# WHEN THE STATE TURNS AWAY FROM ITS PEOPLE:
## INDONESIA'S DEMOCRATIC CRISIS UNDER THE JOKOWI–PRABOWO ERA

### EDITORIAL

A state exists, at its most fundamental level, to secure the conditions in which people can live safely, justly, and with dignity. Government is not established merely to administer territory, maintain bureaucracy, or preserve political authority. Its legitimacy rests on a public mandate: to protect life, uphold the law, provide essential services, and create conditions for shared welfare. A government should therefore be assessed not only by economic growth, infrastructure, or the number of programmes it launches, but also by the quality of protection and opportunity experienced by ordinary people. When the state repeatedly fails to meet these responsibilities, the problem extends beyond administrative inefficiency. It reaches the moral basis of state authority itself.

The decline of a nation rarely begins with a single dramatic event. It may develop through the gradual normalisation of injustice, the weakening of institutional checks, the concentration of power, and the loss of public confidence in government. Constitutional institutions may remain intact, elections may continue, and official programmes may expand. Yet these formal signs of continuity cannot guarantee that the state still serves the public interest. The deeper warning appears when citizens increasingly doubt whether public institutions will protect them, treat them fairly, or listen to their grievances.

Indonesia's recent political trajectory deserves examination through this lens. The closing years of Joko Widodo's presidency were marked by controversies over political ethics, judicial independence, and the growing

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Vol. 3 No. 1 (2026) DOI: 10.66236/senarai.2026.3.1.I-XV

influence of family members in national politics. The administration of Prabowo Subianto, inaugurated on 20 October 2024, inherited those tensions while facing additional questions about programme delivery, public accountability, civilian supremacy, and the relationship between government and society. The Bertelsmann Transformation Index (BTI) 2026 identifies a significant decline in democratic standards in Indonesia. It classifies Indonesia as a "highly defective democracy" and attributes much of this regression to Jokowi's efforts to extend his political influence through family succession and to the use of state resources in the 2024 election. It also notes the growing political role of the military under Prabowo (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2026). The report is an important comparative assessment, although its observations on the new administration cover only its initial period and should not be treated as a final evaluation of Prabowo's entire presidency.

The controversy surrounding Gibran Rakabuming Raka's nomination as vice-presidential candidate in 2023 illustrates the institutional tensions inherited by the new government. Constitutional Court Decision No. 90/PUU-XXI/2023 created an exception to the minimum age requirement for candidates who had held elected regional office. This made it possible for Gibran, then below the ordinary minimum age of 40, to contest the election. The controversy intensified because the Chief Justice at the time, Anwar Usman, was Gibran's uncle. The Constitutional Court's Honorary Council subsequently found Anwar Usman guilty of a serious ethical violation and removed him from the position of Chief Justice (Constitutional Court of the Republic of Indonesia, 2023). The central issue was not simply the eligibility of one candidate. It concerned the independence of a constitutional institution whose authority depends on impartiality and public confidence.

The political implications extended beyond the courtroom. Reformasi in 1998 emerged partly as a rejection of concentrated power, nepotism, and the absence of meaningful checks and balances. The controversy surrounding Gibran's nomination revived questions about whether the safeguards created after Reformasi were sufficiently robust to prevent the use of public institutions for the benefit of political families. Subhan et al. (2026) identify weak political institutions and limited public participation as conditions that can enable dynastic politics. Saputra's (2026) qualitative study of political science students at Hasanuddin University also finds a range of responses to Gibran's candidacy, from principled criticism of the ethical issues to pragmatic acceptance of the political status quo. These findings are not representative of all Indonesian voters, but they show that the controversy has implications for political culture as well as electoral competition.

Tempo's special report, **"A Decade of Declining Democracy,"** published in July 2024, argued that democratic progress had been gradually

reversed during Jokowi's two terms and described the late stage of his administration through the concept of autocratic legalism (Tempo, 2024). This assessment is consistent with a broader scholarly debate about Indonesia's democratic regression. The significance of the 2024 transition, therefore, lies not only in the replacement of one president by another. It lies in whether the new administration can reverse the institutional tendencies that weakened democratic accountability during the preceding decade.

The Prabowo administration has faced particular scrutiny over the relationship between civilian government and the armed forces. In March 2025, parliament passed amendments to the TNI Law that expanded the range of civilian institutions in which active-duty military officers may serve. Reuters reported that civil society groups criticised the amendments for risking a return to aspects of the military's dominant role during the New Order (Sulaiman & Teresia, 2025). The government defended the changes as necessary for national defence and security. The controversy nevertheless raised a legitimate democratic question: how can the state ensure that military expertise contributes to public administration without weakening civilian oversight and accountability? The BTI 2026 report also notes the increased presence of military and police figures in senior government positions (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2026). These developments do not, by themselves, establish that Indonesia has returned to the New Order. They do, however, warrant sustained scrutiny because civilian supremacy is a central safeguard of democratic government.

These developments can be examined through several theories of political and civilizational decline. Ibn Khaldun's concept of 'asabiyyah describes the social solidarity that enables a political community to establish and sustain authority. In The Muqaddimah, he argues that the durability of political power depends not only on coercion or material resources but also on cohesion, justice, and the relationship between rulers and the community. When rulers become detached from collective interests and injustice becomes embedded in government, the solidarity that supports political authority begins to weaken (Ibn Khaldun, 1958). This perspective is relevant to Indonesia because national cohesion cannot be sustained by slogans of unity alone. Citizens must experience fairness in law, protection in public life, and genuine access to opportunity.

Arnold J. Toynbee's challenge-and-response framework offers a complementary explanation. Civilizations do not necessarily decline because they encounter severe challenges. They decline when their institutions and leaders fail to respond creatively and effectively to those challenges (Toynbee, 1947). In this sense, crises should be treated as tests of political leadership and institutional capacity. When the state repeatedly responds to public problems

only after harm has occurred, while leaving structural causes unresolved, its responses become reactive rather than transformative.

Robert I. Rotberg (2004) places the provision of public goods at the centre of state performance. Security, the rule of law, health, education, and protection from preventable harm are among the basic responsibilities through which citizens experience the state. Persistent failure in these areas can weaken legitimacy. This framework should not be used to label Indonesia a failed state on the basis of selected incidents. It is more appropriately used to identify warning signs of declining state capacity. Nancy Bermeo's (2016) account of democratic backsliding adds that democratic erosion need not involve a coup or the formal abolition of constitutional institutions. It can occur incrementally through executive aggrandisement, institutional manipulation, and the weakening of checks and balances. Together, these perspectives help explain how a state can remain formally operational while its democratic and social foundations become less secure.

One of the clearest human tests of state responsibility was the death of Affan Kurniawan, an online motorcycle taxi driver who was struck by an armoured police vehicle during demonstrations in Jakarta on 28 August 2025. Affan was reportedly completing a food-delivery order when he was caught in the unrest. He was not a political leader or a public official; he was a young worker trying to earn a living. His death therefore brought the consequences of state power into sharp human focus. Al Jazeera reported that the incident intensified protests already fuelled by public anger over living costs, lawmakers' allowances, wages, and the conduct of security forces (Al Jazeera, 2025). President Prabowo called for a thorough investigation and said that officers involved should be held accountable.




**Figure:** A Brimob tactical vehicle amid the demonstrations in Jakarta on 28 August 2025, during which online motorcycle taxi driver Affan Kurniawan was fatally run over. *Dok. Istimewa (as credited by AFU.id). Copyright and all*

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The incident should not be reduced to a question of institutional image. The state has a duty to ensure that the use of force is lawful, necessary, and proportionate, and to provide transparent accountability when that duty is breached. The National Police later reported that three officers who were passengers in the armoured vehicle had been found guilty of ethical violations and sanctioned (Indonesian National Police, 2025). That action is part of the factual record; it does not, on its own, resolve the wider questions about responsibility, adequacy of sanctions, and public confidence. Widiastuti (2025) treats the tragedy as a moment for reconsidering the integrity of Indonesia's democratic institutions. Retno and Annas (2026), in a study of a selected sample of Instagram comments, document expressions of cynicism, suspicion, anger, and demands for transparency concerning the police investigation. Their findings cannot be generalised to the entire population, but they illustrate how institutional legitimacy is contested in public discourse.

The same question of responsibility arises in the Free Nutritious Meals programme, or Makan Bergizi Gratis (MBG). The programme has an important social objective: improving children's nutrition and supporting human development. A commitment to children's health deserves recognition. Yet the moral value of a public programme depends not only on its stated purpose but also on the safety, fairness, and quality of its implementation. Sianturi (2025), in a study published in Frontiers in Communication, identifies ambiguity in the early public communication surrounding MBG and shows how the programme was understood simultaneously as a nutrition intervention, an economic initiative, and a flagship political commitment. Abidin et al. (2026) similarly argue that the programme's moral legitimacy depends on fair implementation, transparent governance, accountability, and responsible use of public funds.



**Figure**: Students receiving medical treatment at a hospital in Sidoarjo, East Java, after reportedly experiencing food poisoning following the consumption of meals provided under Indonesia's Free Nutritious Meal (Makan Bergizi Gratis/MBG) programme. The incident formed part of a series of suspected food-poisoning cases affecting students and teachers across several regions in Indonesia in early September 2026.*Reuters/Suryanto, as published by ABC News Indonesia. Copyright © Reuters/Suryanto. All rights reserved by the respective copyright holder. Accessed 22 November 2026, from ABC News Indonesia*

Food-poisoning incidents have made these requirements urgent. The Associated Press reported that, as of 2 September 2026, Health Ministry surveillance data associated MBG with 560 incidents affecting 50,059 people across 245 districts and cities in 36 provinces. The agency responsible for the programme said internal reviews had linked approximately 80 to 90 percent of earlier incidents to failures in food-safety procedures, including storage, ingredient handling, temperature control, and consumption deadlines (Karmini, 2026). In Sidoarjo, laboratory testing of food samples from a mass illness incident found bacterial contamination in one sample, although local officials cautioned that this alone did not establish the precise source of the outbreak (CNN Indonesia, 2026). On 12 November 2026, the Ombudsman's West Sumatra representative reported indications of maladministration in food-safety oversight in Agam and called for corrective action (Ombudsman of the Republic of Indonesia, 2026). These reports should be read carefully: not every suspected case has the same established cause. Taken together, however, they show that food safety and oversight remain central challenges for a programme operating at national scale.

The academic studies supplied for this paper also demonstrate why implementation quality matters. Faramitha et al. (2025), analysing two menu variants in four senior high schools in Makassar, found that the meals provided 610 to 742 kilocalories, depending on whether milk was included, and noted that carbohydrate contributions remained below one-quarter of the daily recommended allowance. Irwan et al. (2026), in a study of 125 students

at SMP Negeri 4 Pancarijang, found that students' perceptions of menu quality were the strongest factor associated with satisfaction. These are local studies and should not be treated as national evaluations. They nevertheless underline the need for nutrition standards, direct beneficiary feedback, and consistent quality control. A meal programme cannot be judged by the number of portions distributed if the food is unsafe, nutritionally inadequate, or poorly received by the children it is intended to serve.

Environmental protection provides another measure of whether the state takes its social obligations seriously. Forest and land fires are not simply ecological events. They affect public health, livelihoods, education, and the security of communities living near fire-prone areas. In August 2026, Al Jazeera reported that wildfires in West Kalimantan forced schools to close and led thousands of people to seek medical care after exposure to dense smoke and ash. Children and pregnant women were among those particularly vulnerable (Washington et al., 2026). Behind every hectare of burned land are people whose daily lives may be disrupted: parents worried about their children's breathing, workers unable to earn an income, and families facing the consequences of environmental damage they did not necessarily cause.

Research in the supplied materials shows that environmental accountability also faces institutional and legal obstacles. Nugraha et al. (2026), examining civil litigation over corporate forest and land fires in Riau, identify delays in enforcing court judgments and the absence of direct allocation of restoration funds for affected communities as barriers to effective environmental protection. Separen et al. (2026) find that forest-fire management requires coordination among fire services, disaster management agencies, the police, the military, and local administrations, while legal authority and inter-agency coordination remain challenging. These studies do not establish that every fire results from government neglect. They do show that prevention, enforcement, and recovery require sustained institutional capacity. The state's duty cannot end when the flames are extinguished; it must also protect residents, hold responsible actors to account, and support ecological and social recovery.

The Sekolah Rakyat programme raises a related question about the difference between an affirmative policy and a structural solution. The programme seeks to expand educational access for children from poor and extremely poor households, and that objective is legitimate. But education is a constitutional right for all citizens, not a benefit that should depend on access to a special institution. Zaini (2026) describes Sekolah Rakyat as an affirmative response to educational inequality and poverty, while warning that governance and educational capacity must be strengthened if the programme is to produce lasting social mobility. Anjainah and Manggalou (2026),

studying implementation in Surabaya, find that the programme has generally expanded access effectively, but also identify centralised decision-making, shortages of professional support staff, and the need to strengthen local institutional capacity.



**Figure:** Construction of the Sekolah Rakyat complex in Blambangan Village, Muncar District, Banyuwangi, East Java, Indonesia. The facility is designed as an integrated educational complex accommodating elementary, junior secondary, and senior secondary levels, with a planned capacity of approximately 1,000 students. The development was reported to be nearing completion in June 2026, reflecting the government's investment in expanding educational facilities for disadvantaged communities. *Banyuwangi Regency Government, as published on the official Banyuwangi Regency Government website. Individual photographer not identified. Copyright and reproduction rights remain with the original photographer/rightsholder. Accessed 22 November 2026, from Banyuwangi Regency Government*

Sutrisno et al. (2026) identify additional difficulties in student recruitment in Lebak Regency. Discrepancies between administrative poverty data and actual household conditions can exclude eligible children, while some families are reluctant to send children to boarding schools because they depend on them for domestic responsibilities or household income. These findings do not invalidate Sekolah Rakyat. Rather, they show that affirmative programmes must be sensitive to local realities and supported by accurate data, family engagement, and professional assistance. The larger policy risk emerges when a highly visible special programme is treated as a substitute for improving the national education system. The state must also address disparities in ordinary schools, teacher distribution, infrastructure, learning quality, and the economic pressures that prevent children from remaining in education. A programme for the poorest children should complement, not displace, the broader obligation to provide quality education to every child.




**Figure:** A television news broadcast featuring Indonesian Vice President Gibran Rakabuming Raka, accompanied by the headline "Supreme Court Decision Highlights Gibran's Educational Documents." The image relates to the legal controversy surrounding the recognition of Gibran's secondary education credentials and the Supreme Court's decision to annul the equivalency certificate issued by the Ministry of Education. *Screenshot from a YouTube news broadcast. Copyright and all reproduction rights remain with the original broadcaster and respective copyright holder. Accessed 22 November 2026, from YouTube*

The political climax of this period came with the resignation of Vice President Gibran Rakabuming Raka on 12 November 2026. The Cabinet Secretariat published President Prabowo's statement confirming that Gibran had presented a resignation letter to him that morning and then submitted the letter to the People's Consultative Assembly (MPR). The MPR separately announced that it had received the letter and that the vice-presidential office had become vacant, subject to the constitutional process (Cabinet Secretariat of the Republic of Indonesia, 2026; People's Consultative Assembly of the Republic of Indonesia, 2026). The letter, as read by the MPR Speaker, stated that Gibran was resigning at his own request but did not provide a specific explanation.

The context nevertheless matters. Reuters reported that Gibran's resignation followed calls by lawmakers for impeachment after rulings by the Constitutional Court and Supreme Court found that his overseas high-school qualifications did not meet the legal requirements for vice-presidential candidates. Reuters also reported Gibran's statement that his decision was personal and unrelated to the controversy over his academic credentials (Teresia & Widianto, 2026). These details must be kept distinct: the resignation is confirmed by official sources; the letter did not state a specific reason; and

the relationship between the resignation and the eligibility controversy was reported as part of the surrounding political context. The event should not be represented as proof that the state has collapsed. Its significance lies in the institutional and political questions it reopens about eligibility, constitutional accountability, and the durability of the governing alliance formed in 2024.

Taken together, these events are not caused by one policy or one individual, and they should not be forced into a simple chain of causation. Their analytical connection lies elsewhere. Each tests a different responsibility of the state: the duty to protect citizens from unlawful force; the duty to ensure the safety of public services; the duty to defend the environment and affected communities; the duty to make education genuinely accessible; and the duty to preserve constitutional integrity. The accumulation of these tests reveals a widening gap between the authority exercised by the state and its capacity to make that authority answerable to the public.




Figure: Indonesian Vice President Gibran Rakabuming Raka arrives at the Indonesian People's Consultative Assembly (MPR) complex in Jakarta on 12 November 2026, surrounded by members of the media, following his submission of a resignation letter to President Prabowo Subianto. His subsequent appearance at the MPR marked a significant development in Indonesia's political transition, as he formally submitted his resignation to the legislative institution amid mounting political pressure and controversy surrounding his educational credentials. *REUTERS/Willy Kurniawan. Copyright © Reuters. All rights reserved by the respective copyright holder. Accessed 22 November 2026, from CNA Indonesia*

Indonesia should not be declared a failure on the evidence discussed here. It retains constitutional institutions, a politically active civil society, significant economic resources, and the capacity for institutional correction. Yet these strengths should not become excuses for normalising democratic erosion or weak public accountability. The central question is whether the

government will use its authority to restore public trust or deepen the concentration of power that makes correction more difficult. That requires stronger judicial independence, effective legislative oversight, civilian supremacy, transparent investigations, robust food-safety regulation, environmental enforcement, and equitable investment in education. Most importantly, it requires a political culture in which criticism is treated as a necessary contribution to public life rather than as a threat to government stability.

A nation's strength is not measured only by the scale of its infrastructure, the reach of its programmes, or the confidence of its leaders. It is also measured by how it treats people who have the least power to defend their own interests. Affan's family deserves a credible account of his death and meaningful accountability. Children who receive meals at school deserve food that is safe and nourishing. Communities living through forest fires deserve protection, healthcare, and recovery. Children from poor households deserve more than a special school; they deserve an education system that does not reproduce their disadvantage. These are not separate acts of benevolence. They are basic obligations of a state that claims democratic legitimacy.

The resignation of a vice president may close one chapter in Indonesia's political history. Still, it cannot resolve the deeper questions that have accumulated since the final years of the Jokowi administration. The country's future depends on whether the Prabowo administration can strengthen institutions, restore accountability, and place public welfare above preserving political power. A nation does not lose its future merely when a leader leaves office. It places its future at risk when public institutions cease to recognise the suffering of the people they are meant to serve. When justice becomes selective, safety becomes a statistic, education becomes a symbol, and environmental protection becomes secondary to short-term interests, the decline is no longer confined to government performance. It reaches the moral and civilizational foundations of the nation itself.

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Keyword: democratic backsliding; legitimacy; state failure; social contract; civilizational decline; Indonesia

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## DECLARATIONS

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