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Systematic fraud: Tempo coverage of Indonesia's presidential election 2024

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INTRODUCTION

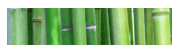
Even before the presidential election, held on February 14, 2024, Indonesia was already scrutinized for the declining trajectory of its democratization process (Aspinall et al., 2020; Ulum, 2020; Warburton & Aspinall, 2019). The Economist Intelligence Unit gives an overall score of 6.3, placing it in 56th place, two places lower than its previous position (EIU Report, 2024). Freedom House places the country under the “partly free” category, scoring 58 out of 100 (Freedom House, 2024). Prodemocracy groups predicted possibility of electoral fraud. The most noteworthy was the release of the documentary “Dirty Vote” on YouTube 3 days before the election (PSHK Indonesia, 2024), which presented three legal scholars/activists exposing signals of electoral fraud committed by the three presidential candidates (Anies Baswedan, Prabowo Subianto, and Ganjar Pranowo) and their teams. However, they mainly directed their criticism at Prabowo Subianto. Thus, when he won the election with 58.58% of the votes, countless voices of disappointment emerged. Activists and academia declared their concerns for the future of Indonesia's democracy.

Why and how politicians violated laws and norms to falsify electoral outcomes constitute indeed a set of topics of importance. Understanding it is not only essential to the history of many democratic systems but also to shed light on political behaviors and their sociological aspects (Molina & Lehoucq, 1999). Unsurprisingly, previous research efforts have identified many structural factors associated with reductions in the integrity of the electoral process. Defined as clandestine efforts to shape election results (Lehoucq, 2003), electoral fraud may include the extent of who is allowed to vote, who is allowed to run, who is allowed to win, and the presence or absence of repression during the process (Gandhi & Lust-Okar, 2009).

Elections present a space for contestation through which opposition forces may periodically challenge, weaken, and even defeat incumbents (Levitsky & Way, 2002). Elite coalitions and the opposition may want to reduce their risk of violent removal from office (Gandhi & Lust-Okar, 2009). When incumbents perceive that the upcoming election will be tight and the electoral rules are majoritarian, the political risks of the ruling party becoming an absolute loser

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increase. Under such high uncertainty, limiting political competition is of interest, and electoral misconducts may be part of the incumbents' strategy to survive in power (Ruiz-Rufino, 2018).

Electoral fraud also tends to occur when elections are largely about access to state resources. As the state controls a vast public sector and state-dependent private economy, citizens from all economic strata remain dependent on the state. Here, voters tend to support candidates with close relations with incumbent elites, and most elites who choose to run in (and win) elections are relatively close to the regime (Schedler, 2002). Hence, while citizens' choices are free, they are constrained by a series of strategic dilemmas that compel them to remain loyal to the regime (Gandhi & Lust-Okar, 2009). Vote buying may be found, representing an exchange to ensure voters cast ballots in prearranged ways (Lehoucq, 2003).

Moreover, ruling elites can manipulate the rules that shape voters' and candidates' behavior in elections. Institutions such as oversight electoral bodies, the independence of the judiciary, and state institutions, can ultimately be taken advantage of by willing perpetrators. Changes may happen before elections, influencing fraud's nature, frequency, and magnitude (Molina & Lehoucq, 1999). In the same vein, some imperfections in the voting infrastructure likely affect the ability of elites to interfere in elections (Fortin-Rittberger, 2014). For regimes that neither practice democracy nor regularly resort to naked repression, organizing periodic elections allows them to obtain at least a semblance of democratic legitimacy, hoping to satisfy external and internal actors (Birch, 2007; Schedler, 2002). In the context of Indonesia, Mietzner argued that elites' electoral and societal weight will determine their roles in the ruling regime. It is in their interests, therefore, to sustain a low-level democracy, that is, the benefit of democratic legitimacy as opposed to the inherent instability of regime authority based purely on repression (Mietzner, 2024).

This review examines the reporting of electoral fraud published in *Majalah Tempo* (hereafter *Tempo*), on February 11, February 18, February 25, and March 10, 2024 (See Table 1). In total, 12 reports and 4 opinions were collected.

The four editions are reviewed because they explicitly refer to the election on the cover. They are online, written in Indonesian, and accessible through a paid subscription.¹ *Tempo* was selected as the source for its reputable status due to its critical stance towards the ruling regime since its establishment in 1971. In 1994, the New Order regime banned *Tempo*, citing them as threatening political stability, yet the publication resumed after the resignation of Suharto in May 1998 (McCargo, 2003). *Tempo* is also long known for its commitment to investigative journalism, setting it apart from other mainstream media outlets in its details of reporting corruption and violations of human rights. Notably, the presence of independent media is especially important for electoral integrity (Birch & Van Ham, 2017).

SYSTEMATIC INVOLVEMENT OF PUBLIC AND STATE ACTORS

Fraud was the central issue covered by *Tempo* before and after the election. The theme for February 11 was "State Institutions for Prabowo-Gibran," with the main headlines focusing on political maneuvers to unveil the lack of political neutrality. *Tempo* illustrated the involvement of the ruling regime and the abuse of public and state institutions for the interest of the Prabowo-Gibran campaign team (See Table 2). The mobilization of the police forces and village heads was emphasized, together with that of several ministries and judiciary institutions (Akyatama, 2024a; Rosana, 2024a). The close network between political parties and their direct



TABLE 1 Overview of data collection.

Publication Dates	Themes	Headlines	Type
February 11, 2024	State institutions for Prabowo-Gibran	How state institutions support and collect votes for Prabowo Gibran	Report
		Maneuvers of regional head officials won Prabowo Gibran	Report
		Amin and Ganjar-Mahfud coalition teams prevent one round of presidential election	Report
		Don't vote for the candidate supported by Jokowi	Opinion
February 18, 2024	Prabowo-Gibran one round election	How Prabowo-Gibran won the presidential election in one round	Report
		Anies Baswedan—Ganjar Pranowo partnership uncovers fraud in the 2024 election	Report
		Source of chaos and fraud in the 2024 election	Report
		Power: Prabowo's key to winning one round of election	Opinion
February 25, 2024	Enquête right to investigate Jokowi's election fraud	Jokowi's way of suppressing the DPR's enquête right on election fraud	Report
		Will the PDIP become the motor for enquête right to investigate election fraud?	Report
		Why did the Democrat Party finally join Jokowi's coalition?	Report
		The temptation of enquête right for presidential election fraud	Opinion
March 10, 2024	Enquête right to investigate fraud in the 2024 election	Who is the driver of the enquête right to investigate election fraud in 2024?	Report
		The offer of ministerial seats to prevent enquête right on election fraud	Report
		What is the evidence of election fraud in the DPR's enquête right?	Report
		Appeal to political parties: Do not give up seeking enquête right	Opinion

influence on their incumbents was seen as a necessary condition that facilitates the positioning of lower public and state actors in their actions directing the behaviors of their constituents.

A top-down perspective was also applied to explain the success of Prabowo-Gibran in securing their winning in the February 18 edition: "Prabowo-Gibran's One Round Election." The headlines were still about electoral fraud but are built upon the rather unexpected one-round election. Here, *Tempo* mainly focused on the high-level actors receiving

TABLE 2 Headlines on electoral fraud.

Publication dates	Themes	Headlines	Public and state actor allegedly involved
February 11, 2024	State institutions for Prabowo-Gibran	How state institutions support and collect votes for Prabowo Gibran Maneuvers of regional head officials won Prabowo-Gibran	Police forces, police commissioners, university rectors, ministry of agriculture, ministry of finance, village heads, state office of religious affairs, corruption eradication commission, office of the prosecutor Village heads, state secretary minister, regional civil service agency, regent of Central Tapanuli, high school teacher, governors
February 18, 2024	Prabowo-Gibran's one round election	How Prabowo-Gibran won the presidential election in one round Anies Baswedan - Ganjar Pranowo partnership uncovers fraud in the 2024 election Sources of chaos and fraud in the 2024 election	Ministry of defence, minister of investment, minister of communication and information, president, minister of state-owned enterprises, police commissioners, police forces, village heads, minister of religion, ministry of religion, ministry of agriculture, state police chief, ex-regent of East Java, members of the parliament, subdistrict heads Vice president-elect, ex-chair of the constitutional court, commissioners of general election commission Polling station committee of Kuala Lumpur (Malaysia), village officials, polling station committees
February 25, 2024	Enquête right to investigate Jokowi's election fraud	Jokowi's way of suppressing the DPR's enquête right on election fraud Will the PDIP become the motor for enquête right to investigate election fraud?	President, president-elect, minister of investment, minister of environment and forestry, state secretary minister, deputy minister of manpower, commander general of special forces command, coordinating minister for the economy, minister of trade Attorney general, village heads

(Continues)



TABLE 2 (Continued)

Publication dates	Themes	Headlines	Public and state actor allegedly involved
		Why did the Democrat Party finally join Jokowi's coalition?	New minister of agrarian and spatial planning, new coordinating minister for politics
March 10, 2024	Enquête right to investigate fraud in the 2024 election	Who is the driver of the enquête right to investigate election fraud in 2024? The offer of ministerial seats to prevent enquête right on election fraud What is the evidence of election fraud in the DPR's enquête right?	Constitutional court, vice president-elect, chairman of Indonesian police watch, general election commission Secretary of PPP Fraction in the parliament, ministry of defence, minister of tourism and creative economy Village heads, ministries, civil servants, governor of Bali, police unit in Garut regency, polling station committees, member of the general election commission, chairman of Indonesian police watch, corruption eradication commission

instructions from Joko Widodo (Jokowi) in his capacity as president (Dongoran, 2024a; Rosana, 2024b). In this edition, *Tempo* also revealed the irregularities that occurred in the polling stations, such as the involvement of village heads during ballot counting, manipulation of the number of votes cast, and vote buying (Hermawan, 2024a).

The next editions collected for this review focused on attempts to control the defeated candidates' responses, while continuing to expose the involvement of public and state actors. With the theme "Enquête Right to Investigate Jokowi's Election Fraud," published February 18, *Tempo* showed Joko Widodo's moves to informally approach political parties, under the narrative of building a stronger coalition for the country (Dongoran, 2024b). At the same time, it also revealed state social assistance (*bansos*) and vote buying on the morning before the election as the last tactics to win (Rosana, 2024c). Another important report was Widodo's attempts to solidify his political support by offering minister seats in his current cabinet that will dissolve in October 2024 (Adyatama, 2024b). A comparable theme, "Enquête Right to Investigate Fraud in the 2024 Election" was chosen for the edition published March 10. Here, *Tempo* again reveals the violation of rules and regulations performed by the ruling regime through the abuse of state facilities and budget during the campaign (Hermawan, 2024b, 2024c; Rosana, 2024d). Explicitly, *Tempo* reinstated their analysis of how minister seats are used as a bargain to prevent significant political actions from the defeated parties (Dongoran, 2024b).

Tempo was not unreserved in stating their political position toward the ruling regime, describing Joko Widodo as the "source of all damage" as he not only changed the rules for his son to run as vice president candidate but also marshaled his staff against the norm of political neutrality (Tempo, 2024a). His roles, by means of persuasion and pressure, were critical to secure the finance necessary for the campaign. The centrality of the president, according to



Tempo, was comparable to what Indonesia experienced during the New Order era. How his influences expanded strategically to diverse bureaucratic levels constituted what *Tempo* identified as “systematic” fraud (Tempo, 2024b). Stipulated in Paragraph 3, Article 286, Law no. 7 of 2017 on Election, the term systematic fraud entails carefully planned, orderly arranged, and even very nattily violations.

DOES INDONESIA HAVE WHAT IT TAKES TO ADDRESS ELECTORAL FRAUD?

While the evidence of the misconduct and manipulation performed by public and state actors can be found, the question is, does Indonesia have what it takes to address electoral fraud?

The storyline was observable in the last two editions addressed in this review, which deals primarily with the possibility of the parliament executing the enquête right. For this to happen, 25 members of the parliament, coming from more than one fraction, need to initiate the process, which should be followed by the approval of 50% of all members of the parliament. According to *Tempo*, this was entirely feasible, as the coalition of both parties supporting Ganjar and Anies has significantly more seats in the parliament than Prabowo's coalition (Rosana, 2024c; 2024d). Moreover, political supports are found from the Honorary Council for the Organization of Election (DKPP), which stated that the Chairman of the General Election Commission committed serious ethical violations as he accepted the candidacy of Gibran as vice-president before the Commission changed the rules of the organization of the election (Tempo, 2024c). *Tempo* also reported how informal meetings between prominent elites, namely Jusuf Kalla (vice president 2004–2009, 2014–2019), Megawati Sukarnoputri (vice president 1999–2001, president 2001–2004) and other party leaders from the defeated coalitions may provide a necessary force for political parties to execute the enquête right (Rosana, 2024d).

Nevertheless, compared to the ways in which the ruling regime and its coalition trade minister seats for political support, the endeavor mentioned above may merely constitute a moral force. The significantly high percentage of winning votes creates an obstacle to the judicial road by involving the Constitutional Court, as happened during the 2019 presidential election. For this reason, *Tempo* viewed that the political road is the only option for restoring democracy. However, some political parties in the defeated coalition remain in waiting for the official election result before they state their position concerning the enquête right (Rosana, 2024d). In response, *Tempo* analysed:

“The enquête right is important to show perpetrators of electoral fraud must not be allowed to get away with it. Without a political process, including evaluation and reform of the voting system, fraud will continue to be carried out by the authorities. The public's chance to have leaders elected honestly and fairly is closed” (Tempo, 2024c)


In their report “Who is the Driver of the Enquête Right to Investigate Election Fraud in 2024?,” *Tempo* hinted at the need for a leadership of PDIP, as the party that wins most of the parliamentary seats, to take the torch to secure democracy (Rosana, 2024d; Tempo, 2024d).

Tempo's coverage of the election told a consistent story. First, fraud took on a panoply of forms. It ranged from procedural violations of laws (that intend to distort results) to the outright use of state facilities and state budgets to mobilize public and state actors, who had to



take sides or otherwise be removed from office. In between, the ruling regime presents an illusion of democracy by accepting the debate on electoral fraud as an exercise of democratic rights that will be intercepted for further evaluation (Dongoran, 2024b, 2024c). Second, the centrality of the ruling president was a decisive factor in establishing the nature and weight of electoral fraud. Widodo's blatant support is instrumental in Prabowo winning, and it allowed *Tempo* to doubt the integrity of the election (Tempo, 2024c). Hitherto, fraud has not led to political instability, as the state's solid infrastructural mechanism informally and formally performs the constraining method for any meaningful challenges to appear. Although theoretically, elections may sustain the ruling regime as much as break it down, the possibility of democratization in Indonesia is now likely through actions outside the electoral arena.

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ENDNOTE

- ¹ Since 2000, *Tempo* has also been published in English. In 2001, it started its daily newspaper *Koran Tempo*. Online it has a number of short pieces freely accessible and since a couple of years *Tempo* also has reached the usual online podcast platforms.

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