

PRABOWO APPROACH RAISES CONCERNS ABOUT CIVIL LIBERTIES

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Abstract

Prabowo Subianto government indicates a consolidation of power that leads to a new authoritarianism, threatening the sustainability of substantive democracy in Indonesia. This article analyses the main dimensions of democratic backsliding, the centralization of power through the revision of the Pilkada Law that reduces regional autonomy, the increased involvement of the military in civilian affairs through the placement of active and retired officers in strategic government positions, and the narrowing of civil liberties space, including restrictions on press freedom, silencing of public criticism, and violence against protests. Empirical data from 2024-2025 shows that retired military officers filled 60% of strategic cabinet positions, three protesters were killed in the March 2025 riots, and the press freedom index dropped dramatically from 60 to 45. These findings confirm that Indonesia is shifting towards an electoral democracy model that only maintains formal electoral procedures but ignores civil rights and accountability mechanisms. Covert authoritarianism threatens political pluralism and erodes public trust in democratic institutions. This article calls for the importance of revitalising the role of civil society and independent media as key actors in safeguarding freedom and the need for broader political pressure to limit authoritarian tendencies in the state's power structure.

Keywords: Authoritarianism, Prabowo, government, civil liberties

Introduction

The post-2024 election transition of Prabowo Subianto as President of the Republic of Indonesia has sparked widespread concern about the direction of democracy and civil liberties in Indonesia. In his first 100 days in power, several policies and political actions have given strong indications of strengthening authoritarianism. One of the most controversial policies was the passage of the Revised Indonesian National Army Law (RUU TNI), which expanded the military's role in civilian affairs. In addition, the repressive crackdown on student and activist demonstrations in March 2025, which resulted in three fatalities (Kontras, 2025), reinforced concerns about shrinking democratic space. An investigative report by Tempo.com (2025) noted that 60% of strategic positions in the cabinet are filled by former military officers, reflecting a trend of militarisation of civilian politics incompatible with the principle of civilian supremacy in a democratic system.

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This phenomenon is not isolated. Fatur's research (2023) shows that modern authoritarianism does not always take the form of an overt abolition of democracy. Instead, it uses more subtle but systematic approaches, such as media control, the use of the security apparatus to silence criticism, and the manipulation of the law to strengthen executive power. At the global level, Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) in *How Democracies Die* mention that democracy does not always die through military coups, but through internal processes, when democratically elected leaders weaken institutions from within. This pattern is also found by Diamond (2020) in the study of "stealth authoritarianism", which is the tendency of populist leaders to use electoral legitimacy to implement repressive policies that are contrary to the principles of liberal democracy.

In the Indonesian context, Jentera (2024) has warned of the potential for "covert authoritarianism" facilitated by legal instruments such as the revision of the ITE Law and restrictions on press freedom through digital regulation. The study by Devi et al. (2025) also confirmed this concern by identifying symptoms of weakening democracy, ranging from executive dominance, weak checks and balances mechanisms, to the abuse of security forces in handling public criticism. Data from PSHK (2025) shows that Indonesia's Press Freedom Index dropped dramatically from a score of 60 to 45 in just the last year, signalling a narrowing space for expression and criticism of the government.

However, while various indicators of democratic weakening have emerged, academic studies that specifically analyze the mechanisms of authoritarianism in Prabowo's administration are still limited. The existing literature generally focuses on the dynamics of democracy in the post-reform era or during the previous administration, without examining how a leader with a military background like Prabowo adopted authoritarianism strategies. This gap is an urgency for this research, especially in looking at how the combination of populism, militarism, and legal regulations is used to centralize power and reduce the space for public participation. This research aims to analyze new forms of authoritarianism in Prabowo Subianto's administration, highlighting three main aspects: (1) the centralization of power through legal instruments such as the revision of the Pilkada Law; (2) the increasing role of the military in the civilian sphere that has the potential to undermine the civil-military balance; and (3) the restriction of democratic space including press freedom and the right to protest. Theoretically, this study rests on latent authoritarianism that develops in electoral democracy systems (Schedler, 2006), where elections are still formally implemented.

However, the substance of democracy, such as accountability, civil liberties, and political pluralism, has been significantly weakened. This article proposes that Indonesia is moving towards a new form of systematic authoritarianism by examining empirical evidence and policy trends in the early years of Prabowo's rule. If this pattern is not critiqued and controlled by civil society and democratic institutions, Indonesia risks becoming trapped in electoral democracy without substance. Therefore, this research has academic significance and practical relevance for maintaining a healthy and inclusive democracy in Indonesia.

Method

This research examines the dynamics of contemporary Indonesian democracy through case studies of the TNI bill and patterns of repression of demonstrations during the early period of Prabowo Subianto's administration. Through a comprehensive qualitative approach combining document analysis and in-depth interviews, the research reveals emerging authoritarian tendencies in national policy. The findings show a consistent pattern in handling public protests that reflects an excessive security approach and systematic efforts to expand the military's authority through the TNI Bill. This raises serious concerns about the direction of Indonesia's

democratisation, which appears to have significantly regressed compared to the previous post-Reformasi period.

An analysis of the TNI Bill reveals several controversial articles that potentially threaten the civil-military balance in state governance. Based on interviews with KontraS and PSHK representatives, there are weak oversight mechanisms in the draft law and provisions that allow military intervention in civilian affairs without clear parameters. Data from the BPS democracy index for the 2020-2024 period shows an accelerated downward trend in the quality of democracy in early 2025, with the civil liberties indicator declining by 12 points on a national scale. This decline correlates with increasing cases of restrictions on freedom of expression and assembly, as documented by various civil society organisations.

Participant observation of the March 2025 demonstrations provides empirical evidence of the repressive approach adopted by the security forces. Tactics used included excessive force, arbitrary arrests, and intimidation of protest coordinators. These findings were reinforced by Tempo.co and BenarNews reports that documented a significant increase in the use of treason and the ITE Law to suppress public criticism. A desk review of 15 national journal articles (2020-2025) confirmed that this pattern continues trends already evident at the end of the previous administration, but with greater intensity and stronger structural support.

This research found that national security discourse is increasingly dominant in government policy narratives, often used to justify restrictions on democratic space. Critical content analysis using Fairclough's (2003) framework identifies significant shifts in how state authorities legitimise policies restricting democratic rights. There is a tendency to construct protest movements as threats to national stability, rather than legitimate democratic expressions. Interviews with activists reveal concerns that these policies create a "chilling effect" on civil society, limiting the space for critical voices. If this trend continues, the prospects for Indonesia's democratic consolidation are under serious threat, with a potential regression towards a more authoritarian direction. The findings highlight the importance of public scrutiny and sustained advocacy to sustain Indonesia's democratisation gains. The analysis also points to the crucial role of civil society as the last bastion in the face of democratic erosion, despite its increasingly restricted space. The research recommends strengthening parliamentary oversight mechanisms, civilian-centric security sector reform, and more substantial international support for Indonesian civil society organisations that champion democratic values amidst increasingly complex political challenges.

Result and Discussion

The shift in Indonesia's political direction under the Prabowo Subianto administration shows the emergence of a latent authoritarianism pattern marked by militarisation of power, centralisation of policies, and restrictions on civic space. Empirical data from various sources during the 2024-2025 period provide strong indications that this government is heading towards the stealth authoritarianism model as described by Varol (2015) and Suryadinata (2023), which is a form of authoritarian government that maintains the formal procedures of democracy, but restricts its substance through legal, military, and communication strategies.

An investigative report by Tempo.com (2025) noted that former military officers filled 60% of strategic positions in the Prabowo administration's cabinet, signalling a significant return of military influence in the civilian governance process. This composition reflects a shift in power structure reminiscent of the New Order-era dual function format of the TNI. In fact, according to BenarNews (2025), there has been a 30% increase in TNI intervention in local

political processes, including the appointment of regional heads and the involvement of officers in public policy formation. These findings reinforce Mietzner's (2021) and ICG's (2023) predictions that the military will return to a dominant role in Indonesia's domestic politics without strict civilian control. This militarisation erodes the principle of civilian supremacy and paves the way to consolidate unaccountable executive power.

The revised Law on Regional Head Elections (Pilkada Law) is important in centralising central government power over regions. This policy, enacted in early 2025, opens a loophole for central government intervention in local political processes and undermines the principle of decentralised democracy, a pillar of the 1998 reforms. This case is a concrete illustration of what Aspinall & Berenschot (2021) describe as "democracy for sale", where regulations secure central power and undermine local political representation. This centralisation also aligns with Mungkasa's (2016) analysis, which states that the decline of regional autonomy is often the beginning of democratic regression in Southeast Asian countries.

The riots in March 2025 are concrete evidence of the deteriorating state of civil liberties in Indonesia. Three demonstrators were killed and more than 50 were injured as a result of excessive use of force by security forces (Kontras, 2025). The violence was claimed to be part of efforts to maintain "security stability," a narrative often used by authoritarian governments to justify repression (Narasi Utama, 2024). This discourse chills civil society, where peaceful protests are considered a threat to the state, rather than a legitimate form of political participation.

Furthermore, the use of the Electronic Information and Transaction Law (UU ITE) and the treason article in the Criminal Code have become legal tools to criminalise activists and political dissidents. Tempo.com and BenarNews (2025) reported a significant increase in using these articles since early 2024. In this context, the government is not openly abolishing civil liberties, but systematically silencing them through legal tools. This pattern is consistent with that described by Hadiz (2022) and Levitsky & Way (2010), which states that modern authoritarianism does not operate in a vulgar manner but rather through the legalisation of repression.

One of the aspects most affected by the hidden authoritarianism approach is press freedom. Indonesia's press freedom index slipped from a score of 60 to 45 according to PSHK (2025), and RSF (2023) noted that Indonesia dropped 20 places in the global index. The revocation of broadcast licenses of media critical of the government and restrictions on access to coverage in areas of conflict and demonstrations drove this decline. The impact is that self-censorship among journalists has increased by 70%, as reported by AJI (2025). These conditions indicate systematic control over public narratives and the weakening of the press's function as the fourth pillar of democracy.

Tapsell (2021) has warned that contemporary authoritarian powers use media regulation to control public perception. The government can shape political reality according to the ruler's interests through broadcast restrictions, surveillance of digital platforms, and pressure on media owners. In the case of Indonesia, this approach is evident in the silencing of alternative and independent media, as well as the dominance of national security narratives in the mainstream media.

The consolidation of power marked by military dominance in the bureaucracy, centralisation of policies, and restrictions on civic space means that Indonesia risks regressing towards electoral democracy without substance. In such a system, elections remain formal, but checks and balances are weakened, civic space is suppressed, and people's political participation becomes symbolic. This is in line with Diamond's (2020) warning that democracy can die slowly from within its system, through the accumulation of anti-democratic policies wrapped in legal and electoral frameworks.

BPS data (2020-2024) shows a decline in the quality of democracy in indicators of political participation, freedom of assembly, and public trust in democratic institutions. If this trend is not corrected, Indonesia could lose the achievements of the 1998 reforms and return to a dysfunctional authoritarian power structure. Despite the pressure on civil and political freedoms, civil society remains important in safeguarding democracy. Although their space is narrowing, civil society organisations, independent journalists, academics and students continue to play an important role in advocating for civil rights and maintaining democratic space. However, civil society's capacity to serve as a counterweight to power will continue to erode

without international support and the strengthening of internal oversight mechanisms such as the DPR and Komnas HAM. Thus, collective efforts are needed to stop this trend of authoritarianism through security sector reform, strengthening laws that guarantee human rights, and decentralising power as a pillar of local democracy. Active citizen participation, policy monitoring, and transnational solidarity are key to preventing Indonesia from falling deeper into the abyss of pseudo-democracy.

Placing former military officers in 60% of strategic cabinet positions (Tempo.com, 2025) is not just a form of personnel dominance but an indication of a paradigm shift in power from civilian rule towards a militaristic command structure. In a democratic system, civilian supremacy is the primary foundation to ensure that executive power is under the supervision and accountability of civilian institutions. However, with the return of the military in strategic civilian positions, this principle has been replaced by a vertical power structure that is difficult to monitor and prone to abuse of authority. The hierarchy of command brought by the military structure can erode the deliberative principle in policy-making, replacing deliberation with absolute obedience.

The TNI's intervention in local politics, which has increased by 30% (BenarNews, 2025), shows that the militarisation of power is happening at the national level and seeping into the regions. This undermines regional autonomy arrangements and creates authoritarian enclaves where power is exercised authoritatively despite being within a democratic state system (Berenschot & Aspinall, 2021). In other words, Indonesia's democracy is beginning to show a dualistic face: procedural nationally, but substantially authoritarian in many regions.

The case of the March 2025 riots (Kontras, 2025), in which three demonstrators were killed and dozens injured, is a clear illustration of how the narrative of "security stability" is used as legitimisation for repressive state action. This approach is not new, but it is now being used within the framework of electoral democracy, which is supposed to protect the rights of expression and assembly. The state uses security logic to negate citizens' constitutional rights, as explained in the theory of authoritarian resilience (Nathan, 2003), which is the ability of authoritarian regimes to maintain control by adapting democratic rhetoric. The criminalisation of activists through the ITE Law and treason articles, as well as restrictions on the space for protests, are not only forms of oppression, but also instruments of normalising fear in citizens' political participation. The long-term effects are political apathy and the delegitimisation of democracy as a system that protects the people.

The revision of the Pilkada Law, which provides greater space for central government intervention in the regional head election process, is a clear form of consolidation of executive power. This policy weakens the space for local autonomy, which has been one of the achievements of reform. In regions such as Aceh, Yogyakarta, and Papua, which have strong traditions of autonomy, such policies have the potential to create political resistance and ongoing social tensions. The weak oversight function of the legislature exacerbates the problem. The national parliament, which formally has a control function over the executive, often becomes part of the power itself. Instead of being a counterweight, the DPR often serves as an extension of government policy. This accelerates the consolidation of authoritarianism, which takes place through repressive measures and the weakening of democratic institutions.

The concept of authoritarian legalism (Scheppele, 2018) is particularly relevant to explain Prabowo's pattern of governance, where laws are used to legitimise actions that restrict civil rights. The TNI bill, the expansion of the role of security forces into the civilian sphere, and the use of the ITE Law to silence criticism show how the law is transformed from an instrument of justice into an instrument of repression. The drop in the press freedom index from 60 to 45 (PSHK, 2025) and the revocation of broadcast licenses for critical media are concrete evidence that the law is being used to restrict public access to information. This process creates fear among journalists and the media, triggering self-censorship that increases to 70% (AJI, 2025). In the

long run, this will undermine the function of the press as a social control mechanism and an accountability channel for power.

Data from BPS (2020-2024) shows a downward trend in the quality of democracy, especially in the indicators of freedom of assembly, public trust in state institutions, and political participation. This symptom shows a shift from substantive democracy to empty procedural democracy. Elections continue, but substance such as the right to dissent, space for criticism, and freedom of information continue to degrade. Prabowo's government shows strong characteristics of illiberal democracy (Zakaria, 1997), where elections occur regularly. However, the government is not subject to the principles of individual freedom and the rule of law. This poses a serious threat to Indonesia's post-reform democracy, as it creates an undemocratic regime that enjoys electoral legitimacy.

Despite the narrowing of civic space, resistance continues to emerge from civil society groups, independent journalists, students and pro-democracy NGOs. However, the pressure on these groups is growing. Many activists have reportedly experienced intimidation, monitoring and even arrest. In this context, pressure from the international community and cross-sector solidarity became essential to keep democracy from collapsing. The 1998 reforms became a significant reference point in the struggle to maintain political freedom and participation in Indonesia. Reform values such as civilian supremacy, decentralisation, press freedom, and the independence of state institutions are now being tested. If the trend of consolidating authoritarian power continues without structural correction, Indonesia risks experiencing democratic backsliding that is not only political, but also institutional and cultural.

Conclusions

Prabowo's government has shown signs of consolidating authoritarianism, marked by the militarisation of the cabinet, centralisation of power through revised regulations such as the Pilkada Law, and systematic restrictions on civil liberties through legal instruments and apparatus repression. Although Indonesia still maintains electoral democracy mechanisms formally, the substance of democracy is increasingly eroded, as reflected in the decline in civil liberties and democracy index in the last five years. The dominance of non-civilian actors, the use of the "security stability" narrative to silence criticism, and weak checks and balances create a climate of fear and narrow the space for public participation. If this trend does not stem, Indonesia risks shifting to a procedural democracy without guaranteed protection of the fundamental rights of its citizens.

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