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# The Politics of Indonesia

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## Table of Contents

- **Introduction**
- **Chapter 1** The Historical Roots of Indonesian Politics
- **Chapter 2** The Struggle for Independence and the Early Years
- **Chapter 3** Guided Democracy: Sukarno's Vision and Legacy
- **Chapter 4** The Rise and Rule of Suharto's New Order
- **Chapter 5** The Asian Financial Crisis and Reformasi of 1998
- **Chapter 6** The 1945 Constitution: Foundation and Amendments
- **Chapter 7** Pancasila: Philosophy of the Indonesian State
- **Chapter 8** Structure of the Executive Branch
- **Chapter 9** The President and Vice-President: Roles and Powers
- **Chapter 10** The Legislative Branch: DPR and DPD Explained
- **Chapter 11** The People's Consultative Assembly (MPR)
- **Chapter 12** The Judicial Branch and the Rule of Law
- **Chapter 13** The Electoral System: Voting and Representation
- **Chapter 14** Political Parties: Trends, Coalitions, and Ideologies
- **Chapter 15** Secular vs. Islamic Political Parties
- **Chapter 16** Decentralization and Regional Governance
- **Chapter 17** Local Politics: Provinces, Regencies, and Municipalities
- **Chapter 18** The Role of the Military in Politics
- **Chapter 19** The Media, Civil Society, and Political Advocacy
- **Chapter 20** Corruption and Accountability
- **Chapter 21** Human Rights and Minority Issues
- **Chapter 22** Contemporary Political Leaders and Dynasties
- **Chapter 23** Challenges to Democracy: Civil Liberties, Blasphemy Laws, and Civic Space
- **Chapter 24** Conflict in Papua and Regional Tensions
- **Chapter 25** Prospects for the Future: Reform and Resilience

## Introduction

Indonesia, an archipelago nation stretching over 17,000 islands, stands as the world's fourth most populous country and the largest Muslim-majority democracy. Its dynamic and diverse society is matched by a complex political landscape, shaped by centuries of colonial domination, a hard-fought struggle for independence, and decades of authoritarian as well as democratic rule. For observers and citizens alike, understanding Indonesian politics requires an appreciation not only of its formal institutions and constitutional frameworks but also of its deep historical legacies, intricate social fabrics, and the delicate balance among competing forces.

Since the dramatic events of 1998, Indonesia has emerged as a vibrant, if often tumultuous, democracy. The fall of Suharto's New Order regime marked the start of the Reformasi era, during which Indonesia set forth on a remarkable transformation, decentralizing governance, empowering civil society, and opening up new spaces for political participation. Yet, the journey has hardly been straightforward. Old structures retain their shadow; the military's legacy as a political actor continues to loom, and the specter of corruption challenges both public trust and democratic consolidation.

Indonesia's political system is defined by its blend of presidential and parliamentary elements, a reflection of both its post-colonial aspirations and the need for stability amidst diversity. The Pancasila, or five governing principles, not only serve as constitutional anchors but also as a unifying ideology, attempting to bridge the gaps between the nation's myriad religious, ethnic, and cultural identities. The resultant system is unique—neither strictly Western nor wholly indigenous—tailored to Indonesia's own historical and social realities.

The story of Indonesian politics cannot be told without considering the deep divide between the center and the regions. From Aceh to Papua, local identities, grievances, and aspirations feed into national debates about autonomy, development, and justice. The post-1998 decentralization reforms represented a major effort to answer longstanding demands for local empowerment while attempting to preserve the unity of the republic. In practice, however, this has created new dynamics of power and patronage at the regional level, adding further layers of complexity to the political system.

Political parties, meanwhile, reflect the pluralism and fragmentation of Indonesian society. No single party has dominated since the demise of the New Order. Instead, coalitions—sometimes uneasy, often pragmatic—shape government and opposition, and the lines between ideology and patronage are frequently blurred. The interplay between secular and Islamic parties, dynastic leaders, and emergent political

movements continues to shape Indonesia's policy direction and social landscape.

This book seeks to provide a comprehensive guide to Indonesian politics and its political system, from foundational histories and constitutional design to the functioning of parties, the media, the military, and civil society. It explores the ongoing challenges—corruption, regional conflict, human rights, and the preservation of civil liberties—while also highlighting the remarkable resilience and adaptability that have carried Indonesia through decades of dramatic change. In doing so, it aims to offer readers a nuanced and holistic understanding of one of the world's most important and fascinating democracies.

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## CHAPTER ONE: The Historical Roots of Indonesian Politics

To truly grasp the intricacies of Indonesian politics today, we must dig into the layers of history that have shaped this sprawling archipelago. Before the Dutch arrived with their ships and ledgers, the lands that would become Indonesia were a patchwork of kingdoms, empires, and diverse societies. There wasn't a single unified political entity, but rather a dynamic landscape of competing and cooperating powers.

Ancient kingdoms like Srivijaya, a powerful maritime empire based in Sumatra from the 7th to the 13th centuries, thrived on trade, controlling vital sea lanes and absorbing influences from India, including Hinduism and Buddhism. Further inland, agricultural kingdoms like the Buddhist Sailendra and Hindu Mataram dynasties flourished in Java, building impressive monuments that still stand today as testaments to their organizational capabilities and spiritual beliefs. These early polities, while not "states" in the modern Westphalian sense with clearly defined borders, established patterns of governance, social hierarchies, and centers of power that would echo through the centuries.

The arrival of Islam, beginning in the 13th century in northern Sumatra and gradually spreading through trade and conversion, added another significant layer to the socio-political fabric. Islam didn't simply replace existing beliefs; it often blended with local customs and earlier religious practices, creating a unique syncretic culture that is still evident in many parts of Indonesia today. This blending of influences would become a recurring theme in Indonesian history, shaping not only religious life but also political movements and identities.

Then came the Europeans. Drawn by the allure of spices, particularly nutmeg, cloves, and pepper from the Moluccas, the Portuguese, Spanish, Dutch, and English began to arrive in the archipelago from the 16th century onwards. This wasn't just about trade; it was about control and monopoly. The Dutch, through the Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie (VOC), or Dutch East India Company, proved to be the most tenacious.

Established in 1602, the VOC was no ordinary trading company. It was a powerful entity granted a monopoly on Dutch trade in Asia and equipped with quasi-governmental powers, including the ability to wage war, sign treaties, and govern territories. The VOC slowly but surely expanded its influence, initially focusing on controlling the lucrative spice trade in the Moluccas through brutal means. They established Batavia, modern-day Jakarta, as their headquarters in 1619, strategically located near vital trade routes.

While their initial aim might have been purely commercial, the VOC soon found itself deeply entangled in the internal politics of Indonesian kingdoms, particularly in Java. They played a "divide and conquer" game, exploiting rivalries between local rulers to strengthen their own position. This involvement in local conflicts and dynastic disputes gradually transformed the VOC from a trading enterprise into a significant political force. By the 18th century, the VOC was the dominant power on Java, though its control over the vast archipelago remained uneven.

Despite its power and profitability, the VOC was plagued by corruption and mismanagement, eventually leading to its bankruptcy at the end of the 18th century. In 1800, the Dutch government nationalized the VOC's possessions, marking the formal beginning of direct Dutch colonial rule over the Indonesian archipelago, which would come to be known as the Dutch East Indies.

The 19th century saw the Dutch state consolidate its control over the diverse islands, a process that was met with numerous local resistances. One of the most significant was the Java War (1825-1830), led by Prince Diponegoro. This costly five-year struggle, fueled by Javanese resentment over Dutch interference in their customs and land, highlighted the deep-seated opposition to colonial rule and became a powerful symbol of resistance for future generations. Although the Dutch eventually suppressed the rebellion, it came at a great cost and led to even tighter Dutch control over Java.

As the 19th century progressed, Dutch control expanded beyond Java to the outer islands, driven by economic exploitation and a desire to prevent other European powers from gaining a foothold. This period saw the implementation of policies like the Cultivation System, which forced Javanese peasants to cultivate cash crops for Dutch profit, further entrenching economic exploitation and generating widespread hardship.

However, the dawn of the 20th century brought a new phase in the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized. The Ethical Policy, introduced by the Dutch in the early 1900s, was ostensibly aimed at improving the welfare of the Indonesian people through education, irrigation, and emigration. While paternalistic in its approach and ultimately limited in its impact, this policy inadvertently contributed to the rise of a new Indonesian educated elite.

It was within this environment of growing awareness and discontent that organized Indonesian nationalism began to emerge. This was distinct from earlier, localized resistances; it was a movement that sought to unite the diverse peoples of the archipelago under a shared identity - Indonesian.

Several key organizations played a crucial role in the early development of Indonesian nationalism. Budi Utomo, founded in 1908, is often considered the first nationalist organization. Started by Javanese intellectuals, it initially focused on cultural and

educational advancement for the Javanese but gradually became more politically oriented, advocating for greater political representation for Indonesians within the colonial system.

Another significant early movement was Sarekat Islam, founded in 1912. Initially a society for Muslim merchants to compete with Chinese traders, it rapidly grew into a mass-based organization with a broad appeal, advocating for the economic and political rights of Indonesian Muslims and becoming a key platform for anti-colonial sentiment. Sarekat Islam's charismatic leader, Omar Said Tjokroaminoto, played a vital role in mobilizing popular support.

The early 20th century also saw the emergence of leftist movements. The Indies Social Democratic Association (ISDV), founded by Dutch socialists in 1914, introduced Marxist ideas to educated Indonesians. This organization would later evolve into the Communist Party of Indonesia (PKI) in 1920, becoming the first communist party in Asia. The PKI gained influence, particularly among workers, and engaged in militant anti-colonial activities, although early uprisings were suppressed by the Dutch.

These early nationalist organizations, though sometimes with competing ideologies and approaches, laid the groundwork for a unified resistance against Dutch rule. They fostered a sense of shared identity among the diverse peoples of the archipelago and mobilized support for the idea of an independent Indonesia. The stage was set for a more intense struggle for self-determination, one that would be shaped by the legacy of colonial exploitation, the rise of new political forces, and the changing global landscape.

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