



Indonesia's Struggle For Democratic Resilience: Issues and Institutional Reforms

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Abstract, *Indonesia's democracy, despite over two decades of progress since the fall of the New Order regime, has faced stagnation and democratic backsliding in recent years. Indicators from institutions such as the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU), Freedom House, and Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) consistently highlight a decline in democratic quality. Contributing factors include identity politics, declining electoral integrity, political dynasties, and weak institutional capacities, described as "Low-Capacity Democracy." This study employs a qualitative approach to explore these challenges, including literature reviews, document analysis, and interviews. The findings reveal systemic issues at both institutional and societal levels, including weakened oversight bodies like the Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK), the dominance of executive power, and the rise of transactional politics and political dynasties. Digital challenges, such as disinformation and low digital literacy, also exacerbate these issues. This study recommends comprehensive reforms, such as strengthening independent institutions, enhancing transparency in public fund management, and improving political education to reduce transactional practices. Digital media regulations and technology-based electoral monitoring are also proposed to increase transparency. By addressing these issues, Indonesia can reinforce democratic resilience and foster an inclusive, accountable political system.*

Keywords: *Indonesian democracy, democratic backsliding, identity politics, political dynasties, democratic reform.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Indonesia, as one of the largest democratic countries in the world, was once praised for its peaceful transition from an authoritarian regime to the Reformasi era in 1998. This reform period gave birth to new institutions designed to safeguard democracy, such as the Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK) and the Constitutional Court (MK), while enabling society to enjoy greater civil liberties. However, over the past two decades, these achievements have begun to erode. The Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) has classified Indonesia as a "flawed democracy," with a score of 6.53 in 2023, while Freedom House categorized it as "partly free," reflecting a significant decline in the quality of democracy.

One of the root causes is the weakening of democratic institutions. Amendments to laws governing the KPK, for instance, have reduced its authority to combat corruption effectively. At the same time, the executive's influence over the Constitutional Court reveals an imbalance in the system of checks and balances. On the other hand, transactional political culture, including vote-buying and patronage practices, has further worsened the situation. Political dynasties also limit participation, creating significant barriers to the emergence of new leadership that is more inclusive and competent.

Challenges in the digital era add complexity to strengthening democracy. On the one hand, social media provides a platform for greater political participation. Still, on the other hand, these platforms are often used to spread disinformation, polarize society, and weaken public trust in democratic institutions. Low digital literacy makes the public vulnerable to divisive narratives, while weak digital media regulations create opportunities for the manipulation of information. To address these issues, strategic steps are needed, including institutional reforms, political education, and fair digital regulations, to reinforce Indonesia's democratic foundation and ensure it remains resilient in the face of evolving challenges.

Indonesia has long been recognized as one of the world's largest democracies, transitioning from an authoritarian New Order regime to a democratic system in 1998. The Reformasi era heralded significant changes, including decentralization, direct elections, and the establishment of institutions to safeguard democratic values. Despite these advancements, recent years have seen signs of stagnation and democratic backsliding. Renowned institutions such as the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU), Freedom House, and Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) have documented Indonesia's declining democratic quality, highlighting critical challenges that threaten its democratic foundation (Freedom House, 2023; York et al., 2024).

Key indicators of democratic backsliding include the erosion of civil liberties, the weakening of independent institutions, and the pervasive influence of political patronage and dynasties. Freedom of expression, a fundamental pillar of democracy, has increasingly come under threat due to restrictive laws such as the Information and Electronic Transactions Law (UU ITE), often used to silence dissent (Barak & Sablosky, 2024). Furthermore, revisions to the authority of the Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK) have raised concerns about the weakening of anti-corruption efforts, reducing public trust in government accountability mechanisms (Levitsky & Way, 2023).

In addition to institutional weaknesses, societal dynamics play a significant role in Indonesia's democratic regression. Political culture in Indonesia often prioritizes transactional relationships, evidenced by widespread vote-buying, patronage, and the dominance of political dynasties. These practices undermine democratic integrity, limiting fair competition and stifling opportunities for new leadership (Aspinall & Mietzner, 2019). The rise of dynastic politics, where political influence is concentrated within families, further exacerbates this issue, creating barriers to inclusivity and equal political participation.

The digital era has added complexity to Indonesia's democratic landscape. While social media enables greater civic engagement, it has also become a tool for spreading misinformation, amplifying identity-based divisions, and polarizing public discourse. These

trends, coupled with inadequate regulations and low levels of digital literacy, have created vulnerabilities that can be exploited to manipulate public opinion and erode trust in democratic processes (Muhtadi, 2018).

Addressing these challenges requires a comprehensive approach. Institutional reforms are imperative to restore the integrity of democratic governance. Strengthening independent bodies such as the KPK and Constitutional Court (MK) is essential to uphold checks and balances. Transparency in public fund management and stricter campaign financing regulations can mitigate the influence of political patronage and corruption. Civic education programs should focus on promoting democratic values and reducing the prevalence of transactional politics, empowering citizens to hold leaders accountable. Furthermore, regulating digital platforms to combat disinformation while protecting freedom of expression is critical in safeguarding democratic discourse (Bermeo, 2016; Mietzner, 2021).

This paper aims to analyze the root causes of Indonesia's democratic decline and propose strategic reforms to address these issues. By examining the interplay between state institutions, societal behavior, and technological disruptions, the study provides insights into strengthening Indonesia's democratic resilience in the face of ongoing and emerging threats. Only through coordinated efforts and sustained commitment can Indonesia preserve its democratic achievements and pave the way for a more inclusive and accountable political system.

2. METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach to exploring the phenomenon of democratic backsliding in Indonesia. It seeks to understand the underlying factors contributing to democratic stagnation and decline by examining the interplay between state institutions, societal behavior, and external influences such as digital technology. Qualitative methods are particularly suitable for this study as they allow for an in-depth analysis of complex social and political dynamics (Creswell, 2014).

Data collection involved literature review, document analysis, and interviews. The literature review focused on scholarly articles, books, and reports from credible organizations such as Freedom House, the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU), and the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem). This provided a foundation for understanding global and local trends in democratic governance. Document analysis included reviewing government policies, laws, and regulations, particularly those related to anti-corruption efforts, electoral processes, and media governance.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with key informants, including academics, policymakers, civil society representatives, and journalists. These interviews provided insights into stakeholders' lived experiences and perceptions of Indonesia's democratic processes. The data from these interviews were triangulated with secondary sources to enhance the validity and reliability of the findings.

Thematic analysis was employed to identify recurring patterns and themes related to institutional weaknesses, political culture, and the role of digital media in democratic regression. This method facilitated a systematic exploration of the challenges facing Indonesia's democracy and informed the recommendations proposed in this study. Through this comprehensive approach, the research aims to contribute to the discourse on strengthening democratic resilience in Indonesia.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Democratic Backsliding in Indonesia: Institutional and Societal Challenges

The findings of this study reveal that Indonesia's democratic backsliding is characterized by institutional and societal challenges, highlighting systemic weaknesses that undermine its democratic resilience. At the institutional level, democratic erosion is evident in the weakening of key oversight bodies such as the Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK) and the Constitutional Court (MK). Revisions to the laws governing these institutions have reduced their authority, limiting their capacity to function as adequate checks on executive power. For instance, the 2019 amendment to the KPK law introduced structural changes that undermined its independence and operational efficiency, raising concerns among civil society and international observers (Bermeo, 2016; Mietzner, 2021). Similarly, controversial rulings by the MK, often perceived as politically influenced, have eroded public trust in the judiciary.

Indonesia's democratic institutions, once heralded as the cornerstone of its transition from authoritarianism, have experienced significant weakening in recent years. For instance, the Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK) has seen its authority diminished through legislative amendments, such as the 2019 revision of the KPK Law. These changes have limited its independence and operational capacity, raising concerns about the erosion of accountability mechanisms. Similarly, the Constitutional Court (MK), which plays a critical role in upholding the rule of law, has been criticized for its controversial rulings, perceived as politically influenced. These developments illustrate the growing dominance of the executive branch in undermining the checks and balances vital for democratic governance.

The integrity of Indonesia's electoral processes, another pillar of democracy, has also come under scrutiny. Vote-buying has become pervasive, distorting electoral outcomes and undermining public trust in the democratic process. The open-list proportional representation system intensifies intra-party competition, pushing candidates to prioritize short-term personal gains over long-term policy goals. Furthermore, the lack of transparency in campaign financing has created an uneven playing field, favoring wealthy candidates and political parties while marginalizing independent candidates. The dominance of political dynasties exacerbates these issues, restricting opportunities for leadership renewal and inclusivity in governance.

In addition to institutional and electoral challenges, Indonesia's digital landscape presents new complexities in the democratic sphere. While social media platforms have enabled greater civic participation, they have also become a breeding ground for disinformation, hate speech, and divisive narratives. These digital threats amplify identity-based polarization, further eroding trust in democratic institutions. Low digital literacy among the population exacerbates the issue, making it easier for malicious actors to exploit vulnerabilities and manipulate public opinion. The lack of effective regulation of digital platforms has allowed these problems to persist, posing a significant threat to the democratic fabric of the nation.

The interplay between weakened institutions, flawed electoral processes, and digital challenges creates a reinforcing cycle of democratic regression in Indonesia. Institutional weaknesses reduce the public's ability to hold leaders accountable, while flawed electoral processes perpetuate transactional politics and political dynasties. At the same time, digital disinformation exploits these systemic vulnerabilities, further polarizing society and diminishing trust in governance. These interconnected problems demand comprehensive and integrated solutions to address their root causes effectively.

To counter these challenges, Indonesia must pursue strategic reforms across multiple fronts. Strengthening the independence and capacity of democratic institutions such as the KPK and MK is essential to restore accountability and balance of power. Electoral reforms, including stricter regulations on campaign financing and vote-buying, can enhance the fairness and inclusivity of elections. Moreover, addressing the digital challenges requires improving digital literacy through education programs and implementing fair yet firm regulations on digital platforms to curb disinformation. By addressing these systemic issues coordinatedly, Indonesia can safeguard its democratic achievements and build resilience against emerging threats.

The dominance of executive power, known as "executive aggrandizement," has further exacerbated democratic regression. This is characterized by using legal and administrative tools to concentrate authority within the executive branch, often at the expense of legislative

and judicial independence. For example, legislative bodies such as the People's Representative Council (DPR) are increasingly seen as extensions of the executive rather than independent actors capable of holding the government accountable (Levitsky & Way, 2023).

At the societal level, the prevalence of transactional politics, patronage, and dynastic political structures significantly undermines the integrity of democratic processes. The practice of vote-buying and the distribution of patronage benefits during elections perpetuate a culture where political loyalty is transactional rather than rooted in shared democratic values. The entrenchment of political dynasties further limits political inclusivity and stifles leadership renewal, creating barriers for individuals outside established political families to participate in governance. For example, several influential political families dominate local and national politics, perpetuating unequal access to power (Aspinall & Mietzner, 2019).

These findings suggest that the interplay between weakened institutions and regressive societal practices creates a feedback loop that reinforces democratic backsliding. Addressing these challenges requires targeted reforms to restore institutional integrity and promote a more participatory political culture.

Electoral Processes in Democratic Backsliding

One of the significant findings in this study is the declining quality of Indonesia's electoral processes, which has become a critical factor in its democratic regression. Elections, as the cornerstone of democracy, are designed to reflect the people's will and ensure public officials' accountability. However, in Indonesia, the integrity of these processes has come under scrutiny due to systemic issues such as vote-buying, lack of transparency, and elite domination.

Vote-buying has become a pervasive issue, undermining the credibility and fairness of elections. Candidates and political parties often distribute material incentives, such as cash or goods, to secure votes. This practice not only distorts the democratic process but also fosters a culture of transactional politics where short-term gains take precedence over long-term policies and governance. Studies have shown that vote-buying disproportionately affects lower-income groups, perpetuating socioeconomic inequalities in political participation (Muhtadi, 2018).

The electoral system, particularly the open-list proportional representation system, also exacerbates competition among candidates within the same party. This intra-party competition incentivizes candidates to focus on personal gain and short-term strategies rather than collaborative efforts to strengthen party platforms or advance public policy. Consequently, elections often prioritize personal popularity and financial power over merit and vision.

The lack of transparency in campaign financing further compounds these challenges. Weak regulatory oversight allows the influx of undisclosed funds from private interests, often leading to policy capture by powerful economic actors. This creates an uneven playing field where wealthier candidates and political parties dominate, marginalizing smaller or independent candidates and limiting political diversity.

The findings also highlight the growing influence of elite dominance in electoral outcomes. Political dynasties, where family members of established leaders maintain control over key political positions, limit opportunities for leadership renewal and reduce the inclusivity of the democratic process. For example, prominent political families in Indonesia continue to dominate both local and national political arenas, leveraging their networks and resources to maintain their influence. This not only perpetuates existing power imbalances but also erodes public trust in the fairness and competitiveness of elections (Aspinall & Mietzner, 2019).

To address these issues, reforms must focus on enhancing the integrity and inclusivity of electoral processes. Strict enforcement of anti-vote-buying regulations, transparency in campaign financing, and measures to reduce the influence of political dynasties are critical steps. Strengthening the role of the Election Supervisory Agency (Bawaslu) and leveraging technology to ensure transparency in vote counting and result reporting can also help restore public confidence in the electoral system. Moreover, fostering voter education emphasizing the importance of issue-based and policy-driven elections can shift public attitudes from transactional practices to more substantive democratic engagement.

These findings underscore that elections in Indonesia while remaining competitive, require significant reforms to fulfill their role as a pillar of democracy. By addressing these systemic weaknesses, Indonesia can work toward ensuring that electoral processes contribute positively to consolidating its democratic system.

4. CONCLUSION

Indonesia's democracy, once lauded for its transition from authoritarianism, is now facing significant challenges characterized by stagnation and democratic backsliding. Institutional weaknesses, such as the diminished authority of oversight bodies like the Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK) and Constitutional Court (MK), coupled with the dominance of executive power, have eroded the checks and balances crucial for democratic governance. At the societal level, the persistence of transactional politics, patronage systems, and the rise

of political dynasties further exacerbate democratic regression by undermining fair competition and inclusivity in political participation.

Moreover, the quality of electoral processes has come under scrutiny due to vote-buying, elite domination, and a lack of transparency in campaign financing. These issues distort the democratic process, prioritizing short-term political gains over substantive governance and policy-making. Additionally, the role of digital media, while providing opportunities for greater civic engagement, has also contributed to spreading misinformation, polarizing public discourse, and undermining trust in democratic institutions.

To address these challenges, comprehensive reforms are imperative. Strengthening democratic institutions, enhancing electoral integrity, regulating the digital space responsibly, and fostering civic education are crucial steps to counter democratic decline. By implementing these measures, Indonesia can reinforce its democratic foundation, restore public trust in governance, and ensure that its democracy remains resilient in the face of evolving challenges. These efforts are essential not only to safeguard the democratic progress achieved over the past two decades but also to pave the way for a more inclusive, accountable, and equitable political system.

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