


ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# Land Control, Coal Resource Exploitation and Democratic Decline in Indonesia

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## Abstract

Debates on the causes of Indonesia's recent democratic decline have mostly focused on institutional, political and attitudinal-behavioural causes. By bringing the rural political economy dimension into this conversation, this article presents another picture of the illiberal turn in Indonesian democracy. Specifically, it examines the implications of elite control over land and coal resources on democratic quality. Based on in-country fieldwork materials and relevant secondary data, it analyses instances of episodic repression, the contraction of democratic spaces and the corrosive effects of coal-fuelled intra-elite clientelism by looking at the elite control of land resources and the influence of political and economic elites benefitting from the coal industry in elections and the broader political arena. Finally, it also discusses the capitulation of key agrarian social movement actors to state interests and its impact on the movement's ability to resist democratic regression. This elaboration shows how the current contour of elite control over rural resources contributes to the declining quality of Indonesian democracy.

**Keywords:** land control; coal mining; episodic repression; intra-elite clientelism; democratic decline; Indonesia

## Introduction

Contestation over land and natural resources has become a major feature in contemporary Indonesian politics since its democratic transition in 1998. Land conflict and mineral resource exploitation, especially coal mining, has tremendous consequences for local politics and citizenry. On a more conceptual level, this phenomenon also reveals how the rural political economy shapes modern democratic politics, particularly in newer democracies.

This article elucidates how elite domination over rural political and economic resources shapes the quality of democratic politics in post-authoritarian Indonesia. As a middle-income democracy with a long history of contentious rural politics, Indonesia serves as an ideal example to study the relationship between rural politics and democratic quality. Evaluating the *quality* of democracy requires one to go beyond the fallacy of electoralism and adopt a more expansive conceptualisation of democracy that includes protection for civil, socioeconomic and political rights (Huber *et al.* 1997; Schmitter and Karl 1991). This includes the extent to which democracy can promote the incorporation of marginalised social forces, contentious civil society and active citizenry into different types of consultative channels (Bernhard and Edgell 2022). This point is hardly new, but it becomes more pertinent in the current context of global democratic backsliding and hollowing of democratic institutions.

More specifically, this article looks at the implications of elite-driven land conflicts and coal resource exploitation on democratic quality in Indonesia. It argues that the enduring oligarchic domination in the land sector and coal industry-fuelled intra-elite clientelism lead to the declining quality and contraction of subnational democratic spaces. This is proven by the episodic yet frequent repression of civil and political liberties of rural citizens and activists in defence of elite land interests in rural areas, collusive relationships between political elites and coal companies in local and national politics and shrinking space

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for oppositional political currents. At the same time, the capitulation of some segments of agrarian social movements to the state, especially under the presidency of Joko Widodo (also known as Jokowi), has further weakened the bargaining power of the rural dispossessed and their activist allies vis-à-vis the state and the capitalist class. The end result of these dynamics is the declining quality of democracy in Indonesia in terms of civil and political liberties and civil society influence in politics, also known as the illiberal turn.<sup>1</sup>

This article draws on fieldwork conducted between September 2015–July 2017 and October 2018–July 2019 and some additional interviews and observation afterwards. A wide range of interviews was conducted, some of which are cited in this article. The interlocutors included peasants and agrarian activists, and interviews were conducted in Jakarta, North Bengkulu, Bulukumba, Yogyakarta, and East Kalimantan as well as over the phone and Zoom. To supplement the interviews, observational fieldnotes and notes of informal conversations with the interlocutors were also taken. Additionally, extensive use was made of materials from civil society and media entities. A contextual single-country focus was adopted, and the national-level analysis was supplemented with a focus on subnational processes (Xiang 2013). Moreover, both analytic explanations and descriptive narratives were combined in the elaboration (George and Bennett 2005: 210–211). The case studies referred to in this article can be considered paradigmatic case studies (Flyvbjerg 2001: 80). Despite their limited number, the case studies allow the general features and patterns of the intersection between the rural political economy and democratic decline to be highlighted. This strategy enables an illustrative image of the impact of elite land control and coal mining-fuelled clientelism on democratic quality to be provided.

This article focuses on elite control over land resources and political implications of coal mining for several reasons. First, access to and control over land shape class relations and the broader social and political dynamics in the countryside (Bernstein 2010: 5–9). Further, key works on agrarian politics suggest that elite domination over land resources has detrimental impacts on democratic quality (Anderson 1988; Usmani 2018). The political impacts of the explosion of land conflict cases in Indonesia since 2009 are a testament to this observation. Second, coal, as a frontier commodity, has played a significant role in the consolidation of the global capitalist economy (Marley 2015). Unsurprisingly, its global expansion has engendered assemblages of local resistance in advanced economies and the Global South (Brown and Spiegel 2017). Indonesia plays an important role in the global coal market as one of the world's leading producers and consumers of the fuel since 2000 (Coca 2021). This suggests the significance of the coal sector in Indonesia's contemporary political economy. In doing so, this article complements recent large-scale studies on conflicts between the notoriously corrupt palm oil companies and rural communities in Indonesia (Berenschot *et al.* 2022b; Berenschot *et al.* 2022a).

This article also examines the role of civil society actors in the agrarian sector. In this context, civil society should be understood in a Gramscian sense, as a terrain of struggle between competing social forces in which the interests of the subordinated classes can be advanced (Alagappa 2004: 28–30). This category comprises not only reformist non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and institutional politics but also social movements: a melange of mass-based movements and disruptive political activities challenging “existing arrangements of power and distribution” (Meyer and Tarrow 1998: 4). This conception of civil society allows this article to recognise and map the fragmentation among agrarian civil society actors, especially between those who are still committed to mass-based confrontational politics and those Johansson and Uhlin (2020) label as civil society elites who become high-level policy activists.

This article proceeds as follows. The first section reviews existing explanations of Indonesia's democratic decline, their shortcomings and this article's intervention in the existing debate. The second part delineates the analytical framework employed. The next sections apply the analytical framework and discuss the empirical findings in three fields: elite land control, coal mining-based clientelism and state–agrarian movement relations. The last section concludes by reiterating this article's main thesis and suggesting avenues for future research.

<sup>1</sup>Indonesia's democratic performance scores have been in decline over the last couple of years. See, for example, Indonesia's country score from 2014–2021 at V-Dem index [https://www.v-dem.net/data\\_analysis/CountryGraph/](https://www.v-dem.net/data_analysis/CountryGraph/). Here, the terms illiberal turn, democratic decline and democratic regression are used interchangeably.

## Reassessing Indonesia's Democratic Decline

Mainstream explanations of democratic decline in Indonesia tend to focus on institutional, political and attitudinal-behavioural dimensions of Indonesia's democratic regression. They typically look at issues such as the authoritarian tactics of the political class (Mietzner 2020; Power 2018), illiberal attitudes among the Indonesian electorate (Aspinall *et al.* 2020) and a variety of structural and institutional shortcomings of Indonesian democracy (macroeconomic conditions, authoritarian institutional legacy and increasing political polarisation, among others) (Power and Warburton 2020). Adding nuances to and sometimes challenging the mainstream discussion, structuralist readings of Indonesia's illiberal turn emphasise state and market failures in addressing social injustices and intra-oligarchic competition for power and resources as major causes of democratic decline (Diprose *et al.* 2019; Hadiz 2017).

Both mainstream and structuralist accounts have rightly identified major causes of Indonesia's democratic decline. These accounts, however, overlook the rural political economy dimension, a key variable in explaining political dynamics in Indonesia and the Global South. This variable is important considering the close connection between rural material conditions, political development and democratic trajectory (Bernstein 2010; Dahl 1971: 53-61; Hall *et al.* 2011; Scott 1976). Furthermore, political and economic dynamics in rural areas have been a major source of democratic expansion (by ordinary rural citizens and civil society actors) and contraction (by the elites). This scholarly concern also resonates with on-the-ground politics in Indonesia, where agrarian issues such as structural land disputes, resource-based conflicts and general rural livelihood have become a regular talking point in political and activist discourses. Studying the rural, therefore, will lead to a better understanding of the hidden causes of illiberal democracy in Indonesia: everyday forms of coercion and corruption in rural areas stemming from elite control over land and coal resources. This analysis is conducted by looking at major cases of land conflicts and the influence of actors benefitting from the coal industry in local and national elections in the past two decades (1998–2019) with a particular focus on Jokowi's presidency (2014 onwards) and how these developments have undermined the overall democratic quality in the country.

Besides making a case for a critical agrarian lens in examining Indonesia's democratic regression, this article makes some other contributions. First, it shows the political processes through which elite-driven land conflicts and mineral resource exploitation influence democratic quality, thereby enriching previous studies on the historical and economic foundations of authoritarian and illiberal spaces at the national and local levels (Sidel 2014, 2015). Second, it intervenes in the debate on resource conflicts in Indonesia under decentralised politics. Echoing other scholarly warnings of elite capture of local democratic and development processes in Indonesia (Dasgupta and Beard 2007; Hadiz 2010), McCarthy (2004) suggests that Indonesia's decentralised politics facilitate the elite extraction of natural resource profit through their clientelist networks. A more updated study on East Kalimantan Province also shows the continuing exploitation of land and coal resources by political and economic elites and its detrimental impacts on the ability of local citizens, especially women, to defend their livelihoods and political aspirations (Mariana *et al.* 2013). Going beyond these accounts, this article shows that this process of elite-driven agrarian dispossession engenders episodic repression and exacerbates political marginalisation via clientelism. Lastly, it also shows that the capitulation of key agrarian activists to state interests weakens the movement's ability to resist democratic regression.

## Analytical Framework

The analytical framework of this article employs insights from diverse literature. Drawing from works on critical agrarian studies and the Murdoch School of political economy, it stresses the way in which the nature of democratisation and decentralisation in transitioning countries such as Indonesia limits the ability of rural citizens and agrarian activists to push for agrarian justice policies and incorporation of the rural lower classes in political processes dominated by oligarchic and market interests (Anugrah 2019a; Hirsch 2020; Scoones *et al.* 2018). The emphasis here is on the interplay between capitalist expansion in rural sectors, contentions between competing social forces and democratic trajectory in domestic context.

This is not to say that other structural factors are unimportant, but ultimately, these factors are mediated by the abovementioned interplay. In particular, scholars have pointed out that natural resources can

inhibit economic development and promote authoritarianism, famously known as the resource curse argument (Ross 2015). Unlike other countries, such as Nigeria, Indonesia managed to avoid the resource curse on its economic growth (Fuady 2012; Rosser 2007). However, the post-authoritarian resource boom seems to have had some impact on the quality of Indonesian democracy and governance. Tadjoeiddin (2007: 29-36) notes how corporate resource extraction might infringe on community land and rights. A more recent study by Hill and Pasaribu (2022) argues that while Indonesia has largely succeeded in managing its resource booms in coal, palm oil and gas circa 2004–2011, the distributional and welfare impacts of this boom are less clear. These two studies allude to an important phenomenon, namely the possible socio-political impacts of the post-authoritarian resource boom in Indonesia. The assessment of such impacts, one could argue, requires one to pay attention to how the dominant social forces seize the political and economic opportunities offered by the boom.

Indonesia's democratisation coincided with the neoliberal turn and the continuation of the oligarchic power structure benefitting the old political and economic elites.<sup>2</sup> This is the context in which Indonesian agrarian movements operate in the post-authoritarian period. Local peasant unions and other types of agrarian coalitions and movements have been active since the 2000s. During the same period, cases of violent land grabbing and agrarian conflicts for investment purposes have been increasing. The deployment of violence by a variety of local and national political and economic elites in these cases is instrumental to preserve their interests in the agrarian sector (Mudhoffir 2022: 161-202). This extra-economic coercion contributes to the contraction of local democratic spaces, especially in the realm of non-electoral, everyday politics.

Apart from everyday rural coercion, coal mining-based clientelism also steadily erodes Indonesia's democratic quality. A classic Weberian argument defines clientelism as corrupt patronage, nepotism and particularistic exchanges (O'Donnell 1996). This tautological definition, however, is insufficient to explain how the clientelist relationship between politicians and oligarchs (including mining companies) shapes democratic quality. Therefore, this article situates clientelism in the context of capitalist development and the power struggle among competing social forces. Block (1977) has shown that states in capitalist societies generally tend to maintain the stability of elite and market interests. In Southeast Asia, this tendency sometimes manifests in the form of clientelistic exchanges between state and business actors (Hameiri and Jones 2020: 23). Borrowing Piattoni's (2001) definition, these clientelistic interactions are privatised economic exchanges aimed at maximising the benefits for the involved parties, in this case aspiring politicians and mining donors, that thrive to counteract mass political mobilisation and opposition. In the Indonesian context, oligarchic actors might even integrate some reformist gestures in addition to their clientelistic tactics as a form of appeasement to civil society and critical constituencies (Fukuoka and Djani 2016), suggesting the resilience of this quid-pro-quo arrangement. However, in contrast to the typical focus on elite-voter linkages in key works on patronage and clientelism by Shefter (1994: 283) and Southeast Asia specialists (Aspinall and Sukmajati 2016; Hicken 2011; Hutchcroft 2014: 176-177; Scott 1972), this article instead concentrates on the *intra*-elite clientelistic exchanges. This definition of clientelism allows the collusive relationship between state elites, business actors and other related actors in the coal industry and the impact of such collusion on electoral and non-electoral politics to be underlined.

Insights from recent comparative studies on subnational politics corroborate the current study's conceptualisation of clientelism. A mixed-methods study of clientelism across Indonesia shows that intra-elite and elite-voter clientelism is more intense in natural resource-rich areas where economic resources are dominated by a handful of elites and less intense in areas with diverse local economies where resources are more dispersed to a wider range of actors (Berenschot 2018). Further, Sidel's (2014) comparative study shows that local democratic quality deteriorates in areas where the local economy is dominated by a few powerful players and interests. These findings resonate with the current fieldwork data and civil society and media reports indicating that the pervasiveness of clientelistic practices by elites tied to the coal industry has corrosive effects on democratic spaces for local citizens.

<sup>2</sup>An oligarchy is defined as a network of politico-business elites, shaped by the confluence of interests between state elites and a variety of capitalist and predatory economy actors, that strives to maintain its political and economic dominance in electoral democracy. For an extensive elaboration of this definition, see Robison and Hadiz (2004). For a more eclectic conceptualisation of oligarchy, see Winters (2011). For critiques of oligarchy theories, see Ford and Pepinsky (2014).

Lastly, Weingast's (1997) classic analysis of the coordination problem among prodemocratic oppositions is used as a lens to evaluate the ability of Indonesian agrarian movement actors to resist democratic regression. The fragmented nature of the movement has made it difficult for its advocates to mount a unified and effective counterbalance against the state and oligarchic interests beyond the mainstreaming of agrarian justice discourse and policy concessions in land and forest resource management (Anugrah 2019a). The participation of key movement actors—essentially civil society elites with backgrounds in agrarian activism—in the Jokowi administration has created fissures within the movement and ultimately weakened its ability to challenge illiberal practices by the elites.

A quick note on the usage of the term 'elites' should be mentioned. As discussed earlier, the definition of elites here is congruent with Robison and Hadiz's oligarchy framework. Therefore, they are seen as a relational network rather than a group of small cliques or individuals. In that sense, the present working definition of elites differs from Mills's (1956) notion of power elites, which refers to a small subset of diverse elites that dominate the commanding heights of societal institutions.

### Land Control and Episodic Repression in Local Politics

In post-authoritarian Indonesia, state and corporate actors continue to play a dominant role in the rural political economy. This contour of domination, however, differs from those of the Philippines (Sidel 2018: 31) and Latin American countries (Petras and Veltmeyer 2011: 61-66), where *latifundia*-owning landed elites dominate local livelihood and politics. In contrast, Indonesian elites, especially the local ones, struggle to monopolise rural resources (Buehler 2018). Indonesian rural elites are also more diverse sociologically, including groups such as corporate actors and aspiring politicians. Moreover, decades of agrarian transformation in Indonesia have resulted in the pluriactivity of rural livelihood (Neilson 2016). This means that agricultural households earn their income from a variety of farming and non-farming sources, giving them relative autonomy in bargaining with the elites.

Within these structural settings, rural democratic spaces are a contested political arena between competing social forces. In the early years of the reform period (1998–2004), the scope and quality of rural democratic spaces fluctuated. On the ground, local peasant movements and coalitions won legal battles against land grabbing corporations, although the actual rulings were not always implemented at the community level.<sup>3</sup> In the legal realm, the issuance of the Parliamentary Decree (TAP MPR) No. IX/2001 on agrarian reform and natural resource management in 2001 provided legal protection for agrarian advocacy (Rachman 2011: 53-65). At the same time, cases of repression by local police forces in defence of elite interests in the plantation sector, such as the arrests of community protesters and activists in Bulukumba,<sup>4</sup> North Bengkulu<sup>5</sup> and South Sumatra (Collins 2007) circa 2001–2003, were also widespread and received national attention.

The roots of these elite-driven land conflicts can be traced back to the New Order period, especially during the 1970s, when the regime issued several laws justifying the capitalist mode of rural development and overturned Sukarno's socialist-populist policies (Fauzi 1999: 168-185).<sup>6</sup> It also capitalised on the legal provision in the populist 1960 Basic Agrarian Law called the commercial lease rights (*Hak Guna Usaha*, HGU) to legitimise and promote state-sponsored large-scale investments in the plantation sector. The state itself also played a crucial role in extracting forest resources through its State Forestry Corporation (Perum Perhutani), which controlled a large part of the forest areas in Java Island (Peluso 1992). As a result, a regime-linked oligarchy controlling land and forest resources emerged. For example, around 20 business groups holding forest exploitation rights controlled 64 million ha of forestland in 1994 (Khudori 1995: 213). This process of capital accumulation and expansion accelerated with little consideration for community needs.

<sup>3</sup>Interview with Rudy Tahas, a local agrarian activist, Bulukumba, 22 May 2016.

<sup>4</sup>Interview with Iwan Salassa, a local agrarian activist, Bulukumba, 24 May 2016. See also Tyson (2010: 141-145).

<sup>5</sup>Interview with Dedyanto, a local agrarian activist, North Bengkulu, 17 May 2017.

<sup>6</sup>These are laws no. 1/1967 on foreign investment, no. 6/1968 on domestic investment, no. 5/1967 on principles of forestry and government regulations, no. 21/1970 on forest exploitation and forest harvesting rights and no. 7/1990 on industrial timber plantation.



The early years of democratic reform led to democratic consolidation in Indonesia. An observer described the two-term presidency of Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (2004–2014) as the years of relative democratic stability (Stott 2014: 1–2).<sup>7</sup> This view, however, overly focuses on the institutional aspect of Indonesian politics and macroeconomic indicators. A closer look at the rural political economy during this period reveals a less pleasant image. Yudhoyono introduced the market-oriented land titling programme to cushion the impact of corporate land grabbing and other forms of agrarian dispossession in his first term (2004–2009) (Rachman 2011: 67). However, his administration did not really tackle the fundamental problem of structural inequality in the ownership of and access to land.

This resulted in a tug of war between the rural community activist coalitions vis-à-vis state and oligarchic actors in land disputes. Eventually, these politics surrounding land conflicts became a source of gradual contraction of local democratic spaces. As explained in the analytical framework, the rising rate of elite-driven and state-backed accumulation of land resources, whether through land grabbing or defence of landed assets, increased instances of localised and episodic repression of rural citizens and agrarian activists even when elections remained competitive, free and fair. Albeit sporadic, this softer form of repression limited the space for civil society actors attempting to challenge state and oligarchic rule in local politics and led to the declining quality of local and national democracy.

Data from annual year-end reports of the Consortium for Agrarian Reform (*Konsorsium Pembaruan Agraria*, KPA) provide a macro perspective of the relationship between land conflict and local democratic regression in the post-authoritarian context. The KPA's 2014 year-end report notes that under Yudhoyono's presidency (2004–2014), there were around 1500 land conflicts involving 1 million agricultural households covering over 6.5 million ha of land (KPA 2014). The same report also shows how the number of land conflict cases increased by more than five times from 2009 to 2014, from 89 cases in 2009 to 472 in 2014, a steep increase compared to the number of cases in his first term (2004–2009). Most of these conflicts were land grabbing cases committed by state and corporate authorities.

Despite its initial reformist credentials, Jokowi's first-term presidency (2014–2019) also contributed to the deteriorating state of land conflict and, by extension, local democratic quality. Although his rhetoric emphasised pro-agrarian reform, his overall land policy largely continued Yudhoyono's land titling scheme rather than promoting a more expansive land reform policy addressing corporate land grab. In 2015 alone, the KPA reported that there were "252 agrarian conflicts concerning 400,340 ha of land and involving 108,714 households" (Ompusunggu 2016). In 2016, the KPA also noted that there were 450 land conflicts covering 1.2 million ha of land affecting more than 86,000 households. Most of these conflicts were spurred by the expansion of commercial plantations and state-sponsored infrastructure projects. This situation deteriorated even further in the latter half of Jokowi's first term. In 2017, the number of land conflicts increased to 659 cases covering more than 520,000 ha of land and impacting more than 650,000 rural families (KPA 2017). In 2018, these conflicts totalling 410 cases covered more than 800,000 ha of land involving more than 87,000 rural households (KPA 2019). This trend continued in 2019, with 734,000 ha of disputed land under 279 conflict cases affecting 109,000 households (Sari and Ahdiat 2020). In total, there were more than 2000 cases of land conflict in Jokowi's first term, with a significant increase in the number of community victims (those who were unjustly persecuted, arrested or even physically repressed by state security forces) (KPA 2020a). This was a significant increase in terms of the number of cases and instances of repression committed by state apparatuses compared to Yudhoyono's records.

This trend continued well into Jokowi's second term (2019–2024). Despite the Covid-19 pandemic and economic downturn, around 240 agrarian conflicts erupted in 2020 affecting more than 135,000 households living on roughly 624,000 ha of land (KPA 2020b). In 2021, there was a slight decline in the number of agrarian conflicts to 207 cases covering an area of 0.5 million ha, but the number of affected households rose to more than 198,000 families (Febryan 2022). Finally, in 2022, a slight increase in the number of conflict cases to 212 was followed by a steep rise in the size of the areas under conflict (1 million ha of land) and the number of victims (346,000 households) (Sari and Sedayu 2023).

One could argue that the ability of Indonesian civil society to record these data and continue its agrarian advocacy work is a reflection of a functional democracy. There is some merit to this argument.

<sup>7</sup>For a more nuanced view of Yudhoyono's presidency, see Aspinall *et al.* (2015).

**Table 1.** Land Conflict Cases during Jokowi’s Presidency, 2015–2022

Year	Number of cases	Areas under dispute (in ha)	Number of affected households
2015	252	400,340	108,700
2016	450	1.2 million	86,000
2017	659	520,000	650,000
2018	410	800,000	87,000
2019	279	734,000	109,000
2020	240	624,000	135,000
2021	207	500,000	198,000
2022	212	1 million	346,000

Source: Annual reports from the Consortium for Agrarian Reform (KPA). Numbers are rounded approximations.

However, it neglects the protracted erosion of democratic quality and the tenuous ground of rural democratic spaces. Gauging the exact impact of elite land control from these data can be challenging. Nevertheless, this record provides a reliable approximation of such an impact. To show the intersecting dynamics between rural material domination and democratic quality, several illustrative case studies and three different modes of repression affecting rural democratic spaces are highlighted below.

***Land Conflict and Rural Democratic Spaces under Democratic Stagnation***

The democratic ‘stability’ under Yudhoyono’s administration could be better described as ‘stagnation’. His consensus-seeking approach in politics put some hard-gained democratic gains, including the state of rural democracy, under duress (Anugrah 2020: 3-6). Despite his administration’s promotion of land titling, violent land control in defence of state and corporate interests remained rampant. For example, in Ciamis District, the West Java Police Force, backed by the provincial government and regional military command of West Java Province, sent hundreds of officers to expel local peasants who occupied Perum Perhutani’s plantation estates in a land struggle case in 2008 (Rachman 2011: 127-130). Other violent land conflict cases involving state and corporate authorities, such as the ones in Kebumen Bima, Mesuji and Papua Province in 2011, also garnered national attention because of the involvement of local security forces in suppressing dissent and protests from local communities (Manggiasih 2011; Munir 2011).

Despite civil society pressure, the Yudhoyono administration did not take decisive action to address this issue (Berdikari Online 2012). To put it more bluntly, his administration did not push for a major nationwide state intervention to resolve agrarian conflicts between state and corporate elites and rural smallholders beyond his land titling policy. This inaction, combined with his government’s neoliberal orientation in rural development and the utilisation of extra-economic coercion by state and corporate elites, served to spur democratic regression in the Indonesian countryside.<sup>8</sup>

***Land Conflict and Rural Democratic Decline under Jokowi Administration***

Despite the initial hope for greater concern for social justice and human rights, Jokowi opted to promote a new version of developmentalism, where the state plays a key role in promoting capitalist development with little interest in a progressive agenda (Warburton 2016). This was also true in the agrarian sector, where the drive for capital expansion outweighed concerns for democratic rights and community interests.

This tension was visible in the stalled implementation of the land titling policy for smallholders. Aldillah (2020) notes that one of the major obstacles to this policy was violent agrarian conflicts. An obvious indicator of the repressive nature of these conflicts is the number of legalised persecutions of peasants and activists advocating for land rights. During Jokowi’s first term, around 600 of these

<sup>8</sup>For an account of the neoliberal rural development policy under Yudhoyono’s presidency, see Safitri (2014).

advocates were detained, another 300 experienced different forms of physical violence and another 30 died (Aldillah 2020).

Who were the major corporate and oligarchic actors behind these conflicts? The KPA's reports identify several key actors, including big palm oil companies such as Sinar Mas Group, Salim Group, Wilmar Group and their subsidiaries, state-owned companies such as Perum Perhutani, State Plantation Companies (PTPN companies) and PT Semen Indonesia and smaller companies with links to New Order-era elites and multinational corporations. Jokowi's state-sponsored projects, such as international airports, tourism development and food estate, also contributed to the increasing rate of land conflicts and repression against rural citizens and activists.

Relatedly, how did this attack on rural democracy unfold on the ground? Evidence from some illustrative cases reveal three modes of rural repression: politicised legal persecution, outright repression and voter suppression.

Politicised legal persecution, such as arrests by local police forces on behalf of established political and corporate interests, was used in several land conflict cases. For instance, in 2017, four local peasants and a Christian minister in Tulang Bawang, Lampung were jailed by the local court because of their activism against land grabbing committed by PT Bangun Nusa Indah Lampung (BNIL), a subsidiary of Bumi Waras, a major local palm oil company (Kresna 2017). In 2018, Heri Budiawan, an environmental activist, was sentenced to four years in prison by the Supreme Court after being accused of spreading communism during an anti-mining protest that he led in East Java (Kahfi 2019). In the same year, two peasants in Cianjur, West Java, were accused of conducting illegal farming activities at PT Pasir Luhur's plantation and subsequently imprisoned for seventeen months (Utama 2018). This mode of repression continued even during the Covid-19 pandemic. In early February 2022, hundreds of police officers arrested 67 residents of Wadas Village in Purworejo District, Central Java, because they resisted the planned andesite mining activities in support of the state-funded construction of a new large-scale dam (Arumingtyas and Nuswantoro 2022).<sup>9</sup> In these instances, political and corporate elites utilised security and judicial apparatuses to suppress criticisms via coercive and legal channels. A long-time activist, Dika Moehammad, accused these elites of being "human rights violators who have killed peasants and pillaged their rights to livelihood."<sup>10</sup>

Another mode of repression is state-sponsored coercion against dissenting rural citizens and activists (Rosana 2019). This was evident in the Tulang Bawang case, when the local police force violently dispersed a peasant protest against PT BNIL in 2016 (Matanasi 2017). Two other cases of state repression in the Kendeng region (Central Java) and Sukamulya (West Java) also received national attention. In Kendeng, a local peasant resistance against the construction of a cement factory by the state-owned PT Semen Indonesia faced various threats and persecution by police and military officers as well as hired thugs since the early days of Jokowi's first term.<sup>11</sup> In Sukamulya, the state's repressive tactic was even more apparent. In 2016, the joint command of local police and military, claiming to "uphold the state duty," shot tear gas on villagers who protested the planned construction of an international airport and brutally arrested some of them (Fahriza 2017).

The last strategy of repression is voter suppression by big plantation corporations. In resource-rich provinces, some plantation companies limit the rights of their workers to cast their ballots during elections in the name of maintaining company productivity. This is particularly apparent in the palm oil industry. For instance, around 2000 plantation workers were unable to vote during the 2015 district head election in Indragiri Hulu Regency, Riau Province because their company, Duta Palma Group, forced them to work instead of giving them a day off (Sani 2015). This pattern continued well into the 2019 general elections. In Central Kalimantan, a number of palm oil companies refused the construction of voting booths on their plantation estates, affecting the voting rights of approximately 8000 workers (Kasriadi and Setiawan 2019). This was also the case in West Kalimantan, where 35 companies did not properly facilitate voter registration for 5000 migrant workers from other provinces (Wijanarko

<sup>9</sup>The police event went further by intimidating participants of a public discussion on the Wadas case in Semarang, declaring that they would disband the discussion (Hidayat 2022).

<sup>10</sup>Script from a speech given by Dika Moehammad at the National Peasants' Day demonstration on 27 September 2022.

<sup>11</sup>Interview with Joko Prianto, a local peasant leader in Kendeng, Jakarta, 13 April 2016. See also Apriando (2019).



2019). These cases might be just the tip of the iceberg, as it is difficult to monitor elections on plantation estates, even for local election commissions and supervisory agencies (Media Indonesia 2018). While this form of repression might be softer than the first two repression strategies, it nevertheless contributes to the deterioration of Indonesian democracy.

These developments created a climate of caution, if not fear, and confusion among dissenting community members and activists concerned with land rights issues in rural areas. Consider the mood among activists and peasant protesters during the Kendeng solidarity campaign in March 2017.<sup>12</sup> Participants of this campaign considered the local authorities' heavy-handed approach to the anti-mining advocacy in the Kendeng region as a threat to not only peasant livelihood but also opportunities for democratic dissent, which reminded them of the New Order government's repressive response to peasant protests. In another meeting discussing the future of Indonesian democracy organised by a social movement coalition, many attendees saw the threat to rural democracy as another dimension of Indonesia's democratic decline.<sup>13</sup> This assessment was corroborated by a number of environmental activists who had been worrying about the recent state of Indonesian democracy and continually asking variations of the same question: "What should we do (to advocate for people's rights and environmental sustainability) under the current (increasingly repressive) political conditions?"<sup>14</sup> An agrarian activist, voicing his concerns, said that unless agrarian movements participate in and safeguard democratic institutions, "the consequences will be devastating for their future."<sup>15</sup>

One might be tempted to downplay the severity of this form of democratic decline, as the modes of repression in land conflict cases and their impacts occur largely outside of the electoral arena. However, it is precisely because of its non-electoral nature that it should be taken seriously, for it threatens the space for dissent and opposition against local government, security and corporate authorities. For many peasants, indigenous people, plantation workers and agrarian activists, this is the first frontier of local democracy and politics. Therefore, a threat to this democratic space is genuinely felt by these rural advocates of agrarian justice. This is the hidden site of repression that the existing scholarship overlooks.

### Coal Resource Exploitation, Clientelism and Oligarchic Influence in Politics

Similar to big land and plantation businesses, elites tied to the coal mining sector have contributed to the declining quality of democracy in rural Indonesia in terms of its liberal and deliberative aspects. Owners and controllers of coal businesses finance the campaigns of aspiring candidates in local and national elections. Once in power, these candidates—now election winners—then return the favour by granting and extending mining licenses or steer policies in support of their oligarchic backers and at the expense of ordinary citizens. Consistent with this paper's analytical framework, this clientelistic practice is particularly prominent in resource-rich provinces. This also indicates, as Block (1977) and Hameiri and Jones (2020: 23) point out, the propensity of state elites (in this case, elected officials) to provide a stable political environment for the smooth operation of business elites: coal companies and oligarchs.

The consequences of this coal mining-fuelled clientelism for rural communities have been devastating, both in terms of socioecological sustainability and democratic control over unethical corporate practices (Apriando 2018; The Gecko Project and Mongabay 2017). This section mostly focuses on how these intra-elite clientelistic practices have brought corrosive influences on democratic processes and accountability in recent years. Taking the cues from Rodan and Hughes (2014: 7-11), the author sees democratic accountability in terms of not only the successful implementation of free and competitive elections but also its ability to provide meaningful spaces and resources for popular deliberation and the expansion of rights.

Historically speaking, the exploitation of natural resources as a source of political power can be traced back to the authoritarian era. The New Order regime established several state-owned companies in

<sup>12</sup>Fieldnotes from personal observation of the Kendeng solidarity protest, Jakarta, 13–27 March 2017.

<sup>13</sup>Fieldnotes from personal observation of a social movement coalition, Jakarta, 12 April 2017.

<sup>14</sup>Zoom discussion with activists from the Indonesian Forum for Environment (*Wahana Lingkungan Hidup Indonesia*, WALHI), 7 October 2020.

<sup>15</sup>Phone interview, Activist M, 10 March 2021.

natural resource sectors such as oil, general mining and forestry to accumulate capital and distribute patronage and spoils among its supporters and cronies (Crouch 1979; Robison 2009 [1986]: 211-217). These sectors, particularly oil, gas and mining, are also notorious for their decades-long corruption, a trend that continues today (Publish What You Pay Indonesia 2018).

Moving away from the centralised patronage system, the regulatory regime for mining operation shifts from the national government to subnational governments. Replacing the 1967 Basic Mining Law, Law No. 4/2009 on Mineral and Coal Mining was issued in 2009, granting district heads and mayors the authority to issue mining licenses (Sitinjak 2011). This shift also coincided with the introduction of direct elections for local executive heads (*pilkada*) in 2005.<sup>16</sup> These institutional changes paved the way for the rise of corrupt political deals and clientelistic transactions between extractive business interests and local candidates.

At the same time, the cost of election campaigns has risen dramatically, especially for *pilkada* elections. According to a 2018 study from the Corruption Eradication Commission (*Komisi Pemberantasan Korupsi*, KPK), many candidates competing in the 2015 *pilkada* elections needed external donors for campaign funding (KPK 2018). It also found that those who won their elections needed around Rp 20–30 billion (US\$ 1.4–2.1 million) to win a mayor or district head position and up to Rp 100 billion (US\$ 7.1 million) to win a governor post.

Further investigation by the Mining Advocacy Network (*Jaringan Advokasi Tambang*, JATAM) also showed the prevalence of quid-pro-quo clientelistic transactions between coal mining companies and local politicians, with winners of *pilkada* and gubernatorial elections granting mining licenses to companies that funded their campaigns. For instance, the number of coal mining licenses issued by several resource-rich district governments, including Kutai Kartanegara (East Kalimantan), Belu (East Nusa Tenggara) and Musi Banyuasin (South Sumatra), increased significantly after the 2010 *pilkada* elections (JATAM 2017). This trend continued in the 2018 gubernatorial elections in provinces such as East Nusa Tenggara, West Java, East Java, South Sumatra and East Kalimantan (JATAM 2018). The vast proliferation of this shady practice is astounding. In a joint research project, JATAM and several NGOs discovered that the number of mining licenses issued across Indonesia skyrocketed “from 750 in 2001 to more than 10,000 in 2010, a 13-fold increase, nearly half of which were for coal mining” (Koalisi Bersihkan Indonesia 2018). Another study from this coalition also found that 7180 out of the total 8710 mining licenses issued in 2018 were issued in 171 districts and regions holding *pilkada* elections (Primastika and Shahbanu 2020). Many of these companies were smaller companies that served as subsidiaries for big miners or had links with old local and national elites.

This intra-elite clientelistic game also extends to national politics. In the 2019 presidential election, national-level oligarchs with business interests in the coal industry heavily financed the election campaigns of both presidential candidates to influence government policies in their favour (JATAM 2019). This included figures such as the former general Luhut Pandjaitan, Jokowi’s close advisor, Sandiaga Uno, Prabowo Subianto’s vice-presidential candidate in the election and coal and energy companies such as PT Toba Bara, PT Antam, PT Kaltim Prima Coal, PT Adaro Energy and PT Arsari Group. Often, there is a close connection between national and local mining companies and elite interests in resource-rich provinces such as Bengkulu and East Kalimantan.<sup>17</sup> The post-2019 election political setup also shows the continuing influence of mining oligarchs on Jokowi’s ministerial appointments and the national parliament (Syahni 2020).

The consequences of these oligarchic, clientelistic practices have been detrimental for rural democratic quality for a number of reasons. Firstly, policymaking concerning the coal industry remains largely insulated from public scrutiny (Taufik *et al.* 2020). Given the economic and political salience of coal mining, this is hardly surprising. The rapid expansion of shady deals concerning coal mining licences and operation exacerbates this problem. This in turn leads to lax policies benefitting corporations and elites controlling coal resources. Take the example of Bengkulu Province. The issuance of mining licenses in the province in the post-authoritarian period is a highly politicised process that depends on the collusive

<sup>16</sup>This discussion on the connection between local elections and coal businesses derives from an earlier essay (Anugrah 2019b).

<sup>17</sup>Interviews with Activist E, Bengkulu City, 15 May 2017 and Pradarma Rupang, a JATAM organiser, Samarinda, 23 March 2019.

relationship between mining companies and local elites.<sup>18</sup> As the power of these elites increases, the ability of community actors to democratically oversee and control mining operation declines. From the standpoint of deliberative democracy (Bernhard and Edgell 2022), this skewed political arena is troubling. A vignette from the author's bottom-up observation reveals this frustration:

I was invited to join a local Koran recitation gathering by my host in the village. After the recitation ended, the attendants chatted for a while over coffee, cigarettes and traditional snacks. My host then started a discussion on the recent plan of PT Dinamika Selaras Jaya, a plantation and mining company, to start coal mining near the village. This became a concern for the attending community members, who were largely uninformed about the company and its investment plan. In the words of my host, "They are rich people who seek wealth, while we just seek to live and survive."<sup>19</sup>

Similar to many other rural communities across Indonesia, this particular community received little information regarding the planned coal mining activities near their village. This indicates the partial nature of rural lower-class incorporation in contemporary Indonesian democracy.

Moreover, this practice leaves little space for political candidates with civil society backgrounds and anti-mining credentials to win elections, let alone influence policies on natural resource management. Zooming in on East Kalimantan, a major coal-producing province, illustrates this challenge. Consider this assessment from a leading anti-mining activist: in the entire East Kalimantan, the only incumbent member of the provincial parliament who openly criticises mining interests is Baharuddin Demmu (Bahar).<sup>20</sup> An anti-mining activist-turned-politician, Bahar is the exception that proves the rule: his electoral success to date, a product of his activist credentials, strong connection with the voters and ability to facilitate access to subsidies for peasants and fishers, is a rarity in the money politics-fuelled political landscape in East Kalimantan and other resource-rich provinces.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, he encountered what can be described as a soft version of intimidation for his anti-mining stance:

I received phone calls [from an unknown person] advising me to stop criticising mining...when I was in Jakarta, a few people also came to me and told me to stop the investigation [of illegal mining] in the provincial parliament...Nevertheless, I carried on.<sup>22</sup>

This suggests another challenge that Bahar and other civil society candidates face in breaking the coal industry-funded clientelistic arrangement.

Outside of the realm of electoral politics, the growing influence of coal mining interests also exacerbates political corruption and suppression of criticisms against elites benefitting from the coal industry. Local political elites, such as former mayors and district heads in resource-rich regions, continue to be implicated in corrupt deals concerning the issuance of coal mining licenses and concessions (Wibisono 2018). Democratic space for voicing dissent against mining oligarchs and their elite backers has been shrinking too. From 2014 to 2019, roughly 200 dissenting citizens involved in criticisms of mining activities were unjustly persecuted by state authorities, using the provisions available in several laws and regulations on mineral and coal mining among others (Syahni 2020).

Equally important is the implication of this oligarchic influence on everyday politics at the community level. Following the pattern in land rights struggle, the consolidation of mining-based clientelism could further limit the democratic space for community dissent against this corrupt practice. Democratic spaces for community disruptive actions against coal mining have become increasingly under duress, threatened by both coercion (intimidation of community rights advocates) and co-optation (the constant lure of money politics), both of which are by-products of coal-fuelled clientelism. Student activists active in anti-

<sup>18</sup>Interview with Activist E, 15 May 2017.

<sup>19</sup>Fieldnotes from community observation, North Bengkulu, 12 April 2017.

<sup>20</sup>Interview with Merah Johansyah Ismail, JATAM's national coordinator, 19 March 2019. A more systematic observation is needed to assess this claim, but considering his in-depth knowledge of East Kalimantan politics, this assessment can be used as a reference.

<sup>21</sup>Interviews with Baharuddin Demmu's constituents and activists in East Kalimantan, 23–28 March 2019.

<sup>22</sup>Interview with Baharuddin Demmu, Samarinda, 25 March 2019.

mining advocacy argued these two-pronged strategies, especially coercion, are a common weapon of elites tied to the mining industry.<sup>23</sup> Conversations with anti-coal mining activists based in Jakarta and East Kalimantan confirmed this assessment. In Jakarta, activists at JATAM's national secretariat had received multiple threats and suffered harassment numerous times because of their community advocacy.<sup>24</sup> In East Kalimantan, JATAM's office was attacked and ransacked by unknown assailants in 2018 after the NGO's local activists investigated the abandoned coal mines that had claimed the lives of children who played around the mining sites.<sup>25</sup> These activists alleged, quite plausibly, that elites benefitting from coal-fueled clientelism played a role in instigating these attacks.

### Civil Society Responses: Between Fragmented Opposition and Capitulation to the State

Since Jokowi took office in 2014, rural civil society actors have pursued diverse strategies in advancing the agrarian justice agenda, ranging from contentious tactics to more conciliatory approaches, such as taking up posts in the state bureaucracy or participating in state-sponsored policy forums. The latter strategy has proven to be controversial, as it is seen by many in the agrarian movement as a form of capitulation to elite interests.<sup>26</sup> This, in the author's view, is a fair assessment. Pursued with little to no consultation with the broader rural civil society, participation of key agrarian movement actors and organisations in state bureaucracy and policy forums since 2014 has created rifts within the agrarian social movement. Applying Weingast's framework, this split weakens the movement's capacity to create a united opposition against the state and oligarchic interests and resist democratic regression. This picture confirms and adds nuances to an earlier study of competition and tension among civil society elites in Indonesian agrarian activism (Lay and Eng 2020).

Contemporary Indonesian rural social movements have been fragmented since the country's resurgence in the 1980s. The many post-authoritarian local peasant unions and agrarian justice coalitions emerged as a response to land and rural resource conflicts across Indonesia. The localised and dispersed nature of these conflicts has also made it challenging for these advocates to form a more unified, national-level organisation of the rural dispossessed. Additionally, sociological dynamics among movement actors, such as political disagreements, competing arguments and organisational splits, have fractured the movement (Anugrah 2019a: 85-86).

Jokowi's victory in 2014 was initially seen as an opportunity to push for a more progressive agrarian reform agenda and political momentum to consolidate the movement. Seeing this opening, several activist actors and organisations then decided to participate in key policy posts and forums of the Jokowi administration. Alas, this decision turned out to be a major point of disagreement between those who joined the government and those who chose to fight outside of the state. This was visible in two cases: participation in the state bureaucracy and the Global Land Forum (GLF).

During Jokowi's presidency (2014–present), several leading activists occupied key posts in the state bureaucracy and enterprise, namely the Presidential Staff Office (*Kantor Staf Presiden*, KSP) and the state-owned Perum Perhutani (Afriyadi 2020; Anugrah 2019a: 87-89). The rationale for taking up these positions was simple: to change the system from within and encourage the Jokowi administration to implement a more progressive agrarian reform policy. Given the nature of the capitalist state and the oligarchic power structure in Indonesia, this seems to be an overestimation of the activists' influence on Jokowi. For this reason, other activists criticised the decision of these activist–bureaucrats. The Indonesian Legal Aid Foundation's chairperson, Asfinawati, and agrarian activist-cum-researcher, Roy Murtadho, argued that the activists' involvement in Jokowi's circle has been rather useless (Bhawono 2020). Younger agrarian activists and scholars seemed to share a similar sentiment, seeing such involvement as a form of political capitulation.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>23</sup>Interview with anti-mining student activists, 14 November 2018.

<sup>24</sup>Interview with Merah Johansyah Ismail, 19 March 2019.

<sup>25</sup>Interview with Pradarma Rupang, 23 March 2019. See also Rosadi (2018).

<sup>26</sup>This is the author's sense of the criticisms directed to activists who decided to join the Jokowi administration by other activists, especially the younger ones.

<sup>27</sup>Fieldnotes from personal observation of the Kendeng solidarity protest, Jakarta, 13–27 March 2017. Informal conversation with young agrarian activists and scholars, Yogyakarta, 24–26 July 2019.

The split deepened further with the GLF conference. In 2018, a number of agrarian NGOs and activists joined the GLF.<sup>28</sup> Endorsed by the Jokowi government, the GLF, which had historic ties with the World Bank and donor countries of the Global North, served more as a tool to legitimise Indonesia's existing market-oriented agrarian policies rather than a genuine opportunity for democratic deliberation (Prasetyo 2019). In response to the GLF, a coalition of concerned individuals, communities and social movements called the People's Alliance Against Eviction (*Aliansi Rakyat Anti Penggusuran*, ARAP) promoted anti-eviction and land rights policies in its platform, opposed the GLF as a Trojan horse for neo-liberalism and criticised the activist participants of the forum.

In brief, the political actions taken by the activist–bureaucrats have triggered a barrage of criticisms from many in the agrarian movement. In their defence, these civil society elites claimed that their involvement has resulted in local concessions for land rights and a more progressive shift in official policy discourses (Afiff and Rachman 2019). However, a more consistent yardstick would be to assess whether 1) their participation has resulted in the promised *significant* policy change, namely the implementation of major land redistribution and settlements of corporate land grab and 2) their actions as activist–bureaucrats have been taken in close consultation and democratic deliberation with other actors and organisations in the agrarian movement. A more sober reflection, one could argue, should consider the lack of success, if not failure, of those civil society elites who chose to participate in the state bureaucracy and policy forums.

Given these conflicting views and assessments, it is then unsurprising and understandable that other movement actors see the decision of these activist–bureaucrats as a form of capitulation to state and capitalist interests. Unlike the Brazilian Landless Workers' Movement (*Movimento dos Trabalhadores Sem Terra*, MST), Indonesian agrarian social movements do not have the power and authority to recall their poorly performing representatives. In other words, there is an absence of a democratic, politically binding recall mechanism for failing delegates, which creates further division among the already-fragmented agrarian justice advocates. The insistence of some agrarian activists-turned-policy entrepreneurs to stay within the state's orbit, despite their questionable results, gives the Jokowi administration a participatory façade and a pretext to continue its policy of half-hearted concessions for land rights. Seen from this perspective, recent appointments of politicians with backgrounds in youth and labour activism from the Indonesian Solidarity Party (*Partai Solidaritas Indonesia*, PSI), a niche party of liberal groupuscules, as vice ministers of the Ministry of Agrarian Affairs and Spatial Planning (Farisa 2022) will not bring any seismic changes to existing agrarian policies. The unforeseen state co-optation of this institutional activism, at the end of the day, weakens the movement's ability, which mainly relies on mass mobilisation, protests and public campaigns, to resist the onslaught on democratic spaces in rural areas.

## Concluding Remarks

This article highlighted an overlooked dimension of the discussion on the illiberal turn in Indonesian democracy: the connection between democratic quality and the rural political economy. It showed the processes of repression, intra-elite clientelism and oligarchic expansion that undermine the quality of Indonesian democracy by focusing on the politics surrounding land control and coal resource exploitation. Perhaps the main takeaway point from this analysis is how material inequality in the form of elite domination of land and coal resources and collusive linkages between state and oligarchic elites contribute to the declining quality of Indonesian democracy. It also underlined the inability of actors in the fragmented agrarian movement to respond adequately to this gradual process of democratic regression. It is hoped that this attempt can provoke further inquiries into this phenomenon using more systematic approaches, such as a controlled comparison of qualitative case studies, a nationwide analysis of cases of land conflict and coal-fuelled clientelism or a quantitative regression analysis of this article's key variables of interest. In addition, future research can also probe the political impacts of other commodity booms in Indonesia. Preliminary research has shown, for example, corporate manipulation of legal institutions to suppress labour rights in Indonesia's thriving nickel industry (Sutiawan 2022).

<sup>28</sup>The GLF's programme and participating organisations and individuals can be accessed at <https://bit.ly/3ioPGS2>.



This article also makes several analytical contributions. First, echoing this paper's analytical framework and a classic insight in the study of politics, elitist domination of political and economic power shapes the quality of democracy in terms of its formal (civil and political liberties), participatory (high level of participation regardless of class, ethnic and gender backgrounds) and social (socioeconomic egalitarianism) dimensions (Huber *et al.* 1997). The alarming rate of oligarchy-induced inequality in Indonesia, including inequality between rural and urban areas, should be seen with caution in this regard.<sup>29</sup> Second, this article specifies the dynamics of Indonesia's illiberal turn in themes and areas previously understudied by the existing explanations. Third, it considers the inability of agrarian social movement actors to form a unified opposition against state and oligarchic interests, a product of their disagreement regarding strategies in engaging the state, which renders them ineffective to resist the tide of democratic regression in rural areas. This fragmentation is also indicative of the gap in political interests and ideas between civil society elites and grassroots activists and communities in the agrarian sector.

This phenomenon is not exclusive to Indonesia. In fact, elite domination of rural resources through market forces and coercion and fragmentation of agrarian civil society actors and organisations have also deepened illiberal tendencies and even contributed to authoritarian turn in other Southeast Asian countries. In Cambodia, the ruling Cambodian People's Party (CPP) has utilised land grabbing to win favour from its tycoon and military supporters and consolidate its authoritarian rule at the expense of democratic spaces (Loughlin 2020). In Thailand and the Philippines, the close connection between state elites and mining corporations has led to the infringement of the civil and political rights of the most marginalised rural groups (Reynolds 2022). Similar to Indonesia, Cambodia also experienced elitisation and state co-optation of prominent agrarian advocates (Lay and Eng 2020). This continuing pattern does not bode well for the future of democracy and rural social movements in Southeast Asia.

What can we learn from this elaboration? Contrary to Slater's (2023) celebratory assessment of Indonesian democracy, his liberal-pluralist criteria of democratic quality do not seem to be warranted in the context of Indonesia's current rural political economy. If recent history is any guide, then the prognosis is rather grim: the trend of episodic repression and other forms of democratic contraction is likely to continue. Recent developments in Indonesian politics are indicative of the possible continuation of this pattern. Indonesia's recent passing of the neoliberal Job Creation Law, an omnibus regulation that sidelines a wide range of human rights and labour/environmental concerns in the name of investment for development, will pave the way for a more unrestrained exploitation of land, forest and mineral resources at the expense of democratic quality and participation (A'yun and Mudhoffir 2020).<sup>30</sup> This trend is not exclusive to Indonesia. Other developing and middle-income countries experiencing the expansion of big agribusiness interests will also have to tackle the challenge that capital expansion poses to democratic governance.

Lastly, findings from this article also suggest that the study of rural politics—a broadly defined term that encompasses not only 'traditional' rural areas in the Global South but also deindustrialised regions in northern countries and other types of peripheral regions outside urban centres—remains relevant for research on democratic trajectory and quality. Future studies on the impacts of populism, socioeconomic crisis or even social disruptions due to the Covid-19 pandemic on democratic governance should take the rural political economy variable more seriously.

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<sup>29</sup>For a recent study on inequality in Indonesia, see Gibson (2017).

<sup>30</sup>The Job Creation Law has recently been replaced by a government regulation in lieu of law (*perppu*) on Job Creation, but the overall spirit of the regulation is still the same.

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