

EDITORS' INTRODUCTION

Governing under Pressure: Institutions, Vulnerability, and Political Change in Contemporary Indonesia and Asia

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Across Asia, governments and societies are confronting several transformations at once. Climate change is intensifying established patterns of disaster risk; rapid urbanization is reshaping relations between communities, land, and local knowledge; expanding administrative systems are creating new demands on citizens and public institutions; forced displacement continues across national borders; and electoral politics is increasingly intertwined with personalized leadership, digital communication, and fragmented information environments. These processes differ considerably in origin and scale, but they converge around a common problem: how do political and social institutions respond when the environments within which they operate are themselves changing?

Recent regional assessments underline the significance of this question. The Asian Development Bank identifies Asia and the Pacific as the world's most disaster-prone region and emphasizes the interconnected effects of climate change, environmental degradation, urbanization, and underlying vulnerability. Its *Disaster Risk Management Action Plan 2024–2030* consequently calls for greater attention to systemic risk, risk knowledge, institutional capacity, investment in resilience, and recovery arrangements rather than a narrow concentration on emergency response (Asian Development Bank 2024). ESCAP's *Rising Heat, Rising Risk: Policy Pathways for Regional Resilience*, published as part of the *Asia-Pacific Disaster Report 2025* series, similarly emphasizes the cascading consequences of rising heat and related hazards for health, food systems, infrastructure, cities, rural livelihoods, and ecosystems (United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific 2025).

Environmental risk, however, is only one dimension of the region's changing governance landscape. Southeast Asian governments are

simultaneously responding to expectations concerning institutional responsiveness, service delivery, transparency, public participation, and digital transformation. *Government at a Glance: Southeast Asia 2025* emphasizes both the considerable development of public institutions in the region and the continuing need to strengthen citizen engagement, digital government, administrative services, transparency, accountability, and institutional trust (OECD and Asian Development Bank 2025). These developments remind us that governance is experienced not only through constitutional arrangements or national policy announcements but also through everyday encounters with rules, public agencies, information systems, and local institutions.

Democratic politics is also being reshaped. International IDEA reports that significant democratic declines in Asia and the Pacific between 2019 and 2024 substantially outnumbered significant advances, with changes evident in such areas as access to justice, credible elections, and effective parliaments (International IDEA 2025). Indonesia forms part of this broader regional debate about the quality and resilience of democratic institutions. Scholarship on Indonesian democracy has likewise drawn attention to institutional weakening, political polarization, executive power, and pressures on democratic checks and balances during the post-authoritarian period (Power and Warburton 2020). At the same time, politics is increasingly embedded within rapidly changing information environments. ASEAN's *Work Plan for Information and Media 2026–2035* identifies artificial intelligence, digital journalism, social-media convergence, misinformation, and disinformation among the forces reshaping communication across Southeast Asia (Association of Southeast Asian Nations 2026).

Indonesia provides an especially revealing setting in which to examine these intersecting transformations. It combines large-scale electoral democracy and extensive decentralization with significant ecological and disaster exposure, rapid urbanization, institutional diversity, expanding digital communication, and participation in regional patterns of migration and displacement. Formal state institutions coexist with customary forms of authority and locally embedded systems of knowledge. Electoral politics operates through parties and formal rules but also through personalities,

digital platforms, campaign materials, and changing patterns of public interpretation. Administrative expansion can strengthen the capacity of government while simultaneously increasing the complexity of citizens' encounters with policies and institutions.

The seven contributions in this issue investigate these dynamics from different empirical locations. They examine Indigenous ecological knowledge and disaster mitigation, the environmental consequences of political campaigning, policy overload and institutional trust, Rohingya refugee protection, informal authority in local democracy, political party institutionalization, and the relationship between political exposure and acceptance. Despite their differences in theory, method, and object of analysis, they share an underlying concern: the relationship between formal institutions and the social worlds within which those institutions operate. They ask what happens when rules and organizations encounter local knowledge, environmental limits, administrative experience, differentiated vulnerability, customary legitimacy, organizational weakness, and citizens who do not necessarily interpret political information as political actors expect them to.

Ecological Knowledge, Resilience, and the Conditions of Continuity

The issue opens with Fadhli Fauzan Ilahi, Dede Syarif, Bukhori, and Asep Muhamad Iqbal's "Indigenous Ecological Knowledge under Urban Pressure: A Cultural Capital Case Study of Disaster Mitigation in Kampung Cireundeu." Its position at the beginning is significant. Rather than beginning with the institutions most commonly associated with politics, it begins with community knowledge, ecological practice, and the social reproduction of resilience. This reminds us that the capacity to respond to collective risk is produced not only through governments and regulations but also through accumulated relationships between communities and their environments.

The article examines Kampung Cireundeu in Cimahi, West Java, where customary forest zoning, ecological values, ritual practices, disaster memory, and the cassava-based *rasi* food system constitute interconnected forms of ecological knowledge. These practices are not approached

simply as isolated examples of “local wisdom.” Instead, the study asks how ecological knowledge is enacted, transmitted, and sustained, and how it functions as a form of cultural capital under conditions of urban and environmental pressure.

This approach connects with a substantial literature on knowledge and disaster risk reduction. Mercer et al. (2010) demonstrate the value, as well as the difficulty, of integrating Indigenous and scientific knowledge in efforts to reduce community vulnerability. Gaillard and Mercer (2013) subsequently argue that effective disaster risk reduction requires stronger connections between local and scientific knowledge, bottom-up and top-down processes, and diverse institutional actors. The significance of these arguments lies partly in their rejection of a simple hierarchy in which scientific knowledge is treated as universally authoritative and local knowledge as supplementary.

The Cireundeu case adds a particularly important dimension to this discussion: knowledge cannot be separated from the material and social conditions that enable its reproduction. Land-use change, urbanization, environmental pressure, and uncertainty surrounding customary territory can weaken the contexts within which ecological practices remain viable. Formal recognition of Indigenous knowledge is therefore not sufficient on its own. Sustaining it may also require safeguarding community institutions, ecological spaces, social relationships, and intergenerational mechanisms through which knowledge remains practiced rather than merely remembered.

The Material Ecology of Democratic Politics

The second article moves from ecological knowledge used to respond to environmental risk to environmental consequences generated by political activity itself. Immanuel Cristwo Bangun and Indra Fauzan’s “The Ecological Burden of Political Campaigning in Indonesia: An Environmental Justice Analysis” asks readers to recognize elections as material as well as institutional and communicative processes.

Election studies conventionally emphasize candidates, parties, campaign strategy, voters, financing, political communication, and

electoral outcomes. Yet elections also involve large amounts of physical material: posters, banners, flags, billboards, stickers, printed matter, plastics, and temporary installations. These materials enter public space for political purposes but remain environmental objects after their immediate communicative function has ended. Indonesian scholarship has already identified environmental problems surrounding campaign materials, including the placement of campaign props on trees and weaknesses in regulatory protection (Taniady, Anggraeni, and Ananda 2024). More recently, experimental environmental research has demonstrated that synthetic election banners and posters can also become potential sources of microplastic pollution through weathering and degradation (Seo 2025).

Bangun and Fauzan locate the problem specifically within Indonesian electoral governance. Their analysis shows that existing rules address issues including placement, recyclable materials, permission, cleanliness, and removal. The more substantial weakness appears after removal, where material inventories, traceability, recovery targets, end-of-life management, and allocation of environmental costs remain less clearly developed. Their argument is therefore more precise than a general assertion that election campaigns are unregulated: the central weakness is incomplete lifecycle governance.

That lifecycle perspective is consistent with contemporary waste scholarship and policy. The *Global Waste Management Outlook 2024* uses lifecycle analysis to demonstrate the social, environmental, health, and economic consequences of existing waste systems. The report estimates that global municipal solid-waste generation amounted to approximately 2.3 billion tonnes in 2023 and could reach 3.8 billion tonnes annually by 2050 under prevailing trends (United Nations Environment Programme and International Solid Waste Association 2024). Political campaign waste represents only one component of this much larger problem, but the same principle applies: environmental responsibility does not end when an object disappears from public view.

The article's use of environmental justice is also appropriately cautious. The evidence reviewed does not establish that particular socioeconomic groups systematically bear a disproportionate share of campaign-related environmental burdens. Rather than claiming such

inequality without evidence, the study identifies weaknesses in data, traceability, and accountability that currently make distributional effects difficult to assess. This distinction matters. Environmental justice requires evidence about who bears environmental risks and costs, not simply evidence that environmental harm exists.

Administrative Density, Fatigue, and Institutional Trust

The third contribution, Anggi Saeful Majid's "Perceived Policy Overload, Policy Fatigue, and Institutional Trust in Indonesian Public Governance: An Exploratory Multivariate Analysis," shifts attention from environmental governance to citizens' and civil servants' experience of policy itself. The expanding responsibilities of contemporary states produce increasingly dense administrative environments. Governments regulate more domains, digitalize services, create new reporting requirements, coordinate across agencies, and respond to rapidly changing policy problems. Administrative-burden scholarship has shown that citizens' encounters with government can involve learning costs, compliance costs, and psychological costs and that such burdens are not merely technical inconveniences but consequential features of state–citizen relationships (Moynihan, Herd, and Harvey 2015; Herd and Moynihan 2018). A recent systematic review confirms both the rapid development of this literature and the need for stronger evidence concerning the wider political consequences of burden, including its connections with public attitudes and institutional relationships (Halling and Bækgaard 2024).

Majid's contribution is particularly interesting because its findings complicate a straightforward burden-to-distrust expectation. High perceived policy overload and policy fatigue coexist with high institutional trust in the study's data. The article appropriately avoids turning this association into a causal claim. Its cross-sectional design and the substantial overlap among the measures require caution about both causal direction and construct distinctness.

Nevertheless, the finding opens a productive question. People may regard administrative systems as complex or exhausting without rejecting the legitimacy of the institutions administering them. Conversely,

individuals who interact more frequently with public institutions may simultaneously experience greater administrative intensity and retain considerable institutional confidence. The relationship between burden and trust must therefore be investigated rather than assumed.

Governing Vulnerability beyond Citizenship

The fourth article moves from relationships between citizens and administrative institutions to people whose position within the national political order is significantly more precarious. Ria Agustina Larasati, Katong Ragawi Numadi, and Ni Putu Devi Maharani's "Governing Vulnerability: An Intersectional Analysis of Rohingya Refugee Protection in Indonesia" places Indonesian governance within a regional humanitarian crisis.

The regional context is severe. UNHCR reported in April 2026 that 2025 had been the deadliest year recorded for Rohingya maritime movements in South and Southeast Asia. More than 6,500 Rohingya attempted dangerous sea journeys during the year, while nearly 900 were reported dead or missing (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees 2026). These movements connect conditions in Myanmar and Bangladesh with receiving and transit societies including Indonesia and Malaysia.

Existing scholarship demonstrates why the Indonesian case cannot be understood solely through formal refugee categories. Missbach (2017) shows how asylum seekers and refugees in Indonesia may obtain greater physical mobility outside immigration detention while continuing to face substantial restrictions on social and economic mobility and limited prospects for durable local integration. More broadly, recent regional scholarship highlights the continuing tension between humanitarian protection, state sovereignty, immigration control, and the roles played by state and non-state actors across Southeast Asia (Kneebone et al. 2025).

Larasati and colleagues contribute an intersectional perspective to this institutional problem. Their analysis shows that although Indonesian arrangements recognize women, children, and other vulnerable groups, legal and administrative categories may not adequately identify overlapping vulnerabilities. Statelessness, gender, age, disability, economic

dependency, family circumstances, and exposure to violence can interact rather than operate independently. The practical question is therefore not only whether vulnerable categories exist in policy, but whether systems of assessment can recognize people positioned at the intersection of several disadvantages.

Formal Government and Socially Embedded Authority

Johan Wahyudi's "The Persistence of Informal Authority in Indonesian Local Democracy" returns the discussion to local governance while retaining the concern with the limits of formal institutional categories. The study examines Dusun Sade in Central Lombok and asks why customary authority remains influential within contemporary village administration

Indonesia has a long history of interaction between *adat*, state institutions, legal pluralism, and changing configurations of political authority. Davidson and Henley (2007) demonstrate how the post-authoritarian revival of *adat* has involved complex processes of political mobilization, identity, institutional reconstruction, and contestation. Research on the Minangkabau *nagari* similarly shows that decentralization did not simply replace one institutional order with another; instead, legal and political change involved continuing negotiation among state law, customary organization, local political structures, and social authority (von Benda-Beckmann and von Benda-Beckmann 2013).

Wahyudi's findings fit this broader pattern while providing a distinctive local case. Customary and administrative authority in Sade do not simply compete. They can be integrated within a dual leadership arrangement, supported by *awik-awik adat*, cultural and genealogical legitimacy, moral expectations, and community acceptance. The case therefore cautions against assuming that institutional modernization necessarily means the disappearance of informal authority.

At the same time, hybrid governance raises questions for future research. Institutional incorporation can improve coordination and social legitimacy, but its democratic consequences depend on who participates, whose authority is recognized, and how accountability operates. The

persistence of customary institutions should therefore be examined not only in terms of continuity but also through questions of inclusion, representation, power, and institutional adaptation.

Parties, Institutionalization, and the Limits of Political Visibility

The sixth article, Dimas Subekti's "Party Institutionalization and Electoral Failure: The Indonesian Solidarity Party (PSI) in the 2024 Elections," moves from locally embedded authority to the formal organizations at the center of electoral competition.

Party institutionalization has long been an important question in studies of Southeast Asian democracy. Ufen (2008) demonstrates that party and party-system institutionalization vary substantially across Indonesia, the Philippines, and Thailand and has implications for democratic consolidation. In the Indonesian case, Mietzner's detailed analysis complicates claims that political parties are simply organizationally weak: Indonesian parties display meaningful degrees of institutionalization, but their internal structures, financing systems, ideological profiles, and exposure to oligarchic influence generate persistent institutional problems (Mietzner 2013).

Subekti brings these concerns into Indonesia's 2024 electoral cycle through the case of PSI. Using systemness, decisional autonomy, value infusion, and reification, the article identifies uneven institutionalization. Available evidence points toward inconsistent internal procedures and constrained strategic autonomy, while the party relied strongly on its association with Joko Widodo's political image. Yet high visibility and personalized association did not produce sufficient electoral support for representation in the national parliament.

The broader lesson concerns the distinction between political visibility and organizational durability. Media-intensive electoral environments can make a political organization highly recognizable without producing institutional consolidation. Personalistic branding may attract attention, but attention cannot substitute for stable procedures, organizational autonomy, internal coherence, and a political identity capable of surviving beyond particular personalities or electoral moments.

From Exposure to Belief in a Fragmented Information Environment

The issue concludes with Zakky Zidan and Idris Hemay's "Exposure without Belief: Mapping Awareness–Acceptance Gaps in Indonesian Political Controversies." It provides a fitting endpoint because it moves from the political organizations seeking public support to citizens who encounter and interpret political information.

This question has become increasingly significant as Southeast Asia's information environment changes. ASEAN's current regional strategy explicitly identifies social-media convergence, artificial intelligence, misinformation, disinformation, media literacy, and information integrity as major concerns for regional cooperation during 2026–2035 (Association of Southeast Asian Nations 2026).

Research in political psychology and misinformation demonstrates why exposure cannot simply be equated with belief. Pennycook, Cannon, and Rand (2018) show experimentally that prior exposure can increase the perceived accuracy of false headlines through familiarity, but their results also demonstrate that overall exposure and belief remain analytically distinct phenomena. A broader review by Pennycook and Rand (2021) likewise emphasizes the complex relationships among reasoning, prior knowledge, familiarity, belief, accuracy judgments, and social-media sharing.

Zidan and Hemay bring this distinction into an Indonesian political context by comparing awareness and acceptance across political controversies. Their results show that issues can become widely known without receiving corresponding levels of belief or endorsement. Political visibility is therefore a poor proxy for persuasion. Citizens interpret information through prior beliefs, political affiliations, media environments, institutional confidence, and other social and cognitive filters.

This final contribution returns the issue to a problem visible throughout the preceding articles: institutional outputs and social outcomes cannot be assumed to correspond automatically. Formal recognition does not guarantee the reproduction of Indigenous knowledge. Campaign-material removal does not necessarily constitute lifecycle environmental accountability. Policy accumulation does not straightforwardly produce

institutional distrust. Administrative categories of vulnerability may not capture intersecting disadvantages. Formal government does not eliminate customary authority. Political visibility does not guarantee party institutionalization. And exposure to political controversy does not necessarily produce belief.

Institutions in Context

Taken together, the seven articles suggest that many contemporary governance problems arise not because institutions are entirely absent, but because institutional arrangements do not always fit the social, ecological, administrative, or political realities they are expected to govern.

This common problem connects subjects that might initially appear distant from one another. Disaster resilience depends partly on living systems of ecological knowledge. Environmental accountability requires following political materials beyond their immediate use. Public administration must consider how policy density is experienced by citizens. Refugee protection must recognize that vulnerability is multidimensional. Local democracy cannot be understood without attention to socially embedded authority. Electoral competition requires organizational durability as well as visibility. Political communication must distinguish awareness from acceptance.

Indonesia provides the common empirical setting, but these questions extend across contemporary Asia. Climate risk, urbanization, displacement, digital transformation, administrative expansion, changing democratic institutions, and persistent local systems of authority are reshaping relationships between states and societies throughout the region. The studies assembled here demonstrate why explaining those relationships requires attention not only to formal institutional design but also to practice, interpretation, social legitimacy, material consequences, and unequal forms of power.

For the social sciences, this is also a methodological challenge. Concepts such as “vulnerability,” “trust,” “local knowledge,” “informal authority,” “institutionalization,” “political awareness,” and “environmental burden” cannot be treated as self-evident categories. Their meaning and relationships must be established empirically. In several articles in

this issue, the most consequential finding is precisely that an apparently intuitive relationship does not operate as simply as expected.

At a time when Asia is experiencing intertwined ecological, administrative, humanitarian, democratic, and informational transformations, this form of careful empirical inquiry is increasingly important. The contributions that follow offer seven distinct entry points into the problem. Collectively, they invite readers to ask not merely whether institutions exist or policies have been adopted, but how institutions operate under pressure, how people experience them, and whether existing institutional arrangements remain capable of responding to the changing societies and environments they are intended to govern.

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