



ISSUE MANAGEMENT BY PUBLIC RELATIONS AT THE INDONESIA CABINET SECRETARIAT IN FACING NEWS OF THE 2024 GENERAL ELECTION POSTPONEMENT

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Abstract

In early 2023, public discourse in Indonesia was stirred by the issue of postponing the 2024 general election, following a Central Jakarta District Court decision favoring the Prima Party's lawsuit. This study aims to examine the issue management strategy employed by the Public Relations (PR) unit of the Indonesia Cabinet Secretariat in responding to this sensitive political situation. Using a qualitative case study approach within a constructivist paradigm, data were collected through in-depth interviews with five key informants including PR practitioners and journalists supported by literature review and document analysis from March 2023 to January 2024. The findings reveal that the PR team followed five standardized stages of issue management: issue identification, issue analysis, action planning, program implementation, and a continuing evaluation process. The strategy was predominantly reactive, with emphasis on accurate news monitoring, internal communication coordination, and dissemination of information via the official Cabinet Secretariat website to counter misinformation and maintain public trust. Although internal communication systems functioned effectively, human resource limitations and uncontrollable media narratives posed challenges. Despite these, the PR team successfully mitigated potential reputational risks and upheld government transparency. This study concludes that a structured issue management strategy, even when reactive, is essential in sustaining public confidence during political controversies. It also underscores the critical role of government public relations in bridging state decisions and public perception during times of democratic tension.

Keywords: Public Relations; Issue Management; Indonesia; Politics; Elections

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INTRODUCTION

At the beginning of 2023, the Indonesian mass media began actively reporting on the perspectives and reactions of several political parties concerning a controversial proposal to postpone the 2024 general election, initially scheduled for February of that year. This controversy arose following a decision by the Central Jakarta District Court, which ruled in favor of a lawsuit filed by the Adil Makmur People's Party (commonly known as the Prima Party). The court decision called for the delay of the upcoming general election. However, this legal ruling was not considered final, as the General Election Commission (Komisi Pemilihan Umum or KPU) announced its intention to file an appeal. In response to the public concern, Vice President KH Ma'ruf Amin assured the nation that the election would proceed according to the predetermined schedule. He emphasized that the Central Jakarta District Court's decision was still under judicial review and not legally binding (State Secretariat of the Republic of Indonesia (Setneg, 2023).

As the issue continued to gain traction, the controversy over the proposed election delay remained a prominent topic in Indonesia's national mass media throughout year 2023. One of the key media outlets covering this topic extensively was CNN Indonesia. According to a CNN Indonesia report, the proposal gained renewed attention after a second ruling from the Central Jakarta District Court ordered the KPU to temporarily halt the election process (CNN Indonesia, 2023). This development triggered a series of political commentaries and reactions as can be seen in Figure 1. The issue became so pervasive that it even prompted a public statement from a high-ranking minister within the Presidential Cabinet, who addressed the possibility of postponing the election. The prolonged media attention surrounding the issue contributed significantly to a national conversation that divided public opinion.



Figure 1: Election Postponement News

Based on our point of view, the public may wonder whether a postponement of the election is feasible, leading to polarized opinions on the matter. These contrasting viewpoints are the reason researchers selected this issue over other potential topics. This extensive public debate includes diverse groups, from public officials, political party leaders, academics, practitioners, and students to the general public. The issue of postponing the election is complex, encompassing political, social, and legal dimensions. Dirhantoro (2023), writing for Kompas, captured a critical perspective from Mahfud MD, then Coordinating Minister for Political, Legal, and Security Affairs. Mahfud stated unequivocally that any attempt to delay the 2024 general election would require substantial constitutional amendments. These changes would need to be supported by clear legal justifications and specific legislative formulations. Furthermore, Mahfud warned that such a move could destabilize the

country, potentially leading to national political chaos (Dirhantoro, 2023). His statement underscored that election postponement is not merely a technical or administrative decision, but one with profound implications for Indonesia's democratic structure and constitutional integrity. Beside that, in his statement, the President Joko Widodo once said that there would be no postponement of the 2024 election and the election would continue to be held in accordance with the constitutional mandate and its implementation would be in accordance with the schedule that had been set in 2024 (Setneg, 2023). This position is further reinforced by the 1945 Constitution of the Republic of Indonesia (UUD 1945, 2023), specifically Article 1, paragraph (2), which asserts that democracy, must be conducted in accordance with the constitution. Additionally, Article 1, paragraph (3) of the 1945 Constitution declares Indonesia as a rule of law state (UUD 1945, 2023). Base on our point of view, thats indicating that all procedures must adhere to the applicable articles. However, despite the President's statement, the issue has not ceased to be a topic of discussion in the public sphere.

In this case, the official website of the Indonesia Cabinet Secretariat, through a publication by the public relations unit, reported that the President has consistently reiterated the government's commitment to conducting the election as planned. The Cabinet Secretariat's Public Relations team aims to restore public confidence in the government by providing factual information to foster a positive public perception of the administration (Setkab, 2023). As an institution, the Indonesia Cabinet Secretariat holds a critical mandate in providing administrative support to both the President and Vice President. Within its organizational structure lies the Public Relations unit, tasked with managing communication strategies and media relations. This unit operates as a bridge between the executive branch and the general public. In times of crisis or public controversy, government public relations professionals are expected to act swiftly and responsibly to ensure that accurate and verified information reaches citizens. The role of PR becomes especially important in minimizing speculation or the spread of misinformation that could erode public trust (Ministry of Administrative and Bureaucratic Reform, 2005, as cited in Setkab, 2023). In doing so, PR not only communicates decisions but also legitimizes the government's stance in the eyes of the public.

Public relations within a government agency cannot escape the influence of news coverage. Given the reports produced by the media, public relations must engage in communication activities to reinforce the desired outcomes, specifically by establishing relationships with the media, known as media relations. When media relations activities are conducted effectively, it is anticipated that strong relationships will develop with the media, ultimately leading to increased trust and credibility (Farihanto, 2014). On the other hand, leaders of government institutions also hope that their public relations units can effectively manage communication with the mass media. This concept isn't limited to Indonesia; Malaysia, with its similar culture, shares this understanding. However, as Cheah (2021) reviewed, discussions regarding the values and ethics of government staff frequently expose numerous issues and problems. These issues invariably become news coverage and material in the mass media, often because government staff violate established regulations, laws, and work ethics, thereby tarnishing their own image and the government's reputation. In addition to this, we also examine aspects of the political process in Malaysia that are noteworthy and serve as valuable references. One significant aspect is the position of the Islamic Malaysian Party (PAS) as an opposition party, which is capable of providing criticism, input, and arguments on legal issues related to hudud, alcohol, gambling, and the interests of Malay Muslims, particularly in relation to Barisan Nasional (BN). This includes critiques of Pakatan Harapan (PH) regarding the issue of drunk driving, which has contributed to community unrest. Like the research results reported by Sopi (2022), since PAS returned to power, it has not effectively fulfilled its campaign promises, in

stark contrast to its performance as an opposition party. One contributing factor is a shift toward a more luxurious lifestyle, leading PAS to neglect its commitments.

Building from that comparison, it becomes evident that political parties in power whether in Indonesia or Malaysia can significantly influence the trajectory of national debates, including those concerning election postponements. In Indonesia, the Prima Party's legal action against the General Election Commission became an important trigger for renewed discussions on the possibility of delaying elections (BBC News Indonesia, 2023). For researchers, this incident provided fertile ground for analyzing issue management in a political context. For instance, Aprianti et al. (2023) examined how PT Kereta Api Indonesia handled public relations crises by employing campaigns, outreach, and press releases in response to sexual harassment cases. Similarly, Sanusi (2022) found that the public relations strategy at Cut Nyak Dhien Hospital were not entirely effective, as news of malpractice cases continued to attract significant media and public attention, which in turn negatively impacted the hospital's reputation.

Additional case studies help contextualize public relations practices in other sectors. Tomohardjo (2022) also conducted research, exploring crisis management strategies within the apartment industry to address conflicts between management and tenants. The findings suggest that Jakarta's apartment managers primarily employ a strategy focused on mitigating public backlash when a crisis reaches its peak. This strategy is implemented via social media, where digital listening is used to respond to customer complaints and counter misinformation concerning Jakarta. Furthermore, apartment management adopted a self-introduction approach, issuing public apologies for the crisis. Likewise, Akasah (2022) states that for government communication to be effective, the government, as the primary initiator, must take several steps: adapting language to the audience, minimizing communication barriers during crises, mastering knowledge of effective communication practices, and controlling the flow of information. Nugroho and Mucharam (2021) identified a "reactive change strategy" PT Angkasa Pura 1's public relations team considers certain issues as rumors. Public Relations at PT Angkasa Pura 1 will not respond to an issue without confirmation, using a reactive change strategy to address verified concerns. Herman (2023) further emphasized the role of social media in shaping political participation in Palu, where online platforms serve as the primary source for news and public engagement in political discourse.

Furthermore, according to Monstad, as cited in Prayudi (2016) an issue is defined as a problem, condition, or event that has transitioned from a private matter to a public concern, initially affecting only specific individuals or groups but eventually drawing the attention of the wider community and becoming a topic of open debate. Kriyantono (2015) further categorizes issue management into five key stages: issue identification, issue analysis, action planning, program implementation, and a continuing cycle of evaluation and monitoring. Drawing from these frameworks, the present study aims to assess how the Public Relations unit of the Indonesia Cabinet Secretariat navigated these stages while addressing public and media discourse around the potential postponement of the 2024 general election.

METHODOLOGY

In this study, the researchers adopted a constructivist paradigm, which posits that reality is not fixed but shaped through individual experiences and the surrounding social environment. From this perspective, truth is neither absolute nor universal it is constructed differently by each person based on their cultural, social, and political

contexts. Central to constructivism is the role of communication, which actively constructs and negotiates social reality. This stance is particularly relevant to the politically sensitive issue of election postponement, where public understanding and perceptions are shaped by how messages are framed, disseminated, and interpreted across different audiences. Public relations strategies, therefore, must go beyond simple transmission of information; they must engage with how diverse actors government officials, media professionals, civil society, and the on-the-ground public interpret and internalize such messages. Effective communication becomes a strategic tool not just for conveying the government's position, but also for shaping public interpretation and managing reputational risks, especially when addressing potentially contentious state actions (Wilcox et al, 2021).

The research design for studying the public relations issue management strategy of the Indonesia Cabinet Secretariat in addressing news of the 2024 election postponement is based on a case study method within a qualitative approach. This article qualifies as a case study as it examines real-world phenomena in their everyday context. This approach is deemed most relevant and appropriate because the research aims to gain an in-depth understanding of the case and explore the communication strategies used by the Cabinet Secretariat's public relations team to manage issues. Covering the period from March 2023 to January 2024, when this debate was most prominent, the research examines how the PR unit employed strategic communication planning, message framing, and stakeholder engagement to align public expectations with constitutional democratic values. The case study method also permits a nuanced understanding of how formal structures and informal dynamics intersect in high-stakes political communication scenarios (Coombs, 2021).

Data were collected using in-depth interviews, alongside literature review and document analysis, thereby strengthening the study through triangulation. Five key informants were selected: (1) Assistant Deputy for Public Relations and Cabinet Secretariat Protocol, (2) a Senior Expert Public Relations Officer, (3) a Junior Expert Public Relations Officer, (4) a Tirto.id journalist, and (5) an MNCTV journalist. Public relations practitioners offered detailed insights into the internal decision-making and issue management process. Journalists provided external assessments, evaluating transparency, responsiveness, and adherence to democratic norms. Gathering insights from both institutional insiders and media observers ensured a richer, more balanced view of the Cabinet Secretariat's communication strategies and their effectiveness during the election postponement debate.

Qualitative data analysis followed the interactive model by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014) and Kriyantono (2022), which includes three iterative stages: data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. After the data is collected, the next process is data reduction, which is the activity of summarizing, selecting the main points, focusing on the important things, and sorting and discarding what is not needed. The next step is data presentation, this is used so that the data has clear visibility. Through data presentation, the data is organized and arranged into patterns that are easy to understand. This cyclical process significantly enhances the credibility and reliability of the study's findings (Wilcox et al., 2021; Coombs, 2021).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The emergence of discourse surrounding the postponement of Indonesia's 2024 general election ignited widespread debate across online and mainstream media platforms. This issue quickly polarized public opinion,

with various groups either supporting or opposing the proposal. In response to this developing situation, the Public Relations (PR) team of the Indonesia Cabinet Secretariat activated its issue management strategy. The primary goal was to rebuild and sustain public trust in the government, which had been challenged by uncertainty and political speculation. The strategy centered on disseminating accurate, evidence-based information that could counter misinformation and prevent public unrest. Public trust plays a foundational role in a democratic society, especially when it comes to sensitive political matters such as elections, which are closely tied to political stability, civic participation, and institutional legitimacy (Coombs & Holladay, 2022). Understanding the social and political risks involved, the PR team sought to implement a strategic communication response anchored in internationally recognized issue management practices. These practices typically follow a five-stage framework, including issue identification, issue analysis, action planning, program implementation, and continuous evaluation (Wilcox et al., 2021; Kriyantono, 2015; Nugroho & Rochmat, (2024). These five issue management activities include Issue Identification, Issue Analysis, Action Planning Stage, Program Implementation (Issue Action Program), and Continuing Circle Process (Table 1).

First, issue identification. Interview results reveal that the Indonesia Cabinet Secretariat employs a systematic issue identification process through weekly and monthly news monitoring. Public relations activities are primarily focused on processing information related to election postponements, positioning public relations as an intermediary between the public and leadership. This role involves relaying information on priority issues, such as election postponements, to support informed decision-making. Second, issue analysis. The findings show that the Indonesia Cabinet Secretariat has an issue analysis process that involves factors including analysis of public opinion, news sentiment, and its impact on image and reputation. Engaging the media in this process is essential, highlighting the Secretariat's active role in managing and responding to emerging issues, including election postponement. The Secretariat utilizes analytical tools and technology while acknowledging the media's influence in shaping public opinion.

Third, action planning stage. The third stage, known as the Action Planning Stage, employed by the Indonesia Cabinet Secretariat aligns with a "Reactive Change Strategy." This strategy reflects an organizational reluctance to change, maintaining continuity with prior practices. At this stage, the Secretariat continues to categorize and prioritize issues, particularly those with technical implications for government. Journalists have affirmed that the Indonesia Cabinet Secretariat has fulfilled its communication duties and functions effectively. Fourth, issue action program. The fourth stage, the Program Implementation Stage, involves a communication strategy that includes collaboration across units, characterized by interactions between superiors and subordinates. Communication from superiors to subordinates primarily takes the form of directives, while subordinates communicate upward through discussions that may be escalated to senior leadership or relevant departments. This communication process is further facilitated by a media monitoring application. Across the 66 inter-unit communications observed, monitoring serves as an indicator of successful performance. Journalists also noted an improvement in the Indonesia Cabinet Secretariat's public relations performance, affirming that procedures align with the established public relations SOP.

Fifth, continuing circle process. This stage assesses whether the implemented program aligns with the organization's objectives. Additionally, as suggested by the term "continuity," this stage includes an ongoing identification process, evidenced by how the Indonesia Cabinet Secretariat website serves as a reference for mainstream media. Journalists noted that the Cabinet Secretariat website is beneficial due to its speed in publishing content, which supports timely reporting. Regarding the results in Table 1, discussions can be carried

out by analyzing the management of public relations issues at the Indonesia Cabinet Secretariat. General Views of Cabinet Secretariat Public Relations in Facing News of Election Postponement, can be reviewed by Monstad (Prayudi, 2016) argues that issues are problems, conditions or events that have shifted from private problems to 72 public issues as stated by Crable and Vibbert. Therefore, it can be concluded that when the issue of postponing the election became a dominant issue and was brought up at a cabinet meeting, this problem was no longer a private problem but instead became a problem because it had spread to the public. If it has spread to the public, it is important for public relations to carry out an issue management strategy for the issues that occur.

Table 1: The Issue Management Stages at the Indonesian Cabinet Secretariat

Stage	Main Activity	Findings at the Cabinet Secretariat
1. Issue Identification	Monitoring media regularly to detect key public issues.	Weekly and monthly monitoring focused on election postponement.
2. Issue Analysis	Analyzing public opinion, media sentiment, and reputational impact.	Used digital tools to assess sentiment and media influence.
3. Action Planning	Developing response strategies (reactive or proactive).	Applied a reactive strategy, prioritizing technical government concerns.
4. Program Implementation	Coordinating internal communication and media engagement.	Conducted cross-unit communication; media noted improved PR performance.
5. Continuing Circle	Evaluating outcomes and re-identifying issues.	Website became a trusted media source for timely and accurate updates.

Then, the role of Cabinet Secretariat Public Relations in Issue Management, in general, one of the tasks of public relations agencies or government institutions is to provide information, both through conventional media and new media. The shift from conventional public relations to digital public relations can be regarded as one significant impact that social media has had on the practice of global communication. It is thus imperative for every public relations practitioner to be cognizant of ubiquitous and real-time nature of online communications that can change very quickly and unexpectedly (Haryanti & Rusfian, 2018). Also, government and nonprofit agencies and elected officials are using social media channels to engage citizens and gain support on various issues (Lee et al., 2021). Referring to the findings that were based on interview results, the public relations role of government institutions, as exemplified by the Cabinet Secretariat, centers on providing information. This is evident in how the Cabinet Secretariat communicates the president's policy to prevent further circulation of the election postponement issue within society. Information is disseminated through various media, conventional and digital, so that information can be quickly accessed by the public, the following is the analysis (Table 2).

First, issue identification. The issue identification process at this stage uses several methods, one of which is monitoring media news. In identifying issues, the Cabinet Secretariat's public relations officer identifies issues by monitoring news weekly or monthly. The issue monitoring is to see which issues are more dominant in the media to be used as material for cabinet meetings. Furthermore, issue monitoring is carried out by categorizing news based on its field. The issue of postponing elections is included in the field of the Coordinating Minister for Political, Legal and Security Affairs. Based on the interview results, on average, Politics, Law and Security are definitely the most prioritized so it can be concluded that the issue of postponing elections is a priority issue. Even though this issue is a priority issue, the Cabinet Secretariat's public relations officer stated that specifically this issue does not affect the image and reputation of the Cabinet Secretariat.

Second, issue analysis. At the issue analysis stage, public relations can create issue categories based on

certain considerations, for example grouping the issues based on public groups that are likely to be affected by the issues based on the cause (whether the issue is important or not). Related to this, at this stage the Cabinet Secretariat public relations categorizes an issue. Based on the results of the interview, this categorization is seen based on the number of media sources, both print and online, from the results of monitoring whether the issue is a main issue or not, then the issues are then grouped into positive, negative or neutral issues. Monitoring this issue, based on the results of interviews, stated that the issue of postponing the election had become the main issue discussed in the cabinet meeting because of the dominant news regarding this issue, but after grouping this issue it was categorized as a negative issue because if this issue occurred it would not be easy because Mahfud MD, Coordinating Minister for Politics, Law and Security, said that there would be a need to change the constitution if this happened. Apart from that, this issue is categorized as a negative issue because it raises pros and cons in society.

Third, action planning stage. At this stage, issue management carried out by the Cabinet Secretariat's public relations is included in a strategy called Reactive change strategy. This stage explains that the organization is unwilling to change while continuing to maintain previous behavior. This is proven by the Cabinet Secretariat's public relations continuing to categorize issues and prioritize issues that are more technical in government. This behavior is carried out by determining the main tasks and functions of the Cabinet Secretariat. Fourth, issue action program. The program implementation phase showcases the integration of public relation strategy with other units. Actually, the Cabinet Secretariat does not have a dedicated work unit for Public Relations; rather, Public Relations exists only as a functional role under the designation of Public Relations Officer. In response to the election postponement, the public relations officer would refer the issue to the appropriate department and subsequently publish opinions or information on the Cabinet Secretariat's official website.

Fifth, continuing circle process. This stage evaluates whether the program aligns with the organization's goals and assesses the effectiveness of issue response efforts. The Public Relations team conducts an ongoing process that revisits initial stages for continuity. Based on interview results, Public Relations draws from past experience for continuous identification, analysis, and improvement. Interaction with the media supports the ongoing issue management process, helping clarify and disseminate cabinet meeting outcomes about election postponement news to the public. Sixth, issue management response according to journalists. Public Relations at the Indonesia Cabinet Secretariat, in this case, only provides information regarding the results of limited meetings via the website as reference material for the media, allowing them to disseminate that the issue of postponing the election did not occur.

Starting from monitoring news and categorizing issues to continuous processes, journalists assess that the performance of public relations has improved and that they have carried out procedures in accordance with public relations Standard Operational Procedures. In terms of duties, functions, and communication, journalists evaluate that the Cabinet Secretariat's public relations has performed its responsibilities well. They note that in conveying information via the website, the Cabinet Secretariat's public relations has engaged in positive publications, indicating that, from the perspective of the aggregator concept, it is already open. Additionally, judging by how it delivers publications via the website, the Cabinet Secretariat provides benefits to journalists due to the speed factor in conveying information. However, despite these benefits, journalists perceive that the relationship between the Cabinet Secretariat and the media is not very strong.

Seventh, supporting and inhibiting factors in issue management. In an organization, it is important to have an organizational communication function to support issue management running as desired. Organizational communication function according to Siregar et al. (2021) namely as follows: a) coordinating the activities of individuals, groups, or other units within the organization; b) providing overall organizational direction; c) facilitating the exchange of information within the organization; and d) ensuring a reciprocal flow (two-way flow) of information between the organization and its external environment.

Table 2: Key Factor on Issue Management of Cabinet Secretariat PR

Stage	Key Points
1. Issue Identification	Media monitoring used to flag election postponement as a political priority issue.
2. Issue Analysis	Classified as negative due to controversy; helped assess risks and plan responses.
3. Action Planning	Reactive strategy; PR sticks to existing protocols, focusing on technical priorities.
4. Implementation	No dedicated PR unit - officers escalate issues and publish updates via the official website.
5. Evaluation (Continuity)	Ongoing improvement based on experience; website used as fast, credible news source.
6. Media Feedback	PR seen as improved, but media ties remain weak and mostly one-way.
7. Support & Barriers	Internal coordination helps; strategic PR still undervalued by top management.

Besides that, important to review, if we look at some organizational public relations practices that are not to the needs of the institution, generally because the public relations officer does not understand what the real PR strategy and tactics are. Or they are not optimal understanding of top management on the role and function of public relations in the organization. This arises because top management only sees PR as a public relations tool, not a strategic management tool (Tomohardjo et al., 2023). Relating to the findings in Table 2, it can be concluded that a supporting factor in the success of the communication function in the Cabinet Secretariat is the communication process between superiors and subordinates, as well as between subordinates and superiors. Public relations officials carry out the coordination process and report ongoing monitoring activities to the Assistant Deputy for Public Relations. In providing organizational direction, the Cabinet Secretariat's public relations refers to the duties and main functions of the Cabinet Secretariat as regulated in presidential regulations and the Cabinet Secretariat guidelines. The Public Relations of the Cabinet Secretariat has a forum to facilitate the exchange of information, namely through a WhatsApp group called "Setkab News." While there are internal supporting factors, the Cabinet Secretariat's public relations also face an inhibiting factor in its issue management efforts: limited human resources. For external supporting factors, the relationship with the media is significant, as the media helps convey repeated reports regarding the issue of postponing the election, enhancing public confidence that the news circulating is a credible issue. However, an external inhibiting factor is that the media cannot be controlled, as each media outlet may adopt different political directions.

CONCLUSION

The study on how the Indonesia Cabinet Secretariat handled the issue of the 2024 general election postponement

reveals a well-structured public relations approach. When media coverage of the issue intensified, the public relations team quickly identified its significance and escalated it for discussion in cabinet meetings. Their issue management process started with monitoring and categorizing news to assess whether the issue was positive, negative, or neutral. Since the postponement was largely viewed negatively, it was treated as a major concern requiring strategic handling. To manage the situation, the Cabinet Secretariat's public relations team took a reactive stance, choosing to maintain existing approaches rather than proactively shaping the narrative. They passed the issue along to relevant departments and published an official statement on the government's website to control the message. This ensured that the public and the media had access to an authoritative response, reducing the spread of misinformation. The team also continued monitoring media reports, keeping a close watch on how the conversation evolved.

A key tool in this process was the Cabinet Secretariat's website, which helped journalists access official information quickly. However, the effectiveness of their strategy depended on both internal and external factors. Internally, strong communication between leadership and staff helped them coordinate responses, but a shortage of human resources posed a challenge. Externally, their good relationship with the media worked in their favor, though they still had little control over how the media framed the issue. Despite these challenges, the Cabinet Secretariat's public relations team demonstrated a structured and responsive approach to managing a politically sensitive topic.

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