

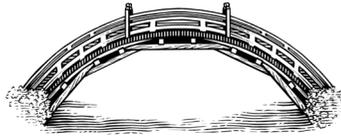
BOOK REVIEW ROUNDTABLE

Diego Fossati's

*Unity through Division:  
Political Islam, Representation and Democracy in Indonesia*

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*Diego Fossati*

## Unity through Division: Re-evaluating Democracy in Indonesia

*Michael Buehler*

A number of scholars have argued over the past few years that democracy in Indonesia is in decline. Electoral institutions established after the collapse of Suharto's New Order dictatorship in 1998 have been curtailed, and the state has continuously shrunk the public sphere through laws and regulations that violate basic human, political, and civil rights.

However, this narrative of a democratic rollback has received surprisingly little critical examination and scrutiny in the scholarly community. The claim that Indonesian democracy is in decline can be contested on either empirical or conceptual grounds. Empirically, a critical evaluation of the literature could point out that many of the democratic achievements after 1998 were exaggerated (ironically, often by the same scholars who have now identified a democratic rollback). Political parties have been weakly institutionalized throughout the past 25 years, unable to aggregate the interests of societal groups and represent them at the national or even subnational level. Moreover, the parliament has remained a marketplace for elites rather than a lawmaking body, while the executive branch of government has continued to represent a narrow group of interests, many of which have ties to the New Order dictatorship. The judiciary has remained dysfunctional throughout the last two-and-a-half decades, unable and unwilling to hold elites to account.

Besides the persistence of ineffective formal institutions from the foundation of Indonesian democracy, informal political dynamics have consistently hindered democratic progress and consolidation in the country since 1998. Indonesian politics may be competitive, but they are also deeply clientelist. The transactional nature of politics in the country's democracy has long undermined accountability along both vertical and horizontal lines and compromised the quality of public service delivery. In short, the alleged democratic decline over the past few years is not as pronounced as claimed if one looks at the quality and functioning of both formal and informal institutions since the post-Suharto era began.

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A conceptual critique of Indonesia's democratic rollback might challenge how democratic decline is defined in the literature that claims to have identified this trend in Indonesia's political trajectory. This is the approach Diego Fossati takes in his book *Unity through Division: Political Islam, Representation and Democracy in Indonesia*, where he examines the question, "Why have Indonesians become increasingly satisfied with democracy despite their country's democratic decline in recent years?" (p. 4). Fossati argues that ideological cleavages are more pronounced in Indonesian society than most of the existing literature on post-New Order Indonesia is ready to admit. The most salient cleavage is over the role Islam should play in politics and the public sphere. Not only does this ideological division within society have deep historical roots, but it has become more sharply defined over the past few years. It has also entered the formal political arena through political parties that push for a more significant role for Islam in the archipelago's politics. According to Fossati, the increasing visibility of a wide spectrum of ideological views to ordinary Indonesians and the representation of these views within the system are key reasons why more Indonesians feel satisfied with the political system they inhabit (p. 35).

Hence, Fossati suggests that scholars need to rethink their understanding of democracy and democratic decline. While most researchers studying Indonesian democracy focus on its outcomes, such as legislation and public service delivery, Fossati argues that many Indonesians assess their political system based on the input side of democracy, or how well it incorporates their views and participation. In other words, a growing number of Indonesians are satisfied with their democratic system because they evaluate it with regard to whether it allows for a range of increasingly popular views associated with political Islam to be represented. Since it does, according to Fossati, Indonesians are satisfied with their democracy, even though it may fall short on output variables, such as the protection of liberal values, the integrity of electoral mechanisms, or the quality of public service delivery.

Fossati's account raises several questions. For instance, is there really an increase in the number of Indonesians that are satisfied with democracy? At the very beginning of the book, he presents a table that shows how 76% of Indonesians were "very/somewhat satisfied" with democracy in 2020, compared to 53% of Indonesians in 2015 (p. 2). However, in 2005, 72% of the public was "very/somewhat satisfied" with democracy (p. 2). It appears, in other words, that the overall percentage of citizens that are generally

satisfied with democracy at present has not increased very much over the past twenty years.

Perhaps more importantly, is the ideological divide over the role of Islam in politics truly reflected in the formal democratic arena as Fossati claims? Since 1999, the few Indonesian political parties advocating for a greater influence of Islam in politics have not performed well in elections. Furthermore, many secular parties have adopted explicitly Islamic agendas, frequently aiming to gain the support of influential movements outside the realm of formal politics. Considering the party system's weak reflection of ideological divisions due to the poor electoral performance of Islamist parties and the inclination of secular nationalist parties to opportunistically adopt Islamic agendas—thus blurring the lines between ideological divides—it would have been beneficial to more clearly explain the reasons and methods through which Indonesians feel their interests are better represented in formal politics at present than a decade ago.

Overall, however, *Unity through Division* is a nuanced account of the role Islam plays in Indonesian politics and a much-needed corrective to the growing body of works that discuss a democratic decline in Indonesian politics. ♦

## Islamic Political Alignment in Indonesia: Does It Truly Hold?

Noory Okthariza

The recent upsurge in studying “democratic backsliding” is partly driven by the understanding that backsliding is a distinct concept from “political transition” in that it entails a slow, fine-grained degree of change associated with a declining trend in democratic quality and governance.<sup>1</sup> Democratic backsliding is also different than the “hybrid regime”—a popular term used in the early 2000s—in the sense that the latter emphasizes its application to predominantly autocratic countries that allow a certain degree of electoral competition, whereas the former highlights the concerning progression when democracy has already become fairly established. Although not inevitable, the constant and unconstrained process of democratic backsliding may lead to democratic breakdown.<sup>2</sup> Or at best, it may lead to protracted stagnation, marked by weak political participation and social redistribution, as proponents of functionalist democracy would argue.

Indonesia is not exempt from this phenomenon. Its recent 2024 election shows how the accumulation of executive power—in this case under President Joko “Jokowi” Widodo—can influence the fairness of electoral competition. In the lead-up to the election, Jokowi weakened institutional checks on the executive by curtailing the power of opposition groups. He paralyzed, or at least politicized, the already vulnerable law-enforcement agencies, notably diminishing the independence of the anticorruption agency (the Komisi Pemberantasan Korupsi). The apex was his engineering of the constitutional court’s decision regarding the age limit for presidential and vice presidential candidates, allowing his son Gibran Rakabuming Raka to run as a candidate and ultimately be elected vice president.

Against this backdrop, Diego Fossati’s book *Unity through Division: Political Islam, Representation and Democracy in Indonesia* presents a

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<sup>1</sup> David Waldner and Ellen Lust, “Unwelcome Change: Coming to Terms with Democratic Backsliding,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 21 (2018): 95.

<sup>2</sup> See Nancy Bermeo, “On Democratic Backsliding,” *Journal of Democracy* 27, no. 1 (2016): 5–19.

puzzle worth exploring: Despite its perceptible decline, why do Indonesians still express strong satisfaction with the course of their democracy? Why do Indonesians remain highly convinced that democracy is the best form of government? What are the underlying factors for such trust and satisfaction?

### *The Ordering Mechanism of Political Islam*

The easiest answers to those questions are well known: individuals and countries may differ substantially in their understanding of what democracy is. Some may favor a functionalist view (“democracy must deliver”), while others might emphasize meaningful participation and representation. Of course, in practice, this distinction is not mutually exclusive. Fossati draws more insights from the latter camp to construct his theoretical framework. He argues that it is deeply rooted political Islam that provides both political expression and a policy platform, offering meaning and tenacity, for its supporters to advance their agenda within the democratic framework.

Readers of Indonesian politics will notice that Fossati’s argument about the role of Islam in politics is not unfamiliar. Scholars have observed the origins and power of political Islam from both political science and historical-sociological perspectives.<sup>3</sup> But what is interesting and provocative is Fossati’s claim that there is a striking degree of congruence between elites and voters on many issues, especially regarding the role of Islam in the public sphere. Voters and elites may have amorphous positions on economic and redistributive policies, but when it comes to the role of religion, their stances become noticeable. This difference can be seen as a continuum where Islamist-leaning parties are at the more conservative end and pluralist parties are at the other extreme, with moderate groups in the middle. In short, ideological linkages exist and partisan identifications in some way drive the dynamics of competitive elections.

Given Fossati’s extensive use of elite and public opinion surveys, there is a wealth of empirical detail to cover. The book demonstrates that voters in general tend to be more conservative than politicians (the baseline roughly stands at 45% and 25%, respectively, see p. 139). As demonstrated

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<sup>3</sup> For a contemporary political science perspective, see Thomas B. Pepinsky, R. William Liddle, and Saiful Mujani, *Piety and Public Opinion: Understanding Indonesian Islam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018); and Jeremy Menchik, *Islam and Democracy in Indonesia: Tolerance without Liberalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016). Historical-sociological readers might consider Robert W. Hefner, *Civil Islam: Muslims and Democratization in Indonesia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); or the classic by Mitsuo Nakamura, *The Crescent Arises over the Banyan Tree: A Study of the Muhammadiyah Movement in a Central Javanese Town, c. 1910–2010*, 2nd ed. (Singapore: ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute, 2012).

in the book's experimental section, voters can also become even more conservative when they are confronted with religious vignettes that signal the stances of parties or candidates on policy issues. In contrast, pluralist voters will go further in objecting to such parties and candidates associated with religious cues.

The author provides a fresh perspective by reinstating the role of ideology, which seemingly has been considered less important in the contemporary literature. Influential interpretations of Indonesian politics view political competition as being influenced by clientelism and patronage,<sup>4</sup> rising illiberalism and polarization,<sup>5</sup> power-sharing arrangements,<sup>6</sup> and the ongoing influence of oligarchy.<sup>7</sup> The implication of the book's core argument is that, even under the widespread clientelism and power-sharing that prevent effective checks and balances, a genuine ideological rivalry still exists and shapes voters' preferences. In addition, the very reasons that scholars consider there to have been a "conservative turn" in Indonesian politics, particularly in the aftermath of Jakarta's gubernatorial election of 2016–17, may turn out to be the main strengths that keep Indonesian democracy resilient.

### *Points for Further Discussion*

While the book offers new interpretations, there are at least three aspects that warrant further examination. First, given that Islamic political forces have been present in Indonesia since the early days of the founding of the republic, does this imply that satisfaction with democracy has existed for an equally long time? The New Order era from 1966 to 1998 is clearly an exception; however, if we examine the voting patterns among Islamic-oriented parties in Indonesia from 1999 to 2024, we will find more continuity and stability rather than change.<sup>8</sup> Taken together, the vote share

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<sup>4</sup> See Edward Aspinall and Ward Berenschot, *Democracy for Sale: Elections, Clientelism, and the State in Indonesia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2019).

<sup>5</sup> See Jamie S. Davidson, *Indonesia: Twenty Years of Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

<sup>6</sup> See Dan Slater, "Party Cartelization, Indonesian-Style: Presidential Power-Sharing and the Contingency of Democratic Opposition," *Journal of East Asian Studies* 18, no. 1 (2018): 23–46.

<sup>7</sup> See Vedi R. Hadiz and Richard Robison, "The Political Economy of Oligarchy and the Reorganization of Power in Indonesia," in *Beyond Oligarchy: Wealth, Power, and Contemporary Indonesian Politics*, ed. Michele Ford and Thomas B. Pepinsky, special issue, *Indonesia*, no. 96 (Ithaca: Cornell University, 2013), 35–37.

<sup>8</sup> Noory Okthariza, "Between the Internal Struggle and Electoral Rules Effect: The Challenges of Political Islam in a Democratic Indonesia," in *Society and Democracy in South Korea and Indonesia*, ed. Brendan Howe (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), 43.

for all Islamic parties tends to be consistent at around 30%, with these votes divided relatively evenly between two groups: Islamist parties, which include the Prosperous Justice Party (Partai Keadilan Sejahtera, PKS), the Crescent Star Party (Partai Bulan Bintang, PBB), and the United Development Party (Partai Persatuan Pembangunan, PPP); and moderate Islamic parties, which include the National Mandate Party (Partai Amanat Nasional, PAN) and the National Awakening Party (Partai Kebangkitan Bangsa, PKB).<sup>9</sup> Given these relatively unchanged voting patterns, does this imply that Indonesian voters have achieved meaningful participation and representation since the onset of the *reformasi*?

I do not know the definitive answer to that question. However, if Fossati's central argument holds, the implication would indeed be affirmative. As the book points out, one of the pivotal forces of Indonesian democracy is its enduring and vibrant civic associations that are predominantly influenced by mass-based Muslim organizations. Major organizations, such as Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah, were established well before Indonesia attained independence and continue to play an influential role in shaping the civic culture. It could be argued that the routine religious social activities facilitated by these organizations potentially contribute to the development of social capital and trust among citizens, which may in turn constitute the foundations of participatory politics. Political Islam seems to form the backbone of civil society and democracy in Indonesia, thus it may be difficult to perceive political Islam as a catalyst for democratic regression as much contemporary literature suggests.<sup>10</sup>

Second, attributing the degree of congruence between politicians' and voters' opinions as the primary explanation for satisfaction with democracy may require a strong assumption regarding the alignment of interests and values between the two. My guess is that this assumption rarely holds true. Apart from the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (Partai Demokrasi Indonesia Perjuangan) and PKS, parties in Indonesia remain ideologically fluid. We have never observed, for instance, a coalition pattern that emerges from a clear ideological configuration between parties. Party competition seems to always end once the elected president extends an invitation to a member of an opposition party to become part of the cabinet. This is, of

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<sup>9</sup> I differentiate between Islamist and moderate Islamic parties based on whether Islamic values or ideologies are written into the party's constitution. This applies to PKS, PBB, and PPP.

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, Syafiq Hasyim, "Fatwas and Democracy: Majelis Ulama Indonesia (MUI, Indonesian Ulema Council) and Rising Conservatism in Indonesian Islam," *TRaNS: Trans-Regional and -National Studies of Southeast Asia* 8, no. 1 (2020): 21–35.

course, familiar as the relevant literature frequently mentions cartel-type party behavior. The author also shows that the congruence of ideology seems weak as “the density plots reveal substantial differences across parties in the extent to which the preferences of voters and politicians align” (p. 148).

What the book has successfully demonstrated empirically is perhaps less about satisfaction with democracy and more about the voting patterns between (predominantly Islamic) parties and their constituencies. This is evident in many findings that show voting preferences on issues such as economic redistribution, decentralization, and the role of religion in public spaces. If the book had intended to show a significant difference in terms of respondents’ satisfaction levels with democracy, its main argument might have been more convincing had it presented simple hypothesis testing to observe the mean difference between supporters of Islamic parties and those of pluralistic parties, or between Islamist-leaning and pluralist-leaning respondents.

Third, while the book’s extensive use of survey questions to measure public attitudes toward democracy is commendable, there might be limitations regarding how well these questions gauge answers to complex issues. Fossati’s five dimensions of democracy (electoral, liberal, egalitarian, participatory, and deliberative) are analytically interesting but may be too sophisticated for ordinary respondents to answer (pp. 171–2). The regression results indicate that satisfaction with democracy is higher among proponents of “participatory” democracy than “liberal-egalitarian” supporters (p. 183). However, the average scores of these five responses are high and not significantly different from one another. I speculate this is due to either bias from respondents that do not necessarily possess sufficient knowledge about the questions or the tendency of respondents to answer survey questions affirmatively. The same table also shows a counterintuitive finding in which being Muslim tends to make people less satisfied with and less supportive of democracy—something that could be discussed further as it appears to contradict the main thesis of the book (p. 183).

All these quibbles are minor and do not detract from the significance of this book in the study of Indonesian politics. Fossati successfully resets the debate on the influence of ideology, which tends to be overlooked in contemporary scholarship. *Unity through Division* presents an unusual perspective, and, therefore, every mainstream interpretation of Indonesian politics must engage with this book for years to come. 

## Strengthening As Well As Weakening: The Contradicting Roles of Islam in Indonesian Democracy

*Djayadi Hanan*

In *Unity through Division: Political Islam, Representation and Democracy in Indonesia*, Diego Fossati argues that political Islam is deeply rooted in Indonesian politics, making it always relevant from the colonial era through today's democratic era. Political Islam as a political ideology derives from clear differences among Indonesians on the role of or relationship between Islam and politics, resulting in a spectrum that positions the Islamist camp (those who would like a greater or dominant role for Islam) at one end and the pluralist camp (those who support a lesser role for Islam or no role for it in politics) at the other. In between the two camps lie the centrists.

Fossati begins the book with a puzzle about why, during an era of democratic deterioration starting in the mid-2010s, Indonesians' satisfaction with democratic practice is unexpectedly increasing. By carefully looking at the relationship between political Islam and political representation, he finds this increase is related to the increase in democratic satisfaction among Islamists because they feel that they are more represented in this period of democratic decline.

By using impressive data (both in volume and quality) and sophisticated analysis, the author makes a convincing argument about the relevance of ideology and political Islam in Indonesian democracy. However, it seems to me that the author does not provide a direct answer to the question of why democratic satisfaction is increasing during a time of democratic backsliding. My answer to this question is mainly based on my understanding of a possible implication of the author's main argument. One clue is where the author writes "the cleavage over political Islam is related to satisfaction with democracy, as on average, Islamist individuals tend to be more satisfied with democracy than pluralists" (p. 17). Another clue is in chapter 7 where Fossati argues that satisfaction with democracy is correlated positively with a participatory conception of democracy to which Islamists tend to adhere.

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If my understanding is right, there are still questions that need to be answered or explained. To what extent does this contribution of Islamists to democratic satisfaction matter at the aggregate level? Does it mean that the level of satisfaction is low among the pluralists and centrists but very high among the Islamists, resulting in the overall increase in the level of satisfaction? How do we know that?

In my view, one of the ways to look at this is by categorizing the level of satisfaction among the Islamic party voters—Partai Persatuan Pembangunan (PPP), Partai Keadilan Sejahtera (PKS), Partai Kebangkitan Bangsa (PKB), and Partai Amanat Nasional (PAN)—and the secular party voters—Partai Demokrasi Indonesia Perjuangan (PDIP), Gerindra, Golkar, NasDem, and Demokrat. Based on the Political Islam Index, the Islamists' ideology tends to be in line with the Islamic parties (chapter 6). Therefore, we should expect that the level of democratic satisfaction among voters for Islamic parties should be much higher than those for secular parties. Because democratic backsliding continues through the present, this expectation should also be confirmed after 2019, which is when the author's data ends.

However, the data that I can access from the national surveys of the Lembaga Survei Indonesia (Indonesian Survey Institute, LSI) between early February 2019 and February 2024, for instance, does not confirm this expectation. Based on six national surveys in February 2019, February 2020 (before Covid-19), January 2021, August 2022, August 2023, and February 2024, the levels of democratic satisfaction of Islamic party voters have always been lower than secular party voters. Consecutively, Islamic parties' voters' satisfaction is 70%, 73%, 63%, 72%, 69%, and 67%. Meanwhile, secular parties' voters' satisfaction is always higher at the levels of 71%, 81%, 78%, 80%, 74%, and 74%.<sup>1</sup>

Looking at this data, we see that Islamists (at least those who vote for Islamic parties) tend to have a lower level of satisfaction with Indonesia's democracy. Similarly, their dissatisfaction, based on these six national surveys, has always been higher than that of voters for secular parties. Can the author claim that the increase in democratic satisfaction during a period of democratic backsliding is, to a significant extent, contributed to by the increase in democratic satisfaction among the Islamists?

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<sup>1</sup> These national surveys were conducted by the LSI team. Each survey used a sample size of 1,200, representative of the national population of Indonesian voters, with the margin of error plus or minus 2.9% at the 95% level of confidence interval.

The answer to this problem is probably related to the number of Islamists. The share of Islamists among the Indonesian electorate, according to the author's measurement (p. 139), is about 44.6% (Islamist-leaning and Islamist). Given that the total support for the Islamic parties above is only around 30%, it is clear that not everyone in this group supports the Islamic parties (even more so when we also assume that the Islamic party voters can also be centrists, at least to some extent). But again, this does not give us a clear picture as to whether the increase in democratic satisfaction during the era of democratic backsliding is mostly contributed to by Islamists.

Also, if political Islam can explain the increase of democratic satisfaction during democratic backsliding, it should also be able to explain the level of democratic satisfaction during the era before democratic backsliding had started. As the author has convincingly argued that political Islam has been a constant relevant factor in Indonesian politics since independence, it should also matter during the era before democratic backsliding (approximately 2004–14). In other words, Islamists during this period should have a lower level of democratic satisfaction compared to the pluralists and the centrists. This should result in a trend of decreasing democratic satisfaction overall. However, if we look at the data presented by the author for the period since 2004, the trend is not a decreasing one; instead, the data fluctuates. Moreover, the number of data points that indicate a high level of democratic satisfaction (around 60% or more) is greater than the number indicating low democratic satisfaction (around 60% or below). It seems to me that using the importance of political Islam, as the author argued, to understand this is not a satisfying answer.

Another point that needs at least clarification is whether the relevance of political Islam is also related to political participation. One measure of this is the level of participation in elections. The Islamists become more willing to participate as political Islam becomes more relevant. The author also argues that the increase in the feeling of being represented among Islamists (making them more willing to participate), other than being related to democratic backsliding, is also related to the introduction of the open-list variant in the proportional representation electoral system. So, there are two factors at work here: namely, political Islam and open-list proportional representation.

Based on the levels of electoral turnout presented by the author in chapter 2, two questions arise: First, why did the turnout decrease sharply from 2004 to 2009 (84.1% to 70.7%)? The question is raised because two factors that could have contributed to the increase of participation were

there in 2009, i.e., political Islam and open-list proportional representation. Second, how do we use political Islam to explain the very high level of electoral turnout in 2004 (84.1%) and 1999 (92.6%)?

On the last point, although the author projects optimism about the role of political Islam, particularly as it relates to substantive representation and participation, with which I agree and praise for its originality, his analysis also implies pessimism. Based on this analysis, as democracy is deteriorating, satisfaction with democracy among Islamists will be higher and potentially provide more legitimacy for less or nondemocratic practices by the political elites and other actors. If this trend continues, does not that mean that the Islamists are paving the way for the elites and other actors to, at some future point, legitimately change democracy to authoritarianism? In other words, political Islam has two contradictory roles in Indonesian politics—it is strengthening as well as weakening democracy at the same time. 

## Curating Citizens' Verdict on Indonesian Democracy

*Sana Jaffrey*

In recent years scholarly debates on democratic backsliding have become progressively abstract, with experts quibbling over definitional differences in an elusive quest for objective indicators to measure changes in democratic quality and gathering opinion data on perceptions of democratic trajectories from other experts. In the midst of this increasingly inward-looking scholarship, Diego Fossati's book *Unity through Division: Political Islam, Representation and Democracy in Indonesia* makes a refreshing attempt to guide us back to a much more basic question: How do ordinary citizens assess the democratic institutions that shape their lives?

Drawing on a wide array of public opinion surveys and electoral data from Indonesia, Fossati persuasively argues that citizens' perceptions of democracy are driven by diverse concerns that do not always align with the structural and institutional criteria that scholars have used to judge democratic development. More importantly, he makes a compelling case for paying attention to popular evaluations of democracy, as citizens are the ultimate arbiters of the political orders that govern them. What is less convincing, however, is the book's empirical framing and its claims about the centrality of ideological cleavages in driving public perceptions of democracy in Indonesia.

Fossati links his theoretical propositions to an empirical puzzle in Indonesia, where scholars have documented a steady decline of democratic quality over the past decade alongside a rise in public satisfaction with democracy. This discrepancy, which the author calls an "empirical anomaly" (p. 3), would be puzzling if we had reason to believe that there was a linear relationship between institutional changes and the public's experience of these changes. But the book offers no theoretical priors or comparative evidence to show how these two variables should move relative to each other over time. At the same time, the author rules out alternative explanations for public satisfaction with democracy because they do not fit the temporal trends.

Most notably, Fossati argues that economic growth, which has long been linked with high levels of democratic approval in Indonesia, cannot explain the current trends because growth has been stable while satisfaction

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has increased (pp. 3, 8). This rejection of a strong alternative explanation does not consider that it takes time for states to translate economic growth into public goods provision and even more time for ordinary citizens to experience prosperity as a result. So, the burst of satisfaction with democracy that we are observing now could be the cumulative effect of Indonesia's stable growth and not despite it.

The book then argues that democratic outputs, such as economic prosperity, public goods provision, and policy outcomes, cannot account for the simultaneous decline of democratic institutions and rise in public satisfaction with democracy in Indonesia. It posits instead that high levels of satisfaction can be explained by democratic inputs that relate to meaningful representation in the democratic process. The book attempts to trace the high levels of democratic satisfaction today to the ideological cleavage present at Indonesia's first democratic election in 1955.

Drawing on district-level results from all democratic elections held in Indonesia since 1955, Fossati convincingly proves what many scholars have long argued: the durability of Islamist-pluralist cleavage in Indonesian politics. Despite having the choice of many political parties and programmatic platforms, voters are still guided by two ideological camps: the Islamists, who believe in a greater role for Islam in public life, and the pluralists, who have a more inclusive vision for the nation. This cleavage, the data shows, is also relatively well represented among the political elites that voters elect, although Islamists are significantly less represented than pluralists.

The book uses an impressive range of data to show that voters aligned with these two ideological camps have distinctly different ideas of what is important in a democracy. Those who support a greater role for Islam in politics are less likely to express support for promoting liberal values and egalitarian principles and significantly more likely to value features of democracy that enable participation in the political process. Fossati posits that given these different understandings, citizens who place a greater emphasis on participatory features of the political system are more likely to be satisfied with Indonesia's democracy, despite its institutional decline. Evidence from a nationally representative survey provides support for this claim (p. 185). It shows that the greater the value voters place on participation, the higher their satisfaction with democracy is, while a greater emphasis on the liberal-egalitarian values of democracy is associated with declining levels of satisfaction.

The data presented throughout the book is copious and sophisticated, and the analysis supports the conclusions derived in each individual chapter. But the different empirical pieces come across more as a collection of separate essays and do not convincingly support the book's aggregate claim about Indonesian politics that "the ideological division over political Islam, which underpins partisan polarization, can also strengthen the legitimacy of democracy by allowing for meaningful participation and representation" (p. 189).

This is arguably due to several analytical gaps. First, the book does not use its proposed independent variable (representation/participation) to address the temporal puzzle it sets up in the beginning. The relationship between a participation-based view of democracy and satisfaction with it is explored in a single survey, which cannot explain the multiyear upward trend identified in the introduction.

Second, the empirical link between the Islamist-pluralist cleavage and democratic satisfaction is not established directly. Rather, the author first establishes the relationship between political Islam and divergent understandings of democracy (pp. 179–80) and then links different understandings of democracy with satisfaction levels (p. 185). It is therefore not clear what role, if any, the pluralist-Islamist cleavage is playing in driving democratic satisfaction.

Third, light engagement with history and current events also detracts from the book's conclusion. The multistep analysis described above implies that Islamists are the most satisfied with Indonesian democracy because they value participation, which is enabled by the democratic process. But given the history of intense persecution of Islamists under the New Order dictatorship (1965–98), it would be difficult to say whether Islamists are satisfied with democracy because it facilitates participation and representation along the ideological cleavage or simply because democracy does not prohibit it.

The implied link between the Islamist emphasis on participation and democratic satisfaction is also surprising, given that the period in which the surveys were conducted (2017–20) saw the most brazen persecution of Islamist organizations since the end of the New Order. In July 2017 the Joko Widodo government issued a controversial ban on Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia after accusing the organization of threatening national unity, in what many experts have described as a barely concealed attempt to quash political opposition from conservative quarters. In December 2020 the Indonesian police unlawfully killed six members of the Islamist vigilante group Front Pembela Islam and banned the organization the following year, citing

unsubstantiated links to terrorist activity. If participation is indeed the most valued aspect of democracy for Islamists, why did their satisfaction not take a hit amid these new restrictions? Should we expect this trend to change in the coming years?

Above all else, perhaps the most perplexing aspect of the book is that by emphasizing Islamists' participation-based view of democracy, and therefore implying their satisfaction with the current state of democracy in Indonesia, it ignores the mounting efforts by Islamist organizations to seek policy change through extralegal violence. Scholars have written extensively about the role played by vigilante organizations in persecuting and violently punishing individuals accused of hurting Muslim sentiments or acting in ways that the vigilantes claim is contrary to Muslim sensibilities. These widely publicized incidents not only serve to intimidate potential targets but also to pressure policymakers into responding with highly restrictive regulations at both the national and the local levels. The question then is if democracy is so satisfactory to Islamist groups because it gives them participation and representation, why have they increasingly looked for ways to achieve their goals by working outside this system?

Fossati has covered important ground in his analysis by drawing our attention to diverse ways in which citizens assess democratic quality. These questions and critiques about the book's empirical framing and substantive claims only highlight the need to further study seriously the ways in which Indonesian voters judge their own institutions. 

## The Return of *Aliran* to the Lexicon of Indonesian Politics

Leonard C. Sebastian

To best appreciate Diego Fossati's book *Unity through Division: Political Islam, Representation and Democracy in Indonesia* from the angle of political developments in Indonesia, I would recommend that it be read in tandem with his article "The Resurgence of Ideology in Indonesia: Political Islam, *Aliran*, and Political Behaviour."<sup>1</sup> Fossati does not use the word *aliran* (streams of political thought) in the book. Instead, he uses terms like "ideological division" and "partisan polarization" (p. 4) to refer to the same phenomenon of division between "pluralist" (both nationalist and traditionalist/Nahdlatul Ulama-affiliated Muslims) and "Islamist" (modernist and newer movements like Salafi, Partai Keadilan Sejahtera, and so forth).

My view is that *Unity through Division* was written with a different audience in mind than this article, namely, general political science researchers who are less familiar with developments in Indonesia or who are focused on political developments more broadly.<sup>2</sup> It is really the skillful application of quantitative methods to the study of identity politics and polarization that the author seems to want to emphasize in this book.

Additionally, he is writing primarily to demonstrate political polarization as a mechanism or factor leading to democratic regression. The book seems targeted to an audience of North American-trained political scientists specializing in the study of democratization and democratic regression, largely through the use of quantitative methods. This is understandable. In the aftermath of the Trump presidential election and Brexit referendum in 2016, there has been a fascination within American-trained social science academia to address the big political science questions like the rise of populist leaders or sources of identity politics with quantitative methods—a research tool much in vogue. I appreciated and learned from Fossati's skilled employment of quantitative methods

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<sup>1</sup> Diego Fossati, "The Resurgence of Ideology in Indonesia: Political Islam, *Aliran*, and Political Behaviour," *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 38, no. 2 (2019): 119–48.

<sup>2</sup> By contrast, the *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* readership is a mixture of Indonesian studies specialists and political scientists.

and provision of comprehensive surveys that delve into the complexities of societal polarization, particularly as they concern political Islam. Surveys, together with graphs and charts, were used effectively to illustrate divisions within Indonesian society.

However, this quantitative approach does have inherent shortcomings. For example, what are the historical origins of polarization in Indonesia? The more eclectic audience that reads the *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, for example, may find that *Unity through Division* does not provide an answer to this question. For researchers who subscribe to the classical school for the study of Indonesia, some degree of *caveat emptor* applies.

To me, Fossati's greatest contribution to the study of Indonesian politics has been his rejuvenation of *aliran* as a salient feature. *Aliran* has been largely missing in the study of Indonesia since the *reformasi* era. By confirming that identity/*aliran* politics, which have long divided the nationalist (or pluralist, to use Fossati's term) and Islamist political activists in Indonesia, still remain relevant, Fossati offers us a different approach from that of other scholars such as Edward Aspinall and Ward Berenschot or Vedi Hadiz.<sup>3</sup> These scholars tend to hold the view that *aliran* politics have largely been displaced by transactional or patron-client politics as determined by coalitional arrangements between different political parties and the relationship between politicians and their political parties in contemporary Indonesian politics.

Instead, Fossati finds that under certain circumstances (e.g., severe politicization and polarization), political *aliran* can be made salient in an Indonesian election cycle. Not only that, he finds that politicians and political parties are able to manipulate and control the level of politicization of identity politics through their statements and rhetoric made on the campaign trail.

Utilizing multilevel statistical analysis, Fossati also demonstrates that politicians from across the ideological divide, namely from nationalist parties—e.g., Partai Demokrasi Indonesia Perjuangan (PDIP) and NasDem—and Islamist parties—e.g., Partai Keadilan Sejahtera (PKS) and Partai Persatuan Pembangunan (PPP)—have very different concepts of what constitutes the idea of Indonesia. Likewise, they disagree on whether or to what extent Islam should be part of the state's ideological foundation, or even whether being a devout Muslim should be considered part of

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<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Edward Aspinall and Ward Berenschot, *Democracy for Sale: Elections, Clientelism, and the State in Indonesia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2019); and Vedi Hadiz, *Islamic Populism in Indonesia and the Middle East* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

Indonesian citizenship. Fossati argues that this ideological divide is the basis for the identity-based politicization and polarization that has affected Indonesian politics over the past decade. As this nationalist (pluralist) versus Islamist division will remain relevant for the foreseeable future, he expects aliran politics will continue to be a noticeable force and engine of political polarization and mobilization in Indonesia's national-level politics for decades to come.

However, while the quantitative approach offers valuable insights, it appears to create a gap in any further elaboration on the quality of the results—probably more so than if Fossati were to engage qualitatively with the complexities of Indonesian society, particularly the multifaceted nature of political Islam. For instance, the book is weaker in its attempt to explain the formation of the political thinking from the cultural antecedents of *aliran*. There is a need for deeper qualitative research (i.e., thick description) by delving into the rich literature from the classical tradition of the study of Indonesia, especially its political culture, such as Benedict Anderson's definition of aliran,<sup>4</sup> which is useful in analyzing sociopolitical groupings, and a similar study by Herbert Feith and Lance Castles.<sup>5</sup>

In *Unity through Division*, aliran is also conceived of in “statist” terms, namely, as manifested via political parties. There is little analysis about the aliran societal organizations, such as Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah, and no analysis of their worldviews.

Finally, the lack of deeper qualitative analysis means that the book does not offer us an explanation of leaders' behavior. Why do certain leaders belonging to a particular aliran behave the way that they do? For example, B.J. Habibie adopted several democratization initiatives during his tenure as president in 1998–99. There is a tendency to contend that he was under public pressure to democratize, even though in reality Habibie had opportunities to consolidate power and resume New Order authoritarianism. It remains a puzzle why there has been no attempt to trace Habibie's sociocultural background as a *seberang* person (a non-Javanese Indonesian from the outer provinces) and how this would impact his political choices. Similarly, in promoting the democratic credentials of Joko Widodo (“Jokowi”) in 2014, there is a lack of qualitative research on aliran that could have better explained his “real” political beliefs. Despite the democratic rhetoric

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<sup>4</sup> Benedict R. Anderson, *Language and Power: Exploring Political Cultures in Indonesia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990).

<sup>5</sup> Herbert Feith and Lance Castles, *Indonesian Political Thinking: 1945–1965* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1970).

surrounding his candidacy, such research may have better explained why Jokowi has adopted a political stance that mirrors Javanese leaders of the past such as Sukarno and Suharto.

Indonesia is not like the United States where there are “blue” and “red” constituencies each clearly representing specific values. In this regard, it is problematic to conflate traditionalist Islam with Nahdlatul Ulama and modernist Islam with Muhammadiyah since there are many Indonesian Muslims that, while considering themselves either a traditionalist or a modernist Muslim, may no longer identify with either group. Anecdotally, the fastest rising category of Indonesian Muslims may be those who consider themselves as not belonging to any Islamic organization.<sup>6</sup> This means, for example, that they might be Salafis who consider themselves Muslim but decline to identify themselves as part of Islamic organizations. One possible way to draw out that information is to take two to three survey reports by the public research firm Indikator, published monthly on their website, that focus on 2015–16 (before the anti-Ahok rallies of 2017), 2019–20 (after the Jakarta gubernatorial election), and late 2023 or early 2024 and compare the number of Muslims who stated in recent years that they never belonged to a specific Islamic organisation (an indication they are either Salafi or Tarbiyah/PKS) versus those who are affiliated with Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah.<sup>7</sup>

The exploration of polarization in the book, particularly concerning political Islam, is useful. However, delving further into the multifaceted reasons behind these divisions—whether they stem from the inherent limitations of quantitative methodologies or the deeper sociopolitical fabric of the country—could enrich the analysis and provide a more holistic understanding of the subject matter.

In sum, *Unity through Division* is a commendable step toward unravelling the intricacies of societal divisions, although further and nuanced analysis and an expanded discussion on the implications of these divisions on Indonesian society would be a great benefit. I am pleased to see that the aliran approach is not completely defunct in the study of Indonesian politics. The book’s argument that Indonesia’s democracy is resilient if we can look beyond the liberal conception of democracy is especially significant.

Additionally, the author does not seem straightjacketed by Western liberal tendencies in studying Indonesia, as evidenced by his questioning

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<sup>6</sup> See Indikator  <https://indikator.co.id/publikasi>.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

the seemingly accepted tenets of democratic decline in the late Jokowi era. Here, Fossati highlights that the participation of Islamists in the democratic process is an essential element of democracy, as it guarantees their political representation and the responsiveness of the state.

This approach cuts against the grain in relation to the current trend in scholarship emphasizing democratic backsliding in Indonesia. Yet, surveys among ordinary Indonesians demonstrate that most view democracy in Indonesia as being in a healthy state. *Unity through Division* concludes by stating that the ideological division between pluralists and Islamists in Indonesia should be viewed as a resource of democracy rather than a limitation. ◆

## Author's Response: Unity through Division— Developing an Alternative Account of Indonesian Politics

*Diego Fossati*

I am very grateful to *Asia Policy* for arranging this review roundtable and to the five scholars of Indonesian politics who have generously shared their thoughts about my book *Unity through Division: Political Islam, Representation and Democracy in Indonesia*. I am humbled to read the praise in the reviews and glad to have the opportunity to address some of the criticism raised. In this essay, I will clarify some points about the argument of the book, respond to some issues regarding empirical support for the argument, and discuss my view of the book's contribution to the study of Indonesian politics.

A first clarification regards the scope of the argument. In some of the contributions to this roundtable, the manuscript is presented as arguing that ideological representation is the main or primary factor driving democratic satisfaction among Indonesian citizens. This characterization is understandable, given the book's almost exclusive focus on the nexus between representation and democratic legitimacy. Yet my argument is more modest, as I simply claim that this factor is significant and that it can help us understand developments in Indonesian politics that other approaches cannot.

A second point to clarify is that the context of the Indonesian case does not suggest that Islamist Indonesians should display higher levels of satisfaction with democracy than pluralists. In fact, as Djayadi Hanan writes in his excellent essay, they generally do not. I argue that this is precisely because this group has historically been (and still is) underrepresented in political institutions. I develop a more fine-grained analysis of public perceptions by allowing that voters vary in their conception of democracy, that such conceptions have implications for democratic legitimacy, and that, to a certain extent, they are rooted in the political Islam cleavage. Accounting for the complexity emerging from this analysis with a parsimonious explanation like mine is challenging, and there are empirical anomalies. But I hope that this effort will inspire further debate and research on these important aspects of Indonesian politics.

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A related clarification should be made on conceptual grounds: Does the argument imply that, when illiberal Islamist forces are rising, satisfaction with democracy should increase among Islamists and decrease among pluralists? Not necessarily. To be sure, it is plausible that satisfaction with democracy may increase substantially among Islamist voters as they see better prospects for policy outcomes closer to their preferences. But the rise of Islamism is not just a shift to the right; it is also a time in which ideological issues become more salient more generally. In principle, this development could strengthen democratic legitimacy among citizens that value ideological debates as a crucial “input” factor in democratic performance regardless of their ideological orientation.

This brings me to the issue of empirical support for the argument that ideological representation is linked to democratic satisfaction. As Sana Jaffrey notes, corroborating the argument would require comprehensive longitudinal analysis that I do not perform. In this respect, it is fair to say that the empirical analysis lacks the “smoking gun” that only this type of unavailable data could provide. However, I don’t find this problematic. My analysis leverages a wide range of data and research designs to document beyond any reasonable doubt that ideological competition is a significant driver of voting behavior, policy preferences, and views of democracy. It would be most peculiar if such a key factor did not affect evaluations of democratic performance at least among some voters.

A second important issue is raised by Noory Okthariza, who observes that political Islam in Indonesia is characterized more by stability than change. In the book, I emphasize the historical roots of the political Islam cleavage, and I think that it is fair to consider it as a structural “asset” of Indonesian politics since this feature has been present since the inception of Indonesian nationhood. At the same time, however, the salience of ideological competition has oscillated over time, including since the onset of the *reformasi*. The political Islam cleavage, then, is a structural feature of Indonesian politics, but like all structures, its significance and nature changes over time, albeit slowly, in response to political agency.

A final point relating to methodological choices and empirical scope is articulated by Michael Buehler and others, who question the focus of the analysis on formal politics. The political Islam cleavage does not align neatly with the Indonesian party system, and political Islam is more commonly expressed informally through social organizations. This is fair criticism, but I believe my approach was warranted for two reasons. First, political Islam in Indonesia is overwhelmingly studied with a focus on informal politics,

and its lack of importance in voting behavior is sometimes assumed without much empirical scrutiny. I hope my book will help to correct this bias. Second, one of my aims was to bring the Indonesian case into conversation with comparative research on substantive representation, for which an analysis of ideological congruence between citizen elites is essential. The fact that the book has been very well received in political science circles reassures me that this strategy was worth pursuing.

I would like to conclude with a few comments on what I see as the contribution of this book to the study of Indonesian politics, an issue on which my thoughts are closely aligned with Leonard Sebastian's insightful essay. Existing research usually articulates two narratives about Indonesian politics. One portrays Indonesia as being dominated by predatory economic and political elites that have hijacked the process of political representation and democratic accountability. The other identifies clientelism as the glue that keeps Indonesia together, highlighting the transactional nature of citizen-politician linkages. Both approaches, in my opinion, excessively downplay the role of political ideology, overemphasize the continuities of the New Order, and insufficiently acknowledge Indonesia's democratic achievements.

My book proposes an alternative view of Indonesian politics, one in which an ideological cleavage about the role of Islam in public affairs is still a crucial feature. From this perspective, some citizens may be responsive to clientelistic appeals, but most of them are not. Most citizens prioritize economic outputs, but many also pay attention to important cultural and social debates. Politicians are self-interested, but many of them also care about representing voters. From this point of view, Indonesia's democratic achievements are remarkable, especially when appraised in comparative perspective.

A second contribution is to the current debate on democratic backsliding, and it lies in rejecting what Sebastian calls the straitjacket of "Western liberal tendencies in studying Indonesia." Many analysts of Indonesian politics indeed conflate democratic deepening with progress on liberal agendas. From this perspective, conservative Islam is a clear enemy: support for pluralism is equated with support for democracy and support for Islamism with support for authoritarianism. As I further argue in a recent article, this simplistic dichotomy is inadequate to account for the Indonesian case.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Diego Fossati, "Illiberal Resistance to Democratic Backsliding: The Case of Radical Political Islam in Indonesia," *Democratization* 31, no. 3 (2024): 616–37.

Democratic performance is a multidimensional idea that intersects not only with liberalism but also with participation, equality, and inclusion. In Indonesia as elsewhere, democracy should be conceptualized and assessed by acknowledging this complexity. ◆