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Deconstructing Paul Karl Feyerabend's Epistemology And Its Implications For Corruption Eradication

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Abstract

This paper examines the thought of Paul Karl Feyerabend, one of the leading contemporary philosophers to criticize the positivism that has dominated modern science. It focuses on Feyerabend's epistemological anarchism and its implications for knowledge about corruption and corruption eradication in Indonesia, addressing the persistent gap between the extraordinary danger of corruption and the fragmented, discipline-bound way it continues to be studied and handled. This is a library (documentary) study using an interpretive description and content analysis. Secondary data were drawn from scholarly literature, books, journal articles and research reports relevant to epistemology, scientific method, and knowledge and handling of corruption, with Feyerabend's Against Method (1975) as the principal reference alongside relevant corruption studies. The findings show the continuing relevance of Feyerabend's thought, in which diverse methods may be used, counterinduction can be applied, and the proliferation of knowledge can occur. Eradicating corruption in Indonesia, given its formal institutions and culture, depends heavily on the President's will. Read through interpretive and content analysis in light of the large public demonstrations of late August 2025, the war against corruption should at minimum be

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pursued through a law that impoverishes convicted corruptors. Should corruption be reduced, anti-corruption education could then be instilled from early childhood, within families and educational institutions, adapted to local wisdom.

Keywords: epistemological anarchism; Feyerabend; corruption; deconstruction; Indonesia.

INTRODUCTION

Corruption is a problem with no end in Indonesia, and indeed in many other parts of the world. This reality is reflected in the 1994 Malta Conference, which classified corruption as an extraordinary crime, precisely because its consequences can devastate the fabric of national and state life.

Various theories explain the fall of governments and states, such as Ibn Khaldun's theory of the erosion of social solidarity (asabiyah) (Santosa et al., 2025), Acemoglu's theory of institutional mismatch (Acemoglu, 2003; Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012, 2019), and Diamond's theory of environmental change (Diamond, 2005). Corruption relates to all three: left unaddressed, it can bring down a government

History records that one cause of the fall of the Ottoman Sultanate was corruption so massive it ran from the topmost elite, the sultan, down to the lowest ranks (Alatas, 1987). Even President Prabowo Subianto has observed that, broadly speaking, history shows civilizations dissolve when corruption cannot be brought under control (Prabowo [1], 2023, p. 189).

Despite being unmistakably dangerous, corruption is frequently treated as ordinary or normal, allowing it to become systemic. Corrupt practices initiated by elites spread to other members of society, who engage in various forms of corruption whenever the opportunity arises. Approaches to the problem tend to be partial, confined within single disciplines, rather than integrated across fields.

Given that corruption is an extraordinary crime yet is understood and addressed as though ordinary, and studied largely within isolated disciplines, a fundamental change of approach is required. Philosophically, this calls for deconstruction, a term popularized by the French philosopher Jacques Derrida to interrogate established concepts, structures and categories. Under this lens, epistemology is not merely knowledge about knowledge, but also an arena in which power and ideology operate to shape what is accepted as truth. For Derrida, deconstruction does not aim to demolish knowledge but to unsettle the boundaries of binary structures that underlie basic concepts such as subject/object, true/false and fact/opinion; no knowledge is ever fully

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neutral, since it is shaped by its surrounding social, cultural and political context (Derrida, 1976). Epistemological deconstruction thus opens the way to a deeper understanding of the dynamics behind knowledge, including how ideology and authority can constrain, and even construct, what is treated as legitimate reality (Sukriyah & Hartono, 2024).

Feyerabend's epistemological deconstruction offers a radical approach that can reasonably be applied to re-examine the methodological foundations of knowledge about corruption and, in turn, the handling of corruption. This discussion proceeds on the assumption that knowledge of corruption is reflected in how corruption is handled: because ethics and morality have generally not become the foundation of corruption eradication, handling efforts are assumed to be bounded by the knowledge available, so that practice extends only as far as existing knowledge allows.

Feyerabend, a prominent philosopher of science known for his "anti-method" position, held that no single scientific method can be regarded as universally superior for reaching truth. His well-known principle of "anything goes" holds that science should remain open to methodological pluralism and flexibility, in opposition to the rationalist-positivist view that has long dominated thinking about the limits of knowledge and, by extension, about handling corruption.

Knowledge about corruption and its handling in Indonesia tends to be weighted heavily toward legal scholarship, when in fact corruption and its remedies should be examined from a range of disciplinary perspectives. Legal provisions drafted by law enforcers could then draw on multiple fields, allowing corruption that has become entrenched and systemic to be reduced sharply, and eventually diminished or eliminated, much as has occurred in many advanced economies. Corruption persists everywhere in some form, but developed countries have managed to suppress it to very low levels; Indonesia should aspire to the same, so that knowledge about corruption and its eradication can advance decisively and, ultimately, allow development to proceed unimpeded.

Since corruption has been described from the outset as an extraordinary crime — and President Prabowo himself has called it a dangerous condition — Feyerabend's perspective is considered relevant here. This study presents various strands of knowledge about corruption, connects them to practical-level events, proposes short-term measures for handling corruption, and argues for continuous improvement toward the goal of reducing, or ultimately eliminating, corruption.

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The study is significant because it offers a fresh perspective on handling corruption that connects its ontological, epistemological and axiological dimensions: ontologically, corruption in its many dimensions; epistemologically, the knowledge and methods used to uncover it; and axiologically, the goals of eradication. Corruption is a complex problem requiring holistic treatment, and Feyerabend's view is considered more realistic for this purpose. The research also offers practical value: handling should begin in the short term, followed by systematic, planned action over the medium and long term, so that corruption can eventually be minimized or eliminated.

METHODS

This study uses a qualitative approach based on a systematic literature review and conceptual analysis to explore Feyerabend's anarchistic epistemology and its application to the problem of corruption. Secondary data were gathered from scholarly literature, books, journal articles and research reports relevant to epistemology, scientific method, and the knowledge and handling of corruption. The principal source is Feyerabend's own work, particularly Against Method (1975), together with corruption studies judged relevant to the discussion.

The analysis combines conceptual examination, content analysis and interpretive analysis of findings drawn from books and journals. The next step is to identify which measures should take priority in eradicating corruption — that is, which steps should be taken first, and which should follow, in order to reduce and ultimately eliminate corruption. As a literature-based qualitative study, validity and reliability are established through the use of credible and relevant reference sources.

The main limitation lies in the literature-based qualitative approach. Although the study attempts to engage with practical-level realities, it necessarily draws on multiple disciplines that may exceed the authors' own specialization, risking encroachment on fields belonging to specialists in those areas. Nonetheless, the study aims, at the conceptual level, to propose short-term reductions in corruption, followed by continuous efforts to push it toward the lowest possible level.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The Development of Philosophy of Science in the Study of Corruption

In the philosophy of science, corruption is commonly viewed as an unlawful act that harms multiple parties. It is an act of self-enrichment considered fundamentally wrong, for which the

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most fitting response, at minimum, is the impoverishment of the perpetrator. Doing so would create a deterrent effect, since corrupt acts reveal a form of human greed toward wealth and property (Bramantyo, 2020). In fact, during the Sukarno era, corruptors were once sentenced to death; although the sentence was never carried out, the offender in question died before it could be (Fakhriansyah, 2024).

Feyerabend's Anarchistic Epistemology: Anti-Method and Pluralism

The term "anarchism" is often understood negatively, associated with violence intended to disrupt social stability. That association is not entirely unfounded, since certain individuals within society do use violent means to unsettle public order and security; some literature likewise describes anarchism as a rejection of all social rules.

Feyerabend's epistemological anarchism, however, holds that the history of science is not solely the product of positivism and rationalism, but is considerably broader. Developments in physics illustrate the point: figures such as Planck and Einstein, through relativity theory, unsettled the positivist framework rooted in Newtonian physics. The simple, mechanical and deterministic universe described by Newton was overturned once it became clear that light, understood as a particle, could not be consistently interpreted through any single formal mathematical formulation (Farhan, 2020).

The anarchism in Feyerabend's thought is theoretical: the history of scientific development need not be force-fed the dogma of positivism but can instead draw on a variety of methods, suited to the particular historical and cultural conditions of each setting. Feyerabend argued, in essence, that the events, procedures and outcomes making up science share no single common structure no element is present in every scientific inquiry while absent elsewhere. From this Feyerabend derived the notion of "anything goes": no single scientific method is inherently superior to all others. This idea is well suited to the study of corruption, whose prevalence has remained persistently high over time. It implies the need for varied methodological approaches in corruption research, given that corruption, left unchecked, damages the life of the nation and endangers the very existence of the state and its government.

Notably, Feyerabend also criticized Western scientists for at times insisting that Western rational thought alone represents the truth. In his view, forms of knowledge existed and advanced before the rise of Western thought, and indeed helped spark the very progress the West later claimed as its own, even as this earlier contribution went unacknowledged (Santosa, 2010; Santosa et al., 2025). Schumpeter (1954), for instance, did not recognize the economic advances

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of the Islamic world during Europe's so-called dark ages; similarly, Chinese medicine developed and flourished long before Western science emerged. As Feyerabend put it, even the oldest or seemingly most absurd ideas are capable of enriching knowledge, since the entire history of thought feeds into science and helps refine every single theory — and political considerations, too, should not be dismissed outright, since they may be needed to counter a chauvinism within science that resists alternatives to the prevailing status quo.

Accordingly, knowledge about corruption and its handling calls for a pluralistic approach, allowing for a diversity of methods suited to context. Pursuing this diversity of knowledge and remedies is essential if corruption is to be pushed toward its lowest possible level, thereby securing the stability and continuity of national development.

The Relevance of Anarchistic Epistemology to Knowledge

It is worth noting that Feyerabend understood mass psychology well, framing his ideas in deliberately bold, attention-grabbing terms. This reflected his own varied intellectual path: he began in physics and mathematics, explored the arts, and eventually turned to philosophy under Karl Popper's supervision. Initially a committed follower of Popper's falsificationist view of scientific progress, Feyerabend came to reject it, arguing that Popper's rigid framework could in fact be counterproductive to the advancement of science rather than supportive of it. Influenced by his colleagues Lakatos and Kuhn, Feyerabend ultimately proposed that science advances through an anarchistic method not a method of anything-goes lawlessness, but one in which any method may be used provided it suits the situation under analysis (Feyerabend, 1975). The rational-positivist method favored by Popper may not fit every social context; interpretive, hermeneutic or other methods may instead be appropriate for a given study, including the study of corruption. As noted above, Feyerabend's anarchistic method has already been applied across disciplines such as accounting, religion and marketing, but not yet, until now, to corruption.

Epistemological anarchism functions as a critique of modern scientific methodology, particularly Popper's rational-positivist model. Freeing inquiry from a single rigid method opens space for innovation and creativity in research methodology. For knowledge about corruption and its application, this implies the need for methodological freedom suited to the particular contours of corruption cases. Epistemological anarchism thus encourages flexibility that is highly relevant to understanding corruption and its handling, permitting mixed methods and pluralism that can be tailored to how corruption is best addressed — an approach expected to assist in combating a problem that has become difficult, complex and dangerous for the continuity of the Indonesian

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state.

The Conventional Paradigm of Corruption and Its Handling

As noted, corruption is treated as an extraordinary crime. Perpetrators are typically prosecuted under Indonesia's Anti-Corruption Law (Law No. 20 of 2001), which sets a maximum fine of Rp 1 billion (SBM Nugroho, 2022). From an institutional-economics standpoint, this provision is flawed: whatever the scale of the corruption, the maximum fine remains capped at Rp 1 billion, even though present-day corruption cases can run into the trillions of rupiah. This mismatch helps explain why corruption continues to flourish in Indonesia.

Corruption remains high in Indonesia. The country's Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) score stood at 34 out of 100 in 2023, unchanged from 2022, ranking Indonesia 115th out of 180 countries surveyed. CPI growth also slowed, falling to 3.1 percent year-on-year in June 2023 from 3.5 percent the previous month. More troubling still, Indonesia's Democracy Index places it among the 48 countries classified as "flawed democracies" — imperfect, blemished democracies. Countries in this category average a CPI score of around 48, well above Indonesia's 34, signaling real danger: a further decline of even two points could see Indonesia reclassified as non-democratic (BPIP, 2023, p. 18).

Money politics colors Indonesian democracy, driven by rent-seeking behavior that corrodes both moral character and mental integrity across society and at every level of leadership, where bribery has become pervasive. Those with sufficient funds can buy votes, loyalty and obedience; many officials answer not to the constitution or the national interest but to whoever pays them — a consequence, in part, of liberal democracy's very high operating costs (Prabowo [1], 2023, p. 106).

More than a quarter-century after independence was won at great sacrifice, foreign powers continue to seek influence, now through subtler strategies rather than open conquest — buying off leaders of weak morals rather than sending armies. Yet democracy is widely regarded as the best available system of government, and Indonesia's version of it is now threatened and tainted by money politics, through which leaders, judges and politicians alike can be bought (Prabowo [1], 2023).

Drawing on content analysis of the President's own writing, it appears he attributes Indonesia's corruption in part to financiers acting through elites who obstruct efforts toward the national goal of a prosperous "Golden Indonesia" by 2045 — obstacles that, while beginning to be addressed, only gained real urgency following the large public demonstrations of late August

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2025.

The Need for a Holistic Study of Corruption and Its Handling

The study of corruption should not be confined to law and legal remedies alone but should draw on multiple disciplines, so that the phenomenon can be understood precisely and consistently before a synthesized solution is formulated.

Historically, according to Ong Hok Ham (2018), corruption in the archipelago traces back to the ancient Mataram Kingdom (732–1016 CE) and the Majapahit Kingdom (1293–1527 CE), linked to how officials were compensated. Officials of the time received no fixed salary; instead, kings granted land and privileges from which income could be drawn to meet personal needs or fund the administration of the kingdom. These privileges were sometimes abused officials demanding "grease payments" from villagers seeking public works funded by the crown, or collecting land tribute below its proper value, and levying various other charges, what today would be called illegal exactions, allowing local officials to grow wealthier than the rulers they served. This pattern persisted under colonial rule, as colonizers exploited local rulers already inclined toward corruption and the exploitation of their own people, turning entrenched local customs to their advantage.

Other studies trace corruption to poor mental habits within Indonesian society. Lubis (2001) and Koentjaraningrat (1991) both point to hypocrisy, feudal attitudes, superstition, extravagance and a preference for shortcuts. Using Williamson's (1998) institutional framework, informal institutions — often slow to change, and not inherently negative — frequently attach themselves to harmful formal rules; entrenched interests, functioning as informal institutions, have embedded themselves in formal laws such as those governing mining, forestry, oil and gas, environmental management, fisheries and marine affairs, coastal and small-island management, and the Job Creation Law (BPIP, 2024, p. 38).

From an economic perspective, SBM Nugroho (2022) finds that corrupt actors typically gain more than society and government lose, a consequence, he argues, of weak legal provisions echoing points raised by both President Prabowo and BPIP regarding the ethical failings of public officials.

Under Indonesia's presidential system, the President holds the highest formal position, serving as both head of state and head of government (Romli, 2019). Given this standing, the President's role in eradicating corruption is pivotal whether corruption declines, stalls, or worsens depends significantly on presidential will, though the President must work with the House of

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Representatives (DPR) to enact new anti-corruption legislation.

Among the passages the President has chosen to highlight in his own writing is the maxim of the Roman military writer Publius Flavius Vegetius Renatus, "Si vis pacem, para bellum" if you want peace, prepare for war. Applied to Indonesia, a nation rich in natural and human resources, the point is that the country must be strong enough to avoid being preyed upon, whether by direct force or by subtler modern means; since corruption is itself a vulnerability others can exploit, the war against it should be waged proactively rather than only in response to public pressure.

He also draws on Thucydides' observation that the strong do as they will while the weak endure what they must a point that, at the macro level, underscores Indonesia's need to build economic and military strength so that it is not dismissed by other nations, though at the micro level the same logic could become counterproductive if the powerful were to exploit the weak domestically, which the President would presumably wish to avoid.

Elsewhere, the President draws on Sun Tzu, observing that war is a matter of the greatest consequence for any state, a matter of life and death, the road either to survival or to ruin a framing that, read through content analysis, applies just as well to the fight against corruption as to armed conflict: both are contests to be waged with total commitment, since anything less risks defeat. Pursued at scale, such a commitment could rally public support behind major national programs such as the Asta Cita and the eight priority transformation programs (Prabowo [2], 2023).

The President also cites Sun Tzu's idea that a commander who treats his soldiers as his own children earns their loyalty even unto death sound guidance for military leadership, but potentially different in a governmental setting, where subordinates may be tempted to report only good news rather than the truth, biasing the information reaching the top. Guarding against this requires a willingness to hear a wide range of voices, including critics, provided their criticism is grounded in sound moral and ethical reasoning rather than criticism for its own sake.

Deconstructing the Paradigm of Corruption and Its Handling

This section considers how the proliferation of ideas, together with counterinduction, applies to knowledge about corruption and its handling. Handling corruption requires attention to both formal institutions (written regulations) and informal institutions (social customs) (Furubotn & Richter, 2005). Both operate through Indonesia's presidential system and its supporting culture of paternalistic leadership. Counterinduction, in this context, involves attending to what is distinctive about Indonesia: at the general level, a firm stance is required to

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fight and eradicate corruption; at the regional level, conditions can then be adapted to local advantage.

Given Indonesia's formal presidential system, the success of corruption eradication depends heavily on the President's stance; given the country's paternalistic culture, the President, as the nation's foremost leader, is expected to fight corruption in all its forms. The large public demonstrations of late August 2025 can be read as a signal that, at minimum, a law impoverishing convicted corruptors should be enacted without delay, so that corruption, regardless of who commits it or in what form, can be eradicated in Indonesia.

The President has expressed admiration for the Chinese reformer Deng Xiaoping (1904–1997), who advanced his country in part by punishing corruption with the death penalty, helping curb corruption in a country whose economy, until the 1970s, was not so different from Indonesia's. State-owned enterprises subsequently became a mainstay of China's economy, an idea the President appears keen to adapt to Indonesian conditions, while affirming continued adherence to the constitution Pancasila and the 1945 Constitution.

Impoverishing convicted corruptors without exception, imprisoning them under a new anti-corruption law, and barring former corruptors from holding elite bureaucratic positions could make meaningful eradication of corruption in Indonesia a realistic prospect. This will not be easy, but the President, as a former military officer and businessman, is well positioned to understand the damage corruption causes and the need to reduce, or eliminate, it.

Once corruption has been substantially reduced, anti-corruption education can be introduced from early childhood. Anti-corruption education already exists at the university level (since 2011), but limiting it to higher education, while corruption remains high, systemic and culturally entrenched, undermines its effectiveness and efficiency.

Anti-corruption education should instead begin at home, from early childhood — teaching children honesty rather than steering them toward uniform, expected answers. Asked, for instance, where they most like to be, children should be free to give varied answers reflecting their own preferences rather than a single approved response; enforced uniformity favors quantitative targets over genuine quality, and can unconsciously instill exactly the hypocrisy, feudal deference, extravagance and shortcut-seeking discussed earlier.

Religious values and examples of leaders who succeeded through humility and simplicity should also be emphasized. Ethical and moral values are already taught across religious and educational settings, but their impact is undermined when figures within those very environments are themselves implicated in corruption turning would-be role models into poor examples

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instead. Education should be adapted to the many forms of local wisdom found across Indonesia's regions, while internet-based information can help promote the transparency and accountability that good governance requires today.

CONCLUSION

Several conclusions follow from the discussion above. First, Feyerabend stands among the foremost critics of positivism as the sole legitimate method for acquiring and advancing knowledge. Second, his critique — commonly termed epistemological anarchism — holds that anything goes, embracing counterinduction and the proliferation of methods. Third, this epistemological anarchism is well suited to understanding corruption and to implementing measures against it.

Fourth, given the President's formal standing as both head of state and head of government, and given the informal, cultural weight attached to that role, the eradication of corruption depends substantially on presidential will. Reading the President's own writing through content and interpretive analysis, and considering the mass demonstrations of late August 2025, the war against corruption should proceed without delay, including through an asset-forfeiture law and measures that decisively weaken corruption's hold — though enacting new anti-corruption legislation will still require cooperation between the President and the House of Representatives.

Fifth, once such measures are in place, anti-corruption education should follow within families, schools and other settings, so that a culture of corruption does not re-emerge. The diverse local wisdom found across Indonesia's regions should be drawn upon to uphold clean governance and other sectors free of corruption, with transparency, accountability and the affordances of the digital era helping carry these efforts toward their intended goal.

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