

Soekarno's Visit to Padangsidempuan in 1948: Historical Significance, Political Mobilization, and Local Support during the Indonesian Revolution

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ABSTRACT

This study examines Soekarno's visit to Padangsidempuan on 12 June 1948 within the political context of Indonesia's struggle to defend its independence following the Renville Agreement. Although the visit represented an important episode during the Indonesian Revolution, its historical significance at the local level has received limited scholarly attention. This study reconstructs the chronology of the visit, analyzes its role in political mobilization, and examines the forms of local support that emerged in response to Soekarno's presence. The research employs the historical method, consisting of heuristics, source criticism, interpretation, and historiography, by analyzing contemporary newspapers, photographic documentation, archival records, and interview data through systematic source corroboration. The findings indicate that the visit served not only as a symbolic political event but also as a strategic instrument for reinforcing national legitimacy, mobilizing public participation, and strengthening local support for the Republic during a critical stage of the Indonesian Revolution. Public enthusiasm, despite adverse weather conditions, and the presentation of *ulos* and buffaloes in the Angkola-Mandailing tradition, reflected the integration of local cultural expressions into the broader national struggle. This study contributes to local history by demonstrating how the historical significance of Soekarno's visit extended beyond ceremonial purposes, functioning as a mechanism of political mobilization that strengthened state–society relations and reinforced collective support for the Indonesian Republic.

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INTRODUCTION

The proclamation of Indonesian independence on 17 August 1945 marked the formal establishment of the Republic of Indonesia. However, it also initiated a prolonged struggle to defend national sovereignty against Dutch efforts to restore colonial rule. The First and Second Dutch Military Aggressions demonstrated that the Republic's survival depended not only on military resistance but also on the government's ability to sustain political legitimacy and public support across different regions (Ricklefs, 2005). National leaders, therefore, employed political communication alongside military and diplomatic strategies to strengthen collective commitment to independence during the Indonesian Revolution. This historical context raises an important question concerning how interactions between national leaders and local communities contributed to sustaining the Republic during one of the most critical periods in Indonesian history.

Within this context, Soekarno assumed a strategic role not only as the President of the Republic but also as a charismatic political leader whose direct engagement with local communities reinforced national solidarity. His visit to Padangsidempuan on 12 June 1948 occurred during the post-Renville Agreement period, when the Republic faced increasing political and territorial pressure that threatened its authority in many regions (Susilo et al., 2024). Rather than functioning solely as a ceremonial state visit, the event represented an important political intervention through which the central government sought to reinforce public confidence, strengthen political mobilization, and consolidate local support for the Republic. The visit, therefore, provides important historical context for examining how symbolic leadership operated beyond the national political arena and influenced community participation during the revolutionary period.

Previous studies on the Indonesian Revolution have primarily emphasized military campaigns, diplomatic negotiations, and national political developments, while paying comparatively limited attention to interactions between national leaders and local communities. Studies of Soekarno have similarly focused on his constitutional leadership, state speeches, and international diplomacy, leaving his political communication at the local level underexplored (Suryani, [2012](#)). Existing scholarship has consequently provided only a limited explanation of how symbolic leadership, political communication, and public participation interact within local settings to strengthen support for the Republic. This limitation has left an important historiographical gap concerning the historical significance of regional visits as instruments of political mobilization during the Indonesian Revolution.

Soekarno's visit to Padangsidempuan illustrates a historical experience that differs from dominant national narratives because it demonstrates how political authority was negotiated through direct interaction between the state and local society. Despite heavy rainfall, the arrival of residents from surrounding areas, and the presentation of *ulos* and buffaloes as expressions of respect, the visit generated more than ceremonial enthusiasm. These responses reflected symbolic communication through which local communities publicly expressed political support while reaffirming their commitment to the Republic. The event also illustrates that the endurance of the Republic depended not only on military capability but also on the construction of legitimacy, collective commitment, and emotional attachment that emerged through direct encounters between national leadership and local society (Novianto et al., [2025](#)).

Although previous studies acknowledge Soekarno's regional visits, they generally present them as brief historical episodes without reconstructing their chronology, examining the substance of political messages, or analyzing the relationship between political mobilization and local community participation. The 1948 visit to Padangsidempuan, for example, has largely appeared as a descriptive narrative rather than as a subject of comprehensive historical analysis (Rizkinta et al., [2024](#)). This study addresses that gap by integrating historical reconstruction, political communication, and local community responses within a single analytical framework. The novelty of this study lies in demonstrating the historical significance of Soekarno's visit not merely as a presidential itinerary but as a political strategy that mobilized public support, strengthened state–society relations, and reinforced local commitment to the Republic during the Indonesian Revolution.

Based on these considerations, this study reconstructs the chronology of Soekarno's visit to Padangsidempuan on 12 June 1948, analyzes the political significance of his speech within the broader context of defending Indonesian independence, and examines the forms of local support that emerged during the visit. The study also investigates how symbolic political communication influenced public participation and strengthened the relationship between the Republican government and local communities during the revolutionary period. Through this integrated perspective, the study contributes to Indonesian historiography by expanding local history scholarship beyond descriptive narratives and demonstrating how historical significance, political mobilization, and local support collectively shaped the dynamics of the Indonesian Revolution.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative historical approach to examine Soekarno's visit to Padangsidempuan on 12 June 1948 by reconstructing the event's chronology, analyzing the historical significance of his speech, and examining the forms of political mobilization and local support that emerged during the Indonesian Revolution. The research applied the historical method through four interconnected stages: heuristics, source criticism, interpretation, and historiography. These stages enabled the study to reconstruct historical events systematically while explaining the interaction between national political leadership and local communities. This approach also facilitated the integration of documentary evidence with socio-political interpretation in order to address the research objectives comprehensively (Kuntowijoyo, [2013](#)).

The heuristic stage involved identifying and collecting historical sources directly related to Soekarno's visit to Padangsidempuan. Primary sources included archival photographs preserved in the KITLV collections, documentary records, contemporary newspaper reports, Soekarno's published writings, including *Under the Banner of the Revolution*, and interview data used to complement documentary evidence concerning local participation and community recollections of the visit. The study also examined secondary sources, including scholarly books, peer-reviewed journal articles, and academic repositories such as Garuda and Google Scholar. Each source was selected according to its

relevance to the chronology of the visit, the substance of Soekarno's political message, and the forms of local support expressed during the revolutionary period.

After collecting the historical materials, the study conducted source criticism to evaluate the authenticity and credibility of every document before incorporating it into the historical reconstruction. External criticism verified the origin, authorship, and authenticity of archival materials, photographs, and documentary records. In contrast, internal criticism examined the consistency, reliability, and contextual relevance of the information contained in each source. The study compared documentary evidence, newspaper reports, photographs, Soekarno's writings, and interview data through source corroboration to identify convergent information and minimize inconsistencies among the available historical records. This verification process ensured that the subsequent interpretation relied on mutually supporting evidence rather than isolated historical accounts (Abdurahman, [2011](#)).

The interpretation stage organized the verified evidence into three analytical themes comprising the chronology of Soekarno's visit, the political significance of his speech, and the forms of local support demonstrated by the community. The analysis examined the relationship between documentary evidence, visual records, and oral testimony to explain how symbolic political communication encouraged public participation within the broader context of the Indonesian Revolution. The historiography stage then synthesized these interpretations into a coherent historical narrative that emphasized the visit's historical significance while explaining its contribution to strengthening the relationship between the Republican government and local society. The final analytical process involved selecting, categorizing, synthesizing, and drawing conclusions from corroborated historical evidence to answer the research questions concerning historical significance, political mobilization, and local support.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Political Context and Historical Significance of Soekarno's Visit to Padangsidimpuan

Padangsidimpuan occupied a strategic position within the Tapanuli region long before the Indonesian Revolution, having developed into an important administrative, educational, and commercial center during the colonial period. As part of the Tapanuli Residency and the administrative center of the Mandailing District, the city connected West Sumatra and North Sumatra through the Bukit Barisan transportation corridor, facilitating the movement of people, goods, and government administration (Anwar, [2022](#); Anwar & Rahman, [2025](#)). Colonial infrastructure, including transportation networks, government offices, and traditional markets, continued to support the city's administrative and economic functions after Indonesian independence. These historical conditions increased the strategic importance of Padangsidimpuan and explain why the Republican government selected the city as one of the destinations for Soekarno's regional visit during a period of national political uncertainty.



Figure 1. Illustration of the East Sumatra Laskar during the Indonesian Revolution
Source: Reproduced from *Historia.id*, "Lagak Laskar Sumatra Timur", 01 Juni 2021

Padangsidimpuan also possessed distinctive social characteristics that strengthened its political significance during the revolutionary period. The Batak Angkola and Mandailing communities maintained strong Islamic traditions while placing considerable emphasis on formal and religious education, creating an educated society with active civic

participation. The emergence of influential figures such as Willem Iskandar, Sutan Tagor Mulia, and Colonel Bejo reflects the region's longstanding contribution to education, political awareness, and the national struggle. Population growth, expanding educational institutions, and increasing commercial activity reinforced Padangsidempuan's position as one of the principal socio-economic centers in South Tapanuli during the early years of independence (Lestari et al., [2025](#); Ziadly et al., [2024](#)).

These regional characteristics help explain why Soekarno's visit carried historical significance beyond its ceremonial purpose. The combination of educational institutions, religious organizations, and influential community networks created favorable conditions for political communication aimed at strengthening the Republic's legitimacy. Historical evidence indicates that students, teachers, religious leaders, government officials, and residents from surrounding areas actively participated in welcoming the President, illustrating the community's readiness to engage in the national revolutionary movement. The geographical position of Padangsidempuan, far from the principal centers of Republican government, further heightened the symbolic importance of the visit, as it demonstrated the central government's commitment to maintaining direct communication with communities in the Republic's outer regions.

The revolutionary situation in 1948 represented one of the most critical periods in the history of the Republic of Indonesia. The implementation of the Renville Agreement substantially reduced the Republic's territorial control while increasing military and political pressure from the Dutch authorities. At the regional level, Tapanuli experienced additional instability through conflicts involving Brigade A, Brigade B, and Banteng Negara, where competition for military resources intersected with political rivalry and identity-based tensions (Priyono, [2020](#)). These circumstances weakened regional stability and increased the importance of political initiatives capable of restoring public confidence in the Republican government.

Primary historical sources strengthen this interpretation of the political circumstances surrounding Soekarno's visit. Contemporary newspaper reports, archival photographs preserved in the KITLV collections, documentary records, and other historical evidence consistently describe unusually large public gatherings despite heavy rainfall and difficult travel conditions. The available visual documentation shows students, community leaders, government officials, and residents arriving from surrounding districts, indicating that participation extended beyond the urban population of Padangsidempuan itself. These primary sources demonstrate that the event was a carefully organized political mobilization supported by broad community participation, rather than a routine presidential visit.

The active participation of students deserves particular attention because educational institutions had become important centers for disseminating nationalist ideas during the Indonesian Revolution. Student attendance, therefore, reflected organized civic engagement that complemented the participation of religious leaders, local officials, and ordinary residents in expressing support for the Republic. The willingness of diverse social groups to gather despite adverse weather conditions underscores the strength of the political message conveyed by Soekarno's direct presence. The response also demonstrates that communities located far from the Republican administrative center continued to regard the President as the principal symbol of national unity and political legitimacy.

The interaction between Soekarno and the people of Padangsidempuan illustrates how symbolic political communication operated during the Indonesian Revolution. The President's physical presence, public address, and direct engagement with local communities transformed the visit into an affirmation of state legitimacy at a time when military confrontation and political uncertainty threatened the Republic's continuity. Local participation did not merely reflect ceremonial respect for a national leader but also expressed collective commitment to the revolutionary struggle through visible public support. The historical significance of Soekarno's visit therefore, extends beyond its chronological reconstruction because it demonstrates how political mobilization, symbolic leadership, and local support collectively strengthened the relationship between the Republican government and communities situated far from the national political center.

Political Mobilization and Local Support during Soekarno's Visit to Padangsidempuan

Soekarno's visit to Padangsidempuan formed part of his broader tour of Sumatra during one of the most critical phases of the Indonesian Revolution. The journey represented more than a presidential itinerary because it served as a political strategy to maintain the Republic's legitimacy following the Renville Agreement, when territorial losses and military pressure threatened public confidence in the central government. Contemporary documentary sources indicate that the President received an official welcome from the Resident of Tapanuli and the Governor of Sumatra before entering

Padangsidempuan, reflecting the close coordination between regional authorities and the Republican government. These official receptions demonstrate that the visit served not only ceremonial purposes but also reinforced political communication between the national leadership and strategically important regions during a period of national uncertainty.

Primary historical sources further illustrate the extraordinary public response that accompanied Soekarno's journey to Padangsidempuan. Contemporary newspaper reports, archival photographs, and documentary records consistently show that residents gathered along the roads long before the presidential convoy reached the city, despite difficult transportation conditions and adverse weather. Ja'far ([2020](#)) records that large numbers of people waited throughout the route to welcome the President, prompting Soekarno to sit on the hood of his vehicle so that those assembled along the roadside could see and greet him directly. This spontaneous interaction transformed the journey itself into a form of symbolic political communication, reducing the distance between national leadership and local society.



Figure 2. President Soekarno Sitting on the Hood of a Vehicle to Greet the Public Directly
Source: Harahap, [2003](#)

The visual documentation presented in Figure 2 provides important primary evidence supporting the historical reconstruction of this event. Rather than remaining inside the official vehicle, Soekarno deliberately positioned himself where he could maintain direct visual contact with the crowd throughout the journey. This gesture carried important symbolic meaning because it projected accessibility, personal leadership, and emotional proximity between the President and ordinary citizens. From the perspective of charismatic leadership, direct physical engagement reinforced public confidence by demonstrating that the head of state remained personally present among communities located far from the principal centers of Republican administration.

Upon arriving in Padangsidempuan, thousands of residents continued to gather despite persistent heavy rainfall. In contrast, many others traveled from surrounding regions such as Labuhan Batu and Pasir Pangaraian to participate in the event. The willingness of people to undertake long journeys under unfavorable conditions demonstrates that public participation extended well beyond routine ceremonial attendance. The geographical position of Padangsidempuan, far from the major governmental centers of Medan and Padang, further underscores the historical significance of this mobilization, as communities in peripheral regions actively responded to direct political engagement initiated by the Republican leadership. These circumstances indicate that Soekarno's visit successfully generated political participation across a broad regional network rather than attracting only local audiences.

The participation of students deserves particular analytical attention because it represented one of the most remarkable features recorded in the available historical evidence. Contemporary photographs and newspaper reports

clearly document the presence of students alongside government officials, religious leaders, teachers, and ordinary residents during the welcoming ceremony and the subsequent mass rally. Educational institutions had become important centers for disseminating nationalist ideals throughout the revolutionary period, making student participation a visible expression of organized civic engagement rather than incidental attendance. Their involvement demonstrates that Soekarno's political message reached younger generations who would subsequently contribute to sustaining nationalist consciousness within local communities.



Figure 3. The Mass Rally Attended by the People of Padangsidempuan
Source: Koninklijk Instituut voor Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde (KITLV)

The primary visual documentation presented in Figure 3 records a massive public gathering that filled the venue, creating what contemporary observers described as a "sea of people." The orderly atmosphere, despite the exceptionally large attendance, illustrates that the rally functioned as a disciplined act of collective participation rather than merely a spontaneous public gathering. The event, therefore, served as an important arena through which the Republican government transformed popular enthusiasm into political legitimacy by encouraging direct interaction between the President and the people. From a political symbolism perspective, the gathering represented a collective affirmation of loyalty to the Republic during one of the most uncertain phases of the Indonesian Revolution.



Figure 4. Newspaper Coverage of Soekarno's Visit to the Tapanuli Region Published by *Nieuwsgier* (left) and *Waspada* (right)
Source: *Nieuwsgier*, 14 June 1948; *Waspada*, 13 June 1948.

During the rally, Soekarno emphasized national unity, vigilance, and the collective responsibility to defend Indonesian independence. Newspaper reports describe his speech as employing persuasive and emotionally charged

rhetoric that encouraged public participation while reinforcing confidence in the Republic (Saefudin et al., [2023](#)). The effectiveness of this political communication did not depend solely on the content of the speech but also on the symbolic authority of its delivery before a massive public audience. Vandenbosch ([2021](#)) argues that political speeches delivered during revolutionary periods often function simultaneously as instruments of communication and mechanisms for strengthening political legitimacy, a pattern clearly reflected in Soekarno's address in Padangsidempuan.

The interaction between the President and the assembled community also illustrates how symbolic politics contributed to the construction of national identity. Benedict Anderson's concept of *imagined communities* helps explain why thousands of individuals from diverse social backgrounds gathered to participate in a single political event despite geographic distance and adverse weather. The rally enabled participants to experience themselves as members of a wider national community united by a shared commitment to the Republic rather than by local or ethnic identities alone. This collective experience transformed the presidential visit into an important process of political mobilization that reinforced nationalism through direct social interaction.

The contemporary newspaper coverage reproduced in Figure 4 further strengthens the historical reconstruction by confirming the chronology and public significance of Soekarno's visit through independent documentary evidence. Reports published in *Nieuwsgier* and *Waspada* demonstrate that the visit attracted attention beyond the immediate locality and was part of broader political developments across Sumatra during the revolutionary period. The convergence between newspaper reports, archival photographs, documentary evidence, and interview data increases the credibility of the reconstructed chronology while illustrating the value of source corroboration in historical research. These primary sources collectively demonstrate that the visit represented an important political event rather than an isolated ceremonial activity.

Soekarno's visit to Padangsidempuan possessed historical significance that extended beyond the chronological sequence of events. The visit functioned simultaneously as an instrument of political mobilization, symbolic leadership, and local participation, strengthening the relationship between the Republican government and communities situated far from the national political center. Public enthusiasm, student participation, mass rallies, and extensive media coverage collectively demonstrate that the Republic's survival depended not only on military resistance but also on political legitimacy constructed through direct interaction between national leaders and local society. These findings reinforce the argument that Soekarno's visit to Padangsidempuan constituted a significant episode in the Indonesian Revolution because it connected historical significance, political mobilization, and local support within a single process of national consolidation.

Local Support, Political Symbolism, and Collective Memory during Soekarno's Visit to Padangsidempuan

The response of the people of Padangsidempuan to Soekarno's visit on 12 June 1948 demonstrated an extraordinary level of public participation, reflecting the broader political atmosphere of the Indonesian Revolution. Primary historical sources, including contemporary newspaper reports, archival photographs, and oral testimonies, consistently describe thousands of people gathering to welcome the President despite heavy rainfall and difficult transportation conditions. Historical records further indicate that many participants traveled from surrounding regions, including Labuhan Batu and Pasir Pangaraian, illustrating that the event attracted support extending well beyond the urban population of Padangsidempuan. The willingness of residents to undertake long journeys amid political instability demonstrates that Soekarno's visit served as a powerful instrument of political mobilization rather than merely a ceremonial presidential agenda.

Student participation was one of the most remarkable aspects documented in the available primary sources. Contemporary photographs and newspaper coverage clearly show students standing alongside government officials, teachers, religious leaders, and ordinary citizens during both the welcoming procession and the public rally. Their participation cannot be reduced to mere attendance at a public event, because educational institutions had become important centers for disseminating nationalist ideals throughout the revolutionary period. The visible involvement of students, therefore, demonstrates that political communication reached younger generations who actively contributed to strengthening public commitment to the Republic despite Padangsidempuan's considerable geographical distance from the principal Republican administrative centers.

Oral testimony further reinforces the interpretation that public participation reflected emotional commitment rather than political obligation. One informant recalled that "the rain did not deter the people from listening to Soekarno

they walked hundreds of kilometers just to see the President of Indonesia at the time" (Zalukhu & Zalukhu, [2025](#)). This testimony complements documentary evidence by illustrating how Soekarno's personal presence fostered emotional attachment, encouraging voluntary participation even under highly unfavorable conditions. From the perspective of charismatic leadership, such responses demonstrate that political legitimacy during the Indonesian Revolution depended not only on governmental authority but also on national leaders' ability to establish direct emotional connections with local communities.

Public participation also appeared through symbolic expressions deeply rooted in the cultural traditions of the Batak Angkola-Mandailing community. The presentation of *ulos* and a buffalo to Soekarno represented the highest forms of respect within local customary practice while simultaneously expressing acceptance of national leadership. As explained by Koentjaraningrat, *ulos* symbolizes protection, warmth, and social acceptance within communal relationships (Permata, [2025](#)). Within the context of Soekarno's visit, these cultural expressions extended beyond ceremonial customs, publicly affirming the integration of local identity into the broader political project of the Indonesian Republic.

The symbolic meaning of these cultural gifts also illustrates the interaction between local tradition and national politics during the revolutionary period. The presentation of *ulos* acknowledged Soekarno not only as President but also as a respected member of the symbolic community. At the same time, the buffalo symbolized sincerity, honor, and recognition of legitimate leadership, in accordance with local cultural values. These symbolic practices transformed the welcoming ceremony into an important political event through which local cultural traditions strengthened the legitimacy of the Republican government. Political symbolism, therefore, operated not only through presidential speeches but also through reciprocal cultural expressions exchanged between the national leader and the local community.

The significance of Soekarno's visit extended beyond the immediate political circumstances of 1948 and gradually became embedded within the collective memory of the people of Padangsidempuan. Benedict Anderson's concept of *imagined communities* provides a useful perspective on how shared historical experiences contribute to the construction of national consciousness through emotional attachment to common political symbols. Soekarno's direct interaction with local communities strengthened perceptions of the Republic as a shared national project rather than as a distant political institution, thereby reinforcing state legitimacy through personal engagement (Berliani, [2022](#)). This interpretation indicates that direct encounters between national leaders and local communities played an important role in transforming abstract ideas of nationalism into lived social experience.

Abdul Haris Nasution likewise emphasized that the principal strength of Indonesia's revolutionary struggle rested upon the moral resilience and commitment of its people. The findings of this study demonstrate that Soekarno's visit contributed to sustaining that resilience by strengthening political legitimacy, encouraging local participation, and reinforcing collective confidence in the Republic's continuity during a period of severe political uncertainty. Public enthusiasm, cultural symbolism, and sustained community participation collectively reveal that local support represented a decisive component of political mobilization rather than merely a response to presidential authority. The historical significance of the visit, therefore, lies in its ability to connect symbolic leadership, local cultural identity, and collective memory into a unified process that strengthened national solidarity during the Indonesian Revolution.

CONCLUSION

This study argues that Soekarno's visit to Padangsidempuan on 12 June 1948 constituted a historically significant political intervention rather than a ceremonial presidential itinerary during the Indonesian Revolution. The visit functioned as a strategic instrument of political mobilization through which the Republican government reinforced its legitimacy, strengthened public confidence, and consolidated local support at a time of territorial contraction and political uncertainty following the Renville Agreement. The interaction between Soekarno and the people of Padangsidempuan demonstrates that the Republic's survival depended not solely on military resistance but also on symbolic political communication that connected national leadership with local communities. Mass public participation, student involvement, and cultural expressions such as *ulos* and buffaloes collectively illustrate how local cultural traditions were integrated into the broader nationalist struggle. These findings contribute to Indonesian historiography by demonstrating that regional political events should be understood not merely as local episodes but as integral components of the Republic's broader strategy of political consolidation, thereby highlighting the historical significance of local support in sustaining national unity during the revolutionary period.

This study is primarily based on archival documents, contemporary newspapers, visual documentation, and a limited number of oral testimonies, which provide a coherent historical reconstruction but cannot fully capture the diversity of individual experiences surrounding the event. Future research would benefit from incorporating broader oral history, ethnographic inquiry, and comparative historical analysis of Soekarno's visits to other regions in Indonesia to examine similarities and differences in patterns of political mobilization, symbolic leadership, and local participation. Such comparative perspectives would deepen understanding of how interactions between national leaders and local communities contributed to shaping political legitimacy and collective memory throughout the Indonesian Revolution.

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