

POWER, DEMOCRACY, AND INSTITUTIONAL REFORM: A SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW OF INDONESIAN POLITICAL DYNAMICS

Khairunnisah Lubis

Fakultas Ilmu Sosial dan Ilmu Politik, Universitas Medan Area, Kota Medan, Indonesia.

Email Korespondensi: khairunnisah@staff.uma.ac.id

ABSTRACT

Indonesian politics has undergone transformative shifts since the fall of Suharto's New Order regime in 1998, ushering in an era of democratic consolidation marked by multiparty competition, direct elections, and sweeping decentralization. This study employs a systematic literature review (SLR) methodology to synthesize and critically analyze scholarly works published between 2000 and 2024 on the key dimensions of Indonesian political dynamics, including democratization trajectories, executive-legislative relations, the role of political parties, decentralization and regional autonomy, and the challenges of institutional reform. Drawing from peer-reviewed journal articles, books, dissertations, and policy documents sourced from Google Scholar, JSTOR, Scopus, and national repositories, this review identifies persistent structural tensions in Indonesia's democratic governance: the fragmentation of political parties, the commodification of electoral processes, the patrimonial character of elite coalitions, and the incomplete institutionalization of horizontal accountability mechanisms. The findings suggest that while Indonesia has achieved significant democratic milestones, its democracy remains substantively constrained by entrenched patronage networks, weak rule of law enforcement, and the unresolved tension between national cohesion and regional aspirations. This review contributes a conceptual framework for understanding Indonesian political stability and conflict as outcomes of negotiated power settlements among elite actors within a decentralized but still centralist-tending institutional architecture.

Keywords: Indonesian politics, Democratization, Decentralization, Political parties.

ABSTRAK

Politik Indonesia telah mengalami perubahan transformatif sejak runtuhnya rezim Orde Baru Soeharto pada tahun 1998, yang membuka era konsolidasi demokrasi yang ditandai dengan kompetisi multipartai, pemilihan umum langsung, dan desentralisasi besar-besaran. Studi ini menggunakan metode tinjauan literatur sistematis (systematic literature review/SLR) untuk mensintesis dan menganalisis secara kritis karya-karya akademik yang diterbitkan antara tahun 2000 hingga 2024 mengenai dimensi-dimensi utama dinamika politik Indonesia, meliputi lintasan demokratisasi, hubungan eksekutif-legislatif, peran partai politik, desentralisasi dan otonomi daerah, serta tantangan reformasi kelembagaan. Dengan merujuk pada artikel jurnal terulas sejawat (peer-reviewed), buku, disertasi, dan dokumen kebijakan yang bersumber dari Google Scholar, JSTOR, Scopus, dan repositori nasional, tinjauan ini mengidentifikasi ketegangan struktural yang terus berlangsung dalam tata kelola demokrasi Indonesia: fragmentasi partai politik, komodifikasi proses pemilu, karakter patrimonial koalisi elite, serta belum lengkapnya pelebagaan mekanisme akuntabilitas horizontal. Temuan penelitian menunjukkan bahwa meskipun Indonesia telah mencapai sejumlah tonggak demokrasi yang penting, demokrasinya masih dibatasi secara substantif oleh jaringan patronase yang mengakar, lemahnya penegakan supremasi hukum, serta ketegangan yang belum terselesaikan antara kohesi nasional dan aspirasi kedaerahan. Tinjauan ini menyumbangkan kerangka konseptual untuk memahami stabilitas dan konflik politik Indonesia sebagai hasil dari kesepakatan kekuasaan yang dinegosiasikan di antara para aktor elite dalam arsitektur kelembagaan yang terdesentralisasi namun masih cenderung sentralistik.

Kata kunci: Politik Indonesia, Demokratisasi, Desentralisasi, Partai politik.

INTRODUCTION

Indonesia stands as one of Southeast Asia's most consequential democratic experiments. With a population of over 270 million spread across 17,000 islands and governed through a decentralized administrative architecture comprising 34 provinces, 416 districts, and 98 cities, Indonesia's political landscape is among the most complex in the developing world (Aspinall & Berenschot, 2019). The collapse of Suharto's authoritarian New Order (Orde Baru) in May 1998 unleashed a cascade of political reforms that fundamentally restructured the relationship between the state and society, between central and regional governments, and between executive and legislative branches of power.

The post-1998 reform era, commonly referred to as the Reformasi period, inaugurated a series of constitutional amendments (1999–2002) that transformed Indonesia from a quasi-parliamentary authoritarian system into a presidential democracy with a directly elected president, a bicameral legislature, a Constitutional Court, and directly elected regional executives. These institutional innovations created new arenas for political contestation while simultaneously generating novel forms of conflict and instability (Sherlock, 2010; Mietzner, 2013).

Despite its democratic achievements—Indonesia was ranked as the world's third-largest democracy—political scientists have documented persistent pathologies in its democratic governance. These include the dominance of money politics and transactional electoral behavior (Aspinall & Berenschot, 2019), the personalization of political parties at the expense of programmatic platforms (Ufen, 2008), endemic patronage and clientelism in the distribution of state resources (Hadiz, 2010), and recurrent conflicts between executive and legislative institutions at both national and subnational levels (Mietzner, 2016).

This article presents a systematic literature review of scholarly works addressing Indonesian political dynamics from 1998 to 2024. The primary objectives are: (1) to map the key thematic clusters in the existing literature; (2) to identify the dominant theoretical frameworks employed by scholars; (3) to synthesize empirical findings regarding the major drivers and constraints of Indonesian democratic governance; and (4) to identify gaps in the current literature and propose directions for future research. This review is organized around five thematic clusters: democratization, executive-legislative relations, political parties, decentralization, and institutional reform.

METHOD

This study adopts a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) methodology as outlined by Tranfield, Denyer, and Smart (2003) and adapted for political science research by Petticrew and Roberts (2006). SLR differs from traditional narrative reviews in its commitment to replicability, transparency, and comprehensiveness in the identification, selection, and synthesis of relevant literature. The review protocol followed three core stages: (1) identification of sources, (2) screening and eligibility assessment, and (3) synthesis and analysis. A comprehensive search was conducted across the following databases: Scopus, Google Scholar, JSTOR, Taylor & Francis Online, SAGE Journals, and the Indonesian national repository GARUDA (Garba Rujukan Digital). Search terms included: 'Indonesian politics,' 'Indonesia democracy,' 'decentralization Indonesia,' 'political parties Indonesia,' 'executive-legislative relations Indonesia,' 'regional autonomy Indonesia,' 'reformasi,' 'oligarchy Indonesia,' and 'political conflict Indonesia.' Boolean operators (AND, OR) were used to refine searches. The temporal scope was limited to publications from 1998 to 2024, capturing the full arc of the post-Suharto period.

Inclusion criteria: (a) peer-reviewed journal articles, book chapters, monographs, dissertations, and policy papers; (b) English and Indonesian language publications; (c) empirical studies, theoretical analyses, and comparative works with substantial Indonesian case material; (d) publication within the 1998–2024 timeframe. Exclusion criteria: (a) opinion pieces and journalistic articles without academic citation; (b) studies focused exclusively on economic or sociological dimensions without political analysis; (c) publications not peer-reviewed or lacking methodological transparency. A total of 412 sources were initially identified; after screening for relevance and quality, 87 sources were included in the final synthesis. The analytical synthesis employs a thematic coding approach. Sources were coded

according to five primary thematic clusters derived inductively from the literature: (1) Democratization and Democratic Consolidation; (2) Executive-Legislative Relations and Institutional Conflict; (3) Political Parties and Electoral Politics; (4) Decentralization and Regional Autonomy; and (5) Institutional Reform and the Rule of Law. Cross-cutting themes—including oligarchy, patronage, clientelism, and identity politics—were coded as secondary clusters applied across all five primary themes.

DISCUSSION

The literature on Indonesian politics draws from a rich and contested array of theoretical traditions. The dominant frameworks can be grouped into four broad schools: transitology and democratic consolidation theory, power structure and oligarchy theory, institutionalism, and postcolonial/cultural approaches. Transitology, associated with scholars such as O'Donnell, Schmitter, and Whitehead (1986), dominated the early post-1998 literature. Works in this tradition examined Indonesia's transition from authoritarianism through lenses of elite pacts, negotiated transitions, and the sequencing of institutional reforms (Liddle, 2000; Sukma, 2003). While transitology provided useful diagnostic tools, critics argued it was insufficiently attentive to the structural persistence of New Order patronage networks in shaping the post-reform political order (Robison & Hadiz, 2004).

The oligarchy thesis, developed most systematically by Vedi Hadiz (2010) and Jeffrey Winters (2011), offers a structural-materialist explanation for the character of Indonesian democracy. Hadiz argues that decentralization, far from dispersing power to ordinary citizens, enabled predatory oligarchic networks to extend their reach from Jakarta to provincial capitals and district governments. Winters' typology of oligarchy frames Indonesian elites as 'sultanist oligarchs' whose primary interest is defending their material wealth through political control. This framework has been highly influential in explaining the persistence of money politics, vote buying, and the dominance of business interests in legislative politics.

Institutionalist approaches, drawing from both historical and rational-choice institutionalism (North, 1990; Mahoney & Thelen, 2010), emphasize the role of formal institutions—constitutional design, electoral rules, party systems—in shaping political outcomes. Marcus Mietzner's (2013, 2016) comparative work on Indonesian presidentialism exemplifies this approach, analyzing how the combination of a directly elected president and a highly fragmented legislature creates persistent governance challenges. Political settlement theory, developed by Di John and Putzel (2009) and Leftwich (2010), has also been applied to Indonesia to explain why certain institutional reforms succeed while others stagnate or reverse.

Democratization and Democratic Consolidation

The post-1998 democratization literature on Indonesia exhibits a clear trajectory from optimism to ambivalence. Early works (Liddle, 2000; Kingsbury, 2002) celebrated Indonesia's rapid institutional transformation—four rounds of constitutional amendments, the creation of the Constitutional Court and the Judicial Commission, and the introduction of direct presidential elections in 2004—as evidence of genuine democratic progress. Nordholt and van Klinken (2007) documented a 'return of the local' through regional elections (*pilkada*), interpreting it as democratic deepening. However, by the 2010s, a more critical literature emerged. Aspinall (2010) and Mietzner (2012) documented the rise of 'democratic regression' indicators: restrictions on freedom of expression, increased use of blasphemy laws, weakening of civil society organizations, and the erosion of press freedom under presidents who themselves were democratic in electoral origin. The concept of 'illiberal democracy' (Zakaria, 1997) was applied to Indonesia with increasing frequency (Ufen, 2019). Slater and Simmons (2013) introduced the concept of 'democratic careening' to describe Indonesia's pattern of reform advances followed by partial reversals, driven by elite accommodation rather than programmatic commitment to liberal democratic norms.

Executive-Legislative Relations and Institutional Conflict

A substantial body of literature examines the structural tensions between executive and legislative institutions in Indonesia's presidential system. Mainwaring (1993) and Shugart and Carey (1992) established the theoretical baseline: presidential systems with multiparty legislatures are prone to governance deadlocks because the executive cannot rely on stable legislative majorities. Indonesia's post-1998 system epitomizes this challenge: the country has a directly elected president operating in a multiparty legislative environment where no single party commands a majority.

Sherlock (2010) and Ziegenhain (2008) documented how Indonesian presidents from Megawati to Joko Widodo have managed legislative fragmentation through 'big-tent' coalition strategies that prioritize political survival over programmatic coherence. These oversized coalitions generate a distinctive dynamic: they prevent executive-legislative gridlock at the national level but at the cost of policy incoherence and the entrenchment of transactional politics. The patronage cost of maintaining such coalitions—in the form of cabinet positions, budget allocations, and regulatory favors—has been analyzed by Sherlock (2010) as a systemic constraint on effective governance.

At the subnational level, the literature documents a similar pattern. Mietzner (2014) and Buehler (2016) showed that regional executives elected through pilkada frequently face hostile DPRD (regional legislatures), particularly when the winning candidate lacked strong coalition support prior to election. This subnational executive-legislative conflict has manifested in the widespread use of parliamentary instruments—interpellation rights, inquiry rights (*hak angket*), and no-confidence procedures—as tools of political pressure rather than democratic accountability. The normalization of these instruments as bargaining chips within patronage networks has been identified as a significant constraint on regional governance quality.

Political Parties and Electoral Politics

Indonesian political parties have been characterized by three persistent features in the scholarly literature: weak institutionalization, personalism, and the primacy of electoral over programmatic functions. Ufen (2008) demonstrated that Indonesian parties exhibit low levels of party system institutionalization (PSI) compared to other Asian democracies, with parties serving primarily as vehicles for elite advancement rather than as ideological or programmatic organizations. The distinction between 'secular-nationalist' and 'Islamist' parties, while analytically convenient, has increasingly blurred as competitive pressures push parties toward centrist religious positioning (Pepinsky, Liddle, & Mujani, 2012).

The commodification of electoral politics through vote buying has received extensive empirical documentation. Aspinall and Berenschot (2019) conducted a nationwide study of vote buying in Indonesian elections, finding that the practice is near-universal but that its effectiveness varies significantly across social and demographic contexts. They introduced the concept of 'democracy for sale' to describe Indonesia's electoral economy, in which the exchange of material goods for votes has become a normalized feature of democratic competition rather than an aberration. Hicken (2011) situates this within the broader comparative literature on clientelism, arguing that Indonesia represents a 'ballot box clientelism' variant in which electoral uncertainty drives elite investment in vote-buying networks.

Decentralization, Regional Autonomy, and Local Politics

Indonesia's decentralization, enacted through Laws No. 22 and 25 of 1999 and subsequently revised through Law No. 32 of 2004 and Law No. 23 of 2014, is among the most sweeping in the world in terms of the scope of powers devolved to subnational governments. The decentralization literature exhibits a clear empirical-normative tension: while decentralization was intended to bring government closer to citizens and break up the centralized patronage networks of the New Order, scholars have found that in many cases it simply relocated these networks from Jakarta to provincial and district capitals (Hadiz, 2010; Robison & Hadiz, 2004).

Van Klinken (2009) introduced the concept of small-town wars to describe how decentralization unleashed violent competition among local identity entrepreneurs seeking to capture newly empowered regional governments. Aspinall (2011) extended this analysis to examine how decentralization interacted with identity politics in resource-rich regions, generating distinctive forms of resource nationalism at the local level. Buehler (2016) showed how Islamic law (Sharia) regulations proliferated at the district level through a combination of piety signaling, identity mobilization, and patronage politics—a phenomenon he termed the politics of Shari'a.

Institutional Reform and the Rule of Law

The reform of Indonesia's legal and judicial institutions has been a central preoccupation of both practitioners and scholars. The creation of the Constitutional Court (Mahkamah Konstitusi) in 2003 was initially celebrated as a transformative institutional innovation. Hendrianto (2018) documented the Constitutional Court's early activism in striking down unconstitutional legislation and expanding rights protections, arguing that the Court represented a genuine departure from the judicial subservience characteristic of the New Order. However, subsequent scholarship has documented a pattern of 'judicialization of politics' in which courts become arenas for political conflict resolution rather than neutral legal arbiters (Butt, 2015).

The Corruption Eradication Commission (Komisi Pemberantasan Korupsi/KPK) has attracted perhaps the most sustained scholarly attention as a site of institutional conflict between reformist and anti-reformist forces. Schütte (2012) and McLeod (2008) documented the KPK's institutional development and its periodic confrontations with the national police, the legislature, and the executive—confrontations that reveal the depth of resistance to meaningful anti-corruption enforcement among established political elites. The 2019 revision of the KPK Law, which critics argued substantially weakened the agency's independence, exemplifies what Butt and Lindsey (2018) term the 'political economy of anti-corruption reform' in Indonesia.

Across the five thematic clusters reviewed above, three cross-cutting analytical themes emerge with particular consistency: the persistence of patronage and oligarchic power, the instrumentalization of democratic institutions, and the structural tension between national integration and regional aspirations.

First, the persistence of patronage networks constitutes the most robust finding across the literature. Whether the analysis focuses on electoral politics (Aspinall & Berenschot, 2019), party politics (Ufen, 2008), decentralization (Hadiz, 2010), or executive-legislative relations (Sherlock, 2010), the dominant explanation for political outcomes consistently centers on the distribution of material resources through personal networks of obligation and reciprocity. This finding aligns with the broader comparative literature on democratic backsliding (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018) and the political economy of weak institutionalization (North, 1990), suggesting that Indonesia's democratic pathologies are not exceptional but rather represent a variant of a recognizable pattern in developing-world democracies.

Second, the literature consistently documents the instrumentalization of formally democratic institutions—elections, legislatures, courts, anti-corruption agencies—for particularistic rather than public purposes. This does not mean these institutions are irrelevant; rather, as Slater (2010) argues, they constitute 'protection rackets' that provide selective benefits to those with the organizational resources to navigate them. The Constitutional Court's adjudication of electoral disputes, for instance, has both reinforced democratic norms and created opportunities for elite forum-shopping in which losing electoral contestants seek judicial relief as an extension of political bargaining.

Third, the tension between national unity and regional diversity remains a structurally unresolved dimension of Indonesian politics. Decentralization has empowered regional identities and interests without providing adequate mechanisms for managing inter-regional resource conflicts or preventing the capture of regional institutions by predatory elites. The 'special autonomy' arrangements granted to Papua, Aceh, and Yogyakarta represent attempted solutions to the most acute expressions of this

tension, but scholars have documented their limitations in addressing underlying grievances (Aspinall, 2005).

Despite the richness of the existing literature, several significant gaps remain. First, the literature is heavily skewed toward national-level politics and a relatively small number of regions (particularly Java, Aceh, and Papua). Systematic comparative research on political dynamics across Indonesia's 34 provinces remains rare, limiting the generalizability of findings about decentralization and local democracy. Second, the literature on executive-legislative relations at the subnational level is substantially thinner than that at the national level, despite the fact that most Indonesian citizens interact primarily with subnational governance institutions. Third, intersectional analyses of how gender, ethnicity, religion, and class interact in shaping political access and representation remain underdeveloped compared to monothematic accounts. Fourth, the impact of digital media and social media on Indonesian political dynamics—including disinformation, political polarization, and identity mobilization—is an emerging area where theoretical and empirical development is needed urgently.

CONCLUSION

This systematic literature review has synthesized 25 years of scholarly research on Indonesian political dynamics across five thematic domains. The overarching finding is one of structured ambivalence: Indonesia has achieved remarkable democratic milestones—the peaceful transfer of executive power, the institutionalization of competitive elections, the establishment of judicial review and regional autonomy—while simultaneously failing to translate these institutional achievements into the substantive democratization of power and resources. The persistence of patronage, the instrumentalization of institutions, and the unresolved tension between integration and diversity constitute the structural parameters within which Indonesian political actors—whether presidents, legislators, party leaders, regional executives, or civil society organizations—must navigate.

For scholars, this review underscores the analytical value of approaches that integrate institutional analysis with political economy perspectives, attending simultaneously to the formal rules of democratic governance and the informal networks through which power is actually exercised. For practitioners and policymakers, it highlights the importance of strengthening horizontal accountability institutions—legislative oversight, judicial independence, anti-corruption enforcement—not as technical-bureaucratic reforms but as political projects that require sustained coalition-building among actors with genuine stakes in democratic governance. Indonesia's democratic trajectory remains open; the findings of this review suggest that its direction will be determined not by institutional design alone, but by the political settlements forged among its diverse and contending elite actors.

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