



Does Democracy Matter? Evidence on Corruption and Poverty Dynamics in ASEAN Countries

Salahudin Salahudin¹, Iradhad Taqwa Sihidi¹, Christine B. Tenorio²

¹Universitas Muhammadiyah Malang, Jawa Timur, Indonesia

²Mindanao State University Iligan Institute of Technology, Philippine

ARTICLE INFORMATION	A B S T R A C T
Received: June 09, 2026 Revised: August 31, 2026 Accepted: Sept 01, 2026 Available online: October 01, 2026	The purpose of this research is to examine the interaction between democracy, corruption and poverty in ASEAN countries during the 2005 and 2025 periode. This research only emphasizes questions of whether democracy in the ASEAN countries is an effective mechanism to lower corruption and poverty rates? We use a cross-country comparative research design for this quantitative study. Finally, the data were sourced from Our World in Data, a platform that offers a variety of International databases (e.g., Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem), World Bank, global governance indicators). A longitudinal data analysis using a comparative descriptive design was carried out to map the relationships between variables. This shows that the relationship between democracy, corruption and poverty of ASEAN is more complicated than linear causation. As data through October 2023 shows, countries with more democracy do not always have less corruption and poverty, as evidenced by Indonesia and the Philippines. On the other hand, Singapore has an extremely low level of corruption and poverty despite its limited electoral democracy. Institutional quality, bureaucratic capacity and the state of governance are potentially more powerful predictors in combating corruption and poverty than procedural democracy alone. The implications of this study underscore a need to reinforce institutions, bureaucratic reform and law enforcement that aid in the functionality of democracy in ASEAN. But at best, this study is only descriptive and it uses macro-level secondary data. Thus, future work should use correlations with panel data and regression methods in order to strengthen the accuracy of results.
KEYWORDS	
Democracy; corruption; poverty; governing capacity; ASEAN.	
CORRESPONDENCE	
Name: Salahudin Salahudin Email: salahudinmsi@umm.ac.id	

INTRODUCTION

Democracy, corruption, and poverty remain closely connected in debates on political development and governance. For the past few decades, democracy has been seen as a governance system with the ability to garantir accountability, transparency, public participation and a more equitable welfare allocation. Quality of democracy is relatively believed to be high or low level of corruption and higher ability for eradicating poverty through demand-driven public policies (Amal & Olfa, 2024; Kim & Heshmati, 2019). Evidence from different countries, however, shows that this relationship is not necessarily linear (Amos et al., 2025). Many democracies are still entangled in high levels of corruption and social inequality, whereas some countries with hardly functioning democratic systems have succeeded relatively well in sustaining economic growth and poverty eradication (Halleröd & Ekbrand, 2023; Tutuncu & Bayraktar, 2024; Wong, 2021). This requirement means that democracy does not lead by itself to good governance or fair social welfare (Campbell & Saha, 2013). For developing countries, especially for the Southeast Asian countries, democracy is often synonymous with weak institutions and governance issues (i.e. political patronage/agendas in favor of economic oligarch), slow law enforcement mainly funded through corruption practices serving developed nations (Acemoglu et al., 2019). This raises a central question: to what extent does democracy reduce corruption and poverty in ASEAN?

The relationship between democracy, corruption and poverty has been widely studied about ASEAN countries with extensive yet diverse results. Various studies have linked democracy to corruption control through public oversight, freedom of press and more robust checks and balances mechanisms provided by democratic systems (Brueckner, 2021; Mizrahi & Krup, 2026).

Additional research finds that reforms in the quality of democratic institutions bring about reductions in poverty through redistributive policies and public services (Jetter et al., 2015). Singapore is low-corruption, but democratic in a different sense (to others e.g. the West); Indonesia and the Philippines are still stuck in a period of post-authoritarian democratization resulting in political corruption as well social inequality challenges (You & Khagram, 2005). On the other side of this path dependence, Myanmar, Laos and now Cambodia show how weak democratic institutions can cross paths with low public welfare in a very dependent way on political elites. Additionally, other studies also surmise that corruption plays a significant role in the persistence of poverty as it diminishes public expenditure impact, quality and quantity of social services and exacerbates economic inequalities (Sanjeev Gupta, Hamid Davoodi, 1998). The literature points to two different expectations. One perspective emphasizes elections, press freedom, and checks and balances as mechanisms for constraining corruption and expanding welfare; the other shows that these mechanisms may remain ineffective when patronage, elite capture, and weak enforcement institutions persist (Campbell & Saha, 2013; Jetter et al., 2015; Nur-tegin & Czap, 2012). The key issue is therefore whether institutional conditions allow democratic mechanisms to improve governance and welfare, rather than whether democracy is uniformly beneficial.

Democracy, corruption, and poverty are articulated to each other in governance and political development studies (Amos et al., 2025; Rock, 2009; Sung, 2004). The democracy is basically defined broadly as a political system that creates opportunities for key components of democratic life such as politiqe participation, public accountability, rule of law and protection of citizens rights (Bohara et al., 2004). From a development

standpoint, this increased inclusion in democratic systems is thought to create more welfare-oriented policies because governments are subject to political pressure from its population, with the expectation that they respond to greater societal needs (Soretz & Fagheh Majidi, 2026; Yağlikara & Bahtiyar, 2022). Nonetheless, democracy often functions on national size development via institutional quality and governance capacity. Within this framework, corruption embodies one of the principal threats to democratic consolidation as power abuses can undermine public trust, attenuate policy efficacy and magnify social disparities (Huamán et al., 2024). Corruption is also linked to poverty, because if public budgets are not used properly it will reduce the effectiveness of education and healthcare services and undermine social protection for deprived communities (Susan Rose-Ackerman, 2016). These relationships indicate that democracy, corruption, and poverty are closely connected in national development. In the conceptual framework used here, electoral democracy provides opportunities for voice and accountability; institutional quality and bureaucratic capacity determine whether those opportunities are converted into enforceable oversight and effective public policy; corruption reflects failures in that conversion; and poverty represents a key welfare outcome. Institutional quality is therefore treated as a contextual mechanism for interpreting the observed democracy, corruption, poverty configurations, not as a statistically tested fourth variable.

Different studies show that the democratic trajectories between ASEAN countries are very different leading to differences in corruption and poverty levels (Amal & Olfa, 2024; Kolstad & Wiig, 2016). In Indonesia and the Philippines, where democratization followed somewhat openly meritocratic authoritarian rule, problems of political corruption, patronage and economic oligarchy counteract any equitable distribution of welfare. Meanwhile in Singapore, one of the least corrupt countries and a region leader in governance by wider measure despite its system often characterized as illiberal in comparison to Western states. Institutional quality and bureaucratic capacity are particularly relevant to these differences (Kolstad & Wiig, 2016). Two important examples are by Rodrik, who shows that democracy induces greater levels of public investment and education and provides for political stability in 2019 (Acemoglu et al., 2019). However, in practice within the region of ASEAN indeed democracy affects social welfare but such impact is frequently moderated by an elite-dominated policy process and variable institutional quality.

Some other studies suggest that corruption is one of the major factors undermining the effectiveness of democracy in ASEAN countries. Certainly, using the public budget is a commonly known form of political corruption (import level), but some forms like clientelism, money politics and nepotism are deeply woven into domestic political systems (Brueckner, 2021; Campbell & Saha, 2013). Electoral democracy has given rise to costly political competition, prompting some political elites in parts of ASEAN to resort to corruption or other disruptive means of maintaining power (Pellegata, 2013). Indonesia, Thailand and the Philippines are prime examples of countries where political stakes equilibrium has increased with democratic reforms but at the same these have experienced high levels of political corruption and weak bureaucratic reform (Campbell & Saha, 2013). Corruption is a major cause of poverty because it decreases the impact of social spending and increases income inequality (Jetter et al., 2015). Additionally, corruption is the fastest way to

ruin public sector services- with poor communities being the most devastated cadre of people. Corruption is sustained because of weak institutional oversight and lack of judicial independence within ASEAN (Tikum, 2024).

Research on democracy and poverty in ASEAN also produces mixed findings. Different research arrives at the conclusion that democracy can support poverty reduction via redistributive policies, extended access to education and wider social protection (Adnan et al., 2021; Buracom, 2021; Huynh & Nguyen, 2025). Comparatively, democratic institutions that are more transparent and fairer to all usually increase the opportunities for civil society and media oversight of government policy (Amos et al., 2025; Mizrahi & Krup, 2026; Sandholtz & Koetzle, 2000). However, other studies show that democracy does not lead to greater welfare if governance quality is still insufficient (Nurtegin & Czap, 2012; Sungur & Altiner, 2023). Yet weak political institutions and elite-political dominance likely impede socioeconomic development in countries like Laos, Myanmar, and Cambodia despite relatively high economic growth rates. Poverty reduction can only succeed if there is vigorous economic growth, but it works by virtue of the stage of institutional quality and government commitment to safeguard social rights for citizens (Sakiko Fukuda-Parr, 2009). For ASEAN, this suggests that democratic governance depends on more than electoral competition.

While past studies have explored relationships between democracy and corruption or democracy and poverty, none in the ASEAN context has expressed them together as a comprehensive analytical framework with all three variables. In addition, most of the earlier works concentrated on few country specificity and thus does not contribute to a comparative perspective about democratic, corruption, and poverty effects among ASEAN countries. Other limitations include the analyses being conducted on incomplete datasets and having relatively short time periods of observation, which fail to fully account for long-term sociopolitical and socioeconomic shifts in Southeast Asia. Conversely, global databases like Our World in Data have more extensive longitudinal data and thus allow for a much more systematic and rigorous cross-country empirical analysis. Consequently, there is a need for research that may investigate democracy, corruption and poverty concurrently, utilizing cross-national ASEAN data across the broader time frame to provide deeper insight into how effective democracy is in stimulating good governance or law-poor welfare processes. The study makes three contributions. First, it combines democracy, corruption and poverty in a single analytical framework better than any previous studies that are either partial. Second, the longitudinal secondary data used in this study were derived from Our World in Data which facilitates comparative and sustainable analyses of political and socioeconomic dynamics across ASEAN countries over time. Third, while the research explores the relationship between democracy and poverty, corruption is identified as an important variable that could reinforce or detract from democratic performance in improving social welfare. The theoretical gap, therefore, is not simply the absence of a study that combines three variables, but the unresolved question of why procedural democracy does not consistently coincide with low corruption and low poverty when institutional quality and state capacity differ across countries. Accordingly, this study asks how democracy, corruption, and poverty trajectories vary across ASEAN cases and whether the observed configurations are

consistent with the proposition that the governance benefits of democracy depend on institutional capacity.

METHOD

Design/methodology/approach This study adopts a quantitative methodology using cross-country comparative research design. The purpose of the comparative design will be to evaluate explanatory similarities and differences regarding democracy, corruption and poverty dynamics across ASEAN countries from 2005–2025. It covers the ASEAN countries having sufficient data that are: Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, the Philippines and Vietnam as well as Laos PDR (Lao), Cambodia, Myanmar and Timor-Leste. This study is designed to provide a comprehensive overview of the impact of democracy on corruption and levels of poverty in Southeast Asia. The main data source used in this study is Our World in Data which combines dozens of international databases such as the World Bank, United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Transparency International and Varieties of democracy (V-Dem). The democracy data are sourced from indicators that measure the relative level of democracy indices and political quality institutionalism, and corruption data is extracted from four sets, namely corruption perception indicators and governance quality indicators. Poverty data at the continental level are based on indicators of poverty rates, income inequality and other social welfare in global data sets. Specifically, democracy is operationalized using V-Dem's Electoral Democracy Index (0-1, with higher values indicating more electoral democracy); corruption is represented by the Political Corruption Index and Public Sector Corruption Index (0-1, with higher values indicating more corruption); and poverty is represented by the share of the population living below the international poverty line of US\$3 per day reported in the World Bank Poverty and Inequality Platform series displayed in Figure 4. These indicators were selected because they provide comparable longitudinal coverage and directly correspond to the political, governance, and welfare dimensions examined in the study.

This period has been chosen as it reflects post-reform democratic developments in a number of ASEAN countries while at the same time being a relevant two-decade window that captures many regional socioeconomic dynamics. Data for all the variables used are also available with at least a yearly interval to allow longitudinal analysis of changes over time of democracy, corruption and poverty. The study used documentation method and secondary data collection. The data are organized as country-year panel series that encompass both time and cross sectional dimensions; coverage may vary across indicators and countries. Data collection consisted of downloading and aggregating data from —this according to the pre-established research variables as reported by Our World in Data. The steps comprised identification of related indicators on democracy, corruption and poverty, and then selection of relevant data according to availability as well as consistency across ASEAN countries at the time period under observation.

The collected data were verified and tabulated to ensure consistency and comparability; indicator values were retained on their original published scales rather than being renormalized. Quantitative descriptive analysis was used to employed for the data analysis. The developments in democracy, corruption and poverty of ASEAN countries over the study years were illustrated using descriptive analysis. Analytical procedures were use tables, graphs and cross-country trend analyses to demonstrate

relationships and dynamic changes between the variables. Moreover, by applying a comparative approach used to compare levels of democracy, corruption, and poverty across ASEAN countries, we could find out the regional pattern of those variables. The analysis itself was -in a very systematic way- carried out to explain whether the most or least democratic countries contain lower-levels of corruption and poverty. Missing country-year observations were not interpolated, and comparisons use the observations available in the source series. Because the analysis is descriptive, it identifies comparative patterns and co movements but does not test statistical significance, causal effects, or mediation; inferential panel-data models are left for future research.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Patterns of Formal–Informal Institutional Interaction

The empirical findings reveal that governance practices within BUM Desa in Mamuju Tengah Regency are characterized by a persistent and systematic interaction between formally established institutional arrangements and dominant informal institutions. Although all villages under study have formally established BUM Desa complete with village regulations (Perdes), bylaws (AD/ART), organizational structures, and basic standard operating procedures (SOPs), these formal instruments are weakly embedded in everyday governance practices. In most cases, formal rules function primarily as symbolic or administrative instruments rather than as effective mechanisms guiding organizational behavior and decision-making.

Electoral Democracy Index

Figure 1 is the Dynamics of the Electoral Democracy Index in ASEAN Countries (2005–2025), based on V-Dem data from Our World in Data in general. The figure illustrates large differences in democratic quality over time between ASEAN countries, with very different paths of democracy. Timor-Leste achieved the highest level of democracy during the entire period studied. The index for the country is slowly rising from around 0.57 in 2005 to more than 0.73 in 2025. The index rose from around 0.57 in 2005 to more than 0.73 in 2025, alongside a relatively steady process of democratic consolidation in Timor-Leste around competitive elections, civil liberties and political participation. Conversely, Laos and Myanmar landed in the lowest tiers with scores staying below 0.15 during much of the observation period. Laos experienced little change in its democratic development over the past two decades, a sign of stagnation defined by the continuation of a one-party political system that severely constrains political competition and civil liberties. The movements for Myanmar were a bit more volatile. Democratic developments between 2011 and 2020 due to political reform and competitive elections had been subsequently reversed by a political crisis in the country followed by a military coup in 1962. Democratic development therefore varied with domestic political and institutional conditions across the ASEAN countries. Moreover, the figure also shows that democratic transitions are not homogeneous phenomena in Southeast Asia as they evolve differently depending on historical contexts, power structures and domestic political dynamics of each country.

Electoral Democracy Index

Data by V-Dem¹. Expert estimates of the extent to which political leaders are elected under comprehensive voting rights in free and fair elections, and freedoms of association and expression are guaranteed. The index ranges from 0 to 1 (most democratic).

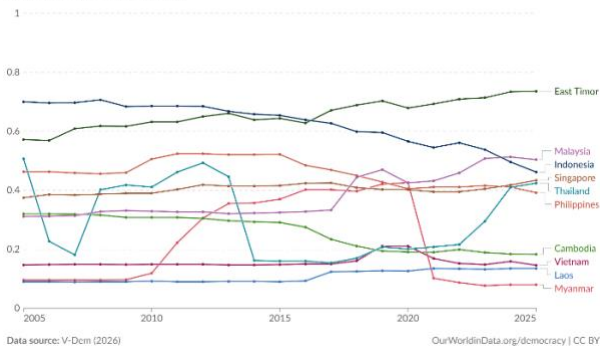


Figure 1. Electoral Democracy Index

Indonesia presents some of the more unique democratic dynamics. In terms of electoral democracy adherents, Indonesia scored the highest in ASEAN between 0.70 (2005) at the start of the observation period. This reflected the achievement of post-New Order political reforms that facilitated democratic elections, greater press freedom, and political participation. But Indonesia appears to have gone into a slow decline for its democratic trajectory from the middle of the 2010s, returning by 2025 to ~around- ~0.46. This decrease can signal the erosion of democratic quality, most evident around political polarization, deconcentration of oversight institutions, increasing oligarchy in politics and encroachment on civil liberties. Malaysia displayed a different pattern. Malaysia's democratic score was relatively stable around 0.31–0.33 during the first decade, then rose sharply post-2018 to reach ~0.50 by 2024–2025. The boost followed a shift in national politics after the Barisan Nasional coalition lost power – and there was room for more free political competition. Fluctuations were sway again among ASEAN staff with the as well rationale Thailand appeared territory staff for the largest changes. Staying just above 0.50 during the initial recovery period, the Thai democracy deteriorated sharply after the military coup in 2014 to about 0.16 (and) However since 2023, there has been a resurgence of democracy. Thailand's trajectory reflects the fragility of democratic institutions under military intervention, elite conflict, and regime change.

At the same time, Singapore, the Philippines, Cambodia and Vietnam notched up democratic features consistent with that country's political system. Despite generally maintaining a fairly static democratic score of between 0.38 and 0.42 throughout the time period reviewed, Singapore Beyond this, the stability illustrates a sound government and functioning bureaucracy, albeit with less direct competition than liberal democracies. The Philippines is an instance of a country that improved during the early 2010s reaching about ~0.52, and begun declining again after 2016. It was connected to the rise of political populism, cuts to media freedom and controversial security measures introduced by the national government. Cambodia showed a steady fall in democracy from around 0.32 in 2005 to under 0.20 by 2025 as the ruling party deepened its grip on power and political opposition was all but extinguished. It is the same story with Vietnam, which over the monitoring period saw a gradual decline from around 0.15 to nearly 0.14 at its end, embodying the characteristic stability of one-party political systems that so often stifle democratic competition.

Political Corruption Index

Political Corruption Index in ASEAN Countries over the period 2005–2025 (V-Dem data) as shown in Figure 2. This is an aggregate index that quantifies the level of corrupt involvement by executive, legislative, judicial and bureaucratic institutions from 0 (no corruption) to 1 (pervasive corruption). Overall, the figure 1 shows substantial variation in political corruption across ASEAN countries. Political corruption scores remained superior to 0.87 and nearly 0.90 for Cambodia's high level of corruption coincided with its low level of democratic quality, as seen in the Electoral Democracy Index. There is a strong correlation between the high levels of corruption in Cambodia and low levels of democratic quality, as can be seen from the previous Electoral Democracy Index figure. Cambodia combines weak political competition with limited institutional accountability. Myanmar rather scored among the worst rank on corruption with index increased again after 2021 to almost 0.86 — an indication of worsening democratic governance following military coup On the other hand, Singapore manage to maintain numbers close to zero in political corruption or simply said that its still kept the lowest political corruption in ASEAN. Singapore's low corruption scores coincide with its highly professional bureaucracy and strong legal institutions.

Political Corruption Index

Data by V-Dem¹. Expert estimates of the extent to which the executive, legislative, judiciary, and bureaucracy engage in bribery and theft, and the making and implementation of laws are susceptible to corruption. The index ranges from 0 to 1 (highly corrupt).

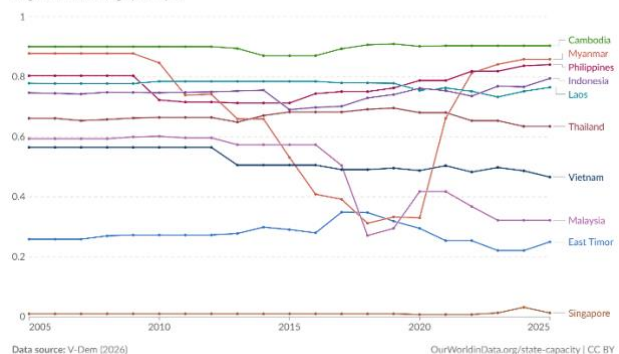


Figure 2. Political Corruption Index

Indonesia was also a more nuanced case for the democracy backlash/ political corruption nexus. In the first few years after political reform, the country appeared to have a relatively healthy electoral democracy: from 2005 onwards, however, the Political Corruption Index climbed steadily — from around 0.59 to almost 0.79 by 2026. The two indicators moved in opposite directions over this period, with the Political Corruption Index increasing as Indonesia's democratic score declined. While Indonesia has managed to sustain a growing relatively competitive elections with a relatively open political freedom, oligarchy and money politics practices in addition to weak institutional oversight continue to pose hurdle against the creation of clean governance. We also see a similar situation in the Philippines where corruption was consistently high and increased from ~ 0.80 to > 0.83 by the end of the observation period. At the same time, the democracy index of that country fell after 2016. The comparison does not show a consistent decline in corruption alongside higher levels of electoral democracy, particularly where institutional oversight remains weak. Thailand displayed a different pattern. Despite democratic shocks caused by military intervention, corruption levels stayed around 0.63–0.68 since military implementation with a modest increase after democratic transitions in these years. Regime change appears to have little

effect on corruption when bureaucratic patronage structures and elite political networks remain intact.

Similar dynamics between democracy and political corruption are revealed in other ASEAN countries too. The index for Malaysia fell far faster, dropping from roughly 0.58 to nearly 0.32 by 2025, particularly after 2018 when the level of corruption began to decrease markedly. This decline came about amid the clear resurgence of Malaysia's democratic index. This has translated into a strengthening of transparency and public accountability through post electoral political reforms. Although Timor-Leste had relatively low corruption levels when compared to the majority of ASEAN countries (ranging roughly from 0.22-0.35). Timor-Leste's relatively low corruption levels coincided with a stable process of democratic consolidation. In contrast, Laos and Vietnam did not experience much intensity, but still a high level of corruption for the entire period examined. These two nations are controlled by one-party political systems with minimal democratic headwinds. The lack of political competition and limited public accountability facilitate the institutionalization of corruption. Democracy is not the only factor associated with differences in corruption levels. Singapore is an important case that shows semi-democratic political characteristics can lead to almost zero corruption where there is high quality professional bureaucracy and independent law enforcement, backed by strong state institutions.

Public Sector Corruption Index

The figure 3 shows the Public Sector Corruption Index in ASEAN countries. Based on bribery and abuse of office, this index gauges the extent to which state functionaries tap into public resources for private profit. In sum, ASEAN countries face several acute governance and bureaucratic integrity challenges. Cambodia recorded the highest level of public sector corruption across all years of measurement, with scores consistently between 0.80 and 0.85 during this time period. The extraordinary levels of corruption in the country demonstrate an absence of institutional checks and balances amidst strong rule by oligarchic political elites undermining public accountability. Myanmar also faced high corruption levels, which rose sharply since the military coup and democratic backsliding in 2021. In comparison, Singapore kept corruption at close to zero levels over the same 20 years. Singapore maintains a clean public administration under relatively limited electoral democracy, supported by strongly bureaucratic and professional institutions that operate largely independently of political processes within a healthy institutional environment

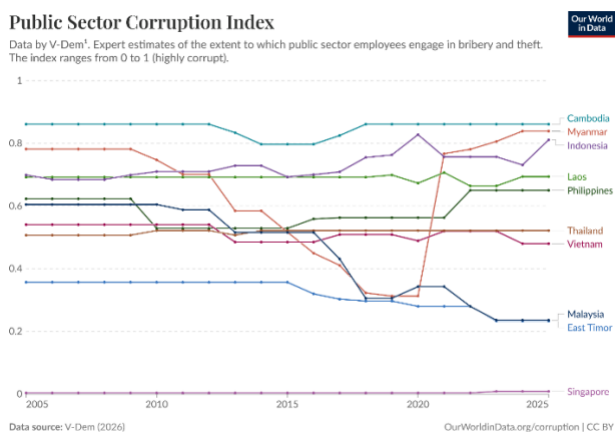


Figure 3. Public Sector Corruption Index

The dynamic between democracy and public sector corruption was rather complex in Indonesia. Indonesia was almost at 0.70 in the initial period and slowly increased to more than 0.80 by 2025. The rise occurred despite Indonesia's relatively strong performance on electoral democracy during the earlier part of the period. Indonesia for example, did comparatively well in the democratic development as demonstrated in the Electoral Democracy Index but faced a political backsliding from mid-2010s onwards. Competitive elections alone do little to reduce corruption; legal institutions and bureaucratic capacity are also necessary for procedural democracy to improve governance. But political oligarchy, money politics, patronage and weak oversight of political elites also remain salient legs of the corruption stool in the public sector. The Philippines showed a similar pattern with respect to corruption, where perception remained high and stable (range: 0.62-0.70) during the entire observation period. While the Philippines has an unusually open democratic system, the weak nature of institutional reform and its enduring political clientelism still reveals great depths of the corruption permeates governance.

Thailand displayed a different pattern. Military intervention and elite political rivalry was responsible for fluctuations in democracy but overall levels of corruption remained moderate and somewhat stable. The persistence of bureaucratic patronage systems and political power relations helps explain the continuity of corruption following political regime change. The magnitude of corruption decrease showed great improvement in Malaysia particularly after the year 2018, where we are able to reduce the level from about 0.60 to nearly 0.23 by year 2025-year logit. It declined with changes in government and progresses in political reform of democracy. Corruption in Timor-Leste also remained relatively low and gradually improved over most of the ASEAN space. On the other side, Laos and Vietnam had higher but stable levels of corruption under one-party political systems featuring limited democratic competition and weak accountability mechanisms.

Share of Population Living in Extreme Poverty

The overall picture shows that extreme poverty declined in almost all ASEAN countries but at different paces and forms (figure 4). Timor-Leste had the highest poverty rate during the whole period of observation. From 2004 onwards, over 60 percent of Timor-Leste's population was in extreme poverty; despite a slow decline this remained above one-in-10 well into the mid-2010s. Timor-Leste's relatively successful democratization has not been matched by comparable economic reform and equitable welfare distribution. In addition, the extreme poverty rate in Myanmar had reached very high levels at the start of the period (over 40 per cent) but fell sharply to below 5 per cent by 2025. Myanmar's sharp decline in poverty coincided with economic growth and infrastructure development, despite fluctuations in democratic quality and the reversal of democratization following the 2021 military coup. The story was similar for Laos, where the share of people in poverty declined consistently from roughly 35 percent to below 10 percent over the period of observation. In Laos, poverty declined substantially despite limited democratic competition, alongside economic policies and state capacity that supported sustained

development.

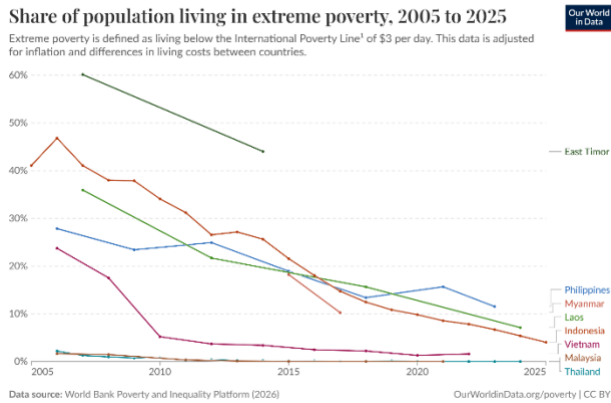


Figure 4. Share of population living in extreme poverty

Extreme poverty fell dramatically in Indonesia over the past twenty years. The share of people living in extreme poverty rose above 40 percent in Indonesia when it conducted its third round of Census back in 2005 and declined progressively over the next twenty years to below 5 percent by 2025. The relative decline therefore suggests that, with the onset of post-Reformasi democracy, there were greater opportunities for social development policies that were more inclusive through growth in social assistance and infrastructure and improved access to education and health services. Although Indonesia is low in data on previous democracy and corruption figures, all this indicates that successful steps have been taken to reduce poverty but governance has not improved. In the same period, public sector corruption increased, although poverty declined substantially. Indonesia experienced substantial poverty reduction despite governance challenges and corruption in institutions, alongside economic growth and social policy. Poverty in the Philippines was initially decreasing slowly, and remained above 10 per cent to the end of our dataset. Closely related to this is continued political corruption and low effectiveness of social welfare distribution. Vietnam provides another important example. Despite the country keeping its democratic levels low along with a one-party political system, it went on to bring down poverty from 24 percent (around quarter of the population at that time) to close zero by 2025. Vietnam reduced poverty substantially despite maintaining a low level of electoral democracy, alongside strong state capacity and sustained economic growth.

Other ASEAN countries display different combinations of democratic institutions, corruption and poverty. Poverty levels for Malaysia and Thailand have been found to be stable around the lowest compared to others within the time-point interval of this review, since early 2010 with extreme poverty rates close to zero. Malaysia is particularly notable because low extreme poverty coincided with improvements in democracy and reductions in corruption after 2018. On the other hand, Laos and Myanmar show that poverty reduction can still take place under weak democratic quality and relatively high corruption. But the fall in poverty can be misleading in these nations because widespread social inequality is hidden beneath high levels of weak transparency and accountability. Singapore may not even appear in the poverty number, given that they have practically zero poverty -- but it represents perhaps the best example available that institutional capacity, bureaucratic professionalism and good governance are essential factors in socioeconomic development.

Democracy, corruption, and poverty followed a non-linear pattern across ASEAN, which is not fully consistent with the linear relationship often discussed in democracy and development literature (Amal & Olfa, 2024; Campbell & Saha, 2013). Based on the comparison of democracy, Public Sector Corruption Index, and the share of the population living on less than \$1.90 per day (2012 PPP) during 2005–2025, the country patterns differ considerably. Relatively open electoral systems such as Indonesia and the Philippines coexist with persistent corruption, while Singapore combines limited electoral competition with very low levels of corruption and poverty. Vietnam and Laos, meanwhile, have recorded substantial poverty reduction despite limited electoral democracy. Electoral democracy does not consistently coincide with lower corruption or poverty across ASEAN. Institutional quality, bureaucratic capacity, and domestic political structures help explain the divergent patterns across countries (Ades & Di Tella, 1999; Amos et al., 2025; Li & Kumbhakar, 2022; Noja et al., 2019). Across the region, three comparative configurations stand out: relatively open electoral systems such as Indonesia and the Philippines coexist with persistent corruption; Singapore combines more limited electoral competition with low corruption and poverty; and Vietnam and Laos show substantial poverty reduction despite limited electoral democracy. Electoral democracy and institutional capacity should be treated as analytically distinct dimensions rather than as a single governance continuum.

ASEAN democratic paradox

The results shows that the relationship between democracy and corruption across ASEAN countries is not homogenous. Indonesia and the Philippines provide key examples of the failure of even relatively open electoral democracies to decrease public sector corruption. Over the period of democracy following the Reformasi, Indonesia began as a relatively democratic regime but gradually succumbed to higher levels of political and public sector corruption (Edward Aspinall, 2019). Weak law enforcement institutions and persistent political patronage mean that competitive elections alone are insufficient to produce clean governance—what the international community has termed ‘the shallow end of democracy’. This pattern is consistent with Rose-Ackerman and Palifka’s argument that corruption in developing democracies frequently endures due to a both weak state institutions and powerful political oligarchies (Susan Rose-Ackerman, 2016). In the case of Indonesia, money politics, patronage and the bilateral pressure raised by contesting for elections with extravagant costs make even democracy a systemic mechanism where corruption is reproduced simply by the fact of being political (Halida et al., 2022; Hendrawan et al., 2021; Warburton et al., 2021; Aspinall, 2014).

Something similar has happened in the Philippines. Despite a relatively democratic political system, corruption remains endemic and poverty alleviation lags behind many ASEAN neighbours. The absence of significant institutional reforms leaves the Philippines with procedural electoral democracy without sufficiently strong institutions for inclusive governance (Nur-tegin & Czap, 2012). Thailand presents another important case. It was marked by even greater democratic oscillations as a result of interventionism and clashes amongst the elites, with exceptional divisions occurring after the coup in 2014. However, levels of corruption act were fairly constant over the course of the study. Thailand’s relatively stable corruption levels despite major changes in its political regime coincide with persistent

bureaucratic patronage systems and elite power relations (Susan Rose-Ackerman, 2016). Corruption in Thailand is more structural than simply dependent on changes in the democratic regime. In Malaysia, however, a different trajectory emerged following the 2018 political transition, which marked a significant opening for democratic and institutional reform. The change in government was accompanied by renewed efforts to strengthen public oversight, accountability, and anti-corruption institutions. These reforms contributed to improvements in democratic governance and public-sector accountability, although their implementation and consolidation remained uneven and were subsequently affected by political instability (Noh & Yashaiya, 2023; Weiss, 2024).

The last country under study is Singapore, which is the most atypical case and also easiest to explain, since it provides a distinctive dynamic relation between democracy, corruption and poverty compared to other ASEAN countries. While the level of electoral democracy in Singapore pales compared with that of Indonesia or the Philippines, Singapore long boasts some of the lowest levels of corruption and poverty. Singapore's experience highlights the role of public administration, state capacity, bureaucratic professionalism, and effective legal enforcement in economic performance (Amos et al., 2025; Li & Kumbhakar, 2022). A good example of governance without competition is Singapore, where tight bureaucratic control and meritocracy produce high levels of effectiveness. One may call it an "ASEAN democratic paradox", where the states with relative lack of democracy are more efficiently governed and prosperous than some electoral democracies. Laos, Vietnam, and Cambodia display different relationships between democracy and corruption. Individual scores for Laos and Vietnam remained low due to the presence of one-party systems which impede political competition and guarantee civil liberties, resulting in minimal changes over time. However, both nations experienced significant reduction in poverty, with Vietnam emerging as one of the fastest poverty-reducing countries in ASEAN. In this study, the ASEAN democratic paradox refers specifically to a mismatch between electoral democracy ranking and governance or welfare ranking: greater electoral competition does not necessarily coincide with lower corruption or poverty. The concept has three descriptive dimensions, an electoral administrative mismatch, an electoral capacity mismatch, and an electoral welfare mismatch and should be interpreted as a comparative pattern rather than evidence that restricted democracy causes better outcomes.

Economic growth, political stability, and state capacity may also contribute to poverty reduction when electoral democracy remains limited. Laos and Vietnam recorded relatively low levels of electoral democracy, while their poverty rates declined substantially during the study period. However, corruption remained relatively high and stable in both countries. Cambodia followed a different path, with a decline in its democratic score while corruption remained high. Myanmar experienced greater political changes. Democratic conditions improved between 2011 and 2020 but deteriorated after the military coup in February 2021, followed by an increase in corruption. The four countries display different combinations of democracy, corruption, and poverty.

The study also finds in respect of poverty that near universal reductions in extreme poverty were achieved across the region during 2005–2025, although at markedly differing rates. During the second half of the observation period, Indonesia was noted to have increased corruption, resulting in a decrease in democratic

quality; and most successfully consolidated their efforts enabling them to reduce poverty. Growth and social assistance may therefore have supported poverty reduction despite governance weaknesses. Nevertheless, the growing trend of corruption may compromise in the long-run sustainability of social development as it undermines its efficiency in public spending allocation. On the other hand, from a different view point the Philippines also had shown a more complicated scenario due to relatively slower progress in poverty reduction than Indonesia and Vietnam. Redistributive policies were shackled by permanent political corruption and poor bureaucratic capacity. In contrast, Vietnam shows that strong state capacity and developmental economic policies can significantly reduce poverty in a context of narrowly defined political participation. The ASEAN comparison also shows differences in poverty outcomes across countries with different levels of democracy, governance, and state capacity (Acemoglu et al., 2019; Rock, 2009).

Lower corruption in Singapore and Malaysia coincides with higher welfare and lower poverty, although the present design does not test statistical mediation. At the same time, high-corruption countries such as Cambodia and Myanmar have poorer social welfare results and less impressive development records. The effectiveness of democracy for poverty reduction is highly contingent upon a state's ability to rein in corruption. Democracy without strong monitoring institutions tends to produce low governance quality, leading the benefits of economic development not being distributed equally. In general, these study results suggest that there is a relationship between democracy in ASEAN countries and the level of corruption and poverty, which is not universal nor linear. In a context of institutional adequacy and in the presence of professional bureaucracy, rule of law, where public accountability tools function effectively democracy becomes an important factor to tackle corruption as well as poverty. Nonetheless constitutional democracy sans institutional reform has rarely prevailed in establishing clean governance and equitable welfare distribution. Within ASEAN, it seems that state capacity and institutional quality matters more than electoral democracy itself. The ASEAN comparison places electoral competition alongside bureaucratic reform, law enforcement, anti-corruption measures and governance improvement in understanding inclusive and sustainable socioeconomic development.

CONCLUSION

The relationship of democracy corruption and poverty in ASEAN nations studied through this research signifies complexity and cannot support a linear regression analysis. Advanced comparative analysis of democracy, public sector corruption and extreme poverty. The period studied is 2005–2025. In response to your question more details can be found in the book findings: democracy does not automatically lead to lower levels of corruption or improved social welfare. However, as the experiences of countries like Indonesia and the Philippines show, even relatively open electoral democracies can be riddled with political oligarchy, patronage and weak institutional oversight; indeed these conditions lead to endemic corruption and considerably less successful social development in many areas. For example, Singapore shows that weak electoral democracy but strong state capacity and law-making can deliver clean governance and extremely low poverty.

Institutional quality and state capacity are important alongside procedural democracy in understanding governance

and political development in developing countries. Institutional quality and state capacity are important alongside procedural democracy in understanding governance and political development in developing countries. Competitive elections alone are not sufficient for effective democratic governance. Democracy also requires bureaucratic reform, rule of law, transparency, and systematic anti-corruption measures.

The study has several limitations. Firstly, descriptive quantitative approach does not explain causal relationships among other variables. Secondly, the study is predominantly based on international secondary data that may not necessarily provide a complete picture of domestic political dynamics and contextual socioeconomic conditions across each country. Thirdly, the study focuses largely on macro-level indicators and fails to appropriately take into account social inequity, political culture, locality of bureaucratic quality and globalization. Thus, instead of ex post facto analysis based on correlations as conducted in this research the recommendation is for future studies to use mixed-methods approaches or causal relationships can be replicated with wider contexts using an inferential panel data approach.

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CRedit authorship contribution statement

Salahudin Salahudin: Conceptualization, methodology, data curation, formal analysis, writing – original draft, supervision. Iradhad Taqwa Sihidi: Conceptualization, methodology, data analysis, writing – original draft, writing – review and editing. Christine B. Tenorio: Validation, data curation, writing – review and editing, supervision.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this article.

Ethical Statement

This study used publicly available secondary data from Our World in Data and did not involve human participants or the collection of personal data. Therefore, informed consent and ethical approval were not required for this study.

Data Availability

The data used in this study are publicly available through Our World in Data and its underlying international data sources. The datasets used for the analysis can be accessed from the respective public data repositories.

Declaration of Generative AI Use

During the preparation of this manuscript, the authors used ChatGPT to assist with language editing, particularly to improve sentence structure, grammar, clarity, and readability. All AI-assisted outputs were carefully reviewed, revised, and validated by the authors. The authors take full responsibility for the scientific content, originality, accuracy, and integrity of this article.

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