

The Development of the Indonesian Political System from the Perspective of Centralization of Power and Elite Politics

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ABSTRACT

Background: Indonesia's political system has evolved through several historical phases, including the Old Order, the New Order, and the Reform Era. In each phase, the concentration of political authority and the influence of elite groups have significantly affected the structure of governance and the practice of democracy in the country.

Aims: This study aims to examine the development of Indonesia's political system by focusing on the relationship between power centralization and elite politics, as well as their impact on democratic governance.

Methods: The study applies a qualitative descriptive method using a literature-based approach. Data were collected from academic publications, political reports, books, and other relevant sources discussing Indonesian political development.

Result: The study shows that Indonesia's political system has experienced changes in the distribution of power from highly centralized authority toward a more decentralized framework after the Reform Era. However, political elites continue to hold considerable influence in decision-making processes and policy formation. The persistence of elite interests has also contributed to the emergence of oligarchic tendencies within democratic institutions.

Conclusion: The development of Indonesia's political system reflects the continuing interaction between democratic reform, centralized authority, and elite political interests. Although democratization has expanded political participation, strengthening institutional accountability and public oversight remains necessary to support a more balanced and inclusive political system.

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Introduction

Indonesia's political system has undergone significant changes throughout its modern history. Since independence in 1945, the country has experienced different political phases that shaped the structure of state power and governance. The Old Order period under Sukarno emphasized guided democracy and strong presidential authority, while the New Order government under Suharto strengthened centralized political control through military influence, bureaucratic dominance, and limited political opposition (Kenawas, 2023). These political developments demonstrate that centralization of power became a major characteristic in the evolution of Indonesia's political system ("DECENTRALIZATION IN INDONESIA," 2024).

Following the collapse of the New Order in 1998, Indonesia entered the Reform Era, which introduced democratic reforms and decentralization policies (Agustito et al., 2025; Kenawas, 2023). The implementation of regional autonomy, direct elections, and greater political participation was expected to reduce excessive concentration of power in the central government. However, despite these institutional reforms, political elites continued to maintain strong influence over political parties, public policies, and state institutions (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2022; Madueke, 2026). In many cases, elite groups adapted to the democratic system while preserving their political and economic interests.

The relationship between centralization of power and elite politics remains an important issue in understanding Indonesia's contemporary political system. Although democratic institutions have expanded after the Reform Era, political authority is still often shaped by elite negotiations, coalition

interests, and oligarchic practices (G. T. L. Brown, 2024; Yesilkagit & Christensen, 2026). This condition indicates that political change in Indonesia has not fully eliminated centralized patterns of power, but instead transformed the ways political elites exercise control within democratic structures.

The development of Indonesia's political system presents an important case for examining the interaction between centralized authority and elite political influence. Political transformation in Indonesia has not only involved institutional changes, but also changes in the distribution and control of political power (Hafel, 2023). The persistence of elite influence within democratic institutions raises important questions regarding the effectiveness of political reform and democratic consolidation in Indonesia (Mietzner, 2025; Vikalista et al., 2026). This study is important because discussions concerning Indonesia's political development are often separated between analyses of democratization and studies of elite domination. In reality, both aspects are closely connected and continue to influence governance practices in Indonesia.

Studies on Indonesia's political system have commonly focused on democratization, decentralization, and political power relations (Fossati, 2023; Silitonga et al., 2023). Several scholars explain that the New Order government established a highly centralized political structure in which decision-making authority was concentrated in the executive branch (Karim & Kholid, 2026). During this period, political institutions functioned mainly to support regime stability and maintain elite control over society and state resources. Other studies discuss the political reforms that emerged after 1998. Democratization brought important institutional changes, including free elections, regional autonomy, and greater civil liberties (Fetrati, 2023; Stein, 2021). These reforms were intended to create a more participatory and decentralized political system. Nevertheless, many researchers argue that elite groups remained dominant within political parties and government institutions, allowing oligarchic practices to survive under democratic procedures (J. Brown, 2025; Hamilton, 2025). Research on elite politics in Indonesia further shows that political elites continue to influence policy-making, electoral competition, and resource distribution. Elite networks often adapt to institutional changes in order to preserve their influence (Gautier Morin & Rossier, 2021; Raynard et al., 2021). Consequently, Indonesia's political system reflects a complex relationship between democratic reform, centralized political authority, and elite interests (Hermanto et al., 2024).

Previous studies have extensively discussed democratization, decentralization, and elite influence in Indonesia. However, many of these studies examine those issues separately rather than analyzing their interconnected relationship within the broader development of Indonesia's political system (Sekaringtias et al., 2023). Research concerning power centralization often focuses on authoritarian governance during the New Order, while studies on elite politics generally emphasize oligarchic influence in the Reform Era.

In addition, existing research frequently emphasizes institutional reforms without sufficiently examining how political elites adjust to political change while maintaining influence over state power and governance (Zolak Poljašević et al., 2025). The continuation of elite domination within democratic institutions suggests that decentralization and democratization have not completely transformed the structure of political power in Indonesia. This issue remains insufficiently explored in a comprehensive and historical perspective.

This study aims to analyze the development of Indonesia's political system from the perspective of centralization of power and elite politics. It also seeks to examine how political elites maintain influence within different political eras and how centralized authority continues to affect democratic governance in Indonesia. Through this analysis, the study intends to contribute to a deeper understanding of the relationship between political power, democratization, and elite domination in Indonesia's political development.

Method

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design to examine the development of Indonesia's political system from the perspective of centralization of power and elite politics. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because the study focused on understanding political phenomena, historical developments, and power relations within different political periods in Indonesia. The research used a literature-based method by analyzing various academic sources, including journal articles, books, political reports, and previous studies related to Indonesian political development, democratization, and elite politics.

Participant

Since this study was conducted through a literature review approach, no human participants were directly involved in the research process. The primary sources of data consisted of scholarly publications, historical documents, government reports, and academic studies discussing Indonesia's political system, centralization of power, democratization, and elite political influence from the Old Order period to the Reform Era.

Instrument

The main instrument used in this study was document analysis. The researcher collected and reviewed relevant literature from academic databases, books, scientific journals, and official publications related to Indonesian politics. In addition, note-taking and data classification techniques were applied to identify important themes, arguments, and political patterns concerning centralization of power and elite politics in Indonesia's political development.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using qualitative descriptive analysis. The researcher examined the collected sources by identifying recurring themes, political patterns, and theoretical perspectives related to centralization of power and elite politics. The analysis process included data reduction, data categorization, interpretation, and conclusion drawing. Furthermore, the study compared political developments across different political eras in Indonesia to understand the continuity and transformation of political power and elite influence within the Indonesian political system.

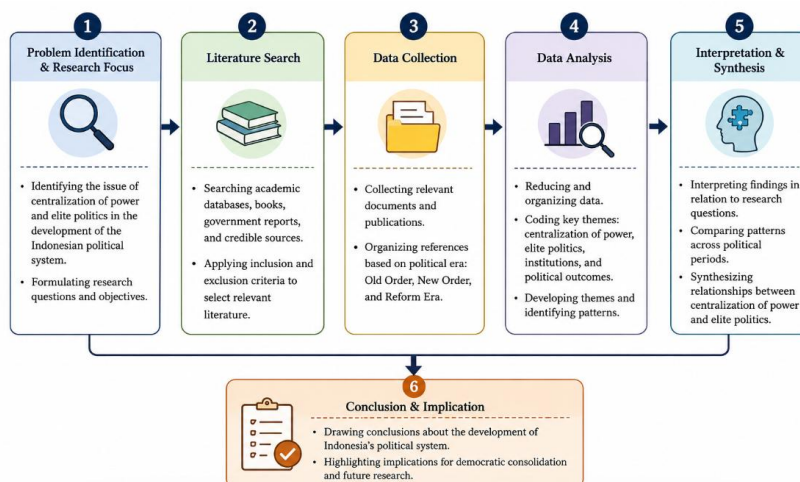


Figure 1. Research Process Flowchart of the Study on Indonesia's Political System, Centralization of Power, and Elite Politics

Results and Discussion

Results

The analysis demonstrates that the evolution of Indonesia's political system has been closely associated with the dynamics of centralized authority and the influence of political elites. Throughout different political periods, the structure of governance in Indonesia reflected varying forms of power concentration and elite control. During the Old Order era, political leadership was strongly centered on presidential authority through the implementation of Guided Democracy, which reduced the role of political opposition and strengthened executive dominance. This pattern became more visible during the New Order government, where centralized political control was maintained through bureaucratic institutions, military involvement, and restricted political competition.

Political reforms that emerged after 1998 introduced significant institutional changes within Indonesia's political system. Democratization and decentralization policies encouraged wider public participation, direct elections, and regional autonomy. These reforms were intended to reduce excessive concentration of political authority within the central government. Nevertheless, the findings indicate that political elites continued to possess substantial influence within political parties, governmental institutions, and policy-making processes. Rather than disappearing, elite influence adjusted to the new democratic environment and remained an important component of Indonesian politics.

The political development of Indonesia across different eras is summarized in the following table.

Table 1. Development of Indonesia's Political System Across Political Eras

Political Era	Characteristics of Political System	Centralization of Power	Role of Political Elites
Old Order (1945–1966)	Guided Democracy under strong presidential authority	Political power was concentrated in the presidency and central government	Political elites and military actors played important roles in political decision-making
New Order (1966–1998)	Authoritarian and highly centralized governance	Executive authority dominated political institutions through military and bureaucratic control	Political elites maintained power through state institutions, political parties, and limited political opposition
Reform Era (1998–present)	Democratic and decentralized political system	Formal centralization decreased through decentralization and regional autonomy policies	Political elites adapted to democratic mechanisms and continued influencing governance and policy-making

The study also reveals that the interaction between centralized power and elite politics continues to shape contemporary Indonesian governance. Although democratic institutions have expanded since the Reform Era, political processes are still frequently influenced by elite negotiations, coalition interests, and oligarchic networks. This situation suggests that democratic transition in Indonesia has not entirely transformed the structure of political authority, but instead changed the mechanisms through which political elites maintain influence.

The relationship between centralization of power and elite politics identified in this study can be seen in the following table.

Table 2. Relationship Between Centralization of Power and Elite Politics in Indonesia

Aspect	Centralization of Power	Elite Politics
Political Authority	Authority concentrated within central governmental institutions	Political influence controlled by dominant elite groups and networks

Decision-Making Process	Policies primarily determined by executive power	Decisions often influenced by elite negotiations and political coalitions
Impact on Democracy	Limited political participation during centralized governance periods	Persistence of oligarchic influence within democratic institutions
Political Development After Reform	Decentralization reduced formal central control	Political elites adapted and maintained influence within democratic structures
Governance Challenges	Risk of excessive concentration of authority	Potential dominance of elite interests over public interests

Overall, the findings suggest that the development of Indonesia's political system cannot be separated from the continuing relationship between centralized political authority and elite influence. Despite democratic reforms and institutional changes, political elites remain significant actors in shaping governance and political decision-making in Indonesia.

This article was conducted using a qualitative literature-based approach and does not involve direct field observation, interviews, surveys, or quantitative statistical measurement. The findings are based on analysis and interpretation of secondary sources, including academic journals, books, political reports, and historical references related to Indonesia's political development.

Discussion

The discussion of this study shows that the development of Indonesia's political system has been closely connected to the pattern of centralized authority and the continuing influence of political elites (Hidayat, [2024](#); Mietzner, [2025](#)). Although Indonesia has experienced major political changes from the Old Order, the New Order, and the Reform Era, the concentration of power within certain political groups has remained visible in different forms. Changes in political institutions did not entirely remove elite influence, but instead altered the mechanisms through which political power was exercised and maintained (Dávid-Barrett, [2023](#)).

In the Old Order period, political authority was strongly centered on presidential leadership through the implementation of Guided Democracy (Yang, [2021](#)). The political system at that time emphasized national unity and political stability, yet it also reduced the effectiveness of institutional balance and political opposition. As a result, decision-making processes became increasingly dependent on executive authority and elite political actors surrounding the government (Lowande & Rogowski, [2021](#)). This condition later developed further during the New Order era, where centralized governance became more systematic through military involvement, bureaucratic control, and restrictions on political competition.

The New Order government demonstrated how centralized political authority could create stability while simultaneously limiting democratic participation (Meyerrose, [2024](#); Mietzner, [2025](#)). Political institutions largely functioned under executive control, and elite groups maintained strong influence over policy-making and governance. Political opposition was limited, while state institutions were used to strengthen political authority at the national level (Meckling & Nahm, [2022](#)). In this context, the relationship between centralization of power and elite politics became increasingly interconnected within Indonesia's political structure.

Political reform after 1998 introduced important changes within Indonesia's political system (Turner et al., [2022](#)). Democratization and decentralization policies opened greater opportunities for public participation, direct elections, and regional autonomy. Institutionally, these reforms reduced formal concentration of authority within the central government. However, the findings of this study indicate that elite influence remained significant even after democratic reforms were implemented (Jacquet et al., [2022](#)). Political elites adapted to the changing political environment by utilizing democratic institutions, political parties, and coalition networks to maintain their influence.

The persistence of elite domination within democratic institutions suggests that political transition in Indonesia remains incomplete (Mietzner, 2025). Democratic procedures expanded political participation, yet access to political power often continued to depend on elite networks, economic resources, and political alliances. Consequently, democratic development in Indonesia reflects a combination of institutional reform and continuing oligarchic influence (Harun, 2026). This situation demonstrates that democratization does not automatically eliminate unequal power relations within political systems.

The study also indicates that decentralization produced complex political consequences (Faguet & Shami, 2022). Regional autonomy successfully reduced certain aspects of centralized governance and encouraged local political participation. Nevertheless, decentralization also created opportunities for the emergence of regional political elites who exercised considerable influence at the local level. In several cases, patterns of political concentration that previously existed at the national level became visible within regional governance structures (Babic, 2023). Therefore, decentralization changed the distribution of authority institutionally, but did not fully transform the broader structure of political power.

Overall, the discussion emphasizes that the development of Indonesia's political system cannot be separated from the continuing interaction between centralization of power and elite politics (Kenawas, 2023). Political reforms have transformed institutional arrangements and democratic procedures, yet elite influence remains an important factor shaping governance and political decision-making. The Indonesian experience illustrates that democratic consolidation requires not only institutional reform, but also stronger accountability, transparency, and broader public participation in political processes.

Implications

The findings of this study demonstrate that political reform in Indonesia cannot be evaluated only through the existence of democratic institutions and decentralization policies, because the influence of centralized authority and political elites continues to affect governance practices and political decision-making. This condition indicates the importance of strengthening institutional accountability, transparency, and wider public participation to support a more balanced democratic system. Furthermore, the study may provide additional insight for academic discussions related to democratization, political transformation, and elite influence within developing democratic states.

Limitations

This study has several limitations due to its use of a qualitative literature-review approach that depends on secondary data from books, academic journals, political reports, and historical references. The research does not involve direct observation, interviews, surveys, or quantitative statistical measurement, therefore the analysis is primarily interpretative rather than empirical. In addition, because the discussion covers Indonesia's political development across multiple political eras, certain regional political dynamics and specific elite actors are not examined in detail.

Suggestions

Future studies are encouraged to apply broader research approaches by combining qualitative interpretation with quantitative analysis in order to produce more comprehensive findings regarding centralization of power and elite politics in Indonesia. Research involving field studies, interviews, surveys, or case studies at national and regional levels may provide deeper understanding of how political elites influence democratic institutions and governance processes. Further examination of regional political dynamics, political parties, and oligarchic networks is also recommended to enrich discussions concerning Indonesia's continuing political development.

Conclusion

The development of Indonesia's political system demonstrates that the relationship between centralization of power and elite politics has continuously influenced the country's governance across different political periods, including the Old Order, the New Order, and the Reform Era. Although democratization and decentralization introduced important institutional reforms intended to expand public participation and reduce excessive concentration of authority, political elites have remained influential within political parties, governmental institutions, and policy-making processes. The findings indicate that political transformation in Indonesia has not fully eliminated oligarchic tendencies, but rather changed the ways political power is maintained and exercised within democratic structures. In addition, decentralization has redistributed authority to regional governments while simultaneously creating new forms of elite influence at the local level. Therefore, the study concludes that strengthening transparency, accountability, institutional supervision, and public participation remains essential to support a more inclusive and balanced democratic system in Indonesia.

Author Contributions Statement

Aden Crystantra contributed to the conceptualization of the study, literature collection, data analysis, and manuscript writing. Fajar Al Sidiq contributed to the development of the research framework, data interpretation, and revision of the manuscript. Rifkiah Asy Syifaa Sunart contributed to literature review, data organization, and manuscript editing. Rudi Santoso, as the supervising lecturer, contributed to research supervision, methodological guidance, academic review, and final evaluation of the manuscript. All authors have read and approved the final version of the article.

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