



Democracy and State Capacity in Southeast Asia: A Comparative Qualitative Study of Indonesia and Vietnam

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the comparative development of democracy and state capacity in Indonesia and Vietnam. The study departs from the argument that democratic performance in Southeast Asia cannot be understood only through constitutional design or election procedures, but must also be analyzed through the relationship between participation, political control, institutional adaptability, and public legitimacy. Indonesia and Vietnam provide an important comparison because both countries have experienced strong state-led development, yet they differ significantly in regime type, electoral openness, and the structure of political competition. Using a descriptive qualitative approach, this study draws on academic literature, policy reports, and comparative governance frameworks to analyze how democratic practices are shaped by institutional arrangements in both countries. The findings indicate four main patterns. First, Indonesia demonstrates broader electoral participation and greater formal political pluralism, but it also faces persistent challenges related to elite consolidation, uneven institutional quality, and democratic fatigue. Second, Vietnam displays strong policy coordination and administrative continuity, yet its governance model remains constrained by restricted contestation and limited civil liberties. Third, both countries reveal that state effectiveness and democratic depth do not automatically move in the same direction. Fourth, the quality of democracy depends not only on elections, but also on accountability, civic space, and the distribution of political access. Thus, this article argues that democracy in Southeast Asia should be assessed through a broader governance lens that combines institutional openness, public responsiveness, and long-term political inclusion.

INTRODUCTION

Democracy remains one of the most debated concepts in political and governance studies because it is simultaneously normative, institutional, and practical. In one sense, democracy refers to a system of rule grounded in popular sovereignty, electoral competition, political equality, and accountability. In another sense, democracy is evaluated through daily institutional performance, the strength of public participation, the openness of civic space, and the extent to which state power can be monitored and corrected. Based on this understanding, the study of democracy cannot be confined to constitutions or election schedules alone. It must also examine how institutions distribute power, how citizens interact with the state, and how governments balance authority, representation, and policy effectiveness.

In Southeast Asia, the democratic experience is especially complex because countries in the region combine different regime trajectories, development paths, and state traditions. Some states formally embrace electoral competition and pluralist institutions, while others maintain centralized political systems with limited contestation. Through this regional diversity, democracy should not be treated as a single linear path. Rather, it should be understood as a contested process shaped by local institutions, historical legacies, elite adaptation, and state-society relations. Accordingly, comparative analysis becomes essential for identifying not only

differences between countries, but also the broader governance patterns that define the region.

Indonesia and Vietnam provide an analytically useful comparison. Indonesia is widely recognized as one of the largest electoral democracies in the world after its post-authoritarian transition, with repeated national and local elections, formal party competition, and a constitutionally protected democratic framework. At the same time, Indonesia continues to face challenges related to oligarchic influence, clientelistic politics, uneven law enforcement, and fluctuating protection of civil liberties. Freedom House's 2025 report categorizes Indonesia as "Partly Free" with a score of 56 out of 100, indicating that democratic procedures coexist with notable institutional and civic constraints.

Vietnam, by contrast, has achieved administrative continuity, strong party control, and consistent economic transformation under a one-party system led by the Communist Party of Vietnam. Its governance model is frequently discussed in terms of policy coordination, developmental discipline, and centralized direction. However, this model also restricts electoral competition, organized opposition, and civil liberties. Freedom House's 2025 assessment classifies Vietnam as "Not Free," and recent reporting highlights intensified restrictions on dissent and civic expression. These contrasting trajectories make Indonesia and Vietnam suitable cases for examining whether democratic openness and state effectiveness necessarily reinforce one another.

Through a broader comparative lens, the current global context also makes this discussion more relevant. The V-Dem Democracy Report 2025 describes a prolonged period of global autocratization, while the Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index 2024 reports another decline in the global average democracy score. In this context, the question is no longer only whether a country holds elections, but whether institutions remain accountable, whether civic participation retains meaning, and whether political systems can sustain legitimacy under social and economic pressure. Thus, a comparison between Indonesia and Vietnam is not merely descriptive; it contributes to larger debates about democratic resilience, hybrid governance, and the trade-offs between political control and public inclusion.

From a theoretical perspective, democracy may be approached through several complementary frameworks. First, procedural theories emphasize elections, contestation, and formal participation as the minimal criteria of democracy. Second, substantive approaches stress civil liberties, equality, and the actual ability of citizens to influence government. Third, governance-oriented perspectives focus on responsiveness, institutional quality, and the effectiveness of public authority. Through these perspectives, democracy cannot be reduced to a binary distinction between democratic and non-democratic systems. Instead, it becomes possible to analyze democracy as a layered phenomenon in which electoral institutions, civic freedoms, and governing capacity interact in different combinations.

Indonesia illustrates the tension between procedural expansion and institutional unevenness. The country has built a relatively open electoral arena, yet political competition is often influenced by established elites, party cartels, and transactional networks. In this context, elections may remain regular without necessarily deepening social accountability. On the other hand, Vietnam illustrates a different tension: strong policy coherence and administrative continuity may support state capacity, but limited contestation narrows the channels through which citizens can openly challenge power. Based on these contrasting patterns, the central analytical question is whether democratic quality should be assessed only through competition, or also through the broader relationship between participation, control, and state performance.

This article argues that a comparative examination of Indonesia and Vietnam can enrich the study of democracy by showing that political openness and administrative effectiveness are not always aligned. In many developing settings, democratic institutions may expand without fully transforming elite domination. Conversely, centralized systems may produce policy stability without providing adequate political rights. Accordingly, the study does not assume that one model entirely resolves the weaknesses of the other. Instead, it seeks to identify how each system produces its own strengths, limitations, and governance consequences.

This research is also important because comparative discussions on Southeast Asia often emphasize regime labels while paying less attention to how citizens encounter these systems through institutions, public services, and participation channels. A governance-based comparison allows democracy to be evaluated not only as an abstract regime type, but as an operational reality that affects representation, responsiveness, and inclusion. Through this approach, the article contributes to debates in comparative politics and public administration by bringing together democratic theory, governance analysis, and regional comparison.

Based on these considerations, this article addresses three main questions. First, how do Indonesia and Vietnam differ in their institutional patterns of democracy and political control? Second, what does the comparison reveal about the relationship between democratic openness and state capacity? Third, what lessons can be drawn for strengthening inclusive and accountable governance in Southeast Asia? Through these questions, the article aims to provide a nuanced account of democracy that goes beyond formal labels and instead highlights how political systems structure participation, legitimacy, and public authority in practice.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach to compare democracy and governance patterns in Indonesia and Vietnam. The research focused on the national political context of both countries and used **12 sources of data**, consisting of scholarly books, peer-reviewed journal articles, democracy assessment reports, and policy-related publications relevant to comparative politics and governance. The study did not rely on survey measurement or statistical testing; instead, it examined how democracy was interpreted and practiced through institutional arrangements, civic space, electoral structure, and state-society relations. Data were collected through document review, literature analysis, and comparative reading of governance reports that discussed elections, political competition, civil liberties, public accountability, and administrative performance in the two countries.

Through the analysis process, the data were reduced into key themes, namely political participation, institutional openness, state capacity, accountability, and public legitimacy. These materials were then interpreted using comparative politics and governance perspectives to identify convergences and contrasts between the two cases. To strengthen the credibility of the findings, the study applied source triangulation by comparing academic literature with recognized democracy monitoring reports and policy-oriented documents, while conceptual triangulation was used by reading the same evidence through procedural, substantive, and governance-based approaches to democracy. Through this method, the article sought to explain not only whether Indonesia and Vietnam differ, but also why those differences matter for democratic development and governance quality in Southeast Asia.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

1. Electoral openness and institutional contestation

Based on the comparative findings, the most visible distinction between Indonesia and Vietnam lies in electoral openness and the structure of political contestation. Indonesia institutionalizes elections as a central mechanism of regime legitimacy. Presidential, legislative, and local elections operate as recurring arenas in which parties compete, coalitions shift, and leadership is periodically renewed. Through these arrangements, citizens are formally given broader channels to influence the composition of government. In this context, democracy in Indonesia is strongly associated with procedural legitimacy, namely the idea that political authority should be formed through open competition and public voting.

However, broader electoral participation does not automatically produce deeper democratic equality. In Indonesia, elections often coexist with high campaign costs, the concentration of political power within elite networks, and the persistent role of patronage in shaping political access. Based on comparative democracy literature, this pattern reflects a condition in which procedural democracy is present, yet substantive equality remains uneven. Citizens may vote regularly, but their capacity to shape agendas, discipline elites, or overcome structural barriers is not distributed equally. Thus, the Indonesian case shows that democratic openness can expand without fully dismantling entrenched political hierarchies.

Vietnam presents the opposite institutional logic. Political authority is not organized through multiparty electoral contestation, but through a single-party structure that centralizes leadership and narrows the arena of public competition. Through this arrangement, policy direction tends to be more coherent and less vulnerable to short-term partisan fragmentation. On the other hand, the absence of open contestation restricts the possibility of organized opposition, leadership alternation through electoral competition, and independent public challenge to dominant authority. Accordingly, democratic evaluation of Vietnam cannot rely on procedural criteria in the same way as Indonesia.

The contrast between the two cases demonstrates that elections should be treated as necessary but insufficient indicators of democratic quality. Indonesia's electoral pluralism broadens access, yet it does not

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eliminate elite concentration. Vietnam's centralized order may reduce open political rivalry, yet it narrows democratic accountability. With demikian, comparative analysis shows that electoral procedures alone do not settle the question of democracy; what matters is how those procedures interact with broader institutional opportunities and constraints.

2. Civic space, accountability, and the distribution of political voice

A second major finding concerns civic space and the distribution of political voice. Democracy is not sustained only by the right to vote; it also depends on whether citizens, associations, journalists, academics, and civil society groups can speak, organize, and criticize power without disproportionate restriction. In this respect, Indonesia and Vietnam again illustrate sharply different models. Indonesia offers a comparatively wider civic arena, with multiple media actors, advocacy organizations, student movements, and issue-based mobilization. Through these channels, public criticism remains visible and politically consequential, even when institutions respond unevenly.

Yet Indonesia's broader civic space is not free from tension. Reports on recent developments point to concerns over pressure on dissent, arrests during protests, and ongoing challenges to the protection of expression and activism. This means that Indonesia's democratic environment should be understood as open but contested. Based on this condition, democratic quality depends not merely on the formal availability of civil liberties, but on the consistency with which those liberties are protected in practice. A democracy that tolerates participation selectively may preserve competition while weakening trust in accountability.

Vietnam, by contrast, operates within a much narrower civic environment. Public criticism, organized dissent, and oppositional politics face stronger controls, which reinforces the state's capacity to maintain ideological and political discipline. Through this model, the government reduces open contestation and keeps political communication more tightly managed. On the other hand, such control limits the ability of citizens to challenge public authority through autonomous civic channels. Accordingly, political voice becomes filtered through state-approved structures rather than shaped by open pluralist competition.

This difference is crucial because accountability depends on the distribution of voice. In a more democratic setting, accountability is not only vertical through elections but also horizontal and societal through media scrutiny, organized criticism, and civic mobilization. Indonesia possesses more of these mechanisms, though their effectiveness is uneven. Vietnam preserves a more orderly political field, but the channels for independent correction are more limited. Thus, the comparison suggests that democracy requires not only institutions of representation, but also institutions and practices that protect the social production of political criticism.

3. State capacity and democratic performance

A third finding concerns the relationship between state capacity and democratic performance. Public debate often assumes that democracy automatically improves governance, or that centralized control automatically produces efficiency. The comparison between Indonesia and Vietnam complicates both assumptions. Indonesia's more democratic framework provides wider participation and greater political pluralism, yet governance outcomes are often slowed by coalition bargaining, fragmented interests, bureaucratic inconsistency, and uneven enforcement. Through this pattern, democratic openness can produce negotiation and inclusion, but it can also generate policy delay and institutional compromise.

Vietnam offers a contrasting image. Strong party coordination and centralized authority can support administrative continuity, strategic direction, and policy discipline. Through this system, the state is often better positioned to move policy with fewer visible electoral disruptions. However, strong coordination should not be equated with democratic legitimacy. Governance may appear more coherent while still limiting citizens' capacity to openly influence direction, question power, or demand correction through independent institutions. Based on this comparison, state effectiveness and democratic depth should not be treated as identical variables.

The analytical significance of this finding is substantial. It shows that democratic systems need institutional strengthening if they are to convert participation into effective public problem-solving. At the same time, centralized systems require broader accountability if they are to avoid insulating authority from public scrutiny. In other words, democracy without institutional capacity risks frustration, while state capacity

without openness risks political closure. With demikian, the real challenge is not choosing between democracy and effectiveness, but designing institutions that combine participation, responsiveness, and governing competence.

The following table summarizes the core comparative patterns identified in this study.

Table 1. Comparative overview of democracy and governance in Indonesia and Vietnam

Dimension	Indonesia	Vietnam	Main implication
Electoral competition	Multiparty and regular elections	One-party political structure	Openness differs sharply
Civic space	Relatively broader but contested	Narrow and highly controlled	Political voice is unevenly distributed
Accountability	More formal channels for public scrutiny	Stronger state control, weaker independent challenge	Oversight capacity differs
State capacity	Often plural but fragmented	More centralized and coordinated	Effectiveness and democracy do not always align

Through this table, it becomes clear that neither case can be explained by a simple success-failure framework. Indonesia performs better in procedural openness and plural political participation, while Vietnam performs more strongly in centralized continuity and state discipline. However, each system carries trade-offs. Indonesia's challenge lies in converting openness into deeper accountability and institutional quality. Vietnam's challenge lies in expanding public voice and political inclusion without undermining governance stability. Accordingly, comparative democracy should focus on how systems balance participation, control, and state performance rather than ranking them solely by formal regime label.

4. Lessons for democratic governance in Southeast Asia

The comparison between Indonesia and Vietnam offers broader lessons for democratic governance in Southeast Asia. First, democracy should not be reduced to elections alone. Electoral procedures matter, but they must be connected to civil liberties, meaningful accountability, and fair access to political influence. Second, effective governance should not be understood as the opposite of democracy. A democratic system can perform well when it develops strong institutions, administrative coherence, and credible oversight. Third, centralized governance may deliver policy continuity, but without open accountability it risks limiting the social legitimacy needed for durable and inclusive rule.

Based on the findings, four key conclusions may be formulated. First, Indonesia demonstrates that democratic transition can institutionalize participation without fully resolving elite dominance. Second, Vietnam demonstrates that high degrees of coordination can coexist with restricted political contestation. Third, both countries reveal that democracy and state capacity should be analyzed as related but distinct dimensions. Fourth, the future of governance in the region depends on whether institutions can reconcile political inclusion with effective public administration.

Through this interpretation, the study also generates several policy-oriented recommendations. Democratic reform in Indonesia should move beyond electoral routine toward stronger accountability institutions, better protection of civic freedoms, and reduced barriers to equitable political participation. In Vietnam, governance reform would benefit from widening channels of public expression, institutionalizing more transparent accountability, and opening more space for social feedback within policy processes. More broadly, Southeast Asian governance debates should avoid false binaries between order and democracy. The more productive question is how institutions can maintain state effectiveness while ensuring that authority remains answerable to society.

Thus, the comparison does not produce a simplistic verdict that one country is wholly democratic and the other

wholly effective. Instead, it shows that both cases illuminate the unfinished relationship between legitimacy, participation, and governing capacity. In this sense, democracy should be understood not as a static model, but as a continuing institutional project that requires openness, correction, adaptation, and inclusion.

CONCLUSION

This article has examined democracy and governance comparatively in Indonesia and Vietnam and has shown that the relationship between political openness and state capacity is more complex than conventional assumptions often suggest. Indonesia represents a case of broader electoral competition, wider formal pluralism, and more visible civic participation. At the same time, it continues to face serious challenges related to elite consolidation, uneven accountability, institutional inconsistency, and pressures on civic freedoms. Vietnam, by contrast, illustrates a model of stronger administrative continuity and centralized coordination, yet one that remains constrained by limited political contestation and restricted civic space.

Based on the findings, the article argues that democratic quality should not be measured solely through the presence of elections, nor should governance effectiveness be measured only through policy discipline. Democracy becomes meaningful when citizens can participate, criticize, organize, and influence public authority within an accountable institutional framework. Similarly, state capacity becomes normatively stronger when effectiveness is supported by openness, public trust, and opportunities for correction. Through this lens, Indonesia and Vietnam should not be treated simply as opposites, but as cases that expose different tensions between inclusion, authority, and performance.

The comparative analysis further shows that democracy in Southeast Asia must be studied as a layered governance phenomenon. Indonesia demonstrates that procedural expansion does not automatically generate substantive equality, while Vietnam demonstrates that coordinated governance does not automatically generate democratic legitimacy. With demikian, the central lesson is that inclusive governance requires both institutional openness and administrative competence. The recommendations of this study are therefore directed toward strengthening accountability, protecting civic space, deepening public responsiveness, and improving institutional quality in ways that connect legitimacy with performance. If these elements can be developed together, democratic governance in Southeast Asia will be better positioned to become both stable and genuinely representative.

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