



The Decline of Democracy and Indications of Authoritarianism: A Study of the Dynamics of Contemporary Indonesian Politics

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the phenomenon of democracy in Indonesia after the 1998 reforms, which was marked by a weakening of the substantive quality of democracy and the strengthening of covert authoritarianism. Using a qualitative approach and desk study methods, this study analyzes the dynamics of contemporary Indonesian politics through Robert A. Dahl's theory of polyarchy, Larry Diamond's concept of democratic consolidation, and Andreas Schedler and Nancy Bermeo's framework of electoral authoritarianism. The findings indicate that although democratic procedures, such as elections, remain formally valid, the practices of power tend to be exclusive, repressive, and manipulative. Civic space has been narrowed, criticism of power has been criminalized, and independent oversight institutions have lost their function. This phenomenon indicates a shift toward a hybrid regime, or a formal democracy but authoritarian in substance. To prevent anti-democratic consolidation of power, institutional reform, the enforcement of a just rule of law, and the empowerment of civil society as a countervailing force are necessary. This research is expected to contribute to the academic literature on latent threats to democracy and provide a normative basis for strengthening substantive democracy in Indonesia.

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1. PENDAHULUAN

The 1998 Reformation was a significant milestone in Indonesian political history, marking the birth of a new era with a spirit of renewal in the state system. This momentum paved the way for the establishment of a more transparent and accountable government system that upheld the principles of civil liberties and political openness. The euphoria that accompanied this transition period fostered high hopes for the achievement of mature and sustainable democratic consolidation in Indonesia. However, more than two decades later, Indonesian democracy actually reflects symptoms of weakening, both institutionally and culturally (*Aspinall & Mietzner, 2010*). While democratic institutions such as elections, parliament, and the mass media still formally exist, the substantive quality of Indonesian democracy is increasingly under discussion. Behind these democratic symbols, the strengthening of dominant, covert, and manipulative power practices is increasingly apparent. Symptoms of authoritarianism are no longer as overt as in the past, but rather infiltrate slowly through legal regulations, co-optation of political elites, and practices of repression disguised as formal legitimacy (Dahl,

2008b). In these conditions, many statements have emerged that democracy in Indonesia is weakening from within, or even moving toward a new form of authoritarianism hidden behind a democratic facade.

This statement serves as both a conceptual framework and a starting point for formulating the analytical framework for this study. This research specifically draws on several theories and models derived from the study of democracy and authoritarianism. Among these is the concept of polyarchy developed by Robert A. Dahl, which offers the view that democracy is not an absolute condition, but rather a spectrum or continuum characterized by two main dimensions: broad political participation and open political competition (Dahl, 2008b). This concept is very useful for assessing the quality of democracy in a country based on the extent to which these two dimensions are guaranteed and implemented effectively.

This idea of democracy continued to develop under Robert A. Dahl. Dahl then viewed democracy not only as an electoral system but also as a government's responsiveness to the voices of its citizens. For Dahl, the ideal of democracy is not merely a formal mechanism, but rather about political equality, where all citizens have equal opportunities to express and influence public policy. He identified three key requirements for a healthy democracy: citizens must be able to form their own opinions, voice those opinions, and have those opinions fairly weighed in the decision-making process (Dahl, 2008a). In the context of modern society, this third requirement cannot be realized without freedom of association, access to information, and institutions that guarantee fair political participation. This means that democracy is not just about voting, but also about how our voices are processed and valued.

This study also adopts the dichotomy between democratic procedures and substantive democracy introduced by Larry Diamond and Juan J. Linz. Democratic procedures refer to the existence of formal institutions such as elections, parliament, and an independent judiciary, while substantive democracy refers to the improvement of democratic values in real life, such as social justice, political equality, and the protection of civil rights. This dichotomy is used to assess whether Indonesian democracy has only stopped at the formal aspect or has experienced a substantial institutionalization of democratic values (Diamond & Plattner, 1996).

Larry Diamond brings this discussion to the stage of how democracy can survive in the long term, which he calls democratic consolidation. In his article, "Toward Democracy Consolidation" (1994), Diamond explains that democracy will not be strong if it stops at the transitional stage. It must be consolidated, meaning that society and political elites truly consider democracy as the only legitimate path to statehood. To achieve this, four important pillars must be maintained: an active civil society, open and competitive politics, strong law enforcement, and an effective state bureaucracy. If even one of these four pillars collapses, the entire democratic system could falter. Diamond also highlights the role of civil society in particular, calling it a learning space for democracy, a place where citizens practice discussion, build tolerance, and peacefully fight for their rights (Diamond, 1994).

Overall, Dahl and Diamond's thinking emphasizes that a strong democracy is not just about political structures, but also about citizen awareness and involvement. Dahl emphasizes the importance of equal participation, while Diamond focuses more on how civil society can be the driving force behind a healthy and lasting democracy. They agree that if citizens are passive and critical voices are silenced, democracy will become a mere formality. However, if citizens are active, politically literate, and engage peacefully and productively in civic spaces, democracy has a greater chance of truly living and thriving. Their theories provide a powerful guide for assessing the quality of democracy, not just by the presence or absence of elections, but by the extent to which the system provides a fair, equal, and open space for all its citizens.

Nancy Bermeo (2016) In his journal, he revealed that in studying the phenomenon of democracy (democracy in decline) in the contemporary context, he realized that he was in a shift in the pattern of democracy from its initially overt form, for example, military coups or the forced dissolution of legislative institutions to its increasingly hidden and formal form. He emphasized that the process of weakening democracy today often occurs gradually and appears legally legitimate, so it is often not immediately recognized as a threat to the democratic order. In his analysis, Bermeo identified two main patterns that mark the current democratic marking, namely executive enlargement and strategic election manipulation (Bermeo, 2016).

Then there's executive aggrandizement, which refers to the personality of executive actors, for example, presidents or prime ministers, who expand their dominance through seemingly constitutional legal systems, such as constitutional amendments, institutionalized judicial independence, or the undermining of oversight bodies. On the other hand, strategic election manipulation refers to systematic and practical damage to election integrity without necessarily denying the electoral process outright. This type of manipulation can include the seizure of media access, the weakening of political opposition, and the manipulation of electoral districts.

Although carried out within a formal legal framework, these practices substantively contradict basic democratic principles, such as accountability, equal political competition, and inclusive public participation. Therefore, Bermeo emphasized the urgency of being aware of these latent yet impactful patterns of democracy, particularly because they are carried out systematically and often go unnoticed by the wider public and the international community.

To understand the current direction of Indonesian political development, it is important to review theories of authoritarianism as a relevant analytical foundation. Authoritarianism generally refers to a system of government that concentrates power in the hands of an elite group or individual, with minimal public participation and weak oversight mechanisms. Juan J. Linz describes an authoritarian regime as a political system characterized by limited pluralism, low political mobilization of society, and the absence of clear authority over the executive branch (Linz, 2000). In this context, formal institutions such as parliament and elections continue to operate, but more as formalities that do not reflect true democratic principles.

Larry Diamond's thinking makes a significant contribution to understanding contemporary authoritarianism, which often appears under the guise of democracy. He highlights the tendency of modern authoritarian regimes to adopt democratic symbols and mechanisms to create political legitimacy, even though the substance of democracy itself has been weakened. This view aligns with the concept of electoral authoritarianism proposed by Andreas Schedler and serves as one of the analytical tools in this study. This framework is highly relevant to examining the phenomenon when a political regime maintains authoritarian practices but continues to hold regular elections as a means of legitimizing power. In this context, elections are not implemented as a mechanism for honest and fair competition, but rather as a means of control wrapped in democratic symbolism.

Electoral authoritarianism refers to a form of government that regularly holds elections, but under conditions that are neither free nor equal, and often controlled by dominant political forces. In such a system, state apparatuses are often used to intimidate political opponents, restrict press freedom, and manipulate election regulations to benefit those in power.

Contemporary authoritarianism no longer manifests itself in a clear and direct form, but rather operates through co-opted legal instruments and official institutions. This makes it increasingly difficult to recognize, as democracy emerges slowly and is permitted through seemingly legitimate processes. Therefore, understanding authoritarianism as a process that operates through formal state channels is crucial for understanding how power is consolidated and how public participation is increasingly narrowed unnoticed.

2. METHOD

The research method used is a qualitative method that seeks to understand the facts in this study using a qualitative approach with a library study method. A qualitative approach was chosen because it is appropriate for exploring and understanding complex socio-political realities in depth, such as the dynamics of democracy and authoritarian tendencies in the context of contemporary Indonesia. This research does not aim to test hypotheses quantitatively, but rather to examine and interpret the meaning behind ongoing political phenomena. Qualitative methods allow researchers to position themselves reflectively in understanding social phenomena as constructions formed by power structures, norms, culture, and narratives that develop in society. A qualitative approach to research allows researchers to deeply understand social phenomena through the perspectives of the subjects being studied. The data collected generally takes the form of narratives, documents, articles, and legal texts, which are analyzed interpretively to uncover the meaning, meaning structures, and thought patterns behind a social action or policy. This research does not focus on statistics, but rather on deepening understanding of complex and dynamic social realities. Thus, qualitative research is both descriptive and analytical, and is able to uncover ideology, power relations, and the dynamics of public policy, including within the context of democracy in Indonesia (Anggito & Setiawan, 2018).

Data collection techniques were conducted through documentation, meaning researchers accessed and reviewed various relevant written sources. The documents reviewed included scholarly books, national and international journal articles, previous research findings, and official documents such as laws, government regulations, and reports from independent institutions related to democracy. Credible online sources, such as publications from The Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU), Freedom House, and reports from the National Commission on Human Rights (Komnas HAM) or the Indonesian Institute of Sciences (LIPI), also served as important references in the analysis. All sources were selected based on their recency, relevance, and academic level to produce valid and scientifically accountable secondary data.

The data analysis process is carried out using the content analysis method, and thematic analysis. Content analysis aims to discover the meaningful structure of the text being studied, while thematic analysis is conducted to identify thematic patterns that emerge from the various documents analyzed. Researchers interpret the meaning of a text not only based on its explicit content but also on the political, historical, and social contexts underlying its emergence. In other words, researchers discuss not only "what is written" but also "why it is written that way" (Purwanto, 2022).

Furthermore, to maintain the credibility and validity of the findings, the researcher applied the theory of strategic triangulation. This means that the researcher did not use a single theory to explain the phenomenon, but rather combined various theories of democracy and authoritarianism to gain a more complete and unbiased understanding. By integrating the views of Dahl, Diamond, Linz, and Schedler, the researcher was able to avoid theoretical reduction and produce an integrative analysis. Furthermore, the researcher also applied the principle of reflectivity, recognizing that the researcher's position influences the way the researcher views and interprets the data. Therefore, each analysis process was carried out with critical awareness and avoided excessive assumptions.

Overall, this research method is designed to produce a study that not only describes empirical facts or conditions but also depicts power relations, ideological constructions, and narrative struggles within the democratic process in Indonesia. The results of this approach are expected to provide both theoretical and practical contributions, particularly in enriching the academic literature on procedural and substantive democracy, as well as the potential dangers of electoral authoritarianism in countries formally designated as democracies (Suardi, 2017).

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Decline of Democracy and Symptoms of Covert Authoritarianism

The democratic transition that occurred after the 1998 reforms gave rise to great optimism for the establishment of an open, participatory political system that upholds the principles of checks and balances. Freedom of the press, freedom of expression, and the establishment of independent institutions such as the Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK) were important symbols of Indonesia's democratic progress at that time. However, in the past two decades, the trajectory of Indonesian democracy appears to be regressing. The revision of the KPK Law, which stipulates the authority of these institutions, the consolidation of major parties into alliances with virtually no critical opposition in parliament, and the state's tendency to regulate civil space through repressive regulations, indicate that democracy is no longer growing but is slowly eroding (Kadir, 2017).

This phenomenon is not only a structural or institutional issue, but has also infiltrated the cultural and ethical dimensions of democracy itself. Transactional political practices are strengthening, the space for public discussion is shrinking, and criticism of power is often met with intimidation and criminalization. National political ethics are weakening, marked by the normalization of repressive practices by the state, disguised as a narrative of stability and security. In this case, the public is not only losing the freedom to voice criticism but also losing trust in democratic institutions that should be a tool to check power (WARBURTON & ASPINALL, 2019).

Concerns about the military's return to civilian spaces are growing, particularly following the drafting of the Indonesian National Armed Forces (TNI) Law, which opens up opportunities for active-duty soldiers to attain strategic positions in government. Yet the spirit of reform firmly rejects the military's dual function and the insistence on civilian supremacy as a key pillar of the democratic system. This trend not only signals a failing institution but also warns of the gradual militarization of the civilian bureaucracy. This poses significant risks to the quality of state governance and the principle of public accountability (Iskandar, 2017).

Pressures on press freedom are becoming increasingly apparent. Intimidation against journalists and independent media outlets is on the rise again, both through physical and symbolic threats, such as sending terrifying objects to journalists' homes. This situation creates a climate of fear and a chilling effect among the public, thus reducing their courage to conduct investigative reporting on those in power. Yet, in a democratic country, press freedom is a key pillar for transparency and control over power. If this freedom is eroded, democracy loses one of its most important pillars (Dahlia & Permana, 2022).

Given the above symptoms, it appears that Indonesian democracy is currently experiencing serious stagnation. Elections are still held regularly, but their quality is declining due to unequal access to information, the dominance of political capital, and the weakening independence of election management institutions. In Andreas Schedler's terminology, this situation can be broken down into a form of electoral authoritarianism, where elements of democratic procedures are maintained but the substance of substantive democracy is

increasingly eroded (Schedler, 2006). Thus, it can be said that Indonesia is at a crossroads between weak democracy and the emergence of a hybrid regime that is at the boundary between democratic legality and authoritarian control.

The Dialectic of Democracy and Authoritarianism in the Context of Indonesian Politics

In examining the dynamics of democracy in Indonesia, it is important to position the existing political reality within a relevant theoretical framework. One highly influential theory in the study of democracy is Robert A. Dahl's concept of polyarchy. He emphasized that true democracy can only be realized if two fundamental conditions are met: inclusive participatory politics and free and fair competition. Democracy is not only measured by the frequency of elections, but also by the extent to which people are given the opportunity to actively participate in decision-making and access power equally. Larry Diamond reinforces this argument by distinguishing between procedural and substantive democracy. Procedural democracy is limited to the routine conduct of elections and formal legal recognition, while substantive democracy encompasses civil liberties, upholding the rule of law, and accountability to those in power. In the Indonesian context, although elections technically still take place regularly, the essence of substantive democracy appears to be seriously undermined (Arrsa, 2014).

Many have called Indonesia's current situation a pseudo-democracy, where formal procedures are maintained but democratic practices are increasingly constrained by an oligarchic power structure. In such a system, people are granted the right to vote in elections, but the available choices tend to be monopolized by elite groups interconnected by economic and political networks. As a result, election results often do not authentically reflect the people's aspirations but are rather the result of political manipulation by elites who control political parties, the media, and state institutions. Democracy has become a sort of formality that masks the reality that important decisions are actually made behind closed doors by a handful of those in power (Andrias et al., 2025).

In contemporary literature, this phenomenon can be explained through the concept of democratic decline as outlined by Nancy Bermeo. She argues that today's democracies are no longer characterized by military coups or forced dissolution, but rather by the gradual weakening of institutions by genuinely democratically elected actors. In Indonesia, this is reflected in various controversial policies, such as the revision of the Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK) Law, which reduces its independence, the dominance of significant power in parliament that diminishes the function of the opposition, and the dwarfing of civil space through the criminalization of activism and freedom of expression. This process demonstrates that democracy can slowly die from within the system itself, without the need for violence or an explicit seizure of power (Bermeo, 2016).

Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt argue that democracy tends to die when legitimately elected leaders begin to abuse democratic institutions to maintain power, silence political opponents, and manipulate the rule of law to suit their personal or group interests. This phenomenon is evident in Indonesia today, with the rise of repressive practices against political opposition, the criminalization of critical historians and activists, and attempts to control independent media through economic pressure and direct intimidation (Levitsky & Way, 2010). In this context, democracy changes function to become an instrument that actually protects power from criticism and accountability.

The current political situation in Indonesia is also highly relevant to the concept of electoral authoritarianism developed by Andreas Schedler. He explains that in such a regime, elections are still held periodically, but they are not conducted fairly and competitively. The dominance of the media by pro-government forces, inequality in access to political resources, and the involvement of state officials in supporting certain candidates are strong indicators of a system that is formally democratic but substantively authoritarian. The ratification of the TNI Bill, which opens up space for active-duty soldiers to hold civilian positions, and the use of security forces to suppress public demonstrations, are symptoms of covert authoritarianism that erodes democracy from within. (Schedler, 2006).

Therefore, Indonesian democracy currently finds itself in an ambivalent position: on the one hand, it continues to implement formal democratic procedures, but on the other, it exhibits a strong tendency toward a hybrid, authoritarian government. This gray area not only confuses the public but also jeopardizes the future of democracy itself. Collective awareness and systematic efforts from civil society, historians, and independent institutions are needed to safeguard democracy from plunging further into the abyss of covert authoritarianism.

Strengthening Civil Infrastructure and Political Culture as Pillars of Democratic Resilience

In facing increasingly complex democratic challenges, one of the most fundamental efforts is rebuilding the strength of civil society as part of a system of balancing power. Democracy that relies solely on the continuity of formal institutions such as parliament, the judiciary, and election organizers, without the support of a strong and active civil society, risks becoming a procedural democracy without a substantive spirit. Civil society, consisting of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), the independent press, academic communities, religious groups, and student organizations, plays a crucial role as a corrective force against legitimate protections by the state (Ginanjar & Maksum, 2022). In the Indonesian context, civil society proved successful in overthrowing the authoritarian New Order regime through the 1998 Reform movement, spearheaded by students, journalists, and cross-sectoral community groups. However, post-reformation, civil society's space for movement gradually declined due to institutionalized legal repression, the silencing of critical voices, and increasing political and economic pressure on media independence (Aspinall, 2005).

The limited civil space occurs alongside the increasing consolidation of power within government structures that tend to be closed to criticism. The state is increasingly using legal instruments to regulate community organizations, even disbanding certain groups deemed to threaten national stability, without due process. Furthermore, the criminalization of environmental activists, human rights activists, and anti-corruption activists adds to the long list of ways in which civil society's role is being weakened. In this climate, democracy is losing one of its crucial pillars: horizontal oversight by citizens. Therefore, the revitalization of civil society is urgent and cannot be postponed. The government must encourage public involvement in policymaking, provide a safe space for dissent, and guarantee freedom of association and expression, as guaranteed by the constitution. Otherwise, power will continue to move unchecked, and democracy will become merely an empty symbol that no longer reflects the sovereignty of the people (Hadiz, 2004).

In addition to strengthening civil society as an actor in democracy, transforming political culture is also a crucial element in strengthening the quality of substantive democracy. A healthy political culture is the psychological and sociological foundation for the sustainability of a democratic political system. In a democratic political culture, values such as tolerance, accountability, respect for minority rights, and openness to differing views become norms practiced in daily life. Unfortunately, in Indonesia, political culture practices are still heavily colored by remnants of patrimonial patterns, where leaders are positioned as figures who cannot be criticized. This pattern of relationships creates independence and reduces citizens' capacity to critically exercise control over power. As a result, the people tend to become objects in the political process, rather than active and empowered subjects in shaping the direction of public policy (Liddle, 1996).

To transform a passive political culture into a participatory one, a systematic and sustainable approach is required, particularly through early political education. Community education must be directed not merely at memorizing the constitution and the names of state institutions, but also at developing democratic attitudes, the courage to express opinions, and the ability to think critically about public policy. School and university curricula must also begin to incorporate aspects of digital political literacy, given the increasingly dominant role of social media and open spaces in shaping public opinion. Furthermore, the mass media needs to carry out its oversight function more responsibly, while upholding the principles of independence, integrity, and objectivity. In this context, a healthy digital democracy ecosystem must be maintained, preventing it from being dominated by political buzzers, hoaxes, and hatred—hatred that actually undermines public discourse, which should be constructive and inclusive (Sarjito, 2024).

Ultimately, safeguarding democracy is not just about overcoming external threats like authoritarianism, but also about building the internal strength of society itself. Democratic resilience will only be achieved if the people have a high level of political awareness, a mature political culture, and a strong and protected civic space. Revitalizing civil society and cultivating democratic values is a long-term process that must be grounded in collective commitment from the state, society, and educational institutions. Without it, Indonesian democracy will become a mere formality, vulnerable to co-optation by powers that are anti-criticism and exclusive. Therefore, fighting for democracy today is not only the task of the political elite or legal institutions, but also a call for all citizens to remain actively involved in reviving the spirit of genuine reform.

Strengthening Institutional Structures and Law Enforcement as Pillars of Inclusive Democracy

In maintaining a healthy and substantial democracy, it is crucial to not only rely on the dynamics of civil society and a participatory political culture, but also focus on the institutional foundations that underpin the democratic system itself. Institutional reform, in this context, must be understood not merely as an effort to

change the formal structure of state institutions, but rather as a process of transforming the values, functions, and power relations between more deeply rooted institutions. State institutions such as the Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK), the Indonesian Ombudsman, and the Constitutional Court (MK) have a strategic mandate to oversee the oversight of power and maintain balance between the branches of government. However, recently there has been a serious decline in the independence and effectiveness of these institutions. The revised regulations on the KPK, for example, have sparked widespread concerns that the corruption eradication process will be hampered by political intervention that erodes institutional autonomy and, consequently, institutional integrity. If left unchecked, this situation will threaten the credibility of the democratic system, as power operates without adequate oversight from these institutions (Butt & Lindsey, 2012).

Institutional reform efforts must stem from the spirit of strengthening substantive democracy, which means creating state institutions that are accountable, transparent, and not subject to the interests of political or economic oligarchies. In addition to ensuring institutional independence, it is also crucial to design a system of checks and balances that operates effectively at all levels of government, both central and regional. In this context, the post-reform decentralization of government authority should serve as a momentum to expand public participation and oversight, rather than opening new opportunities for the formation of anti-democratic local political dynasties. Institutional reform also requires a long-term political commitment to limit the centralization of power in the executive branch and restore the functions of the legislative and judicial branches as critical counterweights to public policy (Fitriani et al., 2005). Without effective horizontal control mechanisms, democracy will always be under threat of limiting power to a small elite who can manipulate legal procedures and systems of representation.

In addition to institutional reform, the rule of law is an essential pillar inseparable from a healthy democracy. The fair, neutral, and non-discriminatory application of the law reflects the extent to which democracy truly guarantees social justice for all citizens. However, the reality of Indonesia's legal system still exhibits various distortions, particularly in the form of unequal access to justice, the criminalization of critical groups, and the practice of impunity against political and economic elites. Law enforcement still tends to be deceptive, with the law often used as a political tool to silence opposition or activism that threatens power. This situation not only affects public trust in banking institutions but also encourages the growth of political apathy, which is dangerous for the survival of democracy. The rule of law must be upheld impartially, and must be based on the integrity of law enforcement officials and the independence of the judiciary (Pompe, 2018).

To achieve ideal legal reform, a thorough understanding of the judicial institution is essential. The recruitment process for judges and law enforcement officers must be transparent, meritocratic, and free from political interference. Training systems and codes of ethics for judges, prosecutors, and police must be strengthened to ensure professionalism and adherence to the principles of justice and human rights. Due process of law mechanisms must be strictly enforced, guaranteeing legal protection for every citizen, especially those who are socially or economically disadvantaged (Crouch, 2010). Without a judicial system that functions fairly and effectively, democracy will easily fall into the trap of covert authoritarianism, where the law becomes only a tool to legitimize power, not an instrument of justice.

Thus, strengthening democracy in Indonesia cannot be seen solely from procedural indicators such as the implementation of elections; it must be complemented by in-depth institutional reform and the fair and consistent application of the rule of law. A substantive democratic system is one that provides space for all citizens to participate in the political process, while ensuring that no power operates without accountability. Within this framework, state institutions must be structurally reformed to truly serve the public interest and not become extensions of the ruling elite. Meanwhile, the law must be enforced as a tool of emancipation, not repression, so that democracy in Indonesia is not only embodied in the constitution but also felt in the daily lives of the people.

Consolidation of State Institutions and the Supremacy of Law as the Foundation of Substantive Democracy

To maintain a quality democracy, Indonesia cannot rely solely on civil society participation or the critical political spirit of its citizens. The institutional aspects of the state play a crucial role in supporting the stability and substance of democracy. Institutional reform in a democratic context does not simply mean changing names or formal structures, but also involves a process of reorienting values, updating bureaucratic work systems, and improving power relations between institutions to make them more equal, accountable, and

responsive to the public interest. Strategic institutions such as the Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK), the Constitutional Court (MK), and the Ombudsman were originally designed to be the main bulwarks of democracy, but in contemporary practice, these institutions often experience erosion of authority and loss of independence due to political and economic pressures. The 2019 revision of the KPK Law, for example, has raised concerns about increasing impunity, as independent investigators are weakened and internal oversight mechanisms increasingly understand the institution's workings (Hadiz, 2017). If this continues to be allowed to continue, the Indonesian democratic system will be at risk of becoming a mere formality without any effective control function.

Institutional revitalization efforts must focus on strengthening democratic values within institutional design. In addition to ensuring institutional autonomy from interference by powerful parties, this reform also requires the creation of an effective system of checks and balances, extending not only at the central level but also down to regional governments. Post-Reformation decentralization should have provided greater participation for citizens in the decision-making process, but what has instead resulted in the formation of local elites who have created new political dynasties, manipulated budgets, and stifled grassroots political participation. This demonstrates that decentralization without accountability will only give rise to local tyrannies that are no less authoritarian than central government (Fitriani et al., 2005). Therefore, political commitment to redesigning horizontal power relations is very necessary so that legislative and judicial institutions can truly play their role as a critical counterweight to executive dominance.

Broadly speaking, supremacy is a crucial element that must be guaranteed in a true democratic system. This principle asserts that the law must apply equally to all, cannot be manipulated to serve political interests at any given time, and must be enforced by a judiciary that is free from coercion. However, in the Indonesian context, the rule of law still faces serious structural and cultural challenges. Inequality in access to justice, discriminatory practices, and the criminalization of activists, academics, and journalists demonstrate that the law often becomes a tool of repression, not justice. Law enforcement officials tend to lie in their handling of cases, especially when implicating prominent political actors or corporations with economic power. This situation contributes to low public trust in legal institutions and fuels apathy toward the political process in general (Pompe, 2018).

To avoid the trap of covert authoritarianism cloaked in democratic legality, legal system reform must be a top priority. This begins with the recruitment of law enforcement officers, including judges, prosecutors, and police, which must be conducted transparently, based on the principle of meritocracy, and free from political co-optation. Training that prioritizes professionalism, judicial ethics, and a deep understanding of human rights is key to creating a humane and just justice system. Due process of law mechanisms must also be implemented consistently to ensure that all citizens receive equal legal protection. Selective law enforcement will only deepen social disparities and facilitate the growth of authoritarian power. Courts must be truly independent institutions, trusted by the public to uphold justice without political influence.

Ultimately, to ensure democracy is not only alive in constitutional documents but also in the daily practices of society, there needs to be synergy between institutional reform and a just rule of law. A healthy political system is one that can guarantee the active involvement of all elements of society in decision-making, while also having oversight mechanisms capable of preventing abuses of power. The state must not allow the law to become a repressive instrument of power, but must instead uphold it as a tool of social emancipation that guarantees justice, equality, and civil liberties. Without strong institutions and just laws, Indonesian democracy will become merely a formality that masks the increasingly entrenched authoritarian tendencies within the power structure.

4. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that Indonesian democracy is facing a serious crisis that encompasses not only procedural aspects but also substantive ones. Although elections, representative bodies, and state institutions are still formally running, the substance of democracy is increasingly being eroded by covert authoritarian practices that rely on formal legality to perpetuate power. This phenomenon demonstrates the symptoms of "electoral authoritarianism," as described by Andreas Schedler, where democratic procedures are maintained, but the practices reflect a systematic, modern authoritarianism that is difficult to recognize with the naked eye. This has led to the stifling of citizen political participation, the narrowing of civic space, and the subtle suppression of freedom of expression through regulation and symbolic intimidation. Dahl's theory of polyarchy, Larry Diamond's concept of democratic consolidation, and the analysis of Juan Linz and Nancy Bermeo

demonstrate that without the active participation of civil society, a just rule of law, and independent state institutions, democracy will fail to become an inclusive and accountable system. Maintaining democracy in Indonesia requires comprehensive institutional reform and consistent law enforcement, as well as the empowerment of a critical and participatory civil society. Only through the synergy of these three can Indonesia avoid the trap of covert authoritarianism and realize a democracy that is not only embodied in the constitution but also felt in the daily lives of all its citizens.

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