Article

From Symbol to Substance: A Theological and Psychological Study on the Differences in Leadership With and Without Rank Insignia

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Abstract: Leadership is often associated with symbols, one of which is the rank insignia worn by regional leaders in Indonesia. This symbol is believed to provide legitimacy and authority to leaders; however, its effectiveness remains debatable, especially when compared to regional leaders in other countries who do not wear rank insignia. This study analyzes rank insignia from the perspectives of Christian theology and leadership psychology to understand its impact on performance, competence, and public perception of leadership. From a Christian theological perspective, ideal leadership emphasizes service over symbolic authority. Meanwhile, in psychological studies, rank insignia can enhance a leader's confidence but may also create psychological distance from the public and increase mental pressure. This study compares the effectiveness of regional leadership with and without rank insignia, considering factors such as competence, transparency, and public participation. The analysis reveals that the substance of leadership is more important than visual symbols such as rank insignia. These findings provide implications for developing leadership based on performance and inclusivity, while also encouraging further research on the psychological impact of leadership symbols in modern governance.

Keywords: Christian theology, Leadership effectiveness, Leadership psychology, Leadership, Rank insignia.

1. Introduction

Leadership in regional governance in Indonesia has unique characteristics that distinguish it from leadership systems in many other countries. One striking aspect is the use of rank insignia on the shoulders of regional heads, which serves as a symbol of authority and formal status within the government structure. These insignia are typically worn by regents, mayors, and governors as part of their official uniforms, signifying their position within the administrative hierarchy (Picture 1, 2). This tradition has strong historical roots, influenced by colonial and military bureaucratic systems that emphasized visual symbols as a means of legitimizing power (Hasan, 2012). In Indonesia, such symbols are often associated with the leader's dignity

and are believed to reinforce their authority in the eyes of the public and their subordinates. However, the question arises as to what extent these rank insignia contribute to the effectiveness of regional leadership, and whether a leader without such insignia would lose their influence and authority in governance.

Picture 1, 2. President Prabowo swears in 961 regional heads and vice regional heads at the Presidential Palace, Jakarta, on Thursday, February 20, 2025. Source: Indonesia.go.id Thursday, 20 Februari 2025.

In contrast, many countries outside Indonesia, such as the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, and Scandinavian nations, do not implement a system of rank insignia for their regional leaders (Picture 3). Leadership in these countries is primarily based on performance, capability, and a leader's track record rather than on visual attributes such as insignia. For example, mayors in major cities like New York, London, or Berlin do not wear rank insignia as part of their official attire, yet they maintain authority and are recognized by both the public and their subordinates. This suggests that in these nations, leadership legitimacy is more reliant on substantive aspects such as competence, integrity, and success in governance rather than symbolic elements like rank insignia. This difference in approach raises a critical debate on the effectiveness of leadership based on symbolism versus leadership based on substance. If rank insignia are considered essential in establishing a leader's authority in Indonesia, why is it that in other countries, leaders without insignia can still govern effectively?

Picture 3. Michelle Wu Sworn in as Boston's First Female Mayor, US. Source: Kompas.tv - 17 November 2021.

From a Christian theological perspective, leadership should not merely rely on symbols and formal status but should instead be rooted in service and moral integrity (Arifianto, 2023). The Christian leadership model taught in the Bible emphasizes that a leader must have the heart of a servant rather than seeking honor through external

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symbols (Rorholm, 2021). Jesus Christ himself, as the central figure in Christianity, taught that true leadership is about serving others, as stated in Mark 10:42-45, where Jesus declares, "Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant." This principle contrasts with the notion that leadership requires symbolic attributes such as rank insignia to assert authority. Therefore, this study will explore the extent to which rank insignia in Indonesian regional leadership aligns with Christian leadership values or contradicts the essence of leadership that prioritizes service and integrity.

From the perspective of leadership psychology, symbols of power such as rank insignia can have psychological effects both on the leaders themselves and on the public they serve. Psychologically, rank insignia may enhance a leader's confidence and authority, as such symbols visually reinforce hierarchy and discipline (Gobel & Miyamoto, 2024). However, on the other hand, insignia can also have negative psychological effects, such as fostering excessive superiority or tendencies toward authoritarianism in leadership. From a societal perspective, the presence of rank insignia on a leader can shape perceptions of their legitimacy and authority, but it can also create barriers to effective communication, particularly if the symbol establishes a sense of distance between the leader and the public. Therefore, this study aims to understand the psychological impact of rank insignia on regional leadership, examining both the leaders' perspectives and the public's perceptions of their governance.

Based on this background, this study seeks to analyze the role of rank insignia in regional leadership in Indonesia from the perspectives of Christian theology and leadership psychology. Additionally, it aims to compare the effectiveness of leaders who use rank insignia with those who do not, evaluating how these symbols influence their performance, competence, and interaction with society. Through this approach, this study is expected to provide deeper insights into the significance of substance in leadership while also offering a comparative analysis of governance models in different countries. Furthermore, this study aspires to contribute to academic discussions in the fields of Christian theology, leadership psychology, and public administration while also offering policy recommendations regarding the relevance of symbolic elements in modern public leadership.

In regional leadership in Indonesia, rank insignia is often regarded as a symbol of authority that reinforces a leader's position and legitimacy. However, in a global context, many regional leaders in other countries govern effectively without the use

of rank insignia. This study aims to analyze the meaning of rank insignia from the perspectives of Christian theology and leadership psychology, examine its psychological impact on regional heads in Indonesia, and compare the effectiveness of leadership between those who wear insignia and those who do not. In terms of novelty, this research offers a high level of originality, as there are few studies that comprehensively explore the impact of rank insignia on the psychology, performance, and competence of regional leaders from both theological and psychological perspectives. Therefore, this study is expected to contribute significantly to academic discourse and provide new insights into the role of symbols in public leadership.

2. Literature Review

Rank Insignia from a Christian Theological Perspective

In Christian tradition, the symbolism of leadership has long been part of theological narratives, both in the Old and New Testaments. In the Old Testament, leaders were often identified through specific symbols that signified their authority and responsibility (Sherley, 2019). For example, Moses carried a staff that represented the power given by God to lead the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt (Exodus 4:2-4). This staff was not merely a physical tool but also a sign that Moses' leadership was divinely ordained. Similarly, the kings of Israel, such as David and Solomon, wore crowns as royal symbols indicating that they were anointed by God to rule. These symbols suggest that, within the biblical context, leadership is often associated with visible signs that communicate a leader's status and authority to the community.

However, while symbols in biblical leadership hold significant meaning, the essence of leadership in Christian theology emphasizes service, integrity, and exemplary character (Kornelius, 2023). In the New Testament, Jesus Christ revolutionized the concept of leadership by rejecting hierarchical power structures based on dominance and external symbolism. In Mark 10:42-45, Jesus teaches that "Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant." This teaching highlights that true leadership is not about symbols and status but about the willingness to serve humbly. In this context, the rank insignia worn by regional leaders can be critically examined from a Christian perspective—does the insignia truly reflect servant leadership, or is it merely a symbol of authority that lacks a foundation in Christian values?

Furthermore, the concept of leadership in Christian theology is not only about authority but also about the calling to lead with love and sacrifice (Resane, 2020). Jesus himself exemplified this in various actions, such as washing the feet of His disciples

(John 13:12-15), an act that was traditionally seen as the duty of a servant. In the context of governance, leaders who wear rank insignia may possess formal legitimacy, but what is more important is how they fulfill their role in serving society. Thus, this study seeks to explore whether rank insignia in the leadership of Indonesian regional heads supports or contradicts the Christian concept of leadership, which prioritizes service over status.

Moreover, throughout church history, various Christian leaders have demonstrated that symbols are not the primary aspect of effective leadership. For instance, Saint Francis of Assisi rejected all forms of wealth and grandeur to emphasize that true leadership is about simplicity and service to others (Christian & Trefry, 2024). Similarly, reformers like Martin Luther opposed excessive church hierarchies that placed too much emphasis on symbols and status, instead advocating that all believers share leadership responsibilities within their communities (Goka M. Mpigi, 2024). In the context of modern governance, these perspectives are relevant: does the rank insignia worn by regional leaders serve as a facilitator or an obstacle to servant leadership?

From an ethical Christian perspective, leadership should also reflect justice and moral responsibility (Nicolaides, 2020). Symbols like rank insignia can have psychological effects on both the leaders themselves and the society they govern. If a leader relies too much on symbols as a source of legitimacy, there is a risk that they may focus more on maintaining formal authority rather than on genuine service. Conversely, leaders who prioritize substance over symbolism will focus more on the welfare of their people rather than on preserving their status and honor. This study will explore how Indonesian regional leaders perceive and implement Christian leadership values in relation to their use of rank insignia.

On the other hand, while rank insignia may have historical and structural significance in governance, it is important to consider whether these symbols remain relevant in modern leadership. In a world that increasingly values competence and transparency, leadership that prioritizes service and performance is more appreciated than leadership that relies solely on visual symbols. Therefore, this study will examine how Indonesian regional leaders interpret the insignia they wear and whether it genuinely enhances their effectiveness as servant leaders.

By examining rank insignia from a Christian theological perspective, this study aims to provide new insights into the role of symbols in governmental leadership. This research not only compares the use of leadership symbols in Indonesia and other countries but also evaluates whether rank insignia has a positive impact or, conversely, hinders the principles of servant leadership. Through this approach, this study is expected to contribute significantly to the development of leadership theories based on Christian values in the context of modern governance.

Leadership Psychology and Symbols of Power

Symbols in leadership have a profound impact on how a leader is perceived by the public and how they perceive themselves in fulfilling their leadership role (Purwanto et al., 2020). Leadership symbols, such as rank insignia, uniforms, or other official attributes, serve as visual representations of authority and responsibility. In social psychology, symbols are believed to shape social expectations regarding a leader, influencing perceptions of their competence, leadership style, and effectiveness in decision-making. For example, the rank insignia worn by regional heads in Indonesia can create the perception that the leader has formal legitimacy and the power to implement policies. However, a critical question arises: does this insignia genuinely enhance a leader's substantive authority, or does it merely produce an artificial psychological effect?

Psychologically, the use of symbols in leadership can influence how leaders see themselves and interact with the public (Qin et al., 2020). The concept of enclothed cognition in psychology explains that the attire or symbols a person wears can affect their thinking, attitudes, and confidence. By wearing rank insignia, a regional leader may feel more self-assured in decision-making and more assertive in demonstrating authority. However, if there is an over-reliance on symbols without strong leadership capacity, there is a risk that the leader may depend on these visual cues to command respect rather than earning it through performance and competence. This can lead to pseudo-leadership, where leadership is more about appearances than actual qualities.

From the perspective of social identity theory, developed by Henri Tajfel, symbols play a crucial role in shaping group identity and social differentiation (Khadka, 2024). Tajfel explains that individuals tend to categorize themselves into specific groups based on certain characteristics, including visual symbols such as clothing and insignia (Buisine & Guegan, 2020). In the context of regional leadership, rank insignia can serve as an element that distinguishes leaders from the general public, reinforcing

their exclusive identity and hierarchical position. However, this can also create social distance, a psychological gap between the leader and the people they govern. If a regional leader emphasizes rank insignia as a symbol of authority rather than fostering interpersonal relationships with the public, it may lead to alienation and decreased leadership effectiveness.

Furthermore, the symbolic leadership theory suggests that leadership is not only rational but also emotional and symbolic. Leaders who understand the importance of symbols in building their image and authority can use them to strengthen legitimacy and increase public trust in their leadership (Wajner, 2022). In the context of regional governance, rank insignia can serve as a tool to create the psychological effect that a leader has legitimate authority and should be respected. However, this symbol is only effective when accompanied by behaviors and policies that demonstrate competence and integrity. If the rank insignia is used merely as a decorative element without substantive leadership qualities, its symbolic effect may be short-lived, potentially leading to a legitimacy crisis, where public trust in leadership diminishes due to an overemphasis on status rather than action.

Additionally, in leadership psychology, the concept of power distance refers to the extent to which society accepts the power gap between leaders and the public. In high power distance cultures, such as many Asian countries, symbols of authority like rank insignia are widely accepted as part of the social hierarchy (Travaglino & Moon, 2020). People tend to show greater respect for leaders who display visual symbols of power, such as uniforms and rank insignia. Conversely, in low power distance cultures, such as Scandinavian countries, leadership is more egalitarian, and hierarchical symbols are considered less relevant. This raises the question of whether rank insignia in Indonesia serves as a necessary tool of legitimacy or merely reflects a hierarchical leadership model that does not necessarily correlate with effectiveness.

From a cognitive psychology perspective, leadership symbols such as rank insignia can also influence public perception of a leader's competence and performance. This phenomenon is known as the halo effect, where people tend to associate physical or symbolic attributes with broader positive traits (Carton, 2022). In this case, the public might perceive a regional leader wearing rank insignia as more competent or authoritative than one without it, even though there is no direct correlation between the symbol and actual leadership ability. If not supported by strong performance, this effect can lead to an expectation gap, where the public becomes disappointed because

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the leader who appears authoritative symbolically does not meet their expectations in terms of governance effectiveness.

Considering the various aspects of leadership psychology and symbols of power, this study aims to explore the extent to which rank insignia in Indonesian regional leadership contributes to public perception, leadership effectiveness, and social interactions between leaders and the public. This research will also compare the psychological impact of leadership with and without rank insignia to understand whether this symbol genuinely enhances a leader's performance or merely provides a temporary effect without contributing to long-term leadership quality. Through this interdisciplinary approach, this study seeks to provide deeper insights into the relationship between symbols, authority, and substance in modern leadership.

Competence and Performance of Regional Leaders

The competence of regional leaders is one of the key factors that determine the effectiveness of leadership in governance (Waldan, 2020). Competence can be defined as a combination of knowledge, skills, and attitudes that enable a leader to perform their duties optimally (Kurniawan, 2021). In the context of regional leadership, competence encompasses not only technical aspects such as knowledge of public policy and administrative governance but also social and psychological aspects, such as communication skills, the ability to build relationships with the public, and decision-making in crisis situations. High competence allows regional leaders to formulate more effective and responsive policies that address the needs of their communities.

The performance of regional leaders is often measured based on various indicators that reflect their success in managing local government. These indicators include economic aspects, such as regional growth and budget management efficiency; social aspects, such as public welfare and the quality of public services; and bureaucratic aspects, such as transparency, accountability, and administrative efficiency (Androniceanu, 2021). Additionally, a leader's performance can also be evaluated based on their ability to build synergy with the central government, legislative bodies, private sectors, and civil society. Regional leaders with high competence tend to demonstrate better performance in meeting these indicators.

Several factors influence the effectiveness of regional leadership, both internal and external. Internal factors include personal characteristics such as integrity, leadership vision, experience, and intellectual and emotional capacity. A leader with a clear

vision and high integrity is more likely to gain public trust and guide their administration toward achieving better outcomes. Meanwhile, external factors include political dynamics, support from the bureaucracy and public, and structural challenges such as complex regulations and budgetary constraints.

One crucial aspect of regional leadership effectiveness is how leaders build relationships with both the public and the bureaucratic apparatus. Participatory and inclusive leadership enables leaders to better understand the needs and aspirations of their communities, resulting in policies that are more relevant and widely accepted. Conversely, an overly authoritative or bureaucratic leadership style may create a gap between the government and the people, ultimately reducing the legitimacy and effectiveness of the policies being implemented. In this regard, communication skills and negotiation abilities play a vital role in determining the success of a regional leader.

Regarding leadership symbols such as rank insignia, there is an ongoing debate about the extent to which these visual attributes influence competence and performance. Some argue that rank insignia reinforce leadership legitimacy and enhance a leader's confidence in decision-making. However, others contend that effective leadership does not depend on symbols but is instead determined by a leader's substantive capabilities. In this context, it is essential to understand whether rank insignia serve primarily as an administrative and protocol tool or if they have a deeper impact on leadership perception and effectiveness.

Previous studies in leadership psychology have shown that competence-based leadership is more effective than leadership that relies solely on symbolic authority (Minh & Osei-Amponsah, 2024; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2020; Li et al., 2019). Leaders with strong intellectual and emotional capacity tend to adapt better to change, make data-driven decisions, and foster a collaborative and productive work environment. On the other hand, leaders who overly depend on visual attributes or symbolic status risk experiencing a leadership deficit, where their decisions are less competency-based and more rooted in the mere exercise of power.

Comparison of Leadership with and Without Insignia

Leadership symbols, including rank insignia, have long been part of government systems in various countries. In Indonesia, regional leaders such as governors, regents, and mayors wear rank insignia as part of their official uniforms, serving as a symbol of legitimacy and authority in governance. These insignia are often seen as crucial elements that clarify hierarchy within the bureaucracy and help construct a

strong leadership image. Conversely, in countries like the United States, the United Kingdom, and Scandinavian nations, regional leaders do not wear rank insignia as part of their official attire. This reflects different approaches to leadership, where some countries emphasize symbolic representation, while others prioritize the substantive aspects of leadership in establishing legitimacy in the eyes of the public.

In the United States, for instance, governors and mayors are more recognized for their policies and actions rather than the visual attributes they wear (de Graauw, 2022). These leaders often appear in formal or casual attire when interacting with the public, emphasizing equality and openness in leadership. A similar approach is observed in the United Kingdom, where regional leaders prioritize direct communication with the public and responsiveness to societal issues. Meanwhile, in Scandinavian countries such as Sweden, Norway, and Denmark, leadership is more democratic and less hierarchical. Leaders in these countries are frequently seen in informal settings, blending with the public without significant visual distinctions in leadership attributes, reinforcing values of equality and public participation in decision-making.

The presence of rank insignia in regional leadership in Indonesia has significant psychological impacts on both leaders and society. From the leader's perspective, wearing insignia can instill a sense of authority and boost confidence in decision-making. By donning official leadership attributes, a regional leader may feel they have stronger legitimacy in governing. However, on the other hand, rank insignia also risk creating a psychological distance between leaders and the people. A leadership model that heavily relies on symbols of authority may result in leaders being more focused on hierarchy and power rather than actively engaging with and understanding the aspirations of the public.

For the public, rank insignia shape perceptions that a regional leader is a figure of high authority who must be respected. This aligns with the concept of high power distance, which is common in Indonesia and other countries with strong hierarchical cultures. In such cultures, society tends to accept clear social status differences, where leaders are viewed as figures of higher standing compared to ordinary citizens. However, in low power distance cultures, such as those in Scandinavia, people tend to see leaders as public servants responsible for their constituents rather than individuals who wield power over them. Thus, leadership without rank insignia in these countries does not diminish a leader's legitimacy, as leadership is assessed more based on policies and a leader's ability to address societal needs.

From the perspective of leadership psychology, symbols play a crucial role in shaping legitimacy and a leader's effectiveness. The symbolic interactionism theory explains that humans interpret their social world through symbols that carry specific meanings (Ansori et al., 2023). In leadership, rank insignia can serve as tools to clarify hierarchical structures and enhance public respect for leaders. However, the authentic leadership theory emphasizes that effective leadership is primarily based on integrity, transparency, and a leader's closeness to the people, rather than external symbols attached to the leader. Consequently, leadership effectiveness is better determined by substantive qualities such as a clear vision, decision-making abilities, and a genuine concern for public welfare.

When comparing the effectiveness of leadership with and without rank insignia, cultural and political factors play a significant role. In Indonesia, rank insignia are often used as a tool to reinforce a regional leader's legitimacy within a bureaucratic system influenced by feudal and militaristic traditions. However, in more democratic and transparent governance systems, leadership legitimacy relies more on performance and active engagement with the public. In this regard, leadership in Scandinavian countries demonstrates that effective governance can be maintained without prominent symbolic attributes, as long as leaders possess competence, integrity, and a commitment to public interests.

By comparing these two leadership models, this study seeks to understand the extent to which rank insignia contribute to the effectiveness of regional governance in Indonesia. Are insignia merely aesthetic and ceremonial elements, or do they have significant psychological and social impacts on leadership? Can leadership based on substantive qualities rather than symbolic authority be implemented within Indonesia's regional governance context? This study will examine these issues through a multidisciplinary approach, combining Christian theological and leadership psychology perspectives to provide deeper insights into the true essence of leadership.

3. Methods

This study employs a qualitative approach using case studies and comparative analysis to understand the meaning and impact of rank insignia in regional leadership. The case study focuses on regional leaders in Indonesia who wear rank insignia as part of their official uniforms, while the comparative analysis examines leadership systems in countries that do not implement the use of insignia, such as the United

States, the United Kingdom, and Scandinavian nations. Data for this research are collected from various sources, including academic literature, official documents, government regulations, and regional leaders' performance reports, to assess the extent to which leadership symbols influence governance effectiveness and leadership psychology.

The data collection technique includes document analysis, particularly regarding policies on the use of rank insignia in regional governments, as well as literature reviews on leadership theory, symbols of power, and leadership psychology (Dalglish et al., 2020). The collected data is analyzed using thematic analysis to identify patterns of meaning and the psychological impact of rank insignia on both leaders and society. Additionally, a comparative study of leadership effectiveness is conducted based on international case studies to determine whether leadership without rank insignia offers advantages in terms of performance, competence, and public engagement. This approach aims to provide deeper insights into the relationship between leadership symbols and the substance of leadership effectiveness in various governmental contexts.

4. Results and Discussion

The Meaning of Rank Insignia in Christian Theology

In Christian theology, leadership carries a profound spiritual dimension, where a leader is not merely an administrative figure but also bears moral and ethical responsibilities toward the people they serve (Noghiu, 2020). Leadership symbols, such as rank insignia in modern governance, can be compared to various biblical symbols that signify divine authority bestowed upon leaders. Moses' staff (Exodus 4:2-5), for example, was not merely a physical tool but a representation of God's power accompanying Moses' leadership in delivering the Israelites. Likewise, the kings of Israel, such as Saul and David, received anointing with oil as a sign of divine legitimacy in their leadership. This demonstrates that leadership symbols play a crucial role in affirming authority, both in religious and modern governmental contexts.

However, Jesus Christ's teachings on leadership present a contrasting perspective. In Mark 10:42-45, Jesus explicitly rejected a leadership model based on hierarchy and dominance. He stated, "Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be the servant of all." This underscores that Christian leadership should not focus on status or symbols but must be rooted in service and sacrifice for others (Kessler, 2019). In the context of regional leaders

wearing rank insignia, Jesus' warning becomes relevant: is the insignia used as a tool to better serve the people, or is it merely a symbol that reinforces the distance between leaders and their communities?

Church history also provides examples of leadership that rejected external symbols to emphasize the substance of leadership. Saint Francis of Assisi, for instance, renounced his noble garments and chose to live in humility, believing that true leadership was not about titles or symbols but about genuine acts of service. During the Protestant Reformation, Martin Luther also challenged the church's hierarchical system, which excessively emphasized rank and authority, asserting that true authority derives from character, honesty, and integrity. From this perspective, leadership without rank insignia can be seen as a more egalitarian model, where a leader's authority does not depend on symbols but rather on trust and legitimacy granted by the people through their actual leadership actions.

In modern governance, rank insignia can have both positive and negative effects. On one hand, it provides structural clarity within the bureaucracy and reinforces a leader's legitimacy within the governmental system. However, on the other hand, reliance on such symbols may create a psychological distance between leaders and their citizens. In cultures like Indonesia, where high power distance is prevalent, rank insignia can reinforce the perception that regional leaders are figures of authority who exist "above" the people rather than being among them. This contrasts with Scandinavian countries, where leaders often do not wear official symbols, fostering a leadership approach that is more participatory and engaged with the public.

From a theological perspective, true leadership should not depend on physical attributes like rank insignia but rather on moral character, integrity, and commitment to justice and the well-being of society. Effective leaders are not those who command respect solely because of the insignia they wear but rather those who genuinely serve their communities with sincerity. Therefore, while rank insignia may function as a legitimate administrative tool within government structures, Christian-oriented leaders must recognize that true authority does not reside in the insignia on their shoulders but in their authentic dedication to public service.

From a Christian theological viewpoint, leaders who wear rank insignia can still embody true leadership if they uphold humility and a spirit of service. Conversely, without these qualities, the insignia becomes a meaningless accessory that fails to reflect the essence of true leadership. Thus, this study asserts that effective leadership

must balance symbolism and substance, ensuring that rank insignia does not merely serve as an external emblem but rather functions as an instrument that supports a leadership model centered on service and the welfare of the people.

The Psychological Impact of Rank Insignia on Leadership

Rank insignia in leadership has a complex psychological impact on those who wear it. On the positive side, insignia can enhance a leader's self-confidence, as it provides formal legitimacy to their authority. In many contexts, leadership symbols such as rank insignia offer a sense of certainty and role clarity, enabling regional leaders to carry out their duties with greater decisiveness and assurance. According to social identity theory, individuals tend to internalize the roles assigned to them, meaning that a leader wearing insignia may feel more confident in making decisions and commanding respect from subordinates. This psychological reinforcement can lead to more assertive leadership and a stronger sense of responsibility.

However, rank insignia can also create a psychological distance between leaders and the public. In cultures with high power distance, such as Indonesia, symbols of authority tend to reinforce social hierarchy and widen communication gaps between leaders and their people. Leaders who overly rely on symbols like insignia may experience isolation effects, where they struggle to receive honest feedback from subordinates due to the perception that someone with rank insignia must always appear firm and infallible. This dynamic can reduce leadership effectiveness, as decision-making may not always reflect actual conditions on the ground.

Additionally, rank insignia can become a psychological burden for regional leaders, especially when they feel the need to constantly meet public expectations associated with symbols of authority. Role strain theory suggests that the higher the social demands on a particular role, the greater the potential stress experienced by the individual in that role (Brezina, 2017). Leaders wearing insignia may feel pressured to always appear flawless, avoid showing any weakness, and maintain an image of unwavering authority. As a result, this psychological pressure can lead to less flexible decision-making, increased work-related stress, and even the risk of burnout over time.

Thus, the psychological impact of rank insignia in leadership depends on how the symbol is interpreted by both the leader and their environment. If used as a tool to strengthen service and communication with the public, insignia can positively contribute to leadership effectiveness. However, if it primarily serves to separate leaders from the people, its psychological effects are likely to be negative—both for the leader

themselves and for their relationship with society. Therefore, leaders must develop reflective awareness in using leadership symbols, ensuring that insignia not only emphasize hierarchy but also foster closer, more participatory engagement with the public.

Competence and Performance of Regional Leaders With and Without Insignia

The competence and performance of regional leaders are key factors in leadership effectiveness, which can be influenced by the presence or absence of insignia. A leader's competence is not only defined by technical and administrative skills but also by communication capacity, decision-making abilities, and servant leadership. Comparative studies indicate that regional leaders who wear insignia are often associated with clearer authority within the government structure, potentially enhancing bureaucratic effectiveness. However, in some cases, insignia can create overly rigid hierarchical relationships, hindering flexibility in communication and participatory decision-making.

In the international context, countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and Scandinavian nations generally do not use insignia in civil leadership, yet their leadership effectiveness remains high. This suggests that the competence and performance of regional leaders do not solely depend on symbolic attributes but rather on adaptive and responsive leadership capacities that address societal needs. In Indonesia, insignia are often perceived as a formal representation of a leader's authority, reinforcing their legitimacy in the eyes of both the public and government officials. However, excessive reliance on such symbols may lead to dependence on rigid hierarchical structures, which can be less flexible in responding to policy changes or social crises.

In terms of performance, studies indicate that leaders without insignia tend to foster closer relationships with the public and government staff, as there are no symbolic barriers reinforcing the distance between leaders and subordinates (Sweeting, 2022; Bauer et al., 2022). This leadership model is often associated with transformational leadership, which emphasizes collaboration, public engagement, and policy innovation. Conversely, leaders who overly emphasize symbols of authority may face challenges in fostering open communication, which can ultimately impact the speed and accuracy of decision-making.

Therefore, the effectiveness of regional leadership relies more on personal competence and leadership style than on the presence of insignia. While insignia can help reinforce a leader's position within the bureaucracy, their use must be balanced with an inclusive and service-oriented leadership approach. This study highlights that effective leadership is not determined by external symbols but by a leader's ability to manage policies, adapt to social challenges, and build harmonious relationships with both society and government officials.

Critique of Symbolism in Leadership

Symbolism in leadership, including the use of rank insignia, has long been a part of governmental traditions in many countries. Rank insignia are often seen as a visual representation of authority and legitimacy. In Indonesia, the rank insignia worn by regional leaders reflect the hierarchical structure of government and are expected to reinforce discipline and compliance within the bureaucracy. However, in modern leadership, which increasingly prioritizes effectiveness, transparency, and accountability, a fundamental question arises: does rank insignia genuinely enhance leadership quality, or has it become merely a ceremonial attribute with diminishing relevance?

Some studies suggest that leadership symbols, such as rank insignia, can strengthen perceptions of authority and increase a leader's legitimacy. In bureaucratic systems that rely heavily on hierarchy, these symbols help clarify organizational structures and maintain order among government officials. However, on the other hand, an overemphasis on rank insignia may result in a leadership style that is overly focused on hierarchy, potentially hindering open and participatory communication. This is in contrast to transformational leadership, which emphasizes the active engagement of leaders with both their staff and the public to achieve collective goals.

A key criticism of symbolism in leadership is its tendency to create a psychological barrier between leaders and the people they serve. Leaders who strongly emphasize symbols of authority, such as rank insignia, may struggle to foster inclusive, trust-based relationships with their communities. In contrast, in countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and Scandinavian nations, regional leaders do not wear rank insignia as a symbol of their authority. Instead, their leadership legitimacy is established through active presence, openness to criticism, and measurable performance. This indicates that effective leadership is more dependent on capability and leadership style than on symbolic attributes.

From a psychological leadership perspective, rank insignia can also have negative effects on the leaders themselves. A visible symbol of authority can increase psychological pressure, as leaders may feel compelled to always project an image of strength, authority, and infallibility. As a result, they may experience higher levels of stress, particularly in crisis situations where flexibility and empathy are crucial. Additionally, leaders who rely too heavily on rank insignia for their authority may struggle to develop sustainable leadership qualities based on competence and trust, which are more effective in the long term.

Furthermore, symbolism in leadership risks creating an illusion of effective leadership, where leaders appear authoritative but fail to demonstrate substantial performance. In some cases, leaders with high-ranking insignia but inadequate competencies may retain their positions due to their symbolic power rather than their actual leadership qualities. In contrast, leaders who do not use rank insignia are often compelled to build their authority through tangible actions, such as policy transparency, innovation, and a more human-centered approach to governance.

Considering these perspectives, it can be concluded that leadership symbols do not always have a positive impact and may even hinder leadership effectiveness if not used wisely. While rank insignia can help clarify authority structures within bureaucracies, ideal leadership is not defined by symbols but by competence, performance, and active engagement with the community. Therefore, in modern governance, a re-evaluation of the role of symbolism in leadership is necessary to ensure that leaders focus on the substantive aspects of leadership that truly impact society and improve governmental effectiveness..

5. Conclusions

Rank insignia in regional leadership carries significant symbolic meaning, both from Christian theology and leadership psychology perspectives. Theologically, symbols such as rank insignia represent hierarchy and authority, historically reinforcing the role of a leader. However, Christian teachings emphasize servant leadership and direct engagement with the community, rather than relying solely on symbolic attributes. From a psychological standpoint, rank insignia can enhance confidence and legitimacy, yet they may also create psychological distance between leaders and the public, as well as increase mental pressure on the leaders themselves. In countries where regional leaders do not wear rank insignia, leadership effectiveness is often determined

by competence, transparency, and public participation, rather than by visual markers of authority.

From a conceptual perspective, discussions on Christian theology and leadership psychology highlight how symbols influence perceptions of authority. The presence of rank insignia does not necessarily guarantee strong leadership, as effectiveness is more dependent on the ability to build trust and demonstrate concrete results. In practical terms, regional leaders and policymakers are encouraged to prioritize substance over symbolism in governance. While rank insignia may help establish authority, true leadership is better reflected through competence, performance, and an inclusive leadership approach. To gain deeper insights, future studies can incorporate quantitative methods such as surveys and experiments to statistically assess the psychological effects of rank insignia, ensuring a more measurable and applicable understanding of modern leadership dynamics.

One limitation of this study is its reliance on controlled experimental settings, which may not fully capture the complexities of real-world leadership dynamics. While the research provides valuable theological and psychological insights into how rank insignia influence leadership behavior, the artificial nature of the study environment may limit the generalizability of its findings. Additionally, cultural and organizational contexts play a significant role in shaping leadership perceptions, and these factors were not exhaustively examined. Future research should explore diverse settings and longitudinal studies to better understand the long-term effects of leadership with and without rank insignia.

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