). The media has a significant role in this perception because every female candidate receives a smaller portion of the news than men. News about women in politics is dominated by negative sentiment and often only focuses on domestic issues such as fashion, family, partners, and beauty rather than highlighting substantive issues such as ideas

(Alfirdaus et al., 2022). The media is not fair enough to provide space for reporting women in the political sphere.

Women who choose a career path in politics are often underestimated; their achievements are also discredited. Female politicians are considered to be dependent on male figures in their political careers. Megawati Soekarnoputri and Margaret Thatcher were the victims of this negative perception⁴ (Basit et al., 2022). These two women then resisted the patriarchal perceptions that dominated the political world.

Megawati

Megawati is often described as an ordinary housewife with no special ability. The only attribute that makes her special is

³ Basit's research shows that female politicians are portrayed negatively in media, reaching 87.70%, while the positive perspective was only 8.80% and the neutral perspective was 3.50% (Perspektif Media Massa Terhadap Politisi Perempuan. Jurnal Pendidikan Islam, 975-1006)

⁴ Basit's research shows that an average of 57% of people in both developing and advanced democracies show negative perceptions of women's leadership (access in Perspektif Media Massa Terhadap Politisi Perempuan. Jurnal Pendidikan Islam, 975-1006)



because she is the daughter of Sukarno, the founding father and the first president of the Republic of Indonesia (Museum Kepresidenan, 2020). The media implicitly formed this perception by not mentioning Megawati's name and often using the pronouns "*Putri Proklamator*," "*Putri Karno*," and "*Anak Sukarno*" when she ran for the presidential election. Those pronouns are considered to shape the public's collective that Megawati does not stand on her own behalf and has no qualified abilities other than her father's big name (Agustina et al., 2005). Indeed, using the name Sukarno increased Megawati's electability but proved that the public could not see Megawati as an independent figure. The media also often cut Megawati's speech to remove the substance. For example, when she talked about Pancasila, the media highlighted

her jokes about "I am a unique human being, Karno's daughter".

In addition to her attachment to her father, Megawati is considered only capable of politics with the support of Taufiq Kiemas (Tokoh Indonesia, 2013)⁵. She was predicted to no longer have power after her husband's death, Taufiq Kiemas, in 2013 (Tokoh Indonesia, 2013). The media portrays Megawati's political career and PDI-P would end because, so far, Taufiq Kiemas is a figure who could bridge communication for PDI-P. The media saw Megawati as too rigid and not articulate, so it would be challenging to expand

⁵ "Taufiq is described and appreciated as an important figure in the political journey of Megawati and the PDI-Perjuangan. Some of the appreciation implied (impression) actually 'underestimated' Megawati's abilities as General Chair of the PDI-P and former President. It is as if Megawati can only get involved in politics with the support of Taufiq Kiemas". Article source: Tokoh.ID - <https://tokoh.id/biografi/1-ensiklopedi/sepeninggal-taufiq-kiemas/>

PDI-P⁶. This phenomenon illustrates a perception that Megawati's achievements seem to be caused only by male figures in her life.

There is a history of male influence in Megawati's political career, but it is not as significant as perceived. This success was not considered her work but a symbol of Sukarno and Taufiq Kiemas's communication skills. Megawati's capabilities have never been recognized. (Sobary, 2003). Nevertheless, that allegation was broken again when Megawati managed to bring PDIP to win legislative and presidential elections twice in a row in 2014 and 2019 when Taufiq Kiemas died.

⁶ "Political observer from the Indonesian Institute of Sciences (LIPI), Indria Samego, called Taufiq a bridge between PDI-P and the outside world. For example, Taufiq diffused the political atmosphere between PDI-P, President SBY, and many political rivals. Meanwhile, Megawati will be harsher (cold) towards President SBY and political rivals" Article source: Tokoh.ID - <https://tokoh.id/biografi/1-ensiklopedi/sepeninggal-taufiq-kiemas/>

Meanwhile, Sukarno's other children, such as Rachmawati Soekarnoputri and Sukmawati Soekarnoputri, failed to become central political actors. The Indonesian National Party (PNI) Marhaenism, founded by Sukmawati, and Partai Pelopor, founded by Rachmawati, failed in political contestation (Widhana, 2016). Both parties failed to qualify for parliament. Nonetheless, these historical facts show that women can stand alone without depending on men. Megawati was not privileged by Sukarno's power network because the new regime had destroyed it. Her communication skills also did not depend on Taufiq Kiemas because Megawati's life experience trained her to become an accomplished political actor (Erianto, 2022). She could still bring PDIP to win elections twice after Taufiq Kiemas died.



Thatcher

Margaret Hilda Thatcher also experienced a similar story. She was born to Alfred Roberts and Beatrice on October 13, 1925, in Grantham, Lincolnshire, the UK. Her father was known as an activist in the Methodist Church and a member of the city council of Grantham (Young, 2023). In 1951, Thatcher married Dennis Thatcher, a wealthy businessman in England. Thatcher admitted that her father and husband influenced her success. It was Roberts who interested Thatcher in politics and Dennis always supported her political ambitions (Ball, 2013). Thatcher was not a figure who relied on men in her career, unlike some media accused at the beginning of her political career in the British Conservative Party.

Margaret Thatcher's career began with being nominated as a people's representative for the borough of Dartford, Kent,

southeastern England, for the 1950 and 1951 elections that ended in defeat. Despite her failure, Thatcher succeeded in running as the youngest candidate from the Conservative Party, putting her in the media spotlight. She succeeded in saturating the votes of the Labour Party (Bahy, 2021).

In this defeat, she was proposed by Dennis Thatcher, who promised to give his full support in politics. Dennis said that Margaret would not have been successful in politics if she had not married him, who had reliable finances (Ball, 2013). Their marriage was often reported as transactional and the subject of attacks by Thatcher's political opponents (Katz, 2012). Thatcher was accused of being dependent on Dennis' material capital to gain power and when Thatcher came to power, Dennis' business became more successful (Katz, 2012).



However, this accusation was not proven because, after the marriage, she ran for councilor but failed again in 1955.

Margaret Thatcher's political career took off quickly after becoming a member of parliament (MP) through Finchley's constituency, known as the Conservative base, in the 1959 election. Thatcher continued to soar until she succeeded in becoming the first female Prime Minister of the UK and Europe in 1979. Intellectual ability, hard work, and a decisive speaking style contributed to her success.

Thatcher also did not rely on men during her political career. She ran as an MP in a constituency different from her father's mass base when he was on the city council. Thatcher's father advanced from Grantham, while Thatcher had a mass base in Finchley. Thatcher refused to run for office in her father's

electoral district to prove she had more political skills than her father (Campbell, 2012).

Many researchers have not shown the role of her father's network in influencing Thatcher's career (Campbell, 2012). She failed at the beginning of her political career in 1955. Her wealthy husband could not change Thatcher's political career (Ball, 2013). It took eight years after her marriage for her to enjoy a strategic political position. Before Dennis' presence, Thatcher also had qualified from her college time as she was President of the Conservative Party at the University of Oxford. Dennis had a more moral role rather than capital support⁷.

⁷ "I could never have been prime minister for more than 11 years without Denis by my side," she wrote in her autobiography *The Downing Street Years*. (Accessed in <https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/the-crown-denis-thatcher-husband-margaret-b1723535.html>)



Megawati and Thatcher proved they did not entirely rely on their fathers' political legacy. Although their fathers had much influence on their political careers, these ladies sought their ways to pursue a career in politics. They were successful because of their hard work, patience, consistency, management, charisma, and communication skills. They brought new values and fought patriarchal hegemony in politics that undermine women's success. This can be seen from how Megawati neither depends on Sukarno's big name in Indonesian politics nor Taufiq Kiemas when raising the party. The same thing also happened to Thatcher, who did not rely on the vote base of her father and her husband in every position she held.

Female Leadership is Weak

The perception that women are weak, thus unfit for leadership

and unable to lead people to a better direction, has been rooted in society. This can be seen from a study conducted by Aspinall et al. (2021), in which the majority of respondents in Indonesia believe that men should be the head or leader of society and are considered more capable of leading. Work reserved for men is also more complex and intensive, and they pay higher wages than women.

Female leadership is considered to be dominated with emotion. They are not firm, slow, and irrational when making decisions in crises (Wayan & Nyoman, 2020). Women are considered only capable in assisting male leaders rather than being the main actors in making important decisions in crises. Women leaders are considered to have lower capabilities in crises (Cavazza & Pacili, 2021). Fox & Lawless (2011) in Cavazza & Pacili (2021)

explain that women pursuing political careers are less likely to be considered as equally qualified as men.

This dominant cultural discourse is deeply rooted albeit without scientific evidence. The media is an instrument to construct and preserve the discourse as it is favor of men than women. It is thrice more difficult for female candidates to be covered by mass media. If they do, 70% receive negative sentiments (Basit et al., 2022). This happens in all countries, whether fully democratic or still partially free (Basit et al., 2022). Due to the limited media spotlight, female politicians face difficulties presenting strong characters in the political sphere.

Initially, during the Reform Era, Indonesian societies were heavily influenced by the discourse of Islamic groups. Women should not be leaders because Imams must be men (Yabassum &

Nayak, 2021). Strengthening women's positions in political leadership is considered taboo and contrary to existing values and norms. Women have a lower opportunity to become leaders because it is contrary to their nature (Yabassum & Nayak, 2021).

A similar situation occurred in the UK. This country already campaigned for gender equality and had the figure of Queen Elizabeth II on 6 February 1952. However, stereotypes toward female leadership remained. British society and the mass media depicted female politicians in traditional gender roles, i.e., the housewife (Campbell, 2012). Moreover, after World War II, the UK experienced a prolonged crisis. Women's leadership was undesirable because the British societies needed decisive leaders who dared to make risky decisions (Campbell, 2012). Female



politicians are portrayed as representatives of their gender rather than gender-neutral like male politicians (Basit et al., 2022). Women in politics is still considered an 'oddity.' Traditional patriarchal views makes them underrepresented in certain areas, such as politics, and they often appear in non-political fields dominated by personal matters (Basit et al., 2022).

Megawati and Thatcher were not immune from this framing, especially at the beginning of their administration. Megawati came to power in Indonesia in 1999-2004 and Thatcher in England in 1979-1990. Megawati was doubted by many Islamic media, both the neutral or affiliated with political parties. *Tempo* and *Kompas* were the only presumably objective media (Yulianti, 2010). On the contrary, *Gatra* and *Republika* were the media with the most critical questions about Megawati's

capacity simply because she is a woman (Sadikin, 2008). *Gatra*, for instance, issued a poll that concluded Amien Rais and Gus Dur were more capable to lead than Megawati. The reason was because she seemed afraid to participate in a debate event. So, her capacity was doubted⁸ (Agustina et al., 2015). *Gatra* held another debate forum, which again labeled Megawati as incapable. As a woman, she was deemed unable to lead Indonesia in escaping a multidimensional crisis, and it was feared that her leadership would worsen the situation (Agustina et al., 2015).

Thatcher also experienced the same thing when she tried to make a breakthrough for the UK to be more assertive in facing

⁸ Magazine *GATRA* says that attitude Megawati Soekarnoputri who did not want to talk and don't want to join in the debate was deliberately held triggering a decline in support votes towards himself. Source: *Tempo* and *Gatra's View of Megawati as a Presidential Candidate in 1999 and 2004*. Susurgalur, 3(1): 71-84



communism. The Soviet media immediately criticized her as a woman who looked strong but was weak and timid in reality. The Soviets considered Thatcher unable to lead the UK to escape the multidimensional crisis, which weakened Britain's position⁹. Thatcher doubted her goals would be achievable because the UK was in a severe economic crisis (Simms, 2008). The British internal media also highlighted Thatcher's personal matters, such as her fashion and family life, i.e., continuing to cook for her children and husband before working. (Katz, 2012). "Thatcher is not the leader of Britain" was voiced by the media

and the Labor Party (Campbell, 2012).

Megawati and Thatcher broke the stereotype that women were weak leaders during their leadership. They prove this through their legacy as governors and political party leaders. Their leadership completely opposed existing stereotypes. They showed that women in leadership can be equal to or even stronger than men.

Megawati

In 2001, Megawati Soekarnoputri was appointed the 6th President of the Republic of Indonesia, replacing Abdurrahman Wahid (Gus Dur), who was impeached by the People's Consultative Assembly (MPR) in a Special Session. Megawati led when Indonesia underwent a transitional phase of a multidimensional crisis. Indonesia was drown in debt, and the IMF blocked the state budget. The socio-politics field also

⁹ The original article in Russian was titled "Zheleznaya Dama Ugrozhayet", which Evans (the Reuters bureau chief in Moscow) translated as "The Iron Lady's Threat". The article stated that Thatcher was considered a threat to the world and Britain itself because of her stubborn character. Her leadership was believed by the Soviet Union to weaken Britain. Source: The Iron Lady Margaret Thatcher: From Grocer's Daughter to Iron Lady.



experienced chaos in the form of ethnic and religious conflict and terrorism, so the capital market did not attract many investors (Megawati, 2021). Legally, Indonesia was also transitioning from authoritarian and centralistic to democratic and decentralized.

As a president, Megawati had a central position in the national leadership at that time. She played a crucial role in determining the state policy outline. Megawati made a bold move by selling Indosat's important assets that were considered corrupt, stopped the Caltex oil mining contract in the Natuna Block, punished 17 generals who were Suharto's cronies, established a democratic system of direct elections, and established the KPK to eradicate corruption. The most successful decision was when she brought Indonesia an escape from the IMF's trap (Soekarnoputri, 2021).

She also decreased Indonesia's alignment towards the West and acted neutrally.

This decision was bold because the West had been the leading supporter of the New Order government for 32 years (Chomsky, 2022). During her administration, ethnic, religious, and terrorist conflicts occurred in Indonesia. Clashes between Christians and Muslims erupted in Maluku, Aceh, Papua, Poso, and Kalimantan. There were Bali Bombings I and II, which have painted dark spots in the history of Indonesia (Chomsky, 2010). Allegedly, these incidents happened because of the West's interference, so Indonesia became dependent on them again (Chomsky, 2010). Western and Eastern blocs have consistently implemented proxy wars to suppress developing countries that did not comply.

Megawati kept Indonesia from the IMF and be more neutral



in international politics. Almost all her decisions were based on data (Soekarnoputri, 2021). Her leadership succeeded in lifting Indonesia from a multidimensional crisis (Wijaya & Permatasari, 2018). She was considered successful in making Indonesia's economy more decentralized, the political system more democratic, the inter-ethnic social situation more conducive, the environmental governance improved, and the defense capabilities more competent.

Megawati also showed her strong leadership as Chairman of the largest party in Indonesia, PDI-Perjuangan. Megawati initiated the party's constitutional struggle against the New Order regime with lawsuits to the Supreme Court. Megawati made PDI-Perjuangan the strongest party in Indonesia, opposing the regime and becoming ruler. In PDI-Perjuangan, she initiated a

guided democracy system that was different from the usual Western style of party democracy and not as authoritarian as communist parties. Guided Democracy is a system where all can deliberate and discuss when a final decision has not been reached. However, when Megawati makes the final decision, all party cadres must obey (Tempo, 2023). Megawati built PDI-Perjuangan by grounding its ideology in pragmatism. Although not successful, the ideological platform of Nationalism PDI-P managed to preserve its dedicated grassroots mass.

Megawati has a relatively firm grip over the PDI-Perjuangan on all fronts when determining the party's policy. Internal conflicts have always been successfully resolved through negotiations or her decisions. PDI-Perjuangan cadre was fired if they rejected the party's decision, whether



they're a strong or just an ordinary cadre. Megawati also became a decisive figure in every political event without her being a candidate. In the 2014, 2019, and 2024 elections, she determined the direction of elections in Indonesia (Erianto, 2022). The "Queen Maker" nickname was pinned on her because her decisions always determined the path of ongoing political contestation at the national level. This nickname indicates Megawati's leadership strength as a female figure. In addition, she is the longest-serving party leader in Indonesian history (Tempo, 2023).

Thatcher

In her reign as Prime Minister of the United Kingdom and Chairman of the Conservative Party (Tory Party), Margaret Thatcher experienced more complicated problems. Britain had to face a cold war with the mighty Soviet Union then. At that

time, the UK experienced an economic crisis that led to an inflation of 24% (Moore, 2013). Britain's prestige fell because its economic condition was far inferior compared to France and Germany, and unable to combat the widespread Soviet communism ideology (BBC News Indonesia, 2013). The British government also continues to face a crisis of declining levels of public trust.

Thatcher became a spotlight in 1976 when she led the opposition Conservative Party. She believed that freedom and individualism would save the country from crisis. She denounced Soviet-style communism that emphasized collectivity over individuals. The condemnation made the Soviet media dub her "The Iron Lady," which she gladly accepted and was her nickname ever since (Campbell, 2012). During that time, Thatcher opposed



the Labour Party, which gave too much subsidy to the public that led to dependency. On the other hand, high tax rate policies are also uncondusive to the investment climate in the UK. Thatcher coined a campaign slogan “Labour is not Working” (Campbell, 2012).

In 1979 the British Conservative Party won over the Labour Party, and Thatcher became Britain’s First Female Prime Minister (Moore, 2013). She believed the crisis arose from the state’s intervention that went too far into economic affairs. The interventions originally aimed at ensuring social welfare have caused, but was backfired with inefficiencies and crises (Young, 2023). Thatcher’s victory also brought the Cold War between the Soviet Union and Britain to its peak. In this domestic and foreign turmoil, she came up with

the “Thatcherism” idea, which shocked the world (Bahy, 2021).

“Thatcherism” changed the British economic paradigm by reducing state intervention in economic affairs to mere regulators and emphasizing free market principles. She reduced employer’s taxes from 60% to 40%, raised the value-added tax from 8% to 15%, privatized homes and mining companies, pressured trade unions, and reduced health and social assistance subsidies for people experiencing poverty (Moore, 2013). Her foreign policy was also harsh on the Soviet Union and anyone who dared to oppose Britain. She did not hesitate to deploy an army to fight with anyone who dared to fight the British.

Thatcher faced serious threats from trade unions, especially in mid-1984-1985 when she closed most coal-fired power stations because they



were deemed unprofitable for future Britain. The unions went on strike for a year but was unable to change Thatcher's policies. The Iron Lady rendered trade unions powerless in British society. Her leadership character was bold, and she did not hesitate to suppress any opponent who dared to oppose her.

Despite the negative connotation, "Thatcherism" succeeded in repowering Britain. Inflation in 1983 began to decline to only 4% as investor's trust began to recover. The economic condition was able to recover. Thatcher's foreign affairs worked with Ronald Reagan, President of the United States, to suppress the Soviet Union and ensure the failure of the communist system. The Soviet Union then collapsed in 1990. The Iron Lady's mission was successful, and the world

recognized how fiery her leadership characteristics were.

While leading the Conservative Party, she sharpened the basic ideological platform. She used "Thatcherism" as the party's ideological foundation until the present day. She is also the longest-serving female party leader in the British political history (Ball, 2013). Her successes have proven that women's leadership can be much stronger than men's. The nickname "The Iron Lady" shows her leadership strength domestically and abroad.

Megawati and Thatcher provided evidence that women's leadership can be effective to drive a country out of a crisis and maintain power. A country cannot come out of a crisis without a decisive leadership factor from its leader. Megawati and Thatcher left a legacy of this system, making it easier for their



successors to the country. They also proved that weak female leadership characters were only media framing and societal stereotypes. Strong or weak leadership does not depend on gender. They counter stereotypes of women's leadership with their actions and policies.

Women Must be Obedient

The social construction of women continues to create barriers to women's career advancement (Yabassum & Nayak, 2021). Megawati and Thatcher, as the first female leaders of their countries, often face unreasonable patriarchal expectations. Eagly & Karau (2002) in Yabassum & Nayak (2021) explained that this happens because female leaders tend to break their gender standards. Leaders have always been closely associated with male stereotypes, while female

stereotypes have been associated with followers.

Stereotyped beliefs are also visible in Indonesian Islamic traditions. As a country with a majority Muslim population, the belief in women's obedience is supported by religious belief. Unfortunately, this is often misused. This phenomenon believes in a patriarchal heretical proposition. Women who become leaders can only obey their environment and men in particular. Not only Islam, Javanese cultural construction, which is dominant in Indonesian politics, also places women as "konco wingking," which literally means "a friend at the back". Women are perceived only to be spouses, cooks, and caregivers (Mys, 2004).

The UK has a more advanced civilization and a monarch, Queen Elizabeth II. Nonetheless, patriarchal culture is still dominant in its politics. For



example, negative news spotlight female politicians' personal lives rather than their political careers. If they win, the media will likely ignore them, and there are usually minimal reportage compared to male politicians. Female politicians are considered to not adhere to values and norms, so the media tend to be hostile.

Women are considered obeying all existing norms (Pramono, 2013). They cannot resist social construction, let alone oppose the majority's voice. Women are thought to obey men even when they are the leaders. Megawati and Thatcher refused to adhere to such expected obedience.

Megawati

Megawati's existence in national politics was not a highlight of the New Order regime. Soerjadi Sudirja, Chairman of the Indonesian Democratic Party (PDI) during New Order time, argued that

although Megawati is Sukarno's daughter, she is a woman and not as capable as Guntur Soekarnoputra, her older brother. Soerjadi believed that Megawati could raise the voice of PDI Perjuangan, but it would not be significant (Erianto, 2022). The New Order regime did not prevent Megawati's rising at the beginning of her political career. Megawati was considered unrefined and having poor communication skills. Being a female politician means that there is nothing to fear about her figure in the national political sphere.

Megawati's existence in national politics was also relatively quiet from media reports. Many media believed that she would not bring significant changes to PDI because there were previously few strong female figures in Indonesia. The media also believes Soekarno's legacy was



through Guntur Soekarnoputra, not Megawati. The state media barely wrote anything about Megawati's joining the PDI. The circulating assumption was that Megawati, who had not graduated from college and whose husband had been eliminated, did not dare fight.

This reflected the perception that women would quickly obey if they mastered the logic of the Soeharto and Soerjadi regimes at that time. Unfortunately, Megawati increased PDI's votes significantly, from 24 seats in 1982 to 40 seats in 1987, with the main basis being in Central Java. This rising popularity surprised Soerjadi and the New Order regime. Megawati was not allowed to enter the party structure as a party member (Presidency, 2020). She was forced to obey and only be a token in parliament. Nevertheless, she still made achievements by increasing the

PDI vote to 54 seats in the 1992 election.

Megawati, who was considered obedient, succeeded in showing her strength in national politics. The peak was when she was lined up to be the Chairman of the Indonesian Democratic Party (PDI) Surabaya Congress in 1993. The split in PDI was prevented when Megawati became a symbol of resistance to the New Order regime. Then, the "Kudatuli" (the 27th July coup) incident happened in 1996 at the DPP PDI office, which killed dozens of Megawati loyalists, and many people disappeared. This incident raised Megawati's name and made her a resistance symbol to rise against the New Order regime.

The problem did not stop there; after the Reform, when the Indonesian Democratic Party changed its name to the Indonesian Democratic Party of



Struggle (PDI-P) in 1999, a black campaign against Megawati was carried out. In the run-up to the 1999 presidential election, when the Islamic Congress was held, there was a call from the Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI) to issue a fatwa on women's leadership¹⁰ (Fasabeni, 2004). This issue spread quickly not only among the public but also among the political elites, especially when Amien Rais and the Islamic Party formed a central axis and highlighted the issue of women not becoming leaders or presidents. PDIP, which obtained a parliamentary majority of 33%, must accept the fact that the candidate from the central axis, Abdurrahman Wahid (Gus Dur), won over Megawati Soekarnoputri. This proves that women's persistence in becoming leaders is subjected to

stigma of obedience, so they cannot become number one.

Megawati only won the presidential election in 2001 when Gus Dur was forcibly deposed by the People's Consultative Assembly of the Republic of Indonesia (MPR). Megawati made history as the first female President of Indonesia. This surprised the world because Indonesia was a new democratic country with the largest Muslim population. It had its first female president earlier than the United States, who had applied the democratic system for much longer.

When Megawati ran for president again in 2004, the gender discourse was repeated. The Indonesian Mujahideen Council (MMI) and a group of Islamic leaders (Kyai) in East Java declared a female President haram following the Al-Qur'an and Hadith, which are the main sources of law in Islam

¹⁰ Indonesia Ulema Council is a national body of Islamic scholars (ulama) that issues fatwas and recommendations (Islamic rulings and legal opinions)



(Fasabeni, 2004). All these fatwas were issued when Megawati was running for a presidential election in 2004. She was considered a woman who refused to obey God's commands. Accusations of Megawati violating religious orders were also expressed among lower levels of society.

This belief is weaponized by the patriarchal system to subordinate women. The fatwa prohibiting women from becoming state leaders (president) is not based on a strong proposition (*dalil*). The judgment basis does not come from the Qur'an but from a weak and controversial hadith because Islam upholds gender equality in society's social standing. Unfortunately, this issue was spread so massively that PDIP recognized it as one of the

factors in Megawati's defeat in the 2004 election.

During the campaign, there were also disparities in the quantity and quality of media reportage. Data shows that news reports regarding Megawati more spotlighted her fashion, family, and other personal matters than her expressed ideas. Meanwhile, her political rivals, such as Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (SBY) and Wiranto, are predominantly reported about their ideas rather than their personal lives (Yulianti, 2010). In terms of quantity, Megawati's reportage as an incumbent is not as much as SBY's. This phenomenon happens not only in Indonesia but also worldwide, where women who become politicians often receive news reportage about their domestic sphere rather than their ideas.

As General Chair of the PDI Perjuangan, Megawati also often oppose the consensus of a



deviant and male-dominated political elites. Most recently, she was the only head of the government coalition party to oppose President Jokowi's narrative of three-term administration and the postponement of elections, which was almost agreed upon by Indonesia's political elites. Megawati refused to obey most parties, such as the National Awakening Party (PKB), the National Mandate Party (PAN), The Party of Functional Groups (Golkar), and the United Development Party (PPP) (Tempo, 2023). President Joko Widodo also never provided a firm refusal regarding this issue. In fact, behind the scenes, this is the political maneuvering of people around "Istana" (the palace) to exercise power even though it is dangerous because it violates the constitution, as the

president is limited to two term administration (10 years).

This wild issue was refuted when, in the PDI Perjuangan anniversary speech in January 2024, Megawati expressed a strong rejection directly in front of President Joko Widodo. Some pro-democracy figures praised Megawati's attitude of obeying the constitution and succeeding in silencing the unconstitutional maneuvers of the political elite. Again, she appeared to resist decisively when many parties obeyed the power of the Palace. This shows that women can fight and not only obey. Megawati, who was ostracized and underestimated since the New Order, emerged as a symbol of resistance and women's leadership. She proved that women are powerful, can fight, are empowered, and are not inferior.



Thatcher

Slightly different from Megawati, Thatcher entered the world of British politics at a young age. She faced obstacles in adhering to party policy norms in Britain. There was a norm agreed upon by the British Labour Party and Conservative Party after World War II. They agreed that the state needed to be more present in helping the community. Thatcher's existence was considered not to undermine the agreement between these parties. The mass media did not spotlight Thatcher until 1970 when she dared to oppose the "free milk" policy for primary school children in England. The slogan "Thatcher, Thatcher, Thatcher milk snatcher" appeared in the media, and for the first time, European female politicians were highlighted by the media (Ball, 2013).

Thatcher was the only political figure to challenge and break the

agreement. She initially did the same thing when she was the Secretary of Education. She cut free milk to children under seven years from the initial plan for those aged 12 and below. Suddenly, a strong reaction came from the Labour Party, which echoed the slogan "Thatcher milk Snatcher" (Ball, 2013). This decision also makes her seen as not caring about women and violates the value that women should make it easy on their own. Thatcher refused to comply and continued saying this was for saving Britain, which was then in crisis.

As mentioned, Thatcher's career rose when she succeeded in becoming the first woman to become Party Chairman in Britain. Thatcher forced Ted Heath to step down as leader when she defeated him in the first round of the leadership race by 130 votes to 119 (Moore, 2013). At this time, the idea of



“Thatcherism” was voiced for the first time, leading the Soviet media to dub her “The Iron Lady.” “Thatcherism” led the Conservative Party to win the 1979 election, and Thatcher became Prime Minister of the United Kingdom. She showed that women can be firm and not readily obedient during this time.

Thatcher announced an economic policy called “Thatcherism” by reducing state intervention in the British economy. Privatization of state enterprises, tax cuts, and reductions in social assistance were carried out. The policy reduced UK inflation from 25% to 4% quickly but raise unemployment rise to 3 million people and widen the inequality (Young, 2023). Thatcher thought that unemployment was caused by laziness. She also said the state did not want to care for the idlers. Protests ensued both externally and internally within

the conservative party. Many disagreed with Thatcher’s policy, which brought unfortunate fates to some groups. She emphatically answered at the party congress, “You can turn if you want. The ladies not for turning,” was Thatcher’s answer, who refused to cancel or reverse all her economic policies (Young, 2023).

Thatcher’s steadfastness and refusal to comply was also reflected in the conflict over the Falkland Islands, thousands of kilometers from Britain. The island is a British possession, but its closer territory to Argentina leaves it with de facto clear status. In 1982, Argentina suddenly declared the independence of the Falkland Islands when an economic crisis hit Britain. At that time, Thatcher was advised to settle diplomatically and avoid open war. Ronald Reagan, President of the United States, also suggested



that Britain should address the issue with diplomacy (Campbell, 2012). There were many doubts about the capabilities of the British fleet if Thatcher went to war openly because of the risk of heavy losses due to Falkland's position. She made one firm decision by sending a British fleet to the Falklands. A battle ensued, and the British won, while the Falkland Islands remained British possessions. All were shocked because the British were in crisis, and the attack made Argentina retreat. This decision made Thatcher's name famous in the UK until she was re-elected as Prime Minister in 1983 (Ball, 2013).

However, not all of her decisions against obedience were good for Thatcher. Media outrage over stereotypes of women resurfaced when Thatcher became skeptical of the European Union. She wanted Britain to exit the European Union

and become the most powerful country in Europe. This desire is against the will of the public and most Conservative Party elites. Negative news about Thatcher's personal life was propagated, such as the divorce rumor and attacks on her children (Basit et al., 2022). Thatcher, who had continued to go against the grain, was finally forced to concede when, in 1990, the Conservative Party replaced her with John Major. After that, she fought back by choosing to stop being a Conservative Party politician and become a lecturer. Nevertheless, her decision to refuse obedience made "Thatcherism" embraced by the British Conservative Party to this day.

Even though they often failed in political contestation, Megawati and Thatcher had proven that women were not like the stereotypes that had been perceived. Megawati, in the 2024 elections, was still recognized as



one of the figures who play a role in making choices. The term “Queen Maker” was raised to remind the central role of Megawati Soekarnoputri. Margaret Thatcher also left traces of “Thatcherism” espoused by many conservative parties worldwide. The legacy of these two significant figures are remembered. They rejected the stereotype that women would only obey the larger patriarchal values and culture. Instead, they showed their strength by resisting, proving that women can fight back. They defied the mainstream political policies and attitudes.

Megawati and Thatcher as The Gender Bias Breaker: Conclusion

The negative portrayal of women in politics can be seen in Megawati Soekarnoputri and Margaret Thatcher, who became disruptors of male dominance as leaders. Indonesia and Britain

have distinctly different socio-cultural systems, but these countries have similar in patriarchal dominance. The process they have to go through to occupy the positions of president and prime minister was much more difficult than men because they has to deal with patriarchal hegemony.

Social construction makes society believe that a woman’s best place is in the home and her best career is becoming a housewife (Muhammad, 2022). These perceptions are perpetuated into values and norms that are deeply rooted in society as a patriarchal system. The actions taken by Megawati and Thatcher can be regarded as a form of resistance to patriarchal hegemony in their country’s system of government. These women directly opposed traditional gender construction.

Megawati and Thatcher fought for the position of women



in government. Their struggle became more complicated when they also had to challenge traditional female stereotypes perpetuated by the media that framed doubts about their capacity for political leadership. The mass media framed them as incompetent in their positions, especially at the beginning of their political existence. Being underestimated because of gender was not a new phenomenon for Megawati and Thatcher.

Women's traditional gender role construction is that they are more suitable to work in the domestic field even though no scientific evidence can explain the physical or biological relationship between the female gender and typical traditional roles such as cooking and nurturing (Idrus et al., 2023). They are also considered unable to lead decisively and do rational policymaking because the

construction illustrates them as weak creatures influenced by feelings.

Megawati and Thatcher succeeded in countering the perception that women cannot stand alone and are permanently shadowed by men in their careers. That was because of their abilities, which starkly contrasted public perceptions of them, especially early in their political careers. Their stories reflect two women fighting against hegemony that has always emphasized the dependence of women's careers on men, not themselves.

In addition, obedient women are desired in a patriarchal culture. These stereotypes continue to hamper women's career advancement (Yabassum & Nayak, 2021). Women will face high pressure, especially when entering a male-dominated job. This is because of patriarchal expectations that expect women



to behave according to their “nature,” as reflected in the case of Megawati and Thatcher at every step of their political careers.

The patriarchal hegemony directly contributes to women's low participation in politics. Politics is referred to as a “masculine” job and is attached to male stereotypes so that women are considered unsuitable to be in that realm. In the process, women in politics and become leaders are considered inappropriate because their nature is to be followers. Such beliefs are deeply entrenched and reproduced repeatedly by state institutions.

Over time, some values and norms change in political leadership. This was shown by Megawati, who became the first female president of Indonesia, and Margaret Thatcher, who became the first prime minister in the UK. In the dynamics,

these women challenged many stereotypes attached to them. Their leadership journey was difficult because the media often highlighted their failures and seemed to lead public opinion that women could not be leaders. The existing social norms also influenced the form of resistance carried out by Megawati and Thatcher. Social norms in Eastern culture are considered stricter than in Western culture. This can be seen from the religious aspect, which still determines the criteria for a good leader in Indonesia.

Megawati and Thatcher proved to bring new values and norms to fight patriarchal hegemony in their countries. Their actions were called by the Gramscian counter-hegemony, a challenge to existing hegemony. In this study, three stereotypes were found to be challenged by Megawati and Thatcher, namely: (1) dependence on men in careers, (2) the presumably weak

women's leadership, and (3) the expectation for women to be obedient. Their leadership certainly brought new hope for women. The Queen Maker and the Iron Lady were among the many women who have paved the way against patriarchy in their countries.



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