

Power Politics in the Structure of Indonesian Democracy as a Manifestation of the Relationship between State Interests and Elite Domination

Jerry Sambuaga¹

¹Universitas Pelita Harapan, Indonesia

email correspondence: jerry.sambuaga@uph.edu¹

Abstract

Power relations constitute a central dimension in understanding the dynamics of democracy, particularly in countries where political institutions coexist with strong elite influence. This article examines power politics within the structure of Indonesian democracy as a manifestation of the relationship between state interests and elite domination. The study aims to analyze how political and economic elites shape public policy and influence the decision-making process within democratic institutions. Using a qualitative approach with a normative and analytical perspective, this research explores the interaction between political authority, economic power, and institutional governance in Indonesia's contemporary democratic system. The findings indicate that although Indonesia has adopted formal democratic procedures such as competitive elections and institutional checks and balances, the concentration of power among a limited group of political and economic elites continues to influence the direction of policy formulation. This condition reflects the persistence of oligarchic tendencies in democratic governance, where state interests are often intertwined with the strategic interests of dominant elites. As a result, public policies may not always fully represent broader societal aspirations but instead reflect negotiated outcomes among powerful actors within the political system. The study argues that the consolidation of democracy in Indonesia requires stronger institutional accountability, transparency in policy making, and broader public participation to reduce the excessive influence of elite domination. Strengthening democratic institutions and regulatory frameworks is therefore essential to ensure that state policies truly reflect the public interest rather than narrow elite agendas.



Keywords: power politics, elite domination, Indonesian democracy, public policy, political economy.

INTRODUCTION

Democracy is widely regarded as a political system that places sovereignty in the hands of the people through mechanisms of representation, participation, and institutional accountability. In theory, democratic governance is designed to ensure that political authority is exercised in accordance with the public interest rather than the interests of particular groups. However, the practical implementation of democracy often reveals complex power relations in which political and economic elites play a significant role in shaping policy outcomes. In many developing democracies, including Indonesia, the presence of elite networks within political institutions raises critical questions about the extent to which democratic procedures truly reflect the aspirations of society (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998). The transformation of Indonesia from an authoritarian regime to a democratic system following the Reformasi period in 1998 marked a significant shift in the country's political landscape. Political liberalization introduced competitive elections, decentralization, and institutional reforms intended to strengthen democratic governance. These reforms were expected to redistribute power from centralized authoritarian control toward a more participatory and accountable political system. Nevertheless, the persistence of entrenched elite structures has influenced how democratic institutions function in practice.

In the context of contemporary Indonesian politics, power relations are not merely determined by formal constitutional arrangements but also by informal networks that connect political actors, business elites, and state institutions. Such relationships often create a symbiotic interaction between political authority and economic influence. Consequently, decision-making processes within democratic institutions may be shaped by negotiations among powerful actors rather than by purely deliberative democratic processes. Scholars of political economy frequently emphasize that democratic institutions alone do not automatically eliminate power concentration. Instead, elites who possess economic resources and political connections are often able to adapt to new democratic structures and maintain their influence. In this regard, democracy may coexist with oligarchic tendencies, particularly when regulatory frameworks and institutional oversight mechanisms remain weak. Indonesia provides an important case study for examining how democratic institutions interact with elite power structures. Despite the successful organization of regular elections and the establishment of representative bodies, various studies



have suggested that economic elites continue to exercise considerable influence over policy-making processes. This phenomenon reflects a broader pattern in which democratic systems may function procedurally while substantive political equality remains limited. The concept of power politics becomes relevant in explaining these dynamics. Power politics refers to the strategic use of political authority and resources by dominant actors to influence state policies and institutional outcomes. Within democratic systems, such practices may manifest through political patronage, campaign financing, and the consolidation of networks that link political leaders with business interests. From a theoretical perspective, the relationship between democracy and elite domination has long been debated within political science. Classical elite theorists argue that all political systems, including democratic ones, are ultimately governed by a relatively small group of powerful actors who possess the resources necessary to control political decision-making. This perspective suggests that democratic competition does not necessarily eliminate elite influence but rather reorganizes the channels through which elites maintain their dominance.

In Indonesia, the intersection between political authority and economic power has become increasingly visible in the context of electoral politics and policy formulation. Political campaigns often require substantial financial resources, which in turn encourages cooperation between political actors and economic elites. As a result, electoral competition may inadvertently reinforce the influence of wealthy individuals or corporate groups within the political arena. Furthermore, the consolidation of elite networks within political parties has contributed to the persistence of oligarchic tendencies. Political parties, which ideally function as institutions that aggregate public. In this context, the persistence of elite domination within democratic institutions cannot be separated from the structural characteristics of Indonesia's political economy. Economic resources often translate into political influence, enabling certain actors to shape legislative agendas, electoral strategies, and policy priorities. Consequently, the relationship between state interests and elite networks becomes increasingly intertwined, creating a political environment in which power is negotiated among influential actors rather than distributed equally among citizens (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011). The dynamics of power politics within Indonesian democracy can also be observed through the role of political parties as intermediaries between the state and society. Ideally, political parties function as channels for political representation and public participation. However, in practice, party structures are frequently dominated by individuals or groups possessing substantial financial and organizational resources. This condition often leads to the concentration of political authority within limited circles of party elites.

Moreover, the growing interaction between political authority and business interests has



intensified the debate regarding the nature of democratic governance in Indonesia. Political leaders frequently rely on financial support from business actors to sustain electoral campaigns and maintain political influence. Such arrangements may create reciprocal relationships in which economic elites gain privileged access to policy-making processes and state resources. Several scholars have argued that this pattern reflects the persistence of oligarchic structures within Indonesia's democratic system. Despite institutional reforms designed to promote transparency and accountability, the concentration of wealth and power among certain elites continues to shape political outcomes (London: Routledge, 2004). As a result, democratic institutions may operate within a framework where elite bargaining plays a decisive role in determining public policies. Understanding the relationship between state interests and elite domination is therefore crucial for analyzing the structure of Indonesian democracy. The interaction between political authority, economic resources, and institutional arrangements reveals how power politics influences governance processes and policy outcomes. This study seeks to examine the manifestation of power politics within Indonesian democratic institutions by exploring the relationship between state interests and elite domination. By analyzing the structural dynamics of political power and economic influence, this research aims to contribute to a broader understanding of how democracy operates in contexts where elite networks remain deeply embedded within the political system.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The discussion of power politics within democratic systems has long been a central concern in political science. Scholars have emphasized that democracy does not merely function as a procedural system based on elections and representation but also reflects deeper power relations between political institutions, economic actors, and social structures. In this context, understanding the interaction between state interests and elite domination requires an examination of theoretical perspectives on democracy, oligarchy, political parties, and political economy. One of the most influential theoretical frameworks for understanding democracy is provided by Robert A. Dahl. Dahl argues that modern democratic systems are characterized by political pluralism, where power is distributed among various groups competing within institutional arrangements. According to Dahl, democracy ideally allows citizens to participate in decision-making through elections, representation, and civil liberties. However, he also acknowledges that in practice political influence may remain unevenly distributed among groups with greater access to resources and organizational capacity.



The issue of unequal power distribution within democratic systems is further explored in the concept of oligarchy. Jeffrey A. Winters explains that oligarchy refers to a political structure in which a small group of wealthy actors uses their economic resources to protect and expand their interests within political institutions. Winters argues that economic elites possess structural advantages that allow them to influence political outcomes, particularly in societies where wealth is highly concentrated. This perspective highlights the possibility that democratic institutions may coexist with oligarchic power structures. The relationship between democracy and oligarchic influence is also examined in studies of Indonesian political development. Vedi R. Hadiz and Richard Robison argue that political reforms in Indonesia following the fall of authoritarian rule did not entirely dismantle existing elite networks. Instead, these networks reorganized themselves within the new democratic system, allowing former power holders to maintain influence through political parties, business alliances, and local political structures. Their analysis demonstrates that democratic transitions may transform institutional frameworks without necessarily altering underlying power relations.

Another important perspective in the study of political power concerns the role of political parties as intermediaries between the state and society. Angelo Panebianco emphasizes that political parties are organizational structures that aggregate societal interests and translate them into political programs. However, Panebianco also notes that party organizations often become dominated by internal elites who control strategic resources, decision-making processes, and leadership positions. This concentration of authority within party structures can limit the ability of political parties to represent broader societal interests. The theoretical foundation for understanding elite domination can also be traced to classical elite theory developed by Gaetano Mosca. Mosca argues that every political system, regardless of its ideological orientation, is ultimately governed by a minority group that possesses the organizational and material resources necessary to control political institutions. According to this perspective, the existence of ruling elites is an inevitable feature of political organization, even within democratic societies. From the perspective of political economy, economic inequality plays a crucial role in shaping political power. Thomas Piketty demonstrates that the concentration of wealth within modern capitalist societies creates structural inequalities that can influence political systems. When wealth is concentrated among a limited number of individuals, those individuals gain disproportionate influence over policy-making processes, electoral competition, and public discourse. This condition may lead to the emergence of oligarchic tendencies within democratic governance. The relationship between economic power and political institutions is further analyzed by Daron



Acemoglu and James A. Robinson. They argue that the development of political and economic institutions determines whether societies move toward inclusive governance or remain trapped in extractive systems dominated by elites. Inclusive institutions encourage broader participation and equitable distribution of power, whereas extractive institutions enable elites to control resources and maintain political dominance.

Another important contribution to the study of political development comes from Francis Fukuyama, who emphasizes the relationship between political institutions, state capacity, and political accountability. Fukuyama argues that democratic consolidation requires strong institutions capable of balancing political authority with mechanisms of accountability. Without such institutional balance, democratic systems may become vulnerable to elite capture and political instability. In the Indonesian academic context, the study of political systems has been significantly shaped by the work of Miriam Budiardjo. Budiardjo emphasizes that political institutions function as mechanisms for organizing power within society, including the relationship between the state, political actors, and citizens. Her work provides a foundational framework for understanding the structure and operation of political systems in Indonesia. Similarly, Ramlan Surbakti highlights that political processes in democratic systems involve interactions among political institutions, actors, and societal forces. According to Surbakti, the functioning of democracy depends not only on institutional design but also on the behavior of political actors and the distribution of political resources within society. The discourse on democracy in Indonesia is also closely connected with the development of civil society. Azyumardi Azra argues that the growth of civil society institutions is essential for strengthening democratic governance and promoting public accountability.

Civil society organizations can function as a counterbalance to state power and elite domination by encouraging public participation and monitoring government actions. Another significant contribution comes from Bahtiar Effendy, who examines the relationship between political thought, religion, and state institutions in Indonesia. Effendy highlights how political ideas and social movements influence the development of democratic governance and shape the interaction between the state and society. In addition, Mochtar Mas'ood provides important insights into the relationship between political power and international structures. His work emphasizes that political decision-making within the state is often influenced by broader economic and geopolitical dynamics, which can shape national policy priorities and governance structures. Overall, the literature reviewed in this study demonstrates that democracy is not merely a system of political procedures but also a complex arena where various actors compete



for power and influence. The interaction between democratic institutions, economic inequality, and elite networks creates a dynamic political environment in which state interests and elite domination coexist. Understanding these theoretical perspectives provides a comprehensive foundation for analyzing power politics within the structure of Indonesian democracy.

Research Problems

Based on the background discussed in the introduction, the dynamics of democracy in Indonesia cannot be separated from the relationship between political power, state interests, and elite domination. Although the democratic system formally provides political participation through electoral mechanisms and representative institutions, the practice of power politics often indicates the continued influence of political and economic elites in shaping public policy. This condition raises critical questions regarding the extent to which the structure of Indonesian democracy genuinely reflects the broader public interest or instead becomes an arena for the consolidation of elite power. In this context, this study formulates several research questions that serve as the primary focus of the analysis. First, how do the dynamics of power politics within the structure of Indonesian democracy influence political decision-making processes and state policy formulation? Second, how is the relationship between state interests and elite domination constructed and manifested within Indonesia's democratic governance? These research questions are essential to understanding how democratic practices operate within a political system that is significantly shaped by networks of power and elite interests.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach with a normative and analytical method to examine the dynamics of power politics within the structure of Indonesian democracy. The qualitative approach is chosen because this research seeks to understand political phenomena through an in-depth interpretation of theoretical perspectives, conceptual frameworks, and the interaction between political authority and elite power in contemporary political practices. The type of research used in this study is library research, which focuses on analyzing various academic sources such as scholarly books, international journal articles, research reports, and policy documents relevant to the study of power politics, democracy, and oligarchic structures in Indonesia. These sources are used to construct a conceptual framework for analyzing the relationship between state interests and elite domination within the Indonesian political system. Data collection is conducted through documentary study, which involves examining literature



related to democratic theory, elite theory, and political economy perspectives that discuss the role of oligarchy and power relations in democratic governance. The collected data are then analyzed using a descriptive-analytical method, which aims not only to describe political phenomena but also to interpret the interaction between political power, state interests, and elite influence in shaping public policy. Through this methodological approach, the study seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of how power politics operates within the structure of Indonesian democracy and how elite domination influences political decision-making and the formulation of state policies.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of power politics within the structure of Indonesian democracy reveals that the interaction between democratic institutions and elite power networks remains a defining feature of the country's political landscape. Since the Reformasi movement in 1998, Indonesia has undergone a substantial transformation from an authoritarian political system toward a democratic governance structure characterized by competitive elections, constitutional reforms, and the expansion of political freedoms. These institutional developments were expected to promote accountability, transparency, and broader participation in political decision-making. However, the persistence of elite influence suggests that the formal establishment of democratic institutions does not automatically eliminate the concentration of power within a limited group of actors. The concept of power politics provides an important analytical framework for understanding these dynamics. Power politics refers to the strategic use of political authority, institutional resources, and economic influence to shape political outcomes and policy decisions. Within democratic systems, such practices may emerge through political alliances, financial patronage, and the consolidation of networks connecting political elites and business actors. These mechanisms allow powerful individuals or groups to maintain significant influence over state institutions despite the existence of democratic procedures.

In Indonesia, the consolidation of democracy has occurred alongside the persistence of oligarchic tendencies. Economic elites who accumulated wealth during earlier political periods have successfully adapted to the new democratic environment. Rather than resisting democratic reforms, many of these actors have integrated themselves into the political system by financing electoral campaigns, establishing political alliances, and participating directly in political institutions. As a result, democratic competition has often become intertwined with the interests of powerful economic actors. The influence of elite networks is particularly visible in the context



of electoral politics. Running for political office in Indonesia often requires considerable financial resources to support campaign activities, mobilize supporters, and maintain political visibility. This reality creates a structural dependency between political candidates and wealthy supporters who are able to provide financial backing. Consequently, electoral competition may reinforce the influence of economic elites who possess the resources necessary to support political campaigns. This relationship between political actors and financial supporters frequently leads to reciprocal arrangements in which political leaders feel compelled to consider the interests of their supporters when formulating public policies. In such circumstances, policy decisions may reflect negotiated compromises between public objectives and elite interests. This dynamic illustrates how the structure of democratic politics can become closely intertwined with economic power. Another important dimension of power politics within Indonesian democracy relates to the role of political parties.

Political parties are theoretically designed to function as intermediaries that aggregate societal interests and translate them into policy platforms. However, empirical observations indicate that the internal structures of many political parties tend to be dominated by influential individuals who control financial resources and organizational networks. This concentration of authority within party elites can limit the effectiveness of political parties as instruments of broad public representation (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988). Furthermore, elite influence is not limited to electoral competition or party organization but also extends into the policy-making process. Public policies that are officially framed as national development strategies may simultaneously reflect the preferences of influential economic actors. The ability of these actors to access decision-makers, participate in policy discussions, and influence regulatory frameworks provides them with significant leverage in shaping government decisions. The persistence of elite domination within democratic systems has been widely discussed in political science literature. Classical elite theorists argue that every political system, regardless of its formal structure, tends to be governed by a relatively small group of powerful actors who possess the resources necessary to influence decision-making processes. These actors maintain their influence through control over economic resources, social networks, and institutional authority (New York: McGraw Hill, 1939).

Within the Indonesian political context, elite networks often operate through informal relationships that complement formal institutional mechanisms. These networks may include alliances between political leaders, business actors, bureaucratic officials, and influential social figures. Such relationships create channels through which political influence can be exercised



outside formal institutional procedures. These informal networks often play a decisive role in shaping the direction of public policy. Political leaders may rely on trusted networks of advisors, financial supporters, and coalition partners when making strategic decisions. As a result, the policy-making process may be influenced by the interests of actors who are not formally accountable to the public. The role of economic inequality also contributes to the persistence of elite domination within democratic governance. When wealth is concentrated in the hands of a small number of individuals, those individuals gain disproportionate access to political influence. Economic power enables elites to support political campaigns, influence media narratives, and shape public discourse regarding policy priorities.

This structural inequality reinforces the political advantages enjoyed by wealthy elites. While democratic institutions provide equal voting rights to citizens, the unequal distribution of economic resources creates disparities in political influence. Individuals or groups with greater financial resources are often able to exert more significant influence over political processes than ordinary citizens (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014). Despite these challenges, democratic institutions in Indonesia continue to provide mechanisms for political accountability and public participation. Civil society organizations, academic communities, and independent media outlets have increasingly contributed to monitoring government actions and promoting transparency in public governance. These actors play a critical role in exposing corruption, advocating policy reforms, and encouraging broader public engagement in political processes. The growing role of civil society demonstrates that democratic consolidation is not solely determined by the actions of political elites but also by the participation of societal actors. Public advocacy and social movements can create pressure for institutional reforms and encourage greater accountability within government institutions. From a broader theoretical perspective, the coexistence of democratic institutions and elite domination reflects the complex nature of political development in transitional democracies. Democratic procedures such as elections and legislative deliberation provide legitimacy and stability to the political system, yet the substantive distribution of power may remain unequal.

This dual structure of democracy and oligarchy is particularly evident in political systems where historical power relations remain deeply embedded within economic and social structures. In such contexts, democratic reforms may alter the institutional framework of governance without fully transforming the underlying distribution of power (London: Routledge, 2004). In Indonesia, the interaction between state interests and elite domination often manifests through policy negotiations and coalition-building processes. Political leaders must balance competing demands



from voters, political parties, and influential supporters when formulating policy decisions. This balancing process frequently results in policies that represent compromises among multiple interests. These compromises may contribute to political stability but can also limit the transformative potential of democratic governance. When elite interests are deeply embedded within policy-making processes, significant structural reforms may become difficult to implement. Therefore, the consolidation of democracy requires continuous efforts to strengthen institutional accountability and regulate the influence of economic power within politics. Reforms aimed at improving political finance regulations, strengthening anti-corruption institutions, and enhancing transparency in governance are essential steps toward reducing excessive elite influence (New York: Crown Publishing, 2012). Ultimately, the findings of this study demonstrate that power politics continues to play a central role in shaping the structure of Indonesian democracy. The interaction between political authority, economic power, and institutional arrangements illustrates how democratic governance can coexist with persistent elite domination. Understanding these dynamics is essential for evaluating the trajectory of democratic development in Indonesia and identifying strategies that can promote a more inclusive and accountable political system (New York: Farrar Straus and Giroux, 2014).

CONCLUSION

The dynamics of power politics within the structure of Indonesian democracy demonstrate that the relationship between state interests and elite domination continues to shape political governance in contemporary Indonesia. Although democratic reforms following the Reformasi era have significantly transformed the institutional structure of the state, the distribution of political power remains influenced by elite actors who possess economic resources, political networks, and strategic access to decision-making processes. This condition reflects the reality that democratic institutions do not operate in isolation but are embedded within broader social and economic power structures (Jakarta: Gramedia Pustaka Utama, 2008). The findings of this study show that the consolidation of democracy in Indonesia must be understood not only through the establishment of democratic procedures such as elections and representative institutions but also through the dynamics of political power operating behind those institutions. Political elites and economic actors frequently form alliances that shape political competition and policy formulation. Consequently, the practice of democracy often involves negotiation and compromise among influential actors who possess the capacity to influence the direction of state policies (Jakarta: Grasindo, 2010). In the Indonesian political context, the persistence of elite influence is closely



related to the historical development of political and economic power structures. During the transition from authoritarian governance to democratic rule, many actors who previously held strategic economic and political positions were able to adapt to the new democratic environment. Rather than disappearing from the political arena, these elites reorganized their influence through political parties, electoral competition, and policy networks within state institutions. Another important conclusion derived from this research concerns the relationship between political authority and economic power. Economic resources frequently function as a strategic instrument that enables elites to influence electoral processes, support political candidates, and shape regulatory frameworks that affect their economic interests. As a result, the formulation of public policy may reflect a balance between national interests and the strategic considerations of influential economic actors.

Nevertheless, the development of democratic institutions in Indonesia has also created space for the growth of civil society and public participation. Social movements, academic institutions, and independent media have increasingly played an important role in monitoring government actions and advocating for transparency in political governance. These actors contribute to strengthening democratic accountability and encouraging policy reforms that reflect broader societal interests. From a theoretical perspective, the coexistence of democratic institutions and elite domination illustrates the complexity of political development in transitional democracies. The presence of formal democratic procedures does not automatically guarantee the equal distribution of political power. Instead, democracy often evolves through continuous interaction between institutional reforms and existing power structures within society. Therefore, strengthening the quality of democracy in Indonesia requires continuous efforts to improve institutional accountability and limit excessive concentrations of power within elite networks. Institutional reforms aimed at regulating political financing, strengthening legal oversight, and enhancing transparency in governance are essential to ensure that democratic institutions function in accordance with the public interest. In addition, expanding opportunities for public participation remains crucial for balancing the influence of elite actors within the political system. When citizens actively participate in political processes through elections, public discourse, and policy advocacy, democratic institutions become more responsive to societal needs and aspirations. Such participation also encourages political leaders to adopt policies that prioritize collective welfare rather than narrow elite interests (Jakarta: ICCE UIN Jakarta, 2005).

The findings of this study also highlight that democratic consolidation is a long-term process that requires both institutional development and cultural transformation within society.



Strengthening democratic values such as accountability, transparency, and public participation is essential for creating a political system that genuinely reflects the aspirations of the people (Jakarta: LP3ES, 1990). In conclusion, the structure of Indonesian democracy reflects a dynamic interaction between political institutions, state interests, and elite domination. While democratic reforms have significantly expanded political participation and institutional accountability, the persistence of power politics indicates that democratic consolidation remains an ongoing process. Future democratic development in Indonesia will depend on the ability of political institutions and civil society to create a balance between elite influence and public participation, thereby ensuring that democratic governance truly serves the interests of the broader society (Jakarta: Paramadina, 1998).

REFERENCES

- Acemoglu, D., & Robinson, J. A. (2012). *Why nations fail: The origins of power, prosperity, and poverty*. New York: Crown Publishing.
- Azra, A. (2005). *Demokrasi, hak asasi manusia, dan masyarakat madani*. Jakarta: ICCE UIN Jakarta.
- Budiardjo, M. (2008). *Dasar-dasar ilmu politik*. Jakarta: Gramedia Pustaka Utama.
- Dahl, R. A. (1998). *On democracy*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Effendy, B. (1998). *Islam dan negara: Transformasi pemikiran dan praktik politik Islam di Indonesia*. Jakarta: Paramadina.
- Fukuyama, F. (2014). *Political order and political decay*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Hadiz, V. R. (2010). *Localising power in post-authoritarian Indonesia: A Southeast Asia perspective*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Hadiz, V. R., & Robison, R. (2004). *Reorganising power in Indonesia: The politics of oligarchy in an age of markets*. London: Routledge.
- Mas'ood, M. (1990). *Ilmu hubungan internasional: Disiplin dan metodologi*. Jakarta: LP3ES.
- Mosca, G. (1939). *The ruling class*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Panebianco, A. (1988). *Political parties: Organization and power*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Piketty, T. (2014). *Capital in the twenty-first century*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Winters, J. A. (2011). *Oligarchy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

