

Indonesia and the Netherlands cooperation strategy in the football player naturalization program: implications for the development of Indonesian football (2019 – 2024)

(Muhammad Rifki Maulana ¹, Gonda Yumitro ²)

(rifkimaulana262003@gmail.com ^{@1}, gonda@umm.ac.id ^{@2})

Abstract

The naturalization of football players has emerged as a strategic approach adopted by various countries to enhance the competitiveness of their national teams on the international stage. Indonesia, which shares a historical relationship with the Netherlands, has leveraged this connection by collaborating to identify and recruit football players of Indonesian descent who are active in European leagues. This study aims to analyze the strategic partnership between Indonesia and the Netherlands in implementing the football player naturalization program and to examine its implications for the development of Indonesian football. Employing a descriptive-qualitative method with a case study approach, the research draws on secondary data sources such as theses, journals, and relevant scholarly articles. The findings indicate that the program has significantly improved the quality of the national team and revitalized historical and cultural ties between the two nations. Nevertheless, several challenges persist, including public resistance, debates on nationalism, and administrative hurdles in the naturalization process. To ensure long-term benefits for Indonesian football, this study recommends a more strategic and sustainable policy framework that balances naturalization efforts with the development of local talent.

Keywords: *Naturalization, Indonesia-Netherlands Cooperation, Football, Sports Strategy, Indonesian National Team*

^{1,2} Departement of International Relations, University of Muhammadiyah Malang

Introduction

Sport plays a vital role in the process of globalization and in shaping the regeneration of local, national, and regional identities of a society or nation. The presence of sport—symbolized by the waving of national flags, the performance of national anthems, the attendance of dignitaries, and the participation of athletes—acts as a positive expression of nationalism and pride in one's country. It reinforces the collective identity of the nation as a tangible and shared entity.(Indrawan & Aji, nd) Sporting achievements are regarded as indicators of national development; thus, sports development should be seen as an instrument for national unity. Beyond this, sport also contributes to public health, national character, and confidence. International sporting success can enhance a country's self-image and economic prospects through the development of the sports industry.(Herdiansyah et al., 2010)

In the context of national interest, sport also serves as a tool of soft power and public diplomacy. According to international relations theory, national interests encompass a nation's economic, military, and cultural goals.(Bainus & Rachman, 2018) Indonesia makes sports its national interest, namely to strengthen the unity and unity of the nation. Sports can foster a sense of brotherhood and a high sense of nationalism for the community, which can be seen when the national team meets other countries in any sport. All athletes and even spectators will be proud to be able to represent their country in the competition, no matter from various ethnicities, races, tribes, and religions, they will be proud and give full support to their country.(Amali, 2022)The Indonesian government uses sports as a tool of public diplomacy, as evidenced by the 18th Asian Games in the cities of Jakarta-Palembang. Sports have an organized nature that is related to the media sector and tourism sector for the host country which is projected to gain global prestige, symbolic power, and economic spin-off potential.(Jesslyn & Rachmat, 2015)

Football has become a very popular sport in Indonesia, attracting people of all ages and backgrounds. This popularity is reflected in the high public interest in football matches, both through television broadcasts and direct attendance at the stadium.(Setiawan et al., 2019)Football is a very popular people's sport and plays an important role in supporting national development in the physical, mental, and spiritual fields. In addition, the public's enthusiasm for football can also be seen from the high level of love for this sport, with Indonesia being one of the countries with the highest level of love for football in the world, reaching 77%. This love is not only limited to spectators, but also encourages active participation in playing football at various age levels and communities. Thus, football is not only entertainment, but also an integral part of the social and cultural life of the Indonesian people.(Thursday, 2024)

The early history of football relations between Indonesia and the Netherlands has been going on since the colonial era. In the late 19th century, this sport was introduced by the Dutch to the Dutch East Indies (now Indonesia) and then developed into one of the sports favored by the local people. On April 19, 1930, Soeratin Sosrosoegondo founded Persatoean Sepakraga Seloeroeh Indonesia (PSSI) in Yogyakarta as a form of resistance against the dominance of the Dutch football organization. The existence of PSSI also reflects the spirit of unity and nationalism. In addition, the Dutch East Indies made history as the first Asian country to compete in the 1938 FIFA World Cup in France. After Indonesia gained independence in 1945, football relations between

Indonesia and the Netherlands continued. Many Indonesian-blooded players, especially from the Maluku community, who were born or raised in the Netherlands chose to develop their careers in Europe. A number of them then underwent the naturalization process to strengthen the Indonesian national team, reflecting the historical and cultural ties between the two countries.

Historically, the naturalization of football players in Indonesia was aimed at improving the performance and achievements of the national team. This process was carried out by granting Indonesian citizenship status to foreign players or those with Indonesian ancestry and careers abroad, especially in the Netherlands. This policy was expected to strengthen the national team by presenting talented players with experience and skills at the international level. However, its implementation has sparked various debates, especially regarding legal aspects, nationalism, and social identity.

As public expectations for the achievements of the national team increase, there is a need for a more progressive strategy in coaching and developing the Indonesian football team. One of the efforts taken is through the naturalization program for players of descent, especially those with Indonesian roots and careers abroad. This program is not only seen as a short-term solution to boost the performance of the national team, but also as a diplomatic and social strategy that strengthens the historical and emotional ties between the Indonesian diaspora and the homeland. The naturalization program, especially in the realm of football, has existed since the 50s, namely the goalkeeper of Dutch descent, Arnold van der vin. In the 2000s, the naturalization program was again carried out by PSSI in the Nurdin Halid era. (History of Naturalization of Indonesian National Team Players, nd) Naturalization of foreign players who have lived in Indonesia for a long time or who have Indonesian blood, has improved the quality of the national team. Players such as Marc Klok, Stefano Lilipaly, and Ilija Spasojevic, who have made significant contributions, bring valuable experience and skills that improve the overall performance of the team. Since the era of coach Shin Tae-yong handling the Garuda Squad starting in December 2019, the naturalization player recruitment system has been different again. Those who are naturalized are footballers who have Indonesian blood. In Indonesia, the naturalization program has been regulated in Law Number 12 of 2006 concerning Citizenship. Naturalization is also called citizenship, which is a way for a foreign citizen to gain recognition as an Indonesian citizen through an application. There are requirements that must be met by someone who wants to do naturalization, namely being 18 years old or married, living in Indonesia for 5 consecutive years, having blood from parents. (Abrar et al., 2024)

In the world of football, naturalization is something that is widely done by countries across continents. Naturalization is one way that a country does in its efforts to be able to increase the strength of its national team in football. In fact, there are several large countries in the world that have national teams whose majority of players are not native citizens of that country. (Zahran et al., nd) The process of granting citizenship to football players or athletes is generally easier than for ordinary citizens. This is because the government grants citizenship to athletes who have rendered services to the country or directly for the national interest, in the hope of improving the achievements of the Indonesian National Team at the international level. Therefore, many athletes undergo naturalization as part of an effort to advance and improve the quality of Indonesian football. As of August 2023, 39 foreign citizens with Indonesian ancestry have been

recorded as having obtained Indonesian citizenship. The majority of them are from Europe, especially the Netherlands.(Romadhon, 2024)

Although the naturalization processThe Indonesian national team has a long history, but the achievements of the national team were only seen after the football association was held by Erick Tohir, who had a lot of experience in Europe and had been the president of the Italian giant club, Inter Milan in 2013. This experience is what Erick Tohir used as a reference to build Indonesian football to develop further. Since occupying the leadership of PSSI, he has changed all the systems adopted by the old PSSI, even in the Shin Tae Yong era, Mr. Erick Tohir dared to allow generation cuts in the Indonesian national team squad. Slowly but surely, the naturalization program in the Erick Tohir era has paid off, the Indonesian National Team is now inhabited by players who play in the top European leagues.

Research Methods

This type of research is descriptive research, namely research conducted to describe the facts and characteristics of a phenomenon, or the relationship between one phenomenon and another systematically. Therefore, the results of descriptive research are generally presented in the form of narratives or images rather than in the form of numbers. This study then uses descriptive research to explain in detail about the Indonesian and Dutch cooperation strategy in the naturalization program for players of descent.

In this study, the author uses a qualitative data analysis method to obtain data through analysis and by describing a phenomenon accurately. Thematic analysis is considered appropriate for this study, thematic analysis itself is a qualitative data analysis technique used to analyze, identify, and patterns or themes that emerge from the data. Themes are important data related to research questions and often appear in the data. By using this analysis, several themes will emerge that are similar to the research title of the Indonesian and Dutch Cooperation Strategy in the naturalization program to help answer questions from the author.

This study uses a literature review as a data collection procedure in this study. The goal is to obtain a strong theoretical basis and support in the preparation of the research framework with the emphasis that the literature used must be based on credible and up-to-date sources, such as scientific journals, academic books, or previous research reports.

Foundation of Research

This study uses the basis of National Interest. National Interest has a definition of state interest based on the power that the state has, this view is represented by Hans J. Morgenthau. According to him, national interest is the minimum power of the state to maintain and protect physical, social, and political identity.(Solechah & Sugito, 2023)The main objective of Indonesia's national interest from the sports sector including football with the naturalization program is to improve the achievements of the national team by strengthening the squad through the addition of talented foreign players. This step was taken as a strategy to improve Indonesia's competitiveness in

the international arena. In addition, the naturalization of football players is also considered an effort to accelerate the improvement of the quality of the national team's game, considering the process of coaching local players which takes longer. However, this policy has raised various public opinions. Some people support naturalization because it is considered capable of improving the experience and international competitiveness of the national team.(Kusumawardhana et al., 2018)

National interests are considered relevant in research onThe strategy of cooperation between Indonesia and the Netherlands in the naturalization program of football players is to improve national football achievements with the player naturalization program which aims to strengthen the Indonesian National Team by presenting quality players who have Indonesian descent. This is in line with national interests in improving competitiveness and sports achievements in the international arena.(Kajian et al., 2023)

Research Problem

Problem formulation is a question that will be answered by the author and becomes the core discussion in a study, so the problem formulation in this study is:

"What is the strategy of Indonesia and the Netherlands in the Naturalization program in the 5 year period (2019 - 2024)?"

Results and Discussion

Indonesia and the Netherlands Cooperation Strategy in Player Naturalization

The Football Association of Indonesia (PSSI) has an important role in efforts to advance national football through various development strategies. One of the initiatives taken is to establish a partnership with the Koninklijke Nederlandse Voetbalbond (KNVB), or the Dutch Football Federation, to improve the quality of football in the country. This form of cooperation includes increasing the capacity of human resources, implementing a coach exchange program, and developing young players by involving coaches from the Netherlands in the national age group team. Not only that, this cooperation also targets aspects of strengthening the organization such as match administration, security, and increasing the frequency of international matches. As a federation that has an established football coaching system, the KNVB makes a major contribution to PSSI through the transfer of knowledge and experience. This collaboration is seen as a strategic step to accelerate the improvement of Indonesian football achievements by adopting a development system that has been proven effective in the Netherlands. The implementation of joint training and the exchange of coaches are part of the strategy to improve national coaching standards. In addition, the presence of Dutch coaches in the process of coaching young players is expected to form a strong foundation for the progress of Indonesian football in the future.(PSSI-KNVB Strengthen Partnership to Develop Indonesian Football - ANTARA News East Java, nd)

The naturalization process for foreign football players in Indonesia is carried out through a mechanism regulated in Law Number 12 of 2006 concerning Citizenship of the Republic of Indonesia. This process begins with the submission of an application by the player concerned to the President through the Ministry of Law and Human Rights, by attaching the required administrative documents. Naturalization can be carried out in a regular or special manner, the latter being given to individuals with extraordinary contributions to the country, such as athletes who are expected to strengthen the national team. After submission, the relevant ministry evaluates the player's eligibility, both in terms of administrative aspects and potential contributions to national sporting achievements. If eligible, a recommendation is submitted to the President for the issuance of a Presidential Decree as a form of ratification of citizenship. The Federation also considers aspects of legality and national identity in the naturalization process. Naturalized players are expected to have strong ties to Indonesia, both through lineage and commitment to contribute to national football. This is in line with the principles of citizenship law applicable in Indonesia. Although this strategy is considered effective in increasing the competitiveness of the national team, especially in football, there are also concerns regarding its impact on the development of local players and the values of nationalism.(Firdaus et al., 2022)

Football academies and clubs in the Netherlands play a significant role in the development of players of Indonesian descent. Many individuals with Indonesian heritage who were born and raised in the Netherlands have developed their football skills through the country's structured coaching system. Players such as Giovanni van Bronckhorst, John Heitinga and Denny Landzaat are prime examples of Dutch football academy products with Indonesian roots. The involvement of players of Indonesian descent in Dutch football not only enriches the diversity of the Dutch national team, but also reflects the historical ties between the two countries. Research published in the *International Journal of Sport Policy and Politics* highlights the participation of different ethnic groups in amateur football clubs in the Netherlands, showing how the sport has become a vehicle for social integration for communities with different backgrounds.(van Haaften, 2019)In addition, the Royal Dutch Football Federation (KNVB) recognizes the large fan base in Indonesia, which is partly due to former Oranje players with Indonesian descent. This has encouraged the KNVB to get closer to fans in Indonesia through various initiatives. Thus, Dutch football academies and clubs not only play a role in honing the talents of players of Indonesian descent, but also strengthen the cultural and historical ties between the Netherlands and Indonesia through football.(Orange Indonesia | KNVB, n.d.)

Factors Influencing the Naturalization of Dutch Descent Players

Historical and social factors play an important role in the naturalization process of Dutch-descent players in Indonesia. Historically, the Dutch colonial period in Indonesia led to interactions between the native population and Dutch citizens, resulting in mixed descent.(Basim Al Khadziq et al., 2024)Some individuals of this descent later became involved in football and were naturalized to strengthen the Indonesian national team. For example, in 1952, PSSI naturalized five players of Dutch descent: Van der Vin, Van der Berg, Piteersen, Pesch, and Boelard van Tuyl, who later strengthened the Indonesian national team in various international matches. From a social perspective, the historical relationship between Indonesia and the Netherlands has created a significant diaspora community. Many individuals of

Indonesian descent who were born and raised in the Netherlands, developed their football careers through the coaching system there, such as Sandy Walsh and Maarten Paes who chose to be naturalized and play for the Indonesian national team. This decision is often driven by a strong sense of emotional attachment and cultural identity to their ancestral homeland. This phenomenon reflects how national identity is not only determined by place of birth or formal citizenship, but also by feelings of attachment and recognition of cultural roots. (Naturalization of Football Players: Breaking Down Traditional Concepts of Citizenship and National Identity, nd) The availability of this database and diaspora network makes it easier for PSSI to identify and recruit players of Indonesian descent who compete in European leagues to be naturalized. In addition, the naturalization of players of Dutch descent is also seen as an effort to reconcile the complex colonial history between the two countries. This process is not only aimed at improving the quality of the national team, but also strengthening cultural and social relations between Indonesia and the Netherlands. (Ministry of Youth and Sports' Explanation Regarding Naturalized National Team Players Dominantly From the Netherlands, nd)

Technical factors and individual quality are the main considerations in the naturalization process of Dutch-descent players to strengthen the Indonesian national team. The Indonesian Football Association (PSSI) emphasizes that naturalization of players of Dutch descent is acceptable as long as the player has the qualities needed by the team and shows a commitment to defending the Indonesian National Team. This policy aims to improve the competitiveness of the national team by utilizing the experience and skills of players who have developed in the European football system, especially the Netherlands. Players such as Jordi Amat and Marc Klok are examples of this effort, where they are expected to bring significant improvements in team performance. However, it is important for PSSI to remain selective in the naturalization process, ensuring that the players recruited not only have adequate technical abilities, but also dedication and loyalty to contribute positively to the development of Indonesian football. (Mulyaningrum, 2011) Sociological and cultural aspects also need to be considered. Naturalization often raises debates about the meaning of citizenship and national identity. National identity in the context of sport is increasingly dynamic, reflecting emotional and historical ties, not just the legal status of citizenship. In this context, players of Indonesian descent who grew up in the Netherlands such as Sandy Walsh or Mees Hilgers carry two layers of identity: as products of the European football system, but also as part of a diaspora who want to contribute to their ancestral homeland. Therefore, their naturalization process can be understood as an effort to strengthen cultural and social ties between countries, not merely a pragmatic practice for the sake of winning.

The process of naturalizing football players in Indonesia faces a number of obstacles, both in terms of regulation, bureaucracy, and socially. In terms of regulation, Law Number 12 of 2006 requires strict provisions such as minimum age, ability to speak Indonesian, and recognition of Pancasila and the 1945 Constitution, and requires an official submission to the President through the Ministry of Law and Human Rights. In terms of bureaucracy, this process involves coordination between agencies such as the Ministry of Law and Human Rights, the Ministry of Youth and Sports, and the PSSI, which often slows down the process due to administrative complexity and the absence of dual citizenship in Indonesia. Meanwhile, in terms of socially, this policy

has drawn pros and cons; some people think that naturalization can boost the performance of the national team, but there are also concerns that this will hinder the opportunities for local players and raise questions regarding nationalism and the identity of players of descent. (Silitonga & Kristina, 2025) The problem experienced by PSSI is that the FIFA (Fédération Internationale de Football Association) regulation states that if a player has played for the senior national team before the age of 21, he will not be able to move federations or countries. (Erick Thohir Reveals Major Problems in Jairo Riedewald's Naturalization Process, nd) This is the obstacle that PSSI is currently experiencing when it wants to naturalize the player of Indonesian descent, Jairo Riedewald, because the player was declared to have defended the Dutch National Team during the Euro 2016 qualifiers against Turkey in 2015 when he was 18 years old. The problem faced by PSSI to naturalize the player is quite complicated compared to the naturalization process of Marten Paes, because many factors have not met FIFA regulations. One of them is the incomplete citizenship documents so that PSSI is not in a hurry to bring in Jairo for the 2026 World Cup qualifiers. (Could Be Problematic, Dito Says Jairo's Naturalization Was Not Processed First - ANTARA News, nd) If the federation insists on naturalization, the risks faced by the federation in the future will be difficult, such as FIFA's trust in the Indonesian football federation will be strained.

Implications of Naturalization for the Development of Indonesian Football

Naturalization of football players of Dutch descent, especially from the Netherlands, has had a significant positive impact on the development of Indonesian football. The presence of naturalized players such as Mees Hilghers and Jay Idzes has improved the technical and tactical quality of the national team, thanks to their experience in competitive European leagues. This not only strengthens the performance of the national team at the international level, but also accelerates the process of transferring knowledge and professional culture to local players, which can improve the overall standard of the game. The Indonesian Minister of Youth and Sports emphasized that the naturalization process is carried out very carefully and based on urgency, with the hope that naturalized players can have a positive impact on the national team and related sports. Although there are pros and cons in society regarding this policy, naturalization of players of Dutch descent remains an effective strategy in increasing the competitiveness of Indonesian football on the international stage. (4 Naturalized Players Approved by Commission III of the Indonesian House of Representatives, Indonesian Minister of Youth and Sports: We Hope They Can Strengthen the National Team, nd) The naturalization strategy can also be seen as a means of sports diplomacy between Indonesia and the countries of origin of the players of descent, especially the Netherlands. When diaspora players choose to defend the Indonesian national team, it creates a positive narrative about emotional attachment and cross-generational loyalty to Indonesia. This can make Indonesia's name famous in the international arena and open up opportunities for wider cooperation in the fields of sports education, technical training, and competition system development. In addition, the presence of naturalized players who are experienced in European leagues is an inspiration for the local young generation and a benchmark in improving training standards in domestic academies. They are not only complements in the national team, but also agents of change who can encourage the professionalization of clubs and youth development systems. If managed systematically, naturalization can be a bridge to a

stronger and more competitive national football industrialization in the future.(Saputra, 2024)

The public response to the current PSSI naturalization program is very diverse and complex. Most of the public supports this program to support the quality and competitiveness of the Indonesian national team in the Asian and world arenas. This is inseparable from the contribution of players of descent in the 2026 World Cup qualification event where Indonesia is the only team from ASEAN to qualify for round 3 of qualification.(Agustian et al., 2024)However, there are also some people who do not agree with this program, they think that the presence of these descendant players will hinder the development of local players and reduce the national identity in the team. The role of the mass media is also very influential in shaping public perception of the naturalization program. Informative and positive news about naturalization, such as player profiles and analysis of coach strategies, tends to increase public support. Conversely, negative or controversial news can reduce public support for the national team.(Mustaqim, 2025)

The use of naturalized players in the Indonesian national team has had a positive impact on improving performance, but on the other hand has also given rise to a number of negative consequences. One of the main concerns is the emergence of excessive dependence on naturalized players, which risks hindering the development of local players and affecting their self-confidence. This policy has also sparked discussions about the meaning of national identity and fairness in providing opportunities for local talent. Therefore, an active role is needed from PSSI and the government in maintaining a balance between the use of naturalized players and the development of native Indonesian talent, through early childhood development programs, improving the quality of local competitions, and improving national football infrastructure. The naturalization process, which is often considered a shortcut in pursuing achievements, can actually have a negative impact on the youth player development system that has been built gradually. The presence of naturalized foreign players can also reduce playing opportunities for local players at the international level, thus risking reducing their enthusiasm and motivation to develop. Therefore, a balanced strategy between the integration of naturalized players and the empowerment of local players is very important in order to create sustainable achievements in the world of Indonesian football.(Naturalization of PSSI Players: Regulations, History, and Pros and Cons of the Indonesian National Football Team – Kompasmedia, nd)

A long-term evaluation of the naturalization program for football players in Indonesia shows that the policy has had a positive impact on improving the quality of the national team, especially through the experience and skills of players who grew up in more competitive foreign leagues. This helps strengthen the game strategy and competitiveness of the team at the international level.(Positive Impact of Naturalization of Players of Descent for the Indonesian National Team PSSI, nd)On the other hand, there are concerns that over-reliance on naturalized players could hinder the development of local talent and reduce their chances of performing at the national level. The public generally tends to support this policy, but still voices the importance of providing space for local players. Therefore, in order for this policy to provide sustainable benefits, PSSI and the government need to balance it with early childhood development, improving the quality of domestic leagues, and developing national football infrastructure, so that naturalization is not just a short-term solution,

but part of a comprehensive strategy to advance Indonesian football.(Sania et al., 2025)However, the big responsibility still lies on the shoulders of PSSI and the government in maintaining the local coaching ecosystem so that it is not left behind. The cooperation program with the KNVB should not stop at the exchange of coaches and recruitment of players of descent, but should be expanded into a strategic collaboration in building a modern training center, designing an early age training curriculum, to the management of a sustainable professional club. Academy models such as Ajax Amsterdam or PSV Eindhoven can be used as inspiration to be applied in the local context with modifications according to Indonesia's needs.

Conclusion

The naturalization program for football players of Dutch descent has made a significant contribution to improving the technical quality and competitiveness of the Indonesian national team through the presence of experienced players from European leagues. This strategy has proven effective in the short term to strengthen team performance and strengthen historical and cultural ties between Indonesia and the Netherlands. Football academies and clubs in the Netherlands also play an important role as a place for early development for diaspora players who are then recruited through the naturalization route. However, this study also identified a number of challenges, including regulatory constraints, inter-institutional bureaucracy, and social resistance related to issues of nationalism and local player development. Therefore, the long-term success of this program is highly dependent on the synergy between naturalization and a more systematic local player development strategy, such as strengthening academies, improving the quality of domestic leagues, and developing national football infrastructure. This study has limitations in terms of the availability of primary data and the scope of analysis is limited to bilateral relations between Indonesia and the Netherlands, so it does not fully represent the dynamics of naturalization policy globally. Therefore, further studies are recommended to conduct comparative analysis with other countries that have similar naturalization programs, as well as explore the long-term impact of this policy on the ecosystem of early childhood development and national identity in sports.

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