



Civil Society and Democratic Challenges in Indonesia and the Philippines within the ASEAN Context

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the role of civil society in responding to democratic challenges in Indonesia and the Philippines within the ASEAN context during 2019–2026. While prior research has addressed civil society, digital activism, populism, and institutional safeguards separately, few studies integrate these dimensions in a comparative framework. This study aims to analyze how civil society strategies, state responses, digital activism, electoral mechanisms, and legal safeguards interact to support democratic sustainability under increasing populist and institutional pressures. Using a qualitative comparative approach with a case study design, the study analyzes secondary data from journal articles, policy documents, democracy reports, digital archives, and credible media sources, examined through thematic analysis and cross-case comparison. The findings suggest that in Indonesia, civil society employs hybrid digital activism, community-based advocacy, and judicial mechanisms to navigate oligarchic influence, fragmented electoral law, and digital polarization. In the Philippines, civil society faces stronger populist repression, state-led constraints, and shrinking civic space, yet maintains adaptive resilience through strategic litigation, human rights advocacy, international networks, and local mobilization. These findings highlight the critical role of adaptive civil society and institutional safeguards in sustaining democratic processes, while emphasizing that democratic resilience cannot be inferred solely from formal electoral institutions. This study contributes conceptually by framing civil society as a socio-political infrastructure that mediates between citizens and institutions, extending theoretical understanding of how hybrid activism and civic strategies support democratic sustainability in ASEAN. The study is limited to Indonesia and the Philippines during 2019–2026, and results should be interpreted cautiously when considering broader generalizations.

INTRODUCTION

Democracy in Southeast Asia has come under serious pressure over the past decade. ASEAN countries are not moving in the same political direction. Some countries have maintained their electoral institutions, but face erosion of civil liberties, political polarization, elite dominance, and pressure on critical groups. In this context, civil society has become a key actor, playing a role in holding power to account, expanding public participation, defending vulnerable groups, and safeguarding democratic space to prevent it from being fully controlled by the state and political elites. Studies on civil society can no longer be limited to examining formal organizations such as non-governmental organizations, labor unions, religious organizations, or advocacy groups. The rise of digital politics, electoral populism, and the shrinking of civic space necessitate understanding civil society as a network of actors operating simultaneously in both offline and online spaces.

Democracy in Indonesia and the Philippines has faced significant pressures over the past few decades, from post-reform political transitions to the contemporary era of populism and digital polarization. Civil society plays a critical role in balancing power, expanding public participation, and safeguarding democratic space, both through traditional organizations and digital mobilization. Developments since 2019, including the COVID-19 pandemic, rising populism, and social media dominance, have demanded adaptive strategies from civil society in each country. Theoretical approaches such as constructivism, historical institutionalism, and democratic resilience theory help

analyze how collective identity (Arugay, 2023), institutional pressures, and advocacy strategies shape the capacity of civil society to sustain democratic resilience in Indonesia and the Philippines, while also providing an analytical framework for comparative study in the ASEAN context.

The period from 2019 to 2026 marks a critical phase as democracy in Indonesia and the Philippines is put to the test by several major events. Elections, the COVID-19 pandemic, the proliferation of social media, information conflicts, and rising populist sentiment are reshaping the relationship between the state and civil society. The pandemic provided an opportunity for governments to expand executive authority under the pretext of health, security, and social stability crises. In the Philippines, coercive and militaristic policies have led to restrictions on civil liberties and reinforced securitization patterns in governance (Gloria, 2021). In Indonesia, the pandemic also highlighted challenges in crisis governance, although civil society continued to foster new forms of solidarity, digital advocacy, and public policy monitoring. This situation underscores that democratic resilience is determined not only by elections but also by the capacity of institutions, civil society, and citizens to uphold accountability of power during crises.

Although prior research has addressed civil society, digital activism, elections, populism, and civic space individually, evidence from comparative studies between Indonesia and the Philippines remains limited. Existing studies frequently examine these dimensions in isolation for example, analyses of Indonesia highlight legal fragmentation, oligarchic influence, and digital

activism (Hariyanto, 2023), whereas Philippine-focused studies emphasize populist governance, state-led violence, and the contraction of civic space (Villegas, 2025). Few studies integrate all these dimensions within a single comparative framework, leaving a significant gap in understanding how civil society navigates democratic pressures across both countries. This gap underscores the need for a holistic comparative analysis that simultaneously examines civil society strategies, electoral integrity, digital activism, and populist pressures.

Third, the historical institutionalism approach explains the resilience and limitations of political institutions in ASEAN. This approach posits that past political choices shape current policy patterns through the mechanism of path dependency. In the ASEAN context, the principles of national sovereignty and the norm of non-intervention often constrain collective responses to democratic crises, human rights violations, and the shrinking of civic space. ASEAN is capable of maintaining institutional sustainability, but tends to be slow in responding to political crises that require a more assertive regional stance (Wicaksana, 2023). This framework is important because the resilience of democracy in Indonesia and the Philippines does not stand alone. Both are situated within a regional ecosystem that emphasizes stability, consensus diplomacy, and respect for state authority.

Fourth, recent studies have begun to identify digital activism as a key factor in democratic resilience. Social media has become a space for political expression, collective mobilization, identity formation, and policy oversight. In Indonesia, the digital movement exhibits a hybrid pattern of online mobilization and offline action. Hashtags, visual content, emotional narratives, and political figures shape new ways for civil society to build public support (Syahrir, 2026). However, digital activism also poses risks of polarization, algorithmic echo chambers, information manipulation, and the reinforcement of identity politics (Wahid, 2026). In the Philippines, studies on digital governance and youth participation highlight opportunities to leverage technology to strengthen citizen participation, transparency, and policy innovation. However, these opportunities coexist with threats of disinformation, digital repression, and state control over the opposition and the media (Cleofas, 2025).

Studies on electoral integrity also provide an important foundation for this research. In Indonesia, the fragmented legal framework for elections, which distinguishes between national and regional elections often leads to inefficiency, legal uncertainty, and limitations in the enforcement of rulings. The roles of the Constitutional Court and the Election Supervisory Agency (Bawaslu) are crucial, but their effectiveness is constrained by issues of jurisdiction, case load, and institutional enforcement capacity (Arifin, 2025). The Philippines has a more integrated electoral court structure, yet it remains vulnerable to populist interference and procedural complexities (Afriyanto, 2025). This comparison is important because democratic resilience is closely tied to public trust in elections, dispute resolution, and the independence of oversight institutions. When elections continue but trust in the process declines, democracy may survive procedurally but weaken substantively.

This introduction draws on several relevant theoretical frameworks to understand democratic resilience in Indonesia and the Philippines, including civil society theory, democratic resilience, constructivism, historical institutionalism, and the populism-securitization approach. To maintain the focus of the analysis and avoid theoretical fragmentation, this study positions

civil society theory as the primary framework guiding the interpretation of adaptive strategies and the role of digital activism in strengthening democratic resilience. Civil society theory helps explain the position of civil society as a socio-political infrastructure that interacts with state institutions and legal mechanisms, while additional frameworks such as constructivism and historical institutionalism are used to support an understanding of collective identity, narratives of resistance, and differences in institutional responses between countries (Syahrir, 2026).

While previous studies have largely synthesized knowledge on civil society, digital activism, populism, and electoral and legal mechanisms in Indonesia and the Philippines, they have not generated an integrated conceptual framework that explains democratic resilience across these dimensions. This study develops such a framework by positioning civil society theory as the central lens, highlighting the socio-political infrastructure through which digital and offline activism, institutional safeguards, and civic engagement interact to support democratic sustainability. Constructivist and historical institutionalist approaches are used to explicate how collective identities, past political choices, and institutional pressures shape civil society strategies, thereby informing both the analytical framework and the interpretation of findings (Bertrand, 2023). By explicitly linking theoretical mechanisms to research questions and comparative analysis, this approach strengthens the manuscript's conceptual contribution beyond mere literature synthesis.

METHOD

This study uses a qualitative comparative approach with a comparative case study design. This approach was selected because the study focuses on understanding the mechanisms, strategies, and dynamics of civil society in strengthening democratic resilience in two ASEAN countries, Indonesia and the Philippines, which have different but comparatively relevant socio-political contexts. A qualitative approach allows an in-depth exploration of social conditions, actor dynamics, and complex institutional contexts that are difficult to measure quantitatively. Therefore, this approach is appropriate for answering research questions related to the role of civil society in democratic resilience (Aminuddin, 2020).

In general, a comparative case study compares two or more cases to examine similarities and differences within their specific contexts in depth. This design allows researchers to explore causal mechanisms that may not be captured through large-N statistical approaches. It is suitable for socio-political studies that emphasize context, political culture, and civil society advocacy strategies in each country (McCormick, 2019).

Table 1. Research Unit of Analysis

Research Question	Unit of Analysis	Indicator / Dimension	Analytic Purpose
How does civil society contribute to democratic resilience?	Indonesia	Digital activism, judicial mechanisms, community advocacy	Examine adaptive strategies, mechanisms, and interaction with institutions

Philippines	Strategic litigation, human rights advocacy, international networks	Evaluate responses to populist pressure and shrinking civic space
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Source: Processed by the researcher, 2026

These two units of analysis were selected using a most-similar/most-different design in a comparative case study to examine how variations in political constellations influence democratic resilience through civil society actors (Pagliarin, 2023).

A. Data Collection Techniques

The study relies on purposively selected primary and secondary sources to ensure relevance to the research dimensions, including civil society participation, digital activism, electoral mechanisms, and institutional safeguards. Primary sources comprise laws, official policies, electoral decisions, and reports from civil society organizations (Arifin, 2025). Secondary sources include scholarly articles, international democracy reports (Freedom House, V-Dem, CIVICUS Monitor), national media coverage, advocacy blogs, and NGO digital archives (Cleofas, 2025). Sources were screened based on credibility, thematic relevance, and timeliness, while documents lacking verifiable origin or context were excluded.

B. Data Analysis Techniques

The data are analyzed using thematic analysis and comparative case analysis. The analysis process consists of the following steps:

1. Data Coding

All texts from primary and secondary documents, media content, and digital archives were analyzed using thematic coding. Coding categories were developed through a combination of deductive and inductive approaches, covering five main dimensions: (1) civil society participation, (2) digital activism strategies, (3) electoral and legal mechanisms, (4) state responses and populist pressures, and (5) civic space contraction. Each document was coded independently by the researcher, and recurring themes were iteratively refined into sub-categories to ensure analytic depth (McCormick, 2019).

2. Data Triangulation

Triangulation was applied across official documents, media content, and NGO reports. In cases of conflicting information, priority was given to primary legal documents and corroborated media reports, while discrepancies were discussed contextually to reduce bias and maintain analytic transparency (Pagliarin, 2023).

3. Cross-Case Analysis

After coding and triangulation, the researcher conducts a comparative analysis between Indonesia and the Philippines. This analysis aims to evaluate similarities and differences in the patterns of interaction between civil society, institutional structures, and the political environment in each country. It also identifies factors that explain variations in democratic resilience.

4. Theoretical Integration and Interpretation

The findings are connected to relevant theoretical frameworks, including civil society theory and democratic

resilience, to provide a strong conceptual interpretation. This step helps explain how theoretical mechanisms operate within each case context.

This comparative method was selected because the literature recognizes it as a strong approach for examining cross-national socio-political phenomena, especially when the number of cases is small but the context is complex, as in the dynamics of civil society and democracy.

C. Methodological Justification

Given that the study exclusively uses secondary data, potential limitations such as source bias, media framing effects, and uneven data availability across Indonesia and the Philippines are acknowledged. Triangulation across multiple sources mitigates single-source bias and supports the validity of cross-case comparison. This approach provides a deeper understanding of socio-political contexts, allows the exploration of complex causal mechanisms, and enables theoretical interpretation of civil society strategies and democratic resilience in both countries (Aminuddin, 2020).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A comparative analysis shows that civil society in Indonesia employs hybrid digital activism, community-based advocacy, and judicial mechanisms to address legal fragmentation and digital polarization. These findings are consistent with previously identified patterns (Widodo, 2025), but the data indicate that strategic variations occur according to local contexts: election monitoring is more prevalent in Java, while environmental campaigns are stronger in non-Java regions (Purwanto, 2023).

Civil society strategies in responding to populist pressure and the COVID-19 pandemic show a significant level of adaptation. In Indonesia, hybrid activism emerged through the combination of online and offline activities. This activism shaped collective narratives that supported citizen participation and public policy oversight. In the Philippines, civil society developed community-based advocacy models and international networks through participatory recovery, technical advocacy, and knowledge transfer for marginalized groups. These mechanisms enabled civil society to maintain civic space despite militarized lockdowns and executive aggrandizement during the pandemic (Serquina, 2023).

The thematic analysis shows that the identity of civil society in Indonesia and the Philippines shapes advocacy strategies and democratic resilience. In Indonesia, civil society identity is influenced by ethnic diversity, religion, and the history of political reform. In the Philippines, civic identity has been shaped by the People Power tradition and human rights struggles. These identities allow civil society to mobilize public support, build coalitions, and respond to populist pressure, although they may also create potential digital polarization. For this reason, constructivism provides an important framework for understanding how identity, narratives, and digital mobilization shape the capacity of civil society to protect democracy (Munandar, 2022).

The findings also show that democracy in Indonesia and the Philippines has experienced different forms of democratic backsliding. Indonesia faces democratic stagnation marked by a hybrid regime, oligarchic dominance, and the limited capacity of civil society. However, judicial activism and digital mobilization by civil society help prevent a sharper democratic decline (Mudhoffir, 2023). In contrast, the Philippines has experienced

faster democratic erosion due to repressive populism, state violence, and the shrinking of civic space. Resilience strategies in the Philippines depend heavily on legal advocacy, international networks, and community collaboration (Agojo, 2021).

The findings on digital activism and civic space show a complex interaction between technology, collective identity, and state pressure. In Indonesia, digital mobilization relies on hashtags, visual content, and emotional narratives to strengthen participation and solidarity. However, it also faces the risks of disinformation and polarizing algorithms. In the Philippines, digital governance and public-private partnerships support multi-actor collaboration and citizen participation, although these efforts remain limited by media control and repressive regulations (Tiglaio, 2025).

Institutional responses to civil society also show fundamental differences. In Indonesia, the state provides collaborative space on socio-economic issues and public services, but it restricts criticism on sensitive political issues. In the Philippines, securitization and populist repression limit civic space more broadly. As a result, civil society must develop adaptive strategies based on legal mechanisms, international networks, and local community participation. These differences confirm that institutional context and populist pressure determine the effectiveness of civil society in protecting democracy (Hiariej, 2022).

This analysis also highlights the importance of judicial safeguards as a democratic defense mechanism. The Constitutional Court in Indonesia plays a key role in maintaining electoral competition, participation, and accountability, although limited authority and internal conflict reduce its effectiveness. In the Philippines, independent electoral courts provide an example of legal integration in maintaining democratic legitimacy, but they remain vulnerable to populist political pressure (Mietzner, 2023).

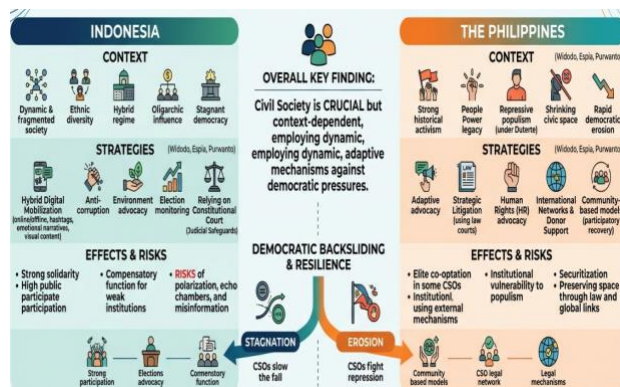


Figure 1. Democratic Resilience: Indonesia vs Philippines
Source: Compiled by the researcher, 2026

In the Philippines, civil society faces more intense structural and populist challenges. State-led repression, media control, and shrinking civic space limit the ability of civil actors to mobilize domestic support. The findings show that Philippine civil society adopts adaptive strategies through strategic litigation, international networks, and collaboration with local communities to preserve civic space. These strategies highlight the importance of flexibility and the use of legal and transnational mechanisms to resist democratic erosion. Thus, Philippine civil society demonstrates a high level of resilience despite operating under severe political backsliding (Villegas, 2025).

Overall, civil society in Indonesia and the Philippines demonstrates adaptive strategies in response to populist pressure and institutional challenges. In Indonesia, hybrid activism combining online mobilization, offline advocacy, and judicial interventions enhances collective identity and civic participation, while mitigating risks of polarization (Hasrullah, 2025). In the Philippines, civil society relies on strategic litigation, international networks, and community-based advocacy to preserve civic space under populist and militarized pressures (Lorch, 2023). Across both countries, the interaction between civil society, institutional capacity, and digital activism explains variations in democratic resilience, highlighting the importance of adaptive capacity and multi-level engagement (Villamejor-Mendoza, 2023).

Further discussion highlights fundamental differences in the institutional contexts of the two countries. Indonesia has the Constitutional Court and Bawaslu, which function as judicial safeguard instruments. Although legal fragmentation and oligarchic dominance limit institutional effectiveness, civil society can use these legal spaces for advocacy and electoral oversight. In the Philippines, electoral institutions are more integrated, but their independence remains vulnerable to populist pressure. This difference shows that the effectiveness of civil society does not depend solely on the internal capacity of organizations. It also depends on institutional configuration and state responses to populist pressure (Mochtar, 2025).

In Indonesia, judicial mechanisms such as the Constitutional Court enable evidence-based advocacy and community monitoring (Mochtar, 2025), whereas in the Philippines, the independence of the electoral court is limited due to populist pressure, so civil society strategies rely more on strategic litigation and international networks (Villegas, 2025). This interaction demonstrates that the effectiveness of judicial protection depends heavily on a combination of institutional capacity and civil society adaptation.

Civil society's adaptive strategies in responding to populist pressure and the COVID-19 pandemic reveal innovative dynamics in both countries. In Indonesia, hybrid activism combines online and offline activities, including public policy monitoring, anti-corruption campaigns, and community-based social movements. This strategy shows the capacity of civil society to continue functioning as a guardian of democracy despite institutional fragmentation. In the Philippines, civil society uses participatory recovery, community-based advocacy, and international networks to respond to militarized lockdowns and executive aggrandizement during the pandemic. This adaptive model confirms that democratic resilience depends on the ability of civil actors to adjust their strategies to changing political and social conditions (Lorch J. &, 2023).

These findings support the conceptualization of civil society as a socio-political infrastructure mediating between citizens and institutions. Rather than acting solely as advocacy organizations, civil society networks structure participation, monitor institutional compliance, and sustain democratic practices. This framework extends theoretical understanding by showing that adaptive strategies, collective identity, and digital mobilization are integral components of democratic resilience in hybrid regimes (Nugroho, 2020).

The discussion on digital activism emphasizes the complex interaction among digital platforms, collective identity, and pressure from state institutions. In Indonesia, hybrid

mobilization allows civil society to build collective narratives through social media and public forums, although it also faces the risks of algorithmic manipulation and echo chambers. In the Philippines, digital governance and public-private partnerships support citizen participation and multi-actor collaboration, even though they remain constrained by repressive regulations and media control. This difference shows that digital technology does not automatically strengthen democracy. The success of digital mobilization depends on political context, organizational capacity, and risk mitigation strategies (Syahrir, 2026). Digital activism builds a collective narrative and a shared identity (Syahrir, 2026), which increases public participation in policy oversight. This participation then puts pressure on legal institutions to act transparently, thereby reducing the risk of democratic backsliding.

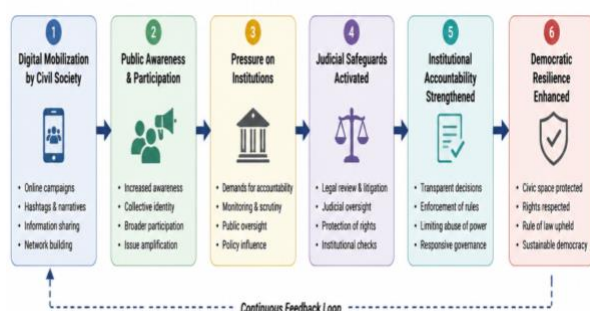


Figure 2. Digital activism pathway to democracy

Source: Compiled by the researcher, 2026

The comparative analysis also highlights electoral integrity as a determinant of democratic resilience. Indonesia faces legal fragmentation between national and regional elections, which creates inefficiency and limited legitimacy. The Constitutional Court and Bawaslu provide oversight mechanisms, but limited authority and heavy caseloads reduce the effectiveness of supervision. In the Philippines, electoral judicial institutions are more integrated, but they still face populist interference. This difference emphasizes the need for legal reform and institutional harmonization to support democratic resilience. It also shows that civil society must act as a watchdog and mediator between citizens and formal institutions (Arifin, 2025).

The comparison matrix shows that public participation and the effectiveness of election oversight are higher in Indonesia than in the Philippines, while populist pressures are stronger in the Philippines, as measured by the frequency of government interventions targeting NGOs and media control (Baidhowah, 2021). Populism is measured by the intensity of executive intervention in civil society organizations and the media (Agojo, 2021), while democratic backsliding is identified through a decline in judicial independence, a shrinking civil society space, and the level of strategic litigation. This approach allows for a more rigorous comparative analysis between Indonesia and the Philippines.

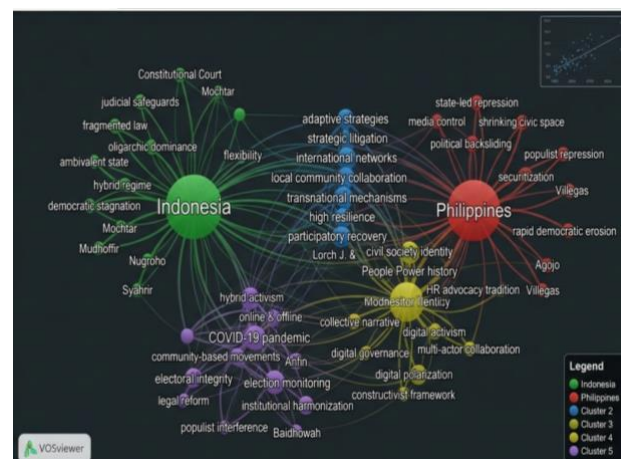


Figure 3. Democratic Backsliding & Civic Space Network

Source: Compiled by the researcher, 2026

Figures 1 and 3 illustrate the comparative democratic resilience and civic space network between Indonesia and the Philippines. These figures are constructed based on thematic coding of secondary sources, including journal articles, policy reports, and credible media archives, which were systematically analyzed through cross-case comparison. Figure 1 visualizes adaptive strategies of civil society, highlighting hybrid digital activism, judicial safeguards, and community-based advocacy. Figure 3 maps the institutional responses and civic space interactions, showing pressures from populist governance and state interventions (Widodo, 2025). These visuals summarize empirical findings rather than mere conceptual diagrams, providing evidence-based representation of the observed patterns.

In the context of digital activism and civic space, the findings reveal a multi-level interaction among technology, collective identity, state pressure, and governance. Hybrid activism in Indonesia has strengthened public participation, policy oversight, and social solidarity. In the Philippines, digital activism has centered more on human rights advocacy and the documentation of government violations. Both cases show that digital technology does not automatically enhance democratic resilience. Its effectiveness depends on the capacity of civil society, adaptive strategies, and integration with institutional and legal mechanisms (Cleofas, 2025).

Table 2. A Comparison of the Characteristics of Civil Society in Indonesia and the Philippines

Dimensi	Indonesia	Philippines	Comparative Insight
Civil Society Identity	Ethnic diversity, reformasi experience	People Power tradition, human rights advocacy	Identity shapes mobilization and coalition-building
Adaptive Strategies	Hybrid digital activism, judicial safeguards,	Strategic litigation, international networks,	Context-specific adaptations to institutional

	community advocacy	participato ry recovery	and populist pressures
Institut ional Response	Constitut ional Court & Bawaslu; fragmented but semi- protective	Integra ted electoral courts; vulnerable to populism	Instituti onal configuratio n affects civil society effectiveness
Digital Mobilizatio n	Hashtags , visual content, emotional narratives	Public- private collaborati on, documenta tion of violations	Technol ogy amplifies participatio n but carries polarization risks
Democr atic Resilience Outcome	Maintain s stability amid hybrid regime	Mainta ins resilience under rapid democratic erosion	Compar ative patterns show role of civil society in mediating resilience

Source: Compiled by the researcher, 2026

Comparatively, Indonesia's fragmented electoral and institutional framework requires civil society to compensate through digital and community mobilization, whereas the more integrated Philippine electoral system remains susceptible to elite capture, necessitating legal advocacy and international engagement. This contrast indicates that institutional context shapes the effectiveness of civil society strategies, providing empirical insight into how hybrid activism interacts with governance structures to produce differential resilience outcomes (Pernia, 2019).

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that civil society in Indonesia and the Philippines plays a critical role in sustaining democratic resilience amid different political pressures. In Indonesia, a combination of digital and offline activism, judicial safeguards, and community-based advocacy enables civil society to respond to legal fragmentation, oligarchic influence, and digital polarization, although these findings are based on secondary sources and should be interpreted cautiously. In the Philippines, despite rapid democratic decline due to populist repression, state violence, and shrinking civic space, civil society maintains resilience through strategic litigation, human rights advocacy, and international networks. This study confirms that democratic resilience depends on the adaptive capacity of civil society, the effectiveness of legal mechanisms, and the openness of the public sphere. The theoretical contribution of this research emphasizes the role of civil society as a socio-political infrastructure connecting citizens and institutions, providing insight into how collective identity, digital activism, and adaptive strategies support democratic sustainability in hybrid regimes. The study's limitations, including reliance on secondary data and potential source selection bias, are acknowledged and form the basis for recommendations for future research, which could expand the country scope and incorporate quantitative indicators of civic participation.

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