



Comparison of regulations on the criminal action of insultation against The President and Vice President in Indonesian Criminal Law

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Abstract

The regulation of criminal acts of insulting the President and/or Vice President is a sensitive issue in Indonesian criminal law, as it lies at the intersection of two legal interests: protecting the dignity of state institutions and guaranteeing freedom of expression in a democratic state governed by the rule of law. This study aims to comparatively analyze the provisions on criminalizing acts of insulting the President and/or Vice President in Law Number 1 of 1946 and Law Number 1 of 2023, and to examine their normative implications for the principle of freedom of expression. This study employs a normative legal research method, combining a statutory and a comparative legal approach, and analyzes it qualitatively in relation to applicable norms, principles, and legal constructions. The results show that the provisions in Law Number 1 of 1946 are still oriented towards protecting state power, a power-oriented law, characterized by the nature of ordinary crimes, broad formulations, and the potential for criminalization of public criticism. In contrast, Law Number 1 of 2023 demonstrates a paradigm shift toward protecting citizens' constitutional rights through rights-oriented law, through changing the nature of the offense to an absolute complaint offense, reducing the criminal penalty, and including an exception clause for criticism in the public interest. Nevertheless, this study finds that the use of evaluative terms in formulating the offense still leaves room for multiple interpretations, potentially creating legal uncertainty in practice. The novelty of this research lies in its comparative analysis, which not only highlights changes in norms but also reveals the legal limitations of criminal law policy reform in maintaining a balance between protecting the President's dignity and freedom of expression in Indonesia's constitutional democracy.

Keywords: Comparative criminal law, complaint offense, freedom of opinion, humiliation of the president, national criminal code

Introduction

Law Number 1 of 1946 concerning Criminal Law Regulations was enacted in a unique historical and philosophical context, specifically during the early phase of the Republic of Indonesia's founding, when the country was still in a state of political, social, and legal transition following independence. Philosophically, the validity of this law was not based on the formulation of autonomous national legal values, but rather on the urgent need to maintain legal continuity in order to prevent a legal vacuum. Therefore, Law Number 1 of 1946 essentially adopted and continued the validity of the *Wetboek van Strafrecht* legacy of the Dutch colonial era with limited adjustments to the symbols and subjects of state power. The criminal law paradigm carried over was still deeply entrenched in the philosophy of *lèse-majesté*, namely the absolute protection of the ruler as a representative of the state, so that criminal law was positioned as the primary instrument to maintain the authority of state power and order. Within this philosophical framework, the interests of the state and the stability of government are placed above the interests of individual citizens, including the right to freedom of expression, so that Law Number 1 of 1946 reflects a criminal law orientation that is power-oriented and repressive (Guntur *et al.*, 2025).

The criminal law paradigm, oriented toward protecting power, faces serious challenges as Indonesia's constitutional system evolves toward a democratic state based on the rule of law, with human rights as its primary foundation. In a constitutional democracy, freedom of expression is understood not only as an individual right but also as an

instrument of public oversight of the exercise of state power. However, the formulation of the offense of insulting the President and/or Vice President under the old criminal law regime created normative tension due to the lack of a clear delineation between legitimate criticism and criminal insult. This situation opens the door to criminalizing citizen expression and could chill public participation. Several contemporary studies emphasize that excessive reliance on criminal law to protect the dignity of those in power risks shifting its function from *ultima ratio* to an instrument for restricting freedom of expression. Thus, the validity of the norm on insulting the President in Law Number 1 of 1946 further demonstrates the inconsistency between the character of colonial-era criminal law and the principles of modern democracy (Ramdan, 2020).

This issue was then given constitutional articulation in Constitutional Court Decision Number 013-022/PUU-IV/2006. In this decision, the Constitutional Court declared that Article 134, Article 136 bis, and Article 137 of the Criminal Code conflicted with the 1945 Constitution of the Republic of Indonesia because they created special treatment for the President and/or Vice President that was inconsistent with the principle of equality before the law and had the potential to restrict freedom of expression. The Court emphasized that in a democratic state, the President, as a public official, must be open to public criticism and oversight. This decision marked a significant shift from protecting the honor of the ruler to protecting the constitutional rights of citizens, while also emphasizing that criminal law should not be used to silence legitimate critical expression. However, the Constitutional Court also opened up space for lawmakers to reformulate the protection of the

President's dignity, provided it is done proportionately and in line with democratic principles (Dewi, 2021).

This rationality then became a crucial foundation for formulating Law Number 1 of 2023 concerning the Criminal Code, as part of the agenda to recodify and decolonize national criminal law. Lawmakers sought to respond to the Constitutional Court's ruling by reformulating the criminal offense of insulting the President and/or Vice President through a more restrictive, measured approach. This is reflected in changes such as elevating the offense to an absolute complaint offense, reducing the potential for punishment, and including an exception clause for acts committed in the public interest or in self-defense. Normatively, this regulation is intended to balance the protection of the dignity of the presidential institution with the guarantee of freedom of expression in a democratic state. However, this reformulation still leaves room for debate, particularly regarding the potential for multiple interpretations in determining the boundary between criticism and insult. Therefore, a comparison of the provisions in Law Number 1 of 1946 and Law Number 1 of 2023 is crucial for assessing the extent to which national criminal law reform has truly shifted from a repressive to a more democratic paradigm that protects citizens' constitutional rights (Rahman *et al.*, 2025).

Methods

This study uses normative legal research, focusing on positive legal norms and drawing primarily on library materials. This approach was chosen because the study focuses on the regulation of the criminal act of insulting the President and/or Vice President, as stipulated by law and regulation. Therefore, the analysis focuses on applicable norms, principles, and legal constructions (Ariawan, 2013). The approaches used in this research include a statutory approach and a comparative legal approach. The statutory approach is used to systematically examine the legal provisions governing the crime of insulting the President and/or Vice President, specifically Law Number 1 of 1946 and Law Number 1 of 2023 concerning the Criminal Code. Meanwhile, the comparative legal approach is used to identify similarities and differences in the regulation of norms between the two laws, including the formulation and nature of the offense, the criminal penalties, and the regulatory philosophy.

The types of legal materials used include primary and secondary legal materials. Primary legal materials include the 1945 Constitution of the Republic of Indonesia, Law Number 1 of 1946, Law Number 1 of 2023, and Constitutional Court Decision Number 013-022/PUU-IV/2006. Secondary legal materials include criminal law textbooks, scientific journals, prior research findings, and expert opinions relevant to the issues of insulting the President and/or Vice President, freedom of expression, and criminal law reform (Wibowo, 2025).

The legal materials were collected through library research, exploring relevant laws and regulations, court decisions, and scientific literature. Furthermore, the collected legal materials were analyzed using qualitative descriptive analysis techniques, systematically describing and interpreting legal norms to gain a comprehensive understanding of the comparative provisions on the criminal offense of insulting the President and/or Vice President. The analysis emphasized the relationship between normative

construction, the rationality of lawmakers, and their implications for the principle of freedom of expression in a democratic state governed by the rule of law (Mahamum, 2021).

Results

1. Regulations on Criminal Acts of Insult against the President and/or Vice President in Law Number 1 of 1946

Based on the results of a normative review, the provisions on the criminal act of insulting the President and/or Vice President in Law Number 1 of 1946 still reflect the colonial criminal law paradigm oriented towards protecting state power. The provisions regarding insulting the President essentially adopt the formulation in the *Wetboek van Strafrecht*, which positions the President as a symbol of state power that must be absolutely protected. In this construction, insulting the President is positioned as an ordinary crime that can be processed without requiring a complaint from the injured party, with a relatively severe criminal threat (Sitompul *et al.*, 2015).

Normatively, the formulation of the offense of insult under the old criminal law regime did not provide a clear distinction between legitimate criticism and conduct that could be classified as an insult. This ambiguity left law enforcement officials open to interpretation, potentially allowing them to exploit it to restrict freedom of expression. Thus, the provisions in Law Number 1 of 1946 demonstrate the repressive nature of criminal law and are inconsistent with the principles of a democratic state based on the rule of law, which places freedom of expression as a fundamental right of citizens.

In addition to reflecting an orientation toward protecting state power, the provisions for the crime of insulting the President and/or Vice President in Law Number 1 of 1946 also demonstrate the retributive nature of criminal law, namely, placing punishment as a form of retribution for actions deemed to harm the authority of the state. This retributive paradigm is reflected in the emphasis on imposing imprisonment as the primary response to acts of insult, without any corrective or restorative mechanisms that take into account the context, motive, or public interest of the expression. Within the framework of classical criminal law theory, this approach aligns with the view that punishment is imposed solely as an appropriate retribution for the perpetrator's wrongdoing, rather than as a means of protecting rights or restoring social relations. As a result, insulting the President is treated as an attack on the state that must be punished by criminal sanctions, rather than as an expression that should be tested proportionally within the context of freedom of expression. This retributive character further underscores that Law Number 1 of 1946 does not position criminal law as the *ultima ratio*, but rather as a repressive instrument capable of limiting democratic space and public participation (Setiawan, 2024).

2. Regulations on Criminal Acts of Insult against the President and/or Vice President in Law Number 1 of 2023

In contrast to the previous criminal law regime, Law Number 1 of 2023 concerning the Criminal Code demonstrates a change in approach to regulating the crime of insulting the President and/or Vice President. The lawmakers reformulated the offense of insult by emphasizing a balance between protecting the dignity of the

presidential institution and guaranteeing freedom of expression (Kaharuddin *et al.*, 2025)^[1].

A fundamental change is evident in the offense, which is defined as an absolute complaint offense, so that law enforcement can be carried out only upon a complaint from the President or Vice President. Furthermore, the criminal penalties are formulated more proportionally than in previous provisions. They are accompanied by an exception clause confirming that criticism made in the public interest or in self-defense cannot be punished. Normatively, this regulation reflects legislators' efforts to internalize the principle of *ultima ratio* in criminal law and to reduce the potential for criminalizing critical public expression.

In addition to demonstrating a shift toward a more proportional approach, the regulation of the crime of insulting the President and/or Vice President in Law Number 1 of 2023 also reflects a restorative orientation in criminal law policy. This orientation is reflected in the determination that the offense of insult is an absolute complaint offense, placing the President or Vice President as the party directly determining whether to continue the criminal process, thus opening up space for resolution outside formal criminal mechanisms. From the perspective of modern criminal law theory, this approach demonstrates a shift from the logic of retaliation to the restoration of legal and social relations between the aggrieved party and the perpetrator, by prioritizing the cessation of conflict and preventing the escalation of the criminalization of public expression. While not explicitly adopting restorative justice mechanisms, the construction of the complaint offense and the exceptions to criticism in the National Criminal Code demonstrate the legislators' efforts to limit the use of imprisonment as the primary response, while simultaneously encouraging more dialogical and contextual solutions.¹⁴¹⁵ Thus, Law Number 1 of 2023 can be understood as a form of transition in criminal law policy towards a more corrective and restorative approach. However, the implementation of these restorative values remains highly dependent on law enforcement practices and officials' sensitivity to the principle of freedom of expression.

3. Comparison of Criminal Law Regulations and Paradigm Shifts

The comparison results show a significant shift in paradigm between Law Number 1 of 1946 and Law Number 1 of 2023. In the old criminal law regime, protection for the President focused more on state interests and the stability of power. In contrast, under the National Criminal Code, this approach is directed toward a more proportional and balanced form of protection (Widyaardanda, 2026).

These differences can be seen in several key aspects, namely the formulation of the elements of the offense, the nature of the offense, and the potential criminal penalties. While Law No. 1 of 1946 defined insulting the President as an ordinary offense with broad scope for interpretation, Law No. 1 of 2023 defines the offense more restrictively through a complaint mechanism and exceptions for criticism. This change marks a shift from a power-oriented to a rights-oriented law paradigm, in which criminal law no longer serves solely to protect power but also protects citizens' constitutional rights.

4. Implications for the Principle of Freedom of Expression

From a legal perspective, the reformulation of the criminal offense of insulting the President and/or Vice President in Law Number 1 of 2023 has positive implications for protecting freedom of expression. By limiting prosecution through complaints and exempting criticism, the risk of a chilling effect on freedom of expression can be minimized (Jefri *et al.*, 2025).

However, the analysis also shows that the new regulation is not entirely free from potential problems. The use of evaluative terms such as "attacking honor or dignity" still leaves room for multiple interpretations in law enforcement practices. Therefore, the effectiveness of protecting freedom of expression depends not only on normative formulations but also on strict, democratic-oriented interpretation by law enforcement officials. Therefore, for more detail, below is a comparison of the provisions for the crime of insulting the President and Vice President in Indonesian criminal law, specifically Law Number 1 of 1946 and Law Number 1 of 2023:

Table 1: Comparison of the Provisions for Criminal Acts of Insult against the President and/or Vice President in the Old Criminal Code and the National Criminal Code

Comparative Aspect	Criminal Code in Law No. 1 of 1946	National Criminal Code in Law No. 1 of 2023
Philosophical Basis	Based on the paradigm of protecting state power (power-oriented law), which is influenced by the colonial legacy of the doctrine of <i>lèse-majesté</i> .	Based on a balance between protecting the dignity of state institutions and the constitutional rights of citizens (rights-oriented law).
Position of President/Vice President	Positioned as a symbol of state power that is absolutely protected from criticism.	Positioned as a public official and symbol of the state who remains open to criticism within certain limits.
Nature of the Offense	Ordinary crimes can be processed without a complaint from the President/Vice President.	Absolute complaint offenses can be processed only on the President's or the Vice President's complaint.
Scope of Action	The formulation of the crime is general and broad, without a clear boundary between criticism and insult.	The formulation of the crime is more restrictive with more precise normative boundaries.
Criminal Exceptions	There are no explicit exceptions to criticism or public interest.	There are exceptions to actions carried out in the public interest or self-defense.
Criminal Threats	The criminal threat is relatively severe and primarily involves imprisonment.	The criminal threat is more proportional, combining imprisonment and fines.
Potential for Criminalization	High, because it opens up a broad scope for interpretation for law enforcement officers.	More limited, though still leaving room for multiple interpretations in evaluative terms.
Implications for Freedom of Expression	Potentially causing restrictions on freedom of expression and a chilling effect.	More accommodating to freedom of expression within the framework of a democratic state of law.
Criminalization Orientation	Retributive (Revenge)	Restorative (Recovery)

Discussion

The results of the study indicate that the differences in the provisions for the crime of insulting the President and/or Vice President between the old Criminal Code and the National Criminal Code are not merely editorial, but rather reflect a more fundamental shift in the paradigm of criminal law policy. In the old Criminal Code, which was in effect under Law Number 1 of 1946, insulting the President was formulated within the framework of protecting state power, placing the stability of the government and the authority of the ruler as primary interests. This paradigm aligns with the character of colonial criminal law, which positioned the law as a tool of social and political control, so that criticism of the ruler could potentially be treated as a threat to the state.

In contrast, the provisions of Law Number 1 of 2023 demonstrate lawmakers' efforts to align criminal law with the principles of a democratic state based on the rule of law and the development of human rights. The establishment of the offense of insulting the President and/or Vice President as an absolute offense can be understood as a mechanism to limit state intervention in the realm of freedom of expression. With this mechanism, the state is no longer automatically a party of record; instead, it delegates law-enforcement decisions to the President or Vice President as the aggrieved party. Theoretically, this construction strengthens the principle of proportionality and reaffirms the function of criminal law as *ultima ratio* (Malau, 2023).

However, these changes do not necessarily eliminate all normative issues. Although the National Criminal Code includes an exception clause for criticism made in the public interest or self-defense, the use of evaluative terms such as "attacking honor or dignity" still leaves room for broad interpretation. In law enforcement practice, the blurred line between criticism and insult can create legal uncertainty if not accompanied by a strict interpretation that protects freedom of expression. Therefore, the success of norm reformulation depends not only on the law's text but also on legal culture and law enforcement officials' sensitivity to democratic principles.

From a freedom of expression perspective, the new provisions in Law Number 1 of 2023 are a normative compromise between the need to protect the dignity of the presidential institution and the state's obligation to guarantee citizens' constitutional rights. This compromise reflects the recognition that the President, as a public official, cannot be fully equated with ordinary citizens, yet he should not be portrayed as immune from criticism. To some extent, protection of the President's dignity remains possible as long as it is not used to silence legitimate critical expression relevant to the public interest.

Thus, this discussion confirms that the updated provisions on the criminal offense of insulting the President and/or Vice President in the National Criminal Code constitute a more progressive normative step compared to the previous criminal law regime. However, this progressiveness remains normative and requires oversight at the implementation level. Without clear and consistent interpretative guidelines, the potential for abuse of the norm remains open, thus risking the primary goal of criminal law reform, which is to strengthen democracy and freedom of expression, not being optimally achieved.

1. Comparison with Previous Research and Research Novelty Value

In the context of academic studies on the crime of insulting the President and/or Vice President, previous research has

generally focused on two main trends. First, research that emphasizes the constitutionality of the article on insulting the President, particularly in relation to Constitutional Court Decision No. 013-022/PUU-IV/2006 and the protection of freedom of expression. Research in this group generally asserts that the article on insulting the President in the old Criminal Code is unconstitutional because it creates preferential treatment for the President and has the potential to silence public criticism. Second, research analyzing the provisions on insulting the President in the Draft Criminal Code or the National Criminal Code focuses more on normative controversies and concerns about reinstating articles previously annulled by the Constitutional Court (Annas *et al.*, 2021).

In contrast to these studies, this article not only questions the constitutionality and normative controversy in part, but also systematically compares the regulations between the old criminal law regime based on Law Number 1 of 1946 and the national criminal law regime based on Law Number 1 of 2023. With a comparative legal approach, this study situates changes in the regulations on the offense of insulting the President and/or Vice President within the shifting paradigm of criminal law policy, from a power-oriented to a rights-oriented model.

Furthermore, some previous studies have tended to focus on the Constitutional Court's norms or decisions in isolation, without comprehensively linking them to the legislators' rationale in the process of recodifying the Criminal Code. This study offers a different perspective by exploring the normative continuity and discontinuity between the Constitutional Court's decisions and the formulation of the offense of insult in the National Criminal Code. Thus, this study not only assesses whether the new regulations are constitutional but also assesses the extent to which these reforms truly internalize the principles of democracy and freedom of expression in the design of criminal law policies (Ntaki, 2024).

The novelty of this research lies in the integration of philosophical, normative, and comparative analyses of two historically and ideologically distinct criminal law regimes. This research demonstrates that although the National Criminal Code has introduced an absolute complaint offense mechanism and an exception clause against criticism, these changes have not eliminated potential implementation problems resulting from the use of open-ended evaluative concepts. Thus, this research enriches the body of criminal law scholarship not only by identifying normative changes but also by offering a critical reading of the limits of criminal law reform's progressiveness in the context of Indonesian constitutional democracy.

Conclusion

Based on the research and discussion, it can be concluded that the regulation of the criminal act of insulting the President and/or Vice President in Indonesian criminal law has undergone a significant paradigm shift between the regime of Law Number 1 of 1946 and that of Law Number 1 of 2023. In the old Criminal Code, the regulation of insulting the President was rooted in the paradigm of protecting power, which positioned the President as an absolute symbol of the state, thereby opening the door to restrictions on freedom of expression and the potential criminalization of public criticism. This paradigm is not entirely in line with the development of democratic

principles based on the rule of law, which demands a balance between the authority of the state and the constitutional rights of citizens.

In contrast, the National Criminal Code demonstrates an effort to reform criminal law policy by shifting the orientation of protection from power-oriented law to rights-oriented law. This shift is reflected in changes such as treating offenses, like insulting the President and/or Vice President, as absolute complaint offenses, reducing the criminal penalty, and including an exception for criticism made in the public interest or in self-defense. Normatively, this regulation is more accommodating to freedom of expression and reflects the legislators' response to Constitutional Court Decision No. 013-022/PUU-IV/2006.

However, this study found that the reform has not eliminated normative and implementation issues. The use of evaluative terms such as "attacking honor or dignity" still leaves room for multiple interpretations, potentially creating legal uncertainty in law enforcement practices. Therefore, although the National Criminal Code is normatively more progressive than the old one, the effectiveness of protecting freedom of expression remains highly dependent on law enforcement officials' interpretation and application of the norms.

The novelty of this research lies in its comparative analysis, which not only highlights changes in the wording of norms but also reveals the shifting paradigm of criminal law policy and the limits of the progressiveness of reforming the Criminal Code in the context of Indonesian constitutional democracy. Thus, this research provides a conceptual contribution to understanding the dynamics of the relationship between protecting the dignity of state institutions and guaranteeing freedom of expression.

Based on these conclusions, it is recommended that lawmakers further refine the formulation of the criminal offense of insulting the President and/or Vice President in the National Criminal Code, particularly by clarifying the normative boundaries between legitimate criticism and actions that can be classified as criminal insult. This clarity is important to minimize the room for multiple interpretations and prevent the misuse of norms in law enforcement practices.

Furthermore, law enforcement officials are expected to apply the provisions on insulting the President and/or Vice President carefully, proportionately, and in accordance with the principle of freedom of expression as a constitutional right of citizens. Interpretation of norms should always refer to the spirit of the Constitutional Court Decision and the principle of *ultima ratio* in criminal law, so that criminal law is not again used as an instrument to limit democracy.

For further research, it is recommended to develop this study through an empirical approach by examining the practice of applying the article on insulting the President and/or Vice President after the enactment of Law Number 1 of 2023. This approach will provide a more comprehensive picture of the effectiveness of criminal law reform and its impact on freedom of expression in the practice of national life.

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