Indonesia today faces an enormous problem related to corruption. Almost every day we read in the newspapers about corruption cases implicating state officials.

Given Indonesia’s shift to democracy more than a decade ago, many have been tempted to question whether rampant corruption during this period is actually the fruit of democracy.

Evidence shows democracies create more dangerous corruption than authoritarian regimes. A study by Olson (2002) of the Eastern Europe post-communist era found that the number of corruption cases climbed in newly democratic countries.

Olson did not talk about the link between democracy and welfare directly. His research simply questioned why welfare did not follow the fall of a bad government (communist authoritarian).

The reason was that the political transformation from authoritarianism to democracy in
these countries only changed the type of corruption, or in Olson terms, a change from a “stationary bandit” to a “roving bandit”.

A stationary bandit refers to corruption in communist regimes. Stationary bandits know they will rule for a long time. They sell protection to small bandits thanks to their monopoly of power.

However, when the regime changes to democracy, the type of bandit changes into a roving one, which is more dangerous than when stationary. Roving bandits are aware that they only have a short time to rule because of democracy, therefore they engage in massively corrupt practices while in power.

Democracy encourages rent seeking behavior among businesspeople and politicians. Politicians need money to win elections, and businessmen provide the money to the politicians.

After the politicians are elected, they pay back the money to businesspeople in the forms of privileges and benefits from state policies.

As a consequence, elected politicians do not care about the interests of their constituents, such as poverty eradication, improvement of healthcare and education.

They just think how to pay back the costs of the election process. This reality is not democracy but plutocracy, the term from Aristotle refers to the domination of rich people in controlling the government.

The other effect of rent seeking is oligarchy. Indonesia, after an authoritarian regime, shows that most of the political elite and leaders focus on debating against each other and how to obtain power rather than how to develop Indonesia’s economy.

Hadiz and Robison (2004) show that true democracy never happened after the Soeharto era. The power of the business oligarchy took more control over Indonesian politics than did politicians and
civil society, even though most Western leaders praised Indonesia as the biggest
democratic, Muslim country.

Some scholars argue that free media will put the government under the public’s control
and therefore create transparency.

However, in democratic countries the media are part of the industry. Under democracy,
an independent media does not truly serve as a “watch dog” of the government.

There is no truly independent media. The media only follow the political interests of their
owners. If their owners are part of the government coalition, they will not report issues
that can endanger the government’s credibility, such as corruption scandals involving
politicians linked to the ruling coalition.

On the other hand, if they are part of the opposition, they will blow up those issues to
attack their government’s credibility.

In these circumstances, the powerful media (in capital power) frames public opinion,
particularly on development issues.

The influential media also frames the view of voters in relation to the best candidates
and parties that they will vote for.

In this media hegemony, businessman Silvio Berlusconi can win the top post in Italy.

Finally, these circumstances are the main reason why in new democratic countries the
supremacy of law is extremely important.

However, in several cases, law enforcement agencies remain under the control of the
authoritarian system.

These are reasons why reformists should establish new and strong institutions, such as
the Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK).
The most valuable element of the KPK is its capability to arrest corruptors. A strong law enforcement agency like the KPK would be useless if it lacked the power to eradicate corruption.

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