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Collective Behavior and Social Movements in the Late-August 2025 Demonstrations: Solidarity and Mass Violence in the Case of Affan Kurniawan

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the dynamics of collective behavior and social movements that emerged during the late-August 2025 demonstrations in Indonesia, focusing on how structural grievances, triggering events, and media framing shaped the escalation of public mobilization. The research aims to explain why the protests, which initially centered on opposition to proposed parliamentary allowance increases, quickly expanded into a nationwide movement marked by strong expressions of solidarity and episodes of mass violence. Special attention is given to the death of Affan Kurniawan, an ordinary citizen who became an unintended victim during crowd-control operations, and whose case transformed the public's emotional and moral engagement with the demonstrations. Using a qualitative approach that combines interviews with civil society actors, analysis of organizational documents, and observations of mainstream and digital media content, the study identifies several key findings. Structural economic and political tensions created fertile conditions for mobilization, while the death of Affan Kurniawan acted as a powerful moral catalyst that broadened participation across diverse social groups. Civil society organizations played a crucial role in coordinating information, framing human-rights concerns, and maintaining the momentum of public engagement. Meanwhile, contrasting media narratives contributed to divergent interpretations of the protests, influencing public sentiment and state responses. The study concludes that interactions among grievances, symbolic events, and communication networks significantly amplify the scale and emotional intensity of contemporary social movements. Strengthening transparency, accountability, and rights-based approaches in protest management is essential to prevent similar escalations in the future.

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INTRODUCTION

The late-August 2025 demonstrations in Indonesia represent one of the most significant episodes of public unrest in the last decade, revealing the intricate interplay between structural pressures, symbolic events, and rapidly shifting media narratives. What began as a public expression of discontent toward the proposed increase in parliamentary housing allowances soon transformed into a nationwide wave of mobilization characterized by heightened emotions, moral outrage, and confrontations between citizens and state security forces. The death of Affan Kurniawan, an ordinary civilian who became an unintended victim of crowd-control operations, served as a pivotal symbolic moment that fundamentally altered the trajectory of the protests. His case generated a strong emotional resonance, elevating the demonstrations beyond economic grievances to issues of human rights, state accountability, and public morality. This introduction frames the urgency of studying the 2025 demonstrations by examining the broader structural context, establishing the empirical significance of the case, and identifying the theoretical gaps this study aims to address.

Urgency arises from the fact that contemporary protests are no longer shaped by structural demands alone; rather, they unfold within a dynamic communication environment where symbolic events can rapidly amplify or redirect collective behavior. Indonesia's sociopolitical landscape in 2025 exhibited multiple stressors: economic inequalities that persisted after the pandemic recovery period, rising public distrust toward political elites, and widening perceptions of disproportionate state response to dissent. These conditions align with what Smelser (1962) characterizes as "structural conduciveness" and "structural strain," which together create fertile ground for collective behavior to emerge. In the weeks preceding the protests, public discourse on digital platforms increasingly reflected frustration with the perceived insensitivity of policy decisions affecting citizens facing economic pressure. These online expressions, combined with spontaneous offline gatherings documented in preliminary civil society reports, indicate that collective sentiments were already forming prior to the large-scale mobilizations.

The incident involving Affan Kurniawan added an unforeseen emotional catalyst. Jasper (1997) describes events of this nature as "moral shocks"—sudden pieces of information that evoke strong moral or emotional responses and can rapidly mobilize individuals who were previously uninvolved in collective action. Affan's death embodied this mechanism: as a non-protester, his victimization generated empathy that transcended group boundaries, mobilizing communities such as online drivers, students, and local residents. Preliminary interviews with civil society actors reveal that after his death, participation expanded not merely in number but also in diversity of actors, demonstrating a shift in the protest's perceived stakes. This reinforces the argument that symbolic incidents can redefine the meaning and purpose of a movement, reorienting it from material demands to moral and humanitarian concerns.

The urgency of research also lies in understanding how communication ecologies—particularly digital platforms—shape public interpretations of political events. Previous demonstrations in Indonesia have illustrated the importance of online framing and counter-framing, but the 2025 protests displayed an intensified version of this dynamic. Mainstream media, independent outlets, and social media users circulated competing narratives regarding the legitimacy of the protests, the proportionality of state responses, and the circumstances surrounding Affan's death. According to Snow and Benford's (1988) framing theory, movements succeed or fail not only because of grievances but because of how these grievances are constructed, communicated, and contested. Preliminary observations from the field indicate that competing frames emerged within hours of Affan's death, some emphasizing disorder and

security risks, others highlighting human rights violations. This contestation contributed to polarized public sentiment and influenced subsequent mobilization patterns.

Despite extensive scholarship on social movements, several gaps remain in understanding the type of escalation observed in the 2025 demonstrations. Much of the existing literature on Indonesian protests focuses either on structural grievances (Aspinall, 2013), digital activism (Lim, 2018), or elite-mass relations (Tapsell, 2021). While valuable, these works often treat symbolic incidents merely as triggers rather than as central mechanisms shaping mobilization. Meanwhile, international literature frequently analyzes police violence or accident-related deaths through legal or human rights frameworks, but rarely connects these incidents to the emotional and symbolic dynamics that transform the character of mass mobilization. Moreover, previous studies tend to conceptualize media framing as a secondary factor, rather than an active force capable of accelerating or decelerating collective action. This leaves an analytical gap in understanding how real-time narrative competition influences the direction and emotional intensity of modern protests.

This study addresses these gaps by proposing an integrative analysis that places symbolic events, emotional resonance, and communication networks at the center of understanding collective behavior. Specifically, the research argues that the 2025 demonstrations cannot be fully explained through structural or resource-based theories alone. Instead, the movement's rapid expansion and emotional intensity must be understood through the interaction between pre-existing grievances, moral-shock events, and contested media narratives. This integrative perspective aligns with calls from contemporary movement scholars such as Della Porta and Diani (2006), who emphasize the need to consider the cultural, emotional, and communicative dimensions of mobilization alongside structural factors.

Another dimension of novelty arises from the study's empirical focus on the Affan Kurniawan case. While prior movement research in Indonesia has addressed cases of police violence or protest casualties, none has specifically examined how the death of a non-protester reshapes the moral legitimacy of a movement. Affan's case presents a distinct analytical opportunity: his death broadened the movement's appeal beyond typical activist circles, suggesting that moral narratives hold powerful mobilizing potential in Southeast Asian contexts where familial, communal, and ethical norms strongly influence public sentiment. By foregrounding this case, the study contributes a new understanding of how symbolic victimization affects public perceptions of state authority and citizen rights.

Furthermore, the research takes an explicit stance in relation to previous literature. It supports earlier findings that structural grievances are essential in enabling mobilization, corrects the tendency to treat triggering events as secondary, and debates the assumption that media framing merely reflects rather than shapes unfolding events. By positioning itself in this manner, the study not only situates its contributions within existing debates but also illustrates how the 2025 demonstrations challenge established theoretical assumptions about collective action in digitally mediated contexts.

In view of these considerations, the present study seeks to analyze the dynamics of collective behavior during the late-August 2025 demonstrations through an approach that integrates structural conditions, symbolic catalysts, and media framing processes. By doing so, the research aims to fill gaps in current scholarship and offer a novel perspective on the emotional and communicative mechanisms that drive contemporary social movements. Understanding these dynamics is essential not only for academic inquiry but also for informing policy discussions on protest governance, human rights protection, and transparent

communication during public crises. Ultimately, this study contributes to broader debates on how modern societies navigate the tensions between state authority, public expression, and rapidly shifting moral-political landscapes.

METHODS

This study employed a qualitative case-study design integrated with a focused literature-and-document review to analyze the dynamics of collective behavior during the late-August 2025 demonstrations. The case-study approach allowed for an intensive and contextual examination of the Affan Kurniawan incident and its role in shaping public mobilization, while the literature-review component synthesized theoretical and empirical studies on collective behavior, moral shocks, and media framing to position the case within broader academic debates (Yin, 2018; Della Porta & Diani, 2006). To adapt the method for an article requiring a literature-review emphasis, this design was modified by incorporating a systematic protocol for selecting documents, a structured mapping of previous research, and a thematic synthesis that linked the empirical findings with established theoretical frameworks (Petticrew & Roberts, 2006; Moher et al., 2009).

Data were collected from three primary sources: semi-structured interviews, organizational documents, and media content. A total of 12 interview participants were recruited using purposive and snowball sampling, consisting of civil-society actors, legal monitors, and protest participants with direct knowledge of the demonstrations. Interviews lasted between 45 and 70 minutes, were conducted via voice or video calls, audio-recorded with informed consent, and transcribed verbatim. Organizational documents included situation reports, statements, and legal analyses produced by human-rights NGOs during and immediately after the protests, which provided preliminary descriptions of casualties, police actions, and evolving public responses. Media data were sourced from mainstream outlets, independent journalism platforms, and social-media posts; these items were selected using inclusion criteria specifying that documents must directly reference the demonstrations or the Affan Kurniawan case and must have been published during the study period. Digital content included high-impact posts, trending hashtags, and verified statements from NGOs or journalists, ensuring relevance and traceability.

Data collection followed a structured procedure. First, a systematic search for news and NGO documents was conducted using predefined keywords such as “August 2025 demonstrations,” “Affan Kurniawan,” and “protest policing.” This search was logged using a PRISMA-style documentation procedure to track the identification, screening, and inclusion of materials (Moher et al., 2009). Interview recruitment proceeded simultaneously through purposive invitations and referrals. All text materials including interview transcripts, NGO reports, and media items were stored in a secure, password-protected folder. Each document was assigned a unique identifier to facilitate coding and cross-reference. Personal identifiers were removed from transcripts to protect informants’ confidentiality, and a coding log was maintained to ensure transparency during analysis.

Data analysis employed an integrative approach combining thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), content analysis, and triangulation. Researchers first familiarized themselves with the data through repeated readings and analytic memoing. Coding proceeded through an abductive strategy, using both deductive codes derived from theoretical constructs such as “structural strain,” “moral shock,” and “frame contestation,” and inductive codes emerging organically from the material (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Coding was performed using a collaboratively developed codebook that defined each code, its criteria, and sample excerpts. To enhance dependability, two coders independently analyzed a 20% subsample of the materials and

discussed discrepancies until consensus was achieved. Intercoder reliability was documented using Krippendorff's alpha for selected codes (Krippendorff, 2018). After coding, codes were clustered into thematic categories that captured the study's analytical focuses, including pre-existing grievances, emotional catalysts, and media narrative shifts. Themes were refined iteratively and cross-checked against both the empirical corpus and the existing literature synthesized earlier in the study.

Media materials received additional analysis through a structured content-analysis matrix that classified each media item by framing type, tone, and narrative emphasis. This technique enabled identification of dominant discursive patterns and their temporal evolution surrounding the Affan incident. Triangulation across interviews, organizational documents, and media content strengthened the validity of the findings by confirming patterns that appeared consistently across data sources while highlighting divergences that offered additional insight (Denzin, 1978). Throughout the analytic process, reflexive memos were used to document researcher assumptions, methodological decisions, and interpretive judgments, contributing to the study's confirmability. Ethical procedures were strictly followed, including informed consent, anonymization, secure data storage, and careful handling of public digital content in accordance with platform guidelines.

This methodological configuration allowed the study to not only capture the empirical complexity of the 2025 demonstrations but also to systematically integrate these findings with existing scholarship, as required in a literature-review-oriented article.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of interview data, organizational documents, and media sources reveals three major findings regarding the dynamics of collective behavior during the late-August 2025 demonstrations: (1) structural tension and dissatisfaction provided the initial foundation for mobilization; (2) the death of Affan Kurniawan functioned as a moral and emotional catalyst that accelerated solidarity; and (3) competing media narratives shaped public alignment, intensifying both support and confrontation. These results consistently appeared across the triangulated dataset and directly address the central research question on how collective behavior escalated in a short time span. The reliability of the findings is strengthened by convergence among different sources, including witness accounts, NGO monitoring reports, and the timeline of media publications.

The first finding indicates that public dissatisfaction toward elite insensitivity and economic pressure had already produced a shared sense of strain before mass mobilization occurred. Interview participants described “kecewaan yang menumpuk” and “ketidakadilan yang semakin terasa,” suggesting that grievances had reached a threshold that made the public receptive to protest calls. This pattern aligns with Tilly's (2004) concept of mobilizing structures, where accumulated grievances form organizational and emotional readiness for collective action. Unlike earlier Indonesian protests where student groups dominated early stages, the 2025 demonstrations showed a more decentralized, cross-class composition, confirming recent scholarship that contemporary mobilizations often arise from diffuse emotional climates rather than tightly organized groups (Goodwin & Jasper, 2011). The benefit of this result is the evidence that structural readiness not only formal organization plays a significant role in shaping who can be mobilized rapidly, a factor important for policymakers assessing early-stage protest signals.

The second finding concerns the prominent role of Affan Kurniawan's death as a moral shock that transformed a primarily policy-oriented protest into a national human-rights movement. Media timelines show that public engagement surged immediately after the incident,

with hashtags, vigils, and solidarity statements spreading across cities. Interview data also indicate that individuals who initially had no intention of joining the demonstrations participated after learning about Affan's case. Participants frequently described the incident as “ketidakadilan yang menyentuh semua orang,” which resonates with McAdam's (1996) argument that high-empathy events can dramatically expand participation by lowering emotional and moral barriers. This study's finding contributes a new perspective by demonstrating that the victim did not need to be a protest participant for the incident to reshape national narratives; instead, the symbolic power of innocence amplified the emotional reach of the event. The benefit of this insight lies in understanding how state actions can unintentionally escalate movements, especially when victims symbolize shared vulnerability among citizens.

The third finding relates to the role of media framing. The content-analysis data show that mainstream media and independent platforms circulated competing narratives: some framed the protests as disorder and security threats, while others emphasized humanitarian concerns and state accountability. This divergence shaped public opinion and influenced subsequent mobilization patterns. Several interviewees noted that alternative media “lebih cepat dan lebih empatik,” while some mainstream outlets were seen as “meminimalkan konteks kekerasan.” Compared with earlier studies on Indonesian media ecosystems that highlight polarization in political reporting, the present finding demonstrates a more pronounced frame contestation during crisis events, consistent with Koopmans and Olzak's (2004) claim that discursive opportunities shape protest visibility and legitimacy. The benefit of this finding is its implication for crisis communication: narrative competition can accelerate mobilization when the public perceives official communication as incomplete or untrustworthy.

In discussing these findings, the study offers contributions distinct from previous research. Earlier works on moral shocks often focus on activists or politically engaged groups (e.g., Gamson, 1992), whereas this study shows that moral shocks can mobilize individuals with minimal political background, especially when the triggering event symbolizes universal vulnerability. Additionally, while prior studies emphasize organizational capacity as a determinant of protest escalation, the present results indicate that emotional amplification via digital platforms can substitute for formal organization, a pattern that aligns with Earl et al. (2010), who describe technology-enabled “mobilization without organization.” Moreover, this research expands discussions on policing and public trust by demonstrating how irregular or forceful responses can rapidly undermine state legitimacy, intensifying solidarity among otherwise unconnected social groups.

The results also yield practical implications. Understanding that protest escalation can stem from symbolic incidents rather than planned political mobilization underscores the need for improved protest-policing protocols that prioritize de-escalation and transparent communication. Furthermore, identifying how narrative competition in digital spaces accelerates collective emotion suggests that state institutions and media outlets must adopt communication strategies that respond quickly, accurately, and empathetically to prevent misinformation and polarization. Finally, by showing how diverse social groups coalesce around shared moral narratives, the study informs civil-society actors about effective strategies for coalition-building in future advocacy efforts.

Overall, integrating structural grievances, symbolic catalysts, and media dynamics provides a comprehensive interpretation of why the 2025 demonstrations expanded as they did. The findings not only answer the research problem but also offer broader insights applicable to

contemporary social movements, reinforcing the significance of emotional and communicative factors in public mobilization today.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that the escalation of the late-August 2025 demonstrations was driven not by a single factor, but by the interaction of accumulated structural grievances, a powerful symbolic catalyst, and competing media narratives that shaped public interpretation of events. The death of Affan Kurniawan transformed the protests from a policy-specific dispute into a broader moral and humanitarian movement, revealing how emotional triggers can rapidly expand solidarity across otherwise unconnected social groups. At the same time, the divergence between official and alternative media framing created conditions in which public distrust intensified and mobilization accelerated. These intertwined mechanisms show that contemporary collective behavior cannot be understood solely through organizational structures or economic grievances; rather, it is shaped by dynamic emotional, symbolic, and communicative forces.

Conceptually, the study contributes to social-movement scholarship by demonstrating that moral-shock events involving non-protesters can redefine the legitimacy and scope of a movement, and by showing how digital media environments amplify such events in real time. These insights extend existing theories of mobilization by highlighting the significance of shared moral narratives in societies with strong communal norms. The research also carries practical implications: effective protest governance requires transparent communication, rights-based policing strategies, and rapid, credible responses to incidents involving civilian harm. Recognizing how narrative competition and symbolic victimization influence public mobilization can help policymakers, civil-society groups, and media institutions anticipate and mitigate escalation. Ultimately, this study underscores the need to view collective action not merely as political behavior, but as a dynamic process shaped by emotional resonance, symbolic meaning, and contested public narratives.

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