

12-02-2026

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To cite this article: Asetya, D. R. (2026). Institutional transformation and governance in Indonesia: Democracy, decentralization, and the persistence of oligarchy. *Journal of International Political Economy and Strategy*, 1 (1), 1–9.

<https://journal.privietlab.org/index.php/JIPES/article/view/1796>

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Institutional transformation and governance in Indonesia: Democracy, decentralization, and the persistence of oligarchy

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Received 1 December 2025

Revised 26 January 2026

Accepted 30 January 2026

ABSTRACT

This paper undertakes a systematic examination of Indonesia's political economy, with particular emphasis on the trajectory of institutional transformation and governance since the collapse of Suharto's New Order regime in 1998. Drawing on comparative political economy, historical institutionalism, and contemporary empirical scholarship, the study analyzes how Indonesia's transition from authoritarian rule to electoral democracy has produced a complex, contested, and often contradictory institutional landscape. The paper identifies four interconnected dynamics that define contemporary Indonesian governance: the partial consolidation of democratic institutions, the deepening of administrative decentralization under the Big Bang reforms of 1999-2001, the persistence of oligarchic power networks that have adapted to electoral competition, and the uneven progress of bureaucratic reform and anti-corruption governance. The analysis reveals that while Indonesia has achieved significant milestones—including the institutionalization of free and fair elections, constitutional reform, and the direct election of regional executives—these gains remain fragile in the face of money politics, elite accommodation, and weak rule-of-law enforcement. The paper argues that Indonesia exemplifies a form of 'oligarchic democracy' in which competitive elections coexist with entrenched structures of patrimonial power, resource capture, and regulatory arbitrage. Implications for developmental state capacity and long-run governance outcomes are discussed, and a research agenda for comparative Southeast Asian political economy is proposed.

Keywords: political economy; democracy; decentralization; oligarchy; governance; institutional reform; reformation

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1. INTRODUCTION

Indonesia stands as one of the most consequential political economy cases in the developing world. As the fourth most populous nation on earth, a G20 member, and Southeast Asia's largest economy, its institutional trajectory carries regional and global significance. Since the fall of President Suharto in May 1998—a moment that precipitated what [Aspinall \(2005\)](#) terms a 'moment of democratic opening'—Indonesia has undergone a profound reconfiguration of its political institutions, administrative architecture, and governance norms. Yet two and a half decades after Reformasi (the Indonesian term for this democratic reform process), the country's political economy remains characterized by deep tensions between democratic aspiration and oligarchic resilience.

The study of Indonesia's political economy sits at a productive intersection of several scholarly traditions. Comparative democratization scholars have interrogated the conditions under which post-authoritarian transitions produce durable democratic institutions ([Linz & Stepan, 1996](#); [O'Donnell & Schmitter, 1986](#)). Historical institutionalists have examined how path dependencies embedded during decades of authoritarian governance shape the capacity and incentives of post-transition actors ([Mahoney & Thelen, 2010](#); [Pierson, 2004](#)). Political economists in the tradition of [Robison and Hadiz \(2004\)](#) have demonstrated that the real locus of analytical attention lies not in formal institutional design but in the social forces—specifically oligarchic networks of capital and political power—that colonize, distort, and instrumentalize those institutions.

This paper synthesizes these analytical frameworks to offer a structured account of Indonesia's political economy under democracy. The central argument is threefold. First, Indonesia has successfully institutionalized the procedural scaffolding of democracy—regular competitive elections, constitutional checks and balances, and a nominally independent judiciary—yet falls short of the substantive democratic ideal due to money politics, institutional capture, and suppression of civil society oversight. Second, the Big Bang decentralization reforms of 1999-2001, while redistributing administrative authority to districts and municipalities, have often reproduced rather than dismantled local oligarchies, creating a fragmented and internally competitive landscape of local elite power. Third, anti-corruption and bureaucratic reform efforts—including the establishment of the Corruption Eradication Commission (Komisi Pemberantasan Korupsi or KPK) in 2002—have yielded partial gains that remain vulnerable to political backlash and institutional rollback.

The paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 situates contemporary Indonesian governance in the context of the New Order's institutional legacy. Section 3 analyzes the institutional reconfiguration of the Reformasi era. Section 4 examines the democratic consolidation process and its limits. Section 5 unpacks the political consequences of decentralization. Section 6 addresses the interface of state-business relations and oligarchic power. Section 7 evaluates bureaucratic reform and anti-corruption trajectories. Section 8 concludes with theoretical implications and a research agenda.

2. THE NEW ORDER LEGACY: INSTITUTIONAL FOUNDATIONS OF AUTHORITARIAN GOVERNANCE

Any rigorous analysis of contemporary Indonesian governance must begin with the institutional inheritance of the New Order in 1966-1998. Suharto's developmental authoritarian regime constructed a distinctive political-economic architecture that combined technocratic economic management, military territorial command, corporatist interest organization, and personalistic patronage distribution. This combination produced what [Crouch \(1988\)](#) described as a 'patrimonial state' in which formal bureaucratic structures were systematically subordinated to informal networks of presidential favor and resource allocation.

The New Order's foundational institutional arrangements were rooted in the doctrine of *dwifungsi*—the dual social-political function of the Indonesian Armed Forces (ABRI/TNI)—which legitimized military occupation of civilian bureaucratic and legislative positions. The political party system was deliberately constricted: Golkar, the regime's electoral vehicle, was not formally a party but a

'functional group' organization; two licensed opposition parties (the Indonesian Democratic Party and the Development Unity Party) were permitted to exist but effectively emasculated. Elections were held on a regular five-year cycle, but their outcomes were managed through state apparatus, military intimidation, and electoral manipulation (Liddle, 1996).

The economic architecture of the New Order rested on a dual strategy: macroeconomic stabilization and growth managed by the so-called 'Berkeley Mafia' of U.S.-trained technocrats on one hand, and a vast patronage economy centered on presidential cronies, Chinese-Indonesian conglomerates, and Suharto family businesses on the other. Robison (1986) was among the first to document the emergence of an Indonesian capitalist class structurally dependent upon state contracts, licensing, and regulatory protection. By the late 1990s, the interlocking of political authority and business interests was so extensive that the Asian Financial Crisis of 1997-1998 did not merely expose macroeconomic vulnerabilities but revealed the fundamental fragility of an institutional order built upon a single personalistic locus of power.

The collapse of the New Order in May 1998, triggered by a convergence of economic crisis, student protest, and elite defection, created what historical institutionalists call a critical juncture—a moment of institutional indeterminacy in which path-dependent constraints are temporarily loosened and new institutional configurations become possible (Capoccia & Kelemen, 2007). However, as subsequent scholarship has demonstrated, the social forces that had prospered under the New Order did not evaporate with Suharto's departure; they adapted, reconfigured, and found new vehicles for the reproduction of their power within the emerging democratic order.

3. REFORMATION AND INSTITUTIONAL RECONFIGURATION (1998 – 2004)

The Reformasi period—roughly spanning the presidencies of B.J. Habibie (1998-1999), Abdurrahman Wahid (1999-2001), and Megawati Sukarnoputri (2001-2004)—constituted an era of intensive formal institutional reconstruction. Four sets of constitutional amendments (1999-2002) fundamentally redrew the architecture of Indonesian governance. The amendments abolished the constitutional status of the military's legislative seats, transformed the upper chamber People's Consultative Assembly (Majelis Permusyawaratan Rakyat, MPR) from a supreme deliberative body into a bicameral legislature, established a Constitutional Court (Mahkamah Konstitusi), and—most consequentially—introduced direct presidential elections beginning in 2004.

Mietzner (2008) characterizes this constitutional redesign as one of the most ambitious exercises in democratic institutional engineering undertaken in the post-Cold War developing world. The introduction of direct presidential elections in particular represented a structural break from the New Order's managed parliamentarism. By creating a popular mandate for executive authority, direct elections in principle reduce the capacity of legislative coalitions to hold presidents hostage, though—as the subsequent analysis will demonstrate—they have simultaneously incentivized the monetization of electoral competition.

The formation of new political parties following the lifting of restrictions on political organization produced a highly fragmented multiparty system. In the 1999 legislative elections, 48 parties competed; in subsequent cycles, the number was reduced through electoral threshold legislation, but party system fragmentation—measured by the Effective Number of Parliamentary Parties—has consistently exceeded five, necessitating coalition governments that introduce transactional dynamics into cabinet formation (Sherlock, 2009). This fragmentation has had important implications for governability and for the capacity of executive leadership to pursue coherent policy reform agendas.

The institutional reconfiguration of the Reformasi era also included the dismantling of the corporatist labor and business organizations of the New Order, the liberalization of the press, and the abolition of restrictions on civil society organization. These changes produced a vibrant, if volatile, pluralism in public discourse. However, as Hadiz (2010) argues in his landmark study of local power, these formal institutional openings were systematically colonized by the same networks of predatory capital and

political patronage that had defined the New Order, now operating through democratic channels. The forms of politics changed; the underlying social relations of power proved considerably more durable.

4. DEMOCRATIC CONSOLIDATION AND ITS LIMITS

Indonesia's democratic trajectory from 2004 onward has been widely analyzed through the lens of consolidation theory. By the minimalist criteria of Schumpeterian democracy—the regularity of competitive elections, peaceful transfers of power, and universal suffrage—Indonesia qualifies without serious dispute as a democracy (Przeworski et al., 2000). The 2004 elections, regarded as the first fully free and fair national contest, were followed by successive democratic cycles in 2009, 2014, 2019, and 2024, none of which produced a military coup, electoral breakdown, or systematic incumbent manipulation sufficient to overturn results. This track record represents a remarkable achievement for the world's largest Muslim-majority democracy.

However, the substantive quality of Indonesian democracy—measured in terms of rule of law, accountability, civil liberties, and horizontal checks on executive power—has been far more contested. Freedom House has consistently rated Indonesia as 'Partly Free,' and the V-Dem project's Liberal Democracy Index identifies a downward trend in liberal democratic quality since approximately 2014 (Lührmann et al., 2019). Scholars have attributed this democratic recession to several converging dynamics, including the re-militarization of civilian governance, the restriction of civil society space through blasphemy laws and cybercrime legislation, the political weaponization of anti-corruption instruments, and the elite accommodation strategies pursued by successive presidents.

Slater (2004) introduced the influential concept of 'accountability politics' to describe the mechanisms through which the Indonesian democratic system, while procedurally robust, has failed to generate reliable mechanisms of vertical and horizontal accountability. Presidential elections create incentives for leaders to build broad, cross-ideological coalitions that neutralize potential opposition rather than represent coherent programmatic agendas. The result, Slater argues, is a form of 'promiscuous powersharing' in which virtually all significant political forces are incorporated into the governing coalition, leaving no credible opposition to enforce accountability through electoral or legislative mechanisms.

The presidency of Joko Widodo (Jokowi, 2014-2024) exemplifies this dynamic. Elected on a reformist, anti-elite platform in 2014, Jokowi progressively accommodated the established oligarchic networks he had initially positioned himself against, appointing business conglomerates and former New Order officials to cabinet positions and acquiescing in the political weakening of the KPK through the 2019 revision of its founding law (Mietzner, 2020). His alliance with former military general and oligarchic businessman Prabowo Subianto—initially his main electoral rival in 2014 and 2019—who subsequently succeeded him as president in 2024, illustrates the centripetal logic of elite accommodation in Indonesia's oligarchic democracy.

The political role of Islam represents a further complicating dimension of democratic consolidation. Indonesia's Islamic organizations—Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah, with a combined membership estimated at over 100 million—have historically been central pillars of civil society pluralism and democratic moderation. However, the mobilization of identity politics by hardline Islamist groups, particularly during the 2016-2017 gubernatorial campaign in Jakarta against Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (Ahok), demonstrated the vulnerability of Indonesian democracy to sectarian polarization (Fealy, 2016). The instrumentalization of religious sentiment by political elites for competitive electoral advantage represents a significant and underappreciated threat to democratic quality.

5. DECENTRALIZATION, FISCAL FEDERALISM, AND REGIONAL GOVERNANCE

Few post-authoritarian transitions in the developing world have matched the scope and speed of Indonesia's administrative decentralization. Laws 22 and 25 of 1999, implemented from January 2001, devolved substantial administrative, fiscal, and political authority from the central government to Indonesia's approximately 500 districts and municipalities (kabupaten and kota). Fiscal transfers expanded

dramatically: the regional share of central government revenues allocated to subnational units increased from approximately six percent in the late New Order to over thirty percent by the mid-2000s (World Bank, 2003). The introduction of direct elections for district heads (pilkada) from 2005 further consolidated local political autonomy.

The theoretical rationale for decentralization drew on both efficiency and accountability arguments. The fiscal federalism literature in the tradition of Tiebout (1956) and Oates (1972) predicts that decentralization improves allocative efficiency by matching public goods provision to local preferences and creating competitive pressures among jurisdictions. From an accountability perspective, proximity between citizens and their elected officials was expected to reduce information asymmetries and enhance democratic responsiveness. Indonesia's decentralization was also driven by centrifugal political pressures: in the immediate post-Suharto context, a demonstrable commitment to regional autonomy was regarded as essential for national cohesion in the face of separatist pressures in Aceh, Papua, and the Maluku Islands.

Empirical assessments of the governance outcomes of Indonesian decentralization have, however, been decidedly mixed. On the positive side, scholars have documented improvements in primary health care provision, basic education access, and local infrastructure in selected regions, particularly where pre-existing stocks of social capital and capable bureaucracies existed (Hofman & Kaiser, 2006). The direct election of local executives has also produced a number of reformist leaders—sometimes described as 'local heroes'—who have leveraged popular mandates to pursue genuine governance improvements, with Jokowi's own tenure as Solo mayor (2005-2012) frequently cited as an exemplar (Tomsa & Ufen, 2013).

On the debit side, decentralization has been associated with the proliferation of local regulatory barriers that impede economic integration, the fragmentation of public services across jurisdictions with highly unequal fiscal capacity, and—most significantly from a political economy perspective—the emergence of 'local strongmen' (bossism) who have captured regional governments for private accumulation. Hadiz (2010) demonstrates that decentralization did not democratize power structures so much as territorialize them: political-business networks that had operated at the national level under the New Order reconstituted themselves at the provincial and district level, exploiting new regulatory and licensing powers to extract rents from natural resources, property development, and public procurement. The creation of new administrative units (pemekaran, or 'blossoming')—from 292 districts in 1999 to over 500 by 2014—has compounded fiscal fragmentation while providing additional rent-seeking opportunities.

6. STATE-BUSINESS RELATIONS AND THE PERSISTENCE OF OLIGARCHIC POWER

The analytical framework most influential in contemporary scholarship on Indonesian political economy is the oligarchy thesis advanced by Robison and Hadiz (2004) and subsequently developed by Winters (2011). These scholars argue that the central dynamic of Indonesian politics is not the competition between democratic and authoritarian logics, nor the ethnic or religious fragmentation of national identity, but the reproduction of concentrated wealth power across different regime forms. Oligarchs—defined by Winters (2011) as 'actors who personally command or control massive concentrations of material resources'—adapt to democratic competition not by yielding their power, but by investing in electoral machinery, party organizations, media ownership, and judicial influence to protect their material interests.

The structural continuities between New Order and post-New Order business-state relations are empirically well-documented. The major Chinese-Indonesian conglomerates that dominated the New Order economy—including the Salim Group, the Sinar Mas Group, and the Lippo Group—survived the post-1998 corporate restructuring process largely intact, albeit with reconfigured ownership structures. New oligarchic actors emerged through the privatization of formerly state-controlled enterprises and the exploitation of regulatory rents in the mining, coal, palm oil, and telecommunications sectors. The Indonesian Forbes 50 consistently reveals a concentration of wealth at the apex of the economy that is among the most extreme in the world relative to median income.

The mechanisms through which oligarchic power is reproduced in democratic Indonesia operate at multiple levels. At the national level, political parties function less as programmatic vehicles for organized social interests than as electoral machines funded by oligarchic patrons who expect regulatory and legislative returns on their investments (Aspinall & Berenschot, 2019). The extremely high costs of electoral competition—driven by the logic of money politics in which votes are traded for cash and material goods—create structural dependencies between candidates and their business backers. The Constitutional Court's 2008 ruling introducing the open-list proportional representation system intensified these dynamics by forcing candidates to finance individual campaigns rather than relying on party resources.

At the local level, the fusion of business and political power is often more naked. Research by Buehler (2016) and others has documented the systematic penetration of local government by business networks through the exploitation of *pilkada* institutions. Regional heads (*bupati*, *walikota*) increasingly emerge from or develop close relationships with local business dynasties, creating interlocking structures of political authority and economic privilege that are resistant to reform from within. The natural resource sectors—particularly coal, palm oil, and nickel—generate license and concession rents that constitute primary currencies of political finance in resource-rich regions.

7. BUREAUCRATIC REFORM, ANTI-CORRUPTION ARCHITECTURE, AND ACCOUNTABILITY DEFICITS

The question of bureaucratic capacity and anti-corruption governance sits at the heart of Indonesia's long-run development challenge. The New Order bureaucracy—structured on the Weberian model of formal rationality in form if not in function—operated as an instrument of patrimonial distribution rather than of public interest. Civil service appointments, promotions, and posting decisions were systematically colonized by political patronage, corruption networks, and military influence. The post-1998 reforms inherited this bureaucratic architecture with all of its pathologies.

The most consequential post-Reformasi anti-corruption institution is the Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK), established under Law 30 of 2002. The KPK was designed with a range of institutional features intended to insulate it from political interference: five-commissioner leadership structure with staggered terms, a mandate to use wiretapping and undercover operations, and exclusive jurisdiction over corruption cases involving state officials and state funds above a defined threshold. By the early 2010s, the KPK had established a remarkable conviction record, securing prosecutions against senior cabinet ministers, legislators, regional governors, judges, and police generals—a record unprecedented in Indonesian legal history (McLeod, 2011).

However, the KPK's effectiveness generated commensurate political backlash. The 'cicak versus buaya' (gecko versus crocodile) controversy of 2009, in which the National Police criminally charged KPK commissioners in apparent retaliation for anti-corruption investigations, revealed the institutional vulnerability of the Commission. The most consequential blow came with the 2019 revision of the KPK Law under the Jokowi administration, which introduced a supervisory board with powers to restrict the KPK's investigative methods—including wiretapping—and transferred the KPK's investigative staff to civil servant status, effectively exposing them to bureaucratic political pressures. International observers including Transparency International and the Indonesian Bar Association characterized the revision as a deliberate political weakening of the Commission.

Broader bureaucratic reform has proceeded through the Civil Service Law of 2014 and associated merit-based recruitment and promotion systems under the State Civil Apparatus Commission (KASN). While these reforms have produced measurable improvements in some dimensions of bureaucratic performance—including the expansion of e-government services and the introduction of performance-based pay—their impact on underlying rent-seeking culture and political patronage in appointment decisions has been limited. As Quah (2015) observes in his comparative study of Asian anti-corruption agencies, the effectiveness of reform bureaucracies depends critically on the political will of executive

leadership to enforce meritocratic norms against their own political coalitions—a condition systematically undermined in Indonesia by the logic of promiscuous coalition-building.

8. CONCLUSION

This paper has offered a structured political economy analysis of institutional transformation and governance in Indonesia, spanning the period from the collapse of the New Order in 1998 to the present. The analysis has identified four defining tensions in Indonesia's democratic political economy: between democratic form and oligarchic substance; between the decentralization of administrative authority and the territorial reproduction of elite capture; between the procedural consolidation of electoral democracy and the erosion of its liberal-accountability dimensions; and between anti-corruption institutional innovation and the political imperatives of coalition maintenance.

These tensions collectively produce what we term Indonesia's 'oligarchic democracy'—a regime type in which competitive elections, constitutional separation of powers, and a nominally free press coexist with entrenched concentrations of material power that systematically constrain the policy autonomy of elected officials and the effectiveness of accountability institutions. This characterization is not deterministic: Indonesia's democratic institutions have demonstrated remarkable resilience, surviving multiple crises—the 2008 global financial crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic, and recurrent episodes of sectarian polarization—without institutional breakdown. The space for reform and accountability that democracy provides, however circumscribed, is qualitatively different from the authoritarian closure of the New Order.

For comparative political economy, Indonesia's trajectory offers important theoretical lessons. First, it cautions against the teleological optimism of first-wave democratization theory, which assumed that competitive elections would progressively erode patronage networks and incentivize programmatic politics. The Indonesian evidence suggests that electoral competition, under conditions of weak rule of law and high campaign finance costs, can reproduce and even intensify oligarchic power by monetizing the democratic process. Second, it complicates the decentralization consensus of the 1990s international development discourse by demonstrating that administrative devolution without prior investment in local institutional capacity and accountability mechanisms can territorialize, rather than democratize, power structures.

Third, and perhaps most significantly, Indonesia's experience suggests that anti-corruption institutions—however well-designed—are insufficient without sustained political coalitions committed to their protection. The trajectory of the KPK from flagship reform institution to politically constrained agency illustrates that institutional design is a necessary but not sufficient condition for governance improvement; the social and political coalitions that sustain and defend reform institutions against backlash are equally essential determinants of long-run outcomes.

Future research should attend to at least three underexplored dimensions of Indonesian political economy. First, the political economy of the energy transition—specifically, how entrenched coal and palm oil oligarchies mediate Indonesia's commitments under the Paris Agreement—represents a domain of increasing urgency and analytic complexity. Second, the implications of Indonesia's digital economy growth for political mobilization, misinformation, and democratic accountability warrant systematic investigation. Third, comparative analysis of Indonesia's governance trajectory relative to other electoral autocracies and 'hybrid regimes' in Southeast Asia—particularly the Philippines, Thailand, and Malaysia—would illuminate the regional dimensions of the tension between democratic and oligarchic logics that this paper has identified as the central problematic of Indonesian political economy.

Ethical Approval

Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement

Not applicable

Authors' Contributions

Not applicable

Disclosure Statement

The author declares no potential conflict of interest.

Data Availability Statement

No primary dataset was generated for this study. All materials analyzed are available in the published sources cited in the reference list.

Funding

This research received no external funding.

Notes on Contributor

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