

Jokowi weakens civil society, Prabowo should reverse course

The Jokowi administration has used two additional strategies to weaken civil society: Repression and co-option, reminiscent of the New Order era.

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Police officers fire tear gas to disperse demonstrators during a protest against the passage of the Regional Elections Law revision in front of the Senayan legislative complex in Jakarta on Aug. 22, 2024.

Last month's massive protests are a striking testament to the power of the nation's civil society. When the House of Representatives wanted to overturn a Constitutional Court decision and pass a bill that would have reduced democratic competition and advanced President Joko "Jokowi" Widodo's dynastic ambitions, nationwide rallies forced lawmakers to retreat.

This episode serves as an inspiring example of how civil society can protect and invigorate democracy. Yet all is not well with Indonesia's civil society.

If anything, last month's events illustrate how important it is for a democracy to have active organizations capable of voicing critical and dissident ideas. As United States political scientist Robert Putnam highlighted in his seminal work on [social capital](#), civil society organizations like labor unions, farmers organizations, religious associations or NGOs are essential for fostering cooperation between the state and its citizens.

In Indonesia, civil society has been instrumental in the country's transition from authoritarian rule to democracy, helping to achieve political change and consolidate democratic gains.

We doubt that President Jokowi has engaged with or agrees with Putnam's insights. Over his 10-year presidency, the government has enacted measures that stifled critical voices and weakened vital civil society organizations.

As Jokowi's presidency concludes, it is crucial to understand how civil society has been weakened during the past decade, so that president-elect Prabowo Subianto can address these issues, despite his pledge to continue Jokowi's policies.

First, civil society has suffered due to Jokowi's government's erosion of state institutions' autonomy. The administration's tightening control over the Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK), the Constitutional Court and the House—key for maintaining checks on executive power—has limited civil society's ability to scrutinize and criticize the government. With some major print media and TV channel owners aligning with the government, media coverage has increasingly reflected state interests. These circumstances have made it more difficult for civil society organizations to be heard.

In this already challenging environment, the Jokowi administration has used two additional strategies to weaken civil society: Repression and cooption. A tactic reminiscent of the New Order era has reemerged in new forms.

The Electronic Information and Transactions (ITE) Law, for example, enables the prosecution of individuals who post critical comments online. The cases of human rights activists Haris Azhar and Fatia Maulidiyanti illustrate how the ITE Law can entangle individuals in legal troubles for their online criticisms. These tactics have evolved to include sophisticated [methods](#) such as wiretapping and doxing.

[Peaceful protests](#) are increasingly often met with intimidation and violence by [security forces](#), while protest leaders are regularly criminalized—an increasingly common word for arresting civil society

figures on trumped up charges.

During the course of [a study of 150 land conflicts](#), we found that 789 protest leaders were arrested. These repressive tactics are on full display in Watchdoc's recent powerful documentary [Tanah Moyangku](#) (Our ancestral land).

[Amnesty International](#) has also documented numerous instances of repression during Jokowi's tenure, including the targeting of NGO personnel who protested the omnibus Law on Job Creation in 2020. According to the organization, 37 cases of intimidation and criminalization of environmental defenders—many of whom were advocating for *adat* (customary) communities and land rights—occurred in 2022 alone.

More recently, during the mass demonstration on Aug. 22 outside the House building against the legislative body's plan to overturn the Constitutional Court's ruling, [301](#) protesters were arrested by the police.

Next to repression, co-option represents a subtler and more insidious threat to civil society. This strategy weakens civil society's capacity to scrutinize government activities by offering leaders lucrative benefits, such as positions within government institutions or business opportunities. Co-option not only diminishes the effectiveness of civil society organizations by removing their leadership but also undermines their independence, turning them from critical watchdogs into passive or even supportive lapdogs.

While appointing civil society [figures to](#) government positions might seem like a gesture of inclusivity, it often aligns these influential voices with government interests, diminishing their capacity to remain critical. Once integrated into the state's structure, these individuals struggle to maintain their independence, weakening civil society's overall voice and blurring the line between state and non-state actors.

A troubling example of co-option is Jokowi's decision to grant [mining permits](#) to religious civil society organizations. By involving these groups in lucrative ventures, the government secures their allegiance while compromising their moral authority.

These organizations, once seen as champions of social justice and environmental stewardship, may become complicit in practices they previously opposed, thus eroding their credibility and weakening their ability to hold the government accountable.

Another notable example of co-option is the government's use of online "cyber troops" to control social media narratives. By flooding these platforms with state-approved content or discrediting critical voices, these cyber armies create the illusion of broad support for government policies while stifling genuine public discourse. This tactic distorts public perception and discourages dissenting opinions, making it increasingly difficult for civil society to mobilize support.

The erosion of civil society's autonomy is concerning because it often occurs gradually, making it less immediately recognizable. While repression is apparent, the slow encroachment of co-option can be even more damaging, as it undermines civil society from within.

By the time the full effects of co-option become evident, civil society may be too fragmented and weakened to effectively challenge the state or advocate for public interests. Over time, co-option diminishes public debate and democratic accountability, as opinion leaders face strong incentives to avoid critical comments.

In short, a troubling legacy of Jokowi's presidency is that he leaves behind a weakened civil society, as repression and co-option have severely impaired its independence and freedom. Civil society, once a fierce guardian of rights, now finds itself subdued or aligned with the state. This transformation from watchdog to lapdog has weakened public debate and democratic accountability.

As Prabowo, a former Army general and former son-in-law of New Order founder Soeharto, assumes the presidency, the uphill challenge will be to rebuild and reinvigorate civil society. Restoring its independence and strength is crucial for Indonesia to reclaim its democratic promise and ensure that the voices of its citizens are genuinely heard.