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Power Dispersion as a Barrier to Autocratization: The Paradox of Indonesia's Compromised Democracy

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Abstract

This article examines the persistence of Indonesia's democratic system as a constitutional state (*negara hukum*), where popular sovereignty operates within the limits of the 1945 Constitution (UUD 1945). Although recent tendencies, such as the expansion of executive authority, electoral narrowing, media consolidation, and suppression of dissent, have weakened democratic quality, these developments have occurred within Indonesia's distinctive constitutional framework, which combines democratic principles with Pancasila-based constitutional supremacy rather than liberal-constitutional doctrines. . Using a qualitative approach with descriptive-comparative analysis, this study draws on primary sources such as government policy documents and secondary materials, including academic journals and books, covering developments from 1999 to 2024. The analysis highlights two primary factors limiting autocratization: the redefinition of power distribution through the mechanisms of checks and balances and decentralization following the post-1998 constitutional reforms, and the continuous elite competition that prevents monopolization. Indonesian elites, while undermining democratic institutions to protect their privileges, remain committed to limited democracy as a framework for regulating elite rivalries. The constitutional design with term limits, separation of powers, and decentralization creates structural barriers against executive dominance. Furthermore, elite self-interest in maintaining political competition outweighs incentives for autocratic consolidation. Although civil society and public opinion contribute to resistance against backsliding, elite calculations are decisive. Thus, Indonesia's experience demonstrates that elite-driven democracies can endure gradual democratic decline without collapsing into authoritarianism, provided that competition remains institutionally guaranteed and power remains dispersed. This dynamic ensures a stable yet compromised democratic system, shaped more by pragmatic elite interests than by normative democratic commitments.

1. Introduction

Indonesia has not yet deviated into a constitutional system that violates the principles of popular sovereignty, separation of powers, and constitutional supremacy as enshrined in Article 1 paragraphs (2) and (3) of the 1945 Constitution—raising questions about the triggers of democratic backsliding and the country's resilience in preventing further erosion of these principles. [1]. A growing body of literature has examined the various dimensions of democratic decline in Indonesia in recent years, reflecting a slow but marked decline in Indonesia's democracy scores on various

1 Marcus Mietzner, "The Limits of Autocratisation in Indonesia: Power Dispersal and Elite Competition in a Compromised Democracy," *Third World Quarterly* 46, no. 2 (2024): 153–169, https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2024.2317970.

international indices [2]. Recent analyses confirm this trend. Likewise, Slater[3] points out that the personalization of executive power under Jokowi represents a regional example of "illiberal resilience". President Joko Widodo's decision to support his son Gibran's candidacy for vice president in 2024[4] , and to mobilize state resources to secure his election, raises further concerns about the health of Indonesian democracy [5]Of course, none of these patterns are unique to Indonesia. However, in this global development, Indonesia's democratic decline has its own weight.

This paradox echoes broader debates in comparative politics regarding *how democracies erode yet persist*. Levitsky and Way[6] describe such systems as "competitive authoritarian regimes", as systems in which formal democratic institutions exist, but incumbents gain unfair advantages through the abuse of state resources and restrictions on opposition. However, applying this framework to the Indonesian context requires careful adjustment, since Indonesia's political structure remains constitutionally grounded in the 1945 Constitution and its post-1998 amendments. Therefore, rather than labeling Indonesia outright as a "competitive authoritarian regime", this concept can be used as an analytical lens to examine tendencies or practices that may resemble competitive authoritarian characteristics, while still acknowledging the country's constitutional and legal framework. . Similarly, O'Donnell[7] conceptualizes *delegative democracy*, where elected leaders claim direct mandates from the people and bypass institutional checks. Indonesia's partial erosion of oversight and concentration of executive power exemplifies these patterns while still maintaining electoral legitimacy. As Linz and Stepan[8] emphasize, democracy requires both robust institutions and the "stateness" necessary for effective constraint—conditions that Indonesia partially fulfills through its post-1998 institutional framework. Tilly[9] further argues that state capacity and trust networks determine resilience during backsliding; Indonesia's fragmented but enduring power dispersion reflects this equilibrium between constraint and contestation.

In this regard, Tomsa[10] observed that Indonesia's democratic institutions persist because elite competition remains structured within constitutional boundaries, even if weakened. Mietzner[11] further shows that public opinion has served as a partial check, preventing full democratic breakdown. In the same period, unlike many Southeast Asian neighbors that experienced coups or democratic collapse, Indonesia retained democratic institutions. In contrast, Since the constitutional amendments took effect in 2004, Indonesia has experienced relatively stable presidential administrations. Although two presidents have completed their terms without impeachment, this should not be seen as the sole indicator of constitutional stability, as mechanisms for impeachment and constitutional oversight remain available under Articles 7A–7C of the 1945 Constitution[12]. Indonesia's current regime can best be described as a compromised but functionally solid democracy. Given the instability of democracy in the region,

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2 Radians Krisna Febriandy and Umaimah Wahid, "Kemunduran Demokrasi Di Indonesia: Analisis Laporan Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Institute 2024," *Kaganga: Jurnal Pendidikan Sejarah Dan Riset Sosial Humaniora* 7, no. 2 (2024): 1041–50, https://doi.org/10.31539/KAGANGA.V7I2.12392.

3 Iqra Anugrah, "The Illiberal Turn in Indonesian Democracy," *Asia-Pacific Journal* 18, no. 8 (2025), https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1017/S1557466020029691.

4 Muhammad Mutawalli Mukhlis et al., "Limitasi Demokrasi Hak Presiden Dalam Kampanye Politik Sebagai Penguatan Sistem Pemilihan Umum," *Jurnal Pembangunan Hukum Indonesia* 6, no. 2 (2024): 260–80.

5 Nuala Aisharani Kinasih Londo et al., "OLIGARKI DAN EROSI DEMOKRASI: KASUS INTERVENSI PENCALONAN GIBRAN RAKABUMING RAKA DALAM PUTUSAN MK PADA PILPRES 2024," *CAUSA: Jurnal Hukum Dan Kewarganegaraan* 8, no. 8 (2024), https://doi.org/doi.org/10.3783/causa.v2i9.2461.

6 Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes after the Cold War* (Cambridge University Press, 2010).

7 Guillermo A. O'Donell and Journal of Democracy, "Delegative Democracy," *Journal of Democracy* 5, no. 1 (1994): 55–69, https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.1994.0010.

8 Juan J. Linz and Alfred Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation: Southem Europe, South America, and Post-Communist Europe* (Maryland: The Jhons Hopkins University Press, 1996).

9 Charles Tilly, *Democracy*, 1st ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

10 Ken M. P. Setiawan and Dirk Tomsa, "Defending a Vulnerable yet Resilient Democracy: Civil Society Activism in Jokowi's Indonesia," *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 42, no. 3 (2023): 350–71, https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1177/18681034231209058.

11 Marcus Mietzner and Jun Honna, "Elite Opposition and Popular Rejection: The Failure of Presidential Term Limit Evasion in Widodo's Indonesia," *South East Asia Research* 31, no. 2 (2023): 115–31, https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1080/0967828X.2023.2236542.

12 Asran Jalal, "Sistem Presidensial Indonesia Masa Kepemimpinan Presiden Soesilo Bambang Yudhoyono (2004-2014)," *Populis : Jurnal Sosial Dan Humaniora* 6, no. 2 (2021): 166–84, https://doi.org/10.47313/pjsh.v6i2.1256.

we need to ask not only why democracy is declining in Indonesia – but why democracy persists?

A substantial body of recent literature extensively documents the various dimensions of democratic decline in Indonesia, indicating a gradual yet discernible deterioration in its democracy scores on international indices. Scholars have consistently highlighted trends such as increasing executive power and aggrandizement,[13] the narrowing of electoral space,[14] intensified pro-government media coverage, and the suppression of dissent.[15] Furthermore, analyses point to a rise in oligarchic influence on democratic processes and significant polarization driven by religious conservatism. These patterns, while observed globally, possess distinct characteristics in Indonesia, rendering its democratic trajectory particularly compelling for study, especially within the Asia-Pacific region and among Muslim-majority democracies grappling with similar challenges.

Indonesia's democratic trajectory has drawn significant scholarly attention because it illustrates both the promise and the fragility of post-authoritarian transitions. Since the fall of Suharto in 1998, the country has maintained multiparty elections and a constitutional framework, yet recent developments reveal worrying trends of democratic backsliding. The paradox is clear: while Indonesia continues to function as an electoral democracy, its institutions and civil liberties show signs of erosion. Yet, understanding why it has not collapsed into full authoritarianism requires examining the actual functioning and effectiveness of its constitutional and legal institutions as mandated by the 1945 Constitution and implementing laws, rather than relying solely on perception-based democracy indices. .

Taken together, these works paint a nuanced picture of Indonesian democracy as both eroding and enduring. However, a critical gap remains: most analyses focus on what has been lost—oversight, liberties, and institutional independence—while few explore how structural features such as the dispersal of power and ongoing elite competition actively prevent full autocratic consolidation. This study addresses that gap by arguing that Indonesia's post-1998 institutional design provides normative and procedural frameworks that, when interacting with elite rivalry and pragmatic calculations, have contributed to sustaining a compromised yet resilient democracy. However, this institutional design should not be understood as a deterministic barrier against autocratization, since its effectiveness depends on how constitutional mechanisms—such as judicial review by the Constitutional Court, impeachment procedures, and legislative oversight—are implemented and enforced in practice. .

Several recent studies shed light on this tension. Mujani and Liddle[16] argue that President Joko Widodo has increasingly sidelined democratic safeguards by consolidating executive authority, weakening legislative oversight, and restricting civil liberties, all while maintaining the façade of regular elections. A considerable body of scholarship has examined Indonesia's democratic decline, focusing on elite behavior, institutional weaknesses, and the persistence of illiberal practices. Complementing this, Asrinaldi[17] argues that even in an era of executive dominance under Jokowi, institutional veto players such as parliament and the Constitutional Court retained significant roles in constraining authoritarian excesses. Taken together, these studies show that while much has been written on executive aggrandizement, oligarchic entrenchment, and weakened civil liberties, none have specifically examined the dispersion of power as a deliberate and sustained mechanism against autocracy within the framework of a "constitutional democracy in the shadow of autocracy." By addressing this gap, the present study contributes a novel perspective on the resilience of Indonesia's democratic system.

At the party level, research by Kristiyanto, Arinanto, and Ghafur[18] on institutionalization and electoral democracy finds that Indonesia's parties remain resilient in contesting elections but lack programmatic depth, leaving them vulnerable to oligarchic influence while still sustaining competitive arenas. Complementing this, a

13 Asrinaldi, "Government Domination in Policy Making in the House of Representatives during the President Jokowi Era," *Asian Journal of Comparative Politics* 10, no. 3 (2025): 272–85, https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1177/20578911251326136.

14 Hasto Kristiyanto, Satya Arinanto, and Hanief Saha Ghafur, "Institutionalization and Party Resilience in Indonesian Electoral Democracy," *Heliyon* 9, no. 12 (2023), https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2023.e22919

15 M Zidny Ilman Nafian, "Evaluasi Sistem Pemilu Dan Ambang Batas Parlemen Di Indonesia," in *Prosiding Seminar Hukum Aktual Pelaksanaan Pemilu 2024: Evaluasi Dan Gagasan Ke Depan*, vol. 2 (2024), 15–26.

16 Saiful Mujani and R. William Liddle, "Indonesia: Jokowi Sidelines Democracy," *Journal of Democracy* 32, no. 4 (2021): 72–86, https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2021.0053.

17 Asrinaldi, "Government Domination in Policy Making in the House of Representatives during the President Jokowi Era."

18 Hasto Kristiyanto, Satya Arinanto, and Hanief Saha Ghafur, "Institutionalization and Party Resilience in Indonesian Electoral Democracy," *Heliyon* 9, no. 12 (2023), https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2023.e22919.

study by Pepinsky[19] on cleavages and institutions shows that dominant presidencies and oversized coalitions have weakened ideological competition and, in the Indonesian case, affected democratic quality. This tendency became evident during the 2024 election cycle, as reflected in the Constitutional Court's 2023 ruling that maintained the open-list proportional system (Decision No. 114/PUU-XX/2022) and in the legislative amendment that adjusted electoral district allocations through Law No. 7 of 2017. These legal and institutional developments illustrate how executive dominance and coalition politics influenced the configuration of electoral competition and the balance among state institutions. .

A recent study by Schäfer and Syam[20] traces how the public health emergency accelerated executive encroachment by expanding emergency powers, constraining accountability, and reducing civil liberties in the name of crisis response. However, it remains essential to distinguish between emergency measures that were temporary in nature and those subsequently incorporated into permanent legal frameworks. The study highlights that while some emergency powers lapsed once the crisis subsided, others were institutionalized through new regulations or judicial interpretations, thereby blurring the line between temporary necessity and enduring legal transformation. . The authors find that even though formal electoral and constitutional processes remained in place, indicators of democratic quality dropped more steeply during the pandemic, and that some institutional changes — once introduced in crisis mode — have lingered and reshaped governance beyond the immediate crisis. Yet, a study by Wadipalapa, Nainggolan, and Katharina[21] on legislative decline after the presidential election reveals how parliament has become increasingly subservient to the executive, weakening oversight while leaving formal structures intact.

A thorough examination of existing scholarship through Google and Google Scholar reveals a significant body of work addressing various autocratic features and democratic decline trends within Indonesia's political landscape. These studies extensively cover aspects such as executive aggrandizement, the narrowing of electoral space, and shifts towards illiberal practices.[22] However, this current research identifies a critical gap: while the division of power in Indonesia has been explored,[23] and certain constitutional checks against autocratic tendencies have been discussed,[24] there remains a distinct absence of studies that specifically examine the *dynamics of power dispersion as an active mechanism against autocracy* within the nuanced context of Indonesia's constitutional democracy—operating under conditions that exhibit tendencies of centralized or autocratic governance, though not constituting a formal autocratic system in legal terms. This study, therefore, offers an unduplicated and direct contribution by addressing this specific void in the literature.

Unlike most recent works that primarily focus on erosion and decline, this research shifts attention to the stability of compromised democracies, showing how Indonesia's case reflects persistence and resilience rather than inevitable collapseIt provides a new conceptual framework for explaining the sustainability of imperfect but resilient democracies, highlighting how institutional design serves as a formal safeguard within the constitutional structure, while elite bargaining operates as an informal political mechanism that influences the practical outcomes of democratic endurance. By doing so, this study fills a critical gap in the literature, which often adopts an overly pessimistic view of democratic decline, and instead offers a roadmap for sustainability through elite stability strategies.

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19 Thomas B. Pepinsky, "Cleavages, Institutions, and Democracy in Indonesia: The 2024 Elections in Comparative Perspective," *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, 20205, https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1177/18681034251349467.

20 Saskia Schäfer and Mutmainna Syam, "Pandemic Politics: The Acceleration of Democratic Erosion and Autocratization in Indonesia during Covid-19," *Zeitschrift Für Vergleichende Politikwissenschaft* 18 (2024): 475–503, https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1007/s12286-025-00634-1.

21 Rendy Wadipalapa, Poltak Nainggolan, and Riris Katharina, "Protecting Two Presidents: Legislative Decline in Indonesia's Post-2024 Election Transition," *The Journal of Legislative Studies*, 2024, 1–18, https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1080/13572334.2025.2484488.

22 Febrian Mulyadi Angsemin, "Konsolidasi Kekuasaan Dan Tantangan Demokrasi Di Era Kepemimpinan Joko Widodo: Antara Pembangunan Ekonomi Dan Stabilitas Politik," *Jurnal Akademika* 24, no. 1 (2024): 78–88

23 Radians Krisna Febriandy and Umaimah Wahid, "Kemunduran Demokrasi Di Indonesia: Analisis Laporan Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Institute 2024," *Kaganga: Jurnal Pendidikan Sejarah Dan Riset Sosial Humaniora* 7, no. 2 (2024): 1041–50

24 Donal Fariz, "Pemerintahan Joko Widodo Dan Serangan Politik Terhadap KPK," *Jurnal Antikorupsi INTEGRITAS* 5, no. 2 (2022): 19–33

A substantial body of literature has meticulously documented various dimensions of democratic decline, often highlighting executive aggrandizement and electoral narrowing. This research deliberately shifts focus from the erosion or potential collapse of democracy to provide a novel perspective on the underlying mechanisms that ensure a form of democratic stability, albeit a compromised one. This reorientation moves beyond a pessimistic outlook on democratic backsliding to explore the conditions that foster democratic persistence, introducing a new conceptual framework to elucidate the continued existence of an "imperfect but resilient democracy" in Indonesia. By analyzing how the institutionalized dispersal of power—a legacy of the post-1998 constitutional reforms—along with persistent inter-elite rivalries, constrains monopolization and full autocratic reversal through the effective functioning of these institutions in accordance with legal norms rather than their mere structural existence, , this study addresses a critical gap in the literature, arguing that elite calculations are often decisive and providing a "roadmap for sustainability through elite stability strategies" that challenges overly pessimistic interpretations of democratic decline by demonstrating that elite-driven democracies can endure gradual erosion without succumbing to authoritarianism, provided that competition remains institutionally guaranteed and power remains dispersed.

The novelty of this study lies in its analysis of how the dispersion of power and ongoing elite competition contribute to political resilience, while acknowledging that constitutional endurance ultimately depends on the strength of legal and institutional safeguards rather than elite dynamics alone. . [25]This study offers a significant contribution to the existing scholarship on democratic trajectories by emphasizing the *de facto* protective role of power dispersion and sustained elite competition against autocratization in Indonesia.

2. Method

This study uses a qualitative approach with a descriptive-comparative analysis method. This approach is chosen because the research aims to understand how Indonesia's democratic system has evolved through the interaction between institutional design and elite behavior, rather than to test statistical correlations. The descriptive–comparative method enables the author to systematically trace political transformations across two temporal points—post-Reformasi (1999–2004) and the consolidation era (2014–2024)—to identify continuities and ruptures in democratic practice. This temporal comparison allows the analysis to capture changes in executive–legislative relations, decentralization, and elite competition under consistent constitutional frameworks.

The data used in this study consist of primary legal sources and secondary data. The primary legal sources include government policy documents, laws, and regulations relevant to the research topic, while the secondary data consist of academic journals, books, and other scholarly works. The data collection method is carried out through literature studies or library research, which is a data collection technique carried out by tracing various written reference sources related to the research object. Literature study is used to gain a deeper understanding of relevant theories, concepts, and policies. The analysis covers the period from 1999 to 2024, enabling the researcher to trace the evolution of Indonesia's political structure over time. In addition, this study also applies document analysis to local government policies related to the research theme.

Data analysis involved thematic coding of recurring concepts such as 'executive dominance,' 'power dispersion,' and 'elite rivalry.' Each theme was examined across time periods to identify patterns of continuity and change. Triangulation was used by cross-checking findings from government documents, media archives, and scholarly analyses to enhance the validity and credibility of interpretations.

3. Findings and Discussion

3.1. The Paradox of Decline and Resilience in Indonesian Democracy

President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (2004–2014), whose first term was marked by sweeping political reforms and even a peaceful resolution of the separatist conflict in Aceh, tended to run a more status quo government in his second term. His successor, Joko Widodo (2014–2024), initially promised more reforms but quickly shifted to managing the status quo. In fact, under his administration, the decline in the quality of democracy that had begun under Yudhoyono accelerated [26]. According to the V-Dem Liberal Democracy Index, Indonesia's score declined to

25 Ahmad Muhajir and Febriyantika Wulandari, "Demokrasi Oligarkis Dan Resesi Demokrasi Di Indonesia Pasca-Suharto: Sebuah Tinjauan Sejarah Politik," *Warisan: Journal of History and Cultural Heritage* 4, no. 1 (2023): 1–10

26 Taufik, Muhamad M.N Nadzri, and Jamaie Hj. Hamil, "Declining Democracy: Autocratization in Indonesia during the

0.43 in 2020—the lowest since 1999. While this composite indicator reflects a broader comparative assessment of democratic quality, it does not in itself constitute evidence of formal constitutional regression. Rather, it suggests a perceived normative and empirical weakening of liberal democratic practices that should be examined in conjunction with legal and institutional developments. . Freedom House downgraded Indonesia to 'partly free' in 2013, and maintained that level throughout Widodo's presidency. This trend indicates not merely stagnation but a structural recalibration of democratic power. Rather than a linear backslide, Indonesia's case reveals how power dispersion—across elites, institutions, and regions—has produced what Levitsky and Way[27] describe as a form of "competitive authoritarian resilience," where formal democratic procedures persist while substantive freedoms contract. Recent findings by Taufik, Nadzri, & Hamil[28] explain that Indonesia's democratic decline under Jokowi was fragmented and selective, with strong executive control in law and media but tolerance in other spheres. This selective backsliding helps explain why Indonesia avoided total autocratic collapse. In general, Indonesian democracy has declined from its peak in 2008 gradually and moderately, reducing its qualitative substance but leaving the formal democratic framework in place [29] [30].

The democratic backsliding recorded in these indices is manifested in a variety of political and social areas [31]. In 2019, for example, Widodo worked with parliament to weaken the Corruption Eradication Agency (KPK) that had previously arrested many political leaders and government officials [32]. In parliament itself, Widodo created a supermajority during his first term, even though he began his presidency with only minority support. To achieve this supermajority, Widodo appeared to benefit from Indonesia's regulatory framework governing political parties, which allows the government to legally recognize party leadership through administrative registration under the *Law No. 2 of 2011 on Political Parties*.

In this context, an extraordinary congress (*Kongres Luar Biasa*, KLB) held in Deli Serdang in March 2021—led by Presidential Chief of Staff Moeldoko—attempted to replace the leadership of the Democratic Party and submitted the new board for recognition by the Ministry of Law and Human Rights (*Kemenkumham*)[33]. The Ministry rejected the request, and subsequent legal challenges were dismissed by the State Administrative Court of Jakarta (Decision No. 150/G/2021/PTUN.JKT, 23 November 2021) and by the Supreme Court (Decision No. 487 K/TUN/2022, 29 September 2022).

These rulings confirmed that the dispute constituted an internal party conflict subject to internal mechanisms under *Article 32 of the Law on Political Parties*, and there is no legal evidence that the President himself directly exercised any constitutional or regulatory authority to remove opposition leaders. Rather, the episode reflects the political dynamics surrounding party alignment within Indonesia's coalition system, operating through legally recognized administrative procedures.

. This, in turn, weakened parliament's oversight function[34]. Yet, this weakening did not lead to outright authoritarian consolidation. As Mietzner[35] argues, Indonesia's system remains characterized by fragmented

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Jokowi Years," *Otoritas: Jurnal Ilmu Pemerintahan* 13, no. 2 (2023): 6, https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.26618/ojip.v13i2.9277.

27 Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way, "Elections Without Democracy: THE RISE OF COMPETITIVE AUTHORITARIANISM," *Journal of Democracy* 13, no. 2 (2002): 51–65.

28 Taufik, Nadzri, and Hamil, "Declining Democracy: Autocratization in Indonesia during the Jokowi Years."

29 Mietzner, "The Limits of Autocratisation in Indonesia: Power Dispersal and Elite Competition in a Compromised Democracy."

30 Ahmad Muhajir and Febriyantika Wulandari, "Demokrasi Oligarkis Dan Resesi Demokrasi Di Indonesia Pasca-Suharto: Sebuah Tinjauan Sejarah Politik," *Warisan: Journal of History and Cultural Heritage* 4, no. 1 (2023): 1–10, https://doi.org/10.34007/warisan.v4i1.1876.

31 Ali Noer Zaman et al., "Kemunduran Demokrasi : Analisis Bibliometrik Atas Data di Indeks Scopus Tahun 2010-2023," *KAIS Kajian Ilmu Sosial* 5, no. 2 (2024): 59–74.

32 Donal Fariz, "Pemerintahan Joko Widodo Dan Serangan Politik Terhadap KPK," *Jurnal Antikorupsi INTEGRITAS* 5, no. 2 (2022): 19–33, https://doi.org/10.32697/integritas.v5i2.468.

33 CNN Indonesia, "Peta Kisruh Demokrat: Dari KLB Deli Serdang Berujung PK Moeldoko," CNN Indonesia, 2023, https://www.cnnindonesia.com/nasional/20230607203253-32-959002/peta-kisruh-demokrat-dari-klb-deli-serdang-berujung-pk-moeldoko.

34 Asrinaldi, "Government Domination in Policy Making in the House of Representatives during the President Jokowi Era."

35 Marcus Mietzner, "Sources of Resistance to Democratic Decline: Indonesian Civil Society and Its Trials," *Democratization* 28, no. 1 (2021): 161–78, https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2020.1796649.

authority and competing veto players, reflecting a deliberate dispersion of power that limits executive dominance. In his second term, 82% of legislators were members of parties affiliated with the government. Additionally, in 2021, Widodo's chief of staff tried to take over one of the only two remaining opposition parties, and although this attempt ultimately failed, it crippled the party and its oversight role [36].

There has also been a significant narrowing of the electoral space. The entry requirements for new electoral parties were significantly tightened between 1999 and 2019, particularly through successive amendments to the Political Party Law and Election Law that introduced higher administrative and parliamentary thresholds. For instance, the parliamentary threshold was first set at 2.5% in 2009, increased to 3.5% in 2014, and raised again to 4% in 2019[37]. These escalating requirements effectively reduced the number of parties represented in parliament, from 17 in the 1999 election to only 9 in 2019. While such thresholds are often justified as a regulatory measure to promote legislative stability, they also raise constitutional concerns regarding the extent to which they restrict political participation and undermine the representative principle guaranteed under the constitution.[3839]. .

The amendments to the Indonesian constitution in 1999–2002 demonstrated a systematic effort to build a constitutional framework that avoids concentration of power. Changes such as the establishment of the Constitutional Court, strengthening of the DPR, separation of the National Police and the National Armed Forces, and direct presidential elections, legally marked the transition from a semi-authoritarian to a democratic-constitutional system of governmentThis indicates that the institutional design of the post-Reformasi state formally establishes a structure of checks and balances intended to prevent the dominance of one branch of power over another. However, its effectiveness in practice depends on the consistency of law enforcement, institutional capacity, and political dynamics.

Democratic backsliding is also reflected in the increasing integration of large media empires into the government's support base. In the 2014 election, media corporate support for the presidential candidate was still divided between Widodo and his opponent, Prabowo Subianto. Subsequently, however, Widodo managed to draw most media companies into his orbit through coercion and accommodation. Major media groups have aligned with the president, limiting critical coverage.

The suppression of dissent—evident in the selective use of laws against government critics, including social media users and political opponents—has also contributed to democratic backsliding. . Government critics, both at the elite level and among ordinary social media users, have been selectively pursued under Widodo to reduce the intensity of expressing dissenting views (author interview with Usman Hamid, director of Amnesty International Indonesia, Jakarta, 15 August 2023). The main instrument for this has been a 2008 law that allows authorities to criminalize online statements deemed defamatory or offensive to officials. In Yudhoyono's second term (2009–2014), there were 74 such cases; in Widodo's first term (2014–2019), this number rose to 233, with 82 of them directly related to alleged insults to the president. However, other regulations have also been used: Repressive actions were selectively used against critics, creating a climate of self-censorship. These repressive actions ultimately have a negative impact on society: in a September 2020 opinion survey, 69.6% of respondents stated that citizens were 'increasingly' afraid to express their opinions.

We have noted that oligarchs are the main beneficiaries of electoral narrowing, and that media entrepreneurs are increasingly part of the government's support structure. However, this phenomenon is part of a broader trend of political oligarchization. The number of oligarchs – defined here as actors whose primary political resource is the ownership of directly controlled private wealth – in the cabinet and other key political positions peaked in Widodo's second term[4041].

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36 Febrian Mulyadi Angsemin, "Konsolidasi Kekuasaan Dan Tantangan Demokrasi Di Era Kepemimpinan Joko Widodo: Antara Pembangunan Ekonomi Dan Stabilitas Politik," *JURNAL AKADEMIKA* 24, no. 1 (2024): 78–88.

37 Mietzner, "The Limits of Autocratisation in Indonesia: Power Dispersal and Elite Competition in a Compromised Democracy."

38 Febriandy and Wahid, "Kemunduran Demokrasi Di Indonesia: Analisis Laporan Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Institute 2024."

39 Edward Aspinall et al., "Elites, Masses, and Democratic Decline in Indonesia," *Democratization* 27, no. 4 (2020): 505–26, https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2019.1680971.

40 Mietzner, "The Limits of Autocratisation in Indonesia: Power Dispersal and Elite Competition in a Compromised Democracy."

41 Basten Gokkon, "Indonesia's New Cabinet a 'Marriage of Oligarchs,' Environmentalists Say," Mongabay, 2019, https://news.mongabay.com/2019/10/indonesia-cabinet-jokowi-widodo-oligarchs-environment.

Many ministers in charge of key portfolios own companies in business areas directly relevant to their portfolios. Among them are Luhut Pandjaitan, the coordinating minister for maritime affairs and investment; Cabinet positions under Widodo increasingly favored wealthy oligarchs, deepening democratic inequality. This, in turn, further reinforced the already entrenched exclusion of lower-class citizens from political influence. Similar oligarchic entrenchment has been observed in Malaysia and Thailand, yet with differing consequences. In Malaysia, elite pacts have produced a "cartelized democracy"[42], whereas in Thailand, military intervention repeatedly resets electoral competition. Indonesia's model thus represents a middle ground where dispersed elite control preserves formal democracy without enabling total autocratic capture.

As in other cases around the world, increasing religious-political polarization is also part of the narrative of democratic decline in Indonesia. In Indonesia, the main divide in this regard is between supporters of religious pluralism on the one hand and supporters of a stronger role for Islam in state organizations on the other. The polarization between the two sides was fueled by the rise in Islamic piety since the opening of democracy in the late 1990s, but first became a political determinant in the 2014 general election. In that election, Widodo represented the pluralist camp and Prabowo represented the Islamist forces [43]. Widodo won in a bitter contest marked by disinformation and slander, and subsequent elections produced more episodes of polarization. The 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election, which involved a Christian of ethnic Chinese descent, was one such episode, as was the 2019 rematch between Widodo and PrabowoIn the context of this polarizing contest, Widodo's administration adopted a firmer stance toward radical Islamist organizations[44].The government revoked the legal status of two prominent groups in 2017 and 2020, respectively, through administrative and legal instruments under the Law on Mass Organizations (*Undang-Undang Ormas*). These measures were justified by the authorities as law enforcement actions aimed at maintaining national unity and public order, although critics viewed them as politically motivated restrictions on opposition groups[45]. The level of polarization eased somewhat after Prabowo joined Jokowi's government in 2019, but the events of the previous years have damaged Indonesia's democratic order [46]. This dynamic reflects what Pierre Rosanvallon[47] terms democracy's "self-limiting nature": a system that must continually regulate its own excesses to survive. Indonesia's democracy, though weakened, endures precisely because competing elites and dispersed institutions constrain total domination.

In short, there is ample evidence of democratic decline in Indonesia that confirms the assessments of international democracy indices. Febriandy & Wahid[48] further confirm using V-Dem data that while Indonesia shows regression in accountability and civil liberties, its retention of regular elections and decentralized governance makes it different from neighbors like Thailand or Myanmar that slid fully into authoritarianism. However, the decline in the quality of democracy in Indonesia is not as severe as in other countries, and unlike some of its neighbors, the country has not experienced democratic collapse. On the contrary, Indonesia's compromised democracy is remarkably stable and continues to function in key aspects of democratic life. Ultimately, despite Indonesia exhibiting clear trends of democratic backsliding across various indicators, this phenomenon has not culminated in total collapse or a full transition to authoritarianism. This paradox—decline without collapse—requires explanation. Comparative studies on hybrid regimes underscore this paradox. Thailand's 2014 coup and Turkey's post-2016 centralization illustrate cases where weakened checks enabled autocratization. Indonesia diverges because the post-1998 constitutional reforms established formal mechanisms of both vertical and horizontal power diffusion, which—while not always effectively enforced—have nonetheless shaped the institutional context consistent with theories of "illiberal resilience."[49]. Thus, understanding Indonesia's trajectory

42 Andreas Ufen, "Opposition in Transition: Pre-Electoral Coalitions and the 2018 Electoral Breakthrough in Malaysia," *Democratization* 27, no. 2 (2020): 167–84, https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2019.1666266.

43 Ibnu Chaerul Mansyur, "Polarisasi Politik Di Indonesia 2014-2019: Sebuah Kajian Pustaka," *Jurnal Politik Profetik* 11, no. 1 (2023): 1–22, https://doi.org/10.24252/profetik.v11i1a1.

44 Muhammad Mutawalli Mukhlis, Zainal Amin Ayub, and Emmanuel Ibiam Amah, "Polemic on the Dissolution of Ministries: An Overview of the Presidential System in Indonesia," *Litigasi* 24, no. 2 (2023): 322–54, https://doi.org/10.23969/litigasi.v24i2.10326.

45 Anan Bahrul Khoir, "Radikalisme Dan Aparatur Sipil Negara: Faktor Penyebab Dan Upaya Pemerintah Menangani Radikalisme Pada Aparatur Sipil Negara," *Kebijakan: Jurnal Ilmu Administrasi* 12, no. 2 (2021): 145–62, https://doi.org/10.23969/kebijakan.v12i2.3938.

46 Mansyur, "Polarisasi Politik Di Indonesia 2014-2019: Sebuah Kajian Pustaka."

47 Pierre Rosanvallon, *Counter-Democracy: Politics in an Age of Distrust* (Cambridge University Press, 2006).

48 Febriandy and Wahid, "Kemunduran Demokrasi Di Indonesia: Analisis Laporan Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Institute 2024."

49 Aurel Croissant and Lars Lott, "Democratic Resilience in the Twenty-First Century: Search for an Analytical Framework and Explorative Analysis," 2024.

requires viewing democratic erosion as a negotiated institutional equilibrium rather than a linear process of decline. . To address this, the following sections examine two mechanisms emphasized in this study: first, the institutional dispersion of power created by post-1998 reforms, and second, the persistence of intra-elite competition structured by Indonesia's constitutional and legal framework. These mechanisms together clarify why Indonesia resists full autocratization despite democratic erosion.

3.2. Institutional Power Dispersion: A Structural Barrier to Autocratic Consolidation

To understand why Indonesian democracy has not yet moved into autocratic territory despite its gradual weakening, let us review each of the areas of democratic decline introduced above. In each case, the ongoing democratic decline has encountered strong constraints that prevent a slide into full-blown authoritarianism. In the area of executive enlargement, for example, neither president has managed to personalize their rule. While Yudhoyono and Widodo were strong presidents due to the constitutional powers granted to them, their ability to extend influence beyond their terms was constrained not only by the political elites allied with them but also by the legal framework of the 1945 Constitution—particularly the two-term limit and the absence of constitutional mechanisms permitting extension of office[50]. The elites' political calculations thus operated within, and were reinforced by, these institutional and legal boundaries[51]. . Yudhoyono, as his second term neared the end, explored the idea of appointing his wife or sister-in-law as his successor, but the effort was quickly shelved due to little support.

This phenomenon shows the effectiveness of the rule of law and constitutional norms in acting as legal boundaries to autocratic drift. Similarly, while the electoral space has narrowed, elections are far from a foregone conclusion, and having more resources than your competitors does not guarantee victory. While vote buying is rampant in many regional legislative and executive elections, presidential elections involve too many voters for this strategy to be effective – and even in local contexts, the practice has its limits. While the 2024 presidential election illustrates the persistence of electoral competition in Indonesia, its significance must be situated within the broader legal-institutional and substantive context. The framework for competition is shaped by campaign-finance regulation and transparency gaps (e.g., private party funding sources remain insufficiently regulated)[52]. Moreover, the integrity of electoral contests is influenced by informal money-politics practices (such as vote buying) which pose structural constraints to non-oligarchic entry and participation[53]. In addition, media access, freedom of expression and digital disinformation pose further challenges to equal competitive opportunities[54]. Thus, rather than functioning as definitive proof of sustained non-oligarchic participation, the 2024 contest reflects a complex interplay between formal procedural competition and continuing structural dominance by established elites and systemic barriers. . In that election, the matriarch of the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDI-P), former president Megawati Sukarnoputri, had to nominate a marginal party figure, Ganjar Pranowo, because his polling numbers were better than those of Megawati's daughter, her top choice. Anies Baswedan, a former university rector, is also a candidate. Even the candidacy of Prabowo Subianto, Suharto's former son-in-law, includes some good news for Indonesian democracy: after failing twice in the 2014 and 2019 campaigns with proposals to return Indonesia to its pre-democratic constitution, he appealed to voters in 2024 with a much softer message that no longer proposed dismantling democracy. Indeed, he now denies that his previous campaigns aimed to do that (author interview with Prabowo Subianto, Jakarta, September 14, 2023).

Meanwhile, the threat of polarization – despite bringing a deep crisis episode for Indonesia – is balanced by the need for all actors to seek compromises in order to access patronage resources. Despite Indonesia's post-1998 reforms, patronage and clientelism remain the central principles of socio-political organization. As a core element of social life since the pre-1998 regime, it has not caused the democratic backsliding that began in the late 2000s, but has been an obstacle to further democratization. However, with regard to polarization, it functions as both a barrier and a neutralizer. As mentioned, Prabowo – after using Islamist forces as his vehicle in the 2014 and

50 Simon Butt and Tim Lindsey, *The Constitution of Indonesia: A Contextual Analysis* (United Kingdom: Hart Pub, 2012).

51 Marcus Mietzner, "Indonesia's Democratic Stagnation: Anti-Reformist Elites and Resilient Civil Society," *Democratization* 19, no. 2 (2012): 209–29, https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2011.572620.

52 Moch Andry Wikra Wardhana Mamonto et al., "Promoting the Principle of Political Equality: Reformulation of Private Funding Source Regulations for Indonesian Political Parties," *Journal of Law and Legal Reform* 5, no. 3 (2024), https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.15294/jllr.v5i3.14457.

53 Burhanuddin Muhtadi, "A Kidney for Your Vote: Money Politics in Indonesia's 2024 Elections," Fulcrum, 2024, https://fulcrum.sg/a-kidney-for-your-vote-money-politics-in-indonesias-2024-elections/.

54 Masduki, "Media Control in the Digital Politics of Indonesia," *Media and Communication* 9, no. 4 (2021): 52–61, https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.v9i4.4225.

2019 elections – joined Widodo's government in 2019. Both Widodo and Prabowo cited their goal of overcoming polarization as the reason for their alliance (author interviews with Joko Widodo, Jakarta, 14 October 2023; and Prabowo Subianto, Jakarta, 14 September 2023). Anies Baswedan, who won the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election by siding with Islamists, then ran the capital as a jack-of-all-trades politician. To be sure, the interlude of polarization damaged the quality of Indonesian democracy, fueling intolerance and socio-religious orthodoxy. But after the election, Indonesia's main actors often prioritized collaboration over continued ideological conflict.

Thus, the institutionalized dispersal of power post-1998, manifested through constitutional and institutional reforms, has erected robust structural barriers against any attempts to autocratically consolidate power. Asrinaldi[55] pointed out that Joko Widodo's dominance in parliament has not eliminated all institutional veto players. Despite the executive's expanding influence, both the Constitutional Court (MK) and some factions in the House of Representatives of the Republic of Indonesia (DPR) continue to act as a check and balance. For example, in Decision Number 91/PUU-XVIII/2020, the Constitutional Court affirmed that Law Number 11 of 2020 concerning Job Creation, formally formulated, contradicts the 1945 Constitution and required legislators to revise it within two years to ensure the law remains legally binding. However, it is also worth noting that regulatory changes—for example, Law Number 7 of 2020 concerning the Third Amendment to the Constitutional Court Law—have raised concerns about the weakening of the Constitutional Court's independence and the potential erosion of its capacity as a veto player[56]. Thus, although the veto institution formally remains in place, its space and effectiveness are increasingly limited in the institutional balance under Jokowi's administration.. From a constitutional-law perspective, it is important to distinguish between the institutional structure that provides legal mechanisms of checks and balances, and the actual effectiveness of those institutions in confronting political practices that may erode them. The current fragmentation of authority thus represents a formal safeguard against the excessive concentration of power, though its capacity to prevent authoritarian regression ultimately depends on how these mechanisms function in practice. . Indeed, as I will argue below, the general pattern across these areas is not accidental. Rather, it indicates a deliberate strategy by Indonesia's leading socio-political forces to undermine the substance of democracy but to allow democracy to survive as an organizational framework. This strategy, in turn, stems from two interrelated structural phenomena: first, the institutionalized diffusion of power after 1998; and, second, the continuing competition among elites for power that, in their view, is better regulated through limited democracy than through autocracy.

3.3. Elite Competition and Pragmatic Commitments: Sustaining a Compromised Democracy

In discussing the reasons for the survival of Indonesian democracy, Slater[57] argues that this is largely due to 'the founding mother of Indonesian democracy: its vibrant and critical civil society. It is almost impossible to overstate the importance of popular pressure and urban protest in keeping Indonesia's comfortable political elites compliant. There is no doubt that civil society remains an influential actor whose political and normative pressure continues to shape the considerations of Indonesian elites in decision-making processes.[58]. However, it is also clear that civil society has become increasingly partisan, especially since the polarizing episodes of the second half of the 2010s[59]. Many civil society groups have taken either pluralist or Islamist sides, leaving only a few groups in the ideological center who continue to fight for civil rights regardless of political orientation[60]. The case of the weakening of the Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK) is illustrative of this: several pluralist non-governmental organizations (NGOs) refused to join its defense because they believed it was infiltrated by Islamists[61]. The reasons why Indonesian democracy has survived, despite the increasing partisanship of civil

55 Asrinaldi, "Government Domination in Policy Making in the House of Representatives during the President Jokowi Era."

56 Farah Syah Rezah and Andi Tenri Sapada, "The Independence and Accountability of the Constitutional Court in the Constitutional System in Indonesia," *SIGn Jurnal Hukum* 4, no. 2 (2022): 247–60, https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.37276/sjh.v4i2.166.

57 Dan Slater, "What Indonesian Democracy Can Teach the World," *Journal of Democracy* 34, no. 1 (2023): 95–109.

58 Edward Aspinall, "Indonesia: Civil Society and Democratic Breakthrough," in *Civil Society and Political Change in Asia: Expanding and Contracting Democratic Space*, 1st ed. (Stanford University Press, 2004), 61–96.

59 Seth Soderborg and Burhanuddin Muhtadi, "Resentment and Polarization in Indonesia," *Journal of East Asian Studies* 23, no. 3 (2023): 439–67, https://doi.org/10.1017/jea.2023.17.

60 Edward Aspinall and Marcus Mietzner, "Southeast Asia's Troubling Elections: Nondemocratic Pluralism in Indonesia," *Journal of Democracy* 30, no. 4 (2019): 104–18.

61 Abdil Mughis Mudhoffir, "The Limits of Civil Society Activism in Indonesia: The Case of the Weakening of the KPK,"

society, must be located outside the civil society arena as well.

One of the main obstacles to full autocratization in post-Suharto Indonesia was the establishment of a legal framework for decentralization—through the constitutional amendments and the enactment of Law No. 22 of 1999 on Regional Government—which normatively limited the recentralization of power during the early years of the transition. . This wide distribution of power far exceeded that found in other post-authoritarian states[62]. Habibie's reforms introduced significant decentralization to empower local governments. It is widely accepted that if a Javanese had replaced Suharto, decentralization would not have been pursued with such speed and intensity. Instead, Habibie left a political order in which fiscal resources – themselves the basis for political power – shifted to the local level. In the 2020s, 43% of state revenue was spent by the regions[63].

Habibie's decentralization reforms deepened in 2005, when direct elections for governors, mayors, and district heads began. These elections, which replaced voting in regional legislative bodies, gave local government heads a direct political mandate, which increased their standing vis-à-vis the center. In addition to being supported by their increased fiscal power, local government heads became the main political power holders in their regions—whereas they had previously been merely extensions of the Jakarta apparatus before 1999. Attempts to revoke direct local elections were blocked by regional leaders and public opposition. Setiawan & Tomsa[64] highlight how civil society activism aligned with local elites to resist centralization, showing that elite rivalry combined with societal mobilization can act as a buffer against democratic breakdown. When parliament reconvened, it did not challenge Yudhoyono's decision, and the post-2005 reforms remained in place.

Another important decision made during Habibie's administration that facilitated the wide distribution of power concerned the electoral and party systems. In early 1999, it was decided to retain the proportional representation system in the country's legislative elections. Proportional representation had been used as the basis for elections both in the democratic experiments of the 1950s and during the autocratic regime of Suharto. In 1998, several actors had proposed replacing this system with a district system based on the winner of the most votes. Had this proposal been enacted, Indonesia's political system would have taken a more majoritarian path than it eventually did. Instead, a variety of parties representing different electoral districts managed to enter parliament, and while we note a gradual tightening of party formation and parliamentary threshold rules, the party system remained devoid of a clear center of power. Indeed, the party system flattened over time: Indonesia's multiparty system remained fragmented, preventing dominance by a single party. Thus, the institutional decisions made in the early democratic period illustrate a competitive party system without making it too fragmented.

The structure of Indonesia's party system has not changed significantly even after the introduction of direct presidential elections in 2004, since the system's fragmentation reflects the dynamics of national political representation rather than the decentralization of governmental authority. In some contexts, the shift to direct presidential elections could result in excessive majority influence, but this did not happen in Indonesia, at least not in a regime-changing way. The reason is that despite being equipped with a strong popular mandate, Yudhoyono and Widodo opted for broad power-sharing rather than exclusive rule. Why, then, did the president form such a broad coalition in the first place? In addition to the benefits of accommodating multiple players afforded by a proportional representation electoral system, post-2004 presidents have also learned lessons from Wahid's impeachment in 2001. His removal from office was not simply the result of a mistaken belief that presidential power was absolute, but rather the outcome of a constitutional and political process based on the People's Consultative Assembly Decree (TAP MPR) No. II/MPR/2001 and the House of Representatives' recommendation concerning alleged abuse of authority. Yudhoyono, who served as one of Wahid's ministers at the time, drew from this episode the conclusion that stable governance requires inclusion rather than confrontation or exclusion. . Widodo, who initially promised to challenge Yudhoyono's broad coalition approach, soon discovered its benefits and emulated it.

The 2002 constitutional amendments, which established direct presidential elections, also led to a dispersal of power in other areas. For example, in the judicial sector, the establishment of the Constitutional Court marked a significant development in Indonesia's judicial system. Before its creation through the Third Amendment to the 1945 Constitution, the Supreme Court did not hold a full constitutional judicial authority; it mainly exercised cassation and supervisory functions over general and special courts. The power to review

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Critical Asian Studies 55, no. 4 (2022), https://doi.org/10.1080/14672715.2022.2123019.

62 Mietzner, "The Limits of Autocratisation in Indonesia: Power Dispersal and Elite Competition in a Compromised Democracy."

63 Setiawan and Tomsa, "Defending a Vulnerable yet Resilient Democracy: Civil Society Activism in Jokowi's Indonesia."

64 Setiawan and Tomsa.

laws against the Constitution was only introduced with the formation of the Constitutional Court. This meant that there were now more judicial checks on executive power, and the Constitutional Court in particular used its powers extensively. The constitutional amendments also gave new powers to the parliament, which implicitly strengthened the multi-party landscape represented therein. From being a mere rubber stamp under the Suharto regime, the parliament then developed into one of the most powerful actors of the post-1998 regime. Furthermore, during the constitutional amendment process, the institutional separation between the military (TNI) and the police (Polri) was formalized — the latter having previously been part of the former since the 1960s. Although this separation is not explicitly stated in the 1945 Constitution, it derives its constitutional legitimacy from subsequent decrees of the People's Consultative Assembly (TAP MPR), particularly those mandating the separation of the TNI and Polri and redefining their respective roles in defense and security. The emancipation of the police thus became another cornerstone in dismantling the previous monopolar political system and shaping a post-Suharto landscape of multiple, competing centers of power. . In short, the rapid post-1998 reforms redistributed power among elite groups in ways that would make it difficult for autocratic efforts at recovery to succeed. As the next section shows, Indonesia's key actors were fiercely protective of this new competitiveness, even though they themselves had an interest in undermining key aspects of democracy While Mietzner[65] emphasizes that inter-elite competition can empirically limit authoritarian tendencies, it is important to note that, normatively, the stability of democracy in Indonesia is safeguarded not merely by elite interests but primarily by constitutional structures. The system of checks and balances among state institutions, as enshrined in the 1945 Constitution, ensures that no single actor can monopolize power, thereby preserving democratic governance. In this context, elite competition may contribute to the dynamics of power, but it operates within—and is constrained by—these formal institutional frameworks. . This dynamic ensures the continuation of Indonesia's compromised yet functional democracy, where elites strategically opt for stability through a limited democratic framework rather than the uncertainties of outright authoritarianism.

3.4. Intra-Elite Competition in the Legal Framework of Electoral Democracy

In some analyses of post-Suharto Indonesia, the elite alliance that controls the country has been described as a cartel. This model has been used to describe a constellation in which Indonesian parties have banded together to collectively exploit Indonesia's patronage resources and protect themselves from potentially damaging accountability mechanisms. There is much truth to this depiction. Indeed, Indonesia's major political forces – not just the parties – have banded together on issues that affect their collective interests as the ruling political class. This has included formal legislative efforts, such as the 2019 revision of the KPK Law, which some observers argue weakened the institution. These efforts were carried out through the formal legislative process in the DPR and reflect dynamics of political negotiation and patronage, rather than illegal or personal actions against individual KPK members. . Elite coalitions have weakened accountability, but internal rivalries limit authoritarian consolidation.

However, the cartel model overlooks key aspects of the dynamics within Indonesian elite alliances, particularly the intensity of competition among coalition members. While collective interests play a role, individual actors also strive for political advantage, and this competition shapes how alliances are formed and maintained. The president often plays an important informal role in these dynamics, not as a formal authority with extra-constitutional powers, but as a mediator who manages relationships and balances competing interests to help maintain coalition stability. In some cases, the president may strategically leverage rivalries among elites, but this reflects the informal practices of political negotiation rather than any constitutional mandate. . Crucially, however, the coalition members watch each other jealously so that no single actor among them gains an advantage that could allow the latter to emerge as a new political hegemon. This also includes the president – who places significant constraints on their ability to pursue autocratic ambitions. The cartel approach thus captures the essential dynamics of Indonesia's democratic decline, but it is less effective in explaining why elites have stopped short of abandoning democracy altogether, and why they have remained committed to competition as the organizing logic of their interactions. To understand this phenomenon, we need to look for alternatives.

For many Indonesian elites, their continued support for democratic inter-elite competition is due to the unpleasantness of the opposite: living under restored autocratic rule. Elite support for democracy stems from negative memories of centralized authoritarianism.

65 Mietzner, "The Limits of Autocratisation in Indonesia: Power Dispersal and Elite Competition in a Compromised Democracy."

In the Indonesian constitutional system that adheres to the principle of horizontal (legislative, executive, judiciary) and vertical (central-regional) distribution of power, competition between elites is also facilitated by an open legal and political system. The Election Law, the Political Party Law, and the Regional Government Law provide a legal framework that shapes political competition and delineates the distribution of authority in Indonesia. [66]. It should be noted that not all provisions explicitly reflect the constitutional principles of horizontal and vertical checks and balances. For instance, many regulations in the Election Law primarily address procedural and administrative aspects of elections, while certain provisions in the Political Party Law govern party organization and internal accountability, and the Regional Government Law regulates the division of functions between central and regional authorities. Collectively, these laws contribute to limiting power concentration and enhancing institutional accountability, even if they do not uniformly enshrine constitutional principles in a direct manner. .

In contrast, in elite-controlled democracies, an actor's electoral and social weight typically determines its representation in the cabinet and its role in the distribution of resources. Because these weights can change over time, each actor has a realistic expectation of having one of them elected president someday. Until then, participating in elite alliances based on competitive allocation of positions is a satisfactory outcome for most actors. Importantly, this outcome arises within the formal legal framework of the 1945 Constitution, which explicitly grants the president executive authority, outlines the legislative powers of the DPR, and establishes mechanisms of checks and balances to prevent the concentration of power. Thus, elite negotiations operate alongside—rather than instead of—constitutional mandates and institutional constraints. . Another benefit that flows from this also figures prominently in elite calculations for maintaining low-level democracies: namely, the benefits of democratic legitimacy relative to the inherent instability of regime authority based solely on repression. Public surveys show Indonesians have consistently expressed strong support for democracy. The IFES survey[67] found *72%* preferred democracy to any other form of government. The Pew Research Center reported[68] *69%* satisfaction with democracy in *2017* and *65%* in *2018*. During the pandemic, SMRC[69] recorded *67%* satisfaction, while the Lowy Institute[70] found about *60%* agreed that democracy is preferable to any other system. More recent Indikator Politik Indonesia[71] surveys reported *70.7%* positive ratings for democratic performance in *2024* and *75.8%* satisfaction in *2025*[72]. The ways in which continuing elite rivalries and ambitions have revolted against potential autocratization campaigns are best embodied in an episode we have already touched on – namely, Widodo's failed attempt to evade term limits. Prabowo, for his part, wants to have one last chance at the presidency himself, so agreeing to Widodo's term extension is detrimental to his career planning. Even the parties that have come under strong pressure from the president's aides to support the extension plan are paying lip service. Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), the country's largest Muslim organization, has also not expressed its support. Although NU's spiritual leader was Widodo's vice president in his second term, NU did not receive special treatment under his administration. While at one point the government restructured certain bureaucratic positions related to NU's engagement with state institutions, these actions were carried out through formal administrative procedures under the Ministry of Religious Affairs. Under Indonesia's constitutional framework, the president does not have personal authority to take over or control religious organizations, and any government involvement with such organizations must follow statutory regulations and administrative law. .

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66 Muhammad Mutawalli Mukhlis et al., "Democratization or Extra-Constitutionalism: Ideas for Limiting the Term of Office for Chairmen of Political Parties in Indonesia," *Jambura Law Review* 6, no. 2 (2024): 367–402.

67 IFES, "IFES Survey on Indonesian Political Attitudes Reveals Satisfaction with Democracy, Lack of Political Information," International Foundation for Electoral System, 2010, https://www.ifes.org/news/ifes-survey-indonesian-political-attitudes-reveals-satisfaction-democracy-lack-political.

68 Christine Tamir and Abby Budiman, "Indonesians Optimistic about Their Country's Democracy and Economy as Elections near," Pew Research Center, 2019, https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2019/04/04/indonesians-optimistic-about-their-countrys-democracy-and-economy-as-elections-near/.

69 Tri Indah Oktavianti, "Public Faith in Democracy Bounces Back after COVID-19 Slump: Survey," The Jakarta Post, 2020, https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2020/08/23/public-faith-in-democracy-bounces-back-after-covid-19-slump-survey.html.

70 Lowy Institute, "Indonesia Poll 2021: Attitudes toward Democracy and Governance," Lowy Institute, 2021, https://interactives.lowyinstitute.org/features/indonesia-poll-2021/topic/democracy/.

71 Fakhri Rezy, "Indicator Survey Says 70.7 Percent of People Value the Performance of Indonesian Democracy as Good," VOI, 2024, https://voi.id/en/news/355699.

72 Fadhilah Primandari, "Indonesian Democracy Takes Another Hit," East Asia Forum, 2025, https://eastasiaforum.org/2025/04/22/indonesian-democracy-takes-another-hit/.

Thus, as Widodo must have realized, Indonesia's elite actors are too ambitious and armed with too many resources by the post-1998 spread of power to accept another autocracy. The prospect of a renewed monopoly of power by the incumbent president does not appeal to them. Presidential term limits in Indonesia are enshrined in Article 7 of the 1945 Constitution (UUD 1945), which formally restricts the president to a maximum of two terms. Introduced through the constitutional amendments beginning in 1999, these limits are a constitutional mechanism to safeguard democratic governance, prevent the concentration of power, and ensure regular leadership turnover. While political elites may consider these limits in their strategic calculations, they cannot be understood merely as tools for elite self-interest, because their primary basis is legal and systemic, aimed at maintaining the integrity of Indonesia's democratic system. . They believe, perhaps correctly, that power will lie in the hands of the new president, not Gibran – who many see as merely a vote-getter for Prabowo, the presidential candidate running in the election.

The power-sharing arrangement established after the fall of Suharto, then, has maintained a level of inter-elite competition that precludes any attempt by incumbents to steer democracy into the realm of personalist autocracy. Any attack by incumbents on existing elite privileges, including their own presidential ambitions, is bound to generate a backlash – or simply a quiet rejection, as in the case of Widodo's attempt to extend his term. Elites support a minimal form of democracy that secures their power while avoiding autocracy. Within the framework of a democratic rule of law (democratische rechtsstaat), the constitution not only regulates the procedure for democratically filling power, but also provides a legal channel that allows elites to compete without threatening the system as a whole. Regulations such as terms of office, presidential nomination thresholds, and the separation of executive, legislative, and judicial institutions are formally legal mechanisms intended to structure government functions and protect the constitutional order for all citizens. While these rules may, in practice, shape the behavior of political elites, this effect is a consequence of political dynamics rather than the formal legal purpose. Distinguishing between the constitutional design (formal law) and political practice (informal use) helps maintain an accurate constitutional analysis. Mukhlis et al.[73] explain that these legal frameworks serve as guardrails not only for public accountability but also for elite survival, ensuring no faction can monopolize political institutions for too long. This shows that constitutional regulations are not only a control mechanism against executive authoritarianism, but also against the potential for domination by certain elite coalitions.

4. Conclusion

Indonesia's democratic decline has been driven primarily by political elites seeking to restore control after the expansive reforms of the post-1998 era. However, constitutionally, oversight institutions such as the DPR, the Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK), and the Constitutional Court (Mahkamah Konstitusi) retain formal authority and legal safeguards that limit direct interference by the president or other elites. These institutions are established and protected under the 1945 Constitution, which defines their independence and oversight mandates. Nonetheless, political elites have increasingly exploited legal amendments, appointments, and budgetary controls to influence these bodies indirectly, leading to a gradual erosion of their effectiveness in practice. . Socio-religious conservatism limiting the liberal aspects of democracy, yet most elites resisted full autocratic restoration. Efforts such as Prabowo's campaigns in 2014 and 2019 or Widodo's bid for a third term failed because the elite consensus fractured.

This study shows that Indonesian elites simultaneously erode and preserve democracy: they resist initiatives that threaten their competition while cooperating in measures that entrench privilege, such as weakening the Corruption Eradication Commission or passing the Omnibus Law. Civil society and public opinion remain important but secondary actors, shaping outcomes only when aligned with elite divisions. The persistence of Indonesian democracy thus rests less on popular resistance than on elite calculations within a constitutional order that disperses power. The reforms of 1999–2002 created enduring checks and balances—through decentralization, term limits, and judicial empowerment—that elites cannot fully ignore. These arrangements function as a constitutional immune system, restricting autocratic consolidation while also preventing substantive democratic renewal.

Conceptually, this research advances the study of democratic resilience by illustrating "resilience through elite rivalry"—a mechanism in which competition among elite factions sustains democratic continuity not merely for elite survival, but within the boundaries of constitutional and electoral institutions that regulate power circulation. In this sense, elite rivalry interacts with formal democratic procedures that uphold public rights and

73 Muhammad Mutawalli Mukhlis et al., "Democratic State Governance: The Urgency of Implementing Conventions in Constitutional Practices in Indonesia," *Fenomena* 23, no. 1 (2024): 1–14.

prevent the monopolization of authority, demonstrating that Indonesia's democracy, while elite-driven, remains institutionally constrained rather than purely symbolic. . This model extends the framework proposed by Croissant and Lott (2024) on illiberal resilience by emphasizing how intra-elite competition can act as a stabilizing, albeit low-quality, form of democratic endurance. Rather than viewing backsliding as a linear decline, Indonesia's experience suggests a cyclical equilibrium between erosion and constraint, shaped by institutionalized power dispersion.

Normatively, the findings highlight the need to strengthen Indonesia's institutional safeguards within the framework established by the 1945 Constitution and post-1998 amendments. These legal reforms were specifically designed to ensure a balance of power and protect the rights of citizens, and not to serve the interests of the elite. Strengthening these safeguards is necessary to maintain the integrity of democratic processes, preventing any potential concentration of power that could undermine these objectives. . Strengthening judicial independence, empowering anti-corruption institutions, and restoring genuine party competition are crucial steps in ensuring that power is not concentrated in the hands of certain groups, and in reviving a democratic commitment based on the principle of justice. This is in keeping with the spirit of the post-1998 laws and amendments designed to create a balance of power, protect citizens' rights, and strengthen the principle of the rule of law. Our Constitution serves not only the interests of the elite but also guarantees the protection of the fundamental rights of every citizen, with the aim of creating a more inclusive and democratic system. . Policies that re-expand civic space and decentralize fiscal power transparently could restore the accountability lost under elite-managed pluralism.

Finally, the Indonesian case offers comparative lessons for other hybrid democracies: resilience does not always equate to the health of a democracy. Elite rivalry may preserve procedural democracy, but it can simultaneously erode its substantive values. In the context of democratic backsliding, this study argues that resilience and erosion can coexist in a precarious balance. This dynamic is referred to as "compromised resilience," a term that aims to capture the tension between formal legal structures and the political realities shaped by elite interests. However, it is crucial to clarify that this concept does not imply that Indonesia's democracy is deliberately maintained at a minimal level for the benefit of the elite. Instead, the analysis highlights the complex role of legal formalities and constitutional institutions, which serve as mechanisms that transcend elite-driven political maneuvering and provide a foundation for democratic stability. This distinction is necessary to avoid oversimplifying the interaction between formal legal frameworks and the political practices that shape them. . Comparative democratization research should therefore move beyond dichotomies of survival or collapse to explore how institutional dispersion and elite pragmatism jointly produce these ambiguous, enduring regimes.

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