

Democratic regression and the rise of electoral illiberalism in Indonesia: A multi-dimensional analysis (1998-2024)

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Abstract

Since the political transition of 1998, Indonesia has been widely regarded as a leading case of democratic consolidation in Southeast Asia. However, recent empirical indicators reveal a persistent decline in civil liberties, political pluralism, and institutional accountability. This article examines whether Indonesia is experiencing democratic regression and investigates the emergence of electoral illiberalism as a durable regime trajectory rather than a temporary fluctuation. Methodologically, this study employs qualitative thematic-narrative analysis, triangulating constitutional amendments, electoral laws, Constitutional Court decisions, and executive regulations with international democracy indices, including the Economist Intelligence Unit and Freedom House, from 1998 to 2024. This approach enables a longitudinal assessment of institutional and normative transformations across key democratic dimensions. The findings demonstrate that democratic regression in Indonesia is not marked by the collapse of electoral competition, but by the weakening of horizontal accountability, erosion of the rule of law through systemic corruption, contraction of civic space, and strategic mobilization of majoritarian identity politics. These dynamics reveal how electoral continuity coexists with substantive democratic erosion. This article contributes to debates on democratic backsliding by showing that Indonesia's trajectory has consolidated into electoral illiberalism, challenging linear models of democratic consolidation and highlighting the limits of electoral democracy.

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Introduction

Indonesia, one of the world's largest democracies, has experienced significant political transformation. Since independence in 1945, through the Old Order and New Order regimes, and into the *Reformasi*, its democratic trajectory has evolved through periods of institutional change and political contestation that have drawn global attention. This dynamic process has also exposed structural tensions that challenge the foundations of its political democracy, however.

The democratic transition after 1998 brought substantial institutional reforms, including expanded freedom of expression and broader political participation (Bhakti, 2002), even as underlying structural vulnerabilities persisted. In recent decades, democratic change has been accompanied by deepening political polarisation, the rise of populist mobilisation (Aspinall & Mietzner, 2019; Hadiz & Robison, 2017; Mietzner, 2020; Yilmaz et al., 2023), and shifts in party competition (Ramadhan, 2019).

Following the collapse of authoritarian rule in the late 1990s, Indonesia initiated a series of institutional reforms that reshaped its political system. Since 1998, the country has witnessed major institutional changes, including constitutional amendments (Barus, 2017), relatively more transparent and competitive elections (Warburton & Aspinall, 2018), and expanded protections for press freedom and human rights. These developments initially led observers to regard Indonesia as a leading example of democratic transition in Southeast Asia. Over the past decade, however, Indonesia's democratic trajectory has raised renewed concerns about the depth and durability of these reforms (Mietzner, 2023), emphasising the need for further analysis.

Recent assessments by international democracy-monitoring organisations reinforce these concerns. By the end of 2022, two major indices reported a downward trend in Indonesia's democratic performance. The Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) documented a decline in Indonesia's democracy score, particularly in the political culture dimension, which registered 4.38, below the global average of 5.38 (Economist Intelligence, 2023). This dimension captures indicators such as public support for democracy, social cohesion, perceptions of leadership, and the separation of religion and state.

Similarly, Freedom House's Freedom in the World report recorded a comparatively low civil liberties score of 29 for Indonesia, below the global average of 33.83 (Freedom House, 2023). These findings indicate weakening protections for equality before the law, judicial independence, and freedoms of expression and belief. These assessments suggest a reconfiguration of Indonesia's democratic architecture. While Indonesia continues to operate as an electoral democracy, its liberal and substantive dimensions have grown increasingly fragile (Mietzner, 2025). The coexistence of regular elections with declining civil liberties, weakened institutional oversight, and entrenched elite dominance raises important questions about the trajectory of Indonesia's democratic consolidation.

While scholarship has highlighted oligarchic resilience and populism in Indonesia, our article situates elite dynamics within a broader framework of regime transformation. It examines whether Indonesia is transitioning toward a stable form of electoral illiberalism, in which elections remain procedurally intact while liberal safeguards systematically deteriorate. Unlike earlier studies that interpret Indonesia through the lens of democratic consolidation, we engage with global theories of democratic backsliding and abusive constitutionalism. We investigate whether democratic regimes can persist procedurally even as their substantive liberal foundations erode, positioning Indonesia as a critical case for evaluating this theoretical tension.

Indonesia's democratic trajectory reflects the interaction of multiple interrelated factors, including political participation, civil society engagement, human rights protection, economic development, and the effectiveness of anti-corruption efforts (Grzywacz, 2020; Parvin, 2018;

Wang & Ye, 2017). In Indonesia, formal political participation has expanded but remains uneven due to structural barriers such as limited access to information in rural areas and educational disparities (Hutasoit et al., 2020; Parinduri, 2019). While civil society organisations and women's participation contribute to strengthening democratic accountability (Labucay, 2016; Sudrajat, 2016), persistent economic inequality and systemic corruption continue to erode public trust in democratic institutions (Merkle, 2022; Warburton & Aspinall, 2018).

Indonesia is frequently cited as a success story of democratic transition despite the challenges it continues to face (Aspinall & Mietzner, 2019; Bhakti, 2002). Existing scholarship offers important insights into the drivers and manifestations of democratic regression, particularly highlighting elite capture, party cartelization, and declining political accountability (Aspinall, 2015; Power, 2018; Schäfer, 2019). Much of this literature, however, treats democratic decline as episodic, contingent, or reversible and gives limited attention to its consolidation into a distinct and durable regime configuration.

We address this gap by examining Indonesia's democratic trajectory through the lens of electoral illiberalism. Our analysis centres on the structural contradiction between resilient electoral procedures and the erosion of substantive democratic dimensions, including horizontal accountability, civil liberties, and pluralism.

Accordingly, our article examines Indonesia's democratic trajectory, with particular attention to developments since *Reformasi*, especially in the mid-2010s. We argue that Indonesia's democratic system has become increasingly shaped by the strategic interests of political and economic elites at the expense of coherent democratic governance principles. We first outline methodological approach and theoretical framework, then analyse Indonesia's democratic trajectory across historical periods, and finally consider the implications of these findings for broader debates on democratic backsliding and consolidation.

Reframing Political Democracy

Political democracy provides the institutional foundation of popular sovereignty, most visibly expressed through mechanisms of representation and political competition. Based on this, we synthesised the core theoretical models and evaluative dimensions of political democracy, offering a conceptual framework for analysing how democratic systems evolve and operate across contexts, including post-authoritarian Indonesia.

1. *Defining the Core: Procedural Minimalism and Its Discontents*

The most widely used definition of political democracy is procedural, or minimalist. Following Schumpeter (1942), democracy is understood as an institutional arrangement for making political decisions in which individuals gain power through a competitive struggle for the people's vote. This electoralist conception focuses on several core institutions: (1) free, fair, and regular elections for key decision-makers; (2) universal adult suffrage; (3) the right to run for office; (4) freedom of expression and access to alternative sources of information; and (5) associational autonomy (Dahl, 1971). For Huntington (1991), a political system qualifies as democratic when its most powerful decision-makers are selected through regular, competitive elections in which virtually all adults can participate. This procedural core distinguishes democracies from non-democracies and provides the baseline for most large-N comparative research (Boix et al., 2013).

Minimalist democracy has been widely criticised as insufficient, however. We consider that it risks equating the presence of electoral procedures with the health of democratic politics. A narrow focus on elections can obscure significant distortions, including competitive authoritarianism (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018), in which elections exist but are systematically tilted in favour of incumbents, and delegative democracy (O'Donnell, 1994), in which elected executives govern with limited horizontal constraints between elections. These critiques suggest the need to assess democratic quality beyond mere electoral procedures.

2. *Expanding the Lens: Models of Democratic Quality and Depth*

To address the limits of procedural minimalism, scholars have advanced richer normative accounts that emphasise distinct dimensions of democratic quality. Liberal democracy sets electoral competition within a broader framework of constitutional restraint, highlighting horizontal accountability, the protection of individual and minority rights, the rule of law, and civilian control of the military (Diamond, 2023; Zakaria, 1997). Democracy, in this view, entails not only popular sovereignty expressed through elections, but also limits on majoritarian power.

Other approaches shift attention beyond institutional constraints. Participatory democracy, emerging from critiques of passive citizenship in minimalist models, calls for extending democratic practice into everyday civic life through mechanisms such as referendums, citizen assemblies, and participatory budgeting (Dacombe & Parvin, 2021; Paulis & Pospieszna, 2025; Venter, 2023). Its focus is on deepening citizen engagement and strengthening political efficacy. Deliberative democracy, by contrast, relocates democratic legitimacy from the aggregation of preferences to the quality of public reasoning. It maintains that decisions are legitimate only when they arise from free and reasoned debate among equals, where arguments are assessed on their merits (Dryzek, 2002; Habermas, 1998). These models broaden the evaluative scope of democracy beyond electoral procedures, highlighting its institutional, participatory, and discursive dimensions.

3. *An Integrative Framework: The Multi-Dimensional Assessment of Political Democracy*

Building on these models, contemporary scholarship advocates a multidimensional assessment of democratic quality (Coppedge et al., 2011; Fuchs & Roller, 2018; Logan & Mattes, 2010). This approach enables analysts to assess where a polity such as Indonesia may be strong in one dimension yet weaker in another. The key interrelated dimensions include: (1) electoral process, the freedom, fairness, inclusiveness, and integrity of elections; (2) political participation, the scope and equality of citizen engagement, such as voting, party membership, and civil society activism; (3) civil liberties, the protection of freedoms of expression, association, assembly, and religion; (4) horizontal accountability, the effectiveness of institutional checks on executive power exercised by legislatures, judiciaries, and independent oversight bodies; (5) rule of law, the extent to which laws are transparent, evenly enforced, and applicable to state actors; (6) responsiveness, the degree to which elected officials and public policies correspond to citizens' expressed preferences; and (7) political competition, the openness of the political arena to opposition parties and new entrants, free from repression or unfair resource advantages.

4. *Conceptual Bridge to the Indonesian Case*

This theoretical framework provides the conceptual vocabulary and benchmarks for analysing Indonesia's democratic trajectory. The post-*Reformasi* period can be assessed through these dimensions: it clearly consolidated the procedural-electoral core (Dimension 1). Scholarly debate has focused on the resilience of horizontal accountability, however (Dimension 4), in the context of a strong presidency and historically weak legislature, the integrity of the rule of law (Dimension 5) amidst systemic corruption, and the quality of political competition (Dimension 7) within an increasingly consolidated and cartelised party oligarchy (Slater, 2018; Warburton & Aspinall, 2019). In addition, the rise of majoritarian identity politics places pressure on civil liberties (Dimension 3), particularly for minority groups. Applying this multi-dimensional framework, therefore, moves the analysis beyond a binary classification of Indonesia's democratic status, enabling a more precise assessment of its strengths, vulnerabilities, and evolving institutional character.

Method

We examine the dynamics of democracy in Indonesia through a qualitative case-study approach. We analyse the trajectory of Indonesian political democracy in depth, capturing the complexity, contradictions, and socio-political meanings embedded in democratization processes that cannot be fully conveyed through quantitative indicators alone (Creswell, 2018). This approach allows us to explore how political events, institutional changes, and democratic practices have been interpreted and contested over time, enabling a holistic understanding of democratic transformation.

We adopt an intrinsic case-study design, treating Indonesia as a historically and politically significant case within the broader wave of post-authoritarian democratisation in the Global South (Stake, 1995)). We do not seek statistical generalisation because we pursue analytical generalisation by situating Indonesia's experience within comparative debates on democratic regression, electoral illiberalism, and democratic consolidation.

We draw on both primary and secondary sources collected through systematic document analysis. Our primary data consist of formal legal and institutional documents that structure Indonesia's procedural democracy, including the 1945 Constitution and its amendments, electoral laws, regulations on political parties, and decisions and institutional mandates of key state bodies such as the Constitutional Court, the General Elections Commission (KPU), and relevant oversight agencies. We analyse these materials to trace the evolution of democratic institutions and the legal frameworks governing electoral competition, accountability, and political participation.

Our secondary sources include peer-reviewed scholarship, such as journal articles and monographs by leading scholars of Indonesian politics and democratisation. We also use reports produced by research institutions and democracy-monitoring organisations, such as Freedom House, the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU), and Bawaslu, to assess changes in democratic quality over time, particularly with respect to civil liberties, political rights, and institutional accountability.

We employ a thematic-narrative analytical strategy (Braun & Clarke, 2020; Braun et al., 2022; Clarke & Braun, 2017) that combines thematic coding with longitudinal narrative interpretation. First, we identify key analytical themes deductively from a multi-dimensional framework of democratic quality, including electoral processes, political participation, horizontal accountability, the rule of law, and political competition. We, then, code relevant materials according to these themes and analyse them narratively to trace how democratic practices and institutional relationships have evolved across political periods, particularly from *Reformasi* through the mid-2010s and beyond.

This narrative approach enables us to capture not only institutional change but also shifts in power relations, elite strategies, and state-society dynamics. To enhance analytical rigour, we use systematic data triangulation, comparing legal and constitutional documents with international democracy indices, such as Freedom House and EIU reports, as well as scholarly interpretations. This strategy allows us to identify convergences and discrepancies between formal democratic procedures and substantive outcomes. By integrating these sources, we develop a more robust explanation of why Indonesia has sustained procedural electoral resilience while experiencing erosion in its liberal-democratic dimensions.

Guided by the multi-dimensional framework of democracy outlined in the literature review, we use each democratic dimension as an analytical lens to interpret the collected data. Through this approach, we can develop a contextualised and theoretically grounded explanation of Indonesia's democratic trajectory, highlighting the coexistence of procedural electoral stability and substantive democratic regression.

Results and Discussion

Since gaining independence in 1945, Indonesia has experienced successive democratic configurations, ranging from early liberal democracy to the post-reform era. The evolution of its political system reflects broader transformations across political, social, and economic domains. Throughout these shifts, Indonesia has formally maintained a Pancasila-based democratic framework, which positions the state ideology as the normative foundation of governance and political order. It has been argued that this institutional continuity has shaped Indonesia's democratic trajectory, even as the system has faced significant structural and political challenges.

The Dynamics of Indonesian Democracy

Indonesia is a democratic country with a long history of institutional development. Since independence, it has adopted democracy as its formal political framework, though its practice has evolved across different political periods. From the Soekarno era to the present, democratic institutions and participation have varied in form and scope, shaped in part by changing constitutional and legislative arrangements. A significant milestone occurred in 1955 with the introduction of direct, competitive parliamentary elections. Following the end of the New Order, Indonesia further institutionalised direct and competitive elections, including for both parliament and the presidency.

As the fourth most populous country in the world and home to considerable ethnic, religious, and cultural diversity, Indonesia grounds its democratic system in Pancasila (Sudrajat, 2016), which positions national unity and collective interests at the centre of political life. In principle, Indonesian democracy is framed around the idea of government of, by, and for the people. Safeguarding the freedoms of expression, religion, and association within this framework is essential to ensuring broad and equitable political participation across society.

The history of democracy in Indonesia began with independence from Dutch colonial rule in 1945 (Zoelva, 2022). Since then, Indonesia has adopted several constitutions and systems of government, including both presidential and parliamentary arrangements. In the early years of independence, the country operated under a provisional constitution that formally guaranteed fundamental rights, including freedoms of speech, the press, association, and religion, as well as the rights to vote, to stand for office, to education, and to a decent livelihood. However, intense political contestation limited the full implementation of these constitutional provisions.

During the Old Order, Indonesia faced persistent political instability and repeated leadership transitions, including coup attempts against the ruling government. Although democratic institutions formally existed, they were frequently subordinated to executive authority and personalist rule (A. Wijaya, 2014), constraining the institutionalisation of democratic governance. Under both the first president, Soekarno, and the second president, Soeharto, political instability was accompanied by significant human rights violations.

The trajectory of democracy in Indonesia is commonly divided into four periods: 1945-1950; 1950-1959; 1959-1998; and the post-1998 reform era following the collapse of Soeharto's authoritarian regime. During the first period, Indonesia operated under a provisional constitution as it consolidated its status as an independent nation-state. This early phase was marked by political instability, including leadership changes and coup attempts. In 1950, Indonesia adopted a more comprehensive constitutional framework (Undang-Undang Dasar 1950), which established a democratic system structured around three branches of government: executive, legislative, and judicial.

During the second period, Indonesia adopted a constitution that reaffirmed the principle of *trias politica* and formally entrenched the separation of powers among the executive, legislative, and judicial branches, although political instability persisted. In 1959, the 1945 Constitution (Undang-Undang Dasar 1945) was reinstated, and it remains in force today. The

current constitutional framework enshrines key democratic principles, including the protection of human rights, civil and political liberties, freedom of expression, and the separation of powers.

The third period, spanning 1959 to 1998, was marked by the reinstatement of the 1945 Constitution, which remains in force today. Under President Soeharto's New Order regime (1966-1998), civil liberties were significantly restricted, and political opposition was tightly controlled. Although the period witnessed sustained economic growth, democratic accountability and human rights protections were limited. The New Order was further characterised by documented human rights abuses and the marginalisation of political and religious minorities (Aspinall & Fealy, 2010; Sahrasad, 2017).

The fourth period followed the collapse of the Soeharto regime in 1998, marking Indonesia's transition to a multi-party democratic system. In the immediate post-authoritarian context, elections were conducted in a climate of political openness, with broad participation from newly formed parties. These elections were administered by an increasingly independent General Elections Commission, no longer subject to direct executive control, contributing to the institutional normalisation of competitive politics (Aspinall, 2005).

Since then, Indonesia has consolidated regular electoral competition and expanded formal protections for civil and political rights. Free and competitive elections have been held consistently, although persistent challenges remain, including corruption, episodic political violence, and discrimination against minority groups (Aspinall, 2015).

After more than three decades of authoritarian rule, Indonesia entered a democratic phase in 1998. The reform period reshaped the country's political institutions and introduced greater openness and procedural transparency. Political liberalisation, the expansion of independent media, and the diversification of civil society actors have altered the dynamics of democratic competition. The growth of information and communication technologies has further expanded avenues for political participation, particularly through digital platforms.

Despite these developments, Indonesia's democratic trajectory remains uneven, though some scholars characterise it as institutionally resilient and politically vibrant (Slater, 2023). At the same time, persistent challenges, including corruption, oligarchic influence, and economic inequality, continue to constrain the consolidation of democratic governance.

Political Democracy

The development and implementation of political democracy in Indonesia have varied across successive political periods, shaped by shifting institutional and political conditions. During the Old Order (1945-1966), the country underwent a fluid, contested political process marked by efforts to institutionalise democratic governance. Following independence, Indonesia adopted a parliamentary system influenced in part by the Dutch constitutional model. Under this arrangement, legislative authority rested with the House of Representatives (DPR), which was responsible for law-making and oversight of the executive. Executive authority was exercised by a Prime Minister accountable to the legislature. This parliamentary system remained in place until 1959, when President Soekarno issued a presidential decree dissolving parliament and restructuring the constitutional order.

Following the dissolution of parliament, President Soekarno introduced a system of Guided Democracy (1959-1965) (Ilmar, 2018). Under this arrangement, executive authority was concentrated in the presidency, while the legislature functioned largely as a formal endorser of presidential policies. Guided Democracy was sustained through the Nasakom alignment – an ideological configuration combining nationalism, Islam, and communism – represented principally by the Indonesian Nationalist Party (PNI), Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), and the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI). In practice, the system exhibited strong authoritarian features and limited meaningful political competition. Guided Democracy came to an end in

1966 with Soekarno's removal from office, paving the way for the New Order regime under Suharto.

During the Old Order, the character and practice of political democracy were shaped significantly by Sukarno's nationalist and socialist orientations. Although the 1945 Constitution remained the formal constitutional framework, political authority in practice was highly centralised in the presidency and the ruling elite. The Constitution affirms core principles such as popular sovereignty, a presidential system, and the separation of powers, and it provides for electoral competition and political parties as institutional components of democratic governance. The 1955 general election, which involved more than thirty political parties, is frequently cited as one of the most competitive and procedurally democratic elections in Indonesia's history.

During Soekarno's leadership in the Old Order, several institutional measures were formally associated with democratic governance, including the continued application of the 1945 Constitution, the 1955 general election, the multi-party system, and the Nasakom coalition. At the same time, the introduction of Guided Democracy marked a significant shift toward concentrated executive authority and reduced political competition. This period was also characterised by episodes of state coercion, including pressure on the Masyumi Party to dissolve (Zoelva, 2022).

During Suharto's New Order regime, the scope of political democracy was highly restricted. Although the constitutional framework formally reflected a liberal-democratic structure – dividing authority among the executive, legislative, and judicial branches – political competition operated within tight constraints. Legislative elections were held through party-list proportional representation, with representation in the House of Representatives (DPR) determined by participating political parties. The President was elected by the People's Consultative Assembly (MPR) in its General Session. The MPR comprised members of the DPR, representatives of recognised political parties and functional groups, regional delegates, and appointed representatives of the Armed Forces of the Republic of Indonesia (ABRI), which at the time included the Army, Navy, Air Force, and Police.

The New Order prioritised political stability and economic growth, while constraining civil liberties and meaningful political participation (Aspinall & Fealy, 2010). One prominent feature of this period was the severe restriction of press freedom. The state exercised extensive control over the licensing, publication, and distribution of print and broadcast media, including newspapers and television. Media outlets were subject to censorship, and critical reporting was frequently curtailed on grounds of national security or political stability. This system of media regulation limited access to independent sources of information and reduced transparency in public decision-making, thereby narrowing opportunities for informed political participation.

In addition, political freedoms were tightly constrained during the New Order. Opposition parties were prohibited, and the electoral system was structured to permit participation only by state-sanctioned organisations. The earlier multi-party system was replaced by a policy of forced consolidation along ideological lines, resulting in the formation of two officially recognised parties – the United Development Party (PPP) and the Indonesian Democratic Party (PDI) – alongside Golkar, which functioned as the regime's principal political vehicle.

Although the constitutional framework formally affirmed human rights and democratic principles, state practice diverged markedly from these provisions—a strong emphasis on security and intelligence oversight characterised governance during this period. The regime imposed the “single principle” policy, requiring all social and political organisations to adopt Pancasila as their sole ideological foundation. The military maintained an institutionalised role in political affairs, and civil society organisations operated under extensive state supervision.

The enactment of Law No. 3/1999 on General Elections expanded political participation by granting voting rights to all eligible citizens and permitting the formation of new political

parties. In the general election of 7 June 1999, forty-eight parties contested seats, reflecting a rapid liberalisation of the political arena. Although national elections had initially been scheduled for 2002, public pressure in the immediate post-*Reformasi* context accelerated the timetable to 1999.

A further institutional shift occurred in 2004, when Indonesia introduced direct presidential elections, allowing voters to elect both the president and members of parliament. The adoption of direct elections strengthened electoral accountability and broadened popular participation, even as concerns over irregularities and vote-buying persisted. Compared to the New Order period, however, the electoral process was substantially more competitive and transparent.

The post-1998 reforms introduced significant changes to Indonesia's political and legal architecture by establishing and strengthening key democratic institutions. These included the Regional Representative Council (DPD), the General Elections Commission (KPU), the Judicial Commission, the Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK), the Constitutional Court, and the Ombudsman. During this period, Law No. 22 of 1999 on Regional Government was also enacted, marking a major shift toward decentralisation. The law expanded the authority of subnational governments, particularly at the regency and municipal levels, and is widely regarded as a foundational step in the reconfiguration of regional autonomy in Indonesia.

Indonesia's institutional reforms have not been consistently reflected in measures of civil liberties. According to Freedom House, Indonesia's civil liberties score declined steadily between 2013 and 2022. The score stood at 35 in 2013, fell to 34 between 2014 and 2018, declined further to 32 in 2019, and dropped to 31 in 2020 before reaching 29 in both 2021 and 2022 (Freedom in the World 2023, 2023; Indonesia: Freedom in the World 2022 Country Report, 2022). Survey data similarly indicate a gradual decline in public support for democracy. The proportion of respondents who identified democracy as the best political system decreased from 80 per cent in 2006 to 71 per cent in 2011 and 69 per cent in 2016. These trends span the second term of President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (SBY) and the beginning of President Joko Widodo's (Jokowi) first term.

Over the past decade, developments in Indonesia's political system and governance practices have driven growing concern among scholars of politics, law, and public administration. Patterns of elite behaviour have increasingly diverged from norms of statesmanship, contributing to sharper political polarisation and social fragmentation. Differences in political preferences have, in some instances, hardened into antagonistic alignments, with political opponents framed less as legitimate competitors than as adversaries (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). In this context, concerns have also been raised about the potential instrumentalisation of law enforcement institutions, such as the Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK), the Attorney General's Office, and the Police, for partisan purposes, particularly against political rivals.

Procedural Resilience and Substantive Democratic Erosion

The post-2004 period, particularly under the administrations of SBY and Jokowi, illustrates a central paradox in Indonesia's contemporary democracy. On the one hand, electoral procedures have remained formally intact, with regular presidential and legislative elections conducted in a largely peaceful and competitive manner. On the other hand, indicators of civil liberties, the rule of law, and horizontal accountability have shown a gradual decline, as reflected in assessments by Freedom House and the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU).

This contradiction indicates a broader pattern of electoral illiberalism, in which democratic legitimacy is increasingly anchored in electoral outcomes while liberal-democratic constraints on executive power weaken. Key oversight bodies, most notably the Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK), have been weakened, diminishing their capacity to constrain

executive and elite authority. Elections, accordingly, continue to operate primarily as mechanisms of elite circulation rather than as robust instruments of democratic accountability.

Abusive Constitutionalism and the Narrowing of Civic Space

A critical manifestation of Indonesia's democratic regression lies in the state's use of legal and constitutional mechanisms to restrict civic and political space. The dissolution of organisations such as Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (HTI) and the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI) should not be treated merely as administrative measures. These actions warrant analysis within the framework of abusive constitutionalism. This concept captures the use of formally lawful mechanisms to weaken political pluralism while maintaining the appearance of constitutional compliance. By invoking Government Regulation No. 2/2017 (Perppu) and a Joint Ministerial Decree (SKB), the executive expanded its discretionary authority over civil society organisations.

Although framed as measures to safeguard national unity, these policies narrowed civic space and reinforced executive dominance. This pattern parallels developments in the Philippines under Rodrigo Duterte and in India under Narendra Modi, where competitive elections have coexisted with shrinking civil liberties (Javate de Dios, 2022; Roy, 2023). Indonesia thus aligns with broader global trends associated with electoral illiberalism.

Indonesia's trajectory reflects cases in which democratic erosion unfolds incrementally rather than through an abrupt breakdown. As in Duterte's Philippines, coercive rhetoric and security narratives have been used to justify restrictions on dissent. Similarly, in Modi's India, majoritarian legitimacy has been mobilised to rationalise institutional centralisation. These comparisons situate Indonesia within a wider pattern of democratic backsliding, positioning it as part of a global phenomenon rather than an isolated anomaly.

While these actions were justified on legal and security grounds, they exemplify a broader pattern of abusive constitutionalism, in which formal legal instruments are deployed to curtail political pluralism and dissent without overtly dismantling democratic institutions. These measures do not amount to a restoration of overt authoritarian rule; they represent a recalibration of state power within an illiberal democratic framework. The selective enforcement of laws, restrictions on organisational activity, and the criminalisation of dissent have narrowed civic space while maintaining the appearance of constitutional legality. This dynamic parallels developments in other electoral democracies undergoing democratic backsliding.

Comparatively, Indonesia's experience parallels developments in the Philippines under President Duterte, where legal and institutional instruments were used to constrain opposition and civil society while electoral competition formally persisted. Similar dynamics can be observed in India under Prime Minister Modi, where majoritarian nationalism and legal reforms have weakened minority protections and institutional checks. These parallels suggest that Indonesia's trajectory is not exceptional, but forms part of a broader global pattern of democratic erosion within formally democratic regimes.

Elite Polarisation and Democratic Norm Erosion

Elite behaviour has further contributed to democratic regression. Rising polarisation has increasingly recast political competition as a zero-sum contest, in which opponents are framed as adversaries rather than legitimate competitors (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). In Indonesia, this dynamic has been reinforced by identity-based mobilisation and amplified through social media, contributing to social fragmentation and the delegitimation of democratic norms.

Law enforcement and judicial institutions, including the police and prosecutorial authorities, are widely perceived as instruments of political influence rather than neutral arbiters. Such perceptions erode public trust and weaken the informal norms that underpin

democratic consolidation. As these norms deteriorate, procedural mechanisms alone become insufficient to sustain substantive democratic governance.

Implications for Democratic Consolidation

Indonesia's democracy has entered a phase of regressive consolidation. Democratic institutions continue to function procedurally in this context, despite their substantive capacity to constrain power, protect rights, and ensure accountability having weakened. Indonesia illustrates how democracy may endure electorally while eroding substantively, a defining feature of electoral illiberalism. This condition challenges linear models of democratic consolidation that equate regular elections with democratic stability. It suggests instead that democratic regression can unfold incrementally through legal, institutional, and normative shifts that hollow out democratic substance while preserving formal structures.

Challenges and Prospects of Democratisation in Indonesia

Democratic systems confront a range of complex challenges alongside emerging opportunities. Contemporary scholarship has identified several structural pressures shaping democratic governance. In Indonesia, persistent challenges include corruption, uneven political participation (Bourchier, 2019), political and social polarisation, and widening economic disparities across social and political groups. Such imbalances in participation and representation may generate tensions that place strain on democratic institutions.

In addition, non-state actors such as technology companies and transnational extremist networks have assumed a more prominent role in shaping political and social life. Through digital platforms and information networks, these actors can influence public opinion and affect electoral processes, raising concerns about the integrity of democratic competition (T. I. Wijaya, 2020). The contemporary era also presents opportunities to deepen democratic governance. Digital technologies and the internet have opened new channels for participation and public engagement in decision-making processes (Saud & Margono, 2021). These developments may enhance transparency, expand access to information, and facilitate broader political involvement.

Civil society organisations and independent media likewise play an increasingly important role in sustaining democratic accountability. Civil society actors monitor state institutions and advocate for the protection of citizens' rights. At the same time, the media supports informed public debate and political participation by providing credible and diverse sources of information. The literature identifies radicalism and extremism as significant challenges to democracy in Indonesia. Such movements, including terrorist networks seeking to undermine democratic institutions, pose risks to political stability and pluralism (Sugiyanto; & Rofi'i, 2018). Corruption and oligarchic entrenchment remain persistent structural constraints that weaken democratic quality and diminish public trust in state institutions.

Technological dependence presents an additional challenge. While digital technologies expand opportunities for participation, they may also reinforce informational echo chambers and enable the restriction or manipulation of speech, so affecting the quality of democratic deliberation. In addition to the challenges it faces, democracy also presents opportunities for renewal and institutional strengthening (Parvin, 2018). Participatory democracy remains a central dimension, with contemporary technologies expanding avenues for public engagement through social media and digital platforms. These developments enhance civic inclusion and broaden access to political deliberation. Technological innovation can also contribute to the diversification of political power and forms of engagement, although its effects remain contingent on regulatory and institutional contexts. Democratic systems retain the capacity to respond to emerging pressures through policy innovation and institutional adaptation, including reforms designed to strengthen accountability and public trust.

At the international level, cooperation among democratic states may provide support for countries confronting governance challenges. Public education and civic awareness remain critical foundations for democratic resilience, as greater understanding of civil and political rights can deepen participation and reinforce democratic norms. Indonesia's democratic institutions continue to confront challenges in safeguarding fundamental rights. The trajectory of democratic development reflects the interaction among complex, interrelated political, institutional, and social factors. Institutional capacity, the structure of the party system, patterns of political participation, protections for freedom of expression, and the governance of digital technologies all shape the quality and resilience of democratic practice.

Theoretical Implications for Democratic Consolidation

Indonesia challenges classical theories of democratic consolidation, which assume that repeated competitive elections reinforce liberal-democratic norms. The Indonesian case demonstrates that procedural regularity does not guarantee substantive consolidation. This study argues that Indonesia exemplifies substantive erosion under procedural continuity, a condition in which democracy endures electorally while deteriorating normatively. Electoral illiberalism in Indonesia appears increasingly institutionalised rather than merely transitional. This pattern suggests that democratic regression can coexist with electoral stability, calling for a reassessment of consolidation paradigms in comparative politics.

Conclusion

Indonesia can be characterised not only as a consolidated democracy experiencing episodic setbacks, but also as a hybrid regime configuration in which electoral procedures persist while liberal democratic guarantees systematically erode. The endurance of competitive elections obscures a deeper transformation: the gradual institutionalisation of weakened horizontal accountability, constrained civic space, and the instrumentalisation of law for the interests of elites. The Indonesian case, accordingly, provides empirical evidence that democracy can remain procedurally intact while substantively deteriorating. This finding extends global debates on democratic backsliding by illustrating how democratic decline may stabilise into a new equilibrium, electoral illiberalism.

Our analysis demonstrates that Indonesia's democratic trajectory is best understood as a process of regressive consolidation. While Indonesia has institutionalised relatively competitive elections and expanded formal political participation, these developments coexist with significant erosion of liberal-democratic accountability and institutional constraints. Efforts to strengthen governance and civil institutions have unfolded within a political environment shaped by entrenched elite interests, limiting their transformative impact. Although Indonesia continues to receive regional and international recognition as a democratic actor, such recognition does not negate the structural vulnerabilities embedded within its current regime configuration.

Indonesia has institutionalised a stable procedural electoral core while simultaneously experiencing significant erosion of liberal-democratic substance. This paradox, which we define here as electoral illiberalism, is driven by the strategic capture of state institutions by consolidated political-economic oligarchies. These actors instrumentalise democratic forms, particularly competitive elections, while weakening horizontal accountability, undermining the rule of law, and marginalising dissent through majoritarian politics and a constricted civic space. Formal democratic resilience thus conceals a regime configuration in which elite interests systematically override mechanisms of accountability and representation.

The Indonesian case highlights that democratic consolidation is neither linear nor irreversible. The persistence of oligarchic power structures constitutes a central structural constraint on democratic deepening. Prospects for liberal-democratic renewal depend less on further electoral engineering than on the reconfiguration of entrenched networks of power and the strengthening of genuinely independent oversight institutions. Without such institutional

transformation, Indonesia's democracy is likely to remain an illiberal hybrid, procedurally resilient yet substantively constrained in accountability, equality, and freedom.

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