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1. Introduction

Corruption, defined as the abuse of public office for private gain, is endemic and systemic in countries across the Global South for historical reasons (Migdal 1988). Despite enormous financial efforts to address it, most anti-corruption interventions by international donor organizations in past decades have failed (DFID 2015, 74–76; Johnson et al. 2012, iv; Johnston and Fritzen 2021, 117; Mungiu-Pippidi 2006, 86). This disappointing record reflects deep flaws in how international donors design and implement reforms.

Arguably, one core reason for the failure of anti-corruption interventions is that standard approaches downplay or outright ignore the political drivers of corruption. They conceive of reform and good governance largely in technocratic terms, hoping for improvement through "the gradual accretion of laws, penalties, and 'best practices'" (Johnston and Fritzen 2021, 7).

Instead, more recent works argue that flawed institutions, laws, and regulations, typically the focus of standard anti-corruption initiatives, are merely symptoms of deeper structural inequalities. Moreover, corruption appears in many guises and shows different levels of severity and impact, depending on how political power is arranged in

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a polity (Johnston and Fritzen 2021, 154; DFID 2015, 7).[1] Identical corruption dynamics may yield differing outcomes in distinct political environments or even within the same polity at different times (Khan and Jomo 2000; DFID 2015: 18).

These findings underscore the limitations of adopting laws and "best practices" wholesale from polities with more balanced power distributions, as these measures may lack traction in different contexts. As Susan Rose-Ackerman (2011) stressed, reform efforts that transplant legal frameworks or "best practices" without recalibrating them to the prevailing political economy are bound to fail, often reinforcing rather than undermining corrupt networks. For interventions to be effective over the long term, they must address these underlying power differentials, not just the symptomatic regulatory deficiencies (Rose-Ackerman 2011; Johnston and Fritzen 2021, 7; Mungiu-Pippidi 2006, 87; Khan et al. 2019; Rodan and Hughes 2014).

In this vein, this paper argues that in order to show any effect, anti-corruption programs must consider the political context of a target polity or sector. Indonesia serves as a critical test case for assessing the impact of international anti-corruption efforts in young democracies. It is the world's third-largest democracy, but corruption remains systemic and entrenched despite more than two decades of donor-supported initiatives.

This paper proceeds as follows: The next section reviews the broader theoretical debate on the drivers of corruption and introduces the PSA theoretical framework that emphasizes political factors as the main drivers of corruption. Following that, the paper analyzes how two foreign donor-initiated anti-corruption initiatives, namely the Corruption Eradication Commission (Komisi Pemberantasan Korupsi, KPK) and the Special Task Force for Upstream Oil and Gas Business Activities (Satuan Kerja Khusus Pelaksana Kegiatan Usaha Hulu Minyak dan Gas Bumi, SKK Migas), failed due to insufficient consideration of the political contexts in which they operated. Finally, drawing from insights gained through the Indonesian case, the paper concludes by proposing several strategies to recalibrate the design of future anti-corruption interventions.

2. Literature Review

A growing comparative literature probes how political power configurations shape patterns of corruption (Johnston and Fritzen 2021). Frameworks such as Mungiu-Pippidi's (2011) "open- vs limited-access orders" (drawing on North and Weingast 1989) and Johnston's (2005, 2014) four "syndromes of corruption" have advanced the debate. However, they remain heavily elite-centered, struggle with fluid definitions of "elite" (Dogan and Higley 1998), and pay limited attention to intra-elite conflict or non-elite agency (Scott 1969; Gibson 2012; Giraudy 2015).

Political settlement analysis (PSA), the theoretical framework used in this paper, addresses these shortcomings (Barma 2017; Jaffrey and Slater 2017; Jamal 2019; Khan 2017). It recognizes that both elites and non-elites contribute to the formation of governance regimes and, consequently, to the patterns of corruption. PSA also considers the presence of "spoilers" to the status quo, acknowledging their potential to reshape

[1] "Polity" may be a more adept term than "country" because anti-corruption interventions should not be limited to countries alone. They should also encompass subnational entities like provinces, districts, or specific governance sectors.

existing governance regimes. At the same time, PSA concurs with Mungiu-Pippidi's (2011) access-order framework and Johnston's (2005; 2014) corruption syndromes framework in recognizing that corruption and rent-seeking are manifestations of political power dynamics, thus necessitating political solutions.

The main argument of PSA is that "the distribution of organizational power is important for understanding the economic and political effects of institutions and policies" (Khan 2017, 1). Assigning causal primacy to the political context, PSA is most immediately "a useful antidote to vague formulations such as 'institutions matter,' more specific ones such as 'liberal democracy is best for development,' and more technocratic 'best practice' approaches to policy advice" (Kelsall and vom Hau 2020, 4). Hence, PSA can show which initiatives are likely to be effective in what context and why. It is therefore not only a useful theoretical framework to map the corruption landscape in a polity, but also a powerful tool to identify areas for effective anti-corruption interventions (DFID 2015, 20; Putzel and Di John 2012, iv). The next section will elaborate on what a political settlement is and how it is analyzed.

2.1 Defining Political Settlements

In a seminal work on PSA, Mushtaq Khan (2010) states that "a political settlement emerges when the distribution of benefits supported by its institutions is consistent with the distribution of power in society, and the economic and political outcomes of these institutions are sustainable over time" (3). This definition has sparked debate among scholars, particularly regarding the interpretation of key terms such as "settlement," "consistent," and "sustainable" (Kelsall 2016, 6). It is useful to briefly clarify how these concepts are understood in Khan's original formulation, as these interpretations shape the direction and design of subsequent policy recommendations.

According to Khan (2017), a settlement is not simply "an agreement of some sort between elites, particularly of a type that emerges at the end of a period of conflict" (18).[2] Elites are notoriously hard to define, especially in the still rather fluid political environments of many countries in the Global South. Furthermore, there are often players not immediately understood as elites that may hold considerable power and therefore shape a political settlement. Overall, "while some political settlements in our sense can indeed be underpinned by a pact or agreement between elites, this is by no means generally the case. What matters in defining a sustainable political economy at the macro level is not an explicit, or even an implicit, agreement or pact between elites, but a stable distribution of power across organizations" (Khan 2017, 18). Khan continues that "[o]rganizations are groups of individuals who work together in structured ways and are subject to the rules of interaction set by institutions in their transactions with other individuals or organizations" (4).

Khan's (2010, 3) initial work on political settlements understands consistency between the distribution of power and institutions as follows: "In advanced countries, the distribution of power is largely based on the distribution of incomes generated by formal institutions and rights. . . . In contrast, . . . in developing countries . . . formal institutions alone cannot support distributions of benefits consistent with these distributions of

[2] For a more elite-centered understanding of political settlements, see Burton and Higley (1998).

power. Informal institutions like patron-client allocative rules, and informal adaptations to the ways in which particular formal institutions work play a critical role in bringing the distribution of benefits supported by the institutional structure into line with the distribution of power."[3] Regarding the sustainability of these arrangements, Khan stated that formal and informal institutions "have to achieve the minimum levels of economic performance and political stability that are required for the reproduction of particular societies" (Khan 2010, 4).

2.2 Identifying and Analyzing Political Settlements

Khan's (2010) framework cross-classifies political settlements along two dimensions: whether formal institutions foster growth and whether actual power aligns with those institutions. When both conditions hold, a "capitalist settlement" prevails. Formal productive rights dominate and are well enforced, limiting distributive conflict. If formal rules support growth but power is still enforced through informal hierarchies, the result is a "clientelist settlement," spanning cases from developmental states to near-crisis situations. Where institutions are not growth-oriented yet power still tracks formal rights, societies resemble "pre-capitalist settlements," akin to feudal orders rooted in land and military privilege. Finally, when neither condition is met, formal rules are weak and power is largely informal, and the polity slips into a "settlement in crisis," with collapsed institutions and violence underpinning most economic activity (Kahn 2010, 49).

For historical reasons, clientelist political settlements are the dominant form across the Global South today (Khan 2010, 126; Migdal 1988; Mungiu-Pippidi 2011, 9–10). The following paragraphs will therefore concentrate on that form. Readers interested in learning more about the other types of political settlements can consult Khan's (2010, 48–60) initial concept paper where all types are explained in detail.

Clientelist Political Settlements

Clientelist political settlements share several characteristics. Formal institutions and rules and regulations exist but are poorly enforced if at all. This is because significant levels of power are situated outside formal institutions but may nevertheless shape the formal political- and policy-making process. However, the degree to which power is located outside formal institutions varies considerably between clientelist political settlements. Coalitions of power holders excluded from the ruling coalition may be weak. They do not have the capacity to significantly influence, undermine, or spoil the interests of the ruling coalition. In case coalitions of excluded power holders are strong, however, they may considerably constrain the interests of the ruling coalition or get rid of the ruling coalition altogether. "Spoilers" may also exist *within* ruling coalitions. If organizations situated at lower levels of the ruling coalition's power hierarchy are strong, they may again influence, undermine, or outright prevent the agenda of the ruling coalition's leadership. There are four possible subtypes of clientelist political settlements between

[3] Scholars have debated whether a settlement is a combination of power and institutions or whether institutions are an expression of power (Kelsall and vom Hau 2020, 6). This is part of a broader debate about whether institutions in general "are epiphenomenal on more fundamental political, social and/or economic relations" (Pepinsky 2014, 1). This paper assumes that institutions are an expression of political and economic power.

Table 1. Subtypes of clientelist political settlements. Source: Based on Khan (2010, 65)

		Strength of coalitions excluded from ruling coalition (horizontal distribution of power)	
		Weak	**Strong**
Strength of lower-level factions within the ruling coalition (vertical distribution of power)	**Weak**	**Potential developmental coalition** • Low opposition from excluded factions gives the ruling coalition stability and a long-term horizon. • Limited power of lower-level factional supporters ensures high enforcement capability. • Construction of developmental state possible.	**(Vulnerable) authoritarian coalition** • Initial enforcement capabilities likely to be strong but strong excluded factions mean force or legal restrictions must be used making the coalition vulnerable to violent overthrow.
	Strong	**(Weak) Dominant Party System** • Enforcement capabilities become weaker as lower-level factions get stronger or more fragmented. • Excluded factions also become stronger if dissatisfied supporters start leaving.	**Competitive Clientelism** • Characterized by competition between multiple strong factions. • Stability can be achieved only with credible mechanisms for cycling of factions in power. • Low enforcement capabilities in most cases and short time horizons.

organizations that follow from variation along these two dimensions (Khan 2010, 64; Behuria et al 2017, 512), as shown in Table 1.

If factions excluded from the ruling coalition are too weak to challenge it, the coalition may feel secure enough to develop long-term agendas. When power is concentrated at the top, there is little resistance from lower-level factions within the coalition, allowing potential development coalitions to emerge. Conversely, if excluded factions are strong but lower-level factions within the coalition are weak, the coalition may face external resistance. Powerful interests outside the coalition can undermine its agenda, leading to a vulnerable authoritarian coalition. In a weak dominant party system, weak excluded factions cannot challenge the coalition, but strong internal factions reduce leadership's capacity to implement interests. In competitive clientelism, strong excluded factions and internal factions prevent long-term strategy, as the coalition constantly faces internal and external threats (Khan 2010, 65).[4]

3. Indonesia's Political Settlement

This section will trace changes in Indonesia's political settlement since the fall of the New Order dictatorship in 1998. The next section will then examine how this political

[4] The concept of "competitive clientelism" is similar to Scott's (1969) concept of "market corruption."

settlement impacts anti-corruption initiatives. The following analysis of Indonesia's political settlement is based on in-depth interviews and archival research both online and on-site in Indonesia since 2014. I interviewed government officials, anti-corruption advocates, and staff members of international donor organizations as well as local watchdogs. Due to the sensitive nature of the topic I mainly relied on written material, however. This includes articles, newspaper clippings, and donor agency reports. I also relied on grey literature I obtained during visits to government archives, think tank libraries, and civil society organizations.

3.1 The "Franchise System" during the New Order Dictatorship

During the New Order dictatorship, which ruled over Indonesia from 1965 until 1998, corruption was institutionalized and deliberately fostered by the government. The regime intentionally underfunded the state apparatus, which compelled government personnel to seek off-budget revenues. The New Order leadership then allowed elites to use state power for private gain in exchange for loyalty and support. Those who contributed financially to the regime were rewarded, while dissenters faced exclusion and prosecution threats. The New Order regime has therefore also been called a "franchise system" (McLeod 2000). This franchise system extended across all branches of government, including the military, judiciary, and civilian bureaucracy, creating deeply entrenched corruption networks where lucrative positions inside the state apparatus were often purchased. The franchise system also co-opted societal and business elites, ensuring control and support through corporatist structures and crony capitalism. However, internal conflicts and the Asian Financial Crisis eventually destabilized the system, contributing to the New Order dictatorship's downfall in 1998.

3.2 The Technocratic Orientation of Post-1998 Reform Initiatives

The numerous reform initiatives pursued after 1998 had two broad intentions: to improve transparency and accountability in Indonesian politics. To this end, various institutional changes were adopted, oversight bodies were created, and the media were liberated. Moreover, various laws and regulations tried to disentangle the three branches of government that had formed a collusive entity during the New Order period.[5]

Regarding the executive branch of government, several reform initiatives aimed at reducing the role of the military in Indonesian politics. For example, Law No. 2/2000 on the People's Consultative Assembly (Majelis Permusyawaratan Rakyat, MPR) and the House of Representatives (Dewan Perwakilan Rakyat, DPR) abolished the reserved seats for the military in the national parliament. Law No. 34/2004 on the Indonesian Armed Forces (TNI) prohibited active military personnel from running for electoral office and to vote in elections.[6] The same law also forbade the military to be involved in business (HRW 2006, 111). The civilian arm of the executive branch of government too was subjected to various reform initiatives aimed at increasing transparency and

[5] For a detailed overview of these and other reform initiatives adopted after 1998, see Crouch (2010) and Ziegenhain (2015).

[6] At the time of writing this article, there was an ongoing debate about whether the voting ban for active military personnel violated soldiers' constitutional rights.

accountability. For instance, elections were introduced for executive government head posts at all layers of Indonesia's state apparatus. At the time of writing this article, Indonesia's president, all governors, districts, and mayors were determined through direct elections.[7] Moreover, nonelected government posts were subjected to reform laws too, aiming to improve transparency and accountability in the civilian bureaucracy. For instance, according to Law No. 25/2009 on Public Services, officials working for public service providers must conduct transparent, nondiscriminatory, and fair selection and promotion of civil servants, grounded in legal principles (Buehler 2011, 68).

The legislative branch too was the target of various reform laws and regulations. All seats in parliament at both the national and subnational level became subjected to elections. A new regulatory framework allowed political parties to form freely and with almost no restrictions on ideological platforms.[8] The judiciary, meanwhile, was freed from executive government interference by the establishment of a "one-roof" (satu atap) system, introduced under Law No. 35/1999, which amended Law No. 14/1970 on the Basic Provisions of Judicial Power. Prior to these reforms, the judiciary's administrative matters, including budgeting and infrastructure, were managed by the Ministry of Justice, leading to interference over the judiciary. Moreover, during the New Order "the amount of money that was left for the judiciary after the budget was creamed-off by the [Ministry] of Justice was pretty meagre" (Pompe, quoted in Van Zorge 2009, 17). The legal reform sought to centralize administrative oversight within the Supreme Court, thereby reducing external influences on judicial processes. The law essentially gave the judiciary autonomy over budget allocation and spending decisions, a freedom not afforded to the judiciary during the New Order dictatorship (Van Zorge 2009, 17). Moreover, new recruitment, training, and appointment mechanisms for personnel with the judiciary were introduced (VanZorge 2009, 17). Finally, the centralized nature of the New Order state apparatus was relegated to the past when Law No. 22/1999 on Local Government and Law No. 25/1999 on Fiscal Balance between the Central and Local Government initiated a decentralization of political and fiscal authority to the subnational level. This was again done in the name of increasing transparency and accountability (Rasyid 2004).

Regarding economic reforms, many state-owned enterprises (SOEs) were either bankrupt or heavily indebted after the collapse of the Indonesian economy in 1998. Various reform initiatives either tried to privatize SOEs or reduce the possibilities for political interference in such companies (ADB 2022, 4).[9] Moreover, many observers

[7] Village heads situated below district heads have been directly elected since the colonial period (Hüsken 1979).

[8] Political parties were banned from having religious platforms during the New Order. Communist party platforms remain banned in post-New Order Indonesia (Mietzner 2008, 439).

[9] For instance, Law 25/2009 on Public Services established sanctions for state officials holding concurrent positions as board members in state-owned enterprises, addressing the frequent abuse of these dual roles for private gain. Although the regulation's intentions are commendable, the prevalence of such dual postings is limited, minimizing the sanctions' overall impact on corruption eradication within the country. Furthermore, this law was violated by then Indonesian president Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono himself when he appointed bureaucrats to the board of state-owned oil company Pertamina in May 2010 (Buehler 2012, 15). In July 2025, Indonesia's Constitutional Court reaffirmed that deputy ministers are prohibited from holding concurrent positions, such as serving as commissioners in state-owned enterprises. Despite previous rulings, thirty-four deputy ministers currently hold such dual roles, raising concerns over professionalism, conflicts of interest, and political patronage. Legal experts argue that the same restrictions placed on ministers must also apply to their deputies to uphold constitutional principles and good governance (BBC News Indonesia 2025).

predicted a collapse of Indonesia's business conglomerates since they no longer had the political protection due to which they grew rich under Suharto (Chua 2008). While such a collapse did not occur, the political environment in which conglomerates find themselves has become less predictable and their position therefore less guaranteed, on which more in the political settlement analysis below.

Finally, societal groups also broke free from the corporatist arrangement they had been confined to during the New Order regime. After 1998, the government promoted the development of civil society organizations and gave them greater space to operate. Many groups that had been oppressed or driven underground entirely reemerged after 1998 to become more visible and vocal in politics again.

3.3 The Limits of Technocratic Reform Initiatives

As a result of aforementioned reform initiatives aimed at Indonesia's state institutions and the regulatory framework organizing the economy and society, there has been a perceptible rise in transparency in Indonesia. Tales regarding the corrupt practices of elites that circulated as mere rumors, covert jokes, or insinuations during the New Order are now openly dissected by the Indonesian media and the public. At the same time, this increased transparency and the freedom to discuss corruption has also made it clear that corruption remains systemic in all the sectors mentioned above. For instance, while the military pulled out of most of the (already bankrupt) SOEs and foundations after 1998, it remains deeply involved in Indonesia's economy (HRW 2006; Mietzner 2008).[10] The civilian bureaucracy remains equally unreformed (Buehler 2011). Corruption within the bureaucracy is ubiquitous and most civil service jobs remain up for sale to the highest bidder (Kristiansen and Rahmli 2006). Meanwhile, Indonesia's party system too is marred by money politics, while the Indonesian parliament remains primarily a market place to broker deals rather than a place to make laws (Mietzner 2015). The judiciary, likewise, has remained corrupt. Judges often bend the law in favor of the highest bidder or politically connected interests. These practices are common at the highest level of Indonesia's legal system, as the arrests of Constitutional Court Judges and Supreme Court Judges in recent years show (Cochrane 2013; Reuters 2022). The private sector remains dominated by crony capitalists reliant on political connections (Chua 2008). Nationally, conglomerates still play a significant political role despite no longer attaching to a single patron as under Suharto. The increasingly fluid political environment compels tycoons to lobby the government and hedge their bets by supporting multiple factions, thereby fueling factionalism.[11] Conglomerates remain influential in the national and subnational economy. Finally, society has become atomized (Aspinall 2013), and broad-based reform movements are absent in post-1998 Indonesian politics (Rodan and Hughes 2014, 29; Antlöv et al. 2008).

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[10] In 2002, the state budget still covered less than 30 percent of the operational expenses of Indonesia's military (Rabasa and Haseman 2002, 70). While approximately 90 percent of the military's formal expenses were covered through the official budget at the time of writing this article, a lack of law enforcement explains why the military's involvement in business continued unabated after 1998 (HRW 2006).

[11] The case of oil mafia godfather Chalid Reza illustrates this dynamic well. A consummate political broker, Reza cultivated ties across political factions. In the 2014 presidential election, he openly backed Prabowo Subianto and Hatta Rajasa, even financing the purchase of a Jakarta campaign headquarters. Yet at the same time, he also maintained links with allies of Joko Widodo, Prabowo's rival, ensuring his influence remained intact regardless of the election outcome (Tempo 2025).

While transparency has increased, accountability has not followed suit after 1998.[12] Descriptors such as "centripetal," "oligarchic," and "cartelized" frequently crop up in discussions about power dynamics in present-day Indonesia. These terms suggest that power structures that emerged after the political opening in 1998 have become entrenched, potentially hindering any meaningful increase in accountability. Arguably, it is this accountability deficit that is the main driver of corruption in Indonesia. Effectively tackling corruption in Indonesia requires addressing the roots of the country's accountability deficit. To do so, it is essential to identify the underlying causes of this deficit. This is what the next section will do.

3.4 Understanding Indonesia's Accountability Deficit through a Political Settlements Analysis

To fully understand how Indonesia's accountability deficit drives corruption and why international anti-corruption initiatives have failed, it is necessary to translate the country's political dynamics into the analytical language of PSA. As outlined earlier, Khan's (2010) framework identifies two core dimensions that shape a political settlement's character and stability: (1) the strength of excluded coalitions relative to the ruling coalition and (2) the strength and cohesion of internal factions within the ruling coalition itself. These two axes produce four ideal-type settlements, ranging from developmental to crisis-prone, each associated with distinct governance patterns and vulnerabilities to corruption.

3.4.1 The New Order as a Vulnerable Authoritarian Settlement

By the mid-1990s, the New Order increasingly resembled a vulnerable authoritarian settlement in Khan's (2010) typology (Table 1). Suharto had subordinated lower-level factions through military rotations and personalized control. His advancing age and succession uncertainty intensified military factionalism, but officers lacked independent power bases and posed no serious threat until the regime's final stage. Meanwhile, opposition strengthened around Megawati's PDI faction. Her election as chair in 1993, her removal through a regime-backed congress in 1996, and the violent eviction of her supporters exposed growing reliance on repression (Buehler and Nataatmadja 2020, 4, 10). Relatively subordinate internal factions and stronger excluded opposition thus support the vulnerable authoritarian classification for this late period. Corruption continued to channel resources upward, with Suharto and his inner circle controlling their distribution (McLeod 2000).

3.4.2 Why Indonesia's Political Settlement Is Competitive

The post-1998 transition fundamentally reconfigured this settlement. Indonesia moved toward competitive clientelism: competition intensified along both vertical and horizontal lines, while stability increasingly depended on clientelist bargains. Competitive elections were introduced, the party system was liberated, decentralization expanded subnational

[12] This is a trend that is not unique to Indonesia but is prevalent across Asia (Fuller 2016; McCargo and Wadipalapa 2024).

authority, and new media freedoms invigorated public discourse, as mentioned above. These changes fragmented the distribution of power along both vertical and horizontal lines (Aspinall 2013).

Vertical Accountability: Open Contests with Weak Party Discipline

The vertical distribution of power became fragmented for the following reasons: Political party discipline is weak in both legislative and executive elections. In legislative elections this is because parties are poorly institutionalized, with local branches often existing in name only rather than functioning as active organizational units. This is due to a lack of funds to uphold any kind of activity in-between election periods. At the same time, Indonesia's open-list proportional representation system introduced in 2009, which allows voters to cast a vote for both a party and a candidate on the party's list, created a system where candidates in legislative elections compete for votes with both co-partisans and candidates from other parties. This has led to a personalization of local legislative elections, as running under a party label carries limited electoral traction in an open-list system. This means that legislative candidates fund and run their own campaigns, trying to appeal to voters by emphasizing personal character traits and financial incentives such as vote-buying. Programmatic party platforms are almost entirely absent. As a result, national party headquarters exert far less influence over legislative elections at both the national and subnational levels than they did during the New Order dictatorship.

The same is true for local executive government elections. The introduction of direct elections for subnational government heads such as governors, district heads, and mayors in 2005 has led to a fragmentation in the distribution of executive power along vertical lines. Local party branches often sell nominations for candidates in local elections to the highest bidder, who is rarely a party member. Often, local parties embrace whatever candidate is emerging as a frontrunner in public opinion surveys (Buehler and Tan 2007). In other words, political parties at both the national and subnational levels have limited control over candidate selection and campaign activities for subnational government head elections. At the same time, competition among candidates for these local executive positions remains fierce across the archipelago. This is because Indonesian voters enjoy relatively high economic autonomy, making them less dependent on local elites for livelihoods and therefore less susceptible to coercion. In addition, the decentralized institutional framework limits incumbents' ability to monopolize resources or manipulate electoral rules, preventing the emergence of durable authoritarian enclaves at the subnational level. As a result, incumbents face continual challenges from rivals, ensuring high levels of electoral competition (Buehler et al. 2021). In short, the post-1998 institutional changes in combination with socioeconomic realities on the ground have fragmented political authority "vertically." Party organizations struggle to coordinate candidates downward. Consequently, candidates operate as semi-autonomous entrepreneurs, and electoral competition is intense at both legislative and executive levels.

Horizontal Competition: Multiparty Fragmentation and Extra-Party Veto Players

Reforms also fractured authority "horizontally." No single party has been able to dominate Indonesian politics at either the national or subnational level since 1998.

While dozens of parties compete for votes in every election, a relatively stable core of five–six parties (Tomsa 2010, 146) routinely enters the national parliament. Fragmented legislatures complicate coalition formation. Outside formal party politics, veto players and spoilers, such as large Islamic mass organizations, oligarch-owned media empires, business cartels, the police, and the military, retain leverage over policy and patronage. Decentralization multiplies arenas in which such actors can bargain, block, or extract concessions. In PSA terms, excluded coalitions are not overwhelmingly strong in Indonesia, but they are numerous and consequential enough to impose costs on rulers who ignore them. The section above has described the *competitive* and fragmented nature of Indonesia's post-1998 political settlement running along both vertical and horizontal lines and identified the causes for it. The following section will describe the *clientelist* nature of the political settlement and identify the causes for it.

3.4.3 Why Indonesia's Political Settlement Is Clientelist

As Khan (2010) noted in his seminal article on political settlements, competitive clientelism can only be a stable arrangement when parties competing for power establish credible mechanisms for rotating factions through positions of influence. In Indonesia, rival factions attempt to stabilize the political settlement through clientelist arrangements, co-opting potential spoilers by granting them access to patronage opportunities. In this sense, corruption in Indonesia plays a stabilizing role. Like the competitive nature of the Indonesian political settlement running along vertical and horizontal lines, the clientelist nature of the political settlement rungs along vertical and horizontal lines.

Vertical Clientelism: Top-Down Patronage and Transactional Mobilization

During the New Order, clientelist bargains flowed primarily from the bottom upward, as actors sought to please and ingratiate themselves with the center of power. Following the institutional reforms after 1998, however, the direction of patronage flows reversed, moving from the top downward. This is because political elites need electoral support to gain and maintain power.

At the same time, political elites struggle to organize that popular support because of two structural conditions, already briefly mentioned above. The first is weak party institutionalization and shallow organizational roots. Most post-1998 parties lack dense grassroots structures and sustained financing, particularly at the subnational level. This weakness is partly a legacy of the New Order, during which parties were barred for decades from organizing below the provincial level outside the official campaign season. As a result, many parties function largely as elite vehicles, with "roots in the air" (Steffens 1904), and maintain only thin programmatic identities (Buehler and Nataatmadja 2019).

The second condition is the limited coercive leverage that elites hold over voters that could have helped them organize popular support in light of poorly institutionalized parties. Distinct land tenure patterns and the structure of the Indonesian economy reduce the direct economic dependency of voters on local patrons (Buehler et al. 2021). Because parties as well as individual candidates cannot reliably coerce or organizationally bind their constituents (Aspinall 2014), they must compete for support through transactional inducements, such as cash, gifts, or selective access to services, rather than ideological

appeals. In short, money politics in Indonesia is less a sign of political dominance than of organizational weakness.

Horizontal Clientelism: Oversized Coalitions and Collusive Pacts

On the ruling side, presidents, governors, district heads, and mayors seek support by co-opting potential veto players. Since 1999, national executives have routinely constructed oversized coalitions, before and after elections, distributing cabinet seats, regulatory favors, and access to rents to neutralize rivals (Slater 2018; Mietzner 2023). Even after the shift to direct presidential elections in 2004, when minimum-winning coalitions became theoretically sufficient, presidents continued to invite most major parties into governing alliances. The logic is straightforward: broad coalitions reduce impeachment risks, mute corruption allegations from the opposition, and secure legislative throughput for budgets and appointments. Mietzner (2023) shows that such coalitions often extend beyond parties to include oligarchs, security services, bureaucratic networks, and major religious organizations. The governing bloc in post-1998 Indonesia is essentially a cartel for mutual protection and resource distribution.

At the subnational level, candidates similarly stitch together large party coalitions ahead of elections, financed by business patrons and sustained by promises of post-election access to procurement, licensing, and budgetary rents (Lewis 2020). These arrangements provide the credible power-cycling Khan (2010) describes for stable competitive clientelist settlements. Factions rotate through office, but the terms of rotation are structured by clientelist bargaining rather than programmatic alternation. In short, competition is real in Indonesia's democracy. However, the institutional and socioeconomic structures in which this competition occurs are such that stability needs to be purchased through clientelist side-payments, co-optation, and cartelization across arenas at both the national and subnational level.

3.4.4 From Competitive Clientelism to an Accountability Deficit

The combined effect of Indonesia's competitive clientelism sketched above is an accountability deficit that runs along both vertical and horizontal lines.

Vertical Accountability: Choice without Consequence

Formally, voters in post-1998 Indonesia can and do replace incumbents. Substantively, however, three features blunt the effectiveness of this vertical accountability. First, the pool of viable candidates is narrow. High campaign costs and dependence on private financing restrict who can credibly run for office. This results in elite circulation confined to a narrow socio-economic class (Buehler 2010). As Benedict Anderson (1988) memorably put it in case of the Philippines, elections in such a context resemble a derby in which supporters choose between well-resourced teams from the same division, while most citizens watch from the stands. Second, campaigns are personalized and non-programmatic. The incentives created by open-list competition push candidates toward individual-centered appeals and vote-buying, thereby diluting programmatic

commitments. As a result, post-election performance is only weakly connected to pre-election promises. Third, responsibility is diffused within oversized governing coalitions. When almost all major political actors are included in government, voters struggle to attribute credit or blame, and alternation in office rarely leads to meaningful policy correction because the underlying coalition cartel remains intact.

Horizontal Accountability: Collusion over Contestation

In principle, fragmented multiparty systems can produce robust checks and balances. In practice, however, Indonesia's elite cartelization significantly mutes oversight.[13] Governing agreements often contain tacit understandings that audits, investigations, or impeachment will not be weaponized, thereby subordinating legislatures and watchdog bodies to the maintenance of coalition unity (Slater 2018; Mietzner 2023). Patronage-based cogovernance further reinforces this dynamic, as bureaucratic and law enforcement agencies are drawn into the coalition through promotions, strategic postings, and privileged access to rents, which in turn makes them reluctant to act against coalition partners. Finally, legislatures and executives frequently collude on budget allocations, procurement processes, and licensing decisions, prioritizing the creation and distribution of rents over the exercise of meaningful scrutiny. These practices do not originate in formal institutional weakness alone. They are rational responses to a political settlement in which competition is intense and stability depends on sharing organizing mass support through clientelist means while also sharing rents widely enough to mute spoiler threats.

3.5 Implications: Why Conventional Anti-corruption Interventions Fail

The section above has shown that Indonesia today fits squarely within the competitive clientelist cell of Khan's (2010) typology. Excluded coalitions are numerous rather than dominant, while internal factions within the ruling coalition are both strong and weakly disciplined. This competitive character is driven by open-list electoral rules, the introduction of direct local executive contests, persistent multiparty fragmentation in both national and subnational government, and the continued influence of empowered extra-party actors. Stability within this competitive environment is maintained through the use of transactional mobilization in place of genuine party organization and clientelist bargains, including the construction of oversized coalitions, to co-opt veto players.

The consequence of this arrangement is an accountability deficit. Vertically, voters may exercise choice, but that choice often has little substantive impact. Horizontally, political actors collude rather than check one another. The various forms of corruption that pervade Indonesian politics, including vote buying, public procurement cartels,

[13] Some scholars have argued that there is no party cartel in Indonesia as Indonesian parties are ill-disciplined, internally competitive, and more rooted in society than parties in most countries in Asia and the Pacific (Mietzner 2013). In this context, the argument could be made that factions competing for spoils of the state provide some crude form of accountability, as their competition over corruption and rent-seeking opportunities provides some checks and balances (Buehler 2012). This argument can be easily refuted. Not only is there no opposition in Indonesian politics (Slater 2018, 28), but competition among parties is over spoils of office, not over control of office to uphold the law and enact programmatic platforms.

licensing rackets, and case-brokering, are therefore not aberrations, but predictable manifestations of the settlement's underlying logic. Addressing corruption in such a context requires interventions that target this political logic directly. Reforms that assume corruption stem only from institutional design flaws are bound to fail if they do not engage with the political incentives that sustain competitive clientelism.

To summarize, PSA helps clarify why technical fixes, including new agencies, procedures, or laws, often fail when they treat corruption primarily as an institutional design problem. Indonesia's myriad forms of corruption are a manifestation of a political settlement that is (1) competitive, (2) stabilized through clientelism, and therefore (3) characterized by an accountability deficit along both vertical and horizontal lines. Programs that ignore these drivers risk mistaking symptoms for causes.

4. Case Studies

To illustrate these findings, this section examines two case studies of international donor-driven anti-corruption interventions in Indonesia that failed because they did not account for the political settlement in which they were situated. The two case studies are the Corruption Eradication Commission and the Special Task Force for Upstream Oil and Gas Business Activities.

4.1 Case Study 1: The Corruption Eradication Commission

The anti-corruption agenda that emerged following the end of Suharto's rule in 1998 was significantly influenced by foreign donor agencies such as the Asian Development Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Bank. These institutions had conducted a series of surveys on legal developments in Indonesia since the early 1990s, and the conclusions drawn from these studies came to shape the post-Suharto reform priorities. For example, Law No. 31/1999 on the Eradication of Criminal Acts of Corruption was facilitated by the Asian Development Bank. Similarly, the International Monetary Fund made its financial assistance conditional on the establishment of a government entity to fight corruption (Juwono 2015, 13).

The Corruption Eradication Commission was formally established in Indonesia in 2002. It was tasked with eradicating corruption through a three-pronged strategy encompassing education, prevention, and investigation. Given the pervasive corruption within the judiciary, particularly within the Attorney General's Office (AGO), the KPK was also granted prosecutorial authority. A 2005 Supreme Court ruling further clarified the KPK's mandate, authorizing it to investigate and prosecute corrupt activities that had occurred after August 1999.

In the years immediately following the KPK's inception in 2004, the agency was criticized as a vehicle for foreign intervention in Indonesian politics. Newspaper columns derisively referred to the KPK as an "extramarital child" (*anak di luar nikah*), present but unwelcome (Masduki 2003). However, within a few years, the Indonesian public began to embrace the KPK and it became one of the most popular government institutions in the country (Butt and Lindsey 2015).

Lack of Horizontal Accountability Undermined the KPK

In the first few years, the KPK became increasingly assertive, as reflected in a growing number of investigations and arrests of ministers, governors, parliamentarians, and business elites for corruption, influence peddling, and rent-seeking. This assertiveness has repeatedly brought the agency into conflict with powerful political interests. Tensions between the KPK and vested interests became publicly visible for the first time during the so-called "gecko vs. crocodile" affair. In April 2009, after the KPK launched an investigation into suspicious bank accounts linked to senior police officers, including Susno Duadji, then National Police Chief. Duadji responded by comparing the KPK to a "gecko" foolishly challenging a "crocodile," a metaphor that quickly entered the national lexicon.

Just a month later, the KPK came under intense pressure when its chairman, Antasari Azhar, was arrested for allegedly hiring a contract killer to murder Indonesian businessman Nasrudin Zulkarnaen. According to police accounts, Zulkarnaen had threatened to expose Azhar's alleged affair with a golf caddy, prompting Azhar to arrange the killing. However, the circumstances surrounding Azhar's conviction remain murky, and speculation that he was framed by powerful interests persists (Butt 2011, 386). The attacks on the KPK continued in September 2009, when police arrested two commissioners, Chandra Hamzah and Bibit Samad Rianto, on charges of extortion and bribery. The two were eventually released, and the dispute between the police and the KPK subsided after then President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono intervened and called for restraint on both sides.

Another high-profile confrontation occurred in early 2015. President Joko Widodo, elected on a reform platform in 2014, nominated police general Budi Gunawan as national police chief. Just three days after the nomination, the KPK declared Gunawan a corruption suspect. The police retaliated swiftly. They arrested KPK commissioner Bambang Widjojanto and named then-KPK chairman Abraham Samad a suspect in a separate criminal case (Giacomo 2015). Similar reprisals have come from the Attorney General's Office, particularly after the KPK began targeting what is widely regarded as one of Indonesia's most corrupt institutions.

In addition to targeting individual KPK commissioners, Indonesia's political elites have also launched more *systemic* efforts to undermine the agency's authority and effectiveness. One such move came in 2009, when the Indonesian national parliament passed legislation that altered the composition of judicial panels in corruption trials. Previously, these panels typically consisted of two career judges, drawn from within the notoriously corrupt judiciary, and three ad hoc judges from outside the system. Ad hoc judges were generally seen as more impartial and more likely to issue firm sentences, as they were not embedded in the bureaucratic or judicial hierarchies. The 2009 law, however, gave district court chief justices the power to determine the composition of these panels, leading to a significant decline in the appointment of ad hoc judges. The proposal received broad, cross-party support in parliament, underscoring the political consensus behind efforts to weaken the KPK's prosecutorial impact.

The executive branch, most notably the presidential office itself, has also played a significant role in undermining the KPK for years. In January 2012, then-President

Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono declined to extend the mandate of the Task Force for the Eradication of the Law Mafia (Satuan Tugas Pemberantasan Mafia Hukum, Satgas PMH). Yudhoyono had established Satgas PMH in 2009 in response to allegations that senior officials in the AGO and the National Police had fabricated corruption charges against KPK members. The task force had acted as an important counterweight to entrenched interests within the judiciary and law enforcement. Its dissolution signaled a retreat from earlier reformist commitments.

Attacks on the KPK continued under Yudhoyono's successor, Joko Widodo, who took office in 2014. Despite being elected on a reformist platform, Widodo's presidency saw repeated efforts to curtail the KPK's powers, often through legal amendments, leadership appointments, and administrative obstruction. For instance, in August 2019, then president Widodo presented a short list of candidates for new KPK commissioners that drew public criticism. Some of the individuals on the president's list lacked anti-corruption credentials and had even antagonized the commission in the past (Ghufron 2017). Shortly thereafter, the Indonesian national parliament passed revisions to the 2002 KPK Law with President Joko Widodo's backing, imposing wiretap restrictions and forcing all KPK staff to become civil servants. These directives triggered widespread concern about the commission's weakened capacity (Tempo 2019-a). By May 2021, these concerns deepened when seventy-five key personnel, including prominent investigators, were threatened with dismissal after failing a nebulous "National Outlook Test." This prompted accusations of a deliberate purge within the KPK (CNN Indonesia 2021).

Simultaneously, corruption scandals within or involving the KPK during the Widodo presidency exacerbated perceptions of an orchestrated effort to compromise the agency's integrity. In September 2021, for instance, KPK investigators alleged that then-Parliament Vice Speaker Azis Syamsuddin from the Golkar paid bribes to a police officer embedded in the KPK, aiming to halt probes of local officials (Tempo 2021). This revelation of high-level interference further undermined public trust, as the KPK was once renowned for its independence and effectiveness in prosecuting powerful elites.

In short, the past decade has witnessed not only a rise in personal attacks and harassment targeting KPK members but also a growing wave of institutional efforts by political elites to undermine the commission's authority. These include legislative changes, judicial manipulation, and executive inaction, all of which have gradually eroded the KPK's capacity to lead the anti-corruption agenda. As a result, the agency has become increasingly defensive, retreating from its earlier assertiveness. This trajectory, from the KPK's initial rise to its gradual weakening, illustrates the weakness of horizontal accountability mechanisms in Indonesia. As a key feature of the country's competitive clientelist settlement, the lack of horizontal accountability enabled elites across government branches to collude systematically against the KPK. They have also allowed political actors to resist meaningful anti-corruption enforcement, even under ostensibly reform-oriented administrations. The following section will demonstrate that underdeveloped vertical accountability mechanisms have also contributed to the KPK's ineffectiveness.

Lack of Vertical Accountability Undermined the KPK

Most attacks on the KPK sparked genuine public outrage. The "gecko" affair in 2009, for example, prompted widespread demonstrations and overwhelming support for the

commission across broadcast and print media. Rock bands held free concerts in solidarity with the KPK, and a social media platform created to rally support attracted more than a million followers within days. Similarly, the controversial nomination of Budi Gunawan as national police chief in 2015 provoked a strong public backlash. Following the KPK's declaration of Gunawan as a corruption suspect, mounting pressure ultimately forced President Joko Widodo to withdraw the nomination.[14]

Similarly, when lawmakers first approved the controversial revisions to the KPK law in September 2019, which imposed wiretap restrictions and required all KPK staff to become civil servants, student demonstrators took to the streets in more than a dozen cities, viewing the changes as a direct assault on reform-era institutions (Tempo 2019-b). Public outrage intensified after a student died amid protests in Kendari, prompting President Widodo to hint at issuing a Decree-in-Lieu-of-Law (Peraturan Pemerintah Pengganti Undang-Undang, Perppu) to revoke the legislation. However, as Widodo's willingness to do so waned in the weeks after, student groups continued to mobilize, condemning the perceived capitulation to vested interests and demanding that the KPK be restored to its original authority.

Subsequent protests persisted into October 2019, with another student fatality heightening tensions (Tempo 2019-c). Activists argued that the government's indifference to protester casualties revealed how far elites were prepared to go to weaken the KPK. Despite a temporary lull, calls for the president to issue a Decree-in-Lieu-of-Law and rescind the KPK revisions remained a rallying cry among civil society. In the eyes of protesters, defending the commission was critical not only for tackling corruption but also for safeguarding Indonesia's broader reform legacy. However, these and similar expressions of public support for the KPK have been largely episodic, often fading within days or weeks (Rustandi 2020). They have also been sporadic, reflecting the absence of a broad, mass-based movement in Indonesia capable of sustaining pressure for reform from below in the name of society.[15]

The lack of *sustained* mass support for the KPK can largely be attributed to the weak grassroots foundations of Indonesia's political parties. Political parties in Indonesia primarily function as vehicles for elite interests rather than as channels for societal representation, as shown above. Since the onset of Indonesia's democratization process in 1998, no major political party has consistently campaigned on an anti-corruption platform.[16] Garry Rodan and Caroline Hughes (2014) succinctly captured the consequences of this vertical accountability gap for Indonesia's anti-corruption efforts: "Opinion polls suggest that corruption is of concern to the Indonesian electorate . . . Nevertheless, because the political party system remains mired in money politics, populist rhetoric aside, there are no regular, well-functioning representative

[14] Gunawan became the national *deputy* police chief instead.

[15] This stands in contrast to countries such as Argentina, where various reform movements throughout the 1990s and early 2000s mobilized broad-based and sustained calls for political change from within society (Villalón 2007). Likewise, in India, the Association for the Empowerment of Labourers and Farmers (Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan) spearheaded the push for right-to-information legislation in the late 1990s (Jenkins and Goetz 1999).

[16] The partial exception is the Prosperous Justice Party (Partai Keadilan Sejahtera, PKS), which ran on a reformist agenda during the 2004 legislative elections. However, in subsequent elections, PKS abandoned its anti-corruption platform in favor of more conventional political strategies.

channels through which public concerns over corruption can translate into consistent political support for anticorruption initiatives" (147).

Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in Indonesia are similarly unable to uphold vertical accountability, a critical precondition for effective anti-corruption interventions. Although the country's democratic transition has expanded the public sphere, and NGOs now routinely comment on pending legislation, their actual ability to influence the legislative process remains limited (Antlöv et al. 2010).[17] In fact, the political space and freedoms that civil society enjoyed in the immediate aftermath of the New Order have come under increasing pressure from bureaucrats and other political elites in recent years (International Center for Not-for-Profit Law 2024). Furthermore, as noted in a report on the state of the sector in Indonesia, "[NGOs] in Indonesia are highly dependent upon international donors for funding and support" (Antlöv et al. 2010, 427). Consequently, many NGOs are perceived as instruments of externally driven government reforms, as foreign-funded organizations have come to dominate Indonesia's democratization process (Muyanja-Ssenyonga 2014). Moreover, competition for donor funding has frequently weakened the ability of NGO coalitions to drive meaningful change through supporting and monitoring anti-corruption programs. As Hans Antlöv et al. (2010, 430) observe, such rivalries have significantly undermined the capacity of NGOs to mount a unified and coordinated challenge to corruption and the erosion of the rule of law.

In addition, the nature of Indonesia's NGOs limits their capacity to mobilize broad-based support, as most organizations lack strong links to mass constituencies. The majority of NGOs are led by professionals from middle-class backgrounds whose worldviews and lifestyles are often more aligned with staff at international aid agencies than with ordinary Indonesians, millions of whom continue to live below the poverty line.[18] A study of the country's NGO sector noted: "The social relations between urban elite NGOs and rural grassroots movements, influenced by cultural, economic, and geographic distances, have had a well-recognized impact on the depth and distribution of civil society capacity throughout Indonesia. The gulf created by these socio-economic divides has contributed to the lack of NGOs' rootedness. Civil society activists in Indonesia have been characterized as 'floating democrats' hovering above, but unconnected to, Indonesian society; and thus unable to gain popular legitimacy and incapable of mustering a broad base sufficient to mobilize political support or influence" (Antlöv et al. 2010, 424).

Finally, many NGOs in Indonesia are under-organized and suffer from limited institutional capacity. Their internal structures are often highly hierarchical, and both accountability and transparency remain weak. As a team of experts on Indonesian NGOs observed: "The international donors have consistently noted weak management and accountability systems as a capacity constraint for NGOs" (Antlöv et al. 2010, 426).[19]

This detachment from society, along with dependence on foreign donors, rivalry over funding, weak coalition-building, limited influence on legislation, socioeconomic divides

[17] The most influential NGOs shaping the policymaking process in Indonesia are Islamist groups (Buehler 2016). However, they show little interest in promoting a public governance agenda.

[18] A few years ago, the director of an Indonesian NGO remarked to me that if international donor funding were ever to dry up and force her to shut down her organization, she would simply return to her previous profession as a piano teacher.

[19] See also Antlöv et al. (2006).

from grassroots communities, and poor internal capacity and accountability limits the ability of Indonesian NGOs to drive meaningful change. A 2010 report concluded that, due to the factors outlined above, "NGO capacity to aggregate citizens' interests and articulate their preferences to policy makers is weakly developed in Indonesia." The authors further noted that "All of the cases [of NGO activities discussed in the report] demonstrate the power of government actors to control access to the venues where policy reforms are analyzed and debated" (Antlöv et al. 2010, 436). Similarly, a 2015 analysis concluded that

> . . . corrupt elites still face precious little public scrutiny from civil society. In fact, this problem seems more serious today than in the early days of the post-Soeharto era, when widespread enthusiasm about reformasi had spawned the formation of many dedicated anti-corruption movements and media outlets committed to the fight against graft . . . Today, many of those former activists have been co-opted into the dominant elite networks, while many new media outlets have faltered under the pressures of market competition. As a result, genuine civil-society groups and investigative journalists are few in number. . . . Where they do exist, they operate in political environments that are characterized by constraining mutual dependencies and a severe lack of resources and mobilization potential . . . [In this context] the prosecution of corruption is driven primarily by . . . elites keen to get key rivals out of the way. (Tomsa 2015, 214–15)

In short, NGOs in Indonesia currently function neither as effective conduits for popular grievances nor as vehicles of mass mobilization capable of uniting broad segments of society to hold political elites accountable. This lack of societal rootedness, mirrored in weak, elite-driven political parties, has prevented the formation of sustained, bottom-up pressure in support of anti-corruption reforms (Davidson 2007). As a result, when the KPK came under attack, there was no mass-based movement or institutional alliance capable of defending it, leaving the commission politically isolated and vulnerable to elite retaliation (Widojoko 2017).

4.2 Case Study 2: The Special Task Force for Upstream Oil and Gas Business Activities

Like the KPK, the Special Task Force for Upstream Oil and Gas Business Activities emerged from governance reform pressures international donor agencies exerted on Indonesia in the wake of Suharto's downfall in 1998. Multilateral donor organizations such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank made stronger oversight of the country's lucrative oil and gas industry one of their primary conditions in exchange for financial assistance. In essence, multilateral donor organizations pressed Indonesia to formalize robust regulatory bodies designed to monitor and audit the sector.

Responding to these external pressures, the Indonesian parliament passed Law No. 22/2001 Concerning Oil and Gas. The legislation ended the decades-long monopoly of state-owned oil firm Pertamina over both the commercial and regulatory aspects of the industry. Pertamina's dual role had proven prone to conflicts of interest, often allowing politically connected elites to divert lucrative contracts. Law No. 22/2001 was heavily influenced by the conviction, prevalent among international donors at the time, that breaking up Pertamina's powers and creating a dedicated watchdog would improve

governance in the upstream oil and gas sector. This reform was expected to reduce corruption.

As part of these reforms, in 2002 the Regulatory Taskforce for Upstream Oil and Gas Business Activities (Badan Pelaksana Kegiatan Usaha Hulu Minyak dan Gas Bumi, BP Migas) was formed to serve as an independent regulatory agency, separate from Pertamina. Donors strongly supported this separation of commercial and regulatory functions, hoping it would reduce corruption in a sector vital for Indonesia's export revenues. The existence of an agency tasked with reviewing Production Sharing Contracts (PSCs), approving annual work programs, and overseeing bidding processes aligned with the technocratic ideals of "good governance" promoted by the IMF and the World Bank.

However, BP Migas did not last long in its original incarnation. In 2012, the Constitutional Court declared the arrangement unconstitutional, arguing it violated Article 33 of Indonesia's constitution, which places natural resources under the direct control of the state. Following that landmark ruling, then President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono quickly established the Special Task Force for Upstream Oil and Gas Business Activities via Presidential Regulation No. 9/2013 on Implementation of Management of Natural Oil and Gas Upstream Business Activities. SKK Migas effectively replaced BP Migas but largely inherited the latter's original functions, continuing to represent the state's interests while regulating the upstream oil and gas sector. However, even after the creation of SKK Migas, many of the donor-driven expectations for enhanced transparency and reduced corruption faced serious obstacles. Tensions among political actors competing for access to resources in the oil and gas sector quickly revealed the limits of top-down donor-led anti-corruption prescriptions with an institutional focus.

Lack of Horizontal Accountability Undermined SKK Migas

A key factor that undermined the effectiveness of SKK Migas was the absence of robust horizontal accountability mechanisms that would have prevented abuse within and emanating from the regulatory agency. In principle, SKK Migas was intended to act as an independent regulator "standing above politics," empowered to oversee the upstream oil and gas sector with minimal outside interference. However, powerful players in the Indonesian executive and legislature systematically exploited SKK Migas's discretionary authority over project approvals, awarding of contracts, and overall sector regulation. With no equally strong institutional check on its operations, SKK Migas not only became a target of extortion from powerful elites but also a conduit for corrupt practices from within.

This dynamic was starkly illustrated when several high-ranking officials first at BP Migas and then at SKK Migas were arrested on corruption charges (Setuningsih 2014). Evidence emerged of a revolving-door type arrangement, in which top SKK Migas personnel demanded "gratifications" from companies in exchange for project approvals or speedy budgetary disbursements. Meanwhile, certain members of Parliament pressured SKK Migas leaders to provide them with "Lebaran bonuses," namely informal payments typically expected around the end of Ramadan, when many Indonesians exchange gifts or money. Members of Parliament also asked for other unofficial payments in exchange for supporting budgetary allocations for the Ministry of Energy and Mineral Resources, in which SKK Migas is situated. Because the legislature effectively had no

independent watchdog policing collusion with regulators, bribes were demanded and paid under the table, unchallenged by other institutional actors.

Such weak horizontal checks, combined with overlapping responsibilities in the energy sector, created an environment in which SKK Migas's multimillion-dollar oil and gas contracts became tools for political and personal gain. Reporting to the Ministry of Energy and Mineral Resources but also subject to parliamentary control over budgets and the legal framework, the agency was vulnerable to unaccountable bargaining. Legislators from dominant parties could pressure SKK Migas executives to distribute payments through their networks to cement loyalties or repay political favors, while SKK Migas officials often felt compelled to pay legislators to secure continued budget approvals and policy support. At times, these opportunities were "rotated" among major parties so all could share in the illicit spoils (Buehler 2020, 13).

In short, the repeated investigations and convictions of SKK Migas leaders reflect how inadequate horizontal accountability hobbled the agency's ostensible mission to regulate the sector transparently. Attempts at top-down oversight, like moving SKK Migas under the Ministry of Energy and Mineral Resources when it was established, did little to limit parliamentary influence or rein in embedded networks of rent-seeking.[20] Without an empowered judiciary or parallel legislative committee that could rigorously scrutinize SKK Migas decisions, the agency was easily corrupted by political demands, to which it often reacted by asking for bribes from companies in order to pay off Parliament. Due to a lack of horizontal accountability within the Indonesian political settlement, SKK Migas failed to safeguard the public interest in Indonesia's vital upstream oil and gas sector.

Lack of Vertical Accountability Undermined SKK Migas

Another significant constraint on SKK Migas's effectiveness lay in the weak mechanisms of vertical accountability that resulted from Indonesia's post-1998 political settlement. In principle, citizens via political parties and civil society groups should have exercised pressure on SKK Migas to ensure that it safeguarded public interests and state revenue flows in the upstream oil and gas sector. Yet, most Indonesians lacked direct channels through which they could track or influence the agency's performance. Because SKK Migas largely operated under a complex legal and technical framework (Buehler 2020), it remained relatively inaccessible to ordinary people, who frequently struggled to grasp the multi-layered contracts and regulations underpinning the industry.

An additional complication was the limited role that political parties played in monitoring SKK Migas on behalf of the electorate. While the legislature formally oversees government agencies, party leaders often pursued personal or factional agendas rather than relaying citizens' concerns upward for reasons outlined earlier. Indeed, some Members of Parliament were complicit in corruption scandals involving SKK Migas, demanding payments in exchange for budget approvals or favorable oversight reports. This meant that the legislative branch, which in theory might have acted as a conduit for voter demands, instead became a weak link in the chain of democratic accountability. The following anecdote illustrates how a lack of vertical accountability undermined the

[20] SKK Migas' predecessor, BP Migas, had been an independent agency not under the control of the Ministry of Energy and Mineral Resources (Taufik 2016).

foreign donor-initiated anti-corruption interventions in the oil and gas sector. Remember that BP Migas, the original task force, was declared unconstitutional by the Indonesian National Parliament in 2012, as it was allegedly enabling the exploitation of Indonesia's natural resources by foreign powers. Here is the actual reason why BP Migas was declared unconstitutional:

> Despite being an efficient and decisive [BP Migas] chairman, [Raden] Priyono did not always observe the nation's anti-corruption laws. [A BP Migas] contact recounts how subcontractors that wanted to have their bids decided upon favorably by BP Migas were typically directed by Priyono to visit parliamentarians from selected political parties. Priyono would direct one subcontractor to a parliamentarian from one party, the next subcontractor to a parliamentarian from the next party, and so on, so that largesse would be spread equally between parties. Visited parliamentarians would request payment in exchange for their willingness to recommend to Priyono that favorable consideration be given to that subcontractor.
>
> Priyono would send would-be subcontractors to large, secular parties (like the at-that-time ruling Democrat Party, the Suhartoist Golkar party and the nationalist PDI-P party), but tended not to send the contractors to smaller Islamic parties (like PAN, PKB, PBB, and PPP). These smaller, and (at that time) out-of-favor parties (and/or in some case, their affiliated religious organizations) rebelled, and eventually brought a challenge against BP Migas to the Constitutional Court. The head of the court at that time, Mahfud Mahmodin, who was close to these Islamic parties, helped to bring about a ruling that [BP Migas] was unconstitutional. (Informant 21, quoted in Buehler 2020, 13)

Civil society organizations, too, faced barriers in their attempts to scrutinize the oil and gas sector in general and the workings of SKK Migas in particular. Many NGOs and think tanks lacked both the financial resources and the specialized technical expertise to consistently monitor SKK Migas' procurement processes or contractual arrangements. Meanwhile, grassroots movements that could potentially mobilize broader public opinion around corruption or mismanagement in natural resource sectors remained fragmented and relatively isolated from the policymaking arena. As a result, citizen-led advocacy lacked the sustained power to pressure SKK Migas into improving its governance practices.

Without a potent civic constituency to raise alarms about irregularities, political elites saw little need to respond to public demand for accountability in the upstream oil and gas sector. In effect, political leaders were more attentive to intra-elite bargaining than to mass-based pressures for cleaner, more equitable resource management. This dynamic enabled SKK Migas to operate with minimal public scrutiny, thereby weakening the checks that broad electoral participation and activism might have provided. Whenever allegations surfaced, such as bribery within SKK Migas's leadership, they seldom stirred widespread public protest or continuous demands for deep reaching institutional reforms. Consequently, major decisions about production sharing contracts, procurement, and revenue allocation were conducted almost entirely within elite circles, thereby remaining opaque to ordinary Indonesians. This undermined vertical accountability, one of the most vital prerequisites for ensuring effective, corruption-free oversight in Indonesia's upstream oil and gas sector.

5. Suggestions for Anti-corruption Program Design Informed by Indonesia's Political Settlement

An accountability deficit running along both vertical and horizontal lines is the defining consequence of Indonesia's competitive clientelist political settlement. Such a political settlement offers few domestic leverage points to effectively contain corruption, as most players who matter have been co-opted into the ruling coalition and therefore have an interest in retaining the status quo. Hence, to tackle corruption in Indonesia more effectively means to address the root causes of Indonesia's accountability deficit identified above.

Earlier in this paper, an examination of Indonesia's political settlement revealed a complex set of factors underlying the country's accountability deficit. This deficit stems from a competitive clientelist system in which power is fragmented both vertically and horizontally: weakly institutionalized, non-programmatic political parties, and high campaign costs undermine vertical accountability, while oversized ruling coalitions and elite collusion erode horizontal checks and balances. These dynamics, reinforced by material inequality and the dominance of a narrow elite class, create a stable but corrupt political order resistant to meaningful reform.

Donor agencies increasingly recognize that the roots of corruption in Indonesia lie not only in weak institutions or unethical individuals, but also in the broader political system. In fact, as early as 2001, a USAID report on corruption in Indonesia recognized that since corruption is deeply embedded in the country's political order it cannot be understood or tackled solely through administrative reform (Goodpaster 2001, 18). Attempts to contain corruption must therefore change the political and economic conditions that enable it.

However, this recognition creates a fundamental dilemma. While changing political conditions are central to curbing corruption, most donor agencies are bound by formal commitments to political nonintervention in aid-recipient countries. This "catch-22" limits their ability to address corruption at its source, compelling them to focus instead on technical fixes and institution-building efforts that most of the time fail to engage with the political realities on the ground. Nevertheless, even within these constraints, there remain feasible strategies that can help reshape the current political settlement with the aim to narrow Indonesia's accountability deficit that facilitates corruption. These strategies, outlined in the following sections, do not require overt political intervention, but rather aim to shift public perceptions, empower new political actors, and create the conditions for more meaningful accountability.

5.1 Reconceptualize Corruption as a Political Problem Embedded in Elite Settlements

At its core, more effective anti-corruption interventions in Indonesia will first require a fundamental reconceptualization of corruption in the public discourse. In mainstream media, donor programming, and even parts of the academic literature, corruption is still largely framed as a moral failing or the result of institutional flaws (Rodan and Hughes 2014, 1–27; Buehler 2015). This framing narrows the perceived solutions to technocratic

fixes, codes of conduct, ethics training, and asset declarations, while ignoring the underlying structures that allow corruption to persist.

A more politically grounded analysis must first frame corruption as a symptom of Indonesia's competitive clientelist settlement, in which competing elites rely on corruption to finance campaigns, secure loyalty, and maintain coalitions. In such a system, corrupt behavior is not a deviation, it is part of the survival strategy for actors who lack ideological roots or sustainable party financing. Corruption in Indonesia helps stabilize the political status quo. This insight reframes corruption as a problem of political incentives, not ethics or enforcement gaps.

To support this shift in public understanding, donor agencies and reformers must work to reshape the narrative ecosystem around corruption in Indonesia. While the country retains a relatively vibrant media landscape compared to its regional peers, much of the investigative journalism that exposes elite wrongdoing is short-form, reactive, and donor-dependent. In-depth, structural investigations, those that map elite capture across ministries, parties, and SOEs, remain rare, underfunded, and high-risk. Moreover, media ownership is increasingly concentrated in the hands of political figures or corporate groups with direct stakes in corrupt activities (Lim 2012), thereby undermining the editorial independence needed for sustained reporting.

In response, donors should pivot away from short-cycle "watchdog grants" and instead support the creation of a permanent Center for Investigative Journalism in Indonesia, modeled on entities like the Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism (PCIJ) or the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP). This institution should be staffed by independent journalists and forensic accountants, linked to academic and civic partners, and equipped to run long-term investigations into systemic corruption, campaign finance, and procurement cartels. As Elizabeth Dávid-Barrett and Mihály Fazekas (2020) emphasize, competitive, transparent information ecosystems are among the most powerful indirect tools to curb corruption, not only by informing the public, but by changing how elites perceive the risks of collusion.

In the Indonesian context, reframing corruption in the public discourse also addresses both vertical and horizontal accountability deficits. Better public information allows voters and citizen groups to more effectively scrutinize elite behavior, thereby strengthening vertical accountability even in the absence of strong institutions. At the same time, sustained exposure of collusive party practices, SOE kickbacks, and judicial manipulation can create reputational and political costs for actors within the governing coalition. All this may improve horizontal accountability by introducing fissures in elite cohesion. In short, changing how corruption is framed and reported is not a soft add-on to legal reform. It is a precondition for changing the political calculus that sustains Indonesia's current corruption equilibrium.

5.2 Empowering Societal Actors and Broadening Political Participation

Indonesia's vertical accountability deficit is not simply the product of weak electoral institutions or unresponsive parties. It is rooted in deeper patterns of material inequality and representational exclusion that follows from it, as the paper has shown. Vertical accountability is weak because broad swathes of the population lack the financial and

organizational power to hold elites accountable. While much donor programming has focused on technocratic oversight through NGO "watchdogs," these efforts have largely failed to generate sustained democratic pressure from below. Instead, as Rodan and Hughes (2014) argue, international donors have often professionalized and pacified civil society, pressuring NGOs to "count" data on government services rather than "shout" about the abuse of public office for private gain.

Prescriptions such as funding NGOs to "name and shame" corrupt officials have repeatedly bounced off Indonesia's political realities because these groups are largely concentrated in Jakarta and are donor-dependent, fragmented, and disconnected from broad-based societal mobilization. They have few ties to labor, rural, or religious constituencies. Their protests, like those following the 2019 weakening of the KPK, have been episodic and sporadic, with little impact on disrupting the stability of Indonesia's political settlement. In short, the fundamental problem is that current Indonesia's NGOs lack the muscle to demand more than symbolic reforms, as the article showed earlier.

5.2.1 Supporting Grassroots Movements

As Rose-Ackerman (2011) and Elizabeth Dávid-Barrett et al. (2020) note, corruption is best challenged when new entrants are empowered to reshape the political field. In this context, external funders must redirect small-grants windows away from think tanks and professionalized NGOs and toward membership-based mass organizations. These may include peasant cooperatives, pesantren-linked community groups, or grassroots organizations such as waste-picker unions. Such groups represent not only untapped constituencies for reform but also a viable counterweight to elite dominance (Anugrah 2015), especially when organized around livelihood and redistributive demands. Supporting these groups will also contribute directly to reducing material inequality, which remains a structural barrier to vertical accountability (Carroll 2010; Regilme 2021).

Support for these organizations must go beyond project funding. Donors should invest in movement-building infrastructure: long-term training in political organizing, digital security, community-based fundraising, and leadership development. Funds should also be directed toward helping these actors enter formal politics, whether by forming their own parties or negotiating platforms with the few reformist electoral vehicles that exist in Indonesia's party system. Overcoming barriers created by incumbent elites, such as laws and regulations aimed at sustaining the status quo, will also require sustained legal and technical assistance. [21]

5.2.2 Strategically Exploiting Divisions among Elites

Moreover, external funders should aim to reduce vertical accountability gaps where elite competition in Indonesia's competitive clientelism creates an opening. One such

[21] For instance, such movements need the resources to comply with the territorial requirements stated in Indonesia's Law of the Republic of Indonesia Number 2 of 2011 concerning the Amendment to Law Number 2 of 2008 concerning Political Parties. This law requires political parties to establish "[c]hapters in all provinces and in no less than 75% (seventy five percent) of all regencies/municipalities in each of the provinces, and in no less than 50% (fifty percent) of all counties in each of the regencies/municipalities" (Article 3b). This makes establishing party structures in Indonesia an extremely expensive undertaking that essentially shuts out a lot of interests from the party system. This supports the status quo.

area of competition is the conflict between national and subnational elites over resource allocation, particularly in oil, gas, and land. Local officials often seek greater control over resource rents, while Jakarta pushes back via fiscal transfers and regulatory control. Donors can leverage this tension by expanding transparency frameworks like the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI) to cover district budgets and village funds, both of which are frequent targets of misappropriation (Aguilar et al. 2011, 16).

Currently, the EITI is a global standard for promoting transparency and accountability in the extractives sector. This means that countries that are signatories to the EITI, such as Indonesia, which joined in 2010, are required to ensure that companies disclose payments to the government, such as royalties and taxes. In turn, governments disclose the revenues they have received from these companies. If discrepancies arise between what companies report as paid and what governments report as received, independent audits are conducted to reconcile the differences. Essentially, a tripartite multi-stakeholder group including civil society actors, private sector companies, and the government monitor national resource flows in the extractive sector.

Expanding an EITI-like initiative to the subnational budget process in Indonesia would involve the publication of district budgets (Anggaran Pendapatan dan Belanja Daerah, APBD), which include routine (Dana Alokasi Umum, DAU) and earmarked fiscal transfers (Dana Alokasi Khusus, DAK) from the national government, as well as local taxes and natural resource revenues. These budgets would be accompanied by disaggregated revenue and expenditure reports, along with publicly accessible procurement data. Discrepancies between what local officials report as having received and national officials claim to have transferred would again be monitored by local stakeholder groups that include the types of mass-based civil society organizations mentioned above in addition to local businesses, media, and community representatives.

An EITI-like set up aiming to improve vertical accountability in Indonesia's competitive political settlement by taking advantage of rivalries and competition across government layers could be expanded even further down in Indonesia's administrative hierarchy. Village fund allocations, projects, and contractor names could be shown publicly on billboards, village websites, and printed posters. Village-based social auditors could be trained in basic budget oversight. These social auditors would be selected through village deliberation forums (Musyawarah Desa, Musdes). The findings of these social audits would be made public online, on local radio stations, and in local newspapers.

International donors could support such initiatives by providing grants to mass-based civil society organizations to conduct such audits with the help of NGOs that specialize in local budget monitoring such as Indonesian Corruption Watch (ICW) and The Indonesian Forum for Budget Transparency (Forum Indonesia untuk Transparansi Anggaran, Seknas Fitra). International donor agencies could also fund existing open-source digital platforms such as SatuData or fund new village-level dashboards. Most importantly, accompanying such initiatives for improved transparency are funding for training social auditors and funding their subsequent work through reimbursing travel costs, materials, and legal costs. Finally, donor agencies could provide access to infrastructure grants and blended finance only to districts and villages that meet certain accountability benchmarks.

While earlier donor efforts to promote transparency often demobilized civil society, reducing NGOs to "counters" of compliance data rather than advocates for systemic reform, the strategy proposed here aims to repurpose public monitoring as a political tool. By embedding disaggregated budget tracking in mass-based, locally rooted coalitions and linking findings to contested political fault lines such as revenue sharing, the proposed strategy transforms monitoring from a technocratic exercise into a mobilizing and adversarial function. The goal is not just to count but to equip communities to contest elite misappropriation with credible, actionable evidence.

5.2.3 A Rapid-Response Fund for Strategic Civil Society Litigation

Finally, International donors could also help strengthen vertical accountability in Indonesia by establishing a rapid-response fund for civil society litigation. This would be a pooled resource that allows civil society organizations of the kind mentioned above, namely whistleblowers, journalists, and public-interest lawyers, to immediately access legal, financial, and security support wherever transparency and accountability in general and anti-corruption initiatives and institutions in particular are under attack. Potential threats that such a rapid response fund would help protect against include elite attempts to revise or weaken anti-corruption legislation and institutions, the (physical) intimidation or legal harassment through Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPPs) (Sulistiawati and Zain 2025), as well as the defunding or dissolution of independent oversight bodies.

Such a rapid response fund for civil society litigation would be managed by a neutral host. This could be a trusted university or an international civil society consortium. Funds would be released within a matter of days based on simple eligibility criteria such as proof of an urgent threat, media coverage, and legal standing. Funds would be used to pay legal fees and expert witness support for urgent lawsuits. These could also pay for temporary relocation or digital security for targeted individuals or expenses for strategic communications including fact-checking, press conferences, as well as court monitoring and trial observation to reduce intimidation.

Skeptics may argue that a rapid response fund for civil society litigation faces a "last-mile" corruption challenge. As pointed out earlier in this paper, Indonesian courts are notoriously corrupt. If the judiciary itself is compromised, the entire logic of a rapid-response civil society litigation fund seems to collapse. Even if investigations, audits, or lawsuits are strong, they die in court because the bench is part of the same corruption network.

However, in line with the main argument of this article, that the drivers of corruption are political in Indonesia and elsewhere, litigation should be seen as a political act, not just a legal one. Even in countries with a corrupt judiciary, strategic litigation may buy time, potentially delaying the rollback of anti-corruption legislations and institutions. It may also generate publicity by spotlighting judicial bias and naming elite interests. Finally, strategic litigation may trigger social mobilization and document the abuse of public office for private gain for institutional bodies.

In short, strategic litigation, even if unlikely to score legal victories in a judicial system as corrupt as Indonesia's, will put elite malfeasance on the record. Moreover,

it will give activists and journalists a legal event around which to organize. The act of filing a lawsuit, particularly in a coordinated, media-savvy way, can be more powerful than the actual verdict. The rapid-response fund for civil society litigation should therefore be seen primarily a mobilizing tool rather than a legal remedy. Non-verdict "wins," such as forcing a judge to recuse themselves or exposing their elite ties, can be powerful outcomes. Making elite interference visible to voters, donors, and journalists; creating legal precedents for future reform movements; and disrupting elite timelines by delaying a land seizure, procurement deal, or the revision of an important law all help to alter the informal environment in which corruption thrives. Since corruption networks thrive on secrecy, speed,[22] and impunity, a rapid response fund for civil society litigation can improve visibility, disruption collusion, and shift the narrative surrounding elite interests.

To summarize, international donors should invest in membership-based mass organizations and accompanying movement-building training, not consultancy NGOs. Indonesia's political settlement will change once new organized interests enter the political arena. Broadening the *range* and not just the *number* of players participating in Indonesian politics by lowering entry barriers to the formal political arena, while also providing new tools to strategically exploit elite rivalries would start reducing the vertical accountability deficit in Indonesia's political settlement in several ways: They would provide citizens with information and tools to challenge local politicians. Such measures would also reduce elite capture by making budget data and procurement decisions harder to hide, while building civic capacity to challenge corruption based on empirical data.

5.3 Reforming Party Finance and Building Market-Based Oversight Mechanisms

While vertical accountability focuses on empowering citizens to pressure elites, strengthening horizontal accountability requires institutional mechanisms that constrain elite collusion. In Indonesia, the horizontal accountability deficit is driven by the dominance of oversized post-election coalitions, a weak and compromised opposition, and political finance structures that lock parties into dependence to private donors and on state access. Traditional reforms aimed at enhancing institutional checks, to contain corruption, such as strengthening local parliaments or watchdog agencies, have often failed or backfired. For instance, Law No. 22/ 1999 on Local Government required local government heads to submit an accountability report to local parliaments each year. Only if local parliaments approved this accountability report was the local government head allowed to continue their tenure. Local parliaments immediately weaponized this "accountability mechanism" to extort bribes from local executives in exchange for approving the report. Similarly, watchdog agencies, though once promising, have been systematically defanged through legal revisions and political capture. Relying on

[22] See, for instance, Steve Bannon's concept of "muzzle velocity" during the first and second Trump administration in the USA. Bannon argued that the media "can only focus on one thing at a time" and that the Trump administration's strategy was to "flood the zone" with multiple initiatives so that journalists would be overwhelmed. The tactic was to move so quickly and relentlessly that no coherent opposition could form and no single issue could be scrutinized effectively (Klein 2025).

institutional reforms alone therefore risks reinforcing elite collusion rather than curbing it, as the two case studies earlier have aptly shown.

A more strategic approach targets the financial structures that force Indonesian political parties to depend on big donors and to skim state budgets to sustain their operations. This is in line with findings by Dávid-Barrett et al. (2020) who highlight that external financing structures, if properly shielded from elite capture, can tilt the political economy toward competition rather than collusion. In the case of Indonesia, Mietzner (2015) has shown that the political finance system was deliberately designed to fail, forcing parties to depend on illicit fundraising, clientelist networks, and oligarchic backers. International donors operating in Indonesia should therefore support a vote-based system of public party financing with strict transparency rules and conditional access. There are three elements to such a reform program.

5.3.1 Fund Technical Assistance for Vote-Based Party Subsidy Pilots While Localizing and Shielding from Capture

In theory, funding technical assistance to the Ministry of Finance (MoF) and the General Elections Commission (Komisi Pemilihan Umum, KPU) to design and implement vote-based political party subsidies seems like a politically neutral entry point into reforming Indonesia's corrupt party finance landscape.[23] However, both institutions are embedded within the broader political structures that blunt reformist efforts in Indonesia. While the MoF enjoys a relatively technocratic reputation in Indonesia, it remains vulnerable to political interference in sensitive areas such as party financing. The KPU, though formally independent, faces mounting partisan pressures, particularly in the lead-up to elections. Direct donor engagement with these institutions, without insulating the process, risks reproducing the very elite capture that sustains corruption.

To navigate this risk, a more promising approach involves localizing party financing reform. Instead of piloting national subsidy systems directly through Jakarta-based ministries, donors should focus on provincial or municipal governments with relatively competitive local politics (Buehler et al. 2021). Critically, donor support should be tied to the establishment of a multi-stakeholder oversight committee comprising local mass-based civil society organizations of the kind mentioned above, independent media outlets, and academic institutions. These groups would co-monitor the subsidy's rollout, audit party eligibility, and verify fund allocation, strengthening both vertical and horizontal accountability simultaneously.

This strategy directly addresses horizontal accountability deficits by realigning incentives among political parties and administrative bodies. Subsidies reduce reliance on illicit campaign contributions, while external monitoring discourages collusive behavior. It also strengthens vertical accountability by enabling citizens and independent groups to monitor political financing transparently at the subnational level. Embedding transparency, participation, and oversight into the pilot process itself, rather than relying

[23] Vote-based party support means that a political party receives a certain amount of money for each vote that party won in the past election.

on goodwill from national bureaucrats, provides a pathway to rebalance Indonesia's political settlement incrementally.

5.3.2 Pair Subsidies with Real-Time Donation Disclosure While Relying on Public Pressure, Not State Enforcement

A central feature of credible public financing systems is real-time donation disclosure. However, expecting real-time transparency through Indonesia's formal electoral oversight bodies is unrealistic. Although disclosure laws exist, they are inconsistently enforced, and the institutions responsible, such as the KPU and law enforcement agencies, often lack both the capacity and the political autonomy necessary to sanction non-compliance (Mietzner 2015). This exposes a core flaw in many donor strategies. They assume that formal legal requirements will automatically produce compliance in contexts where state enforcement is politically compromised.

A more viable approach focuses on indirect enforcement through public pressure and increasing reputational costs. Instead of depending on state institutions alone, donors could fund the development of independent public ledgers, hosted by trusted academic-media coalitions, that track donations in real time. These platforms would list donations by donor, recipient, and amount, enabling full public scrutiny outside government control. Accompanying this, weekly compliance dashboards should highlight parties that fail to report or that receive suspiciously large or clustered contributions. Donors should also finance investigative journalism fellowships and training programs during election cycles to help media actors detect and publicize instances of illicit financing.

Such an approach bolsters horizontal accountability by creating visible consequences for parties and candidates who flout transparency norms, making it politically costly for elites to collude in hiding financial flows. Through visibility, reputational risk, and public mobilization, these measures reconfigure the incentives around party financing even within a politically captured state apparatus. The proposed dual strategy also strengthens vertical accountability by empowering citizens, journalists, and civic organizations to monitor and expose elite financial malpractice without having to rely on state action.

5.3.3 Introduce Mobile-Based Vouchers to Incentivize Small Donations

Encouraging small political donations is a recognized method for reducing the dependence of political parties on oligarchic backers. In wealthy countries, this is typically achieved through tax incentives. However, in Indonesia, only a minority of the electorate pays personal income taxes, and tax enforcement remains weak (Mietzner 2015, 596). Public trust in fiscal institutions is low, and relying on tax credits to stimulate political engagement would largely exclude the informal sector and the poor. Moreover, administrating tax credits creates bureaucratic complexities that could easily be captured or manipulated.

A more accessible model would involve offering mobile-based vouchers or e-cash incentives for verified small donations. Citizens who donate to political parties through accredited digital platforms, linked to their Resident Identity Card (Kartu Tanda

Penduduk, KPT), could receive small, instant rewards such as phone credit, cash rebates, or public utility discounts. Donor support could be channeled into matched funding pools to finance these rewards, with strict caps per citizen to prevent abuse. Implementation should start in urban centers with widespread digital payment adoption and should be rigorously audited to detect fraud or manipulation.

This strategy indirectly fosters horizontal accountability by reducing political parties' reliance on illicit funding networks tied to rent-seeking elites. Over time, encouraging a diversified and transparent funding base can gradually weaken the entrenched oligarchic party financing system that sustains Indonesia's corrupt political settlement. At the same time, it addresses vertical accountability deficits by creating an incentive structure that broadens citizen participation in political financing. By reducing the financial gap between ordinary voters and corporate donors, it empowers a wider cross-section of the electorate to influence party strategies and candidate selection.

In short, collectively, these interventions, vote-based party subsidies, real-time donation transparency, and grassroots financing mechanisms, represent a multipronged approach to reducing collusion and building checks within Indonesia's elite-dominated system. They work not by assuming ideal institutional conditions, but by leveraging incentives, public pressure, and reputational risks to shift elite behavior over time. In doing so, they reduce Indonesia's accountability deficit, thereby helping to rebalance Indonesia's political settlement toward more rules-based and competitive governance.

Moreover, these recalibrated strategies aim not only to avoid the political non-intervention paradox facing international donor agencies but to turn it into an advantage. By operating through transparency, incentives, and citizen empowerment, rather than direct political engineering, donors can reshape the political settlement underpinning corruption. In doing so, they contribute to closing both the vertical and horizontal accountability gaps that currently facilitate and maintain corruption in Indonesia without breaching their formal mandates of political neutrality.

6. Conclusion

Understanding corruption as a political issue bears several implications for the design of containment programs by international donors. One, it is essential that strategies be tailored to the specific political settlement they address. Two, devising context-specific interventions necessitates a comprehensive understanding of the historical underpinnings shaping the current political settlement. Acknowledging the historical factors that have contributed to present-day corruption reveals the structural conditions that have led to power imbalances, facilitating the abuse of public office for private gain.

In Indonesia specifically, effective anti-corruption interventions will need to be aimed at shifting the competitive clientelist settlement that sustains the current accountability deficit and the corruption that follows from it. This means, above all, addressing the economic and political conditions that sustain the current settlement. The paper therefore proposed reframing corruption as a political problem embedded in competitive clientelism, strengthening vertical accountability by investing in mass-based civil society and transparency mechanisms tied to local rivalries, and reducing horizontal collusion through reforms to party finance and oversight structures. These measures emphasize

indirect but sustained strategies, such as expanding investigative capacity, fostering grassroots mobilization, and redesigning political funding incentives. Such strategies gradually alter elite incentives and open space for more meaningful accountability.

While the measures proposed may reduce this accountability deficit, the Indonesian case also shows that the most effective anti-corruption interventions are likely to be indirect, must be sustained over a very long time horizon to demonstrate an effect, and are prone to generate political conflict. However, supporting groups that advance a vision of a more radically equitable political system offers a way to contain corruption. This requires a long-term commitment to political change and a willingness to confront conflict. Such an approach is arguably more effective than foreign donor agencies' current approach, which depoliticizes corruption, relies on collaboration with existing power elites, and operates within the short time horizons of project funding cycles.

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