



The President as Executive Power: The Transformation of Presidential Power from the Old Order to Reform in the Framework of Indonesian Democracy

Aulia Fujianti^{a,1*}, Prayoga Bestari^{b,2}, Cecep Darmawan^{b,3}

^{a,1, b2,3} Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia

¹ auliafujianti25@upi.edu; ² yogabestari@upi.edu; ³ cecep darmawan@yahoo.com

* Aulia Fujianti

(Received March 1, 2025 Revised April 21, 2025 Accepted May 1, 2025, Available online May 1, 2025)

Abstract

This research examines the transformation of presidential power as the holder of the executive in the Indonesian political system, from the Old Order to the Reform era, within the framework of the dynamics of Indonesian democracy. Using a qualitative approach based on a literature study, this research analyses the changing role and authority of the president through the lens of political history, using secondary data from books, journals and official documents. The findings show that in the Old Order, presidential power under Guided Democracy was super-presidential, characterised by centralisation and early authoritarianism. In the New Order, executive power was strengthened through military and bureaucratic control, creating stability but sacrificing democratic freedoms. The Reform era introduced amendments to the 1945 Constitution that limited presidential authority, strengthened checks and balances, and promoted participatory democracy through direct elections and decentralisation. However, challenges such as the pragmatism of political coalitions, oligarchy and corruption continue to hamper ideal democracy. The study concludes that a balance between formal presidential powers and institutional oversight is key to building a democracy that is inclusive, accountable and responsive to the aspirations of the Indonesian people. This study contributes to an in-depth understanding of the evolution of executive power and its implications for strengthening democracy in Indonesia

Keywords: Executive Power; President; Political Transformation; Indonesian Democracy; Reformasi

1. Introduction

Indonesia has gone through various transformations of its political system throughout its history. From pre-colonial times to the Reformation era, significant changes in governance have shaped the political dynamics of the archipelago. During the time of traditional kingdoms, such as Majapahit and Mataram, the political system centred on a monarchy led by a king or sultan, with laws and procedures governed by local cultural and religious values. This government structure emphasised social hierarchy and loyalty to the supreme leader. (Siregar, 2019, p. 12)

When Europeans, particularly the Portuguese and Dutch, began colonising Indonesian territory in the 16th century, the political system shifted towards colonialism. Colonial governments organised territories based on economic interests, such as the spice trade, by placing governors or colonial officials as rulers. After independence in 1945, Indonesia started a new chapter with a democracy-orientated political system. From 1945 to 1950, Indonesia implemented a presidential system based on the 1945 Constitution, in which the president had a central role in government. (Hartono, 2021, p. 45)

In 1959, the political system shifted towards Guided Democracy under the leadership of President Soekarno. This system emphasised centralisation of power and a strong role for the state in directing national development, but often restricted political and press freedoms. After the political upheaval of 1965-1966, Indonesia entered the New Order era under President Soeharto. The New Order, which lasted from 1966 to 1998, promoted a political system that prioritised national stability and economic development. It imposed strict controls on political activities, restricted freedom of speech, and strengthened the role of the military in politics. On the other hand, the New Order succeeded in boosting economic growth through foreign investment and infrastructure modernisation, although it was often marred by corruption and social inequality. (Pratiwi & Nugroho, 2023, pp. 67-68)

Another major change occurred in 1998, when the Reformation era began after Soeharto stepped down. Reformasi brought a breath of fresh air by expanding democratic space, strengthening the rule of law, and giving greater freedom to the press and civil society. A decentralised political system through regional autonomy was also introduced

to give greater authority to local governments. This transformation reflected Indonesia's efforts to build a political system that was more inclusive and responsive to people's aspirations. (Widodo, 2020, p. 89)

In a modern government system, executive power is one of the main pillars that run the wheels of government. Executive power is the branch of government in charge of implementing and enforcing the law, as well as managing state administration. In many government systems, especially presidential systems, the president acts as the highest holder of executive power. This paper aims to analyse the role of the president as the chief executive, with a focus on his or her powers, responsibilities and interactions with the other branches of power, namely the legislature and the judiciary, in maintaining a balance of power, known as checks and balances.

As the chief executive, the president has a number of duties and powers that are crucial in determining the direction of government. These duties include:

1. **Policy Implementation.** The president is responsible for implementing policies that have been passed by the legislature, as well as formulating new policies in accordance with the vision of his government.
2. **Management of Government Administration.** The president leads the state bureaucracy, including appointing high-ranking officials, overseeing government performance, and ensuring effective public services.
3. **State Representation.** In international relations, the president acts as the face of the country, signing treaties and leading diplomacy.
4. **Legislative Influence.** In some systems, the president has the right to sign or veto laws, thereby influencing the legislative process. Despite this great power, the role of the president is not absolute. A system of checks and balances ensures that executive power is overseen by the legislative and judicial branches. For example, the legislature can hold the president accountable or even impeach him, while the judiciary is authorised to review the legality of executive actions. These mechanisms are designed to prevent abuse of power and maintain government stability.

2. Methodology

This research uses a qualitative approach with a literature study to examine the President as the Executive power: The Transformation of Presidential Power from the Old Order to Reform in the Framework of Indonesian Democracy, by referring to Indonesian historical literature as an analytical framework. The qualitative approach was chosen to provide an in-depth and contextualised picture of the President as Executive power: The Transformation of Presidential Power from the Old Order to Reform in the Framework of Indonesian Democracy, with a focus on the President as Executive power.

The data used is sourced from secondary data, including books, scientific journals, articles, official reports, and other relevant documents. Data collection was conducted systematically to ensure the accuracy and relevance of information that supports the analysis. This research not only aims to collect facts, but also analyse in depth to understand the Transformation of Presidential Power from the Old Order to Reform in the Framework of Indonesian Democracy.

In the process of analysis, the President as the Executive power: The Transformation of Presidential Power from the Old Order to Reform in the Framework of Indonesian Democracy in Indonesian history is used as a theoretical foundation to parse the collected data. Concepts such as the Transformation of Presidential Power from the Old Order to Reform became the main tool to explore how the President as executive power reshaped the social structure and identity of Indonesian society. Analyses were conducted by integrating secondary data with the theoretical framework to produce a comprehensive interpretation.

In the conclusion stage, this research focuses on synthesising the findings based on the research objectives and the theoretical framework of Indonesian history. The resulting conclusions are expected to provide new insights into how the President's position as an Executive power: The Transformation of Presidential Power from the Old Order to Reform in the Framework of Indonesian Democracy in Indonesian history. This research also seeks to develop relevant recommendations based on the analyses that have been conducted.

3. Results and Discussion

Presidential Power Transformation from Old Order to Reform

In the Indonesian constitutional system, the president plays a central role as the holder of executive power. However, the dynamics of presidential power cannot be separated from the political and historical context surrounding it. Since independence until now, Indonesia has experienced three main political periods: Old Order (1945-1966), New Order (1966-1998), and Reform Era (1998-present). Each period reflects the transformation of presidential power influenced by constitutional, political and socio-cultural factors. In the Old Order, presidential power under Soekarno tended to be super-presidential, with the executive dominating the legislature and judiciary through the Guided Democracy system. In the New Order era, Soeharto built an authoritarian regime by consolidating power through control over the military, bureaucracy and political parties. Meanwhile, Reformasi came as a response to the crisis of

democracy by amending the 1945 Constitution to limit presidential power, strengthen checks and balances, and accommodate decentralisation. Although the constitutional framework has changed, political practices are often not in line with formal norms. For example, while Reformasi limited the presidential term, pragmatic party coalition practices and oligarchic influence remain a challenge. This study aims to unravel the interaction between formal (constitutionally regulated) powers and political practices in shaping presidential authority across three regimes, and its implications for Indonesian democracy.

Indonesian Democracy

Indonesia's independence in 1945 was the starting point for the country's democratic experiment. In the early period, Indonesia adopted a parliamentary democracy system, in which executive power was vested in the prime minister, while the president served only as a symbol of the state. This system lasted until the late 1950s, but was often plagued by political instability. The large number of political parties with diverse ideologies made it difficult to reach consensus, so governments often changed in a short period of time. This instability prompted President Soekarno to introduce Guided Democracy in 1959. With the support of the military, this system shifted power into the hands of the president, reduced the role of parliament, and restricted political freedoms. The aim was to create stability and accelerate national development, but in practice, Guided Democracy was more like authoritarianism, with strict controls on the opposition and the media.

After Soekarno's fall in 1966 due to political and economic upheaval, President Soeharto took power and established the New Order. In this era, Pancasila Democracy was introduced as an ideology that combined democratic elements with Indonesian cultural values. However, in reality, the New Order was more of a covert authoritarian regime. Elections were held regularly, but were tightly controlled by the government, and freedom of speech was severely restricted. The New Order ended in 1998, when the economic crisis and popular pressure through the reformasi movement forced Soeharto to step down. Reformasi paved the way for modern democracy in Indonesia. Amendments to the 1945 Constitution made between 1999 and 2002 strengthened the democratic system by limiting presidential powers, increasing the role of parliament, and guaranteeing more democratic elections. Since then, Indonesia has organised regular elections, which are considered one of the largest and most complex democratic processes in the world given its vast territory and population.

Currently, Indonesia is a presidential republic with a multiparty system. The president, who is directly elected by the people every five years, holds the dual role of head of state and head of government. He or she has the authority to form a cabinet, set policies, and manage the country's administration. However, the president's powers are limited by oversight mechanisms from the legislature and judiciary, reflecting the principle of checks and balances.

The legislature in Indonesia is represented by the House of Representatives (DPR), whose members come from various political parties elected through elections. The DPR is responsible for making laws, overseeing government performance, and approving the state budget. In addition to the DPR, there is also the Regional Representative Council (DPD), which represents regional aspirations, although its influence is more limited than that of the DPR. The multiparty system allows for political diversity, but also creates challenges. A governing coalition is often required to gain a majority in the DPR, which sometimes results in complicated political compromises. In addition, decentralisation implemented since reformasi gives more autonomy to regions, with the aim of bringing government closer to the people. However, this has also led to problems such as

Challenges Facing Indonesian Democracy. Indonesian democracy faces a number of challenges that test its resilience. One of the most prominent is corruption, which has taken root at various levels of government. This practice not only drains state resources, but also undermines public trust in public institutions and hinders equitable development. Economic inequality is also a major issue. While Indonesia has recorded impressive economic growth, the benefits have not been equitably shared by all. Stark differences between urban and rural areas, as well as between rich and poor groups, can fuel social discontent that threatens democratic stability.

Cultural and religious diversity, which are Indonesia's strengths, are also sometimes a source of conflict. Ethnic or religious tensions still arise in some areas, requiring the government to continue to maintain a balance between majority and minority rights. In addition, freedom of speech and the press, while having grown considerably since reformasi, still face threats such as intimidation of journalists or restrictions through ambiguous regulations.

Civil society is the backbone of democracy in Indonesia. Non-governmental organisations, independent media and people's movements have played a crucial role in promoting transparency and accountability. During the reformasi period, these groups became the driving force for change, including in the establishment of institutions such as the Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK) to fight corruption. Independent media, while sometimes facing pressure, have become critical voices that speak up for the public interest. Meanwhile, student movements and activists continue to be agents of change, as seen in the large demonstrations that toppled the New Order and various actions to demand social justice to date.

The Old Order (1945-1966): From Parliamentary Democracy to Guided Democracy

At the beginning of independence, Indonesia adopted a parliamentary democracy system based on the original 1945 Constitution. In this system, executive power was held by the prime minister, while the president functioned as the head of state with a more ceremonial role. The president was elected by the People's Consultative Assembly (MPR), and legislative power rested with the DPR. However, this period was characterised by political instability due to the fragmentation of political parties with diverse ideologies, resulting in frequent changes of government and difficulty reaching consensus.

This instability culminated in 1959, when President Soekarno issued a Presidential Decree to dissolve parliament and return to the 1945 Constitution, while introducing Guided Democracy. Under this new system, executive power passed entirely into the hands of the president, who became both head of state and head of government. Formally, the 1945 Constitution gave the president broad powers, such as appointing ministers and setting national policy. In political practice, Soekarno utilised these powers to consolidate control, backed by the military and its supporting parties. Opposition was suppressed, press freedom was restricted, and power was centralised in the executive. The interaction between formal power and political practice during the Old Order shows that the expansion of presidential power was initially intended to create stability, but eventually led to authoritarianism.

Soekarno used the rhetoric of nationalism and anti-imperialism to legitimise his control, but the inability to overcome economic crises and political conflicts weakened his regime, leading to its eventual collapse in 1966.

New Order (1966-1998): Executive Power in a Pancasila Democracy

After the fall of Soekarno, President Soeharto established the New Order with a presidential system based on the 1945 Constitution and the ideology of Pancasila Democracy. Formally, the president had very broad executive powers, including forming the cabinet, controlling state administration, and setting policy direction. General elections were held every five years, but were tightly controlled by the government through the Golkar party, while opposition was limited through regulation and intimidation.

In political practice, the president's formal powers were utilised to create political stability and economic growth. Soeharto successfully attracted foreign investment and encouraged infrastructure development, which became the main legitimisation of his regime. However, behind these achievements, the New Order exhibited a covert authoritarian character. The media was controlled, civil liberties were restricted, and human rights violations such as in East Timor and Aceh became part of government practice. Corruption, collusion and nepotism (KKN) were rampant, with Soeharto's family and cronies dominating the economic sector.

The interaction between formal power and political practice during this period shows that the president not only used constitutional authority to govern, but also to maintain political dominance. Extensive executive powers became a tool to suppress dissent and ensure regime continuity, albeit at the expense of democratic principles. The New Order regime finally collapsed in 1998 due to the economic crisis and popular pressure through the reformasi movement.

Reformation (1998-present). Limits on Power and More Open Democracy

The fall of Soeharto marked Indonesia's entry into the Reformasi era, which was characterised by efforts to build a more accountable democracy. One major step was the amendment of the 1945 Constitution (1999-2002), which limited presidential power and strengthened checks and balances. The president remained the head of the executive, but his authority was reduced to a two-term limit, elections were conducted directly by the people (not the MPR), and the DPR was given a greater role in oversight. Judicial institutions, such as the Supreme Court and Constitutional Court, were also strengthened to maintain independence.

In political practice, the president in the Reformasi era had to operate in a more democratic environment. The opposition, media and civil society have more space to voice criticism, while presidents often rely on political coalitions to gain majority support in the DPR. This creates new challenges: decision-making becomes slower as it requires negotiation and compromise. Although his formal powers are limited, the president still has significant influence in shaping policy, especially if he has strong leadership or large public support.

The interaction between formal power and political practice during the Reformasi period shows a shift towards a more inclusive and participatory system. Limits on presidential power encourage collaboration with other institutions, but challenges such as corruption, economic inequality and political polarisation remain obstacles to a mature democracy.

A Comparison of the Interaction of Formal Power and Political Practice

These three regimes show different patterns of interaction between formal presidential power and political practice. Under the Old Order, formal powers extended through Guided Democracy were used to consolidate control and suppress opposition, leading to early authoritarianism. In the New Order, the extensive formal powers in the presidential system were utilised for stability and development, but also to maintain an authoritarian regime that suppressed freedom. And in the Reform Era, the limitation of formal powers encouraged more democratic political practices, with an emphasis on negotiation and inter-institutional balance of power. This transformation emphasised

that presidential power is not only determined by the constitution, but also by the political and social context of the time. Each president adjusted his formal authority to respond to the challenges at hand, with mixed impacts on democracy.

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study concludes that the transformation of presidential power as the executive in Indonesia from the Old Order to the Reformation reflects a long journey towards a more mature democracy. During the Old Order, super-presidential powers under Guided Democracy led to authoritarianism, characterised by centralisation and restrictions on political freedoms. The New Order, under Soeharto, utilised broad executive powers for stability and economic development, but at the expense of democracy through tight controls and the practice of KKN (corruption, collusion, nepotism). The Reformation era brought significant changes through the amendment of the 1945 Constitution, which limited presidential powers, strengthened checks and balances mechanisms, and opened up space for participatory democracy through direct elections and decentralisation. However, challenges such as coalition pragmatism, oligarchic influence and corruption still hamper the ideals of inclusive democracy. The balance between the president's formal authority and oversight from the legislature, judiciary and civil society is crucial to ensure that executive power is accountable and responsive. This study confirms that strengthening democratic institutions and commitment to the values of Pancasila as the foundation of the state are key to realising a just, civilised and sustainable Indonesian democracy.

The journey of presidential power from the Old Order to Reformasi reflects the evolution of Indonesian democracy. In the Old Order, the expansion of power led to authoritarianism; in the New Order, broad powers were used for stability at the cost of freedom; and in Reformasi, restrictions on power opened up space for a more open democracy. The balance between formal power and political practice is key in maintaining stability while advancing democracy. For the future, strengthening oversight from the legislature, judiciary and civil society will be crucial to keep the president's power accountable, so that Indonesia can realise a fair and inclusive democracy.

Further Study

Future studies and policy initiatives should build upon these findings to ensure that artificial intelligence is utilised ethically and efficiently for the benefit of society.

References

- [1] Hartono, R. (2021). *Sejarah Politik Indonesia Pasca-Kemerdekaan*. Jakarta: Penerbit Kompas.
- [2] Pratiwi, A., & Nugroho, B. (2023). *Orde Baru: Stabilitas dan Tantangan Demokrasi*. Yogyakarta: Gadjah Mada University Press.
- [3] Siregar, M. (2019). *Kerajaan-Kerajaan Nusantara: Sistem Politik dan Budaya*. Bandung: Mizan Pustaka.
- [4] Widodo, S. (2020). *Reformasi dan Demokratisasi di Indonesia*. Surabaya: Penerbit Airlangga.
- [5] Anderson, B. R. O'G. (1990). *Language and Power: Exploring Political Cultures in Indonesia*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- [6] Aspinall, E., & Fealy, G. (Eds.). (2003). *Local Power and Politics in Indonesia: Decentralisation and Democratisation*. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.
- [7] Budiardjo, M. (2008). *Dasar-Dasar Ilmu Politik*. Jakarta: Gramedia Pustaka Utama.
- [8] Cribb, R., & Brown, C. (1995). *Modern Indonesia: A History Since 1945*. London: Longman.
- [9] Crouch, H. (2010). *Political Reform in Indonesia after Soeharto*. Singapore: ISEAS Publishing.
- [10] Elson, R. E. (2001). *Suharto: A Political Biography*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- [11] Feith, H. (2007). *The Decline of Constitutional Democracy in Indonesia*. Jakarta: Equinox Publishing.
- [12] Hadiz, V. R. (2010). *Localising Power in Post-Authoritarian Indonesia: A Southeast Asia Perspective*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- [13] Honna, J. (2013). *Military Politics and Democratization in Indonesia*. London: Routledge.
- [14] Indrayana, D. (2018). *Konstitusi dan Demokrasi Indonesia: Dinamika Hukum dan Politik*. Bandung: Mizan Pustaka.
- [15] Liddle, R. W. (1996). *Leadership and Culture in Indonesian Politics*. Sydney: Allen & Unwin.
- [16] Mahfud MD. (2019). *Politik Hukum di Indonesia*. Jakarta: Rajawali Pers.
- [17] Mietzner, M. (2015). *The Politics of Military Reform in Post-Suharto Indonesia: Elite Conflict, Nationalism, and Institutional Resistance*. Washington, DC: East-West Center.
- [18] Nasution, A. B. (1992). *The Aspiration for Constitutional Government in Indonesia: A Socio-Legal Study of the Indonesian Konstituante, 1956–1959*. Jakarta: Pustaka Sinar Harapan.

- [19] Ricklefs, M. C. (2008). *A History of Modern Indonesia Since c. 1200* (4th ed.). Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- [20] Robison, R., & Hadiz, V. R. (2004). *Reorganising Power in Indonesia: The Politics of Oligarchy in an Age of Markets*. London: RoutledgeCurzon.
- [21] Schwarz, A. (1999). *A Nation in Waiting: Indonesia's Search for Stability*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- [22] Suryadinata, L. (2002). *Elections and Politics in Indonesia*. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.
- [23] UUD 1945 (Amandemen 1999–2002). *Undang-Undang Dasar Negara Republik Indonesia Tahun 1945*. Jakarta: Sekretariat Negara.
- [24] Vatikotis, M. R. J. (1998). *Indonesian Politics under Suharto: The Rise and Fall of the New Order*. London: Routledge.