

# Indonesia: The state of **Indonesia's** **democracy**

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# Why Indonesia matters now

Indonesia, South-East Asia's most populous country, was classified as a consolidated electoral democracy until very recently. The world's biggest democracy and the largest Muslim democracy, it has through its role in diplomacy and security, promoted democratic norms and human rights in a region historically characterised by coups and one-party dominance. Over the past decade and a half, however, it has experienced steady democratic erosion under two successive presidencies across three terms.

Nonetheless, Indonesia continues to exert significant global and regional influence. Its membership in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the G20, Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum, and BRICS, signifies the heightened importance of its democratic direction. It has a pivotal geopolitical role within the Indo-Pacific region, controlling vital sea lanes and economic routes. Moreover, it holds major natural resources reserves of gold, liquefied natural gas (LNG), copper, and timber, and is the world's biggest producer of nickel, an essential material in the manufacture and production of batteries.

Despite recent developments, civil society remains active and Indonesia retains considerable democratic strength that could counter its democratic backsliding.

# Democracy dashboard

Sources: V-Dem; Freedom House; Civicus; IMF; World Justice Project; RSF; World Bank

Head of government:  
**Prabowo Subianto**  
(2024– )

Regime type:  
**Electoral  
autocracy**

Freedom score:  
**56 /100 –**  
**Partly free**

Quality of civic space:  
**42 /100 –**  
**Obstructed**

Rule of Law Index:  
**63 /143**

Press freedom ranking:  
**127 /180**

Accountability ranking:  
**49 /100**

GDP:  
**\$1.57 trillion**  
(Largest of ASEAN  
countries)

## A note on our sources

Our findings are based on desk research, literature reviews, and interviews with subject matter experts. Our assessments are based on indices from democracy observers of record:

- Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem): the V-Dem Liberal Democracy Index (LDI) ranging from 0 (least democratic) to 1 (most democratic), and other indices.
- Reporters Without Borders (RSF): the World Press Freedom Index; the World Justice Project (WJP): the Rule of Law Index; and the World Bank: the Worldwide Governance Indicators.
- We have also reviewed and cite the relevant scores and rankings from Freedom House, Civicus, and other organisations concerned with the monitoring of different aspects of democracy.
- We have developed our own matrices for prioritisation of (1) countries; (2) democracy tactics within those countries; and (3) civil society organisations' effectiveness.

# Need to know

- Indonesia was hailed as a model of democracy in South-East Asia following the substantial democratic reforms that were introduced in 1998 after the 32-year rule and fall of former president General Suharto.
- The country has experienced democratic decline over the past 15 years which steepened with the election of former president Joko Widodo ('Jokowi'), particularly during his second term that began in 2019. This decline has continued under the current president Prabowo Subianto ('Prabowo') (Suharto's son-in-law), who was elected in 2024.
- Multiple democracy indices of record plot Indonesia's democratic decline. They note the erosion of numerous democratic norms and standards, towards electoral autocracy, though not yet full autocracy.
- Key threats to democracy include an increasingly repressive legal environment, a compromised judiciary, curbs on press freedom, and the role of the military in the civilian bureaucracy
- Indonesia still retains considerable democratic strengths: civil society remains plural and vocal; successful resistance moments demonstrate civic resilience; and international donors continue to support democratic engagement. At the same time, civil society and the media face legal harassment, funding constraints, and financial dependence on elites, weakening their ability to function as effective watchdogs.
- Power for Democracies has found policy research and advocacy to ensure the democratic integrity of changes to the law and legal processes, and legal action to protect civic actors – activists and journalists – to be among the most promising tactics for countering authoritarian backsliding.

# Democracy snapshot

Until 2024, Indonesia was one of the top three largest democracies in the world in terms of population; notably it is the only one with a majority Muslim population. Officially a presidential unitary republic with a multi-party system and a directly elected president and legislature, the country has a long and complex political trajectory that has undergone various political evolutions. These include the short-lived parliamentary experiment of the 1950s, which led to what was termed ‘guided democracy’ (1957–1965)<sup>1</sup>. Former president General Suharto’s highly centralised New Order (1966–1998) followed a military-led purge between 1965 and 1966 in which at least 500,000 people were killed in what experts have called genocide or crimes against humanity<sup>2</sup>. The *Reformasi* era heralded by Suharto’s fall in 1998 saw impressive democratic gains, significant political and media pluralism, and subsequently multiple peaceful transfers of power<sup>3</sup>.

## Democratic milestones

Democratic milestones during this and the eras that followed include a number of substantial pro-democracy reforms, ushered in by the Asian Financial Crisis (1997) and mass protests. These include: (1) a new constitution with strong human rights provisions and checks and balances; (2) the imposition of term limits of two five-year terms for the presidency; (3) the establishment of a bicameral parliament and the Constitutional Court; (4) the empowerment of a Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK); and (5) the introduction of direct elections for presidents (from 2004) and local executives<sup>4</sup>.

The reforms gave rise to a competitive multiparty system and an energetic civil society. Indonesia held its first free elections in 1999 following the fall of Suharto, and subsequent votes introduced a system of pluralism whereby people had the right to organise in different political parties and groupings without discrimination<sup>5</sup>.

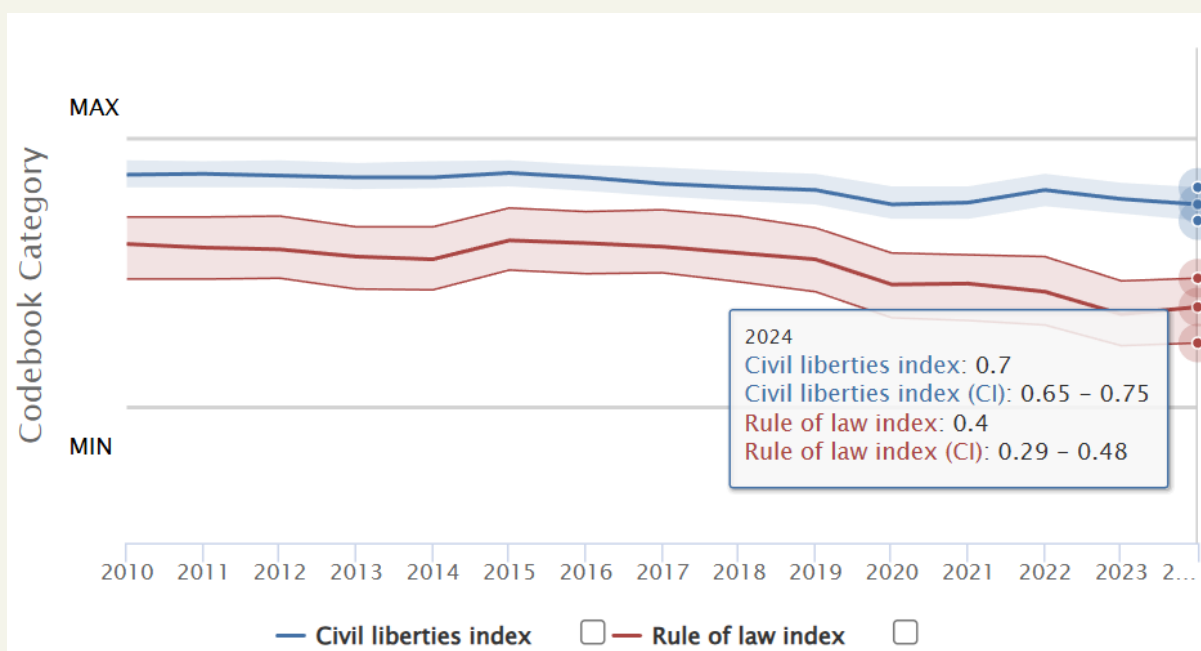
## Democratic backsliding

Yet the country has experienced an erosion of its democracy since around 2010 as a result of corruption scandals and weak institutions. The administration of President Joko Widodo ('Jokowi') is said to have significantly weakened Indonesia's democratic institutions while entrenching dynastic politics. A former furniture businessman and Jakarta governor with no military background, Jokowi won two terms in 2014 and 2019. Despite his focus on infrastructure and economic growth that modernised parts of Indonesia's economy, stagnation during his presidency heightened risks of democratic regression, corruption, ethnic/religious conflicts, and occasional sectarian tensions according to critics<sup>6</sup>. The slow but steady democratic decline following Suharto's fall was particularly pronounced in the period after Jokowi's re-election to a second term<sup>7</sup>.

Significant challenges persist, including systemic corruption, discrimination, and violence against minority groups, conflict in West Papua, and the politicised use of defamation and blasphemy laws. Indonesia has been labelled as 'partly free' by Freedom House due to its uneven rule of law and eroding civil liberties<sup>89</sup>.

The country has since 2010 slid into electoral autocracy, a form of government characterised by Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem)'s Liberal Democracy Index (LDI) as an authoritarian regime that still holds elections<sup>10</sup>.

Its position on the V-Dem Civil Liberties Index (CLI) and Rule of Law Index (RLI) also declined during the period of Jokowi's second term between 2019 and 2024. The indices, which range from 0 to 1 with 0 representing weakest and 1 representing strongest, fell 0.05 points to 0.7 and 0.14 points to 0.4, respectively. Indonesia is mid-to-low globally on both measures; relative to East Asia, it performs below average on rule of law and above average on civil society liberties. Though the trend is downward, the country's civil society remains very active, decentralised, and often outspoken, though it operates under increasing pressure.



Source: V-Dem's Civil Liberty Index (CLI) and Rule of Law Index (RLI) for Indonesia 2010–2024<sup>11</sup>

## Prabowo presidency

Prabowo Subianto ('Prabowo') and Gibran Rakabuming Raka, President Jokowi's son, took office as president and vice-president of Indonesia in October 2024. Prabowo, who has strong connections with the old military elite and was formerly a high-ranking general under Suharto before being dishonourably discharged in 1998, has been accused by human rights groups of human rights violations, kidnapping, and human rights abuses<sup>12</sup>. In the pre- and post-election periods, Prabowo's Gerindra Party successfully set up a coalition government by gaining the support of all opposition parties running for the House of Representatives (DPR) in the legislative elections, save one, the Indonesian Party of Democratic Struggle (PDI-P).

The coalition known as Advanced Indonesia Coalition (KIM) and later updated into KIM Plus with additional members, also includes regional and national non-members parties of the DPR or those unqualified for election. In August 2025, the PDI-P, the only one to hold a considerable number of seats in parliament that is not a member of the coalition, stated it would not join the Cabinet but would support the policies

under the president's administration that benefit the people and would not act as the opposition<sup>13</sup>.

In 2024, Indonesia also held elections for executives at the provincial city and regional levels. Although in August of that year, a constitutional court ruling had struck down a provision from a 2016 law that required political parties or coalitions nominating candidates to have won 20 per cent of the popular vote in the most recent election, the ruling lowering that threshold came too late to improve electoral competition. This led to a large number of candidates running unopposed – a 60 per cent increase in single candidates only as compared with 2020 and nearly 1,300 per cent more when compared to 2015. An estimated 24 million people were left with only a single registered candidate to vote for, according to Freedom House<sup>14</sup>.

The results of these elections were particularly favourable for Prabowo as the candidates he backed won key regional elections. These results were critical as even with a wide coalition at the national level Prabowo could not afford losing regional leadership in strategic regions<sup>15</sup>. These restrictive laws favoured the creation of a big coalition, a sort of 'big tent' politics that has become a legacy of Jokowi's government, paving the way for the country's biggest political party with effectively no opposition<sup>16</sup>.

Since taking office, Prabowo has expanded executive powers to accommodate this diverse group of coalition parties; abuses of power and forms of executive aggrandisement are consolidating. Among the most recent examples is the plan to revise the law on regional elections to scrap direct voting and revert to the system used during the authoritarian era, when governors, regents, and mayors were selected by regional legislative councils<sup>17</sup>. Meanwhile, threats to the judiciary, civil society, the media, and fundamental rights are widespread, and corruption and militarisation are on the rise.

Prabowo's record has intensified concerns among democracy observers about the return of militarised politics and a rollback of hard-won checks and balances. At one time highly influential, the military formally withdrew from politics in 2000. But its resurgence both in political and economic matters is evident: retired generals are more frequently being appointed for governmental positions, and some authoritarian-era figures and their families continue to wield power through

political parties or business empires. Thus, historical legacies continue to shape Indonesia's political landscape.

## **West Papua**

Areas such as Aceh and Papua have long-standing histories of separatist movements and armed conflict, rooted in grievances over autonomy, identity, and resource exploitation<sup>1819</sup>. Democracy observers have voiced particular concern about the situation in West Papua. The 1969 'Act of Free Choice,' which led to the integration of West Papua into Indonesia is widely viewed as illegitimate by Papuans due to its army-controlled process. Since then, Jakarta has enforced a strong military presence, encouraged mass transmigration, and facilitated resource extraction projects such as the Grasberg mine – benefiting the military and reshaping the region's demographics<sup>20</sup>.

According to a Human Rights Watch report in 2024, Indigenous Papuans are often treated as barriers to these projects, resulting in militarised repression of peaceful activists, displacement, and racial discrimination, with impunity for security forces<sup>21</sup>.

# **Threats to democracy**

The main threats to Indonesia's democracy are: (1) repression of civil society and media; (2) institutional erosion; (3) suppression of human rights; and (4) militarisation and increased law enforcement.

## **Repression of civil society**

The recent deterioration of Indonesia's civic space is well-documented: Civicus has classified it as 'obstructed' and in July 2025, added Indonesia to its Monitor Watchlist that tracks civic space, signalling a marked decline in the freedom of civic

space in the first year since Prabowo took office. Amnesty International already highlighted freedom of expression and peaceful assembly as being under attack in 2022, and, based largely on interviews with human rights defenders, activists, students, lawyers, and journalists, documented a shrinking civil society space. These interviews noted hacking attempts, intimidation, digital and physical harassment, surveillance, and defamation lawsuits. In the same year, according to the Indonesian Political Indicators Survey, 60.7 per cent of participants agreed that people were increasingly afraid to express their opinions, 57.1 per cent felt it was becoming harder to protest, and 50.6 per cent believed more people were being arbitrarily arrested for dissent<sup>22</sup>. A later Amnesty report highlighted how, in 2023, peaceful demonstrators were arrested, and excessive force was used to break up protests, particularly in Papua<sup>23</sup>.

According to Civicus, in 2024 and 2025, protests were forcibly dispersed, and activists were jailed or sued for peaceful actions, including opposing land projects or testifying in court<sup>24</sup>. Moreover, the state's approach to dissent has become more securitised, with the introduction of a new Police Bill in 2024 perpetuating a notable pattern of impunity towards law enforcement and military actors who have been accused of rights violations.

In late August and early September 2025, large-scale protests erupted across Jakarta and other Indonesian cities in response to reports that members of parliament were receiving lavish allowances amid widespread economic hardship<sup>25</sup>. Public anger deepened after violent police repression and the killing of a motorcycle taxi driver by a tactical vehicle. During the unrest, TikTok disabled its live-streaming feature, a move widely viewed as compliance with government censorship efforts<sup>26</sup>. In the aftermath, around 3,000 people were arrested, many were injured, and ten lost their lives<sup>27</sup>. Although most detainees were released, four activists now face prosecution for incitement under the new Criminal Code (KUHP)<sup>28</sup>.

Civicus has found that protests in West Papua province have been met with violence, while Human Rights Watch notes that authorities have continued to restrict travel in and access by outside media, diplomats, and human rights monitors<sup>29</sup>. The intimidation and arrest of activists has continued, with

widespread violence and repression throughout the whole region in 2025 and 2026. Notably, in March 2026 the human rights defender Andrie Yunus was the subject of an acid attack, suffering burns to more than 20 percent of his body<sup>30</sup>. The activist, who was previously targeted for his work, had a longstanding record of opposing militarisation and conducted an independent investigation into the violations that occurred in Indonesia in August 2025. Investigations later revealed that members of the military intelligence unit were involved in the attack<sup>31</sup>. Civil society has experienced internal erosion as well. Once a check on autocratisation, many civil society organisations now face financial challenges and lack of support from international and national donors<sup>32</sup>. Recently, the government has been working on a draft bill to counter disinformation and foreign propaganda, adding to Prabowo's narrative of foreign interference in the public space<sup>33</sup>. Though civil society is still active and positions itself as a check on autocratisation, the continuous crackdown on activists, financial constraints posed by elite alliances especially on the media, and censorship has weakened their independence and disruptive potential.

## Repression of media

Press freedom in Indonesia has likewise deteriorated: between 2024 and 2025, the country fell significantly on the Reporters Without Borders 2024 Press Freedom Index, from 111 to 127 out of 180 countries<sup>34</sup>.

Indonesia's media landscape is diverse yet remains fragmented, underfunded, and heavily influenced by oligarchic and political interests<sup>35</sup>. Although hundreds of independent media outlets have emerged since the democratic transition that began in 1998, making Indonesia a pioneer in this domain in South-East Asia, recent years have seen increased intimidation of journalists, tighter legal constraints, and media concentration in the hands of politically connected oligarchs.

Self-censorship is widespread, independent journalism is under pressure, and the legal environment remains hostile due to laws such as the Electronic Information and Transactions Law (ITE law) and the 2022 Criminal Code<sup>36</sup>. Though the 1999 Press Law guarantees protections, in recent years, authorities

have used vague and broad provisions in the Electronic Information and Transactions (ITE) Law to bypass them and employed the criminal code to prosecute journalists for blasphemy, defamation, hate speech, or spreading fake news. Between 2013 and 2024, 27 journalists were targeted under the ITE Law, with at least three sentenced to prison in the past five years<sup>37</sup>.

Structural issues, including economic precarity for journalists and dependence on state advertising, further undermine watchdog functions<sup>38</sup>. These problems are expected to continue to worsen under the Prabowo administration, as instances of violence against journalists have been treated with impunity during his presidency<sup>39</sup>. The media outlet Tempo, for instance, has been particularly targeted, with The Guardian reporting it as a result of the nature of Tempo's coverage of the Prabowo administration<sup>40</sup>. These attacks on journalists were documented and censured by Human Rights Watch and the Committee to Protect Journalists throughout 2025 and 2026 to date<sup>41</sup>. As reported by the Alliance for Independent Journalists, this drop in press freedom was attributed to increased intimidation of journalists, harsher legal constraints and concentration of media outlets in the hands of politically connected oligarchs (AJI)<sup>42</sup>.

## **Institutional erosion**

Rather than considering isolated incidents in Indonesia, the steady decline in the capacity of democratic institutions to provide oversight, enforce accountability, and safeguard the rule of law can be viewed as institutional erosion. This erosion reflects a broader pattern in which corruption and elite influence interact to weaken legal frameworks and institutional integrity, gradually undermining democratic norms.

## **Weakening checks and balances**

Indonesia's judiciary and legal reform system have become increasingly diminished and politicised, eroding the institutional safeguards designed to limit executive or elite

power. A number of high-profile cases illustrate the growing executive influence over legal decisions. For example, a constitutional court ruling in 2023 allowed Jokowi's son to run for vice-president even though he failed to meet the minimum age requirement clearly stated in the country's constitution<sup>43</sup>. Widely criticised as nepotistic, the move triggered public protests, with many arguing that allowing Jokowi's son, Gibran, to run for vice president under Prabowo's new mandate was a way for Jokowi to maintain influence after leaving office, following Indonesia's legacy of 'political dynasties.' It was later condemned by a judicial court as an ethical violation<sup>44</sup>.

That same year, a lower court ordered a two-year delay of the 2024 elections, overstepping its jurisdiction without the proper authority to do so. An Indonesian high court later declared the ruling unlawful<sup>45</sup>. This sparked significant controversy, as members of Joko Widodo's cabinet had also floated extending his term beyond constitutional limits.

In addition, there have been accusations of seeking to exert government control over pivotal independent institutions directed at various public officials. The parliament has made blatant attempts to gain control over anti-corruption bodies, most notably in 2019 when the parliament passed a law that rendered the highly-regarded anti-corruption body (KPK) irrelevant. The bill stipulated the establishment of a supervisory council to oversee the KPK, reclassified all KPK employees as civil servants (thereby transforming the agency into a government body), and required the KPK to secure council approval for wiretapping warrants<sup>46</sup>.

In 2022, civil society organisations accused members of the House of Representatives of violating the constitution in its dismissal of members of the constitutional court, thus undermining the independence and impartiality of constitutional judges<sup>47</sup>.

Other recurring issues have been the government's practice of drafting laws behind closed doors and fast-tracking them, with little transparency or meaningful public participation, as well as inadequate training and insufficient resources for judges<sup>48</sup>.

## Entrenched corruption

In Indonesia, the systemic misuse of public office for private and oligarchic gain is a common theme. While the formation of modern oligarchy in Indonesia can be traced back to the authoritarian rule of Suharto (1966-1998), in recent years, corruption has been a persistent and worsening issue across all levels of government. Both Jokowi and Prabowo have been accused of enabling powerful bureaucrats and big businesses to amass wealth and power, returning the country to the practices of its past<sup>49</sup>.

The law that rendered the anti-corruption body, the KPK, ineffective is not the only example of oligarchic influence<sup>50</sup>. In 2020, the government passed the omnibus law on job creation, aimed at boosting the economy by simplifying the country's web of business, labour, and environmental laws to attract investment. The bill was backed by mining interests within Jokowi's cabinet and reflected the alignment between legislative initiatives and business elites, a pattern often coming at the expense of the public<sup>51</sup>. Thousands protested the law for violating workers' and environmental rights.

Bribery scandals involving government officials and justices also highlight how corruption is eroding Indonesian institutions, particularly when it comes to environmental issues<sup>52</sup>.

The weakening of checks and balances and the persistence of entrenched corruption in Indonesia are deeply interconnected. When institutions such as the KPK or judiciary are compromised, elites can misuse state resources with impunity, while deep-rooted corruption further erodes institutional independence through clientelism and bribery. Together, these dynamics reinforce each other, entrenching elite dominance and undermining democratic accountability.

## Suppression of fundamental rights

Minorities in Indonesia likewise face systemic repression and human rights violations. In West Papua, for example, the long-standing separatist conflict has been exacerbated by state-led transmigration programmes aimed at altering the region's demographic balance and allegations of extrajudicial killings,

torture, and mass displacement of Papuans<sup>53</sup>.

Religious and gender minorities also suffer under increasingly regressive policies. Local bylaws have introduced curfews for women, mandatory hijab rules, and moral policing, while LGBTQ+ individuals have faced prosecution and corporal punishment<sup>54</sup>.

The judiciary's inconsistent handling of rights-related cases further weakens civil rights protections, as courts often uphold discriminatory laws or fail to intervene when local authorities violate basic freedoms<sup>55</sup>. Across the board, the government's actions reveal a narrowing space for dissent, identity, and public participation.

## **Militarisation and increased influence of law enforcement**

Recent legislative changes allow for military officers on active duty to hold civilian posts; this shift has been considered by some as an attempt by the current government to consolidate power through executive aggrandisement as it undermines the separation of the armed forces and governance that was established during the Reformasi era<sup>56</sup>. The military remains heavily involved in regional administration, especially in Papua where its operations have intensified alongside resistance from the Free Papua Movement. The military's role in natural resource management and internal security has expanded, often at the expense of civilian oversight<sup>57</sup>. With the military playing a role in law enforcement, food logistics, pharmaceuticals, and youth education, the army's growing authority over civilian life has raised concerns among the experts we interviewed. In these interviews, they also note the trend risks entrenching authoritarian norms under the guise of maintaining stability.

Additionally, the introduction of the new Police bill in 2024 granting the police additional powers – including digital surveillance, wiretapping, and internet control – without additional oversight and accountability measures, could lead to further backsliding.

Public trust in the police is already low, with hundreds of

complaints being filed every year<sup>58</sup>. Police impunity meanwhile is high as a consequence of a long-standing relationship between the police and political elites who have no interest in an accountable law enforcement system that upholds the democratic rule of law, as Jacqui Baker of the University of Melbourne noted in 2022<sup>59</sup>. Human rights experts warn this risks deepening impunity and undermining democracy, especially given the police's poor human rights record.

# Geopolitical importance

## Regional and global influence

Indonesia is a regional and global actor with significant influence as a founding member of ASEAN, in which it is the largest country. A member of the G20, it is also a participant in the Bali Democracy Forum and was newly admitted to the BRICS bloc in January 2025. Indonesia holds considerable geopolitical and economic power as the world's fourth most populous country (280 million); South-East Asia's largest economy; and its gross domestic product (GDP) ranks 16th in the world.

Geographically straddling the Indian and Pacific Oceans and controlling vital sea lanes, the country plays an important regional role, and its ability to maintain a resilient, inclusive democracy has implications beyond its borders. It has served as a model of democracy in ASEAN and across the Muslim world, and its history provides valuable lessons on democratic emergence<sup>60</sup>.

Indonesia's importance is especially pronounced in South-East Asia, as it has been historically active in regional diplomacy and human rights and a linchpin of the region's diplomatic and security architecture. Unlike several ASEAN neighbours that have experienced military coups or one-party dominance, Indonesia stood out as a pluralistic and consolidated democracy until very recently. Indonesian diplomacy has often subtly promoted democratic norms – for instance, it launched

the Bali Democracy Forum in 2008 as an intergovernmental platform to share democratic best practices.

Within ASEAN, Indonesia has pushed for greater attention to human rights: the country was instrumental in the creation of the ASEAN Human Rights Declaration and Commission. It likewise advocated for a tougher stance on the restoration of democracy in Myanmar following the 2021 coup<sup>61</sup>. While constrained by ASEAN's non-interference principle, Indonesia has offered, until recently, a counterexample to the authoritarian tendencies in Thailand, Myanmar, and elsewhere, thus acting as a regional democratic model and touchstone<sup>62</sup>.

## Geopolitical and economic factors

Indonesia has many strategic partners around the world. It maintains a strong economic bond with China, despite some tensions due to China's military action in the South China Sea<sup>63</sup>. It enjoys a substantial level of political and military cooperation with the United States, although there is a sense in Indonesia that the United States is not as engaged economically as it could be<sup>64</sup>.

While maintaining cordial relationships with both countries, Indonesia, like many ASEAN economies, collaborates with a diverse set of partners, including the EU, Japan, and South Korea, careful to avoid overdependence on any single power in the United States-China strategic continuum.

The country is also a member of Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), a key regional forum that works to advance trade, investment, and economic integration across the Asia-Pacific. Through APEC's market-opening and facilitation agenda (including the Bogor Goals), Indonesia aims to strengthen access to regional supply chains and investment networks – enhancing its economic weight and connectivity in the Asia-Pacific.<sup>65</sup>

Among its natural resources, Indonesia is the world's largest producer of nickel, an essential material for construction and manufacturing (e.g. modern batteries); it also holds major reserves of copper, gold, liquefied natural gas (LNG), and timber. Its mining expansion is motivated by the region's high level of natural resources, as well as the global energy

transition that is increasing their extraction. This has had the further consequence of human rights violations in regions such as West Papua<sup>66</sup>.

## Countering democratic decline

Indonesia presents a mixed environment for pro-democracy initiatives. Although progress is constrained by increasing repression, politicised regulation, and elite co-option, there is space and manoeuvrability for civil society and international engagement. Civil society remains active (though ‘obstructed’) and international donors are permitted to operate provided they navigate bureaucratic controls.

Unlike countries with ‘foreign agent’ laws, Indonesia allows foreign funding, albeit with constraints: organisations must register and obtain government clearance. Some areas remain restricted for foreign funding: insights from expert interviews conducted by Power for Democracies suggest it is still highly challenging for civil society organisations to engage with areas such as LGBTQ+ rights or the situation of Indigenous people in West Papua, due to the high level of censorship and repression. Similarly, organisations directly criticising the government, or addressing systemic corruption, are often targeted. Thus, foreign funding for organisations dealing with these topics is problematic. Nationalist rhetoric and government suspicion of ‘foreign intervention’ also disrupts engagement, with recent efforts displaying exacerbating attacks toward foreign funding and a general effort to codify ‘anti-foreign propaganda’<sup>67</sup>.

Overall, civil society organisations engaged in pro-democracy activities such as advocacy, research, and litigation are still able to secure foreign funds, and Indonesia continues to participate in pro-democracy platforms such as the Open Government Partnership (OGP).

## Civil society responsiveness

Despite the obstruction of civil society in Indonesia, moments of successful resistance demonstrate its underlying resilience.

When key democratic thresholds are threatened or crossed, civil society can mobilise effectively, even if this is not always sustained or cohesive and demands are not always met. Examples of this include the mass protests in 2019 against the weakening of the anti-corruption organisation, the KPK. There have also been protests and general pushback against a proposed delay of the 2024 general elections and in early 2025, student and activist protests under the banner, 'Dark Indonesia', which opposed Prabowo's policies, particularly a \$19 billion spending cut that protesters say would undermine their livelihoods and support systems<sup>68</sup>.

Civil society responsiveness has also been pivotal in a high-profile defamation trial known as the Fatia-Haris case. In September 2023, the two human rights defenders Haris Azhar and Fatia Maulidiyanti faced charges stemming from allegations of defamation against the Coordinating Minister for Maritime Affairs and Investment Luhut Binsar Pandjaitan. The activists were charged under various articles of Indonesian law, including the Electronic Information and Transactions (ITE) Law<sup>69</sup>. The case drew widespread attention due to its implications for freedom of expression, resulting in a compelling example of mobilisation of civil society<sup>70</sup>. In 2024, under the representation of the Advocacy Team for Democracy (TAUD), the activists were acquitted of all defamation charges.

## Media responsiveness

The media continues to serve as an important tool for civic advocacy and awareness, with organisations, press networks, and journalists' associations pushing back against the crackdown. A steady increase in relatively small and potentially independent media outlets, sometimes referred to as 'guerrilla' media, has cropped up across the country in recent years<sup>71</sup>. Typically operating on small budgets, these media differ from traditional journalism, notably in the way they blend advocacy with reporting, often counterbalancing mainstream reporting on critical issues.

Finally, a significant victory was marked by a constitutional court ruling in May 2025 stating that criticism against the government cannot be criminalised under the ITE Law<sup>72</sup>. This

decision emerged as result of a judicial review petition by Daniel Frits Maurits Tangkilisan, an environmental activist who was sentenced to seven months in prison for speaking out on social media against the environmental damage in Karimunjawa. This result is not only a victory for freedom of expression but also highlights the legal capacities of civil society to use legal means as a response to the criminalisation of criticism.

## Opportunity for change

The years 2026 and 2027 will be key to Indonesia's democratic trajectory as democratic openings for ongoing civil society mobilisation and advocacy are created. The momentum of the protests that took place in August and September of 2025 has extended through 2026, with millions of Indonesians taking to the streets for issues ranging from working rights to the country's increased militarisation<sup>73</sup>. At the same time, organisations such as Indonesian Legal Aid Foundation (YLBHI) continue to investigate many of the violations by the authorities that occurred following those protests, including alleged extortion practices targeting individuals arrested during the riots and instances of torture<sup>74</sup>.

Seeking justice for these cases is especially important as part of a nationwide effort to tackle the growing power of the police and military, which fuelled the riots and is still the focus of the work of many civil society organisations. Indeed, these individual cases are being used by civil society to reveal a bigger picture of systemic violations and to advocate for legislative change.

Our research and expert interviews pointed to several upcoming legislative reforms that, under a democratic and participative legislative process, can constitute further opportunities to bring about systemic change. Indonesian civil society has a history of engaging with governmental institutions and courts in the process of law, to advocate for democracy and human rights principles. They have also been defenders of threatened rights and work to spread public

awareness while coming to the defence of activists and journalists, challenging existing laws, and advocating for human rights and democratic principles. In September 2025, the parliament increased the government budget for 2026 as compared to the previous year, citing economic growth as priority. While the spending is characterised as being ‘optimised for social justice’, it is also true that this adds to the government’s record of passing laws without proper public scrutiny, which highlights the need to support public awareness and participation<sup>75</sup>.

An overview of the potential openings for intervention is highlighted by the Indonesian Parliament’s 2026 priority legislation programme, which includes 67 bills, 44 of which are from the preceding year and 17 of which are new proposals<sup>76</sup>.

## **Judge Position Bill**

Notably, the Judge Position Bill (JUU) that was added to the legislative agenda in 2025, and is currently being debated in parliament, seeks to address the working conditions of all judges in the higher and lower courts, particularly regarding: appointment and oversight; lack of clear standards defining roles and duties; as well as safeguards to ward off corruption risks.

All these aspects threaten the independence and perceived legitimacy of the courts, affecting judicial independence as well as public trust. Even while these moves appear to address corruption and other threats, they will contribute to the erosion of democracy. Democracy observers are concerned that these provisions will extend state power of the judiciary and protect them from scrutiny at the expense of civil liberties and rights.

## **Criminal Code and Criminal Procedural Code**

Another significant piece of legislation in terms of Indonesia’s freedoms is the Criminal Code, which passed in 2022 and came into force in January 2026. Although the code is constituted in law, many important human rights issues

remain unaddressed, such as several articles that violate the rights of women, the LGBTQ+ community and overall rights to freedom of speech and association. Thus, 2026 is particularly important for monitoring and gathering evidence related to the code's enforcement and interpretation.

In November 2025, the House of Representatives passed the amendment on the Criminal Procedure Code (KUHAP) expanding wiretapping and detention powers for police and prosecutors. Lawyers and legal groups opposed these expanded powers, specifically asking for the articles (sections of the law) about surveillance and wiretapping to be removed<sup>77</sup>.

Other provisions in the code, such as the lack of judicial oversight of police actions, the waiving of the right to legal representation, and the dominance of the National Police as the main investigator, also raise concerns among such groups according to the news outlet Tempo<sup>78</sup>. While both the Criminal Code and the Criminal Procedure Code have already passed, monitoring their application after the implementation period will be essential; this would present a further democratic opening and could open the door to legal challenges.

## Recommended actions

Based on extensive research and consultation<sup>79</sup>, Power for Democracies focuses its investigations on two democracy tactics to counter authoritarian backsliding:

1. Policy research and advocacy to ensure the democratic integrity of changes to the law and legislative processes. This aims to support judicial and legal associations in safeguarding the courts, advocating for integrity, and ensuring the constitutionality of reforms.
2. Legal action to protect civic actors such as activists and journalists and their capacity for free expression and assembly. This seeks to mitigate increasing legal harassment of civil society members by providing legal assistance to those facing lawsuits or criminal

investigation intended to or with the effect of restricting the exercising of democratic rights – especially in cases where an expected outcome would have wide-reaching strategic implications.

Although the two democracy tactics pursue different objectives, each relies in part on strategic litigation, or legal action deliberately designed to influence law, policy, practice, or public awareness beyond providing relief for the immediate claimant<sup>80</sup>. As they both are aimed at setting legal precedents, they thus serve as a tool for effecting change.

The distinction lies in their starting point: the legal reform tactic is directed primarily at institutions, occasionally using individual or group cases to expose and address systemic weaknesses, whereas the legal support tactic begins with the individual or group case itself, and from there builds a broader argument for systemic transformation. While many of these strategies are already widespread and receive funding from national and/or international actors, our research aims to fill potential funding gaps and strengthen existing organisations that have potential.

# Democracy tactics

## **Policy research and advocacy to ensure the democratic integrity of changes to the law and legislative processes**

This tactic recognises laws and legislative processes' critical role in safeguarding the justice system against political interference and reinforcing institutional checks and balances.

High-profile cases such as the Constitutional Court ruling that paved the way for President Jokowi's son to run for vice-president have highlighted how judicial institutions can be co-opted to serve elite interests. Similarly, the legislative process often lacks integrity, resulting in laws passing with limited

public oversight and against the interest of the public. Finally, the limited integration of democratic principles in legal education leaves professionals ill-equipped for structural challenges.

The policy research and advocacy tactic aims to address these issues through a combination of systemic and targeted interventions. The organisations identified as best suited to implement this are independent legal research and advocacy institutions and issue-specific centres that focus on strengthening judicial independence, promoting fair and accountable legal frameworks to legal professionals and legislative actors, and providing oversight of law-making processes. They combine policy research, public advocacy, and litigation support to safeguard democratic integrity and ensure that legal reforms serve justice and human rights rather than political or authoritarian interests.

These associations play a vital role in resisting the politicisation of the judiciary by initiating legal proceedings, advocacy, trainings, and research production that informs public discourse and policy-making. This tactic also considers the role of public trust and visibility, encouraging transparency measures and public engagement around the judiciary's function<sup>81</sup>.

## **Theory of change**

The theory of change underpinning this democracy tactic posits that strong, well-supported judicial and legal associations are essential to protecting democratic rights and upholding the rule of law. The evidence cites the successes of legal associations in Indonesia. A 2018 study of Indonesia's Constitutional Court found that NGO interventions between 2003 and 2013 influenced a significant number of landmark rulings, suggesting that civil society can indeed bolster constitutional enforcement<sup>82</sup>.

The Legal Aid Law of 2011 (ensuring access to counsel for the poor) and the Supreme Court transparency and chamber reforms are just a few of the cases where Indonesia's civil society has proven successful in achieving judicial reforms, often through the establishment of partnerships and specific justice programmes.

Empowering such organisations can help improve

transparency and integrity in legal reforms and raise public awareness<sup>83</sup>. For instance, research enables civil society organisations to gather public feedback, highlight needs and challenges, consider solutions, and monitor and evaluate government policies and programmes. Overall, the findings point to meaningful changes in the justice system alongside stronger capacities within civil society organisation partners, showing that external support can amplify both the impact of reforms and the effectiveness of institutions.

Policy research and advocacy

## **Theory of change**

Donor investment in policy research and advocacy



Civil society organisations work to safeguard the courts, advocates for integrity, and constitutionality of reforms



Judicial independence and rule of law are strengthened



Practices undermining checks and balances and democratic rights countered

This approach recognises that defending the legislative process is not solely a legal challenge, but also a political and institutional one<sup>84</sup>. In addition to formal safeguards, legal action must be reinforced by the active participation of civil

society and professional associations that can raise awareness for the necessity of due process, as well as generate pressure and build momentum for reform<sup>85</sup>. By supporting these associations in their research, advocacy, and coalition-building work, this democracy tactic aims to reinforce the judiciary as a pillar of Indonesia's democratic system – one that can uphold constitutional values and protect citizens' rights.

### **Legal action to protect civic actors and their capacity for free expression and assembly**

This tactic responds to the increasingly repressive legal environment in Indonesia, where criminal and civil law is frequently used to suppress dissent and silence critical voices. Journalists, human rights defenders, environmental activists, and other members of civil society are regularly targeted with defamation charges, violations of the Electronic Information and Transactions (ITE) Law, and strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPPs). These attacks undermine the ability of civil society to criticise the government or simply exercise their democratic rights, including freedom of expression and the right to protest<sup>86</sup>.

In many cases, those prosecuted lack timely access to quality legal defence, and coordinated support is rare or reactive.

Legal support seeks to address these challenges by enhancing legal protection through two interlinked strategies:

Providing legal aid to individuals and communities facing politically motivated charges

Supporting strategic litigation that can clarify legal interpretations and set precedent in favour of democratic rights

### **Theory of change**

The underlying theory of change assumes that improving the availability, coordination, and strategic use of legal resources can reduce the effectiveness of 'lawfare', or the use of legal systems and institutions as a tool of repression. The efficacy of legal aid was most visible in January 2024, when Haris Azhar and Fatia Maulidiyanti were acquitted of minister-initiated defamation charges after a broad civil society legal coalition rallied to their defence. When victims of police brutality obtain

compensation, it demonstrates that institutions other than street protest can deliver justice, encouraging citizens to channel grievances through existing institutions, increasing the trust in them.

Additional research shows that credible legal aid increases journalists' and activists' sense of safety and empowerment. Since LBH Pers (the Legal Aid Centre for the Press) launched its 'Lapor' digital legal aid portal in January 2023, reporters nationwide have used it in 53 cases, and its director notes the service 'empowers journalists to fight injustice.'<sup>87</sup>

By contrast, newsroom 'ethnography' at Indonesia's biggest national newspaper Kompas finds that when such protection is weak, reporters resort to deep self-censorship rooted in *rasa* – a culturally conditioned fear of offending powerful actors<sup>88</sup>. At the day-to-day level, LBH Pers reports that the portal not only advises but also helps journalists file court cases themselves, a feature that promotes active rights-claiming<sup>89</sup>.

In the short term, access to legal aid can reduce harm to individuals and organisations under threat. Over the long term, legal aid combined with strategic litigation can generate system-wide effects. The common binary 'win or lose' interpretation of a case outcome does not allow for a full understanding of the effects of strategic litigation<sup>90</sup>.

One of the 'goals' by which strategic litigation can be considered a success is its ability to mobilise social movements. In some cases, social movements can give rise to litigation, while in others litigation can catalyse them. Indeed, the literature shows how litigation and other legal tactics can be coupled with other forms of political expression such as out-of-court advocacy, protests, marches, and similar, underscoring the importance of engaging with social movements<sup>91</sup>.

Even the loss of court cases due to unfavourable legal opportunities and state repression can point to a policy gap or gain media attention while possibly mobilising the public – which could be an effective litigation strategy in itself<sup>92</sup>.

Legal action to protect civic actors

## Theory of change

Donor investment in legal action



Civil society organisations provide legal support to civic actors targeted by the government



Lawyers win cases that would not otherwise have been won



Journalists and civil society feel more empowered to work independently

Similarly, mass or iterative cases are often more effective than landmark judgements as they can sensitise judges and build gradual popular awareness. It is worth noting that the strategic value of a case can be derived after the fact, as not all cases aim at achieving systemic change but start with limited objectives and see strategic value drawn retroactively<sup>93</sup>. Finally, litigation can shift institutional and legal cultures toward a stronger rule of law and greater respect for civil liberties.<sup>94</sup>

Overall, legal action alone is not sufficient. Legal victories must be accompanied by public engagement and broader advocacy

to shape discourse and increase the political cost of repression. This is reflected in the strategies adopted by civil society organisations in Indonesia, which use a wide range of activities, including public relations work, to amplify the effects of strategic litigation. Nonetheless, legal support remains a central defensive and enabling tool for civic actors, especially in an environment where state institutions are being instrumentalised to consolidate executive power and silence opposition. This tactic therefore positions legal support not only as a protective mechanism, but also as a pathway to challenge authoritarian tactics and uphold democratic norms through institutional means.

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