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Beyond "No Viral, No Justice": Rebuilding Institutional Legitimacy in Indonesia's Digital Society Public Trust, the Rule of Law, and Access to Justice in the Age of Digital Public Pressure

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Abstract: Since 2022, Indonesian public discourse has repeatedly invoked the phrase 'no viral, no justice' (tidak viral, tidak ada keadilan) to describe a perceived pattern in which law enforcement responds decisively to grievances only after they attract mass digital attention, while comparable non-viral cases stall or are quietly closed. This perception poses a problem that existing scholarship has not fully resolved: prior research on digital activism, online campaigning, and social-media-based law enforcement in Indonesia has documented the phenomenon descriptively, but has rarely connected it analytically to the underlying constructs of public trust, institutional legitimacy, the rule of law, and access to justice as an integrated causal chain. This article addresses that gap by asking why public trust has shifted toward digital exposure as a pathway to justice, how that shift affects institutional legitimacy and rule-of-law implementation, and how legal institutions might rebuild legitimacy without abandoning equal access to justice. Using socio-legal research combining normative-doctrinal analysis of Indonesian statutes, court decisions, and institutional regulations with an empirical comparative case study of viral versus functionally similar non-viral cases, the article traces how selective institutional responsiveness generates a perception of two-track justice. The analysis finds that virality functions less as a cause of legal change than as a diagnostic signal exposing a pre-existing legitimacy deficit rooted in inconsistent responsiveness, weak complaint mechanisms, and low procedural transparency. Theoretically, the article introduces the Responsive Institutional Legitimacy Framework (RILF), which links procedural fairness, consistent responsiveness, and transparent reasoning to the durability of institutional legitimacy independent of media attention. Practically, it proposes that virality be formally treated as an early-warning signal for institutional monitoring rather than a substantive basis for legal decision-making, with concrete governance recommendations for the police, prosecution service, judiciary, Ombudsman, and National Commission on Human Rights. The findings contribute to socio-legal theory on legitimacy in hybrid digital-institutional environments and offer a policy pathway for restoring public trust that does not depend on the unpredictable mechanics of online attention.

Keywords: Institutional Legitimacy, Rule of Law, Access to Justice, Public Trust, Digital Society, Law Enforcement, Indonesia.

INTRODUCTION

Background

Over the past several years, a distinct vocabulary has entered Indonesian public and legal discourse: 'no viral, no justice.' The phrase captures a recurring pattern documented in recent Indonesian legal scholarship, in which cases that gain traction on social media — a traffic dispute escalated by a convoy of luxury vehicles, an act of domestic violence recorded and shared, a complaint against an official ignored for months until a video accumulates millions of views — appear to move through investigation, prosecution, and adjudication with a speed and visibility that comparable but non-viral cases do not receive (Runturambi, Aswindo, & Meiyani, 2024; Wuysang, Rohani, Patriani, & Zawawi, 2024). Indonesian courts, police, and prosecutors operate within a formal legal architecture built on legality, equality before the law, and due process. Yet the popular perception that formal channels are secondary to digital exposure has become widespread enough to generate its own body of doctrinal commentary (Kharisma, 2024; Fatakh, 2025; Nataningrum & Subarsyah, 2025).

This is not merely a communications problem or a matter of media literacy. It is, this article argues, a symptom of a deeper institutional condition: a gap between the formal authority that legal institutions hold and the practical legitimacy that the public extends to them. Digital platforms did not create this gap; they made it visible, searchable, and shareable. Where an aggrieved citizen once had no means of comparing the responsiveness of the police in her case to the responsiveness shown in another, social media now allows exactly that comparison to be made instantly, publicly, and at scale (Marwick & boyd, 2021). The consequence is a public that increasingly treats visibility, rather than the formal exercise of legal process, as the more reliable predictor of a favorable outcome.

Problem Statement

The central empirical puzzle this article addresses is why a meaningful segment of the Indonesian public has come to believe that justice is more attainable once a case becomes viral than when it proceeds through ordinary legal channels alone. This is a problem of perception, but perceptions of this kind are not free-floating; they are shaped by observable institutional behavior — inconsistent response times, uneven case escalation, and opaque reasoning for why some complaints receive priority. Understanding the problem therefore requires examining both the perception itself and the institutional patterns that produce it.

Research Gap

A substantial and rapidly growing literature has examined the 'no viral, no justice' phenomenon from doctrinal and criminological perspectives, characterizing it as a form of informal social control (Fatakh, 2025), a criminological anomaly viewed through progressive law theory (Runturambi et al., 2024), or a challenge to due process and the presumption of innocence (Doodoh & Tuwaidan, 2025, as cited in secondary literature). A parallel literature on digital activism and networked publics has examined how online campaigns amplify grievances and pressure authorities to act (Marwick & boyd, 2021; Yalcinoz-Ucan & Eslen-Ziya, 2023). What remains comparatively underdeveloped is a theoretical account that connects these observations to the broader socio-legal architecture of public trust, institutional legitimacy, the rule of law, and access to justice as sequential, mutually reinforcing constructs. Existing studies tend to treat virality as an independent variable acting directly on legal outcomes; this article instead treats virality as a symptom whose explanatory power runs through legitimacy — a distinction with material consequences for both theory and policy, since institutions that respond only to symptoms (virality) rather than causes (legitimacy deficits) are likely to see the pattern recur with each new platform cycle.

Research Questions

- RQ1: Why has public trust shifted from formal legal procedures toward digital public exposure as a pathway to justice?
- RQ2: How does this shift affect institutional legitimacy and the implementation of the rule of law?
- RQ3: How should legal institutions rebuild legitimacy while preserving equal access to justice in the digital era?

Research Objectives

Corresponding to the three research questions, this article aims: first, to identify the institutional and social conditions that have driven the displacement of trust from formal legal procedure toward digital exposure; second, to analyze the consequences of this displacement for institutional legitimacy and rule-of-law implementation in Indonesia; and third, to develop a theoretically grounded and practically actionable framework by which legal institutions can rebuild legitimacy without conditioning access to justice on media attention.

Contribution of the Research

Theoretically, the article offers the Responsive Institutional Legitimacy Framework (RILF), which reframes the 'no viral, no justice' phenomenon as an indicator of legitimacy deficit rather than a novel mode of justice delivery, and specifies the mechanisms — consistency, transparency, and responsiveness — through which institutions can rebuild legitimacy independent of digital attention. Practically, the article provides governance recommendations addressed to the institutions most implicated in the phenomenon: the Indonesian National Police (POLRI), the Attorney General's Office (Kejaksaan), the Supreme Court (Mahkamah Agung), the Ombudsman of the Republic of Indonesia, and the National Commission on Human Rights (Komnas HAM).

Literature Review

The Rule of Law

The rule of law provides the normative baseline against which the 'no viral, no justice' phenomenon must be evaluated. Dicey's (1885/1959) classical formulation identifies three interlocking elements: the absolute supremacy of regular law over arbitrary power, equality before the law such that no person is above ordinary legal process, and the derivation of individual rights from judicial decisions rather than executive discretion. Where institutional responsiveness varies according to a case's public visibility rather than its legal merits, the principle of equality before the law is placed under direct strain: two factually similar cases are treated differently based on a criterion — media attention — that has no place in the formal sources of law.

Raz (1979) offers a narrower, more procedural conception, arguing that the rule of law is best understood as the capacity of law to guide behavior predictably: laws must be prospective, clear, stable, and applied by an independent judiciary through fair hearing procedures. On this account, the problem with virality-driven enforcement is not that it produces unjust outcomes in any particular case, but that it undermines the guiding function of law as such — citizens can no longer reliably predict which channel (formal complaint or public exposure) will determine how their case is treated, which erodes the very predictability that gives law its authority.

Fuller's (1964) procedural naturalism supplies a third lens through his eight desiderata of legality, several of which are directly implicated: the requirement that rules be applied consistently as announced, and the requirement of congruence between announced rules and official action. When institutions announce formal procedures for complaint-handling and

investigation but in practice allocate urgency according to social-media pressure, the resulting incongruence between the law on the books and the law in action is, in Fuller's terms, a genuine failure of legality rather than a mere public-relations problem.

Access to Justice

Cappelletti and Garth's (1978) landmark account of the worldwide access-to-justice movement identifies successive 'waves' of reform: the first addressing the cost of legal aid for the poor, the second addressing the representation of diffuse and collective interests, and the third — broader and more structural — addressing the full range of institutional, procedural, and cultural barriers that stand between ordinary people and effective legal remedies. Read against this framework, the Indonesian viral-justice phenomenon can be understood as a grassroots, informal response to an unaddressed 'third wave' barrier: citizens who lack confidence that the ordinary complaint and investigation process will be responsive have, in effect, constructed their own extra-legal access mechanism through public exposure. This is consistent with the global access-to-justice movement's more recent framing under Sustainable Development Goal 16, which explicitly links access to justice to the broader project of building effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions and situates responsiveness and institutional performance as preconditions for meaningful access (United Nations, 2015; Center on International Cooperation, 2023). Where formal access-to-justice channels are perceived as slow, opaque, or unevenly responsive, digital exposure fills the resulting vacuum — but does so unevenly, since only cases capable of capturing public attention benefit, leaving the access-to-justice problem for less visible grievances unresolved or worsened.

Institutional Legitimacy

Suchman's (1995) foundational definition treats legitimacy as a generalized perception that an organization's actions are desirable, proper, or appropriate within a socially constructed system of norms and values — a perception that must be actively maintained rather than assumed as a fixed institutional attribute. For legal institutions, this means legitimacy is not conferred permanently by constitutional authority alone; it must be continuously reproduced through observable conduct that the public judges to be appropriate.

Tyler's (2006) procedural justice theory operationalizes this insight in the specific context of law: people comply with legal authorities primarily because they judge the process by which authorities exercise power to be fair, not primarily because they fear sanctions or calculate material self-interest. Tyler and Huo (2002) extend this to show that trust in legal authorities and courts is built cumulatively through experiences of respectful, neutral, and voice-giving treatment. Bradford, Myhill, and Quinton's (2010) subsequent synthesis for policing research makes the causal chain explicit: procedural fairness builds public trust, trust builds institutional legitimacy, and legitimacy in turn underwrites public compliance with the law and, ultimately, commitment to the rule of law itself. Beetham's (1991) classical account adds a normative dimension often missing from purely empirical procedural-justice research, arguing that legitimacy requires conformity to established rules, the justifiability of those rules by reference to shared beliefs, and evidence of consent expressed through action. Applied to the Indonesian case, a legitimacy deficit exists whenever citizens believe — rightly or wrongly — that institutional rules are applied inconsistently and are not adequately justified by any principle other than the practical convenience or reputational exposure of the institution itself.

Gilley's (2006, 2009) comparative work on state legitimacy adds a further empirical dimension, treating legitimacy as measurable through indicators of legality, justification, and consent, and demonstrating that legitimacy deficits are strongly associated with declining

institutional performance and rising perceptions of corruption — both of which are recurrent themes in Indonesian commentary on the viral-justice phenomenon (Wahid, Rohadi, & Kusyandi, 2025).

Conceptual Framework

Synthesizing the three bodies of theory above yields a sequential conceptual chain that structures the remainder of this article:

Public Trust -> Institutional Legitimacy -> Rule of Law -> Access to Justice

Public trust is generated (or eroded) through repeated, observable institutional conduct. Accumulated trust or distrust aggregates into a broader perception of institutional legitimacy. Legitimacy, in turn, is the precondition for the rule of law to function as more than a formal text — it is what makes citizens treat legal rules as binding rather than merely as one input among several strategic options. Finally, a functioning rule of law is what makes access to justice meaningful rather than nominal: a citizen only has genuine access to justice if the legal system she approaches is one whose rules are legitimate, predictable, and equally applied. The viral-justice phenomenon, on this model, represents a rupture inserted at the first link of the chain, whose effects cascade through legitimacy and rule-of-law implementation to ultimately compromise the equality of access to justice for those without the means or circumstances to generate digital attention.

Research Propositions

P1: A decline in institutional legitimacy drives the public to seek alternative pathways for obtaining legal attention.

P2: Perceived inequality in law enforcement lowers public trust.

P3: Responsive and consistent institutions strengthen the rule of law.

These propositions are not tested through statistical hypothesis testing, consistent with the socio-legal and qualitative comparative design described below; rather, they function as analytical anchors against which the case comparison and findings in Sections 4 and 5 are read.

METHOD

Research Type

This article employs socio-legal research (penelitian sosio-legal), a design that deliberately combines doctrinal legal analysis with attention to the social and institutional context in which law is produced, interpreted, and enforced. This design is appropriate to the research questions because the 'no viral, no justice' phenomenon cannot be understood through doctrinal analysis alone — the relevant legal rules on equality before the law and due process are, on their face, unremarkable — nor through purely sociological analysis of public opinion, since the phenomenon is ultimately about the behavior of legal institutions applying (or failing to apply) those rules consistently.

Approach

The analysis proceeds through two complementary approaches. The normative approach examines the relevant statutory and regulatory framework, including provisions governing criminal procedure, police discretion in case handling (including the SP2HP mechanism for informing complainants of investigation progress), prosecutorial guidelines, and the institutional mandates of the Ombudsman and Komnas HAM. The empirical approach examines how these formal rules operate in practice by tracing documented

institutional responses to specific cases, drawing on published case chronologies, official statements, and secondary academic case analyses rather than on primary interviews, which fall outside the scope of this desk-based study.

Data Sources

Primary legal materials consist of relevant Indonesian legislation and regulations (including the Criminal Procedure Code / KUHAP, the Police Law, the Prosecutorial Service Law, and Ombudsman Law No. 37 of 2008), together with published judicial decisions where available. Secondary sources consist of the academic literature on the viral-justice phenomenon identified in the literature review, institutional annual reports and public statements from POLRI, Kejaksaan, and the Ombudsman, and reputable news media coverage of the specific cases used in the comparative case selection described below, used strictly to establish case chronology and institutional response timing rather than as a source of legal analysis.

Case Selection

Consistent with the comparative case-study logic outlined by Cappelletti and Garth's (1978) attention to structural barriers, this article compares publicly documented viral cases with functionally similar non-viral cases within the same offense category (e.g., traffic-related abuse of authority, domestic violence, and administrative negligence by public officials), selecting cases on the basis of comparable factual complexity and jurisdiction rather than on outcome, in order to avoid selecting only cases that confirm the hypothesized pattern. This design follows a most-similar-systems logic: holding offense type and jurisdictional context approximately constant while allowing the presence or absence of viral attention to vary, so that differences in institutional response timing and outcome can be attributed with greater confidence to the viral/non-viral distinction rather than to unrelated case characteristics.

Analytical Techniques

Three techniques are applied in combination. Content analysis is used to code institutional statements, press releases, and formal complaint-response documents for indicators of responsiveness, transparency, and stated justification. Comparative case study analysis is used to structure the viral/non-viral comparison described above. Process tracing is used to reconstruct the sequence of institutional actions in each case — from initial complaint, through internal escalation, to final resolution or closure — in order to identify the specific point in the process at which viral attention appears to alter institutional behavior, if at all.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Why the Perception of "No Viral, No Justice" Emerges

Documented case chronologies analyzed in the recent Indonesian literature show a consistent pattern: complaints that later became viral had, in most instances, already been lodged through formal channels weeks or months earlier, with little or no visible institutional movement, before a recording or account of the incident circulated online and was followed within days by public statements, formal summonses, or arrests (Kharisma, 2024; Fatakh, 2025). This sequencing is itself analytically significant: it indicates that virality typically operates on cases already inside the formal system rather than creating entirely new legal pathways, and that the perceived acceleration coincides with, rather than substitutes for, the formal process. The perception of 'no viral, no justice' therefore emerges less from any single dramatic case than from the accumulated, comparative visibility that digital platforms provide

— citizens can now observe, in near real time, that a formally identical complaint filed without media attention typically shows no comparable movement over the same period.

Patterns of Institutional Response

Across the cases reviewed, institutional response to viral pressure follows a recognizable sequence: an initial period of routine or minimal processing; a rapid escalation in the volume and prominence of official statements once a case reaches viral thresholds on social media; and, frequently, a public acknowledgment framed in terms of responding to public concern rather than to the substance of the original complaint. Nataningrum and Subarsyah (2025) characterize this as a mismatch between the legal facts of a case and the social-media narrative surrounding it, in which institutional communication increasingly addresses the narrative rather than the underlying legal process. This pattern is consistent with Wuysang et al.'s (2024) characterization of viral justice as an emergent, informal mode of law enforcement operating alongside, rather than fully within, the formal legal architecture.

Factors Driving the Decline in Public Trust

Several recurring factors emerge across the cases and literature as drivers of declining trust independent of any single case outcome. First, weak or inconsistently used complaint-progress notification mechanisms (such as SP2HP) leave complainants without reliable information on case status, creating an information vacuum that public exposure appears to fill more effectively than the formal channel itself. Second, perceived disparities in the treatment of cases involving individuals with social, economic, or institutional power compared with ordinary complainants reinforce a belief that equality before the law is aspirational rather than operative (Attidhira & Saptomo, 2025). Third, the absence of clear, publicly available criteria for case prioritization allows the public to infer — accurately or not — that visibility itself functions as a prioritization criterion. None of these factors depends on social media directly; digital platforms make them visible and comparable rather than causing them.

Consequences for the Perception of Justice

The cumulative consequence documented across the literature is a bifurcated public perception of the legal system: a "loud" track in which visible cases receive rapid, high-profile institutional attention, and a "quiet" track in which the great majority of complaints proceed, if at all, through ordinary and largely invisible administrative channels. This bifurcation risks becoming self-reinforcing: as citizens increasingly perceive virality as the more reliable pathway, complainants may be incentivized to prioritize public exposure over formal complaint mechanisms, further starving the ordinary channel of the institutional attention needed to demonstrate its own reliability, and further entrenching the perception the phenomenon originally described.

5.1 The Shift in Public Trust and Institutional Legitimacy

The Shift in Public Trust and Institutional Legitimacy

The findings above are best interpreted through Suchman's (1995) relational conception of legitimacy: legitimacy is not simply asserted by an institution but continuously granted or withheld by the public in response to observed conduct. Where institutional responsiveness is inconsistent — quick and visible for viral cases, slow and opaque for others — the public is, in effect, withdrawing legitimacy from the ordinary channel while extending conditional legitimacy to the digital-pressure channel instead. This is consistent with Bradford et al.'s (2010) procedural-justice account: it is not the eventual outcome of any single case that

principally damages trust, but the experience (or, for non-viral complainants, the absence of any experience at all) of fair, transparent, and timely process.

Challenges to the Rule of Law

Read against Dicey's (1885/1959) requirement of equality before the law, the differential responsiveness documented in Section 4 constitutes a structural — if informal — violation of that principle, since institutional attention is being allocated according to a criterion (public visibility) with no basis in the formal sources of law. Read against Raz's (1979) emphasis on the guiding function of law, the unpredictability of which channel will produce a response undermines law's capacity to give citizens reliable expectations about how the legal system will treat their grievance. Read against Fuller's (1964) requirement of congruence between announced rule and official action, the gap between institutions' stated complaint-handling procedures and their observed practice constitutes precisely the kind of internal incoherence that Fuller identified as corrosive of legality itself, independent of whether any individual official acts in bad faith.

Impact on Access to Justice

Cappelletti and Garth's (1978) waves framework suggests that the viral-justice phenomenon should be read as an informal, citizen-generated fourth wave layered atop the three canonical waves of access-to-justice reform: where legal aid (first wave), collective representation (second wave), and structural procedural reform (third wave) have not adequately resolved barriers of responsiveness and transparency, digital exposure has emerged as a substitute mechanism. But it is a poor substitute precisely because it reproduces, rather than resolves, the inequality that access-to-justice scholarship seeks to eliminate: it privileges complainants with the digital literacy, platform reach, or narrative appeal to generate attention, while leaving those without such resources — often the most vulnerable, consistent with the concerns underlying SDG 16 (United Nations, 2015) — in the same structurally disadvantaged position the access-to-justice movement was designed to address.

Central Argument

The central argument of this article can be stated directly: the perception of "no viral, no justice" is not evidence that social media has displaced or substituted for formal law. It is a diagnostic signal of a pre-existing decline in the legitimacy of law-enforcement institutions — a decline rooted in inconsistent responsiveness and opaque prioritization that predates, and is merely made visible by, digital platforms. Treating virality as the disease rather than the symptom risks a policy response confined to managing social media relations, when the underlying institutional deficit — variable responsiveness untethered to any transparent, legally grounded criterion — would remain unaddressed and would resurface under whatever communication technology succeeds the current platform environment.

Theoretical Contribution: The Responsive Institutional Legitimacy Framework (RILF)

Building on the conceptual chain in Section 2.4 and the findings in Section 4, this article proposes the Responsive Institutional Legitimacy Framework (RILF) as an integrative theoretical contribution. RILF holds that institutional legitimacy in a digitally networked society is sustained not by the absence or suppression of public pressure, but by three observable institutional properties operating jointly: (1) consistency — the application of comparable process and priority to comparable cases regardless of their public visibility; (2) transparency — the publication of clear, generally applicable criteria for case handling and prioritization, together with accessible progress information for individual complainants; and (3) responsiveness — timely engagement with grievances through the formal channel itself,

such that the formal channel, rather than public exposure, becomes the more reliable route to institutional attention. Where these three properties are jointly present, RILF predicts that digital public pressure will function as Beetham (1991) and Gilley (2006) suggest legitimate feedback mechanisms should — as an early-warning signal that supplements institutional monitoring — rather than as a substitute mechanism that citizens are driven to rely upon because the formal channel has failed them. RILF thus repositions virality not as an external threat to be managed defensively, but as a diagnostic instrument whose signal strength should, over time, diminish as the three underlying properties are institutionalized.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This article set out to answer three questions. On why public trust has shifted toward digital exposure (RQ1), the analysis finds that the shift is best explained not by any inherent public preference for spectacle over process, but by documented institutional inconsistency — particularly weak progress-notification mechanisms and opaque prioritization criteria — that digital platforms make newly visible and comparable. On the consequences for institutional legitimacy and the rule of law (RQ2), the analysis finds that differential responsiveness tied to visibility constitutes a structural strain on equality before the law, the predictive function of law, and the congruence between announced procedure and institutional practice, and that this strain accumulates into a broader legitimacy deficit rather than being confined to any single case. On how institutions should respond (RQ3), the article proposes that legitimacy be rebuilt through the three properties specified in the Responsive Institutional Legitimacy Framework — consistency, transparency, and responsiveness — implemented through the concrete institutional reforms set out in Section 6.

The central conclusion is that the perception of "no viral, no justice" reflects a crisis of institutional legitimacy in Indonesian law enforcement, of which virality is a visible symptom rather than a root cause. The article's principal theoretical contribution is the Responsive Institutional Legitimacy Framework, which reframes the phenomenon within an integrated public-trust-legitimacy-rule-of-law-access-to-justice chain and specifies the institutional properties through which that chain can be repaired.

This study is subject to important limitations. Its empirical basis is a desk-based comparative analysis of publicly documented cases and secondary academic literature rather than primary interview or survey data with complainants, investigators, or prosecutors, which limits its ability to establish causal mechanisms with the confidence that mixed-methods primary research would allow. The case comparisons, while selected to minimize confirmation bias, are necessarily limited in number and cannot support strong generalization across the full range of case types and jurisdictions in Indonesia. Future research should pursue three directions in particular: the role of artificial intelligence and algorithmic content curation in shaping which grievances achieve viral visibility and which do not; the influence of social-media platform algorithms and moderation policies on the distribution of legal attention; and comparative studies examining whether similar legitimacy-driven viral-justice dynamics appear in other jurisdictions with comparable institutional trust deficits, which would help establish whether the phenomenon documented here is specific to the Indonesian institutional context or reflects a broader pattern in digitally networked legal systems.

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