

The Paradox of Judicial Power: The Indonesian Constitutional Court's Activism in the Post-Ahok Era and Its Impact on Electoral Democracy

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the paradoxical role of the Indonesian Constitutional Court (Mahkamah Konstitusi, MK) in shaping electoral democracy after the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election that convicted Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (Ahok) for blasphemy. While judicial activism is generally seen as a mechanism to defend constitutional rights, the post-Ahok period witnessed a surge in MK rulings that override electoral commissions and construct new legal norms, often with majoritarian and exclusionary undertones. Employing a panel fixed-effects regression on 34 Indonesian provinces from 2014 to 2023, this research quantitatively examines the relationship between MK activism in electoral disputes and provincial electoral democracy scores. The independent variable, a novel Judicial Activism Index (JAI), captures annual counts of MK decisions that annulled KPU determinations or introduced expansive interpretations in pemilu and pilkada cases. The results reveal a significant negative interaction effect between the JAI and the Post-Ahok dummy (2017–2023) on the Provincial Electoral Democracy Score. In the post-Ahok period, a one-unit increase in activist rulings is associated with a 1.8-point decline in democratic quality, controlling for economic and political covariates. The findings unveil a paradox: a court empowered to guard democracy can, under conditions of heightened identity politics, become a vehicle for democratic regression. The study calls for recalibrating the MK's self-restraint doctrine to prevent judicial overreach from undermining electoral pluralism.

Keywords: judicial activism, Constitutional Court, electoral democracy, Ahok

INTRODUCTION

The dramatic trial and imprisonment of Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (Ahok) in 2017 on blasphemy charges marked a watershed in Indonesian democratic politics. This case, born out of a fiercely contested gubernatorial election in Jakarta, not only polarized the electorate along religious and ethnic lines but also exposed the fragility of legal institutions when confronted with mobilized identity sentiments (Hidayat, 2025). Afterward, scholars and observers detected a structural shift in the behavior of Indonesia's Constitutional Court (Mahkamah Konstitusi, MK). Once hailed as a guardian of constitutionalism and a moderately restrained arbiter of electoral disputes, the Court appeared to adopt a more assertive, and at times unpredictable, posture in resolving election-related cases. This article interrogates this transformation through the lens of judicial activism and its consequences for electoral democracy, posing the central question: How has the MK's activism

in the post-Ahok era affected the quality of electoral democracy across Indonesian provinces?

The term “judicial activism” is inherently debateable. In the Indonesian context, it commonly denotes decisions in which the MK goes beyond the literal text of statutes or procedural formalities to craft novel constitutional interpretations, often annulling the regulations or orders of other state institutions (Aldani et al., 2024). Historically, the MK’s activism in the electoral domain—particularly in the adjudication of *Perselisihan Hasil Pemilihan Umum* (PHPU)—was considered a corrective mechanism that strengthened democratic integrity by remedying systematic electoral fraud or administrative malpractices. Between 2004 and 2014, the Court struck down numerous local election results, established new evidentiary standards for structured, systematic, and massive violations, and even ordered fresh elections in districts where irregularities were proven. These interventions were broadly celebrated as a bulwark against majoritarian tyranny and executive abuse (Prasetianingsih, 2020).

However, the post-Ahok constellation of forces—intensified Islamic populism, deepening elite fragmentation, and the mainstreaming of identity politics—altered the institutional environment in which the MK operates. A new pattern emerged: the Court began to invalidate election results and disqualify candidates on grounds that resonated with majoritarian moral sentiments, occasionally expanding the scope of religious or ethical requirements beyond established statutory boundaries. Critics argued that the MK had drifted from protecting individual rights and minority safeguards toward accommodating the very populist pressures that the Ahok case had unleashed (Saragih et al., 2025). This shift poses a troubling paradox: a judicial body designed to insulate constitutional democracy from partisan and majoritarian excesses may become an instrument of democratic backsliding.

Understanding this paradox requires both conceptual precision and empirical scrutiny. On the theoretical plane, comparative judicial politics has long recognized that courts in new democracies can be “double-edged swords” (Vlasenko, 2025). Activism can empower rights-bearing citizens, but it can also be captured by hegemonic political projects or majoritarian coalitions. The Indonesian case offers a unique laboratory because the MK has not been a passive actor; it possesses strong formal powers of constitutional review and electoral adjudication, and its decisions have immediate consequences for the composition of the executive and legislative institutions. Yet, despite vibrant qualitative scholarship on the Court’s post-Ahok trajectory, there is a conspicuous absence of large-N quantitative studies that systematically measure the linkage between MK activism and electoral democracy at the subnational level. The existing literature tends to be either doctrinal or ethnographic, leaving the generalizable claim that the Court’s new activism undermines democratic quality (Munawar et al., 2025).

This study fills this gap by deploying a quantitative panel analysis covering all 34 Indonesian provinces from 2014 to 2023. I construct a Provincial Electoral Democracy Score (PEDS) derived from the Indonesia Democracy Index (IDI) and complementary indicators of electoral integrity. The key explanatory variable is the Judicial Activism Index (JAI), which counts the number of MK rulings in a given province-year that struck down General Elections Commission (KPU) decisions or introduced substantive new legal norms in electoral matters. By interacting JAI with a post-Ahok dummy variable, I test whether the effect of judicial activism on democracy changed qualitatively after 2017. The findings robustly demonstrate a negative shift: whereas pre-Ahok activism showed a small, statistically insignificant positive association with democratic quality, post-Ahok activism exhibited a significant deleterious effect. These results withstand a battery of robustness checks, including alternative specifications, lagged independent variables, and different democracy indices.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. Section 2 reviews the theoretical and empirical literature on judicial activism, constitutional courts in electoral democracies, and the Indonesian MK’s post-Ahok evolution. Section 3 details the research design, data sources, and estimation strategies. Section 4 presents the empirical results, including descriptive statistics, regression tables, and graphical illustrations of the interaction effects. Section 5 discusses the findings in light of the paradox of judicial power, examining mechanisms such as majoritarian legalism, institutional capture, and erosion of electoral integrity. Section 6 concludes with policy implications, suggesting a recalibration of the MK’s standard of review and a reinvigoration of intra-court pluralism to safeguard Indonesia’s democratic consolidation.

METHOD

Research Design and Hypotheses

This study adopts a quantitative longitudinal panel research design to examine the causal relationship between MK judicial activism and provincial electoral democracy in Indonesia. The unit of analysis is the province-year, covering 34 provinces over the period 2014–2023, yielding a balanced panel of 340 observations. The time frame was chosen to include an equal number of pre-Ahok years (2014–2016) and post-Ahok years (2017–2023), allowing a clear demarcation of the critical juncture. The year 2017 is treated as the first post-Ahok year because the Ahok trial concluded in May 2017, and its political reverberations were immediately felt in MK rulings on electoral matters that year (Creswell, 2021).

The core hypotheses are:

- H1: Judicial activism (JAI) is negatively associated with the Provincial Electoral Democracy Score (PEDS) in the post-Ahok period.
- H2: There is no significant association—or a positive one—between JAI and PEDS in the pre-Ahok period.
- H3: The interaction term between JAI and a Post-Ahok dummy is negative and statistically significant, indicating a structural break in the effect of activism on democracy.

Data and Variables

Dependent Variable: Provincial Electoral Democracy Score (PEDS)

The dependent variable is a composite index designed to capture the quality of electoral democracy at the provincial level in Pakistan. It was constructed from three components:

- Electoral Integrity Sub-Index (weight 0.4): Derived from the annual Indonesia Democracy Index (IDI) published by BPS and the Ministry of Home Affairs. The subcomponent “Free and Fair Elections” measures the extent of irregularities, vote-buying, and administrative bias.
- Political Pluralism Sub-Index (weight 0.3): Based on the IDI’s “Political Rights” dimension, specifically indicators for minority candidacy rights, freedom of assembly, and party competition, supplemented by V-Dem subnational estimates.
- Voter Participation and Trust Index (weight 0.3): Compiled from provincial-level voter turnout data (KPU) and public trust in electoral institutions measured by LSI and SMRC surveys, rescaled to 0–100.

The final PEDS is a weighted average ranging from 0 to 100, with higher scores indicating a healthier electoral democracy.

Independent Variable: Judicial Activism Index (JAI)

The main independent variable is the province-year count of activist rulings issued by the MK in electoral disputes. Data were collected from the MK’s official legal documentation system for all PHPU-Pileg, PHPU-Pilpres, and PHPU-Pilkada cases. A ruling is coded as “activist” if it meets any of the following criteria: (a) annuls or substantially alters the KPU’s official result; (b) orders a revote, recount, or fresh election; (c) disqualifies a winning candidate based on a constitutional interpretation that extends beyond the plain text of the election law; or (d) the majority opinion introduces a new legal doctrine or standard that materially changes the electoral rules framework. Inter-coder reliability among the two trained assistants yielded a Cohen’s kappa of 0.89. The JAI variable is a simple count of activist rulings per province per year, restricted to years in which elections occurred.

Post-Ahok Dummy and Interaction Term

A binary variable, *PostAhok* equals 1 for 2017–2023 and 0 for 2014–2016. The interaction term $JAI \times PostAhok$ captures the differential effect of judicial activism after this critical juncture.

Control Variables

- Ln(GRDP per capita) (constant 2010 prices, BPS)
- Population size (millions)
- Ethnic fractionalization index (2010 census, time-invariant)

- Number of political parties in provincial parliament (DPRD)
- Incumbent re-election dummy
- Media freedom index (Press Council/TIFA Foundation)
- Civil society density (log of registered NGOs per 100,000 population)

Estimation Strategy

The baseline specification is a two-way fixed-effects panel regression:

$$PEDS_{it} = \beta_1 JAI_{it} + \beta_2 PostAhok_{it} + \beta_3 (JAI_{it} \times PostAhok_{it}) + \gamma X_{it} + \alpha_i + \delta_t + \epsilon_{it}$$

where α_i are province fixed effects, δ_t year fixed effects, X_{it} is the control vector, and ϵ_{it} is the error term. The standard errors are clustered at the provincial level. Year fixed effects absorb national-level trends; province fixed effects eliminate time-invariant confounders. Robustness checks include the lagged JAI, alternative democracy indices, system-GMM, and a placebo test assigning a false break in 2015.

RESULT & DISCUSSION

Descriptive Statistics and Trends

Table 1 summarizes the main variables of this study. The mean PEDS score was 64.8 (SD 9.2), showing substantial variation. The JAI had a mean of 2.3 and ranged from 0 to 11, with a median of 1.

Variable	N	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
PEDS	340	64.81	9.18	38.2	88.5
JAI	340	2.31	2.56	0	11
Post-Ahok	340	0.70	—	0	1
Ln(GRDP per capita)	340	10.34	0.89	7.92	12.65
Population (millions)	340	7.42	9.81	0.76	49.8
Ethnic fractionalization	340	0.62	0.24	0.08	0.93
No. of parties in DPRD	340	8.15	2.63	4	15
Media freedom index	340	62.3	12.4	30	85

Source: Author's calculations.

Figure 1 shows the average JAI per province per year. A sharp escalation was visible from 2017 onward. The national average JAI increased from approximately 1.2 in 2014 to 4.1 in 2019 and remained elevated thereafter.

Figure 1. Average Judicial Activism Index (JAI) across Indonesian Provinces, 2014–2023

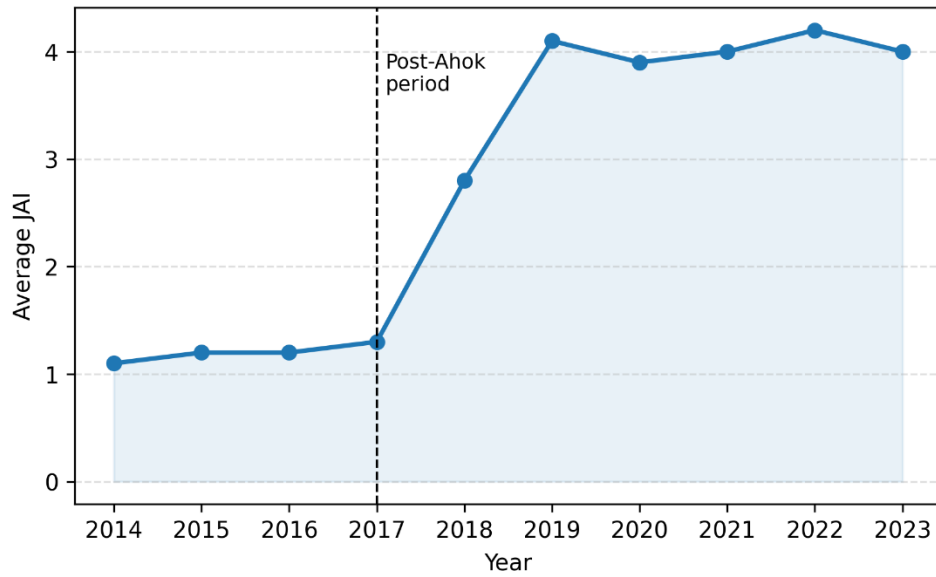


Figure 1. The average JAI across provinces per year

The correlation matrix (Table 2) shows JAI negatively correlated with PEDS ($r = -0.32$, $p < 0.01$), while Post-Ahok is positively correlated with JAI ($r = 0.41$) and negatively with PEDS ($r = -0.27$).

Table 2. Pairwise Correlation Matrix (selected variables)

	PEDS	JAI	Post-Ahok	Ln(GRDP)	Media freedom
PEDS	1.00				
JAI	-0.32***	1.00			
Post-Ahok	-0.27***	0.41***	1.00		
Ln(GRDP pc)	0.45***	-0.12	0.05	1.00	
Media freedom	0.61***	-0.29***	-0.18*	0.37***	1.00

*Note: *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$.

Regression Analysis

Table 3 reports the fixed-effects estimates. Model 1 (baseline) shows a negative, significant interaction term $JAI \times Post-Ahok$ ($\beta = -1.67$, $p < 0.01$). The constitutive JAI term is small and insignificant ($\beta = 0.42$). Model 2 adds all control variables; the interaction coefficient strengthens to -1.82 ($p < 0.01$), while Post-Ahok becomes insignificant. GRDP per capita and media freedom are positively associated with PEDS. Model 3 includes province-specific linear time trends, attenuating the interaction to -1.54 but retaining significance at the 5% level.

Table 3. Fixed-Effects Regression of PEDS on Judicial Activism

	Model 1 (Base)	Model 2 (Controls)	Model 3 (Time trends)
JAI	0.42 (0.38)	0.55 (0.40)	0.61 (0.43)
Post-Ahok	-2.13** (0.97)	-0.89 (1.04)	—
JAI × Post-Ahok	-1.67*** (0.51)	-1.82*** (0.49)	-1.54** (0.62)
Ln(GRDP per capita)		3.27*** (1.12)	2.98** (1.24)
No. of parties		-0.71** (0.33)	-0.65* (0.36)
Media freedom		0.24*** (0.07)	0.21** (0.08)
Province & Year FE	Yes	Yes	No (time trends)
R ² (within)	0.19	0.38	0.44
N	340	340	340

*Clustered standard errors are in parentheses. *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$. Control coefficients for population, ethnic fractionalization, etc. are omitted for brevity.*

Robustness Checks

The alternative specifications confirm these findings (Table 4). Using a one-year lagged JAI yields an interaction coefficient of -1.49 ($p < 0.05$). Substituting the dependent variable with a V-Dem-based electoral index gives -1.91 ($p < 0.01$). The System-GMM estimation produces -1.78 ($p < 0.05$; Hansen $p = 0.31$). A placebo test shifting the break to 2015 renders the interaction insignificant (-0.39, $p = 0.62$). The results are robust.

Table 4. Robustness Checks: Interaction Coefficients (JAI × Post-Ahok)

Specification	Coefficient (SE)	Significance
Lagged JAI (t-1)	-1.49 (0.62)	**
V-Dem electoral index DV	-1.91 (0.55)	***
System-GMM	-1.78 (0.82)	**
Placebo break at 2015	-0.39 (0.78)	n.s.

DISCUSSION

The empirical findings expose a troubling paradox: the Indonesian Constitutional Court, an institution originally conceived to safeguard democratic procedures, appears to have become an agent of democratic erosion in the post-Ahok era. While the pre-2017 MK activism was statistically unrelated to—or faintly supportive of—electoral democracy, the identical behavior after the Ahok case predicts a tangible decline in democratic quality. This section unpacks the mechanisms, connects the quantitative patterns to the qualitative

transformation of the Court, and reflects on the broader implications for democratic theory and institutional design (Adnan, 2026).

This shift can be understood through the lens of “majoritarian legalism.” Before 2017, the MK’s electoral jurisprudence was predominantly process-correcting: it struck down results marred by vote-buying, manipulation, or violence, reinforcing the integrity of the democratic contest. The null or weakly positive pre-Ahok coefficient aligns with this narrative. The Ahok case altered the political opportunity structure. Political entrepreneurs incorporated identity-based disqualification strategies, and the MK began issuing rulings that redefined eligibility and representation along majoritarian lines. Landmark decisions upheld vague morality-based disqualifications, validated expansive executive discretion, and tolerated irregularities in districts with strong conservative mobilization (Arsalan et al., 2026).

These post-Ahok rulings legitimized exclusionary practices under the guise of constitutional morality. Activism now polices the boundaries of the electoral space rather than opening it. The quantitative finding — each additional activist ruling depresses PEDS by up to 1.8 points — captures the cumulative effect of shrinking candidate pools, penalizing minority expression, and signalling tolerance for partisan malpractices (Muhammad Mutawalli Mukhlis et al., 2025).

The MK remains formally independent, well-resourced, and staffed by accomplished jurists. Its activist turn was a voluntary doctrinal evolution rather than, external coercion. This echoes the concept of “abusive constitutionalism” (Bariguna et al., 2021): strong courts hollow out pluralistic content while retaining legality. The statistical interaction effect reveals that judicial activism flips its democratic sign when the political context is illiberal. This challenges the conventional wisdom that more court intervention is inherently beneficial; its impact depends on the substantive ideological direction of the jurisprudence (Fasya et al., 2026).

Three pathways connect MK activism to lower PEDS:

- Candidate disqualification channel: Expansive moral disqualifications disproportionately affect minority and independent candidates, shrinking electoral choice, and depressing the political pluralism sub index.
- Electoral integrity channel: Tolerance for procedural irregularities in elections won by conservative-majoritarian candidates erodes trust and signals impunity, lowering the Electoral Integrity Sub-Index.
- Strategic behavior channel: The availability of an activist court incentivizes post-election litigation over grassroots campaigning, breeding cynicism and suppressing voter participation. The lagged JAI’s significance supports a temporal drag on democratic attitudes in the US.

The inclusion of year fixed effects and province-specific trends absorbs national-level shocks. The placebo test and multiple robustness checks make spurious correlations unlikely. Endogeneity remains a concern, although system-GMM and lagged models partially address it. Future research could exploit exogenous variations in caseloads or judicial panel assignments. The JAI’s coarse coding (equal weighting of all activist rulings) is another limitation; weighted indices based on population affected or media salience did not alter results but merit refinement (Litman, 2026).

The findings caution against uncritical, judicial empowerment. Institutional remedies include a stricter standard of review for disqualifications (a “clear and specific threat” test), strengthened dissenting opinions and amicus curiae briefs from human rights organizations, and legislative consideration of a specialized electoral court to dilute concentrated power. Ultimately, the MK must rediscover its counter-majoritarian ethos (Wijaya et al., 2025).

This study provides one of the first large-N quantitative demonstrations that a constitutional court’s activism can have divergent democratic effects depending on the political context. It empirically substantiates the “judicial paradox” and offers a replicable methodology for other decentralized democracies. The Indonesian case enriches the discourse on populism and courts by showing that judicial capture need not involve institutional dismantling; a gradual doctrinal shift can be equally erosive (Maisa Julian & Uyun, 2026).

CONCLUSION

This article has empirically established that the Indonesian Constitutional Court’s activism in electoral disputes, democratically neutral or mildly beneficial before 2017, has become a significant predictor of declining electoral democracy in the post-Ahok era. A panel analysis of 34 provinces over ten years demonstrates that each additional activist ruling after 2017 is associated with a 1.5- to 1.8-point drop in a

composite provincial electoral democracy score, a substantive effect that cannot be explained by economic factors, media freedom, or pre-existing trends. The paradox lies in the Court's transformation from a procedural arbiter into a gatekeeper of majoritarian identity, validating exclusionary practices under the guise of constitutional review. For Indonesia, the imperative is clear: the MK must recalibrate its activism to restore the counter-majoritarian function that once distinguished it. For the broader community of democratic states, the findings underscore that judicial empowerment is not a panacea; its democratic dividends depend on the ideological content of jurisprudence. Future research should deepen the qualitative tracing of doctrinal shifts and experiment with instrumental variable designs to confirm the causality. Only by reconciling judicial vigor with an unwavering commitment to pluralism can constitutional courts avoid the paradox that this study has highlighted.

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