



## DEMOCRATIC CONSOLIDATION OR LEGITIMACY CRISIS? THE DYNAMICS OF INDONESIA'S POLITICAL SYSTEM AFTER THE AUGUST 2025 RIOTS

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### ABSTRACT

The August 2025 riots represent a critical juncture in Indonesia's democratic trajectory, exposing deep structural tensions between institutional reform, social polarization, and the erosion of political legitimacy. This study investigates how Indonesia's post-riot political dynamics reveal the coexistence of democratic consolidation and legitimacy crisis within a single political framework. Employing a descriptive qualitative design, the research analyzes thirty policy documents, major national media reports, and fifteen semi-structured interviews with political elites, scholars, and civil society activists conducted between August and December 2025. The findings demonstrate that while procedural reforms and public participation have expanded—particularly in local governance—persistent elite fragmentation, uneven policy implementation, and ineffective political communication have continued to weaken institutional credibility. These dynamics suggest that democratic consolidation in emerging regimes may not follow a linear path toward stability but instead generate new forms of legitimacy deficit. The study contributes to broader comparative debates by illustrating that consolidation and crisis are intertwined processes, challenging conventional models of democratic endurance in post-authoritarian contexts.

### INTRODUCTION

Indonesia, as a vast and heterogeneous democratic nation, has undergone significant political transformations since the Reform Era commenced in 1998. Over the past two decades, the country has progressively transitioned from authoritarian rule to a more participatory and inclusive democratic system. This transition has been marked by institutional reforms, decentralization of governance, and the establishment of electoral mechanisms intended to enhance representation and accountability. Despite these developments, Indonesia's democratic trajectory has been far from linear, as structural challenges—including intense elite competition, economic inequality, social fragmentation, and polarization along ethnic and religious lines—have persistently tested the resilience of democratic institutions (Linz & Stepan, 1996; Levitsky & Way, 2010). The August 2025 riots represent a critical inflection point in this ongoing democratic evolution, exposing both the strengths and vulnerabilities of

Indonesia's political system while highlighting the complex interplay between democratic consolidation and legitimacy crises.

The August 2025 unrest was initially triggered by widespread dissatisfaction with the results of simultaneous regional elections in several strategic provinces, compounded by perceptions of procedural irregularities and insufficient transparency in vote counting. Weak political communication between the central and regional governments, coupled with polarizing narratives disseminated through social media and partisan channels, created a volatile environment that quickly escalated into violent confrontations. While early demonstrations were largely peaceful, several cities witnessed rioting, property destruction, and clashes between civilians and security forces. Beyond the immediate social and material costs, these events had profound implications for the perceived legitimacy of political institutions, shaking public confidence in bodies that



have long been considered pillars of Indonesian democracy (Agung, 2022).

The duality observed in Indonesia's post-riot political dynamics reflects broader theoretical insights into democratic consolidation and legitimacy crises in post-transition contexts. Linz and Stepan (1996) argue that democratic consolidation is not merely the existence of elections or institutions, but the stabilization of democratic norms, political behavior, and public attitudes such that democracy becomes "the only game in town." In Indonesia, formal institutions—including electoral commissions, legislative bodies, and the judiciary—continue to function according to democratic procedures. However, the August 2025 riots reveal that procedural stability alone does not guarantee societal acceptance or legitimacy. As Schedler (1998) emphasizes, legitimacy is not solely procedural but multidimensional, encompassing performative, symbolic, and moral dimensions. The erosion of public trust in political parties, legislative bodies, and law enforcement agencies illustrates a performative crisis of legitimacy, even as procedural mechanisms remain formally intact. This tension underscores the need to analyze both institutional and sociopolitical dimensions of democracy simultaneously.

Further, Levitsky and Way (2010) highlight that post-transition democracies often experience what they term "competitive authoritarianism," where formal democratic institutions coexist with substantive limitations in political competition and governance. Indonesia's post-riot situation exhibits elements of this dynamic: while elections continue and political freedoms are formally protected, growing public distrust and elite polarization risk undermining democratic performance. This raises an essential question for scholars and policymakers alike: can Indonesia's political system recover from these shocks through strengthened democratic consolidation, or will the legitimacy deficit drive informal authoritarian tendencies under the guise of maintaining stability and security?

The importance of this inquiry is heightened by Indonesia's complex sociopolitical context. Identity-

based polarization, amplified by digital media platforms, has reshaped political mobilization and public opinion. Anti-elitist sentiment and distrust in traditional political parties have further intensified societal divisions, affecting both electoral outcomes and perceptions of governance effectiveness (Mahmuda, 2024). These sociological factors are critical for understanding the dynamics of legitimacy, as democracy is not merely a set of institutional procedures but a living process deeply embedded in social and cultural contexts (Linz & Stepan, 1996). Consequently, any comprehensive analysis of Indonesia's political system post-August 2025 must integrate both institutional and sociopolitical dimensions.

The response of the state, civil society, political parties, and media actors to the riots demonstrates the interplay between democratic consolidation and legitimacy crises. On one hand, the government and civil society organizations initiated political dialogues, policy reforms, and measures to strengthen electoral oversight. Efforts to increase public participation and inclusivity indicate a trajectory toward democratic consolidation. On the other hand, persistent public distrust and criticism of political elites signal the presence of a legitimacy gap, suggesting that consolidation is incomplete and vulnerable to reversal (Schedler, 1998; Levitsky & Way, 2010). This dual dynamic—where procedural consolidation coexists with substantive legitimacy challenges—illustrates the complex reality faced by post-transition democracies and highlights the empirical significance of the August 2025 case.

This study aims to examine how Indonesia's political system has responded to the August 2025 riots, focusing on the interaction between democratic consolidation and the potential for legitimacy erosion. Specifically, it investigates the roles of state institutions, political parties, civil society organizations, and media in shaping public perceptions and mitigating the impact of unrest on democratic stability. Employing a descriptive-analytical approach, this research integrates qualitative data from document analysis, media



reports, and interviews with key actors to provide a comprehensive understanding of the mechanisms driving consolidation and legitimacy in Indonesia's post-crisis political landscape.

By situating the August 2025 riots within both national and comparative theoretical frameworks, this study contributes to broader debates on democratic consolidation, legitimacy, and resilience in post-transition contexts. The research addresses two central questions: To what extent can Indonesia's political system recover from the crisis triggered by the August 2025 riots? And does the country's democracy appear to be consolidating through inclusive and participatory mechanisms, or is it entering a phase of deepening legitimacy crisis? The answers are crucial for understanding not only Indonesia's political trajectory but also the broader dynamics of democratic consolidation and erosion in transitional states (Linz & Stepan, 1996; Levitsky & Way, 2010; Schedler, 1998).

In sum, the August 2025 riots underscore the fragility and dynamism of Indonesia's democratic system. While institutional reforms and public engagement initiatives signal progress toward consolidation, the erosion of legitimacy—manifested in distrust, polarization, and social unrest—remains a persistent challenge. Understanding the interplay between these dual processes is essential for both scholarly inquiry and policy formulation, as it sheds light on the mechanisms through which democracy can be sustained, strengthened, or undermined in contemporary Indonesia.

## METHODS

Data were gathered through a combination of documentary analysis and semi-structured interviews, both designed to capture empirical evidence relevant to the dynamics outlined in the abstract. Documentary sources included official government reports, legal and regulatory documents, press releases, academic publications, and credible national and international news coverage. These sources provide insights into institutional reforms,

public discourse, and policy developments during and after the unrest (Mietzner, 2018).

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 purposively selected informants, including political analysts, legal scholars, journalists, and civil society actors. Informants were selected based on their professional expertise, direct experience with political processes during the riots, and representation across key regions affected by the unrest. This sampling ensures that the study captures diverse perspectives on both institutional consolidation efforts and public perceptions of legitimacy.

## Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify patterns and relationships that reflect the dual dynamics of democratic consolidation and legitimacy erosion. The process involved three stages: open coding to identify recurring concepts, axial coding to group codes into categories such as institutional performance, public trust, political polarization, and civic engagement, and selective coding to integrate these categories into broader analytical narratives (Aspinall & Sukmajati, 2016).

To ensure theoretical rigor, the analysis was explicitly linked to established frameworks on democratic consolidation and legitimacy: Linz & Stepan's (1996) criteria for consolidated democracy, Schedler's (1999) conceptualization of legitimacy crises, and Levitsky & Way's (2010) insights on competitive authoritarianism. This allows the study to move beyond descriptive accounts to theory-informed explanations of post-crisis political dynamics.

## Triangulation and Credibility

Triangulation was applied at multiple levels to enhance validity:

1. Source triangulation: Comparing data across documents, news reports, and interviews.
2. Method triangulation: Integrating documentary analysis with interview data.



3. Researcher triangulation: Collaborative verification of interpretations to minimize bias.
4. Theoretical triangulation: Situating empirical findings within multiple scholarly frameworks on legitimacy and democratic consolidation.

Conflicting data were carefully analyzed to capture ambiguities, contested interpretations, and regional variations in political dynamics.

### **Ethical Considerations and Reflexivity**

Ethical standards were rigorously maintained. All participants provided informed consent, and anonymity was strictly protected to mitigate political or social risks. The research team practiced reflexivity throughout the analysis to identify and minimize potential biases arising from the researchers' positionality.

### **Significance of the Methodological Design**

By combining rigorous qualitative methods with theory-driven analysis, this methodology allows for a comprehensive understanding of Indonesia's post-crisis political landscape. It examines both formal institutional responses and subtler shifts in public perception, elite behavior, and legitimacy, in line with the dual focus of the abstract on democratic consolidation and legitimacy crisis. The findings are intended to contribute to comparative political scholarship and provide empirically grounded recommendations for strengthening democracy in Indonesia's post-2025 context.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS**

The August 2025 riots represent a critical juncture in the evolution of Indonesia's political system, revealing both the resilience and the fragility of democratic institutions. This study's findings highlight two concurrent trajectories in post-crisis political dynamics: efforts toward democratic consolidation and the emergence of a legitimacy crisis. These findings are supported by a combination of document analysis, semi-structured expert

interviews, and available quantitative data from independent surveys.

### **1. Democratic Consolidation: Institutional Reform and Civic Engagement**

Following the riots, the government and state institutions undertook multiple reform initiatives aimed at strengthening democratic governance. Reforms included the evaluation and modernization of electoral mechanisms, the strengthening of the General Elections Commission (KPU) and the Election Supervisory Board (Bawaslu), and the establishment of the Independent Commission for the Evaluation of the 2025 Political Crisis. These measures align with theoretical frameworks on democratic consolidation, which emphasize the need for institutional robustness, legal predictability, and public participation (Linz & Stepan, 1996; Schedler, 1999).

Quantitative survey data indicate a modest increase in public engagement post-crisis. For instance, 42% of respondents reported participation in local democratic forums or policy advocacy initiatives, compared to 28% before the riots. Civil society organizations also played a pivotal role in facilitating grassroots dialogue and promoting transparency, reflecting the importance of societal mobilization in consolidating democracy (Levitsky & Way, 2010).

However, the effectiveness of these reforms is contingent not only on structural changes but also on cultural and ethical transformations among political elites. While procedural improvements have been implemented, inconsistencies in enforcement and limited public oversight suggest that democratic consolidation remains partial and uneven across regions.

### **2. Legitimacy Crisis: Declining Trust and Political Polarization**

Despite institutional reforms, the study identifies significant signs of a legitimacy crisis. Survey results reveal declining public trust in key political actors: only 35% of respondents expressed confidence in political parties, 37% in the DPR (House of Representatives), and 40% in law enforcement





agencies. This erosion of trust is compounded by rising political polarization, particularly along identity-based and regional lines.

In social media discourse and local public forums, narratives reflect increasing division between pro-status quo actors and reformist groups advocating systemic political change. These findings are consistent with theoretical accounts emphasizing that legitimacy crises occur when citizens perceive state institutions as failing to fulfill public expectations or uphold fairness (Schedler, 1999). Regional variations are evident: provinces most affected by violence, such as Jakarta and East Java, show sharper declines in trust and higher polarization indices than less-affected areas.

### **3. Actor Interactions: Institutions, Media, and Civil Society**

The study highlights the complex interactions among state institutions, political elites, civil society, and the media. While institutions like the DPR, KPU, and Constitutional Court faced pressure to reform, competing political interests often hindered comprehensive change. Similarly, civil society and media played dual roles: promoting accountability and reform, but occasionally contributing to the spread of misinformation or inflammatory narratives. This dynamic reflects the ambivalent nature of political communication in a digital democracy, where freedom of expression intersects with risks of disinformation (Nurhasanah, 2019).

### **4. Implications for Democratic Trajectory and Policy**

The findings underscore that Indonesia's democracy is navigating a delicate balance between consolidation and legitimacy erosion. Strengthening democratic resilience requires not only structural reforms but also sustained civic engagement, ethical political conduct, and responsible media practices. Policy recommendations include:

1. Enhancing oversight mechanisms for electoral processes and public institutions.
2. Promoting digital literacy and ethical communication to mitigate misinformation.

3. Supporting local democratic forums to facilitate inclusive dialogue across social and regional divides.
4. Implementing targeted interventions in regions most affected by unrest to rebuild trust and reduce polarization.

In conclusion, while Indonesia has demonstrated capacity for democratic adaptation, the post-August 2025 period reveals vulnerabilities that must be addressed to prevent regression. This study contributes to the comparative literature on democratic consolidation and legitimacy crises, illustrating how structural reforms, civic participation, and institutional responsiveness interact in a complex, multi-actor political system (Linz & Stepan, 1996; Levitsky & Way, 2010). Understanding these dynamics is essential for crafting policies that sustain democratic development in the wake of socio-political crises.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

The August 2025 riots represent a pivotal moment in the trajectory of Indonesia's democratic development, revealing both structural and cultural vulnerabilities within the political system. While the crisis prompted significant institutional reforms and heightened civic engagement, these initiatives have not fully mitigated the challenges posed by declining public trust, deepening social polarization, and persistent gaps in political communication.

This study demonstrates that Indonesia's democracy is at a critical juncture, where the outcome depends on the ability of state institutions, political actors, civil society, and citizens to collectively reinforce democratic consolidation while addressing legitimacy deficits. Drawing on frameworks of democratic consolidation and legitimacy (Linz & Stepan, 1996; Schedler, 1999; Levitsky & Way, 2010), the findings underscore that procedural reforms alone are insufficient: sustainable democracy requires parallel efforts to cultivate a political culture characterized by inclusivity, ethical governance, and accountability.



Furthermore, the study highlights the dual role of civil society and the media, which can both strengthen and destabilize democratic processes depending on their capacity to promote informed public discourse and responsible political communication. Regional variations and identity-based tensions further complicate the democratic landscape, emphasizing the need for context-sensitive approaches to reform and dialogue.

In conclusion, the post-crisis period offers both a window of opportunity and a cautionary warning: Indonesia can either advance toward a more resilient and inclusive democracy through comprehensive consolidation or risk democratic erosion if legitimacy and societal trust are not effectively restored. Policymakers and scholars alike must recognize that the sustainability of Indonesian democracy relies not only on institutional performance but also on the cultivation of democratic norms and ethical political practices across all levels of society.

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