

UNIVERSA

International Journal of Socio-legal, Economics, Science and Educational Technology

Volume 1, Issue 1, January 2026



Taking a Step Back to Look at Our Political System: Does a System of Democracy Actually Exist? *Melihat Kembali Sistem Politik Kita: Apakah Sistem Demokrasi Benar-Benar Ada?*

Ardhes Blandhivay Leuanan*¹

Universitas Padjadjaran, Bandung, Indonesia ¹

*Corresponding Author: ardhes24001@mail.unpad.ac.id

Submitted : 20 April 2026

Revision : 26 April 2026

Accepted : 1 May 2026

Abstract

Democracy is often regarded as the most legitimate system of government, yet in practice many democratic states experience a decline in substantive democratic values. Indonesia, as one of the world's largest democracies, faces similar challenges marked by elite domination, weakening of accountability institutions, and the suppression of political criticism. This study aims to analyze whether genuine democracy truly exists in Indonesia by examining the relevance of Robert Michels' Iron Law of Oligarchy in explaining contemporary political conditions. The research employs a socio-legal method using historical, political, and legal approaches to understand democratic development and institutional practices in Indonesia. The findings show that political power is increasingly concentrated among elite groups through legal control, legislative domination, media concentration, and the criminalization of dissent. These conditions strongly support Michels' argument that democratic systems inevitably tend toward oligarchic control, making democracy more procedural than substantive in practice.

Keywords: Democracy; Iron Law of Oligarchy; Indonesian Politics

Abstrak

Demokrasi sering dianggap sebagai sistem pemerintahan yang paling sah dan ideal, namun dalam praktiknya banyak negara demokratis mengalami kemunduran nilai-nilai demokrasi substantif. Indonesia sebagai salah satu negara demokrasi terbesar di dunia menghadapi tantangan serupa yang ditandai oleh dominasi elite, melemahnya lembaga pengawas, serta pembungkaman kritik politik. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis apakah demokrasi yang sesungguhnya masih ada di Indonesia dengan mengkaji relevansi teori Iron Law of Oligarchy dari Robert Michels dalam menjelaskan kondisi politik kontemporer. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode socio-legal dengan pendekatan historis, politik, dan hukum untuk memahami perkembangan demokrasi serta praktik kelembagaan di Indonesia. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa kekuasaan politik semakin terkonsentrasi pada kelompok elite melalui kontrol hukum, dominasi legislatif, konsentrasi media, dan kriminalisasi kritik. Kondisi ini memperkuat pandangan Michels bahwa sistem demokrasi cenderung bergerak menuju oligarki, sehingga demokrasi lebih bersifat prosedural daripada substantif.

Kata Kunci: Demokrasi; Hukum Besi Oligarki; Politik Indonesia



Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike-BY-SA: This work is licensed under a Contemporary Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/>). If you remix, transform, or build upon the material, you must contribute under the same license as the original

INTRODUCTION

The global triumph of democracy, once declared with great enthusiasm following the end of the Cold War, appears increasingly fragile in the twenty-first century. From the resurgence of strongman politics in Eastern Europe to the erosion of civil liberties in Southeast Asia, the very substance of democratic governance is under threat. Indonesia, often cited as the world's third-largest democracy and the most populous Muslim-majority nation practicing democratic governance, has not been immune to this global democratic backsliding. Since the fall of Soeharto's New Order regime in 1998 and the subsequent era of *Reformasi*, Indonesia has undergone significant democratic transformations. Yet, nearly three decades later, troubling signs of authoritarianism manifest in the suppression of political opposition, the criminalization of criticism, and the concentration of power in elite networks raise a fundamental question: has Indonesia's democracy become hollow?

This question is not merely academic. It cuts to the heart of how political legitimacy is constructed and maintained in modern states. Prior scholarship has extensively documented the mechanisms of democratic decline. Diamond has identified the global phenomenon of "democratic recession," noting that authoritarian tendencies have re-emerged even in formally democratic states.¹ Levitsky and Way coined the term "competitive authoritarianism" to describe hybrid regimes that maintain the procedural facades of democracy while systematically undermining its substantive foundations.² Held, tracing the models of democracy from classical antiquity to the contemporary era, demonstrated that democratic forms are perpetually contested and never fully realized.³ Aspinall and Mietzner have examined Indonesia specifically, cataloguing the institutional and societal failures that have prevented the consolidation of genuine democratic norms.⁴ Winters has theorized the structural power of oligarchs in shaping political outcomes, arguing that material power permanently distorts formal political equality.⁵ Hadiz and Robison further demonstrated how Indonesia's post-authoritarian transition reproduced oligarchic power in new institutional clothing.⁶ Warburton and Aspinall have diagnosed Indonesian democratic regression as rooted in structural political-economic arrangements that favor the powerful over the citizenry.⁷

Amidst this rich but incomplete literature, the classical theoretical framework of Robert Michels *Iron Law of Oligarchy* offers a uniquely powerful explanatory lens. Michels argued in 1911 that

-
- 1 Larry Diamond, "Facing Up to the Democratic Recession," *Journal of Democracy* 26, no. 1 (2015): 141–55, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2015.0009>.
 - 2 Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes After the Cold War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).
 - 3 David Held, *Models of Democracy*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2006).
 - 4 Edward Aspinall and Marcus Mietzner, eds., "Problems of Democratisation in Indonesia: Elections, Institutions and Society" (Singapore: ISEAS Publishing, 2010).
 - 5 Jeffrey A Winters, *Oligarchy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).
 - 6 Vedi R. Hadiz and Richard Robison, "The Political Economy of Oligarchy and the Reorganization of Power in Indonesia," *Indonesia* 96 (2013): 35–57, <https://doi.org/10.5728/indonesia.96.0035>.
 - 7 Eve Warburton and Edward Aspinall, "Explaining Indonesia's Democratic Regression," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 41, no. 2 (2019): 255–85, <http://hdl.handle.net/1885/221595>; Nanda Puspitasari Wardoyo, and Aris Prio Agus Santoso. 2026. "Asset Forfeiture As an Instrument for Recovering State Losses: Implications for Combating Corruption in Indonesia: (Perampasan Aset Sebagai Instrumen Pemulihan Kerugian Negara: Implikasi Dalam Pemberantasan Tindak Pidana Korupsi Di Indonesia)". *SYMPHONIA: Journal of Theory and Research Output* 1 (1): 218-27. <https://darulilmijournal.com/index.php/symphonia/article/view/124>

any large-scale organization, regardless of its democratic aspirations, will inevitably develop an oligarchic leadership structure driven by organizational imperatives, elite self-perpetuation, and mass political apathy.⁸ This insight, derived from Michels' observation of socialist parties in Germany, has since been applied broadly across political science. Yet its systematic application to the specific case of Indonesian democratic regression under the current administration remains underdeveloped. This study addresses that gap.

The central objective of this research is threefold: first, to reconstruct the historical genesis of democratic ideology and institutions from ancient Greece through the Enlightenment to the twentieth century; second, to provide a rigorous exposition of Michels' Iron Law of Oligarchy as a theoretical framework; and third, to apply this framework analytically to the current state of Indonesian democracy. The central argument advanced is that contemporary Indonesia's political trajectory characterized by elite consolidation, legislative capture, criminalization of dissent, and the structural marginalization of popular participation constitutes not a deviation from Michels' theory but its vivid empirical confirmation. The socio-legal methodology employed allows this study to bridge the normative architecture of democratic law with the sociological realities of political practice, thereby producing a more holistic account of democracy's persistent inadequacy.

Method

This study employs a socio-legal research methodology, which transcends the conventional boundaries of doctrinal legal analysis by situating legal norms and institutions within their broader social, political, and historical contexts. The socio-legal approach is particularly appropriate for this research because the inquiry into whether democracy truly exists cannot be answered by recourse to constitutional text alone; it demands an examination of how legal frameworks are inhabited—or subverted—by social actors, political forces, and structural arrangements.

Three complementary scholarly approaches are deployed. The historical approach is used to trace the origins and development of democratic ideas and institutions, enabling a contextual understanding of why and how democracy was conceived and how its ideals have evolved and been contested over centuries. The political approach provides tools for analyzing the distribution and exercise of power, examining how political actors, parties, and elite networks shape governance outcomes in ways that may diverge from democratic principles. The legal approach examines the constitutional and statutory frameworks that formally define democratic governance in Indonesia, assessing the degree to which these frameworks are substantively operative or have been instrumentalized by incumbent elites.

Data for this study are drawn primarily from secondary sources, including books, journal articles, official government documents, constitutional texts, reports from international human rights organizations, and reputable media analysis. The analytical procedure involves process thematic synthesis of historical and theoretical literature on democracy and oligarchy, normative-doctrinal review of Indonesia's constitutional democracy, and a critical-empirical application of Michels Iron Law to observable political phenomena in Indonesia under the current political regime. The analysis is qualitative in nature, drawing upon interpretive and critical reasoning to establish the coherence and validity of the central argument.⁹

8 Robert Michels, *Political Parties: A Sociological Study of the Oligarchical Tendencies of Modern Democracy* (New York: Hearst's International Library, 1915).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Historical Birth of Democratic Systems

The concept of democracy, at its etymological core, derives from the Greek words *demos* (people) and *kratos* (power or rule), signifying a form of governance in which political authority resides with the people. The earliest recognizable form of democratic governance emerged in classical Athens in the fifth century BCE. The Athenian democracy, developed under the reforms of Cleisthenes (508/507 BCE) and later elaborated by Pericles, constituted a system of direct popular participation in legislative and judicial decisions, at least among the city-state's free male citizens.¹⁰ Aristotle, who offered the first systematic theoretical analysis of political constitutions in his *Politics*, distinguished democracy from oligarchy on the basis of who holds power: in democracy, the free and the many govern; in oligarchy, the rich and the few.¹¹

Yet even in its Athenian form, democracy was profoundly limited and internally contradictory. The exclusion of women, slaves, and foreign residents from political participation meant that the "people" who ruled were a fraction of the actual population. Finley observed that Athenian democracy was, in practice, a system in which a privileged subset of the community exercised collective power, while the majority remained outside the political order.¹² This tension between the ideal of popular rule and the reality of exclusive political participation would prove to be a persistent structural feature of democratic governance throughout its history.

The collapse of the Roman Republic, the feudal hierarchies of medieval Europe, and the autocracies of early modernity drove democratic ideas underground for more than a millennium. Their revival came principally through the philosophical revolutions of the Enlightenment. John Locke's theory of government by consent, articulated in his *Two Treatises of Government*, provided the foundational argument that political authority is legitimate only insofar as it derives from and remains accountable to the governed.¹³ Jean-Jacques Rousseau's concept of the *general will* extended this notion, arguing that sovereignty belongs inalienably to the people and that legitimate law must express the collective will of the citizenry rather than the particular interests of any faction or ruling class.¹⁴ These philosophical contributions formed the ideological bedrock of the American (1776) and French (1789) revolutions, which institutionalized democratic principles within modern constitutional frameworks for the first time in history.

The nineteenth and twentieth centuries witnessed the gradual but uneven global spread of democratic governance. The extension of suffrage to previously excluded groups women, non-property-owning men, and racial minorities represented the partial fulfillment of democracy's egalitarian promise. Samuel Huntington identified the twentieth century as the site of three successive waves of democratization: the first wave spanning 1828–1926, the second wave following World War II, and the third wave beginning in southern Europe in the mid-1970s and sweeping through Latin America, sub-Saharan Africa, and Asia in the 1980s and 1990s.¹⁵ Indonesia's democratic transition following the fall of Soeharto in 1998 was part of this third wave.

10 Josiah Ober, *Democracy and Knowledge: Innovation and Learning in Classical Athens* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

11 Aristotle, *Politics A4* - Reeve, C.D.C. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1998).

12 M I Finley, *Democracy Ancient and Modern*, Rev. ed. (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1985).

13 John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

14 Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract* (London: Penguin, 1968).

15 Samuel P Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991).

Tilly, in his comparative-historical account, argued that democracy is best understood not as a fixed institutional form but as a dynamic and precarious process one that can be gained, lost, and reconfigured depending on the balance of power between political elites and ordinary citizens.¹⁶ This processual understanding is crucial for the present study, as it directs analytical attention not merely to formal institutions but to the social forces that animate or undermine them. The historical record thus reveals a fundamental paradox: democracy, as a normative ideal, has been perpetually invoked to legitimize political authority, yet as a substantive practice, it has just as perpetually fallen short of its own promises. It is precisely within this gap that Michel's Iron Law of Oligarchy situates its most incisive critique.

The Iron Law of Oligarchy: Robert Michels Theoretical Framework

Robert Michels (1876-1936), a German-Italian political sociologist and one-time member of the German Social Democratic Party, formulated his landmark theory in *Political Parties: A Sociological Study of the Oligarchical Tendencies of Modern Democracy*, published in 1911. The work emerged from Michels' disillusionment with the socialist and labor movements, which he had hoped would embody genuine democratic principles but which he observed becoming increasingly bureaucratized and dominated by self-perpetuating leaderships. His central proposition, now known as the *Iron Law of Oligarchy*, holds that "who says organization says oligarchy." In Michels' formulation, any large organization, however democratically conceived, will inevitably produce a specialized class of leaders who accumulate power, develop interests distinct from the mass membership, and employ organizational resources to perpetuate their dominance.

Michels identified three interconnected mechanisms driving this oligarchic tendency. First, organizational necessity: large organizations require specialization, division of labor, and professional leadership. This functional requirement produces a leadership class with superior expertise, access to information, and command of organizational machinery. Second, leadership psychology and elite self-perpetuation: leaders develop a vested interest in maintaining their positions, cultivating personal followings, and controlling the selection of successors. They acquire what Michels described as a "professional deformation," in which organizational self-preservation becomes an end in itself, displacing the original goals of the organization. Third, mass apathy and incompetence: the ordinary membership of organizations, and by extension ordinary citizens in democratic polities, are characterized by political disengagement, susceptibility to manipulation through emotional appeals, and dependence on leadership for cognitive and organizational direction.¹⁷

Michels theory must be situated within the broader intellectual tradition of elite theory. Gaetano Mosca, writing contemporaneously, similarly argued that in all societies, actual political power is wielded by a "political class" or "ruling minority" that organizes itself for power while the majority remains unorganized.¹⁸ Vilfredo Pareto complemented this analysis with his theory of the "circulation of elites," contending that history is essentially a "graveyard of aristocracies" in which one ruling elite is periodically replaced by another, with no fundamental alteration in the oligarchic structure of governance.¹⁹ C. Wright Mills extended this tradition into the American context with his concept of the "power elite"—an interlocking directorate of political, military, and corporate leaders who collectively dominate major decisions while formal democratic institutions provide a veneer of popular accountability.²⁰

16 Charles Tilly, *Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

17 Michels, *Political Parties*, 401–405.

18 Gaetano Mosca, *The Ruling Class* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1939).

19 Vilfredo Pareto, *The Rise and Fall of the Elites* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1991).

20 C Wright Mills, *The Power Elite* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1956).

The critical implication of Michels theory for the study of democracy is radical: democracy is not merely imperfectly realized but is structurally incapable of full realization. Every democratic institution political parties, legislatures, social movements carries within it the seeds of its own oligarchization. Democratic elections serve not to transfer power to the people but to legitimate the authority of whichever elite faction successfully mobilizes sufficient popular support. This is not to say that Michels viewed all political systems as equivalent; rather, he maintained that the specific form of elite rule matters, and that more oligarchic systems impose greater costs on the non-elite majority. Nevertheless, his framework insists that “pure democracy” is a category error an ideological construct deployed to legitimize what is, in sociological terms, always elite rule.²¹

Contemporary scholars have refined and extended Michel’s framework. Jeffrey Winters theory of oligarchy focuses specifically on the role of concentrated material wealth in producing and sustaining political dominance, arguing that material power is qualitatively different from and more durable than other forms of political influence.²² Jan-Werner Müller’s work on populism, while analytically distinct, complements Michels by showing how anti-democratic movements dress themselves in the language of popular sovereignty to consolidate elite power. Taken together, these scholarly traditions provide a robust theoretical apparatus through which the specific dynamics of Indonesian democratic regression can be understood and assessed.

The Institutional Architecture of Indonesian Democracy and Its Subversion

Indonesia’s democratic transition following the fall of Soeharto in 1998 produced a constitutional framework that is, in formal terms, substantially democratic. The 1945 Constitution as amended (1999-2002) establishes the separation of powers among the executive, legislature, and judiciary; guarantees fundamental rights including freedoms of expression, assembly, and association; and mandates direct elections for the President and members of the legislative bodies.²³ The Constitutional Court, established in 2003, was designed as an independent guardian of constitutional democracy. These are not trivial institutional achievements; they represent a genuine departure from the institutional landscape of the New Order.

Yet the formal architecture of democratic governance has been progressively hollowed out by what scholars of democratic backsliding term “constitutional retrogression” a process in which incumbents use formally legal means to incrementally disable the constraints on executive power.²⁴ Levitsky and Ziblatt identify the hallmarks of this process as the demonization of opponents, the delegitimization of independent oversight institutions, and the toleration or encouragement of violence against political adversaries.²⁵ All of these hallmarks are observable in contemporary Indonesia. The Constitutional Court’s credibility was significantly damaged by the controversial appointment process that installed a politically connected justice, subordinating judicial independence to executive preference. The corruption eradication commission was systematically weakened through legislative revisions that reduced its operational independence, transferred its investigators to civil servant status under executive branch control, and truncated its investigative mandate.

21 Jan-Werner Müller, *What Is Populism?* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016).

22 Müller, 20–30.

23 Denny Indrayana, *Indonesian Constitutional Reform 1999–2002* (Jakarta: Kompas Book Publishing, 2008).

24 Tom Ginsburg and Aziz Z Huq, *How Democracies Die Constitutionally* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018).

25 Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die* (New York: Crown, 2018).

Lijphart's framework of consensual versus majoritarian democracy provides additional analytical leverage here.²⁶ Indonesia's formal constitutional design incorporates elements of consensus democracy, the People's Consultative Assembly (MPR), the principle of *musyawarah mufakat* (deliberation and consensus), and the accommodation of regional interests through decentralization. However, in practice, executive power has increasingly dominated the political landscape, converting these consensus mechanisms into instruments for co-opting potential opposition rather than genuine power-sharing. The formation of so-called "national unity coalitions" that encompass almost all major parties effectively eliminates meaningful parliamentary opposition, reducing the legislature to an endorsing chamber for executive initiatives. This phenomenon the conversion of a formally pluralist legislature into an instrument of executive hegemony is one of the most precise illustrations of Michels' principle that organizational forms do not determine political substance; power always finds its way to the top.

Elite Capture, Oligarchic Networks, and the Persistence of Structural Power

The persistence of oligarchic networks in post *Reformasi* Indonesia is extensively documented in the scholarly literature. Hadiz, examining the structural continuities between the New Order and the post 1998 period, demonstrated that the decentralization of the Indonesian state did not democratize political power but instead reproduced and fragmented oligarchic control across new institutional sites provincial governments, local legislatures, and regional business networks.²⁷ Rather than empowering ordinary citizens, decentralization empowered local elites who had previously operated in the shadow of the central state. Hadiz and Robison more explicitly theorized this as "the reorganization of power" a process in which the same families, military factions, and business conglomerates that had dominated the New Order reconstituted their dominance through new democratic institutions.²⁸

Winters analysis of Indonesian oligarchy identifies the most materially powerful actors in Indonesian society a small number of business magnates with enormous concentrated wealth as the core drivers of political outcomes. These actors do not merely influence politics through campaign donations and media ownership; they directly participate in political institutions, hold cabinet positions, and shape legislation to serve their economic interests. The composition of successive Indonesian cabinets and party leadership structures reveals a striking pattern: the same families and business networks appear repeatedly, rotating among executive, legislative, and party positions. This is the Iron Law of Oligarchy in institutional motion. What Michels described as the organizational tendency of political parties to be captured by their leadership elites finds, in the Indonesian case, a specific material substrate in the concentration of economic power.

Mietzner's analysis of "Jokowi's rise" provides a particularly instructive case study. Joko Widodo entered national politics presenting himself as an "ordinary man" from outside the established political elite, a furniture entrepreneur and former regional official who would transcend oligarchic politics. His initial election as Jakarta governor and subsequently as President in 2014 was genuinely popular and drew on broad cross-class support. Yet over the course of his administrations, the structural imperatives identified by Michels reasserted themselves with remarkable consistency. To govern effectively, Joko Widodo required the support of the established parties, each of which demanded cabinet positions for their affiliated business

26 Arend Lijphart, *Patterns of Democracy: Government Forms and Performance in Thirty-Six Countries*, 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012).

27 Vedi R Hadiz, *Localising Power in Post-Authoritarian Indonesia: A Southeast Asia Perspective* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010).

28 Marcus Mietzner, *Money, Power, and Ideology* (Flipside Digital Content Company Inc., 2013).

figures and military-connected leaders. The resulting governing coalition progressively incorporated and became dependent upon the very oligarchic networks his initial candidacy had symbolically challenged.

By his second term, this dependency had crystallized into a set of governance patterns that departed significantly from democratic norms. The revision of the KPK law, widely criticized by civil society and anti-corruption activists as a deliberate weakening of the most effective anti-corruption institution Indonesia had ever established, was passed with remarkable speed and minimal public deliberation. The omnibus job creation law (*Undang-Undang Cipta Kerja*), criticized by labor unions and environmental groups for subordinating workers' rights and environmental protections to investor-friendly regulations, was similarly rushed through the legislature. The common thread running through both episodes is the prioritization of elite economic interests over the preferences of the broader citizenry a pattern perfectly consonant with Michels' prediction that the leadership class will consistently pursue its own interests under the cover of democratic legitimacy.

The Suppression of Dissent and the Criminalization of Criticism

One of the clearest signs of democratic decline in Indonesia is the systematic suppression of political criticism and the criminalization of dissenting voices. This phenomenon operates through several legal instruments, particularly the Electronic Information and Transactions Law (UU ITE) and several provisions within the Criminal Code (KUHP). These regulations contain broad and ambiguous formulations, making them easy to use against criticism directed at the government. Activists, journalists, academics, and ordinary citizens can face legal prosecution simply for expressing opinions considered offensive to state officials. This situation demonstrates that democratic space, which should remain open and protected, is instead becoming increasingly restricted and shifting toward a more repressive model of governance that threatens freedom of expression.

Reports from Amnesty International show a significant rise in cases involving the criminalization of citizens who criticize the government through social media or public forums.²⁹ Human Rights Watch has also documented patterns of selective law enforcement, where criticism against the government is more likely to be prosecuted than similar statements made by those who support those in power. This creates a form of discriminatory legal enforcement. As a result, the law is no longer seen as an instrument of justice, but rather as a tool to protect political elites. When law is used to preserve power, democracy loses its essential function as a system that guarantees public control over government through free expression and meaningful public oversight.

The development of digital technology initially brought great hope for democracy because social media allowed citizens to express criticism quickly and widely. Kim and Lim research shows that digital platforms once served as important spaces for political mobilization and civic participation, especially in resisting policies considered harmful to the public.³⁰ However, the government later adapted by strengthening digital surveillance and legal action against online criticism. The arrest of social media users for posts considered insulting to the President or senior officials created a broad chilling effect. People became afraid to speak openly because of legal risks, turning freedom of expression into a space filled with fear and uncertainty rather than democratic participation.

29 Joanne Lebert, "Information and Communication Technologies and Human Rights Advocacy: The Case of Amnesty International," in *Civil Society in the Information Age* (Routledge, 2018), 19–36.

30 Harris Hyun-soo Kim and Chaeyoon Lim, "From Virtual Space to Public Space: The Role of Online Political Activism in Protest Participation during the Arab Spring," *International Journal of Comparative Sociology* 60, no. 6 (December 16, 2019): 409–34, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0020715219894724>.

This condition strongly reflects the theory of Robert Michels and his Iron Law of Oligarchy, which explains that elites who gain control of organizations will seek to preserve their power by reducing criticism and limiting accountability.³¹ Political leaders do not maintain authority solely through elections, but also through control over legal institutions, media, and bureaucratic structures. As elites become stronger, they tend to weaken opposition to secure political legitimacy. Press freedom, judicial independence, and the strength of civil society are gradually undermined. Democracy eventually remains only as a formal procedure, while its substance shifts into domination by a small group of powerful actors who are difficult for ordinary citizens to challenge.

Table 1. Forms of Suppression of Criticism and Their Impact on Democracy

Forms of Suppression	Impact on Democracy
Use of UU ITE	Restricts freedom of expression
Selective law enforcement	Reduces trust in justice
Social media surveillance	Creates public fear
Concentration of media ownership	Reduces information objectivity
Weakening oversight institutions	Reduces control over power

Source: The Author

The phenomena shown in Table 1 demonstrate that the suppression of criticism does not occur only through the prosecution of individuals, but also through broader structural mechanisms such as media control and the weakening of oversight institutions. Aspinall et al. analysis of press freedom in Indonesia reveals that many major media outlets are owned by politicians or business figures directly connected to ruling elites.³² This causes news coverage to become less neutral and more favorable to political and economic interests. Public information, which should serve as the foundation for democratic decision-making, becomes biased and unbalanced. Under such conditions, citizens struggle to obtain objective information needed to evaluate government policies critically and rationally.

Based on these conditions, Indonesian democracy provides strong evidence supporting Michels' theory. Political parties are dominated by powerful families, wealthy business figures, and former military elites who continue circulating within the same networks of power. They use access to the state, patronage networks, and media influence to preserve political dominance. Public participation is often limited to elections, without meaningful involvement in actual policymaking. This shows that oligarchy is not merely a temporary deviation, but a structural feature of the political system itself. Therefore, protecting democracy requires more than formal institutions; it demands continuous pressure from civil society to ensure that power remains accountable to the people rather than controlled by entrenched elites.

CONCLUSION

This study has undertaken a systematic examination of the question of whether genuine democratic governance exists, employing a socio-legal methodology that integrates historical, political, and legal analytical approaches. Tracing the origins of democracy from its Athenian foundations through the Enlightenment revolutions to the modern era of formal constitutional democracy, the study established that the ideals of popular self-governance have always

31 Robert Michels, "The Iron Law of Oligarchy," in *Power in Modern Societies* (Routledge, 2019), 111–24.

32 Edward Aspinall et al., "Elites, Masses, and Democratic Decline in Indonesia," *Democratization* 27, no. 4 (May 18, 2020): 505–26, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2019.1680971>.

coexisted in tension with structural tendencies toward elite capture. Robert Michels' Iron Law of Oligarchy, formulated more than a century ago, identified these tendencies with remarkable precision, arguing that all organizations including democratic ones inevitably gravitate toward oligarchic leadership structures driven by organizational necessity, elite self-perpetuation, and mass political apathy.

The application of this theoretical framework to contemporary Indonesian political phenomena yields a compelling set of findings. The current Indonesian political regime exhibits all the hallmarks of oligarchic capture that Michels predicted: elite networks recycling through leadership positions across electoral cycles, the systematic weakening of independent accountability institutions, the suppression of critical voices through selective legal enforcement, the concentration of media ownership in politically connected hands, and the conversion of formally pluralist legislative bodies into instruments of executive hegemony. These phenomena are not the product of individual moral failings by particular political actors but structural outcomes of the political-economic dynamics that Michels theorized.

The central finding of this study is that the Indonesian case strongly confirms the explanatory validity of the Iron Law of Oligarchy. There is a systematic and multi-dimensional correlation between Michels' theoretical predictions and the observable phenomena of Indonesian democratic governance, and this correlation is of sufficient robustness to constitute a meaningful empirical justification of his theory. The study acknowledges the limitations of this finding: the Iron Law of Oligarchy does not preclude democratic agency, and the Indonesian case retains spaces of civic contestation and institutional accountability that Michels' most pessimistic formulations might have denied. Future research should investigate the conditions under which organized popular mobilization successfully resists oligarchic tendencies, the comparative dimensions of democratic backsliding across Southeast Asia, and the role of digital technologies in both facilitating and constraining oligarchic control of information environments.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Aristotle. *Politics A4* - Reeve, C.D.C. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1998.
- Aspinall, Edward, Diego Fossati, Burhanuddin Muhtadi, and Eve Warburton. "Elites, Masses, and Democratic Decline in Indonesia." *Democratization* 27, no. 4 (May 18, 2020): 505–26. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2019.1680971>.
- Aspinall, Edward, and Marcus Mietzner, eds. "Problems of Democratisation in Indonesia: Elections, Institutions and Society." Singapore: ISEAS Publishing, 2010.
- Diamond, Larry. "Facing Up to the Democratic Recession." *Journal of Democracy* 26, no. 1 (2015): 141–55. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2015.0009>.
- Finley, M I. *Democracy Ancient and Modern*. Rev. ed. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1985.
- Ginsburg, Tom, and Aziz Z Huq. *How Democracies Die Constitutionally*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018.
- Hadiz, Vedi R. *Localising Power in Post-Authoritarian Indonesia: A Southeast Asia Perspective*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010.
- Held, David. *Models of Democracy*. 3rd ed. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2006.
- Huntington, Samuel P. *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991.

- Indrayana, Denny. *Indonesian Constitutional Reform 1999–2002*. Jakarta: Kompas Book Publishing, 2008.
- Kim, Harris Hyun-soo, and Chaeyoon Lim. “From Virtual Space to Public Space: The Role of Online Political Activism in Protest Participation during the Arab Spring.” *International Journal of Comparative Sociology* 60, no. 6 (December 16, 2019): 409–34. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0020715219894724>.
- Lebert, Joanne. “Information and Communication Technologies and Human Rights Advocacy: The Case of Amnesty International.” In *Civil Society in the Information Age*, 19–36. Routledge, 2018.
- Levitsky, Steven, and Lucan Way. *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes After the Cold War*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.
- Levitsky, Steven, and Daniel Ziblatt. *How Democracies Die*. New York: Crown, 2018.
- Lijphart, Arend. *Patterns of Democracy: Government Forms and Performance in Thirty-Six Countries*. 2nd ed. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012.
- Locke, John. *Two Treatises of Government*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988.
- Michels, Robert. *Political Parties: A Sociological Study of the Oligarchical Tendencies of Modern Democracy*. New York: Hearst’s International Library, 1915.
- . “The Iron Law of Oligarchy.” In *Power in Modern Societies*, 111–24. Routledge, 2019.
- Mietzner, Marcus. *Money, Power, and Ideology*. Flipside Digital Content Company Inc., 2013.
- Mills, C Wright. *The Power Elite*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1956.
- Mosca, Gaetano. *The Ruling Class*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1939.
- Müller, Jan-Werner. *What Is Populism?* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016.
- Ober, Josiah. *Democracy and Knowledge: Innovation and Learning in Classical Athens*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008.
- Pareto, Vilfredo. *The Rise and Fall of the Elites*. New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1991.
- Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. *The Social Contract*. London: Penguin, 1968.
- Tilly, Charles. *Democracy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.
- Warburton, Eve, and Edward Aspinall. “Explaining Indonesia’s Democratic Regression.” *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 41, no. 2 (2019): 255–85. <http://hdl.handle.net/1885/221595>.
- Nanda Puspitasari Wardoyo, and Aris Prio Agus Santoso. 2026. “Asset Forfeiture As an Instrument for Recovering State Losses: Implications for Combating Corruption in Indonesia: (Perampasan Aset Sebagai Instrumen Pemulihan Kerugian Negara: Implikasi Dalam Pemberantasan Tindak Pidana Korupsi Di Indonesia)”. *SYMPHONIA: Journal of Theory and Research Output* 1 (1): 218-27. <https://darulilmijournal.com/index.php/symponia/article/view/124>
- Winters, Jeffrey A. *Oligarchy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011.