

Rethinking State Theory: Addressing Political Oligarchy and Dynastic Power in Indonesia

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ABSTRACT:

Background: The persistence of political oligarchy and dynastic power in Indonesia suggests that power tends to be concentrated within certain groups, even within a formally democratic system. This condition raises questions about the extent to which existing state theory remains relevant in explaining contemporary political realities.

Aims: In response to this issue, this study aims to rethink state theory by examining its capacity to explain and address political oligarchy and dynastic power in Indonesia, while also identifying its theoretical limitations and exploring possible contextual reinterpretations.

Methods: This study adopts a qualitative conceptual approach based on a critical review of the literature. It draws on key perspectives in political science, including state theory and elite theory, and engages with prior studies and documented political developments in Indonesia through a process of analytical synthesis.

Result: The literature-based analysis indicates that conventional state theory does not fully capture the dynamics of concentrated power and the persistence of elite dominance across political generations. The presence of oligarchic structures and dynastic practices suggests that formal democratic institutions alone are insufficient to ensure an equitable distribution of power. These findings point to the need for a more context-sensitive understanding of the role and function of the state.

Conclusion: Rethinking state theory offers a more grounded and contextually relevant framework for interpreting contemporary power relations in Indonesia. This study contributes to narrowing the gap between theoretical assumptions and political practice, and highlights the importance of integrating empirical realities into the analysis of the state in emerging democracies.

Keyword: Dynastic Politics; Political Oligarchy; Power Distribution; State Theory;

INTRODUCTION

The growing concern over the quality of democracy in many countries, particularly in emerging democracies, has positioned the issue of power concentration as a central challenge in contemporary political studies. While democracy is normatively associated with equality, representation, and accountability, a substantial body of recent research indicates that political power often remains concentrated within a limited group of actors (Abizadeh, 2021; Ingham, 2022). This condition not only creates imbalances in power distribution but also raises fundamental questions about the extent to which existing theoretical frameworks, especially state theory, remain relevant in explaining contemporary political realities.

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In line with this concern, recent literature suggests that oligarchic tendencies do not disappear within democratic systems; instead, they adapt and persist through both formal and informal mechanisms. Oligarchy no longer manifests solely in overt forms but operates through institutional arrangements, networks, and strategic alliances that enable elites to maintain their influence over political and economic processes (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2022; Vartavarian, 2023). This indicates that the presence of democratic institutions does not automatically ensure an equitable distribution of power. Therefore, the concept of political oligarchy becomes essential for understanding how power continues to be concentrated despite the existence of democratic procedures.

Furthermore, the phenomenon of dynastic politics adds another layer of complexity to democratic governance. The circulation of political power within family networks reflects patterns of continuity that potentially undermine open and fair political competition (Abdurahman et al., 2025; Nelson, 2021). Such practices not only reinforce existing power structures but also restrict broader public participation in political processes. Consequently, the coexistence of oligarchic structures and dynastic practices suggests that democratic systems may function procedurally while deviating from their normative foundations.

These conditions point to a deeper theoretical issue, namely the limited capacity of conventional state theory to fully explain contemporary configurations of power. Both classical and modern approaches to state theory tend to emphasize institutional order, legal authority, and the role of the state as a neutral regulator. However, recent studies demonstrate that political outcomes are often shaped by elite interests, informal networks, and intergenerational power relations (Aggeborn & Nyman, 2021). This discrepancy highlights a gap between theoretical assumptions and empirical realities, indicating the need to revisit and rethink state theory.

In the Indonesian context, these issues become particularly relevant due to the persistent influence of oligarchic networks and the emergence of political dynasties across different levels of governance. Although democratic institutions have developed significantly since the reform era, patterns of concentrated power remain evident (Alvarez, 2021; Laštro & Bieber, 2023). This suggests that formal institutional arrangements alone are insufficient to ensure equitable governance. However, there is still limited research that explicitly reexamines state theory in relation to the interconnected dynamics of political oligarchy and dynastic power in Indonesia. Therefore, this study seeks to address this gap by offering a more contextually grounded and theoretically informed understanding of contemporary political power.

The discussion of state theory in contemporary studies increasingly emphasizes the need to understand how power is distributed, exercised, and maintained within political and legal systems. Rather than being viewed as a neutral institutional entity, the state is better understood as a dynamic arena shaped by interactions among various actors. In this context, the concept of power distribution becomes central to explaining how state functions operate in practice. Abidin (2024), for instance, demonstrates that the distribution of authority in legal investigations reflects the influence of particular actors within institutional processes. Similarly, Salmon & Lekipiouw (2024) show that the division of governmental authority does not always function in a balanced manner, indicating a gap between formal institutional design and actual power relations. Building on this perspective, studies on democratic practices further reveal that power distribution within political systems is rarely

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egalitarian. Fauzan et al. (2025), illustrate that local democratic processes are shaped by social and cultural structures that influence how power is allocated and exercised. In a related context, Sunarto et al. (2025) argue that economic and legal partnerships also reflect unequal power relations among actors. Taken together, these findings suggest that power tends to accumulate within certain groups, pointing to implicit oligarchic tendencies within democratic systems. Furthermore, the influence of power becomes more visible in policy-making and governance processes. Wibawa et al. (2025) indicate that policy innovation is closely linked to the role of influential actors in decision-making processes. Likewise, Nasution (2024) shows that the distribution of financial resources between central and regional governments reflects underlying power dynamics. In addition, Darnela et al. (2025) highlight that the implementation of law, particularly in the protection of rights, is often shaped by existing power structures. These studies collectively suggest that power within the state is not only concentrated but also sustained through institutional mechanisms. From a more critical perspective, legal and institutional studies emphasize that the understanding of the state must incorporate the dynamic and enduring nature of power relations. Sahlan et al. (2024) argue that legal reform cannot be understood solely from a normative standpoint, but must be analyzed in relation to the power structures that underpin it. Similarly, Salam et al. (2024) demonstrate that the evolution of property rights in Indonesia is closely linked to broader socio-political power relations. These findings indicate that power is not only concentrated but can also be reproduced and maintained across social structures, implicitly reflecting patterns associated with dynastic power. Despite these contributions, most existing studies remain focused on legal, institutional, or sectoral dimensions without explicitly linking them to broader discussions of state theory. Moreover, the relationship between power concentration (oligarchy) and the continuity of power across generations (dynastic power) remains underexplored, particularly in the Indonesian context. Therefore, there is a need for a conceptual approach that reexamines state theory by explicitly integrating these two dimensions. Such an approach is expected to provide a more comprehensive and contextually grounded understanding of power relations in contemporary Indonesian politics.

A number of studies have examined power distribution, governance, and legal dynamics within political and administrative systems (Abidin, 2024; Fauzan et al., 2025; Salmon & Lekipiouw, 2024; Sunarto et al., 2025). Other research has also shown that policy processes and legal implementation are often shaped by specific actors and imbalanced power structures (Darnela et al., 2025; Nasution, 2024; Wibawa et al., 2025). In addition, studies on legal reform and the evolution of property rights suggest that the state does not operate as a neutral entity, but rather within complex configurations of power relations (Sahlan et al., 2024; Salam et al., 2024). However, these studies tend to remain sector-specific and are rarely connected explicitly to a broader framework of state theory, leaving the question of how power is concentrated and sustained in contemporary political practice insufficiently addressed.

At the same time, discussions of unequal power relations have not consistently positioned political oligarchy as a central analytical framework, while dynastic power is still often treated as a practical political phenomenon rather than as part of a broader structure of power. These two dynamics are also frequently examined in isolation, which limits a more comprehensive understanding of how power is not only concentrated within certain groups but also reproduced

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across generations. This situation points to an important gap in the literature, namely the absence of a more integrated effort to rethink state theory by directly linking it to the dynamics of political oligarchy and dynastic power, particularly in the Indonesian context, in order to develop a more coherent and contextually grounded understanding of power relations.

METHOD

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative conceptual research design aimed at critically examining and reinterpreting state theory in relation to contemporary political realities, particularly concerning the phenomena of political oligarchy and dynastic power in Indonesia. Conceptual research is commonly used to develop and deepen theoretical understanding through systematic analysis of existing knowledge without relying on primary data collection (Dahal, 2025; Karpen et al., 2023). In this context, the study focuses on critically engaging with relevant literature to explore the conceptual relationships between state theory, power concentration, and the reproduction of power across generations. This approach enables the researcher to construct a more integrated theoretical perspective through processes of synthesis and reinterpretation (Whittle et al., 2023).

To ensure that the research process is conducted systematically, the overall workflow of this study is illustrated in Figure 1, which presents the stages of conceptual analysis from problem identification to the development of a refined theoretical framework.

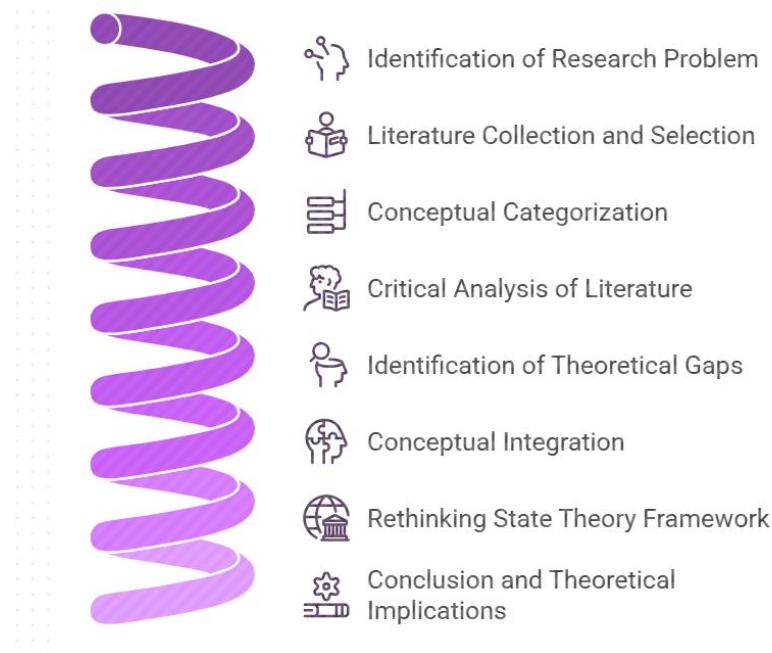


Figure 1. Rethinking State Theory in Indonesia

Participant

Consistent with the conceptual design, this study does not involve human participants in the conventional sense. Instead, the “participants” consist of a body of academic literature, including peer-reviewed journal articles, books, and scholarly reports related to state theory, power distribution, political oligarchy, and dynastic power. In literature-based research, these scholarly sources function as the primary units of analysis, as they provide both theoretical grounding and contextual understanding of the phenomenon under study (Khan & Nasim, 2025; Magistretti et al., 2021). The selection of sources is conducted systematically based on their relevance, credibility, and contribution to understanding power dynamics within the Indonesian context.

Instrument

Based on the identified data sources, this study utilizes a conceptual analysis framework as its primary instrument to examine and interpret the collected literature. This framework is designed to identify and analyze key concepts such as state theory, political oligarchy, and dynastic power in a systematic manner. It also incorporates analytical criteria to examine patterns of power concentration, mechanisms of power reproduction, and the interaction between formal institutions and informal power structures. The use of a structured analytical framework is essential to ensure consistency and rigor in the interpretation and synthesis of diverse theoretical sources (Kowalski et al., 2024; Maynard, 2025).

Data Analysis

Based on the established analytical framework, data analysis is conducted through a qualitative process involving critical reading, categorization, and synthesis of the selected literature. The process begins with identifying key themes related to power distribution, elite dominance, and intergenerational continuity of power. These themes are then systematically compared and interpreted to uncover patterns, relationships, and theoretical limitations in explaining the phenomena of political oligarchy and dynastic power. This approach aligns with qualitative thematic synthesis and literature-based analysis, which aim to generate new insights through the integration of existing findings (Morales-Brown et al., 2024).

Subsequently, the results are synthesized to construct a reinterpreted framework of state theory by explicitly integrating the dynamics of political oligarchy and dynastic power within the Indonesian context. This approach ensures that the analysis is conducted systematically and consistently, while also producing meaningful theoretical contributions to the understanding of power dynamics in contemporary political systems.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Result

This study develops a conceptual understanding of contemporary power relations in Indonesia through a critical synthesis of relevant literature. The analysis indicates that the state cannot be adequately understood as a neutral institutional entity, as commonly assumed in conventional state theory. Instead, it functions as a dynamic arena in which power is shaped through the interaction between formal institutional arrangements and informal networks of influence. This pattern is also reflected in studies highlighting the role of specific actors in shaping authority and institutional processes (Abidin, 2024; Salmon & Lekipiouw, 2024).

Furthermore, the findings suggest that power concentration within specific groups reflects the presence of oligarchic dynamics embedded in the political system. A limited number of actors tend to exert disproportionate influence over policy direction, governance practices, and resource distribution. This pattern aligns with existing research showing that political and institutional processes are often influenced by dominant actors within the system (Nasution, 2024; Wibawa et al., 2025).

The analysis also reveals that power is not only concentrated but reproduced across generations. Influence is maintained through relational networks and inherited political capital, enabling continuity of control over time. Similar patterns have been identified in studies that emphasize the persistence of influence within social and institutional structures (Salam et al., 2024; Sunarto et al., 2025).

Moreover, the findings indicate that oligarchic and dynastic dynamics are closely interconnected. The concentration of power creates conditions that facilitate the formation of sustained networks, while these networks reinforce long-term control over political and economic resources. This interaction forms a cyclical pattern of power that operates beyond formal institutional mechanisms.

The core findings of this study are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Summary of Conceptual Findings on Power Dynamics

Conceptual Dimension	Key Findings	Implication for State Theory
Nature of the State	The state is shaped by power relations rather than neutrality	The state should be viewed as a contested arena
Power Concentration	Power is concentrated among specific elite groups	Indicates oligarchic tendencies within democratic systems
Power Reproduction	Power persists across generations	Reflects dynastic mechanisms
Interaction of Power	Oligarchy and dynastic power reinforce one another	Demonstrates cyclical power structures
Theoretical Limitation	Existing theory fails to capture these dynamics	Calls for rethinking state theory

Interpretation:

Table 1 highlights that power in contemporary political systems is sustained through interconnected mechanisms of concentration and reproduction.

The analytical patterns identified in the findings are further elaborated in Table 2.

Table 2. Patterns of Power Relations Derived from Conceptual Analysis

Analytical Focus	Conceptual Findings	Interpretation
Nature of the State	Interaction between formal institutions and informal networks	The state is shaped by relational power dynamics
Power Concentration	Dominance of specific actors in decision-making processes	Reflects oligarchic structures
Power Reproduction	Continuity of influence through networks and inheritance	Indicates sustained power relations
Structural Dynamics	Power extends beyond formal institutional boundaries	Reveals embedded power structures

Interpretation:

Table 2 demonstrates that power operates through layered mechanisms that sustain unequal relations.

The interrelationship between oligarchic and dynastic dynamics is presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Interconnection Between Oligarchic and Dynastic Power

Dimension	Oligarchic Dynamics	Dynastic Dynamics	Integrated Meaning
Source of Power	Control over resources and policy by elite actors	Continuity through family and networks	Power is both controlled and inherited
Mechanism	Concentration of authority	Reproduction across generations	Power is sustained
Structure	Informal elite networks	Familial ties	Power is socially embedded
Outcome	Persistent dominance	Long-term continuity	Creates cyclical power patterns
System Effect	Limits equality	Restricts competition	Weakens democratic balance

Interpretation:

Table 3 shows that oligarchic and dynastic power reinforce one another, forming a stable structure of long-term dominance.

Overall, these findings indicate that existing state theory frameworks remain limited in explaining contemporary power relations, highlighting the need to rethink state theory by integrating oligarchic and dynastic dimensions within the Indonesian context.

Discussion

The findings of this study invite a reconsideration of how state theory is commonly understood, particularly the long-standing assumption that the state operates as a neutral and autonomous entity. Rather than functioning as an impartial structure, the analysis suggests that the state is better viewed as a space shaped by ongoing interactions among actors with unequal access to power. In this sense, formal institutions do not operate in isolation, but are continuously influenced by informal networks and relational dynamics. This perspective resonates with more recent approaches that position the state within broader configurations of power, where authority is negotiated rather than simply exercised (Essex et al., 2023; Kustermans & Horemans, 2022).

From this standpoint, the concentration of power observed in the findings reflects more than a temporary imbalance; it points to the persistence of oligarchic tendencies within democratic systems. While democratic frameworks are often associated with inclusiveness and equal participation, in practice they may coexist with arrangements that enable certain actors to retain disproportionate influence. This suggests that democratic institutions alone are not sufficient to ensure balanced power distribution, particularly in contexts where access to resources and political influence is uneven (Marchevska & Steen, 2022; Mathisen, 2023). In the Indonesian case, this reinforces the idea that oligarchic dynamics are not incidental, but embedded within the structure of political practice.

At the same time, the findings extend this discussion by showing that power is not only concentrated, but also sustained over time through processes of continuity. The recurring presence of particular networks and actors indicates that influence is often reproduced across generations,

rather than redistributed. This continuity highlights the role of social ties, familial connections, and accumulated capital in maintaining political authority. In this regard, dynastic power can be understood not merely as a political phenomenon, but as a structural mechanism through which inequality is preserved within the system (Ghosh, 2023).

What becomes particularly significant is the way these two dynamics intersect. The findings suggest that oligarchic concentration and dynastic continuity are not separate processes, but are closely intertwined. Concentrated power creates opportunities for long-term control, while dynastic networks provide the means to sustain that control across time. This interaction produces a reinforcing cycle, where power is both maintained and reproduced in ways that are difficult to challenge through formal institutional channels. Similar patterns have been discussed in recent work on persistent inequality and institutional rigidity within political systems (Qin et al., 2023).

Taken together, these insights point to the limitations of conventional state theory in capturing the complexity of contemporary power relations. Approaches that focus primarily on formal institutions and normative assumptions of neutrality risk overlooking the deeper mechanisms through which power is structured and sustained. In response to this limitation, the study emphasizes the need to rethink state theory by explicitly incorporating the dynamics of political oligarchy and dynastic power. Such a perspective allows for a more grounded and context-sensitive understanding of how the state operates, particularly in settings like Indonesia, where power is both concentrated and continuously reproduced over time.

Implications

The findings of this study imply that contemporary analyses of the state need to move beyond a purely institutional perspective toward a more relational understanding of power. By demonstrating how oligarchic concentration and dynastic continuity shape political processes, this study highlights that power does not operate solely within formal structures, but is also embedded in informal networks and long-term social relations. In the Indonesian context, this suggests that efforts to strengthen democratic governance should not only focus on institutional reforms, but also address the persistence of elite dominance and the mechanisms through which power is continuously reproduced. These implications reinforce the need to reconsider how state theory is applied in analyzing real political dynamics.

Research contribution

Building on these implications, this study contributes to the development of state theory by offering a more integrated conceptual perspective on power relations. Specifically, it brings together the concepts of political oligarchy and dynastic power, which have often been examined separately, into a unified analytical framework. This integration provides a clearer understanding of how power is not only concentrated but also sustained over time through interconnected mechanisms. In doing so, the study narrows the gap between normative assumptions of state neutrality and the observable realities of power dynamics, particularly in the Indonesian political context, thereby enriching theoretical discussions on the nature and function of the state in contemporary settings.

Limitations

Despite these contributions, this study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. As a conceptual and literature-based analysis, the findings rely on the interpretation and synthesis of existing studies, which may not fully capture the complexity of power relations in specific local or empirical contexts. Additionally, the focus on Indonesia limits the broader applicability of the

findings to other political systems with different institutional arrangements and socio-political conditions. These limitations indicate that while the study provides a useful theoretical lens, it does not claim to offer a complete or universally applicable explanation of power dynamics.

Suggestions

Considering these limitations, future research is encouraged to extend this study by incorporating empirical approaches that can further examine how oligarchic and dynastic dynamics operate in practice. Studies employing case studies, comparative analyses, or mixed methods would be particularly valuable in validating and refining the conceptual framework proposed here. Moreover, expanding the scope to include different national contexts could provide deeper insights into the variations and common patterns of power relations across political systems. Such efforts would not only strengthen the empirical grounding of this study but also contribute to the ongoing development of state theory in explaining contemporary political realities.

CONCLUSION

This study suggests that contemporary political realities in Indonesia challenge the conventional view of the state as a neutral and autonomous institution. Rather than operating independently from power relations, the state appears to function as a space where authority is shaped through ongoing interactions between formal structures and informal networks. Within this setting, power is not only concentrated among particular actors, but also tends to endure over time through relational ties and inherited influence, reflecting the overlapping presence of oligarchic and dynastic dynamics. These dynamics do not stand alone; instead, they interact in ways that reinforce and stabilize existing power structures, making them difficult to alter through formal democratic mechanisms alone. By bringing these patterns into a single analytical frame, this study points to the need for a more grounded interpretation of state theory, one that takes into account how power is actually organized, sustained, and reproduced in practice, particularly in the Indonesian context.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

Putri Naila Ramadhani contributed to the development of the research idea, drafting of the manuscript, and the preparation of the introduction and results sections. Alya Sherillia was responsible for structuring the methodology, organizing the research framework, and assisting in the data analysis process. Gifa Al-Khoiri Ramadhani contributed to the discussion, conclusion, and refinement of the overall manuscript. Rudi Santoso acted as the academic supervisor, providing guidance, critical feedback, and final review to ensure the quality and coherence of the study. All authors have read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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