



## **THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN DEMOCRACY AND BUREAUCRATIC PROFESSIONALISM IN INDONESIA**

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### **Abstract**

Bureaucratic reform that began in Indonesia since 1998 has become a crucial moment in the effort to build a democratic and professional government. This study aims to explore the relationship between democracy and professionalism in the bureaucracy by highlighting the challenges and opportunities that arise within the framework of government reform. Using a qualitative descriptive approach, data were collected through a literature review of relevant regulations, policies, and previous research. The results of the study indicate that professionalism in the bureaucracy is an important foundation to support successful democratic practices, especially in the provision of fair and transparent public services. However, the politicization of the bureaucracy, the implementation of a weak merit system, and resistance to change are serious obstacles to realizing a neutral and competent bureaucracy. Therefore, the integration of democratic values into the structure and culture of the bureaucracy is an important requirement for creating responsible governance that supports the interests of the community.

**Keywords:** democracy, professionalism, bureaucracy, reform, politicization, meritocracy.

### **Abstrak**

Reformasi birokrasi yang dimulai di Indonesia sejak tahun 1998 telah menjadi momen krusial dalam upaya membangun pemerintahan yang demokratis dan profesional. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengeksplorasi hubungan antara demokrasi dan profesionalisme dalam birokrasi dengan menyoroti tantangan dan peluang yang muncul dalam kerangka reformasi pemerintahan. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan deskriptif kualitatif, data dikumpulkan melalui tinjauan pustaka terhadap peraturan, kebijakan, dan penelitian sebelumnya yang relevan. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa profesionalisme dalam birokrasi merupakan fondasi penting untuk mendukung keberhasilan praktik demokrasi, terutama dalam penyediaan layanan publik yang adil dan transparan. Namun, politisasi birokrasi, penerapan sistem merit yang lemah, dan resistensi terhadap perubahan merupakan hambatan serius untuk mewujudkan birokrasi yang netral dan kompeten. Oleh karena itu, integrasi nilai-nilai demokrasi ke dalam struktur dan budaya birokrasi merupakan syarat penting untuk menciptakan tata kelola pemerintahan yang bertanggung jawab dan berpihak pada kepentingan masyarakat.

**Kata kunci:** demokrasi, profesionalisme, birokrasi, reformasi, politisasi, meritokrasi

### **Introduction**

The reform movement that began 21 years ago, precisely since 1998, has become the starting point for changes in the government system in Indonesia. Some of these changes include the arrangement of political institutions as an effort to consolidate democracy and decentralize government. To realize a democratic country, synchronization of various elements is very important, especially in the implementation of government and the arrangement of the personnel system. Transformation through



bureaucratic reform that is oriented towards the formation of a competent and professional state apparatus is very necessary, in order to achieve good governance.

The main subject in bureaucratic reform is civil servants (PNS) who are not only tasked with achieving institutional goals set by their superiors, but are also committed to the community in the context of democratic politics. The strategic role of PNS in implementing public service policies is the key to the success of sustainable development. This can be achieved if the country has professional human resources, namely reliable and competent PNS (Perdana, 2019).

Bureaucratic reform in general is an effort to make fundamental changes and transformations in the way administration is carried out, especially in the aspects of bureaucracy (organization), management (business processes), and human resource capabilities. Various problems in the bureaucratic system that cause public services to be hampered need to be fixed and reorganized (Nurdin & Anshori, 2022). Democracy believes that general elections (elections) have a very vital role in determining the future of a nation. Therefore, holding elections is crucial for democratic countries, including Indonesia. In addition to being a form of implementing the constitutional mandate, elections also play an important role in ensuring the sustainability of a country in the future (Purwanto et al., 2021).

Bureaucratic institutions can be considered as the main component in a government system consisting of individuals (officials) who are paid and employed by the state to provide recommendations and implement political policies. However, this definition is often viewed differently by various experts. In general, bureaucracy can be interpreted as a state apparatus, but in practice, bureaucracy also includes government institutions or sectors that involve both institutions and individuals who receive salaries from the APBN or APBD (Rahman, 2022).

Good governance should prioritize public interest. Denhardt and Denhardt's opinion (2003:3) supports this by stating that public organizations should be managed within the framework of a democratic system. The implementation of this system allows the community to be actively involved in the provision of public services. Bureaucracy, as the driving force of government, plays an important role in implementing democratic principles. As a democratic country, the implementation of government in Indonesia must be based on democratic principles which are the main foundation for the government in carrying out its duties.

Keban (2008:248) explains that to build an effective bureaucracy, there are several important aspects that need to be considered. First, the bureaucracy must prioritize service to citizens and prioritize the public interest. In addition, community involvement is very important, where the decision-making process must think strategically and act democratically. Existing norms, values, and standards also need to be respected, and respect for the community must be an integral part of this process. To realize a better bureaucracy, improvements need to be made to the organizational structure, such as regulating differentiation both vertically and horizontally (Hasan et al., 2023).

Bureaucracy plays an important role as an indicator of the effectiveness of governance, which is highly dependent on the efficiency of the bureaucratic system itself. This shows that the success of a country's government in implementing programs for the advancement of its citizens is determined by the extent to which the bureaucracy functions well. In Indonesia, bureaucratic problems often come from two very complex sources of difficulty, namely internal and external factors. Internal factors include issues such as the quality of human resources which are still relatively low, systems and procedures that are too complicated, a work culture that is still feudal, and leadership that is inflexible and lacks vision. In addition, low moral and intellectual standards, a fat organization without clear functions, and inadequate employee morale are also part of this challenge.

Bureaucracy in Indonesia, both at the central and regional levels, is often in the spotlight and receives sharp criticism, especially during the New Order era. This is due to the behavior of leaders who



are often not in line with their responsibilities as civil servants. As a result, the term "bureaucracy" is often associated with negative connotations, considered ineffective, slow, and complicated. Bureaucracy tends to prioritize procedures over substance, which ultimately hinders the expected progress (Perbawa & Najicha, 2022).

In the practice of politics and public administration in Indonesia, there is an anti-democratic behavior (Kompas, 2002). This has led to the emergence of a perception in society that democracy is unable to bring prosperity, but can instead cause insecurity and trigger anarchy. As a result, the transition to democracy has been hampered. Democracy should operate by following existing rules, with the courts as the vanguard. However, the courts in Indonesia still face a number of serious problems that have not been touched by reform (see case: Law Enforcers Working in a Corrupt Atmosphere, Kompas, November 2, 2002).

There is a paradoxical relationship between democracy and bureaucracy. On the one hand, for democracy to function effectively, it requires support from the bureaucracy through participatory public policies and acts as a tool to maintain social order. Weak bureaucracy can lead to chaos, which in turn can damage the future of democracy itself. On the other hand, if the bureaucracy is too strong, it can hinder the role of other political institutions, so that the checks and balances mechanism does not work properly. Excessive dependence on bureaucracy will make it difficult for people's initiatives to develop (Rosarie & Triastuti, 2003).

Bureaucracy that is not based on democratization will result in government implementation that is not on the side of the people. Without involving community participation in public services, improvements in government performance will not be achieved in accordance with the principles and mandate of democracy. Since Indonesia entered the Reformation era, its democratic system has undergone many significant changes. The shift from a centralized system to a decentralized system, along with strengthening regulations through the Law on Regional Government, is one example. In addition, government management is no longer as closed as it was before the Reformation. Openness of public information is now a principle that must be upheld.

## **Method**

The research method used in this study is descriptive qualitative. Data were collected through literature studies, government regulations, and other sources relevant to the research issue. The main focus of this study is on the process of bureaucratic democratization in the context of public information disclosure services in Indonesia.

In addition, this study also examines policies formulated by the Indonesian government related to public information. The qualitative approach allows researchers to investigate the background, views, and experiences related to the practice of developing human resources for civil servants. By understanding the details and complexities of changing situations and interactions that occur in the bureaucratic reform process, this study can present a more comprehensive and contextual view.

## **Discussion**

### **Evolution of Democracy and Bureaucracy, Political Parties, and Voter Involvement in Indonesia**

Bureaucracy is a concept that originated from the thoughts of Maximilian Weber, although Albrow has developed the idea from a different perspective. Etymologically, the term bureaucracy has roots in the English "red tape bureaucracy", German "burocratie", Italian "burocrazia", and French "bureaucratie", all of which relate to a desk or office. The term reappears in notes written by Vincent de Gournay, a French philosopher, written by Baron de Grimm. In Greek, "cracy" or "kratos" means power or regulation, and



bureaucracy is often associated with management or process because the government has the authority to create rules and procedures that affect the relationship between the ruler and the led.

This statement is in line with the views of Gornay and Laski who define bureaucracy as a system of government in which officials have great control and can limit individual freedom. In addition, the concept of bureaucracy is also related to democracy and oligarchy, where the source of power comes from society or a group of elites. However, Michel provocatively stated that every discussion about organizations is always related to oligarchy. In practice, there are deeper ministerial issues related to the concept of bureaucracy (Setyasih, 2023).

Political views focus on efforts to seek and maintain power in society. This also includes efforts to influence the process of formulating and implementing public policy in order to achieve and maintain certain values. In discussing and understanding politics, it is important to realize that power is always considered a phenomenon that is always present in political dynamics. One reality in our political context is the existence of a bureaucracy that is often influenced or even dominated by the political interests of the rulers. This situation causes the goals of the bureaucracy to shift from the direction that should be desired. As a result, the orientation towards public services that should be a priority, shifts to become more political. In circumstances like this, the relationship between the bureaucracy and the community becomes less harmonious, and often feels distant. The performance of the bureaucracy which is full of political influence is what ultimately gives rise to the stigma of bureaucratic politicization (Fitriana, 2021)

Indonesian democracy is facing quite complex dynamics. On the one hand, the implementation of routine and transparent elections reflects the sustainability of the electoral democracy system. However, on the other hand, a number of indicators of democracy have declined, especially related to civil liberties, the neutrality of state institutions, and freedom of expression. Reports from Freedom House and EIU indicate that Indonesia is experiencing stagnation in terms of democracy, with major challenges faced in the form of political polarization, digital disinformation, and a significant decline in public participation.

The government's efforts to digitize public services can be seen as a step towards democratizing governance. However, public involvement in the decision-making process is still relatively limited. This has an impact on the low level of public trust in state institutions, including in the bureaucracy. General elections are one of the real manifestations of a democratic state, where the public has the right to choose leaders and representatives who will manage the government and the constitution. In this context, the voice of the public is very important to be represented. Therefore, the implementation of democracy is very crucial. Political parties act as drivers who mobilize the public to participate in general elections. However, their role is not only limited to influencing society for certain interests, but also includes the responsibility to prepare candidates for state leaders who have high integrity and love for the country.

Political parties use mobilization as a strategy to attract attention and gain support in elections. This is part of the party's performance itself. There are various ways to mobilize, one of which is the canvassing technique, where political parties interact directly with the public or voters to influence them to be more motivated to vote. In today's era, political parties often use social media to attract public attention. With the development of technology, many parties apply various methods, from campaigns to direct approaches to the public. However, this approach can have different perspectives, namely it can be beneficial or vice versa, being useless if the main goal is only for the interests of the party itself.

The question is, are only political parties able to mobilize the public? Of course not. Mobilization can also be done in various ways outside the political context, such as through social organizations, religion, or gender issues. Work networks, families, and communities can also be channels to influence the public. The purpose of this mobilization is so that the public can better understand and comprehend, while realizing a healthy democracy in a country.



From this explanation, we can see that political parties have a significant influence in the implementation of democracy that is being built. If political parties carry out their functions and structures well, and put forward appropriate ideologies, then many people will contribute and participate more actively in political and state life. In accordance with the theory of democracy, sovereignty should be in the hands of the people. Therefore, authorized institutions, especially political parties, should prioritize the interests of the community rather than their personal or group interests, so that the public can be more involved. Next, we will discuss how political parties play a role in influencing the course of democracy in Indonesia (Ribka Sri Rezeki Simanjutak et al., 2024).

### **Bureaucratic Professionalism: Progress and Challenges**

German philosopher George Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel argued that bureaucracy acts as a bridge connecting government and society. In the context of bureaucracy, it is important to create a structure that can link the state, which reflects the public interest, with civil society consisting of various special interests (Rakhmawanto, 2019).

The Indonesian bureaucracy continues to carry out structural reforms with an emphasis on simplifying processes, implementing a merit system, and digital transformation in public services. Professionalism in the bureaucracy is measured through several indicators, including competence, integrity, neutrality of the State Civil Apparatus (ASN), and service efficiency. However, the results of supervision by the State Civil Apparatus Commission (KASN) revealed that there were still violations related to ASN neutrality, especially ahead of the 2024 Election. This indicates political intervention that influences bureaucratic management. In addition, the job promotion process is still not entirely based on competence, but is influenced by political relations and existing patronage culture.

In Indonesia, bureaucratic reform is an effort to improve the quality of public services and overcome various challenges that have long been inherent in the government system. The goal of this reform is to build a responsive, accountable, and professional bureaucracy, so that it can meet the public's expectations for quality services. With the digitalization of public services, the administrative process is expected to be faster and more efficient, which in turn will reduce the burden borne by the public. Inflexibility and lack of innovation in the bureaucracy not only hamper organizational performance, but also have the potential to cause inefficiency, decreased productivity, and even corruption. Therefore, bureaucratic reform is present as a strategic solution to overcome these problems. By simplifying procedures, increasing accountability, and empowering employees, this reform aims to create a government that is more efficient, effective, and responsive to the needs of the community. However, the implementation of bureaucratic reform is not without challenges. Several obstacles, such as resistance from the bureaucracy, minimal political support, and limited resources, often become obstacles. Therefore, strong leadership, active participation from all stakeholders, and ongoing efforts are needed to ensure the success of this bureaucratic reform. Bureaucratic reform efforts aim to produce fundamental changes in the way the government works, so that it can provide better services to the public.

Although bureaucratic reform in Indonesia has shown progress, many complex challenges are still faced, one of which is the rampant practice of corruption and collusion. These practices not only harm state finances, but also erode public trust and hinder development, especially in the procurement of goods and services that are less transparent and accountable. Therefore, eradicating corruption is one of the main priorities in bureaucratic reform efforts. In the context of bureaucratic reform, the application of information technology and the development of human resource capacity have made significant contributions to improving the quality and effectiveness of public services. Now, the public can enjoy easier access and higher responsiveness from government agencies. One of the positive results of bureaucratic reform is the increase in public satisfaction with public services. Survey results show that the



public is more satisfied with the quality of services they receive, especially in terms of speed, convenience, and ease of obtaining information. Currently, the public also has more confidence that government institutions are trying to provide the best service. The level of public satisfaction has increased, and public participation in public policy has also increased. Through this interaction, the government can better understand the needs and expectations of the community, so that public services can be adjusted to their expectations (Mendrofa et al., 2025).

### **Politicization of Bureaucracy and its Impact on Professionalism**

Politicization of bureaucracy refers to a situation where strategic decisions in the bureaucracy, such as promotions, rotations, and appointments of officials, are more influenced by political considerations than by competence and performance. In Indonesia, this phenomenon is still very real, especially at the regional bureaucracy level, where regional heads have great authority in determining structural officials. One significant impact of the politicization of bureaucracy is the disruption of the meritocracy system. The merit system, which should guarantee that positions are obtained through qualifications, experience, and competence, is often ignored when job placement prioritizes political loyalty. This condition erodes the motivation of State Civil Apparatus (ASN) who try to work based on achievement.

Research conducted by Edison revealed that intervention by regional heads in the process of mutation and promotion of officials at the local level can result in instability in the bureaucracy. When officials only stay on for the term of office of the incumbent regional head, this will disrupt the continuity of public programs and policies, making it difficult to build and improve professionalism. Politicization of bureaucracy creates a strong dependency between bureaucrats and politicians. In this situation, bureaucrats tend to "play it safe" by supporting certain political interests in order to maintain their positions. As a result, the resulting policies are often not neutral and are unable to objectively reflect the needs of the community.

On the other hand, the politicization of bureaucracy reduces the effectiveness of internal control in government institutions. Many officials are afraid to express criticism of decisions that are not in accordance with procedures, for fear of being transferred or losing their positions. This certainly reduces their courage in upholding integrity and accountability. The State Civil Service Commission (KASN) has received a number of reports regarding violations of the neutrality of the State Civil Apparatus (ASN), especially in the run-up to regional head elections. Data collected by KASN recorded hundreds of cases of ASN involved in political campaigns, indicating weaknesses in enforcing discipline related to deviations from professionalism.

The politicization of bureaucracy has a significant impact on public services. When bureaucratic officials are selected based on political proximity and lack adequate competence, this often causes services to the community to be poor, slow, and unresponsive. This condition further worsens public trust in the government. Bureaucratic reform in Indonesia has begun since the reform era, but many structural obstacles still hinder progress. When the merit system conflicts with a transactional political culture, reform can stall. Therefore, a strong political commitment is needed to reject interventions that are not in accordance with procedures.

Civil society, media, and academics have a crucial role in encouraging efforts to depoliticize the bureaucracy. The importance of advocacy for the neutrality of the State Civil Apparatus (ASN) and transparency in the appointment of structural positions must continue to be encouraged. Without critical public participation, the bureaucracy will continue to be used as a tool by political forces. Therefore, it can be concluded that the politicization of the bureaucracy is a real threat to the professionalism and quality of government. If not handled properly, this will strengthen the practice of nepotism and inefficiency, and weaken the state's capacity to provide effective public services. As a solution,



depoliticization of the bureaucracy needs to be a shared agenda between the government, supervisory institutions, and the community.

### **The Relationship between Democracy and Bureaucratic Professionalism**

The relationship between politics and bureaucracy has been a topic of discussion for many scientists, including in the field of Political Science. Politics and bureaucracy are recognized by experts thanks to Woodrow Wilson's work entitled "The Study of Administration," which was first published in The Journal Political Science Quarterly in 1887. Wilson argued that a science was needed that analyzed administrative problems and helped translate political policies. Politics and administration should be separated because each has different tasks. The separation between politics and administration aims to ensure that the political bureaucracy can operate professionally in serving the public interest without being influenced by political problems (Islam et al., 2024).

In theory, a healthy democracy should encourage the formation of a professional bureaucracy, because this system demands accountability, transparency, and fair public services. Conversely, a professional bureaucracy can maintain the continuity of democracy by providing neutral and non-discriminatory services to all citizens. However, in practice in Indonesia, the relationship between the two is often paradoxical. When democracy is hijacked by the interests of elites or political parties, the bureaucracy functions as a political tool rather than as an institution that serves the public. Politicization of bureaucratic positions, both at the central and regional levels, can endanger the principle of meritocracy and have a negative impact on the quality of service. A clear example is seen in the rotation of officials after regional head elections, which is often based on political loyalty rather than competence. This situation leads to institutional instability and low continuity in public policy, which should be carried out professionally.

In the administration of government, bureaucracy functions as a coordination channel for carrying out tasks and discussing in order to produce policies and decisions. However, bureaucracy is often used as an excuse for slow decision-making in a policy. Therefore, more effective and efficient methods and methods are needed in the bureaucratic process, without reducing accountability for changes in documents that occur. Bureaucratic reform is one of the important pillars in efforts to improve the public sector. Bureaucratic improvement needs to begin with solving existing problems, then continuing with internal analysis to identify the obstacles faced (Sri et al., 2024).

The typology of political systems is usually developed based on two main criteria, namely who holds power and how that power is exercised. In a democratic political system, there is a recognition that the people are the owners of sovereignty and the source of power. Therefore, the use of power by the government must be dedicated to the interests of the community. Given that interests are a fundamental element of human life, the democratic political system is designed as a peaceful mechanism to resolve differences of interest. Within the framework of democracy, there is room for differences, competition, and conflict between both individuals and groups. However, the idea of democracy limits these differences so as not to damage the existing system. In managing this dynamic, society is guided to regulate and channel differences towards consensus and resolve various issues in a peaceful manner (Raidar, 2023).

### **Challenges and Opportunities for Improvement between Democracy and Bureaucratic Professionalism**

The tension that often arises between the principles of democracy and bureaucratic professionalism is caused by the basic logical differences between the two. Democracy emphasizes the importance of participation, public accountability, and representation of the people, while bureaucratic professionalism



focuses more on efficiency, neutrality, and adherence to administrative procedures. This difference often results in a dilemma in government practice, especially when political pressure pushes the bureaucracy to respond quickly, even though this is contrary to existing formal procedures. One of the main challenges in a democratic system is the politicization of the bureaucracy. Often, bureaucratic officials are appointed or promoted not because of their competence, but because of their political closeness to those in power. This situation weakens the spirit of professionalism and can have a negative impact on the quality of public services. Ideally, democracy should strengthen the principle of meritocracy in the bureaucracy. However, in practice, uncontrolled political processes can actually worsen the condition.

Bureaucratic reform often faces obstacles due to resistance from within the bureaucratic structure itself. Bureaucrats who have been involved in the system for a long time tend to feel comfortable with the existing conditions, so efforts to improve the system with democratic principles such as transparency and accountability are often seen as a threat. However, it is important to remember that modern democracy requires an adaptive bureaucracy that is open to change. On the other hand, democracy provides an opportunity to improve the bureaucracy through public oversight and community participation. Various mechanisms such as information transparency, e-government, and public involvement in policy making can serve as effective control tools for the bureaucracy. With good management, these steps will strengthen accountability and increase the professionalism of bureaucrats in serving the public.

Another significant opportunity is the implementation of a merit system in the recruitment and promotion process of state civil servants. If implemented consistently and free from political intervention, this system has the potential to increase professionalism and maintain the neutrality of the bureaucracy in the context of a dynamic democracy.

Countries that successfully implement a merit system tend to have bureaucracies that are more efficient, responsive, and free from corrupt practices. The digitization of the bureaucracy serves as a significant bridge between democracy and professionalism. By utilizing information technology in public services, we can achieve a level of openness, efficiency, and real-time performance tracking. This not only supports the principle of democracy that prioritizes transparency, but also strengthens accountability and high work standards for bureaucrats. However, there are various structural obstacles that still hinder the integration between democracy and professionalism, such as the existence of dualism of regulations, overlapping authority, and weak human resource capacity in the bureaucracy. In many cases, the lack of synchronization of regulations between levels of government causes confusion for bureaucrats in taking action.

As a result, even though the country formally adopts a democratic system, the effectiveness of public policy remains disrupted. Another challenge faced comes from the bureaucratic culture which is usually hierarchical and patrimonial. This kind of culture often clashes with democratic values that prioritize openness and fair service for all citizens. To change the organizational culture in the context of bureaucracy, sufficient time, visionary leadership, and consistency in training and performance evaluation are needed. Opportunities to align democracy and professionalism in the bureaucracy can be strengthened through continuous education and training.

Training that focuses on the values of public ethics, integrity, and understanding of democratic governance will foster new awareness among the bureaucracy. This is very important to create bureaucrats who are not only technically proficient, but also understand and uphold democratic values. Finally, the realization of synergy between democracy and bureaucratic professionalism requires a strong commitment from all parties: political elites, bureaucrats, civil society, and the media. Improvement in bureaucracy is not only related to the technical aspects of administration, but also about consistency in building transparent, accountable institutions that serve the public fairly. Democracy and professionalism



should not be considered as two things that are contradictory, but must be developed simultaneously to strengthen each other.

### **Conclusion**

Democracy and professionalism in bureaucracy are two important elements that are interrelated in realizing effective governance in Indonesia. Since the start of reform in 1998, there has been an opportunity for the democratization process in bureaucracy through decentralization, increased transparency of information, and wider public participation. However, there are still major challenges in the form of politicization of bureaucracy that damages the merit system and disrupts the neutrality and integrity of the State Civil Apparatus. Instead of being a neutral state tool, bureaucracy is often used as an instrument of political power, which in turn reduces the quality of public services and erodes public trust. Therefore, to achieve professionalism in bureaucracy, not only technical expertise is needed, but also integrity, accountability, and dedication to the principles of democracy. The integration between strengthening the merit system, enforcing administrative ethics norms, political commitment that is free from intervention, and active community involvement are key steps in building a professional and democratic bureaucracy in a sustainable manner.

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