

The power of the chair: Indonesia's presidency of the 61st session of the UN Human Rights Council

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze how Indonesia exercised formal leadership as President of the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) at its 61st session. The novelty of this study includes the empirical analysis of Indonesia's inaugural presidency and the application of formal leadership theory to a middle power nation. The researcher employed a qualitative approach with a single case study design. Data were collected through document analysis, encompassing official UNHRC documents, session recordings and statements, press releases from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia, non-governmental organization reports, and credible media coverage. Data were analyzed using Talberg's (2010) concept of formal leadership across three functions: agenda management, brokerage, and representation. The findings indicated that Indonesia's leadership was evident across all three functions: (1) agenda management through procedural efficiency that shortened session duration to save 10 percent of the UN budget; (2) brokerage through mitigating polarization between Western and developing nations, as evidenced by the consensus adoption of 29 out of 38 resolutions; and (3) representation through an impartial stance while advancing Global South priorities, supported by the participation of more than 20 high-level state officials. This study offers a theoretical contribution to International Relations scholarship regarding state formal leadership within international organizations. Due to time and access constraints during the research process, the researcher gathered data exclusively from online sources.

Keywords:

Multilateral Diplomacy; Formal Leadership; Chairmanship; UN Human Rights Council; Indonesia

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INTRODUCTION

This study aims to analyze Indonesia's leadership during its presidency of the 61st session of the UN Human Rights Council. On January 8, 2026, Indonesia was designated as the President of the UN Human Rights Council for 2026 during the Council's organizational meeting in Geneva. The position was filled by Ambassador Sidharto Reza Suryodipuro, who serves as the Permanent Representative of the Republic of Indonesia to the UN in Geneva. The 61st session of the Human Rights Council took place from February 23, 2026, to March 31, 2026. This session marked the first time Indonesia served as the chair of the UN Human Rights Council. Indonesia's presidency of the UN Human Rights Council carried the theme "A Presidency for All," which was put forward to emphasize inclusive leadership for every member by prioritizing the universality of human rights norms (Kementerian Luar Negeri RI, 2026a). In connection with this topic, Indonesian Foreign Minister Sugiono explained that Indonesia is committed to upholding the credibility of the Human Rights Council through the consistent and fair application of human rights standards (Kementerian Luar Negeri RI, 2026b).

Coinciding with the session, the global political landscape is currently marked by polarization that is fueling conflicts in several regions and leading to failures in the fulfillment of human rights for affected communities. The Human Rights Council is focusing on addressing a number of human rights crises in various regions, such as the conflict between Ukraine and Russia, and the human rights situations in Sudan, Myanmar, and Palestine. Issues of development rights and climate change are also beginning to be discussed at this 61st session (UN Human Rights Council, 2026a). In this global political context, Indonesia's presidency must manage a broad agenda, mitigate global polarization, and represent the collective aspirations of member states. Therefore, the theme "A Presidency for All" is considered highly appropriate for Indonesia's current presidency of the UN Human Rights Council.

Scholarship on leadership in multilateral forums has been widely discussed, particularly focusing on the role and influence of the chairmanship holder. In his study on the European Union Presidency, Tallberg (2006) posited that the role of the chair has evolved from a merely procedural and administrative function into a political power platform. Tallberg found that this chair influence is not a phenomenon unique to the European Union, but rather a general principle in multilateral politics that he termed "the power of the chair" (Tallberg, 2006). This concept is supported by Blavoukos, Bourantonis, and Tsakonas (2006), who examined the Presidency of the UN Security Council. They found that although the chair's formal duties are procedural and short in duration, behind the scenes informal interventions (such as confidential consultations) exert substantive political impacts in shaping consensus (Blavoukos et al., 2006). Furthermore, Blavoukos and Bourantonis (2011) highlighted the role of the chair across various UN organs, revealing that traditional assumptions of chair neutrality often mask the potential for opportunistic action to advance national preferences, and that political support from the majority group critically determines the success of compromises offered by the chair. While these bodies of literature provide a conceptual foundation regarding the power of the chair, they largely remain focuses on the EU presidency or principal UN organs in general (Blavoukos & Bourantonis, 2011).

In the context of state leadership beyond superpowers, Frizler and Wivel (2025) found that middle powers influence international agenda setting by combining entrepreneurial leadership and intellectual leadership to frame new norms. This diplomatic practice is reflected in Indonesia's leadership track record (Fritzler et al., 2025). Rachmat (2022) analyzed Indonesia's role as a regional leader in ASEAN in responding to the 2021 Myanmar crisis, during which Indonesia utilized the independent and active (*bebas-aktif*) foreign policy norm and shuttle diplomacy. However, this informal leadership frequently encountered structural obstacles such as the non-intervention principle and domestic human rights consolidation issues (Rachmat,

2022). At more specific global level, particularly within the UN Human Rights Council, Indonesia's previous positions were examined by Karim (2020). Karim explained that Indonesia's foreign policy at the UN Human Rights Council often appeared ambivalent and defensive, as evidenced by its reluctance to support country specific resolutions (such as in the cases of Sudan, Myanmar, and North Korea). This stance was driven not by a rejection of Western values, but rather by historical memory regarding territorial integrity, concern over the Papua issue, and Indonesia's orientation as voice for developing nations (Karim, 2020).

These previous studies leave a significant research gap. Research by Blavoukos et al. (2006; 2011) and Tallberg (2006) focuses on Western institutions or principal UN organs in general without highlighting the role of developing nations. In response to this, literature specifically examining formal leadership or the chairmanship role within the UN Human Rights Council sessions remains scarce. Meanwhile, studies by Frizler and Wivel (2025) and Rachmat (2022) focus on informal leadership at the state or regional level. On the other hand, Karim (2020) positions Indonesia merely as an ordinary member of the UN Human Rights Council focused on defensive voting behavior. Differentiating itself from this existing body of literature, this study aims to examine Indonesia's formal leadership at the global level as President of the 61st Session of the UN Human Rights Council. This study fills the gap in the literature by analyzing how the formal authority of the chairmanship ("the power of the chair") was constructively utilized by Indonesia as a developing nation. Therefore, this study poses the following research question, how was Indonesia's formal leadership role exercised during the Session of the UN Human Rights Council?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study employs the analytical framework of formal leadership in international cooperation developed by Jonas Tallberg. Tallberg argues that the chair of a multilateral negotiation forum is not merely a passive facilitator, but rather a rational actor possessing two inherent sources of power, namely procedural control over the proceedings and privileged access to information from all negotiating parties (Tallberg, 2010). Based on these two sources of power, Tallberg identifies three primary functions exercised by the chair in influencing negotiation outcomes, which are Agenda Management, Brokerage, and Representation (Tallberg, 2010).

The first function is agenda management, which refers to the role of the chair in organizing and establishing the discussion agenda through their procedural control. In this role, the chair possesses the authority to determine the sequence of issues to be discussed, allocate speaking time for each delegation, and direct debates toward outcomes capable of generating consensus (Tallberg, 2010). Beside this, the chair is equipped with asymmetric procedural controls, defined as exclusive institutional authorities not possessed by ordinary member states (Tallberg, 2010). Through these asymmetric controls, the chair holds the privilege to manipulate the parameters of the session proceedings. In the context of this study, agenda management is defined as Indonesia's ability to formulate and direct the agenda of the 61st Session of the UN Human Rights Council in such a manner that reflects the inclusivity of perspectives across all member state groups, aligned with the theme "A Presidency for All".

Within this agenda management function, Tallberg also highlights the emergence of strategic opportunism, defined as the tendency wherein the presiding officer leverages their position and procedural control to introduce, emphasize, or direct agendas aligned with their states' national interests and priorities. Nevertheless, strategic opportunism does not automatically undermine the legitimacy of the presiding officer. An effective presiding officer manages this dynamic through a framing approach, which involves framing their national priorities in such a way that they are perceived not as the selfish agenda of a single nation, but

rather as a universal issue providing added value and benefits for all members of the forum (Tallberg, 2010). In the context of Indonesia's presidency at the 61st Session of the UN Human Rights Council, this dynamic was demonstrated when Indonesia championed key Global South priorities and national interests, including human capital development and the right to food under Resolution 61/13, not as narrow national motives, but by framing them as universal human rights imperatives that support sustainable development for all member states under the overarching vision of "A Presidency for All".

The second function is brokerage, which refers to the role of the chair as a mediator or bridge between state groups with differing interest. In this role, the chair leverages privilege access to information to facilitate compromise and foster consensus. An effective chair is capable of assessing the positions of each party, identifying common ground, and proposing formulations acceptable to all groups (Tallberg, 2010). In the context of this study, the brokerage function is defined as Indonesia's efforts to bridge gaps resulting from geopolitical polarization, particularly between developed and developing nations. The success indicator for this function is objectively measured through the level of consensus achieved, specifically by comparing the number of resolutions successfully adopted by acclamation with those requiring a voting mechanism.

The third function is representation, which refers to the chairperson's role as the representative of the collective interests of all forum members, rather than the national interests of their own country. In carrying out this function, the chairperson derives legitimacy from the mandate granted by all forum members and is therefore expected to act impartially and objectively (Tallberg, 2010). In this study, the representation function is operationalized as Indonesia's ability to position itself as a representative of the interests of all members of the UN Human Rights Council. The indicators used include official statements by the President of the United Nations Human Rights Council emphasizing objectivity, transparency, and non-selectivity, as well as the responses of member states and non-governmental organizations to how Indonesia exercised its leadership of the session. Using Tallberg's three leadership functions as an analytical framework, this study seeks to systematically explain how the theme "A Presidency for All" was implemented by Indonesia in actual leadership practice during the 61st Session of the UN Human Rights Council, while also filling a research gap regarding formal leadership in multilateral human rights forums involving developing countries as presiding nations.

METHOD

This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach with a case study design to gain an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon under investigation (Creswell, 2018). Within this case study design, the unit of analysis observed was the formal leadership role exercised by the Indonesian presidency. Meanwhile, the boundaries of the case were specifically established within the operational duration of the 61st Session of the UN Human Rights Council, which took place from February 23 to March 31, 2026. The researcher served as the primary instrument in the data collection process, which was conducted through document review methods (Creswell, 2018). To ensure consistency and validity, research data sources were strictly limited to aligned primary and secondary documents, such as official UN Human Rights Council documents, official statement from the Indonesian delegation, and press releases from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia. The collected data were subsequently analyzed using qualitative content analysis procedures. This analytical process was carried out through stages of data coding and categorization aligned with Jonas Tallberg's theoretical framework of formal leadership in international organizations. Tallberg argues that the chair of a multilateral negotiation forum is an actor possessing procedural control as well as privileged access to information to influence final outcomes (Tallberg, 2010).

Based on this framework, the first coding indicator is Agenda Management, operationalized as the chair's procedural control to manage, sequence discussions, and efficiently direct debates. Relevant data were coded by analyzing the chair's institutional decisions regarding session schedule adjustments and the final composition of adopted resolutions to assess the reflection of inclusivity across various member state groups. The second coding indicator is Brokerage, operationalized as the chair's efforts and ability to bridge gaps arising from geopolitical polarization, particularly between Western nations and the Global South. Given that mediation processes are often confidential, the success indicator for this function was objectively measured through the level of consensus achieved, specifically the proportion of resolutions successfully adopted by acclamation compared to voting mechanisms. The third indicator is Representation, operationalized as the chair's ability to position themselves as a representative of the collective interests of all forum members. This indicator was measured through official statements by the President of the Council emphasizing the principle of objectivity, as well as how the chair strictly separated their role on the multilateral stage from their own country's national voting behavior on sensitive resolutions (Tallberg, 2010).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Inclusive Agenda Management

The first function of formal leadership, as defined by Tallberg and implemented by Indonesia during its presidency of the 61st session of the UN Human Rights Council, is agenda management. According to Tallberg, agenda management refers to the chairperson's ability to manage and steer the discussion agenda through the procedural controls at their disposal, including determining the order of issues to be discussed, allocating speaking time, and guiding the debate toward a direction that can lead to consensus. This function serves as a critical starting point, as the direction and substance of the entire session's discussions depend on how the chair manages the agenda as a whole (Tallberg, 2010).

Indonesia officially assumed the presidency of the UN Human Rights Council on January 8, 2026, with the inauguration of Ambassador Sidharto Reza Suryodipuro, Indonesia's Permanent Representative to the UN in Geneva, as President of the UN Human Rights Council for 2026. This inauguration marks the first time Indonesia has led the UN Human Rights Council since the body was established in 2006 (United Nations, 2026). In his first statement following his inauguration, Sidharto, as President of the UN Human Rights Council, emphasized that Indonesia's presidency is rooted in the 1945 Constitution, which mandates contributing to world peace based on independence, peace, and social justice. This statement also reaffirms Indonesia's commitment to carrying out the presidency objectively, inclusively, and impartially, as reflected in the theme "A Presidency for All" championed by Indonesia throughout 2026 (OHCHR, 2026b).

Indonesia's implementation of the agenda management role during the 61st session was evident in how Indonesia formulated and guided the discussion agenda to ensure that it reflected the interests of all member state groups. The 61st session produced 38 resolutions encompassing a broad spectrum of issues, ranging from human rights situations in specific countries and mandate extensions of special procedures to economic, social, and cultural rights, as well as technical assistance and capacity building. Despite facing a similarly complex spectrum of issues as previous sessions, such as the 58th Session which had a voting rate of 37.5 percent, Indonesia's presidency at the 61st Session demonstrably succeeded in bridging polarization by increasing the consensus percentage to 76.3 percent (OHCHR, 2025, 2026a).

In addition, the 61st Session included a series of thematic panel discussions designed to accommodate active participation from all member state groups. These discussions encompassed the annual panel on the rights of persons with disabilities themed around inclusive

infrastructure, a panel on human rights and a culture of peace, a panel on financing sustainable development aligned with economic, social, and cultural rights obligations, as well as high-level panel commemorating the 25th anniversary of the Durban Declaration and Programme of Action (OHCHR, 2026a). The diversity of topics addressed across these panels ensured that all state groups had opportunities for meaningful participation (UN Geneva, 2026).

The agenda management function is also utilized to prevent “agenda failure” that may arise from the complexity of multilateral negotiations. In the context of the 61st Session of the Human Rights Council, agenda failure posed a tangible risk given financial constraints within the UN and an exceptionally dense schedule encompassing numerous critical agenda items. Indonesia leadership addressed this challenge by applying asymmetric procedural controls, namely by shortening the session duration from its originally scheduled conclusion of April 2 to March 31, 2026 (UN Human Rights Council, 2026a). This decision effectively saved 10 percent of the budget allocation in terms of both financial resources and time. This serves as concrete evidence of the role of agenda management in enhancing collective efficiency (UN Human Rights Council, 2026a).

Tallberg highlights the concept of strategic opportunism, wherein the presiding officer navigates the inherent tension between maintaining institutional impartiality and advancing national priorities. During the 61st Session, Indonesia, acting as part of the core group, prioritized the right to food and children’s access to adequate nutrition, culminating in the adoption of Resolution 61/13 (UN Human Rights Council, 2026b). Although advancing an issue aligned with its domestic policy vision, the Indonesian Presidency effectively managed potential tensions with its impartial representative role. Rather than pursuing narrow or divisive national interests, Indonesia framed this initiative as a universal priority, thereby successfully securing broad consensus across diverse regional groups. This demonstrates that strategic opportunism, when constructively aligned with collective multilateral goals, enables the presiding state to shape international human rights norms without compromising its institutional legitimacy as an impartial chair.

The Role of Brokerage in Navigating Polarization and Fostering Consensus

The second function is brokerage, which serves to overcome “negotiation failure” that frequently occurs because states tend to conceal their true preference (the negotiator’s dilemma). Tallberg argues that the presiding officer possesses privileged access to information through bilateral and confessional meetings enabling them to identify points of agreement (Tallberg, 2010). During the 61st Session, Indonesia faced sharp geopolitical polarization between Western nations and the Global South, particularly regarding country-specific situations such as those in Belarus and Ukraine. Amid these frictions, the success of Indonesia’s brokerage role was demonstrated by the adoption of the majority of the 38 resolutions through consensus or acclamation, including traditionally sensitive country-specific resolutions such as the human rights situations in North Korea and Myanmar (UN Human Rights Council, 2026e, 2026g). As President of the Human Rights Council, Indonesia received substantive and administrative support from the Secretariat of the UN Human Rights Council. This institutional support enabled the Council President to obtain the necessary information to facilitate dialogue and consultations among member states (UN Human Rights Council, 2026j).

However, on issues where voting was unavoidable, it is crucial to distinguish Indonesia’s national position as a Council member from its formal role as President of the Human Rights Council. As the presiding officer, the Indonesian Presidency maintained procedural integrity and provided a fair and inclusive platform for all delegations to express their positions. Meanwhile, in its capacity as an individual member state, Indonesia’s voting pattern reflected its national foreign policy priorities amid geopolitical frictions. For instance, on country-specific resolutions

regarding Belarus (adopted with 28 votes in favor, 4 against, and 15 abstentions) and Russian aggression against Ukraine (adopted with 25 votes in favor, 4 against, and 18 abstentions), Indonesia as member state chose to abstain (UN Human Rights Council, 2026c, 2026d). Conversely, on the resolution concerning the negative impact of unilateral coercive measures, Indonesia voted in favor alongside countries such as China, India, Brazil, and South Africa, while 17 states voted against it, including France, Japan, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, and the Republic of Korea (UN Human Rights Council, 2026h). These voting choices represented Indonesia's national stance as member state, whereas the Presidency's brokerage success lay in its ability to ensure that such highly polarized debates were conducted in a transparent, balanced, and procedurally compliant manner.

It is in this context that Indonesia exercised its brokerage role, attempting to bridge divergent positions and promote broadly acceptable outcomes. As the presiding officer, Indonesia facilitated debates to ensure that all delegations had an inclusive platform to express their positions, in line with the vision of "A Presidency for All." For instance, during deliberations on sensitive Middle East issues, the Presidency balanced strong accountability demands, as reflected in Resolution 61/4, 61/31, 61/32, and 61/33 concerning Palestine and the occupied Syrian Golan, while strictly upholding the Council's procedural integrity, transparency, and non-selectivity (UN Human Rights Council, 2026f). Methodologically, direct empirical tracking of informal brokerage, such as unrecorded bilateral confessional meetings or closed-door cross-group consultations, remains a limitation due to the confidential nature of diplomatic negotiations. Nevertheless, objective procedural interventions and balanced steering by the Presidency demonstrate how an inclusive chairing style can reinforce the procedural legitimacy of negotiation outcomes amid a broader crisis of multilateralism.

Indonesia's Role as the Representative of the Forum's Collective Interests

The third function is representation, wherein the chair acts as a collective agent representing the institution before external actors to overcome "representation failure." Tallberg explains that this function authorizes the chair to speak on behalf of the group while granting room for agent discretion (Tallberg, 2010). In his opening address, the President of the Human Rights Council welcomed more than 120 high-level government officials, a figure that reinforced the powerful message that the Human Rights Council and multilateralism remain crucial in confronting global challenges (UN Human Rights Council, 2026i). As the collective voice of the Council, Indonesia utilized this forum to highlight the relevance of the Human Rights Council as a central pillar in the international architecture, particularly coinciding with the 20th anniversary of the establishment of the UN Human Rights Council. In its capacity as chair, Indonesia articulated the Council's consensus by emphasizing that all human rights must be treated equally, including the right to development (UN Human Rights Council, 2026i). This representative role was also exercised in interactions with other UN bodies, such as the General Assembly, marked by the participation of General Assembly President Annalena Baerbock and Secretary-General António Guterres (UN Human Rights Council, 2026i).

The challenge of fulfilling the representation function became increasingly complex for Indonesia, given that domestic human rights issues, such as the ongoing conflict and human rights security in Papua, remained under international observation, potentially undermining its moral legitimacy as a presiding nation (Rachmat, 2022). According to Tallberg, the representation function requires the presiding officer to act as a whole, from its national stance as an individual member state. While the brokerage function focuses on facilitating compromise between opposing blocs during negotiations, the representation function is demonstrated through the institutional neutrality of the presiding officer during official proceedings. By ensuring that formal statements from the Council President consistently emphasized principles

of universality, transparency, and non-selectivity without reflecting its national voting stances, Indonesia successfully protected the legitimacy of the Council's collective voice. Conversely, on resolutions of a universal nature free from geopolitical friction, such as the rights of persons with disabilities, child protection, and mental health, the Presidency championed adoption by consensus to reflect the unified will of all members.

Indonesia's role as an impartial representative of the Council was further reinforced by Foreign Minister Sugiono's statement, which emphasized that Indonesia's presidency was dedicated to building trust, strengthening cross-regional dialogue, and encouraging constructive participation from all stakeholders (Kementerian Luar Negeri RI, 2026b). This approach explicitly prioritized the collective interests and institutional integrity of the forum over narrow national positions. The legitimacy of Indonesia's representative role garnered broad international recognition across diverse geopolitical blocs. For instance, during the 11th Human Rights Dialogue, the European Union expressed its support for Indonesia's presidency as a key coordinating partner in multilateral forums (European External Action Service (EEAS), 2026). Simultaneously, this inclusive orientation received positive responses from non-Western coalitions, including orientation received positive responses from non-Western coalitions, including the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), the African Group, and ASEAN members, who welcomed the presidency's emphasis on non-selectivity, depolarization, and the integration of development rights onto the main agenda (Kementerian Luar Negeri RI, 2026b; UN Human Rights Council, 2026a, 2026i). By securing endorsement from both Western states and Global South coalitions, Indonesia successfully fulfilled its representative mandate as a true "Presidency for All."

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that Indonesia's formal leadership during its presidency at the 61st Session of the UN Human Rights Council was successfully executed through the synergistic integration of Jonas Talberg's three leadership functions, namely agenda management, brokerage, and representation. Rather than operating in isolation, these three functions reinforced on another under the overarching normative vision of "A Presidency for All." Indonesia leveraged procedural controls in agenda management to establish an inclusive substantive scope, deployed brokerage to bridge severe geopolitical divides between Western state and the Global South through consensus-oriented stewardship, and maintained institutional representation by strictly separating the Presidency's neutral voice from national voting stances on divisive resolutions. Overall, these three functions demonstrate that procedural impartiality can enhance the legitimacy of multilateral outcomes even amid acute institutional and financial crises.

This article contributes to the literature on international organization leadership by addressing the empirical gap regarding the role of developing nations as presiding officers in global human rights governance. While previous scholarship was dominated by discussions of developed nations' institutional power, this study demonstrates how a Global South nation can effectively harness asymmetric procedural leverage to mitigate polarization, promote principles of non-selectivity and steer cross-regional dialogue. In doing so, this study expands Talberg's framework by emphasizing that framing and procedural neutrality serve as primary strategic instruments for middle powers navigating contested multilateral arenas. For future research, key avenues warrant further investigation.

For future research, several limitations of this study present valuable opportunities for further exploration. First, given the confidential nature of behind-the-scenes diplomatic negotiations, direct empirical tracking of the informal brokerage role remained limited. Future studies could employ primary qualitative methods, such as in-depth interviews with key

diplomats and delegates in Geneva, to capture unrecorded negotiation dynamics. Second, because this study examined only the 61st Session, longitudinal research covering Indonesia's entire 2026 presidential tenure (the 61st, 62nd, and 63rd Sessions) would provide a comprehensive evaluation of its sustained leadership trajectory. Third, comparative analysis comparing Indonesia's leadership role with other Global South nations that have presiding experience at the UN Human Rights Council could yield broader generalizations regarding the leadership patterns of developing countries. Finally, integrating Talberg's framework with structural theories of international power could offer deeper insights into how procedural chairing tools intersect with broader geopolitical hegemonies.

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