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Last Democracy Standing?
Civil Society and Politics in Indonesia

Hans Antlöv

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report

Summary

In May 1998, the rule of Soeharto ended and Indonesia embarked on a path toward democracy. The democratisation process meant that there are now elections at all levels of government. Decentralisation policies further devolved power from Jakarta all the way to cities and districts. While the aim was to strengthen the nation but over time it has become clear that very small administrative units often have inadequate administrative capacity to manage the responsibilities. Civil society developed alongside the formal institutions to complement them. This report describes the democratic trajectory, examines future scenarios for civil society and democracy in Indonesia, and discusses how democratic backsliding might be avoided.

Dr. Hans Antlöv

Anthropologist, development practitioner and political observer with forty years of experience in Indonesia

Language editing: Andrew Mash
Photo: TT

Introduction

In the 1998 Swedish Asian Strategy, the eminent historian Robert Cribb contributed a chapter on Indonesia. At that time, Indonesia was part of the so-called Asian Miracle and President Soeharto was one of the longest-serving world leaders. As the strategy went to print, however, Cribb's chapter became obsolete. The authoritarian Soeharto regime collapsed in May 1998 and the country embarked on a new path to democracy.

Fast-forward to 2025 and Indonesia is still a democracy, albeit an imperfect one. In comparison with many other countries in the region and globally, it is doing well. Election results are respected, there is trust in government, there are peaceful political transitions, and the political space is relatively open. Village heads, mayors, governors and presidents are directly elected, and democratic institutions draft laws, some of which are good and some less so. There have been some recent restrictions on civic space (see below) but civil society organizations (CSOs) continue to operate, advocating for an alternative, positive vision of Indonesia's future.

In 2022 and 2023, civil society was successful in mobilizing resistance to constitutional amendments that would have extended presidential terms and abolished direct elections for local heads of government. CSOs also secured sexual rights and built awareness of environmental degradation and the climate emergency (Setiawan and Tomsa 2023; Fernandes 2022). In August 2024, students and activists countered an attempt by the government to change the regional election law that would have enabled an underage son of the president to run for governor. However, the attempt a year earlier to prevent the underage Gibran Rakabuming Raka, another young son of the president, from standing as vice president was unsuccessful, and he is now Vice President of Indonesia.

This report describes this democratic trajectory, examines future scenarios for civil society and democracy in Indonesia, and discusses how democratic backsliding might be avoided.

The Roots of the Current State

The early postcolonial period following independence from the Dutch in 1945 was characterized by a revolutionary war in the late 1940s, regional conflicts in the 1950s and increasing social and political polarization in the early 1960s. This culminated in a military coup by General Soeharto in 1965, supported by the US, Australia and other anti-communist regimes, which led to the deaths of up to one million people who were portrayed as supporters of communism in the region. Soeharto established his authoritarian New Order and appointed himself President. Between 1966 and 1998, the country was highly autocratic and run from Jakarta. There was very limited local autonomy or democracy. Soldiers were posted in each village to ensure compliance with the autocratic system of governance (Antlöv 1995). The military had a "*dwifungsi*" (dual function), both military and civilian, that allowed the armed forces to crush dissent and dominate public life. Procedural elections were held every five years but political parties, candidates and the results were controlled from Jakarta. The state-party, Golkar, regularly won elections with 75 per cent or more of the vote. Restrictions on civil liberties led to depoliticization and citizens were characterized as a "floating mass" in what McVey called "the separation of people from politics" (McVey 1982). However, like many other authoritarian states in recent decades, the Soeharto government was unable to maintain the economic progress that had kept it in power for three decades,

which increasingly undermined support for the regime.

Ultimately, this led to a separation of the regime from the people. In May 1998, a student and civil society movement inspired by the third wave of democratization, and triggered by divisions among the elites, increasing corruption, human rights abuses and mismanagement of the Asian financial crisis, overthrew the president following months of violence and state killings. Vice President J.B. Habibie was inaugurated president by default and put in place a number of core reforms that are still relevant today – the three most important being free and fair elections, decentralization and a free press. These new freedoms also led to the emergence of a vibrant media and civil society.

That Habibie became the new president in 1998 was symptomatic of what in Indonesian is known as *reformasi* (reform). It might have been a regime change, but there was no rooting out of old political practices – the new government was based on military and elite negotiations (Mietzner 2006). The ruling elites remained in power and the constitution was amended rather than replaced. The bureaucratic mindset and many rent-seeking practices remained in place, albeit with more democratic oversight, such as through the establishment of a Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK). Celebrated democracy institutions such as *Musrenbang* participatory development planning and even the KPK did not challenge existing power relations. State structures continued to suffer from endemic corruption and an unwillingness to allow general access to public information. Many people who lived comfortably under the New Order were still in power under *reformasi*, albeit under new political arrangements and often wearing different party badges. These new spaces were captured by elites and oligarchies in unholy alliances between the private sector, politicians, bureaucrats and the military.
In 2004, former-general Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono become the first directly elected president. (Previously, presidents had been indirectly elected by the national parliament.) He was re-elected in 2009 and served 10 years in total. His rule marked the end of a disorderly political transition, which had seen three presidents in six years. Yudhoyono's rule was a period of relative economic growth (averaging 6 percent) and stability. Efforts to fight corruption, however, proved unsuccessful in the long term. It was also a period characterized by a process of political fragmentation, which saw new forms of "decentralized clientelism" (Aspinall 2013:36) and new elites gaining more wealth (Mietzner 2013).

In 2014, Joko Widodo ("Jokowi") was elected president as part of a new generation of political leaders. He was a furniture maker who became a popular mayor in the Central Javanese town of Solo (first elected in 2005 and re-elected by acclamation in 2009), before becoming Governor of Jakarta in 2012. Jokowi rose to power on a wave of reform and grassroots empowerment. His first term as president brought infrastructure projects and economic growth, but there were also signs of democratic backsliding and democracy indices starting to decline. This "new developmentalism" (Warburton 2016) echoed the state-driven development agenda under Soeharto: pragmatic and growth-oriented with a disregard for transparency and human rights. He was elected for a second term with a smaller majority in 2019, during which his regime became increasingly populist and autocratic. Jokowi began to resemble many other Southeast Asian populist leaders, such as Thaksin in Thailand, Marcos Jr in the Philippines and Mahathir in Malaysia—loved by the people for delivering services (Jokowi had a 75 percent approval rating in 2024)

but criticized by observers and the Jakarta elite for curtailing political contestation.

After serving two terms, Jokowi was replaced in October 2024 by Prabowo Subianto (usually just referred to by his first name), the son of one of the country's most famous economists, a former three-star general and once married to Soeharto's daughter. He had for a long time been banned from entering the US following allegations of human rights abuses. He lived in a self-imposed exile in Jordan for a decade after being discharged from the military in late 1998.[1] Prabowo campaigned on a platform of law, order and free lunches. Like many populists, he also made clever use of social media, rebranding himself from a tainted general to a dancing grandpa. While the other two presidential candidates together had 117 million engagements on TikTok, Prabowo alone had 172 million (Kurawal 2024:16). Prabowo was not the favourite when he launched his third presidential campaign. (He had previously lost to Jokowi in 2014 and 2019.) However, he made Jokowi's son, Gibran Rakabuming Raka, candidate for vice president and gained the support of the popular Jokowi and the youth vote. (People under 30 make up half the electorate in Indonesia.) Prabowo surprisingly won 57 percent of the vote in an election that had issues around handing out envelopes in exchange for votes and the alleged use of state resource to support the Prabowo-Gibran ticket,[2] and with a turnout above 80 percent that other countries can only dream of. According to some observers, efforts to rig the 2024 election has led Indonesia to be on the brink of "competitive authoritarianism", the co-existence of democratic institutions alongside power abuse, yielding elector competition that is real but unfair (Jaffrey and Warburton 2024).

The State of Democracy

The Economist Intelligence Unit categorized Indonesia – the world's third largest democracy – as a mid-level "flawed democracy" in 2024. Freedom House labelled it "partly free", downgraded from "free" in 2013. There have been declining ratings over the past five years on both indices. Civil society was ranked as mid-level "obstructed" by CIVICUS in 2024, and the Civil Society Organization Sustainability Index has shown declining scores for the legal environment since 2016, but increases in capacity and advocacy. The Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) data for accountability and civil society indicators show a similar trend: a rapid improvement around the turn of the century, stable improvement until 2014 and a decade of slowly declining indicators since then.[3]

Indonesia is at a crossroads in 2025. After a decade of slow democratic backsliding and contracting civic space, but with some significant victories for civil society, will the new administration continue down the autocratic road or will there be a bounce back for democracy? It is too early to tell, as the new administration is still in its honeymoon phase. However, it is worrying that, in December 2024, in the context of implementing large and expensive free lunch and health check-up programmes, Prabowo floated the idea of abolishing direct elections for governors and mayors/regents,[4] suggesting instead that they be indirectly elected by the Regional

[1] However, just before the 2024 election, Jokowi controversially gave Prabowo the honorary rank of four-star general.
[2] Prabowo victory secures Jokowi's legacy - Indonesia at Melbourne (unimelb.edu.au); CIVICUS 2024, TEMPO 2024.
[3] See Power (2018), Mietzner (2021) and Baker (2023) for reviews of this decline.
[4] A regent heads a rural district and a mayor a city.

House of Representatives (DPRD), which was the case under the autocratic New Order. His argument was that local elections are too expensive to organize, and result in leaders with their own agendas. The bigger picture is that oligarchs and political parties would rather see their loyal supporters as governors and mayors. In the interim, in January 2025, Prabowo announced that local government heads elected in November 2024 would take part in a military-style bootcamp end of February 2025, just as his cabinet had in October 2024 (see below). At the time of writing, there has been no further public discussion on abolishing the regional elections, which would be a major backward step for democracy. Jokowi tried to do the same in 2023, but the idea was shot down by a mass student and civil society protest. How pro-democrats are allowed to react this time will therefore be a good measure of the degree of democratic backsliding.

Indonesia is certainly not immune from continuing democratic challenges. Its democracy is open but fragile. Civil society is active but fighting an ongoing battle for its legitimacy. Civic spaces and critical thinking are gradually becoming more restricted. An increasingly powerful "uncivil society", comprising paramilitary, ethno-nationalist or religious conservative groups, uses disinformation, intimidation and even violence to achieve its anti-democratic and illiberal agendas (Beittinger-Lee 2009; Hadiz 2018). The government and these non-state actors use various negative narrative tactics to malign CSOs in order to alienate them from citizens. They seek to delegitimize their work as promoting foreign interests and the "non-Indonesian" values of freedom and universal human rights, plotting against the government and destabilizing the country. This has at times led to the criminalization of civil society, putting human rights defenders, investigative journalists and civil society activists at risk. Some have been jailed, undermining the ability of civil society and media organizations to operate safely and effectively.

Laws and regulations narrow democratic freedoms.[5] Information and Electronic Transaction Law No. 11/2008 criminalizes defamation and insult, and its vague language can be broadly interpreted and used to target individuals for expressing their opinions online. The Law is not aligned with international standards on freedom of expression. Social Organization Law No. 17/2013 imposes harsh administrative burdens on CSOs, such as strict regulations on their formation and operation that require them to register with the government and adhere to specific regulations.[6] The government has the authority to dissolve organizations that are deemed to threaten national unity or public order, and this is used to suppress dissent and limit the activities of groups critical of the government. A new Criminal Code in 2022 made public criticism of the presidency illegal.

The Prabowo cabinet is inclusive. Only one major political party, PDI-D, which has been led for decades by the daughter of Indonesia's first president Soekarno, is outside the broad ruling coalition.[7] The personalization of political parties by elites has led to a reduction in the ideological

[5] See for instance YAPPIKA (2023), Power (2018), Mietzner (2021) and Baker (2023) for reviews of this decline.
[6] "Burying them in paperwork" is part of the authoritarian playbook.
[7] In the same way as Prabowo, after losing the presidential run-off to Jokowi in 2019, was asked to become Minister of Defence. There are very few countries in which political opponents are willing to team up to this degree. It perhaps leads to effective government, but the lack of a political opposition is also a sign of a flawed democracy, so democracy activists are watching this carefully.

positions that parties adopt (Mietzner 2023b), which explains the supermajority coalitions under Jokowi and Prabowo.

To divide the political cake between the parties, there are 48 ministries – up from 34 under Jokowi. In exchange for Jokowi's support, 17 ministers were kept on from his administration, including some high performers such as the Minister of Finance and Minister of Health. Twenty-three ministers are from political parties and 25 are non-partisan, including several from the Armed Forces and the Police, but there are only five women (down from nine). There is a new generation of leaders in the cabinet and dynasties are being built. Appointing Jokowi's son as Vice President might be an attempt to position him for the 2029 presidential election, when Prabowo will be 78. That will be the first election with Millennials and Generation Z in majority, looking for younger leaders.

With his military background, President Prabowo promotes a disciplined leadership style. This is different from Yudhoyono, who was a moderating influence and always prioritized harmony,[8] and Jokowi who went from a self-made political outsider and reformist to a populist and autocrat.[9] As Minister of Defence, Prabowo allowed frank internal discussion but once a decision was made, demanded obedience. Immediately after the inauguration on 20 October 2024, the full cabinet attended a four-day bootcamp at the Indonesian Military Academy in Central Java, inducing the core values of discipline and loyalty.[10] However, there are already signs of lack of coordination and cases of ministers in the bloated cabinet pursuing their own agendas.[11] A February 2025 article by a former Deputy Minister of State Administrative Reforms[12] blames this on performance management and rigidity in the planning and budgeting system.

Public Administration, Public Services and Decentralization

The militaristic approach described above can only be understood in relation to the historical origins of the postcolonial state. The contemporary Indonesian state was built up around the bureaucracy and the armed forces, and not around ruling dynasties, landholding families or religious institutions, as was the case in other post-colonial countries. Public administration and the civil service have taken over much of the state's inner workings for their own benefit, rather than the public good. In the words of Benedict Anderson, this is "best understood as the resurrection of the state and its triumph vis-à-vis society and nation" (Anderson 1983). There is today still a strong sense of entitlement and resistance to change among government officials. Jokowi's 2014 high-profile Mental Revolution (*Revolusi Mental*), which was intended to transform the traditional mindset and behaviour of Indonesians to foster a more optimistic, self-reliant and cooperative society, was strongly resisted by the bureaucracy and never properly implemented.[13]
With the lack of substantive political-economic reforms after 1998, politics has become characterized by patronage and the

[8] https://www.newmandala.org/stability-and-stagnation-under-sby/
[9] Jokowi's leadership: From successful reforms to hubris syndrome?
[10] https://www.thejakartapost.com/indonesia/2024/10/26/prabowo-introduces-military-way-to-cabinet-in-magelang-bootcamp.html
[11] Missteps, lack of coordination loom over 'bloated' cabinet - Politics - The Jakarta Post
[12] Governance challenges in implementing Prabowo's vision - Academia - The Jakarta Post
[13] https://www.medcom.id/nasional/politik/akWXqAWK-pakar-ungkap-penyebab-gagalnya-revolusi-mental

exchange of money and goods for political affiliation. Personalistic power relationships disburse material resources for political benefit (Aspinall 2013; Mietzner 2024), allowing oligarchic networks and predatory practices to survive in global neoliberal markets. Robison and Hadiz (2004) call this the "Indonesian paradox". However, one prominent observer of Indonesian politics sees the recent fragmentation of patronage and the subsequent political competition as a potential positive for democracy and the preservation of social peace, since it constrains power (Aspinall 2013).

Indonesia's population of 285 million and the sprawling geography of 6,000 inhabited islands favour a decentralized system of governance. In the aftermath of *reformasi*, there was a strong demand for revised relationships between the centre and the regions. There were regional rebellions in East Timor, Aceh and Papua[14], as well as vocal demands for more autonomy in resource-rich provinces such as East Kalimantan and Riau. At the same time, ethnic groups were killing each other in frustration over social injustice in West Kalimantan and the Moluccan islands.

The 1999 Law on Regional Autonomy set in motion perhaps the most radical decentralization policy in the world (Antlöv and Hidayat 2004). Authority over all government services apart from finance, foreign affairs, defence, justice and religious affairs was transferred to cities and districts, bypassing the provinces. This gave far-reaching regional autonomy to local government, which often had very low capacity. The main architects of the 1999 law argued that this was done to "save the nation and the unitary state" (Syakani, Gaffar and Rasyid 2002:167). Ethnic tensions have been reduced by dramatically increasing the number of provinces and districts from 28 provinces and 377 districts in 1998 to 38 provinces and 514 districts in 2025, providing new political opportunities for disgruntled regional elites. As part of a policy to promote community development, Indonesia's 75,000 villages have also received large amounts of funding (an average of US $100,000/year) with "extreme variations" in results (World Bank 2023; see also Antlöv et. al. 2016).

However, wide regional disparities and variations in the implementation capacity of local government have created significant challenges. After two decades of decentralization and democratization, citizens' needs and poverty targets have failed to shape government plans and priorities. Sub-national service quality remains low. Studies have shown that this is not due to a lack of public funds or low government capacity, but because local government officials have no incentive to improve public services (Lewis 2010). Corruption also remains a big problem: over 250 heads of government have been charged with corruption since 2010, and there is no end in sight with new cases every month. There has also been a mixed performance by the Corruption Eradication Committee, the Chair of which had to resign in 2024 because of accusations of corruption.

Civil Society and Democratic Practices

Civil society groups are active in Indonesia, and the operating environment is largely positive for civic society engagement at the local level (Ferrazzi 2022:270, Antlöv 2013). Civil society has shown resilience even in the light of the increased political restrictions.

[14] East Timor got its independence in 2002, and Papua and Aceh far-reaching autonomy in 2001 and 2006, respectively.

There is still space for collaboration between CSOs and the government on issues around public services. Collaboration with government is more difficult, however, on issues such as human rights, land tenure, sexual rights and Indigenous people's rights, where CSOs instead focus on advocacy and campaigning.

After the initial flowering of civil society during the early *reformasi* period (Antlöv 2003; Antlöv and Wetterberg 2013), the democratic decline and changes to the civic space in the past decade mean that many CSOs have found it difficult to survive, especially at the local level where funding is not as readily available. The capacity of local CSOs is also limited. Many simply follow the flow of projects and the contracts they can obtain. There has also been a weakening of community institutions. A 2013 study on village resilience found that community capacity for collective action was declining (Wetterberg et. al. 2013) and a recent World Bank (2023) report found similar tendencies, albeit with variations. Many who had reached the limits of what they could achieve as activists joined elite-dominated political parties in 2019 and 2024, further weakening and fragmenting civil society. As a result, civil society is not a political force, as it is in Thailand, Malaysia and the Philippines.

Under the right conditions and with the right support, however, local CSOs can make positive contributions, as exemplified by the USAID MADANI project that the present author led in 2019–2024. CSO partners in 32 districts in six provinces were provided with organizational capacity, grants and support to lead multistakeholder "Learning Forums" in each district, which brought together different actors to design and pilot a local development solution tailored to that district. (On the lessons learned from MADANI, see FHI 360 Forthcoming.) At the end of the project, MADANI CSO partners had increased their confidence to expand their networking and play a larger role, including as role models for other local CSOs and positive partners in local government. Civil society empowerment resulted in concrete improvements in service delivery on the frontline, such as additional staff and expanded working hours in Community Health Centres and primary schools, improved parking spaces and waiting areas in public facilities, disability-friendly classrooms and new community management initiatives for solid waste management. Where local-level reforms were successful, the triggers were commonly a combination of public entrepreneurship and civil society activism that brought together CSOs, reform-minded local government officials, responsible businesses, journalists and community leaders for public deliberation on local development issues. They achieved more together than each actor could have done on its own (Antlöv and Wetterberg forthcoming).

Future Challenges: Indonesia's Centennial in 2045

There are many challenges facing the Prabowo administration. First and foremost is how to avoid falling into the middle-income trap. Indonesia is an upper middle-income country with an annual growth rate of 5 percent. Experience from East Asia shows that an average annual growth rate of 8 percent is required to become a high-income country. Prabowo has set as his target in the 2024–2029 development plan to become a high-income country by the "Golden Centennial" in 2045. However, this will be difficult to achieve without foreign investment, innovation, and expertise, and Indonesia lacks all three.
The new administration is looking at ways to increase foreign investment, eliminate red tape, improve infrastructure, provide incentives for the Indonesian diaspora to

return home and allow foreign experts to work in Indonesian universities and hospitals. The challenge is how Indonesia can move beyond its dependence on low-tech manufacturing and extractive industries. The transition to a knowledge-based and high-tech economy is slow. R&D comprises just 0.24 percent of the national budget and the Jakarta-based University of Indonesia is the only university in the Times Higher Education World University Rankings, and then only in the bottom 800–1,000 quintennial.

A second weakness in relation to the demands of the aspiring middle class is the weak capacity of local government to improve the quality of basic public services, such as healthcare and education. There has been a dramatic expansion in the past two decades of a class of "precariously non-poor" (Hill 2021) who are no longer poor but also not prospering as a middle class. This increasingly vocal class is demanding improved government services and faster reform, which presents new political challenges for a government providing poor public services and lagging reforms (Baker 2023). Most Indonesians today have access to healthcare and primary education, but the quality is low. Stunting, and neonatal and maternal mortality remain significant problems, and Indonesian high school and university students rank very low in international tests. Prabowo has proposed more centralized governance to improve this (for instance involving the military in distributing school lunches), but this will have high anti-democratic costs.

Finally, globalization has led to growing influence from China and the Middle East. Chinese investments are mainly in the economic sphere, while wealthy Middle Eastern countries are investing in religious (conservative Islamic) infrastructure. More recently, however, both China and Middle Eastern countries have been investing in higher education in Indonesia, funding sandwich programmes with Indonesian universities and offering generous scholarships. Just as the US and Europe in the 1960s–1980s built neoliberal influence by educating a generation of leaders in western universities, these new lines of foreign influence could produce a generation attuned to Islamic and Chinese values and models. Previous administrations were staunchly non-aligned. (Indonesia was a founding member of the Non-Aligned Movement in 1955.) Prabowo, however, moved fast to seek new alliances as the US, the European Union and the United Kingdom become increasingly inward looking. Indonesia is since January 2025 one of the BRICS countries.

The Future of Democracy in Indonesia

As Indonesia moves forward under the Prabowo presidency, it is important for observers and activists to monitor potential early warning signs that have affected other countries that have backslid and turned authoritarian. This section highlights some of the signs.

The first is related to increasing restrictions on freedom of speech. As noted above, public criticism of the president has been made illegal and social media such as Facebook and TikTok are monitored by government agencies for criticism. When legitimate legal challenges are lost, mistrust in the courts grows and the *trias politico* is weakened. There are some signs of this in Indonesia – the above-mentioned political game by Jokowi to permit his son to run as vice-president, in which the Constitutional Court was chaired by Jokowo's brother-in-law, being perhaps the most blatant. On the positive side, a high-profile defamation case in 2023, in which two civil society human rights defenders were accused by a senior minister (and former general) after

implicating him in a case of connections between the military and mining companies, was won by the activists.

Indonesia has experienced an increase in religious intolerance and communal polarization, which can have political repercussions as it has in India or the US. In Indonesia, increasing religious intolerance has been linked to an increase in conservative, mainly Islamic, values. However, identity politics as seen in many other autocratic countries has not taken hold in Indonesia – and its strong history of religious tolerance might be a factor in this. The resurgence of conservative Islamic values has had only limited spillover in the political sphere: between 2004 and 2024, the national vote for Islamic parties has remained below 10 percent. This might be partly due to the normalization of extreme positions, which has been seen in many countries, as mainstream political parties adopt more conservative or fundamentalist policies. By and large, political discourse is not as nasty as in many other countries, but instead focused on Indonesian values such as harmony and family. There are also no signs that the public is losing faith in civil society or activists who stand up for human rights, which is another warning sign. There is none of the "anti-wokeism" seen in the US and Europe. However, the rise of more aggressive "us vs. them" language would signal a move away from tolerance under democracy.

Increased militarization and use of the military and police for political purposes are also warning signs. This might include the military style Prabowo uses to run the cabinet and greater use of the military in civilian affairs. There has been a significant recent expansion in the military's role in civilian affairs, reminiscent of the "*dwifungsi*" (dual function) doctrine of the Soeharto era. The military has been tasked with managing a $28 billion free school meals programme and overseeing farming and irrigation projects.[15] In addition, legislation has been drafted to permit military officers still on active duty to occupy senior government positions. Critics argue that this could undermine democratic reforms and erode civilian oversight.

This is related to the final and perhaps most serious threat against democracy: the rise in Indonesia of the practice of "the unitary executive"[16], putting the entire government, including independent democratic institutions, under presidential control, both national and local. The ban on criticism of the government is one step. The proposal to end regional elections a second. Getting rid of critical public servants is a third: in February 2025 the national parliament – led by Prabowo's coalition – revised its rules to allow lawmakers to assess and dismiss high-ranking government officials that might stand in the way of the President's political goals, such as in the General Election Commission (KPU) and Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK),[17]undermining the independence of institutions that should keep the president and executive in check. The notion of a unitary executive with limited opposition fits into the political economy of the post-colonial Indonesian state with its limited party competition, which makes the notion more powerful and legitimate.

Conclusions: How Resilient is Democracy in Indonesia?

[15] Indonesia's new leader expands military's role in test of fragile democracy | Reuters

[16] Unitary Executive Theory (UET) | Wex Legal Dictionary / Encyclopedia | LII / Legal Information Institute

[17] Democracy under threat - Editorial - The Jakarta Post

The jury is still out on democracy under Prabowo. Certainly, there has been none of the havoc that Trump has unleashed in his first weeks in office. After the first 100 days, trust in the government remains above 75 percent. The main Indonesian newspaper KOMPAS reported in January 2025 that 80.9 percent of respondents to a survey were satisfied with Prabowo's performance after the first 100 days. However, observers[18] also note missteps and poorly coordinated policy statements, such as on the South China Sea and the last-minute rescinding of a proposed VAT increase.

On the negative side, there is a certain fatigue with democracy. Turnout in the February 2024 general election was very high (above 80 percent), but voting in the November 2024 regional elections declined to only 57 percent.[19] In an interview with *The Guardian*, the prominent Indonesian scholar, Vedi Hadiz,[20] saw this as part of a global disillusionment with democracy, as people have fewer expectations of what it can deliver. There is also a legacy of a rentier system in Indonesia in which citizens sometimes look past corruption (and now an increasing authoritarianism) if the government delivers.

A commentary in *Foreign Affairs* on the Prabowo candidacy ahead of the February 2024 General Election noted that Indonesian democracy is stronger than one strong man.[21] The political fragmentation of the past 15 years has made it difficult for any individual to gain too much influence. Indonesia has shifting coalitions and scattered power centres. Even as Minister of Defence, Prabowo did not dramatically reform the military or make it loyal to him (Mietzner 2023a). He rules over a broad coalition with multiple and competing interests. He also runs a bloated bureaucracy with its own internal logic and interests and multiple layers of directly elected leaders who might not have the capacity or political incentive to implement national policies. Indonesia has an active civil society and a student movement that takes to the streets when required. There is continued trust that democracy is the least bad option; many still remember the harsh restrictions under the authoritarian New Order. Recent civil society wins also show that the country has the tools for regime repair and that democratic failure is not inevitable (Jaffrey and Warburton 2024:301).

The future of democracy in the world might look uncertain but Indonesia has been resilient. There is a continual slow backsliding that needs to be taken seriously, but it is not yet as bad as in many other countries. Nevertheless, as the global authoritarian clouds gather, civil society and pro-democracy actors in Indonesia need to consolidate and up their game to continue effectively disrupt the authoritarian agenda (HUMANIS 2024). Let us hope that this report does not, like Cribb's in 1998, become obsolete overnight. Or that the recent rise of competitive authoritarianism and new developmentalism does not lead Indonesia towards the same type of regime that the 1998 democracy movement hoped to make obsolete.

[18] Indonesian president Prabowo's first 100 days marked by u-turns, missteps … and sky-high popularity | Indonesia | The Guardian

[19] Jakarta, regions see historically low voter turnout in local polls - Politics - The Jakarta Post

[20] Did democracy survive the 2024 global election marathon?

[21] Indonesia's Democracy Is Stronger Than a Strongman

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About UI

The Swedish Institute of International Affairs
Visiting Address: Amarilitetsbacken 1, 111 49 Stockholm
Postal Address: Box 3163, 103 63 Stockholm
Phone: +46 8 511 768 00
www.ui.se info@ui.se X: @UISweden