

Research Article

Freedom as the Foundation of Legitimate Government According to John Locke and Its Relevance for Democracy in Indonesia

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Abstract

This paper examines the concept of freedom as the foundation of legitimate government according to John Locke and its relevance for strengthening democracy in Indonesia. Locke emphasizes freedom as a natural right inherent in human beings from the state of nature, possessing moral, rational, and political dimensions that function as the standard of political and moral legitimacy of government. Legitimacy is achieved solely through the consent of the governed; therefore, any exercise of power that violates the freedom of the people constitutes tyranny. The method employed in this study is library research combined with a philosophical hermeneutic approach. This paper highlights that Indonesian democracy continues to face a disparity between formal freedom and substantive freedom, characterized by oligarchic practices, money politics, and restrictions on public participation. The relevance of Locke's thought is reflected in the necessity of the rule of law, the limitation of power, public accountability, and the strengthening of citizens' deliberative capacities as rational subjects. By positioning freedom as an ethical and normative foundation, this study finds that Indonesian democracy can only be legitimate, just, and humane if it genuinely respects the moral autonomy of its citizens and establishes popular consent as the source of political legitimacy.

Keywords

Freedom, Legitimate Government, John Locke, Democracy, Political Philosophy, Indonesia

1. Introduction

Contemporary social realities indicate that political freedom in Indonesia remains largely formal rather than substantive. Consequently, Locke's political thought can serve as a reflective foundation for assessing whether the Indonesian government truly derives its legitimacy from the freedom of the people or merely preserves democratic symbols devoid of moral substance [1]. Several previous studies demonstrate that Locke's thought continues to inspire evaluations of the ethical and rational foundations of political power.

For instance, John Dunn (1969), in *The Political Thought*

of John Locke, emphasizes that Locke's concept of freedom constitutes the core of modern liberal political legitimacy. Dunn argues that, for Locke, freedom does not signify the absence of law, but obedience to laws that are freely consented to. Meanwhile, C. B. Macpherson (1962), in *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism*, criticizes Locke by arguing that his conception of freedom is individualistic and biased toward property owners, thereby generating social inequality. This critique is crucial for reassessing the relevance of Locke's thought within democratic contexts marked by

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structural inequality, such as Indonesia [2].

Peter Laslett (1988), through his critical edition of *Two Treatises of Government*, emphasizes that Locke's work emerged as a response to political absolutism of his era. Locke sought to establish a rational foundation for limiting royal power through the supremacy of law and individual freedom. In the Indonesian context, this idea parallels the spirit of constitutionalism and the rule of law as enshrined in the 1945 Constitution. However, as Franz Magnis-Suseno (2016) argues in *Political Ethics*, Indonesian democracy is still frequently dominated by elite interests, reducing popular freedom to a mere electoral formality [3].

Similarly, Riswanda (2020), in his study *Freedom and Political Legitimacy in John Locke's Thought and Its Relevance for Indonesian Democracy*, finds that the principle of consent of the governed has not been fully realized in Indonesia's political system. Quoting Locke, Riswanda argues that democratic practice continues to position the people as objects of legitimacy rather than as subjects who freely determine the direction of government [4]. Thus, a significant gap exists between the ideal of freedom articulated by Locke and the reality of democracy in Indonesia. These studies reinforce the urgency of philosophical research that reexamines freedom as the moral foundation of legitimate government.

These analyses demonstrate that freedom, in Locke's view, cannot be understood partially. Freedom constitutes a moral political structure that unifies human rights, law, and legitimacy. From the perspective of political philosophy, freedom is not merely a political instrument but an ontological principle concerning human existence as a rational and autonomous being [5]. Therefore, any discussion of legitimate government must begin with an understanding of the dignity of human freedom. In the Indonesian context, this thought demands a critical reflection on the extent to which the democratic system genuinely respects citizens' freedom not only at the level of constitutional rhetoric but also in concrete socio-political practice.

Accordingly, this study is both relevant and urgent, given the persistent gap between the principle of freedom and the practice of power in Indonesian democracy. A renewed philosophical reading of political legitimacy is necessary to ensure that democracy does not lose its ethical dimension and that John Locke's thought serves as a rational foundation for a form of government that truly originates from the freedom of the people [6]. This paper therefore seeks to identify the relevance of Locke's conception of freedom as the foundation of legitimate government for the strengthening of a more substantive and humane Indonesian democracy.

2. Methodology

The method employed in this study is library research, which emphasizes critical analysis of various relevant written sources, including books, scholarly articles, reputable academic journals, historical documents, and the primary works

of John Locke, particularly *Two Treatises of Government*. All data are systematically analyzed through conceptual and comparative interpretation to identify the relevance of Locke's thought to the strengthening of substantive democracy in Indonesia. This approach enables the author to construct a coherent, objective, and in-depth argument without conducting field research, as the primary focus of the study lies in theoretical understanding and philosophical evaluation of Locke's conception of freedom within the Indonesian political context.

3. Discussion

3.1. Freedom as a Natural Right in the State of Nature According to John Locke

In Locke's political philosophy, the state of nature is not a realm of disorder as imagined by Hobbes, but a normative sphere governed by the law of nature, namely a moral law that can be recognized through reason. Here, human beings appear as rational subjects who from the outset possess the capacity to affirm ethical boundaries that preserve communal life [7]. Freedom in the state of nature is therefore not synonymous with unrestrained autonomy, but with reflective sovereignty that enables individuals to subject their will to universal principles affirming the preservation of life, integrity, and property. Natural rights are not metaphysical gifts that arbitrarily descend upon humanity, but articulations of human rationality as moral beings. Locke emphatically states that "reason... teaches all mankind... that being all equal and independent, no one ought to harm another in his life, health, liberty, or possessions [8].

Locke understands natural freedom as a normative field in which humans affirm their dignity through rational deliberation regarding what is permissible and impermissible. Freedom is not a license for manipulation or domination; rather, it is an expression of the capacity for just judgment that forms the ethical basis of human relations. Consequently, the state of nature presents the highest authority in the form of reason itself, not external coercive force [9]. In Locke's text, freedom is described as "a liberty to follow my own will in all things, where that rule prescribes not," meaning that humans are free insofar as they are governed by the law of nature rather than by arbitrary will. Locke's conception of freedom is thus both relational and egalitarian, grounded in the moral obligation to treat others as rational subjects occupying a position of ontological equality.

Departing from this anthropological structure, Locke dismantles the foundations of political absolutism, particularly the doctrine of the divine right of kings, which situates power as a sacred privilege [10]. Locke argues that any form of power that abolishes individual rational autonomy constitutes a direct violation of the law of nature, because such power reduces human beings to instruments devoid of will. It is for this ontological reason that freedom, rather than hereditary origin

or transcendent mandate, becomes the sole source of political legitimacy. Citing the same source, Locke writes that power which exceeds the limits of natural law “is no longer legitimate political authority but mere tyranny.” Consequently, Locke’s political theory simultaneously affirms the rejection of tyranny and formulates the foundational principles of modern democracy, namely government arising from the rational consent of free individuals.

3.2. Social Contract and the Consent of the Governed as the Foundation of Political Legitimacy

Within Locke’s political philosophy, the social contract is never reduced to a utilitarian agreement or a mere political transaction; rather, it represents a normative leap a moral transition from the condition of natural freedom to an institutionalized political community. Individuals in the state of nature, although guided by the law of nature, encounter epistemic and practical deficiencies in enforcing that law, particularly when conflicts, biased judgments, and the tendency to act as judges in one’s own case become unavoidable [11]. This critical awareness of limitation motivates individuals, voluntarily and reflectively, to establish political structures capable of regulating power relations for the protection of natural rights. In the Second Treatise, Locke asserts that only through “a community united into one body” can the law of nature be applied in a stable and impartial manner. Consequently, the consent of the governed functions as an ontological principle affirming that the state is a rational human construction rather than a supra-individual entity possessing metaphysical claims over its citizens.

Political consent, within Locke’s horizon, does not entail the surrender of freedom but its deliberative reconstruction within the public sphere. Individuals relinquish only one fundamental aspect: the right to personally enforce the law upon themselves. However, rights that constitute the existential core of humanity life, liberty, and property remain inalienable. The social contract thus represents the highest expression of rational autonomy, wherein the partial transfer of authority becomes a means of securing the conditions under which substantive freedom can be guaranteed. A government that operates outside the mandate of consent exceeds the boundaries of political legitimacy and enters the realm of destructive power [12].

Locke writes that when a government “acts contrary to the trust reposed in them,” it “dissolves itself,” having betrayed the normative foundation of its existence. At this point, morality and politics are inseparably intertwined: moral authority exists only insofar as it is continually renewed through the rational consent of the people.

The philosophical consequences of the consent of the governed are radical and subversive to all forms of authoritarianism. The people are not merely the source of legitimacy but also the ultimate moral authority determining the continuity of

government. Locke provides a normative foundation for the right to resistance, namely the right to oppose or overthrow a government that deviates from its original purpose. Resistance is not a destructive act, but an ethical intervention aimed at restoring the natural law that has been abused by rulers. Locke states that when a government violates the fundamental rights of the people, “they put themselves in a state of war with the people,” thereby forfeiting all claims to legitimacy [13]. Locke’s social contract theory thus constitutes not merely a critique of monarchical absolutism but the foundational architecture of modern democracy, demanding that power remain perpetually accountable to the moral community that authorizes it through rational consent.

3.3. Limits of State Power and the Supremacy of Law Within the Framework of Freedom

In Locke’s political philosophy, state power is the result of trust or political mandate conferred by the people through the social contract, as articulated in *Two Treatises of Government* (1689/1988) [14]. This power is strictly limited because its purpose is not domination but the protection of natural human rights: life, liberty, and property. Locke asserts that “the power of the government is a fiduciary power,” meaning that it is morally obligated to serve the public good. Any expansion of state power not grounded in the rational consent of the people constitutes a betrayal of that political mandate. Through this argument, Locke situates the limitation of power not merely as a technical constitutional matter but as an ethical principle rooted in human dignity as free beings [15].

The concept of the supremacy of law in Locke’s thought is grounded in the view that law is an expression of public rationality designed to secure freedom rather than to restrict it arbitrarily. Locke sharply criticizes laws that serve rulers rather than the public what modern political theory later terms rule by law rather than rule of law [16]. In the Second Treatise, Locke writes that legitimate law must be “established, settled, and known,” and must apply equally to all citizens, including rulers. Law must therefore be universal, predictable, and oriented toward the protection of fundamental rights. This principle affirms that legal legitimacy is moral rather than merely procedural, as law is legitimate only when it arises from collective consent and functions to safeguard freedom as the highest value of political life.

Locke’s conception of the right to resistance underscores that limitations on power are ineffective without corrective mechanisms enabling the people to oppose or replace governments that deviate from their mandate. In Section 222 of the Second Treatise, Locke forcefully states that when rulers “act contrary to the trust reposed in them,” the people are morally justified in replacing that government. This idea provides the philosophical foundation for modern constitutionalism, including checks and balances, public accountability, and constitutional supremacy. In post-reform Indonesia, particularly

after the experience of New Order authoritarianism, this principle remains relevant as a moral justification for strict oversight of executive, legislative, and judicial institutions and for preserving democratic space as an arena of political correction [17].

3.4. Freedom as the Moral Basis of State Legitimacy in Locke's Perspective

In Locke's political philosophy, freedom is not merely a natural right but the source of the state's moral legitimacy. Government is legitimate only insofar as it exercises power based on the free consent of individuals who exist in the state of nature. Such consent is rational because every human being possesses moral capacity to determine what is good for themselves. Therefore, any form of government that manipulates, oppresses, or coerces its citizens contradicts the essence of freedom and forfeits its moral legitimacy [18]. This understanding provides a robust philosophical foundation for critically evaluating power practices in modern democracies.

In the Indonesian context, the relevance of this concept becomes evident when political freedom is curtailed through restrictions on free speech, criminalization of criticism, and the deployment of state apparatus to maintain illusory stability. Such practices generate what contemporary political theorists describe as democratic backsliding, achieved through formally legal mechanisms aimed at suppressing substantive freedom. Consequently, popular consent no longer emerges from moral awareness but from structural pressure and institutional co-optation [19]. This contradicts Locke's principle that political legitimacy must be grounded in authentic, rational freedom.

Locke also emphasizes that political freedom must be understood as a condition enabling individuals to participate deliberatively in collective decision-making. Freedom therefore entails not merely the absence of coercion but equal access to information, public space, and political opportunity [20]. In Indonesia, socio-economic inequality obstructs the realization of substantive freedom. When large segments of the population lack the capacity or space to express political opinions, claims that the state is grounded in popular consent lose their normative validity.

3.5. Relevance of Locke's Concept of Freedom for Strengthening Substantive Democracy in Indonesia

Locke's thought on natural freedom provides an essential normative foundation for the development of a more substantively grounded democracy in Indonesia. Locke affirms that human freedom is a rational capacity to act in accordance with the moral law recognized by reason. Such freedom is not merely the ability to act, but an ethical condition that enables human beings to become autonomous political subjects. In the Indonesian context, this conception demands a public sphere

that is not only formally open, but also genuinely conducive to the articulation of citizens' opinions without structural pressure [21]. Only through freedom rooted in moral autonomy can popular consent acquire authentic legitimating force, rather than functioning merely as the product of mechanical electoral mobilization.

One of Locke's most significant contributions to the strengthening of Indonesian democracy lies in his principle that political power is delegative in nature and is never inherent in the state or in rulers themselves. Locke emphasizes that the people grant authority solely for the purpose of protecting fundamental rights, and that any deviation from this purpose nullifies the legitimacy of power. This principle calls for a serious reconfiguration of the relationship between government and citizens in Indonesia, particularly in the face of political practices still shaped by patronage and oligarchic structures [22]. The reinforcement of public accountability, bureaucratic transparency, and the independence of oversight institutions constitutes a direct normative implication of Locke's view that power remains legitimate only so long as it fulfills its protective function and does not degenerate into an instrument of domination.

In the realm of law and constitutionalism, Locke offers a conceptual framework capable of restoring the supremacy of law in Indonesia as a mechanism for limiting power. Locke maintains that legitimate law must be a "standing rule, known and authorized" that safeguards freedom and is not subject to the personal will of those who govern [23]. This idea provides important enlightenment for the development of Indonesian democracy, which continues to struggle with selective law enforcement, the criminalization of dissent, and the weak protection of civil liberties. When law is repositioned as an expression of public rationality rather than as a tool of power, Indonesian democracy can acquire a solid ethical foundation capable of preventing both procedural tyranny and majoritarian tyranny.

Locke's concept of freedom also furnishes a philosophical basis for constructing a democracy that respects human dignity by recognizing individuals as equal political subjects. Locke asserts that human beings are "equal and independent" from the state of nature, so that any form of political subordination not grounded in moral consent constitutes injustice. In the Indonesian context, this equality must be realized through equitable access to political education, fair economic distribution, and meaningful deliberative participation [24]. By adopting natural equality as a guiding principle of state governance, Indonesian democracy can move beyond a merely electoral model toward a democracy that acknowledges its citizens as moral agents with the right to be heard, considered, and respected.

Therefore, the relevance of Locke to Indonesian democracy lies in his insistence on preserving the intrinsic relationship between freedom and legitimacy. Locke argues that when a government fails to safeguard the freedom of its people, the people possess the right to withdraw their consent as an act of

moral restoration. This principle is not an invitation to instability, but rather an ethical foundation for a responsive and responsible democracy [25]. In the Indonesian context, this implies the necessity of political reforms that enable citizens to effectively monitor power, strengthen democratic institutions, and cultivate a critical public culture. Through the integration of Locke's principles rational freedom, the supremacy of law, accountability, natural equality, and consent-based legitimacy Indonesian democracy can be developed toward a more humane, deliberative, and substantively just form.

3.6. The Challenges of Indonesian Democracy Between Formal Freedom and Substantive Freedom

Constitutionally, Indonesian democracy has enshrined popular sovereignty as a fundamental principle of state governance; yet in political reality, this principle tends to remain a normative construct devoid of performative force. Political freedoms guaranteed through positive legal instruments do indeed provide a space for participation, but this space does not automatically translate into a substantive capacity for citizens to autonomously determine political directions. Electoral mechanisms, which should function as media for articulating the popular will, have instead become arenas for the reproduction of oligarchic power through money politics, patronage networks, and institutional co-optation [26]. From a Lockean perspective, this condition indicates that popular consent has been reduced to a procedural formality, stripped of its moral status as the source of political legitimacy. The state may still claim legality, yet it fails to fulfill the ethical prerequisites of legitimacy grounded in free and rational consent.

These challenges become even more complex when civil liberties are treated as domains to be controlled rather than as ontological prerequisites for a healthy democracy. Practices such as the criminalization of dissent, digital surveillance, and restrictions on the activities of civil society organizations reveal a tendency on the part of the state to frame freedom as a threat to stability rather than as a natural right that must be safeguarded. In Locke's perspective, such actions signal that the state has exceeded its political mandate, since power that restricts freedom of expression effectively places itself "in a state of war with the people" a concept that marks the loss of a government's moral legitimacy [27]. Deeply entrenched socio-economic inequalities further erode substantive freedom, as citizens living under conditions of material vulnerability lack the rational capacity to participate in the political arena as equal subjects.

These conditions lead to a fundamental question concerning the quality of consent in Indonesian democracy: do the people genuinely give authentic consent, or is such consent instead produced through political mechanisms already distorted by structural power? For Locke, political legitimacy cannot be separated from conditions of public rationality that enable citizens to evaluate, criticize, and correct governmental actions

without intimidation. However, structural inequalities whether economic, informational, or representational obstruct the formation of such deliberative capacities. As a result, popular consent loses both its epistemic and normative value, and democracy proceeds without a solid ethical foundation. This situation demonstrates that the core problem of Indonesian democracy lies not merely in electoral procedures, but in the failure to recognize the political dignity of citizens.

Therefore, the principal challenge of Indonesian democracy resides in the tension between constitutionally guaranteed formal freedom and the substantive freedom that constitutes the moral condition of political legitimacy within Locke's framework [28]. Formal freedom, absent adequate material, social, and institutional conditions, produces only pseudo-consent that is, consent that appears legally valid yet remains ethically defective because it does not emanate from genuine civic autonomy. Bridging this gap requires a structural transformation of Indonesian democracy, including the strengthening of independent legal institutions, the dismantling of political oligarchy, the democratization of the economy, the expansion of civil space, and the cultivation of a political culture that enables citizens to engage critically in public life [29]. As Locke himself emphasizes, democracy can be considered legitimate only when the people do not merely exist numerically, but are present as rational subjects who freely grant their consent. Without the restoration of substantive freedom, Indonesian democracy will continue to exist in a condition of fragile legitimacy.

4. Conclusion

John Locke's conceptual framework affirms freedom as a natural right that constitutes the moral, ethical, and political foundation of governmental legitimacy, wherein political power is considered valid only when it is derived from the rational consent of the people and exercised for the protection of fundamental rights such as life, liberty, and property. In the context of Indonesian democracy, although popular sovereignty is constitutionally acknowledged, political practice continues to exhibit structural inequalities, oligarchic dominance, and restrictions on substantive freedom, resulting in popular consent that remains largely formal in character. Drawing upon Lockean principles, the strengthening of Indonesian democracy must prioritize the supremacy of law, the accountability of power, natural equality, and the cultivation of an open and deliberative public sphere, so that political legitimacy is not merely procedural but genuinely ethical. In this way, citizens are affirmed as free moral subjects, and democracy can evolve as a humane, just, and substantively grounded political system.

Author Contributions

Marianus Elki Semit: Conceptualization, Writing – review & editing

Anselmus Elson Kolo: Project administration, Resources
Pius Pandor: Validation, Investigation

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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