



## Interview

# Indonesia's Democracy in the Shadow of Oligarchic Interests

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*In an interview with Watch Indonesia!, Vedi R. Hadiz, Professor of Asian Studies and Director of the Asia Institute at the University of Melbourne, criticises the common assumption that democratic values and principles have been on the decline in Indonesia for several years. On the contrary, the entire democratisation process since the Reformasi era has always been characterised by the persistence of close alliances between political and oligarchic interest groups that use the system to their own advantage. Against this backdrop, expectations that individual candidates would decisively advance democracy or human rights should also be fundamentally questioned.*

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**In recent years we have seen a steady decline of democracy in Indonesia. Many international observers and activists are criticizing the government, especially since during the second term of Jokowi's presidency, a steady decline of democratic values or democratic principles in Indonesia has been noted. Do you share this perspective and if so, where do you see the main challenges?**

Well, first of all, I don't actually subscribe to the perspective of democratic transitions and consolidations. I think that's sort of a theoretical framework that is way too linear and neat. So I've always kind of thought that Indonesia certainly democratised after 1998, but that there was a lot of illiberalism, you might call it, in its democratization. And that meant to me that you had all of the mechanisms and procedures of democracy, but at the same time while some rights were recognized - the rights of minorities, for example, sexual minorities, ethnic minorities and the position of those most marginalised in society were never sort of rectified through democratisation.

So all the talk about democratic regression, I think while correct, also is premised on an overestimation of the degree to which Indonesia has not only democratised in the past but also liberalised. That's my first point.

My second point is that this regression is something that whilst quite obvious or apparent over the last few years, actually we've seen signs of it, at least going back to the end of the year.

This is the second term of Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono's Presidency, in which the illiberal contents of Indonesian democracy became clearer. For instance, in the beginning of the eradication of the powers of the KPK, the Anti Corruption Commission. And I think that people generally overestimated the democratizing nature of a Jokowi presidency. When he came to power in 2014, I thought that there was nothing even particularly liberal or social democratic about him. I think mainly he was a small town nationalist who got catapulted onto the national stage through a range of alliances from the local and then to the national level with established interests. And therefore I think it was always a mistake to expect a Jokowi presidency to expand democratic space in Indonesia, let alone expecting him to deal with issues such as social injustice, past crimes against human rights and so on. I think that that was always mistaken.

**Talking about Jokowi's legacy, around 1 1/2 years ago there was some debate about a possible third presidential term for Jokowi. This actually didn't happen. Instead now we see that he successfully installed his son Gibran as the running mate for Prabowo. You have researched a lot about the rise of an oligarchy in Indonesia. Do you see this actually happening with Gibran now? Can we interpret this as one sign of a new oligarchy being established in Indonesia?**

Well, I think what it clearly shows is that Jokowi was never independent of oligarchic forces. As I said, he was catapulted into power through alliances with oligarchic forces. And, you know, he has become a major player himself within the conflicts that take place between oligarchic factions. The alliance that he has now established with Prabowo though the pairing of his son with him shows really that all of the fighting in 2014 and 2019 was a bit misguided, in that people were drawing such a clear demarcation between Jokowi and Prabowo. And as it turned out, Prabowo would join Jokowi's cabinet not long after many people died in his name, fighting the results of the elections in 2019.

But Jokowi has actually forged an alliance with him, making all of the arguments between family members and friends and so on in 2019 seem rather silly now.

**When comparing the forthcoming elections next year with past election campaigns, it is widely acknowledged that there are numerous prerequisites for individuals aspiring to become presidential candidates in Indonesia. Apart from garnering political support, securing a substantial amount of financial funding is also imperative to effectively pursue a presidential candidacy. In your opinion, have there been any noticeable changes in this aspect?**

It hasn't changed at all. In fact, over the years it has become generally more expensive to win political office. And you would expect that to win the presidency would require the most amount of financial backing.

And of course, when you know you rely on that sort of financial backing to win, then of course you are more or less beholden to the kinds of interests that can supply that kind of money to you.

And again, that is why, one should not have thought that the 2014 and 2019 campaigns were won without oligarchic alliances. In 2024 you already see that particular business people have lined up behind different candidates. My expectation is that the big-

gest contributors will have hedged their bets and funded different candidates. But it seems that the Anies Baswedan and Cak Imin pairing at the moment is least endowed with financial support.

**Indonesia has experienced a massive decentralisation and with that some kind of regional leadership emerged which has shaped Indonesia's political landscape. Just to mention Ganjar Pranowo, who is in a similar position Jokowi was in 10 years ago as a local leader.**

Well Jokowi was a mayor. Ganjar is governor. Winning such major offices as governor of Central Java doesn't happen unless you are connected. In fact, decentralisation actually has meant that you just have a lot of local political bosses developing local alliances with local businesses, local bureaucrats, local military commands, sort of trying to take control of local resources, local budgets and so on. Decentralization itself does not guarantee substantive democratization.

**You just mentioned the need for political leaders to build alliances with the military. During Jokowi's presidency the military has gained ground in politics again. What was the main reason for this?**



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In fact, Jokowi has basically allowed them back into the civil sphere through the back door, most recently. I mean, do people actually think that in 2014 and 2019 there were no factions of the military that supported Jokowi?

They would have been the sorts of military people that the PDI-P would have supplied.

Megawati is very much connected with sections of the military establishment, including those who are anti Prabowo. Of course, in 2014 and 2019, it didn't take an alliance with Prabowo to forge an alliance with the military. I mean the PDI-P can supply that in abundance.

**What are your expectations regarding the future role of the military within the Indonesian democratic system?**

Well, I do not expect the military to take up as prominent a role as it had during the New Order. But there are certainly indications that it is creeping back into civil life, into civil government. And with that you actually have diluted one of the major achievements of the Reformasi movement, which was to put the military back in the barracks, you know, certainly more so than they were under the New Order. I think they were never completely just in the barracks, but now you can expect them to demand more of the spoils of power and to be able to be in the position to negotiate with greater leverage with civilian politicians for a greater piece of the resources pie.

**What do you expect from the candidates in the upcoming elections in terms of upholding or enhancing Indonesian democracy and civil liberties? Does this actually play any role in their campaigns?**

I do not think that any of the three candidates are genuinely interested in upholding democracy or expanding democratic space. They all want to get into power and they will forge any kind of alliance that is necessary and undertake any kind of tactic to get into power.

All three of them really are just representations of a very fluid and very easily changing composition of oligarchic factions.

So what they represent really is the kind of intra-oligarchic conflict that happens every five years in Indonesia to decide which factions of the oligarchy actually have the greatest control over public resources and institutions for the purposes of pursuing private accumulation.

**That's quite a pessimistic outlook for the future.**

It's a realistic outlook for the future.

**What should be done to put Indonesia's democracy and the realization of civil liberties on track? Has civil society any realistic power to advocate for these values?**

Civil society is fragmented. Parts of civil society get easily absorbed into intra oligarchic competition. The biggest mass organizations in Indonesia, Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah, are regularly a big part of these competitions. And then you have the NGOs, labour movements and so on. There are two problems. One is that they still are quite fragmented. There's unnecessary competition between a lot of them and there is actually little to unite them in a joint effort to challenge the status quo. In 98 there was Suharto which everybody could gather around to challenge.

Now it's difficult to come up with an issue or a set of issues, a programme, an overall agenda that would unite the disparate civil society forces. That's one problem.

The second problem is that, although I think many are trying harder now - given the experience of probably being fooled by sections of the oligarchy they may have trusted from time to time - is developing grassroots bases. But the degree to which that would have an effect, certainly an effect electorally, will not be seen for a while.

**Could one say that Reformasi has come to a halt?**

Reformasi has brought a lot of changes like freedom of organization, freedom of expression and so on. Although a lot of these now are again under attack in some quarters. I think the rosy idea that some people had about what was possible under Reformasi was never realistic in the first place.

So if you say Reformasi is on hold, I actually don't understand that because I think that Reformasi was always being constrained by powerful interests that were crafting it in a way that would suit their purposes.

**Let's imagine we are talking again in 2029, when the next elections are scheduled to take place. Will we still be talking about the same issues?**

I think we will probably have the same sort of political circus that we see today which is basically for the benefit of oligarchic elites.

That may provide some opportunities for negotiation and leveraging from sections of society temporarily, especially if they want to be mobilized by elites, you know, for demonstrations against this and that.



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But in the end Indonesian democracy still remains quite exclusionary in that it's really only the most powerful political and economic forces that are able to shape its course in their interests.

#### **Our Interview Partner**

**Vedi Hadiz** is Professor of Asian Studies, Director at the Asia Institute, and an Assistant Deputy Vice-Chancellor International at the University of Melbourne. Professor Hadiz's research interests revolve around political sociology and political economy, especially in relation to the contradictions of development in Indonesia and Southeast Asia, and more recently, in the Middle East. Professor Hadiz is an elected Fellow of the Academy of Social Sciences in Australia and was an Australian Research Council Future Fellow in 2010-2014. He is the author of several books, including *Islamic Populism in Indonesia and the Middle East* (Cambridge University Press 2016).