

The Dynamics of Party Cartels: Obstacles to Reforms and Reinforcers of Political Corruption in Indonesia

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Abstract: Political reform in Indonesia has produced a paradox within the country's political dynamics. While the reforms were intended to strengthen democracy, they have instead contributed to its weakening and facilitated the rise of political cartel practices. These practices are marked by the consolidation of opposition parties, the erosion of party ideologies, and the prioritization of ruling elite interests through unfettered access to state resources. The decline of ideological commitment among political parties has led to the emergence of cartelized party coalitions, which in turn promote political corruption, weaken mechanisms of checks and balances, and undermine the overall quality of democracy. This article employs a qualitative research methodology, focusing on literature reviews of scholarly books and academic articles related to political corruption and cartel politics in Indonesia. The findings indicate that the entrenchment of political cartels is a major driver behind the increasing incidence of political corruption in Indonesia. The dismantling of political cartel structures is therefore essential to curbing corruption. The shift away from ideological politics towards opportunistic alliances aimed at extracting benefits from state resources has exacerbated corrupt practices. Reforming Indonesia's party system is thus imperative to breaking the cycle of political cartelization and reducing the pervasive corruption among political elites. The novelty of this study lies in its in-depth analysis of how political parties, once vehicles of democratic expression, have transformed into instruments of collusion and corruption. This transformation has led to new configurations of power relations and the unequal distribution of state resources. The implications of this study underscore the urgent need for party system reform and the reinforcement of democratic institutions as essential strategies for effectively combating political corruption in Indonesia moving forward.

Keywords: Corruption; Political elite; Political cartel

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INTRODUCTION

An ideal democracy requires opposition parties to balance and monitor government policies and maintain accountability and transparency (Rose-Ackerman, 1996) for the welfare of society. Positive steps, such as electoral restrictions, can help the birth of opposition parties. Opposition in a democratic state is essential to maintaining the inclusiveness of democracy and respecting the diversity of society, while political party pluralism strengthens checks and balances in government. However, in Indonesia, the inability to build political accountability means that elections often fail to produce accountable politicians (Chalmers & Setiyono, 2012), with parties

tending to collude and form political cartels to monopolies state resources (Eristyawan, 2015; Slater, 2004; Slater & Simmons, 2013). Political cartels, which disregard party ideology and aim for mutual benefit in the power struggle, pose a systemic threat to democracy in Indonesia. Along with the loss of active opposition, democracy, which should be the foundation of people's prosperity, is now utilized for political corruption.

The increasingly strong political cartel among political elites has become a threat to the sustainability of democracy, especially since the Soeharto-era decentralization system (Rahmatunnisa, 2018), weak supervision of fiscal decentralization in the regions (Fatoni, 2020), and the increasingly strong political corruption practices involving political elites in Indonesia. Party cartels are also encouraged by the number of legislators at the central and regional levels who commit corruption (Zarmaili, 2012). The practice is part of illegal campaigning and bribery by politicians (Rose-Ackerman & Søreide, 2011). Finally, it is related to the high cost of politics, which has led to political corruption by political elites and the weakening of democracy. In addition, the tendency to form political coalitions built on the creation of political stability ultimately strengthens the occurrence of political cartels in Indonesia, and the disruption of political stability changes the structural conditions that support and strengthen political cartels in Indonesia (Widojoko, 2017).

There have been many studies on political cartels and their relationship with political corruption. One of the causes of political cartels in Indonesia is the presidential threshold and parliamentary threshold systems that are vulnerable to political transactions (Saad et al., 2022), the loss of democratic characteristics increases political corruption (Paar-Jakli & Molina, 2024), weak control over coalition parties (Muhtadi, 2019), transactional politics during elections (Satriawan & Angela, 2024), and party funding systems (Mietzner, 2012). Misappropriated party pluralism has opened state co-optation for oligarchic interests by accessing state resources (Lestari, 2017a), and party coalitions currently tend to become rent-seeking machines through political corruption (Ambardi, 2023). The research only focuses on analyzing individual cases and their relationship with party funding mechanisms but has not touched on the structural dynamics of how political cartels affect the transformation of democratic institutions and become a tool to legitimize the corruption of political elites.

Political cartels are collusions between political elites and a manifestation of widespread institutional failure, encompassing collusive practices and exclusive agreements between political parties or ruling elites to control state resources. Political cartels are linked to the weakness of democratic institutions due to weak oversight, lack of transparency, and low accountability. This study highlights how political cartels reinforce political corruption and hinder institutional reform, emphasizing the importance of broad institutional reform in strengthening democracy. It expands the understanding of political cartels and political corruption in Indonesia as an essential step in the fight against political corruption. This research provides a comprehensive overview by examining the relationship between political cartels and political corruption.

The study of how political cartels not only reinforce political corruption and form new power relations that hinder institutional reforms is a new offer to see corruption as a logical consequence of a perverted multi-party system (Adiguna et al., 2020; Hamid et al., 2022; Hajar Abra, 2022; Isnaini, 2020; Muzzammil, 2021; Nurhasim, 2020) without being aware of how party pluralism is then transformed into a space that nourishes the corruption ecosystem through a symbiotic mutualism of legislative-executive-business oligarchy. This study offers an in-depth understanding of the concept of political cartels in Indonesia and its correlation with political corruption. The importance of studying the latent danger of political cartels becomes a benchmark to illustrate the unresolved problem of political corruption. This research aims to elucidate the relationship between political cartels and political corruption in Indonesia and how eradicating political cartels can minimize political corruption. Therefore, this research seeks to discuss "The Dynamics of Party Cartels: Obstacles to Reforms and Reinforcers of Political Corruption in Indonesia."

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Party Cartels Inhibiting Reform

The political cartels in the party system stem from the emergence of new party models in Europe that form coalitions as agents of the state to utilize state resources to ensure the survival of their group (Katz & Mair, 1995). Cartel parties that collectively form coalitions are dominated by historically established parties that have been in politics for a long time. This new form of cartel party has established a new relationship between civil society and the state, and such a pattern is not only occurring in Europe. However, it has begun to spread to several developing countries. Established cartel parties seek to keep power away from new party groups or limit government regeneration by excluding the presence of new members.

The beginning of the discussion on cartel parties has been criticized for its widespread impact on other countries. In response to this opposition, further discussion of cartel parties is carried out by providing several critical indicators, the first of which is the discussion of institutions, and the second indicator is related to the narrowing of competitive policy space and several other additional indicators such as the weakening of the party's role in society, the loss of balance of benefits in the management of resources that are more dominant to the party and the party's dependence on state resources (Katz & Mair, 2009). However, the debate on cartel parties is still ongoing, even though the existence of cartel parties has sidelined civic accountability and prioritized the dominance of political parties in the state and policymaking.

Recent studies on cartel party behavior have shown that there are obstacles to the implementation of democracy (Parreira, 2025) due to cartel party affiliations that manipulate elections, as evidenced by the absolute victory of one party that initially had ideological differences but later united as a coalition, as well as the dominance of cartel parties in local elections that have an impact on governance gaps in areas controlled by cartel parties. The widespread existence of cartel parties provides evidence of gaps in services and biased governance, so the principles of democracy in state administration cannot be implemented optimally. The existence of cartel parties is also marked by policy-making that protects the interests of cartel parties, which leads to the polarization of the ruling party's status quo (Richman, 2015). Efforts to maintain the status quo are carried out through systematic collusion by distorting the substance of democracy.

Party cartels in Indonesia also exist, showing the co-optation of large parties into national alliances by marginalizing small parties. The collusion of the major parties forms a fat collusion in the governing party that indirectly undermines democratic accountability and dismisses electoral influence. The unification of major parties that previously competed at election time is an attempt to avoid competition in favor of sharing power (Slater, 2004). The political cartel in Indonesia that emerged after the 1998-1999 monetary crisis continued during the democratic reform period, where the election of SBY as President of Indonesia outside the previously formed cartel parties (GOLKAR, PDIP, PAN, et cetera.) turned out to be another coalition of cartel parties (Slater, 2006). In Australia, cooperation between parties in parliament is also carried out to increase the benefits of coalitions consisting of large parties, in this case, the spotlight on public funding, which primarily benefits large parties because it can be a resource for incumbent parties (Orr, 2016) and to small parties although not too significant.

Cartel parties have a plural segmentation direction to form coalitions sheltered behind efforts to realize state democracy (Yusuf, 2020). However, cartel party coalitions paralyze society by damaging the merit system and decreasing the quality of democracy due to policy priorities that tend to represent party elites. The increasing influence of cartel parties impacts the emergence of ethnic gaps and other marginalized groups who are unable to adapt to policies made by cartel parties.

Cartel Parties Reinforce Political Corruption

Political corruption is defined as corrupt activities involving government officials (Hwang & Nam, 2025) and party elites who have positions in government, such as Ministers, regional heads, and members of parliament (Lestari, 2017b). Government officials carry out political corruption for personal gain (Chen et al., 2021). Political corruption is very different from other forms of corruption because it involves power obtained through the political process through manipulation of the political system, money politics, policy manipulation, nepotism, etc., by utilizing its political position.

Political corruption can also take the form of rent-seeking (Du et al., 2025) by political elites monopolizing market policies, taxes, and state finances. Political corruption is done by exploiting public power for the private interests of political elites or party groups, such as rent-seeking involving coalitions between party elites and companies or business owners. So, the issue of political corruption has a broad impact, not only on the public sector but also on the private sector. Even in the United States, the increase in political corruption significantly impacts corporate decision-making (Chowdhury et al., 2024).

Political corruption is significantly influenced by media freedom and the strategy of the government regime that controls the judiciary (Aydin-Cakir & Akarçay, 2025). In countries with democratic regimes, the media and the judiciary become a forum for managing public perceptions regarding the news of political corruption. In contrast, in authoritarian regimes where media freedom and the judiciary are controlled, it will be used as a tool for political elite propaganda to cover up their political corruption cases. Political corruption practices involving elites and corporations can occur due to cooperation to utilize state resources, one of which is by making policy products that protect their interests; this is manifested through the misuse of bureaucratic administration by party elites in collaboration with corporations.

The collusion between cartel parties and business actors allows party elites to work on mega projects, such as infrastructure projects that are funded with large amounts (Oluseye, 2024). Working on mega projects involving government programs and entrepreneurs always indicates the emergence of patronage practices, embezzlement, biased law enforcement, and connections for personal gain. The existence of cartel parties protects the high practice of political corruption to realize rules that protect their efforts in using state resources. Political corruption will harm society because of the non-achievement of welfare, social and economic injustice, and the increasing cost of services and development due to the impartiality of government policies to the community.

The rise of political corruption and its coalition with corporations undermines the reform process in democratic countries. The higher the level of corruption, the more vulnerable a country's democracy will be (Saha & Sen, 2021). Countries with party pluralism systems and free democratic systems provide opportunities for alarming rent-seeking; this is reinforced by the thesis regarding the quality factors of political corruption such as the justice system for corruption cases, country population, civic awareness and political culture, and country demographic variations (Poppi, 2023). Several cases in democratic countries that apply a party pluralism system that prioritizes hegemony by forming large coalitions have found these factors. In some cases, political corruption also involves the practices of clientelism, prebendalism, patrimonialism, and neopatrimonialism (RN Sheni, 2021). These practices are standard in institutionalized corruption systems that involve transactional politics.

RESEARCH METHOD

This qualitative research used a systematic literature study design (Carrera-Rivera et al., 2022) combined with critical discourse analysis to reveal the dynamics of party cartels related to reform barriers and political corruption in Indonesia. The data sources in this study are sourced from SCOPUS and SINTA-indexed academic journals with the criteria of publication in the last 10 years, but in some sources from older years due to the importance of these sources as the initial basis of thought that has historical value and the initial foundation in this study. In addition to using article reference sources, this study also processed sources of investigative reports and all literature in the range 2000-2024 relevant to cartel parties, political corruption, and reform.

Triangulation was conducted by comparing data from scientific articles, media, official reports, and official documents to avoid bias. After the data is obtained, data analysis uses an interactive model consisting of data condensation, data presentation, and conclusion (Miles et al., 2014). The findings were then classified based on the themes raised: cartel parties, political corruption, and reform. Researcher neutrality in this writing uses strict selection criteria, namely, coming from credible article sources, going through a validation process by double-checking and avoiding manipulating data. The findings presented data without adding or subtracting facts. It avoids political bias by not mentioning names in cases that have not been decided by the court and

presenting clarity of document facts and references in describing the findings and discussions in the article.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Barriers to reform and political corruption are not always caused by the existence of party cartels but also by the existence of vested interests (Harms & Landwehr, 2020), social inequality (Hlatky & Gyárfášová, 2025), money politics (Subrata, 2022), minority discrimination (Reutzel, 2024), weak law enforcement (Apolte, 2025), transactional politics (Arifin et al., 2020), low political education (Bellani & Hidalgo-Hidalgo, 2025), and the absence of opposition parties (Eroglu, 2025). Based on several other factors mentioned, the existence of cartel parties can practice other factors in one place called cartel parties.

The formation of cartel parties in Indonesian politics can simultaneously result in distortions to strengthen power through state resources, reduce democratic competition, and facilitate political corruption. Cartel parties affect vote-sharing systems and coalition structures, where ideological differences between political parties are visible only during elections and then forgotten once victory is formalized. Previously, competing parties formed 'fat' coalitions for power, affecting the quality of multi-party elections by overriding ideology favoring political elite dominance. These 'fat' coalitions stem from pragmatic deals that reduce inter-political competition and conflict in government. The behavior of the cartel parties can be seen during the formation of the cabinet of ministries in the government, which is dominated by people from parties supporting the government rather than experts (Bland, 2019; James Massola, 2019; Marchio Irfan Gorbiano, 2019; Sigit Joyowardono, 2014; Ufen, 2010). Forming too strong and closed coalitions results in weak, healthy political competition and opens opportunities for corrupt practices. It is paralleled by Indonesia's Corruption Perception Index, which is still far below the median limit on a scale of 1-100 in 2004-2024, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Indonesia's Corruption Perception Index Score 2004-2024

Year	Indonesia's CPI Score (0-100)	Note
2004	27	=
2005	27	=
2006	28	↑
2007	29	↑
2008	29	=
2009	31	↑
2010	32	↑
2011	32	=
2012	32	=
2013	34	↑
2014	34	↑
2015	36	↑
2016	37	↑
2017	37	↑
2018	38	↑
2019	40	↑
2020	37	↓
2021	37	=
2022	34	↓
2023	34	=
2024	37	↑

Source: Researcher data processing, Lestari, YS (2024)

Political cartels are believed to have been born from the emergence of changes in the party system in Europe in the 1960s (Katz & Mair, 1995; Rose-Ackerman, 2006). It has become increasingly complex and affects almost all current democratic government systems. Indonesia is one of the countries that focus on strengthening its democracy. It continues to face multiple challenges that seem to subvert the initial foundation of democracy enforcement since the

beginning of the 1999 reformation due to a shift in the body of its political parties. The very significant changes in the party system in Indonesia can be seen in Table 2.

Table 2. Cartel System in Indonesia

No	Date	Description
1.	July 23, 2001	President Abdurrahman Wahid (Gus Dur) was ousted through a Special Session (SI) by the MPR RI.
2.	2001-2004	Megawati replaced Gus Dur as president, supported by a coalition of government parties at the time, especially the role of the MPR.
3.	2004	Megawati - Hasyim Muzadi VS Soesilo Bambang Yudhoyono - Jusuf Kalla ran for the 2004 Presidential Election. Megawati's defeat and SBY's victory resulted in the government party (SBY) versus the opposition party (Megawati), but they did not play much of a role in policy control.
4.	2008	The Century Bank case dragged several politicians of the democrat party and the formation of the Century Bank Special Committee (Pansus).
5.	2008-2014	Bakrie group tax returns and the formation of the Joint Secretariat as the forerunner to the reshuffle of SBY's cabinet

Source: Researcher data processing, Lestari, YS (2024)

The existence of political cartels was seen in President Abdurrahman Wahid's resignation from office on July 23, 2001, which was triggered by conflicts with the Golkar Party and PDIP (Fana Suparman, 2016). Political parties accentuated their ideological differences to maintain power, with political cartels practicing cooperation and competition to protect the interests of their groups (Katz, 2018; Koskimaa, 2020; Meijers & Zaslove, 2021). Although the Golkar-PDIP coalition lost the 2004 election, political cartels continue to exist and are active in Indonesian politics, seeking to gain an advantage through state resources. Cartel parties pursue state resources to uphold power, prioritizing cooperation and reducing conflict despite ideological differences (Katz & Mair, 2003). The 2004 elections became essential in building post-reform democratization in Indonesia with honest, direct elections.

The Bakrie Group tax case was resolved through political lobbying among political elites (Anonim, 2009; Boni Hargens, 2010; Didik Supriyanto, 2010; Felix Nathaniel, 2021) that led to Sri Mulyani's transfer to the World Bank, suggesting conflict resolution through strengthening political cartels. The World Bank defines political corruption as the abuse of public power by government elites for personal gain (Collier, 2005), as seen in decisions by the SBY-era government. Similarly, Jokowi's two terms in office were also characterized by the emergence of political cartels, especially with the integration of Prabowo and Sandiaga Uno into the ruling coalition. The state's disregard for the presence of opposition parties in favor of a grand alliance indicates political corruption in government, as indicated by indicators of political corruption that include the abuse of authority for personal gain (Brooks, 1909) and the use of power for personal gain (Rose-Ackerman & Palifka, 2016), which political cartels exacerbate. Concrete steps are needed to minimize the influence of political cartels and curb political corruption.

The development of political cartels in Indonesia from time to time has become more established, marked by the strengthening of interest groups involving political elites from across parties. It is also supported by the agreement between the parties on the policies issued by the government. Therefore, in summary, the strong presence of political cartels in Indonesia can be seen from its development from time to time, which is influenced by several factors:

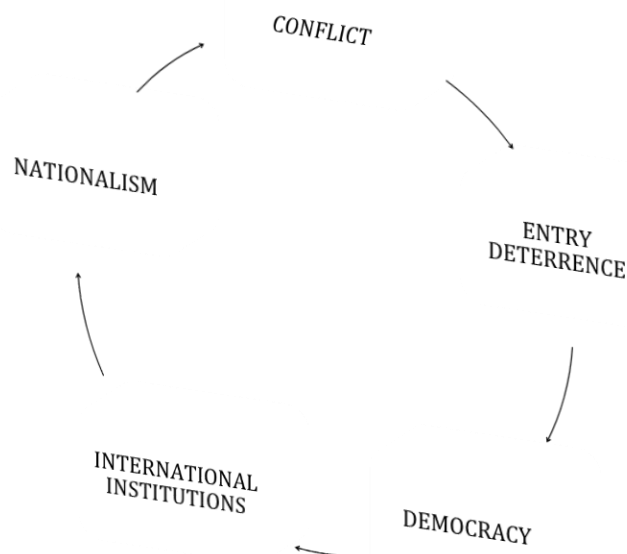


Figure 1. Factors of Political Cartels

Source: Researcher data processing, Lestari, YS (2024)

The vital role of political cartels in Indonesia is also almost the same as the factor in the occurrence of economic cartels because the cartel pattern is based on material gain and loss considerations. The first factor is the presence of conflicts that can cause divisions during the struggle for power in elections. Each party with various ideologies fights for votes using all means, such as money politics, black campaigns, and other means. However, the struggle between parties is no longer visible when power is passed. Therefore, one by one, the party elites began holding meetings to build cooperation with the government parties.

Political Cartels Are the Leading Cause of Political Corruption

The characteristics of cartel parties can be seen in the following Table 3:

Table 3. The Characteristics of Cartel Parties

No.	Characteristics	Description
1.	The blurring of party ideology	Competition between parties and the ideology carried out only appears when the general election (election) process occurs, where each party carries its ideology, fighting for the people's vote. However, this lasted only briefly when the election results were announced, and the boundaries between different ideologies tended to unite. Therefore, ideological competition is limited only to competition during the election. When the election is over, join the ranks to gain benefits both in position and in other powers by obscuring the party's ideology.
2.	Permissiveness in coalition formation	Political parties that previously competed in elections began to form a large coalition regardless of ideological boundaries, goals, or work agendas, which became the work programs of political parties. The permissive attitude in forming coalitions is one of the common factors often seen in Indonesia's political cartel system. For example, the joining of Golkar in 2014, who initially became a political opponent in the Jokowi administration, clearly illustrates the characteristics of a political cartel. In addition, Prabowo Subianto and Sandiaga Uno in Joko Widodo's working cabinet clearly show the permissive attitude of forming a government coalition that tends to be a cartel.

Table 3. The Characteristics of Cartel Parties (cont')

No.	Characteristics	Description
3.	No opposition party	During the SBY-JK administration, the Democratic Party and Golkar dominated parliament. At the same time, PDIP, as an opposition party, had minimal influence in resolving the Bank Century and Bakrie Group tax cases. During the Joko Widodo administration, although the Democratic Party did not join the government coalition, its influence remained minimal, with state issues being resolved with party interests, such as the issue of the 212 Movement, scarcity of staples, and rising prices of goods. Political parties tend to support government policies in resolving conflicts and market issues.
4.	Election results do not affect determining the behaviors of political parties.	The results of the election victory are not the primary basis for determining the political elite's attitude, but personal and group interests are the basis for the elites to determine their attitude toward a government or opposition party. Despite choosing the opposition party, the party elites have yet to be able to make decisions about the interests of the wider community and even tend to accept the policies made.
5.	The party's strong tendency to collaborate as a group	Political cartels tend to prioritize collective attitudes for the benefit of the group, which is reflected in public policies and decisions that pursue the group's interests, such as the Century Bank corruption case involving the Democratic Party's political elite. A cabinet reshuffle took place, with the Golkar Party receiving a large share as the backer of the Special Committee for the Century Inquiry. In addition, the political competition between Prabowo and Sandiaga Uno after the 2019 elections led to both joining the working cabinet of Joko Widodo's administration, motivated to reduce conflict and gain benefits from state resources by suppressing differences and reducing the potential for conflict due to party competition.

Source: Researcher data processing, Lestari, YS (2024)

Party cartels are collaborations between political parties to acquire and maintain state financial resources, ignoring party ideology. They obtain funds through elections, which can lead to political corruption, eliminate opposition, and undermine democratic principles (Lestari, 2017a). The existence of political cartels has a significant impact on the country's political stability, threatens people's welfare, and increases corruption among political elites. The eradication of political cartels must be encouraged by public education about their dangers. Efforts are required to eradicate political cartels to maintain the stability of the democratic system and eradicate political corruption.

Eradicating Political Cartels Is the Same as Eradicating Political Corruption

A contentious pattern of government and community relations over discriminatory and burdensome policies, such as the increase in cooking oil prices and its scarcity at the end of 2021, has led to conflict. The government responded with three policies, including subsidizing cooking oil, which BPDKS (Palm Oil Plantation Fund Management Agency) manages. However, these policies have worsened the community's economic conditions, increased the prices of other necessities (ICW, 2022), and created cooking oil hoarders, further prolonging the conflict with the community. The policies taken to address the problem of cooking oil scarcity and price hikes negatively impacted the economy and the relationship between the community and the government.

The existence of cartel parties is supported by the weakening relationship between political parties and civil society and the efforts of party elites to conspire to guarantee the lives of their groups by using state resources (Jonathan Hopkin, 2022). In this context, the government's policy on the Mandatory Biodiesel 30% (B30) Program can be seen as an example, with incentive assistance to entrepreneurs reaching 28.09 trillion in 2020 and increasing to 59.95 trillion (Divisi Korupsi Politik ICW, 2023) in 2021. These incentives, which are intended to encourage the diversion of CPO production to biodiesel, are considered one of the causes of cooking oil scarcity.

Ironically, entrepreneurs benefit from these incentives, while the public faces the problem of oil scarcity and price hikes, which impact the price of other necessities.

Conflicts can be suppressed to reduce the influence of political cartels in expanding elite political networks. Cartel parties build patronage to strengthen profits, ignoring conflict triggers (Bolleyer, 2009). Conflict management is necessary to prevent a crisis of public confidence in the government while creating a welfare state. This conflict management relates to the government's legitimacy, which the public does not trust and supports radical parties (Erber & Lau, 1990). A crisis of trust and disregard for the merit system (Rakhmawanto et al., 2019) can strengthen political cartels by continuing to scoop up state resources to benefit their groups.

Companies use entry deterrence or economic cartels to prevent competitors from entering the market, while political cartels involve old parties working together to deter new political parties. This concept aims to minimize too much competition (Katz, 2022). Cartel parties are organized to remain competitive but with controls to safeguard their interests. In Indonesia, entry deterrence is seen in applying the presidential threshold (PT) to strengthen the presidential system and build a relationship between the president and the DPR to gain majority support (Saad et al., 2022). The interaction between political parties and companies must also be considered to maintain political and economic stability.

The Structured Enterprise (PT) mechanism in Indonesia negatively impacts the democratic system by increasing the influence of political parties that are more concerned with their group interests than the public interest. This practice involves interaction between companies and the government to create opportunities through various means, such as new products, import-export regulations, government contracts, and other policies (Smith, 2016). As a result, corruption by political elites increases, and public policies are affected. A review of thresholds in elections is needed to protect the rights of political parties to nominate presidential candidates, as well as an evaluation of the relationship between the government and companies (Chen et al., 2021) to control uncontrolled interactions. Measures to reduce coalitions of political parties and favorable corporations should be taken to improve these conditions in Indonesia.

Democracy plays an essential role in strengthening political cartels, as the weak implementation of democratic values in Indonesia, often characterized by money politics, triggers rampant political corruption by political elites (Utami et al., 2020). The instability of countries based on democracy occurs due to low public participation in elections, low political awareness, limited access to public information, and unilateral decision-making. Data from Freedom House shows that Indonesia's elections in 2024 are still fraught with fraud and abuse of power, controlled by the government to maintain its power. These conditions threaten democracy and increase the practice of political corruption, prompting efforts to strengthen democratic principles and participatory values to preserve the country's stability.

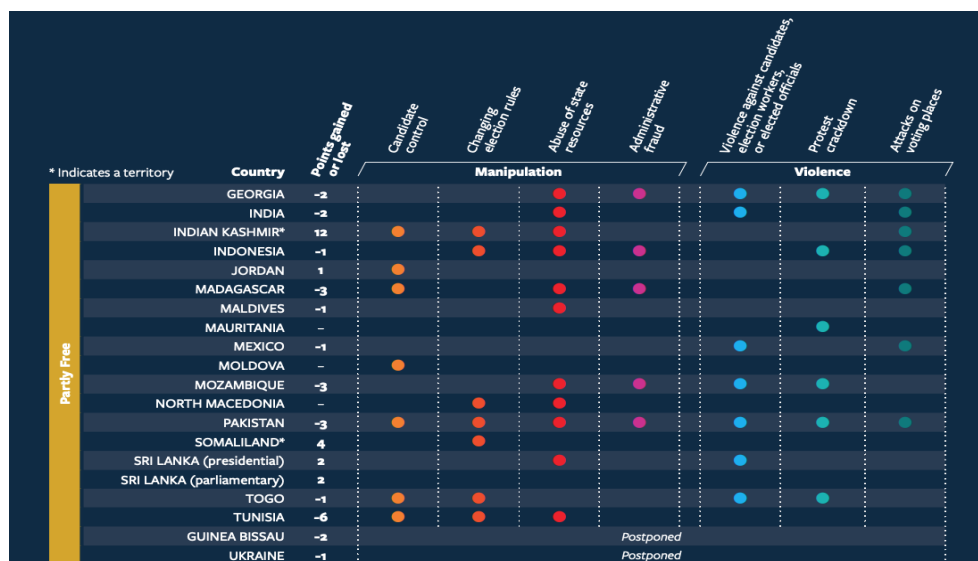


Figure 2. Manipulation and Violence During The Year of Elections
Source: (Freedom House, 2025)

Political elites often use democracy in political cartels to gain public support rather than to engage in public participation or policymaking (Blyth & Katz, 2005; Kitschelt, 2000), with examples of electoral practices involving money, power, illegal campaigning, hoaxes and vote buying. It is essential to improve the quality of local democracy to reduce corrupt practices (Kabullah et al., 2020) and make elections a means of achieving social change in governance rather than simply gaining social stability.

Asia & Australasia 2024

	Overall score	Global Rank	Regional rank	I Electoral process and pluralism	II Functioning of government	III Political participation	IV Political culture	V Civil liberties	Regime type
Afghanistan	0.25	167	28	0.00	0.00	0.00	1.25	0.00	Authoritarian
Australia	8.85	11	2	10.00	8.57	7.22	8.75	9.71	Full democracy
Bangladesh	4.44	100=	20	6.08	2.57	5.00	5.00	3.53	Hybrid regime
Bhutan	5.65	79	16	8.75	5.93	3.89	5.00	4.71	Hybrid regime
Cambodia	2.94	123	21	0.00	2.36	5.00	5.00	2.35	Authoritarian
China	2.11	145	24	0.00	3.21	3.33	3.13	0.88	Authoritarian
Fiji	5.39	81	17	6.58	5.00	4.44	5.63	5.29	Hybrid regime
Hong Kong	5.09	87	18	2.75	4.00	3.89	6.88	7.94	Hybrid regime
India	7.29	41	6	8.67	7.50	7.22	6.88	6.18	Flawed democracy
Indonesia	6.44	59	11	7.92	6.79	7.22	5.00	5.29	Flawed democracy
Japan	8.48	16	4	9.58	8.93	6.67	8.13	9.12	Full democracy
Laos	1.71	160	25	0.00	2.86	1.67	3.75	0.29	Authoritarian
Malaysia	7.11	44	7	9.58	7.14	6.67	6.25	5.88	Flawed democracy
Mongolia	6.53	53	10	8.75	5.71	6.67	5.63	5.88	Flawed democracy
Myanmar	0.96	166	27	0.00	0.00	1.67	3.13	0.00	Authoritarian
Nepal	4.60	96	19	4.83	5.36	5.00	2.50	5.29	Hybrid regime
New Zealand	9.61	2	1	10.00	9.29	10.00	8.75	10.00	Full democracy
North Korea	1.08	165	26	0.00	2.50	1.67	1.25	0.00	Authoritarian
Pakistan	2.84	124=	22	0.83	4.29	2.78	2.50	3.82	Authoritarian
Papua New Guinea	5.97	73	15	6.92	6.07	3.89	5.63	7.35	Hybrid regime

Figure 3. Democracy Index Asia & Australasia 2024

Source: (Freedom House, 2025)

Based on the 2024 democracy index data, Indonesia ranks 59th globally, and the Asia Australasia region ranks 11th. The democracy index shows that the implementation of democracy in Indonesia is in the type of flawed democracy, which is most influenced by the low points on political culture based on democratic principles, which only gets 5.00 points, and still, low civil liberties, which only gets 5.29 points. The decline of democracy in Indonesia impacts weakening representative democracy, institutional accountability that is increasingly retreating, and fading social cohesion.

Indonesia's current multi-party government system (Ferza & Aulia, 2020) has the potential for political patronage and cartelization practices that lead to ambiguity in the democratic system. For example, the governing coalition during SBY's leadership tended to be less competitive and more focused on shared interests, such as in the Bank Century and Bakrie Group tax cases (Ahmad & Herdiansah, 2013). The weak democratization of the country also allows for political

corruption involving party elites, especially from government parties. The loss of the role of opposition parties also explains the low level of democracy in Indonesia, as there is a lack of counterbalance in government policymaking. A decline in democracy can provide room for political elites to misbehave. Dahl (1971) states that opposition in democratic life is inseparable and becomes a foundation other than participation, which is called polyarchy or government with democratic nuances. It is then complicated by assumptions from party elites or influential party figures who still regard the opposition as irrelevant to current political life (Noor, 2016).

The importance of democracy enforcement efforts in guarding the ideology and behavior of party members to reduce political cartels is emphasized in the text. Cartelization can threaten democracy by creating dependency on political representation and encouraging the emergence of far-right parties that limit people's freedom (Pelizzo, 2007). To overcome this, political education for the public is needed to monitor political party members and prevent corruption by party cadres (Suryanto & Hidayat, 2016). In addition, understanding the dangers of money politics needs to be improved so that people's understanding of democratic elections increases, and policies to reduce political cartels need to be made. Thus, these efforts are essential in creating a better party system.

International institutions play an essential role in the growth of political cartels in Indonesia by offering opportunities and controlling economic and political policies through the adaptation of their policies. The country's dependence on international institutions has led to political parties conspiring to utilize state resources to benefit their groups (Hanrieder, 2012), including setting market policies that support cartels. It causes Indonesia's economic and political system to be in crisis due to systemic dependency (Made et al., 2014). As a result, the infiltration of international institutions in the Indonesian government influenced the increase of political corruption and political cartels in the country.

Political corruption is currently debated in terms of institutional and behavioral relationships, especially in its impact on the country's economy and other forms of political corruption. Political decision-makers often use political power to maintain their group's power and wealth (Adelina, 2019). International organizations also contribute to the successful development of countries by creating interest groups of political elites, which can lead to political corruption. This corruption involves transactions between the private (Arnold J. Heidenheimer & Michael Johnston, 2017) and public sectors, illegally turning state goods into private property. In liberal democracies, opportunities for political corruption are exacerbated by weak government accountability in managing state resources through the economic system.

Globally, it can also be seen that the cracks in the international system manifested by the national sovereignty of states, conflicting jurisdictions, and lack of coordination between international organizations can provide many opportunities for the emergence of forms of political corruption (Harris, 2003). Therefore, political corruption is not only related to national issues but is also influenced by international organizations where state policies and international organizations can lead to the practice of political corruption through the role of political cartels.

Nationalism in the context of political cartels is used to strengthen national identity in response to conflict and democracy in a country. Party elites use nationalism to unite political parties and create political consensus in their favor. Nationalism also impacts political corruption and political cartels in Indonesia, where the state uses policies to regulate economic competition to benefit the ruling party. Party stability influences cartelization at the national level by devolving responsibility and decision-making to specific bodies so their activities do not have to be accountable to the public for legality (Karina Bottom, 2007).

Nationalism in economic competition is often considered part of the government's efforts to build the country's economy with a capitalist system based on liberal market democracy. However, indigenous entrepreneurs and the government can manipulate price controls and economic policies to benefit certain political groups. Cartel parties often use the excuse of nationalism to legitimize coalitions in the public interest, whereas political competition is usually influenced by state subvention (Bachtiar & Andrean, 2020; Rose-Ackerman, 2012) rather than ideology or programs. Nationalism used by cartel parties aims to maintain power, so the role of political parties is increasingly distanced from society. Elections are often disproportionate and allegedly a competition dominated by capital, giving more power to cartel political parties than to the representation of the people.

Strengthening political parties through grand coalitions in the name of nationalism to build positive cooperation in government can weaken competition between parties and increase corrupt practices. It drives voters further away from political parties as they no longer represent the people's interests. Political parties then join the government (He & Zhang, 2024) and use nationalism to achieve their party's goals. To reduce the development of political cartels in Indonesia, a joint effort is needed between the government and society to create political parties free from corruption. Political education and public awareness are also crucial in the fight against political cartels to maintain the country's stability and prevent corruption.

CONCLUSION

This study contributes to the ongoing discourse on political corruption by critically examining the role of political cartels within the Indonesian context. The findings reveal that the consolidation of political cartels exacerbates corruption by eroding party ideology, prioritizing factional and elite interests, and weakening the system of checks and balances—primarily due to the dominance of coalition parties and the marginalization of opposition forces. Drawing on Katz and Mair's cartel party theory alongside Rose-Ackerman's framework on corruption, the research demonstrates how political cartels institutionalize the misuse of power through clientelist networks and oligarchic alliances. However, the Indonesian case presents important deviations from conventional theoretical models due to its distinctive sociopolitical landscape, characterized by a fragmented party system, entrenched patron–client relations, and the cultural normalization of corrupt practices such as bribery and elite collusion. Effectively addressing political corruption in Indonesia thus requires a multidimensional strategy: dismantling entrenched cartel structures, strengthening democratic institutions, reforming political party financing mechanisms, and enhancing civic engagement and oversight.

Furthermore, this study underscores the importance of culturally embedded, context-sensitive approaches in analyzing political corruption within developing democracies. Future research should explore the intersection of oligarchic power, local political economies, and regional governance dynamics through integrative methodologies such as social network analysis, ethnographic fieldwork, and comparative provincial studies. While this research acknowledges the limitations in accessing empirical data on political cartels and corruption networks, it provides a foundational framework for advancing the study of political reform and understanding the persistence of systemic corruption in Indonesia.

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