

## Article Review: Explaining Indonesia's Democratic Regression: Structure, Agency and Popular Opinion

Saittawut Yutthaworakool<sup>1</sup>

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In the last two decades following the mass mobilizations that ousted a well-renowned authoritarian leader, Suharto, Indonesia's democracy has had its progress, ranging from presidential to local elections. Compared to other states in the Asia-Pacific, Indonesian citizens have enjoyed their rights and freedoms (Freedman & Tiburzi, 2012, p. 135). Free and fair elections, decentralization, and political participation become the key elements of Indonesia's democratic success (Freedman & Tiburzi, 2012, pp. 135-136). Indonesia's economic development has grown steadily despite the short disruption of the 1997 Asian Economic Crisis. However, in this article, Warburton and Aspinall argue that Indonesia's democracy seems to encounter significant challenges. To respond to this argument, Warburton and Aspinall analyze Indonesia's democratization process and political structure. In addition to that, they consider the characteristics of the recent Presidents, Yudhoyono and Jokowi. Finally, as part of their argument, Warburton and Aspinall identify the continuous erosion of democratic values among Indonesian people.

Eve Warburton, a post-doctoral research fellow at the Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore, and Edward Aspinall, a Professor of Politics at the Department of Political and Social Change, Coral Bell School of Asia Pacific Affairs, Australian National University, argue against the number of literature by proposing that Indonesia's democracy nowadays is in regression since the 2014 presidential elections. In this article, Warburton and Aspinall aim

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<sup>1</sup> Graduate student in Human Rights and Democratization, Institute of Human Rights and Peace Studies, Mahidol University, Nakhon Pathom 73170. E-mail: saittawuty@gmail.com

to close the literature gaps by seeking factors that contribute to Indonesia's inconsistent democratic development and, respectively, to regression through the analysis of political structures, elite agency, and public attitudes. The article is structured into two major analysis parts. For the first part, Warburton and Aspinall indicate the rise of populism and illiberal drift as the signs of democratic decay in Indonesia. At the same time, the second part unfolds three factors that contribute to democratic stagnation. The article starts with re-examining the historical evolution of Indonesia's democracy since its sudden and unexpected democratic transition. To analyze agential factors, two notable presidents, Yudhoyono and Jokowi, are selected to imply their similarities and differences conducive to Indonesia's democratic regression. In the last section, Warburton and Aspinall bring in polls and survey questions to demonstrate the Indonesians' attitudes toward the rising erosion of democratic preferences and values.

Warburton and Aspinall argue that the recent trends of Indonesia's democratic stagnation are rarely military but elected populist governments with a strong leadership character. Prabowo Subianto, the presidential candidate in 2014 and 2019, well represents Warburton and Aspinall's explanation that a strong leader, as Prabowo himself, is required for the country to deal with foreign exploitation and corrupt political elites. When Joko Widodo or Jokowi defeated him, Prabowo denied both of the elections' results. Later in 2019, he mobilized the street protests leading to violence. Likewise, Warburton and Aspinall provide another influence from Islamist organizations such as Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (HTI) against Jakarta's Chinese Christian governor, Basuki Tjahaja Purnama or Ahok, who opposed the misuse of the Quran for political purposes in 2016-17. While Ahok was charged with blasphemy, the protests proved the successful Islamic populism in Indonesia. The second sign of democratic regression is the illiberal drift that can be witnessed through laws, regulations, and enforcement. With this point, Jokowi deploys his political tools to contain criticisms and threaten his opponents in the "Change the President" campaign. Similarly, Jokowi introduced in 2017 another restriction posed on freedom of organization which weakened the Islamist mobilizations against Ahok. Some minority groups, such as Christian

and LGBT groups, were slandered as traitors supported by foreigners. Jokowi also used national ideology of Pancasila to shut down the radical groups that harmed his political security. Though claiming to defend Indonesia's democracy, Warburton and Aspinall conclude that Jokowi decided to fight against illiberalism with illiberalism.

The core analysis of Warburton and Aspinall's article is to understand the causes and continuities of Indonesia's democratic regression upon the complex combinations of structural, agential, and public opinions with the rise of populism and the illiberal drift. Firstly, Warburton and Aspinall review that the historical institutionalist argument best illustrates Indonesia's democratic constraint. Starting from the regime change in 1998-99, Warburton and Aspinall view that the change contributes to the critical juncture for Indonesia's democratic stabilization and stagnation. Warburton and Aspinall argue that democracy in Indonesia was naturally founded with deep military roots. Indonesia's Constitution is an example of undermining Indonesia's democratic progress and its long-term consolidation. Furthermore, Indonesia's democratization process enabled the rise of oligarchs in economic accumulation and political institutions known as the New Order military and politico-business figures. These oligarchs, coming from local to regional and national levels, are referred to by Warburton and Aspinall as "elite-biased democracy." As a result, corruption leads to public disturbance and political distrust, which finally allows the rise of populism to take place, such as in the case of Prabowo.

Secondly, Warburton and Aspinall emphasize the roles of political elites in which their actions and decisions affect the decline of democracy in Indonesia, known as an "elite project." Warburton and Aspinall argue that the New Order leaders justify authoritarian and illiberal legitimacy in the post-Suharto reform era. These political elites are also referred to as the embedded political circles, including political parties, parliamentarians, and government institutions. Two prominent Indonesian leaders, Yudhoyono and Jokowi, are selected to prove their argument that although they adopted different tactics, their actions led to democratic regression. A conservative New Order with an army root, Yudhoyono,

came into power in 2004 until 2014. His inclusive character resulted in his lack of democratic support, as witnessed by his resistance to bureaucratic institutional reforms. Moreover, Yudhoyono's close ties to Islamist organizations provided him political gains from the Muslim majority and disregarded the protection of minorities from human rights violations. Unlike Jokowi, Warburton and Aspinall assert that this former Jakarta's governor initially attempted to promote pluralist democratic values such as decentralization, civil society. However, Jokowi built ties with military leaders and Islamist organizations for his political security purpose. Additionally, Jokowi was successful in his polarizing effort since 2014 by using connections with Islamic groups and military against his opponents, particularly Prabowo.

Lastly, Warburton and Aspinall explore Indonesians' public attitudes toward an understanding of democratic values and preferences. Against the existing literature, Warburton and Aspinall deploy the Asian Barometer (AB) survey, conducted in 2016, which inquires the Indonesians about their perceptions of democracy and authoritarianism, and their preferences and values. Compared to other states, the results show that Indonesians' understanding of democracy is complex and inclined to authoritarianism. There are three categories that Warburton and Aspinall bring to the article. First, a high percentage of respondents perceived democracy as a political system that delivers public services and economic achievement rather than rights and freedoms. Free and fair elections and corruption-free politics were also regarded as part of democracy. The second question asked about their democratic preferences. Although most Indonesian respondents realize that democracy is preferable and able to solve problems, less than ten percent agree that economic development places higher significance than democratic value. That is why Prabowo's personal militaristic character and strong populist campaign against foreign economic exploitation were successful. The last category focused on democratic values. Warburton and Aspinall find that paternalistic, religious, and illiberal values have posed critical implications to Indonesia's democracy.

Regarding the analysis mentioned above, there are three critical elements to be debated in this article. Firstly, the article is rather designed and presented through the state-centric approach, which hinders the socio-cultural structures in Indonesian politics. To some extent, these structures have shaped the country's undemocratic norms, values, and beliefs. Wardana (2014) suggests that the rise of populism is strongly boosted by political Islam which has sought to be compatible with democracy since Indonesia's independence in 1945. Furthermore, Wardana (2014) argues that it is not Islamic political parties that represent political Islam in Indonesia. Instead, civic Islamist organizations, such as HTI legitimize and inspire Islamization as a significant political agenda in Indonesia's domestic politics. More importantly, political Islam represents the deep-rooted cultural ideology that tackles social injustice, inequality, and corruption. Finally, its popularity supports the rise of populism in Indonesia (Wardana, 2014). With the influence of the Islamist organizations in Indonesian politics, in late July 2020, Nadiem Makarim, Minister of Education and Culture made a public apology to the two largest Islamic interest groups, Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah, for insufficient support in a teacher training program (Jibiki, 2020). This shows how Islamist organizations are able to pressure national administration and policy in Indonesia.

In addition to that, when discussing illiberalism, Warburton and Aspinall could have analyzed the lack of left-wing political parties in Indonesia, leading to the regression of democracy (Lussier & Fish, 2012, p. 80). An article written by Aspinall, Fossati, Muhtadi, and Warburton (2018) addresses that Indonesian political parties mostly share slight differences in policy and ideology. The authors refer to a survey conducted around late 2017 to early 2018 with 508 random respondents who are members of ten Indonesian provincial legislatures across thirty-one out of thirty-four Indonesian provinces. The survey results reveal that most political parties in Indonesia are located in the central spectrum, and they sometimes pose similar views on political and socio-economic issues. Once asked about the 'left/progressive' or 'right/conservative' wing their political parties possess, the variation of answers is only slightly different. Furthermore, the survey

points out that more than half of the listed Indonesian political parties tend to pursue the party's support on the role of Islam (Aspinall et al., 2018). Because of the present lack of real left-wing political parties, this may allow the populist political parties and non-political party organizations to dominate Indonesians for political purposes that resonate with the grassroots' demands. The successful rise of Prabowo well explained this phenomenon when he was able to mobilize fellow Indonesian grassroots to favor his political standpoint. At the same time, Jokowi is popular among those voters since he is portrayed as a technocratic populist. His political agenda is to bureaucratically reform entire Indonesia's administrative structures (Mietzner, 2015, pp. 17, 23).

Secondly, besides an AB survey conducted in 2016, which discusses public opinions on liberal views, it might have been interesting to observe the active operational performances of civil society organizations or public engagement to democratic values across Indonesia. It is found that though Indonesian public citizens largely engage in these organizations, their perceptions toward democracy are likely to be illiberalism. Looking at their roles ranging from campaigning to lobbying, Antlöv and Wetterberg (2011) present that civil societies in Indonesia have changed and shifted from Reformasi-based to civic engagement and government accountability. This significant change enables consolidation of decentralization and democratization outcomes. Moreover, local governments are more positive with civil society organizations and commit to providing more policy engagement spaces (Antlöv & Wetterberg, 2011, p. 8). Lussier and Fish (2012) exemplify the respondents of the East Asian Barometer (EAB) that Indonesia, compared to other Southeast Asian states, has the highest number of people who participate as members of civil society organizations. Besides, this social activism has positively taken down conflicts at the local level, such as the terrorist attack in 2002 (Tuijl, 2019). Nevertheless, if we take a look closely at the Indonesian civil society sector, Miichi (2015) claims that some civil society organizations have connections to illiberal elements, such as political Islam, authoritarianism, and political elites. They also play more prominent roles in influencing public mobilizations and pressuring political elites in Indonesia's

domestic politics. For instance, the cases of HTI versus Ahok and the mass supports from Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) to Jokowi's victory, and from Muhammadiyah to Prabowo (Baker, 2019).

The last point that could have been provided in this article is that Indonesia's democratic regression is not new. Still, it has been embedded in Indonesia's society for a period of time. According to Sulisty (2002), Indonesia's democracy has struggled since its post-Suharto reforms, particularly the district-based constituency system, which poses risks to vote-buying politics during the elections. Lack of political accountability among Indonesians' politicians and voters demonstrates that Indonesia's institutional reforms must be strengthened (Sulisty, 2002, p. 90). Another inevitable element that enhances Indonesia's democratic stagnation is the military's roles in the political arena. Sulisty (2002) and Freedman and Tiburzi (2012) assert that even though the *dwifungsi* or the dual functions demonstrated by the military during Suharto's regime were abolished, the military has continuously played its dominant role in political-economic aspects such as local political recruitment.

Close ties with military figures and priority in national security as the highest concern also devalue Indonesia's democratic progress. As demonstrated by Jokowi, despite his non-military background, he develops close connection with military to secure his political stance against Prabowo. In 2017, Jokowi's government was able to amend the mass organizations law, which gives rights to the authorities to shut down civil society organizations and public mobilizations that the authorities may see as threats to national security (Lischin, 2019). Hence, the dissolution of HTI is the prominent result of this amendment. This phenomenon is, of course, harmful to freedom of association and expression. Not only Jokowi, a veteran military like Yudhoyono, previously showed a small interest in reforming the armed forces during his administration (Mitzner, 2015, p. 12). We can conclude that Indonesia's willingness to strengthen democratic values is reluctant. Similarly, Indonesia's pathway toward democracy continues to face challenges if politicians continue to utilize illiberal-driven policy to favor voters.

All in all, contesting the traditional literature, Warburton and Aspinall argue that the democratic stage of Indonesia is in decline because of three factors, including structures, agency, and public opinion. The article begins with framing the signs that lead to Indonesia's democratic regression, which Warburton and Aspinall emphasize the rise of populism and illiberal drift. The populist challenge, largely prompted toward the 2014 and 2019 presidential elections, attests that it is the elite project aiming for political gain. Besides, illiberal critique adds a more critical challenge for Indonesia's value as laws and regulations are enforced to shut down the political opponents, political elites, and public mobilizations. With these influential factors, the article unwraps the historical legacy of Indonesia's democratic triumph and finds that the inherent institutional structure undermines democratic nurture. Instead, it enables the New Order military and politico-business elites to cultivate corruption, leading to populist campaigns. Moreover, the unwilling democratic efforts of two prominent political figures, Yudhoyono and Jokowi, are proved as the barriers to Indonesia's democratic success. In the end, the article also affirms that Indonesians hold complex attitudes toward liberal democracy because of religious, paternalistic, and militaristic influences, as observed through the AB survey.

Warburton and Aspinall's article is a valuable contribution to the historical development of Indonesia's democratic debates. However, there are some critical points to be addressed. First, the article should have mentioned the roles of political Islam that cause undemocratic norms, values and beliefs. Second, the article could have also identified the rise and fall of civil society organizations and civic participation, along with the Indonesians' perceptions of democracy. Last, it is debated that democratic regression is not new due to Indonesia's embedded undemocratic political structure and unwillingness to democratic reform.

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