

## Managing Face: A Pragmatic Analysis of Political Interview Discourse in Indonesia

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### Abstract

This study aims to analyze the facework strategies used by Indonesian political actors in public interviews to maintain their self-image and mitigate accountability in front of the public. Using a pragmatic approach with Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory framework and Goffman's (1967) face theory, this study analyzed transcripts of the political talk show Mata Najwa, September 2023 edition, featuring Anies Baswedan (ABW) and Muhaimin Iskandar (MI). The analysis results showed that the three main strategies, positive politeness, negative politeness, and off-record politeness, were used selectively and contextually in responding to sensitive, confrontational, or ideological questions. Positive politeness was widely used to build solidarity and shared values, negative politeness to show caution and avoid direct responsibility, and off-record politeness to convey messages implicitly through metaphors, humor, and religious symbolism. Theoretically, these findings expand the development of politeness theory by incorporating dimensions of religiosity, hierarchy, and collective orientation that are unique to the political context of Southeast Asia. Empirically, this study shows that facework strategies function not only as linguistic tools but also as means of ideological and cultural framing in the Indonesian public discourse space.

**Keywords:** facework, politeness, political interview, politeness strategy

## INTRODUCTION

Political communication is integral to the democratic system that mediates between political actors and society through symbolic representation and discourse strategies. Within the framework of pragmatic and applied linguistics, political communication is understood not only as a process of conveying information but also as a social practice that shapes power relations, ideology, and public perception (Chilton, 2004; van Dijk, 2011; Wodak, 2015). Various studies indicate that political discourse has distinctive characteristics in lexical choice, discourse structure, and interaction strategies that are strategically designed to influence public understanding and attitudes. In the global context, research on facework in the political sphere has grown rapidly, especially in Western countries that tend to be individualistic, where politeness strategies are often directed at protecting self-image and individual freedom. Conversely, in Asian countries with a collectivist orientation, such strategies often prioritize the protection of group face (mutual-face) and the maintenance of social harmony, giving rise to hierarchical structures and prevailing social norms. These differences make cross-cultural studies of facework in political communication increasingly relevant, particularly for understanding how politeness strategies are modified according to the sociocultural context of each country.

In this arena, language functions not only as a means of conveying messages but also as a mechanism for constructing, maintaining, and reconstructing political identities. One of the most dynamic forms of political communication is political interviews in the mass media, which serve as an open discursive space for political actors to convey their positions directly to the public. Political interviews, especially those live and guided by critical journalists, are high-risk communication situations because every statement can influence public perception widely. Therefore, political actors must be able to use careful linguistic strategies to remain credible and responsive without being trapped in absolute accountability. In this context, face and facework strategies become important instruments in managing one's image in front of an audience.

The concept of face was introduced by Goffman (1967) as a representation of the social image that a person wants to maintain in social interactions. This theory emphasizes that individuals behave in such a way as to maintain the consistency of their social identity, especially in face-to-face interactions. This theory was further developed by Brown & Levinson (1987) through the politeness theory, which explains how speakers use linguistic strategies to mitigate actions that have the potential to threaten the face of the interlocutor, known as face-threatening acts (FTAs). They classify these strategies into four main categories: bald-on record, positive politeness, negative politeness, and off-record. Each strategy has different pragmatic goals, from building social closeness to maintaining distance and avoiding explicit accountability. In the context of political interviews, the choice of strategy is greatly influenced by the situation, power relations, and public expectations.

Aspect	Individualistic Culture	Collectivistic Culture
Face Orientation	<i>Self-face</i> (protecting one's image)	<i>Other-face</i> and <i>Mutual-face</i> (protecting others'/group image)
Common Facework Strategies	Assertive, direct, low-context	Indirect, avoiding, high-context
Conflict Management Style	Competing, dominating, confronting	Avoiding, obliging, integrating
Communication Goal	Message clarity, personal autonomy	Relational harmony, social appropriateness
Typical Practices	Expressing disagreement openly	Topic shifting, use of humor, soft metaphors
Cultural Fit	Suitable for egalitarian and open societies	Suitable for hierarchical and context-sensitive societies

Table 1 Politeness Strategies (Brown & Levinson, 1987)

In addition to the classic politeness theory framework of Brown & Levinson (1987), developments in politeness studies over the past two decades have introduced new perspectives that place greater emphasis on the dimensions of relationships and cultural context. Spencer-Oatey (2000), through the concept of rapport management, emphasizes that politeness is not only related to efforts to avoid face-threatening acts, but also includes the maintenance and management of social relationships in a sustainable manner.

Meanwhile, Culpeper (2011), through his study of (im)politeness, shows that politeness and impoliteness can function strategically, both to build solidarity and to assert power and social distance. Research in non-Western contexts also highlights the need to adapt this theory, as done by Mao (1994), who examined politeness in Chinese culture with a collectivist orientation, and Kádár & Haugh (2013), who proposed a “relational work” approach to understanding cross-cultural politeness practices. These developments strengthen the argument that studies of politeness in the political field require an analytical framework that takes into account interpersonal relationships, power strategies, and the cultural values underlying interactions.

Furthermore, Ting-Toomey (2005) developed the Face Negotiation Theory, which focuses on cultural differences in selecting facework strategies. In collectivistic cultures such as Indonesia, communication strategies prioritizing harmony, hierarchy, and politeness are preferred over confrontational strategies. Strategies such as direct avoidance, metaphors, and deferral to authority are often used to defuse conflict and maintain social stability. Collectivistic cultures view the face as a shared property, not merely an individual identity. Hence, facing violations has implications for the individual and the group or institution they represent. Therefore, in Indonesian political communication, facework strategies are often indirect, using symbolic language and framing issues in normative or religious narratives. This framework is important for understanding the pragmatic and ideological motivations behind the linguistic behavior of political actors in public.

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Table 2 Taxonomy of Face Negotiation Theory (Ting-Toomey, 2005)

In the growing body of research on facework and politeness in political discourse, numerous studies have shown how public figures employ linguistic strategies to manage impressions and mitigate accountability during high-stakes communication. For instance, studies have emphasized that political exchanges involve unique demands on facework due to their institutional and adversarial nature, especially in parliamentary and broadcast settings (Bayley, 2004; Bull, 2015; Bull & Fetzer, 2010; Ilie, 2018; Tracy, 2017). Research has also examined how metaphor serves as an indirect facework strategy in Asian political campaigns, which enables politicians to project favorable identities and delegitimize opponents (Brugman et al., 2019; Charteris-Black, 2013; Musloff, 2016; Yap, 2016).

In the Indonesian context, investigations have revealed how face-threatening acts (FTAs) in debates are carefully managed through both positive and negative politeness strategies that reinforce the salience of Brown and Levinson's theory in collectivist cultures (Rezkiyan & Simatupang, 2024). Furthermore, empirical studies have documented the extensive use of positive politeness in Mata Najwa interviews, especially among international speakers, supporting the notion that politeness is strategically used to enhance in-group identity and reduce social distance (Bintangtrichaya et al., 2023; Haryanto et al., 2024; Yafi & Maris, 2025).

In the research corpus on political interviews, several key studies show how (im)politeness is produced and negotiated institutionally. Macaulay (2017) details how 'loaded' questions and the choice of (im)politeness strategies position interviews and interviewees within the media accountability regime. These findings are linked to a series of studies that describe the genre devices of political interviews, from media references as markers of interaction opening/closing (Fetzer, 2006) to identity construction through 'voicing' and 'ventriloquizing' (Lauerbach, 2006), and how interviewees ask questions to manage discursive positions (Mammadov & Agamaliyeva, 2023). On the rhetorical strategy side, a study shows how metaphors are deliberately used in non-institutional interviews to project political identity and shift responsibility (Heyvaert et al., 2020), while the latest comparative study involving Indonesia emphasizes the importance of ideological/cultural frameworks (e.g., moral-religious issues) in political framing (Schäfer, 2024). Relevant to the religious context of Southeast Asia, the role of Islamic discourse in contemporary political communication practices in Asia emphasizes that the religious dimension is often a source of legitimacy and symbolic face-work (Kurnia et al., 2024).

Other studies underscore the cultural variation in face orientation and communication style. Pan (2012), for instance, found that indirect facework strategies in Chinese survey interviews can either reduce the perception of impoliteness or appear evasive, depending on contextual expectations. Harrington (2019) advanced the theoretical notion of "institutional face," showing that professionals, including political actors, must navigate between personal and institutional face needs. In local Indonesian contexts, Purwitarini (2020) demonstrated the prevalence of both positive and negative politeness strategies in interviews discussing sensitive social topics, echoing the adaptability of Brown and Levinson's framework in multicultural societies. These findings are complemented by Lyashuk (2024), who analyzed rhetorical facework in the speech of Julia Gillard, illustrating how identity, gender, and institutional power intersect in strategic face management. Collectively, these studies reveal not only the complexity of face negotiation in political

discourse but also the cultural sensitivity required in interpreting pragmatic choices, particularly in collectivistic societies like Indonesia.

Although studies on facework have developed rapidly in the field of intercultural communication and interpersonal interaction (Harrington, 2019; Pan, 2012; Tracy, 2017), research specifically examining the use of facework strategies in open and live Indonesian political interviews is still rare. Political discourse in Indonesia is rich in cultural nuances, symbolism, and collectivist values that influence how politicians present themselves and respond to criticism. Television programs such as *Mata Najwa*, which feature critical dialogues between journalists and politicians, offer a strategic space for empirically analyzing facework practices. However, such interactions have not been extensively studied through the lens of pragmatic theory, particularly those focusing on politeness strategies and face management. In this context, political interviews can be viewed as a highly representative linguistic arena for observing how political actors deal with public pressure, maintain legitimacy, and shape their leadership image.

Therefore, this study examines the facework strategies employed by Indonesian political figures in high-risk, public political interview situations. This study focuses on the forms of politeness strategies that emerge in verbal interactions between politicians and interviewers, as well as the pragmatic functions of each strategy in the Indonesian social and cultural context. The main question is: How do political figures use facework strategies to manage their image and mitigate public accountability in high-risk political interviews? This question stems from the assumption that in the context of public communication, political actors convey rational arguments and engage in strategic impression management through language. This study is expected to contribute to developing political pragmatics and provide a deeper understanding of the relationship between language, power, and culture in Indonesian public discourse.

This study offers a thorough theoretical framework for examining politicians' language use in public by fusing Ting-Toomey's (2005) face negotiation theory, Brown & Levinson's (1987) politeness theory, and Goffman's (1967) theory of face. Additionally, this

study applies these theories to the reality of political communication in Indonesia, which is rich in religious considerations, cultural symbols, and politeness standards. In addition to identifying the language methods used, this study seeks to comprehend how these strategies work to uphold honor, evade direct accountability, and frame political stances in a competitive debate. Therefore, it is anticipated that this study will contribute to the body of knowledge on political pragmatics and create opportunities for contemplation regarding communication ethics in Indonesia's modern democratic processes.

## **RESEARCH METHOD**

This qualitative research employs pragmatic discourse analysis to provide a comprehensive and in-depth exploration of the linguistic strategy used in a formal political interaction context (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Goffman, 1967). This study does not aim to generalize the findings but to comprehensively picture the strategy forms and functions of politeness based on the context of speech. The primary focus of this present study is to investigate the politeness strategy (facework) utilized by political figures in a televised interview. This research is grounded in Brown & Levinson's (1987) politeness theory and Goffman's (1967) concept of face as its primary analytical framework, both of which are widely applied in the study of interpersonal and institutional discourse.

The data source of this study is the interview transcript from the September 2023 episode of the *Mata Najwa* program, featuring two main interviewees: Anies Baswedan (ABW) and Muhaimin Iskandar (MI), moderated by Najwa Shihab (NS). The episode was selected purposively due to its high public engagement, controversial political themes, and the critical questioning style of the interviewer, which created high-risk communication scenarios. The transcripts were compiled and transcribed verbatim from the official broadcast and numbered for each speech unit to facilitate identification. The total duration of the program was approximately 120 minutes, producing over 18,000 words in the verbatim transcript.

The data were collected through the following steps: (1) rewatching the interview session and note-taking the relevant speech unit; (2) transcribing verbatim with speaker

code (ABW, MI, NS); (3) selecting quotations containing indication politeness strategy use based on the interactional context and pragmatic content. Inclusion criteria for quotation selection included the presence of face-threatening acts (FTAs), explicit or implicit politeness markers, and contextually relevant responses to sensitive or ideological questions. Quotations unrelated to the research focus, such as purely procedural talk, were excluded.

Furthermore, the data were analyzed through the following steps: (1) data coding was carried out using the main categories of politeness strategies according to Brown and Levinson (1987): positive politeness, negative politeness, and off-record politeness; (2) each quotation was further analyzed to identify contextual sub-strategies, such as religious fatalism, delegation to authority, humor, metaphor, etc.; (3) data were categorized manually by considering pragmatic functions, lexical structures, and Indonesian sociocultural context; (4) the coding results were then presented in tables listing the quote number, speaker, strategy used, and analytical explanation; (5) after all data were analyzed (total of over 100 quotations), frequency tabulation and identification of patterns in the use of politeness strategies based on main categories and sub-strategies were conducted. To enhance the credibility of the analysis, peer debriefing sessions with two experts in pragmatics were conducted, and coding consistency was checked through inter-coder agreement procedures. Ethical considerations were also addressed by ensuring that the analysis relied solely on publicly available broadcast material without altering or misrepresenting the original utterances.

## **RESULTS & DISCUSSION**

### **Positive Politeness Strategy**

Positive politeness is a dominant form of linguistic behavior used by the political actors in the interview session, especially when discussing sensitive issues on the political coalition, declaration of a candidate pair, and internal party dynamics. This interview featured public figures Anies Baswedan (ABW) and

Muhaimin Iskandar (MI) as the main interviewees. They explained forming the presidential and vice-presidential candidate pair from the Coalition for Change.

Facework Sub-strategy	Occurrences	Percentage
Alignment & Solidarity	1	2.94%
Appeal to Shared Value	2	5.88%
Appeal to Solidarity	1	2.94%
Assertion of Integrity	1	2.94%
Collective Framing	1	2.94%
Constructive Framing	1	2.94%
Cultural Wisdom	2	5.88%
Deference & Praise	1	2.94%
Empathy and Moral Support	1	2.94%
Empathy for Public	1	2.94%
Equality Framing	1	2.94%
Hospitality	1	2.94%
Inclusive Framing	1	2.94%
Inclusiveness	1	2.94%
Institutional Praise	1	2.94%
Moderation & Norm Appeal	1	2.94%
Modesty & Tolerance	1	2.94%
Moral Framing	1	2.94%
Moral Integrity	1	2.94%
Optimistic Alignment	1	2.94%
Philosophical Aphorism	1	2.94%
Preserving Harmony	1	2.94%
Proverbial Wisdom	1	2.94%
Religious Humility	1	2.94%
Respect for Institutions	1	2.94%
Self-Humbling	1	2.94%
Shared Experience	2	5.88%
Solidarity Appeal	1	2.94%
Stating Norms	1	2.94%
Team Solidarity	2	5.88%

**Table 1** Positive Politeness Sub-strategy of Facework

Based on the analysis of the 34 data on facework strategy in positive politeness, there are 30 variations of sub-strategy with various pragmatic functions. This sub-strategy portrays speakers' communicative effort to ease tensions, rebuild legitimacy, and strengthen moral and emotional closeness with the public.

In this interview context, the interviewees faced tough questions from Najwa Shihab, particularly regarding allegations of "political betrayal" and alleged closed communication between elites. Amid this pressure, positive politeness became an important tool for restoring their image, explaining their political positions, and avoiding open conflict.

Several dominant sub-strategies appeal to shared values, cultural wisdom, and team solidarity. For example, when ABW obtained a question about the formation of a coalition that surprised the public, he used the Appeal to Shared Values to frame his decision in universal values such as meritocracy:

*"Ini perlu ada prinsip meritokrasi..." (ABW)*

'There needs to be a principle of meritocracy...' (ABW)

In this excerpt, ABW tries to shift attention away from political maneuvering to values. He builds an image that decisions are not based solely on political pragmatism but on principles shared by the public.

Aside from that, MI used cultural wisdom to ease negative perceptions about the shift of his political position:

*"Satu musuh sangat berat dibanding seribu kawan..." (MI)*

'One enemy is a greater burden than having a thousand allies...' (MI)

This quote was presented to explain how coalition dynamics should not be viewed as conflict but rather as an effort to expand political friendships. It relies on traditional expressions to reach the public emotionally and culturally.

Meanwhile, when NS brought up ABW's closeness to previous coalition parties that were no longer part of his supporters' ranks at the time of the

declaration, Anies tried to ease the tension by bringing up memories of their shared experiences.

*“Kita selesaikan juga itu tempat kita sama-sama makan ...” (ABW)*

'Let us finish up at the place where we ate together... (ABW)

This statement was made in response to questions about the dynamics of relations with the old coalition party. He used the shared experience strategy to emphasize that personal and emotional ties remain intact despite political differences and interpersonal loyalty, which he is trying to maintain.

### **Negative Politeness Strategy**

The interviewees used negative politeness strategies in the interview session of Mata Najwa to respond to confrontational, sensitive, or potentially threatening questions that could harm their self-image. In the context of an interview conducted in September 2023 between NS, ABW, and MI, this strategy serves to avoid appearing aggressive, maintain a safe verbal distance, and demonstrate caution when addressing controversial issues.

Based on the classification results, 34 negative politeness sub-strategies were identified, each appearing only once (frequency = 1). These sub-strategies reflect the diversity of approaches in addressing sharp questions related to political maneuvers, coalition dynamics, or the legitimacy of personal decisions.

<b>Facework Sub-strategy</b>	<b>Occurrences</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Acknowledging concern	1	2.94%
Acknowledgment of Mixed Reactions	1	2.94%
Anticipating Offense	1	2.94%
Apologetic Interruption	1	2.94%
Appeal to Procedure	1	2.94%
Avoiding Commitment	1	2.94%
Avoiding Direct Critique	1	2.94%
Cautious Framing	1	2.94%
Cautious Inquiry	1	2.94%

Clarification	1	2.94%
Concessive Framing	1	2.94%
Defensive Justification	1	2.94%
Deference to Authority	1	2.94%
Delegation to Authority	1	2.94%
Denial of Ambition	1	2.94%
Denial of Intent	1	2.94%
Framing Accusation as External	1	2.94%
Generalization	1	2.94%
Hedged Challenge	1	2.94%
Deferring Commitment	1	2.94%
Hedging	1	2.94%
Impersonalization	1	2.94%
Indirect Challenge	1	2.94%
Indirection	1	2.94%
Lack of Claim to Knowledge	1	2.94%
Managing Disagreement	1	2.94%
Mitigated Accusation	1	2.94%
Mitigated Challenge	1	2.94%
Respect for Hierarchy	1	2.94%
Soft Challenge	1	2.94%
Softened Instruction	1	2.94%
Softening FTA	1	2.94%
Uncertainty Claim	1	2.94%
Warning as Caution	1	2.94%

**Table 2** Negative Politeness Sub-strategy of Facework

One prominent form of this strategy is "denial of intent," which is used to distance oneself from the impression of hidden political motives. For example, when NS asked ABW about the possibility of him knowing about the sudden announcement of the presidential and vice-presidential candidates, ABW responded:

*"Saya tidak pernah menduga di malam hari muncul opsi baru..." (ABW)*

‘I never expected a new option to emerge in the evening...’ (ABW)

This quote appears in discussions about sudden dynamics within the coalition for change. ABW uses direct denial to maintain its image and avoid accusations of being the central actor in the strategic maneuver. This reflects the sub-strategy of the negative politeness type, "denial of intent," which creates distance from potential mistakes or intentional scenarios.

Another strategy is "appeal to procedure," which shifts individual responsibility to formal institutional mechanisms. For example, when asked about the political choices made by his party, MI stated:

*“Perbedaan cara persepsi itu akan selesai kalau ada keputusan organisasi.”*  
(MI)  
‘Differences in perception will be resolved once there is an organizational decision.’ (MI).

This statement was made in a situation where Najwa pressed on the issue of inconsistency among party elites. In this quote, Muhaimin did not directly address the accusation but emphasized procedure as the ultimate determinant. This strategy demonstrates the use of delegating responsibility to an institution to protect one's position from direct conflict while maintaining good relations with all parties.

In another moment, NS posed a critical question about Muhaimin's feelings after being called "overthrown" by his own party elite before being declared the vice presidential candidate. In his response, MI employed the "Cautious Framing" strategy:

*Bahaya itu memang realitas ... banyak yang harus dijaga perasaannya.”* (MI)  
“The danger is indeed a reality... many feelings need to be safeguarded.” (MI)

In this context, Muhaimin neither explicitly confirmed nor denied the events. Instead, he framed the issue as part of the complexity of political actor relationships. The phrase "the danger is indeed a reality" demonstrates the use of Negative

Politeness to acknowledge the existence of a problem without singling out a specific party while mitigating the potential for escalation.

A strategy like “Apologetic Interruption” was also employed by Najwa when she had to interrupt the interviewee's explanation to confirm information:

*“Maaf, sekali itu ya Selasa malam itu?” (NS)*

“Sorry, was that on Tuesday night?” (NS)

In this quote, the initial apology maintains interactional politeness while reducing the threat to the interviewee's face. This strategy is common in media discourse when interviewers strive to balance control over the interview flow while maintaining a good relationship with the interviewee.

### **Off-record Strategy**

The off-record politeness strategy is used when the speaker wants to avoid direct responsibility for a statement or when they want to convey something sensitive implicitly. In the context of a political interview between NS, ABW, and MI on the program Mata Najwa in September 2023, this strategy has been used to avoid public pressure, disguise political maneuvers, or implicitly assert a position.

<b>Sub-strategy</b>	<b>Occurrences</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Metaphor	4	12.50%
Self-Deprecation	2	6.25%
Humor	2	6.25%
Impersonal Critique	2	6.25%
Distancing from Speculation	1	3.12%
Fatalism	1	3.12%
Framing as Reluctance	1	3.12%
Humor via Generalization	1	3.12%
Indirect Confrontation	1	3.12%
Indirect Religious Legitimacy	1	3.12%
Invitation to Frame	1	3.12%
Irony	1	3.12%
Irony/Contrast	1	3.12%
Light Humor	1	3.12%
Metaphor & Denial	1	3.12%
Metaphor for Loyalty	1	3.12%

Playful Humor	1	3.12%
Redirection	1	3.12%
Reframing Criticism	1	3.12%
Reframing	1	3.12%
Religious Attribution	1	3.12%
Religious Deferral	1	3.12%
Religious Fatalism	1	3.12%
Religious Submission	1	3.12%
Spiritual Delegation	1	3.12%
Temporal Deferral	1	3.12%

**Table 3** Off-record Sub-strategy of Facework

From 32 facework strategies classified as off-record politeness, 26 sub-strategy variations were found. The most dominant strategy was using metaphors (4), followed by self-deprecation, humor, and impersonal critique, each appearing twice. The rest appeared once, indicating the diversity of approaches used to avoid threats to face.

One of the most prominent forms of off-record politeness is the use of metaphors, particularly by ABW when responding to allegations that he had “intercepted” someone's candidacy:

*“Kalau saya ditawari makan, saya kenyang.” (ABW)*

‘If I am offered food, I am full.’ (ABW)

This quote was delivered in the context of Najwa mentioning allegations that Anies had taken over the vice presidential position previously touted for someone else. Anies did not give a direct denial but instead used the metaphor of “eating” to imply that he was uninterested or did not initiate taking the position. This strategy allowed him to maintain the honor of the other party while avoiding explicit responsibility.

The self-deprecation strategy also appeared in Muhaimin's response when asked to explain his feelings after being called “deposed” by his party's elite before joining Anies' coalition:

*“Saya di-kudeta, saya terima, saya enggak-enggak-enggak.” (MI)*

"I was deposed, I accept it, I do not mind." (MI)

This statement is light-hearted and shows deliberate humility, which is used to calm the situation without directly blaming anyone. This strategy is important for building an image as a non-reactive figure who remains rational and mature in dealing with internal conflicts.

The strategy of humor is also an important tool for conveying meaning or satire without being explicit. When Najwa raised the issue of inter-party communication, which was considered confusing to the public, Muhaimin responded jokingly:

*"Kalau mau dapat pasangan, datanglah ke undangan Mata Najwa."* (MI)

'If you want a partner, come to Mata Najwa.' (MI)

This statement was framed as playful humor, but in context, it contained subtle criticism of the unpredictable and fast-paced political situation. This kind of humor reinforced the impression of a relaxed atmosphere amid political tension and avoided the need to answer sensitive questions directly.

The use of religious fatalism also emerged when the speakers wanted to avoid direct responsibility for political decisions. In several parts, Anies and Muhaimin referred to terms such as "Allah's destiny," "God's way," or the results of *istikharah* as a form of religious framing:

*"Saya serahkan kepada Allah bila memang Allah takdirkan untuk berlayar."*  
(ABW)

'I leave it to Allah if it is Allah's destiny to sail.' (ABW)

This statement defuses accusations of being the leading actor in political decisions and frames those decisions as part of divine will—a powerful strategy in Indonesia's religious political culture. This form of religious submission or spiritual delegation aims to shift the source of decision-making from oneself to a higher entity.

## DISCUSSION

The findings of this present study confirm that the facework strategies used by Indonesian political figures in public interviews are adaptive, complex, and highly contextual. The three main categories of politeness strategies, positive politeness, negative politeness, and off-record politeness, are not used separately but complement each other to build image, maintain legitimacy, and mitigate accountability risk. This is in line with Brown & Levinson's (1987) view that politeness strategies are pragmatic devices used by speakers to manage face-threatening acts (FTAs) according to the conditions of interaction.

However, the data in this study show that the application of these strategies in Indonesia involves distinctive religious, cultural, and ideological dimensions, which are rarely found in the context of political communication in Western countries that tend to be individualistic. Therefore, these findings not only confirm the relevance of classical politeness theory but also extend it by incorporating the variables of collectivist culture and religious symbolism specific to Southeast Asia.

The dominance of positive politeness in the interview shows that politicians seek to maintain and strengthen moral and emotional closeness with the public. This strategy is used to create a sense of togetherness, emphasize shared values, and avoid confrontation, especially when discussing sensitive issues such as coalition building and internal party dynamics. Sub-strategies such as appeal to shared values, cultural wisdom, and team solidarity are found repeatedly and have a pragmatic function to shift public focus from political tactics to principles that are considered noble. For example, ABW's statement "*There needs to be meritocracy...*" shows that he frames his political decisions within a framework of universal values that are accepted by the public, rather than mere political interests. This approach is consistent with Liang's (2021) finding that in collectivist cultures, politicians tend to build legitimacy through participatory narratives and shared values.

Furthermore, MI's use of cultural wisdom, such as the proverb "one enemy is heavier than a thousand friends", serves as a mechanism to smooth over potential conflicts. Politicians do not only build emotional bonds with their audience but also place political discourse within a cultural value framework that is familiar and difficult to argue against by relying on local wisdom. This is in line with Ting-Toomey's (2005) Face Negotiation Theory, which emphasizes that collectivist cultures prioritize mutual face, relational harmony, and avoidance of direct confrontation. In this context, positive politeness not only serves as a sign of courtesy but also as an ideological instrument to reposition political identity in line with public aspirations.

The strategy of shared experience also plays a significant role in building a positive image. When ABW recalls moments of togetherness with old political partners, he does not only affirms that personal relationships have been maintained, but also sends a signal to the public that political differences do not always lead to hostility. In Indonesian society, which upholds the value of kinship, the strategy is effective in maintaining the other-face and reducing the risk of losing sympathy from old supporters. Brown & Levinson (1987) state that positive politeness can reduce psychological distance, and in this case, the strategy is used to bridge the gap caused by political differences.

Meanwhile, negative politeness appears consistently when the speaker faces critical or potentially damaging questions. Sub-strategies such as denial of intent, appeal to procedure, and delegation to authority are used to maintain verbal distance, avoid direct commitment, and shift responsibility to formal mechanisms. ABW's statement, "I never expected a new option to emerge in the evening..." is an example of the use of denial of intent to distance oneself from the impression of being involved in political maneuvering. This strategy is consistent with the findings of Cheng & Zhang (2020), who noted that Asian politicians often use strategic ambiguity to avoid confrontation and save face.

Another example is MI's statement, "differences in perception will be resolved when there is an organizational decision." Which represents delegation to authority. This strategy shifts judgment from individuals to institutions, thereby reducing the potential for personal attacks and strengthening institutional face (Harrington, 2019). In hierarchical cultures such as Indonesia, references to formal procedures also serve to demonstrate compliance with norms and power structures. The combination of a humble tone, avoidance of direct criticism, and emphasis on hierarchy helps politicians maintain legitimacy without getting caught up in risky statements. In addition, the cautious framing strategy used by MI in "the danger is real ... we must be careful not to hurt people's feelings" reflects caution in acknowledging problems without pointing fingers. MI avoids escalating conflict by framing issues as part of the complexity of political relations. This strategy demonstrates a deep understanding of Indonesian cultural expectations, where saving face is an integral part of polite public interaction.

The strategy of off-record politeness occupies a unique position in the data because it is the most flexible and laden with implicit meaning. Sub-strategies such as metaphor, self-deprecation, humor, and religious submission are used to convey messages without having to bear the burden of direct responsibility. The metaphor "if I am offered food, I am full" uttered by ABW is an example of a strategy that combines linguistic subtlety and broad room for interpretation by the public. This approach is in line with Yap's (2016) finding that metaphors in Asian political discourse are often used to convey political identity indirectly while defusing tension. The self-deprecation strategy, such as "I was overthrown, I accept it, I don't mind," from MI shows deliberate humility defuse criticism.

MI creates an image of himself as a mature and tolerant figure by framing himself as a victim who holds no grudges. Humor is also used to negotiate meaning without damaging relationships, such as MI's statement, "if you want a partner, come to Mata Najwa's invitation," which on the hand provokes laughter, but on the

other hand conveys subtle criticism of the unpredictable dynamics of politics. The use of humor as an indirect critique aligns with findings by Yap (2016), who notes that in Aisan political discourse, humor and metaphor often serve as face-giving strategies that soften the impact of criticism while reinforcing a politician's affable public persona. Similar tendencies were also observed by Purwitarini (2020) in Indonesian interview settings, where indirect humor was used to address sensitive social issues without triggering overt confrontation. Likewise, Pan (2012) found in Chinese survey interviews that indirect strategies, such as humor or anecdotal references, can reduce perceptions of impoliteness by framing critiques in socially acceptable terms. In MI's case, the humorous remark does not only mitigates potential offense but also aligns with the Indonesian high-context communication style, where implicit meaning is preferred to maintain social harmony and preserve mutual face.

The use of religious submission such as "I leave it to God if it is God's will for me to sail" emphasizes the religious dimension in Indonesian political facework. Politicians do not only avoid direct accountability but also leverage strong moral legitimacy in religious societies. Kurnia et al (2024) demonstrate that religious-based symbolic legitimacy holds significant power in shaping public perceptions in Southeast Asia, and this study's findings confirm this. This aligns with Schäfer's (2024) observation that moral-religious frameworks are central to political framing in Indonesia, where invoking shared spiritual values functions both as an ideological anchor and as persuasive strategy.

Compared to previous studies, such as Hinton & Budzyńska-daca (2019), which analyzed political communication strategies in televised pre-election debate with a focus on explicitly identified forms of persuasive strategies, this study provides a more detailed picture of the combination of explicit and implicit strategies used situationally. These findings also support the argument of Rączaszek-Leonardi & Redington (2022) that linguistic strategies in politics are

performative and multifunctional, serving not only to defuse tension but also to shape broader political narratives. This study expands the framework of Face Negotiation Theory (Ting-Toomey, 2005) and the relevance of politeness theory (Brown & Levinson, 1987) in a collectivist cultural context.

The results of this study indicate that facework strategies in Indonesian political communication are carried out through negotiations between institutional pressures, public expectations, and cultural-religious norms. These strategies are not only used to avoid political losses but also to construct a moral, inclusive political identity that is in line with shared values. The three strategies, positive, negative, and off-record, operate as a complementary tactical network that enables politicians to effectively manage their image in high-pressure interview situations. This contribution is important for the development of cross-cultural politeness theory while providing practical insights for political communication ethics in the age of information openness.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study shows that Indonesian political actors in media interviews use structured and strategic facework strategies to manage their image and mitigate demands for public accountability. The three main strategies—positive politeness, negative politeness, and off-record politeness—are used in different contexts depending on the type of question, media pressure, and discourse position. Positive politeness is used to build solidarity and articulate collective values; negative politeness is used to show caution and avoid direct responsibility; off-record politeness plays a role in conveying sensitive messages covertly through humor, metaphors, and religious symbolism.

These findings suggest that facework strategies reflect personal efforts to maintain self-respect and contain ideological functions in framing political positions in public. This analysis reinforces Brown and Levinson's politeness theory and broadens the cross-cultural pragmatic perspective by incorporating cultural

and religious elements specific to Indonesia. Thus, this study not only contributes empirically to the study of political pragmatics but also presents a new framework for understanding power communication in the public media.

This study has several limitations that need to be noted for a more proportional interpretation of the results. First, the data source is limited to one television interview episode, namely *Mata Najwa*, September 2023 edition, so generalizations of the findings on Indonesian political discourse must be made with caution. Second, this study focuses on the facework strategies used by two political figures without comparing them to the narratives of other politicians from different ideological spectrums. Third, the analysis is primarily based on Brown & Levinson's (1987) pragmatic approach, thus not fully integrating multimodal or psycholinguistic approaches that may be relevant in media communication.

Furthermore, limitations in the representation of gender, intonation, and nonverbal context in interviews also pose challenges that are not fully addressed in transcript-based studies. Therefore, the results of this study are more indicative of discursive tendencies in one media context than a comprehensive reflection of Indonesian political communication practices.

Further research is recommended to expand the scope of data by analyzing other types of political interactions, such as public debates, press conferences, or state speeches, to obtain a more comprehensive picture of facework strategies across contexts. In addition, a cross-cultural comparative approach between Indonesia and other Asian countries can enrich the understanding of cultural dimensions in political politeness. Furthermore, subsequent research could consider integrating a multimodal discourse analysis approach to capture facework strategies' visual, gestural, and prosodic dimensions in political communication. Involving audience perceptions through qualitative methods such as focus group discussions (FGDs) or interpretive surveys could also add an evaluative dimension to the strategies' effectiveness. Finally, expanding the theory by incorporating local

approaches—such as Javanese ethics or social concepts in Indonesian communication—will provide a more contextual theoretical foundation for explaining political facework practices in Indonesia.

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