

State Centralization and the Collapse of Parliamentary Democracy in Indonesia

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Abstract

This study analyzes the transformation of Indonesia's political structure from a federal system to a unitary state during the 1950s, with particular attention to center-periphery relations, the emergence of the PRRI and *Permesta* movements, and their political implications for the configuration of national power. Employing a qualitative approach grounded in historical research, the study utilizes document analysis of state archives, legal and regulatory texts, political speeches, and relevant academic literature. The data are examined through qualitative content analysis and historical interpretation to identify patterns of power centralization, elite fragmentation, and fiscal-political tensions between the central government and regional authorities. The findings indicate that the transition to a unitary state was shaped by a complex interaction of parliamentary political dynamics, unequal resource distribution, and post-election institutional instability. PRRI and *Permesta* emerged as expressions of regional dissatisfaction with increasing centralization rather than as explicitly separatist movements; however, the escalation of these conflicts contributed to the weakening of parliamentary democracy. The study further demonstrates that the dissolution of the Masyumi Party and the Indonesian Socialist Party (PSI) reflected state-led efforts to consolidate political authority within the framework of Guided Democracy. This research contributes to historical scholarship on center-region relations and the processes of political centralization in postcolonial state formation.

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INTRODUCTION

The transformation of Indonesia's political structure from a federal state to a unitary state in the late 1950s represents one of the most critical phases in post-independence political history. The dissolution of the Republic of the United States of Indonesia (Republik Indonesia Serikat, RIS) and the reassertion of the unitary state not only marked the end of the federal system established through the Round Table Conference, but also generated new dynamics in center-periphery relations. In practice, this process of power centralization coincided with escalating regional tensions, which later manifested in the rebellions of the Revolutionary Government of the Republic of Indonesia (Pemerintah Revolusioner Republik Indonesia, PRRI)

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in Sumatra and the Universal People's Struggle (Perjuangan Rakyat Semesta, Permesta) in Sulawesi during the period 1957–1961 (Aryasahab, 2023; Nugroho, 2025; Putri et al., 2024).

A growing body of scholarship suggests that the emergence of PRRI and Permesta cannot be separated from the accumulation of regional grievances toward increasingly centralized governance. Unequal development distribution, the marginalization of regional political and military elites, and perceptions of inadequate regional representation in national decision-making processes contributed to the escalation of armed conflict (Lorenza et al., 2024; Rahmi & Asri, 2021). Within this context, center–periphery dynamics affected not only security stability but also the sustainability of national political institutions, particularly opposition parties such as the Masyumi Party and the Indonesian Socialist Party (Partai Sosialis Indonesia, PSI).

Although M. Natsir one of Masyumi's central figures had previously played a pivotal role in national reintegration through the Integral Motion in 1950, the political positions of both Masyumi and PSI became increasingly marginalized in the subsequent decade alongside the strengthening of executive authority. This condition reflects a paradox in post-revolutionary state consolidation, in which efforts to reinforce national integration proceeded in tandem with the weakening of parliamentary democracy and legitimate political opposition.

Previous studies have largely situated PRRI and Permesta within frameworks of military conflict or narratives of national stability from the perspective of the central government (Kurniawan, 2018; Lubis & Nasution, 2021). Other research has examined the historical representation of these movements in school textbooks (Putri et al., 2024), traced their socio-political roots as precursors to broader discourses on regional autonomy (Aryasahab, 2023), or analyzed Indonesia's macro political-military dynamics from the Liberal Democracy to the Guided Democracy periods (Nugroho, 2025). Meanwhile, (Hasanah & Sukri, 2022) specifically explore the dissolution of Masyumi from the perspective of party elites.

Nevertheless, systematic analyses that elaborate the causal relationship between state centralization, the escalation of regional armed conflict, and the erosion of liberal democratic institutions through the dissolution of major opposition parties remain limited. This analytical gap underscores the need for an approach that views PRRI and Permesta not merely as security events, but as integral components of broader structural dynamics in state formation and political power reconfiguration.

Against this backdrop, this study aims to analyze how the transition from a federal to a unitary state contributed to the emergence of PRRI and Permesta, and how these conflicts subsequently correlated with the dissolution of the Masyumi Party and PSI. This study is grounded in the assumption that power centralization was not solely a defensive response to political instability and threats of disintegration, but also functioned as a mechanism for consolidating executive authority that narrowed the space for political opposition (Sayfullah & Bashori, 2025).

More specifically, this study advances three analytical propositions. First, the strengthening of the unitary state and presidentialism in the late 1950s functioned as structural factors accelerating center–periphery tensions. Second, the military suppression of PRRI and Permesta generated political legitimacy for the central government to restructure the party system through the dissolution of Masyumi and PSI. Third, these processes collectively contributed to the collapse of parliamentary democracy and the consolidation of executive authoritarianism within the framework of Guided Democracy.

Accordingly, this study seeks to contribute conceptually to the scholarship on post-independence Indonesian politics by demonstrating that the transition toward a unitary state was not merely a process of territorial consolidation, but also involved a

restructuring of political power with significant implications for center–periphery relations and the sustainability of liberal democracy.

METHODS

This study employs a qualitative approach with a historical analysis design. This approach is chosen to examine the political and economic dynamics of Indonesia during the 1950s, particularly in the context of the transition from the Republic of the United States of Indonesia to a unitary state and the emergence of center–periphery conflicts (Antwi & Hamza, 2015; Darling-Hammond, 2016; Misnahwati et al., 2024; Yildirim & Güleğül, 2025). The research data are obtained through document analysis and secondary sources, including official state archives, political speeches, economic statistical reports from the 1950–1957 period, as well as relevant scholarly publications and historiographical works.

Data collection is conducted through a systematic review of these written sources, which are subsequently analyzed using qualitative content analysis. The analysis focuses on identifying patterns of interaction among power centralization, elite political fragmentation, and center–regional economic disparities (Akyuni et al., 2025; Az-Zahra et al., 2025; Jaafar et al., 2025; Rahawarin et al., 2025). To ensure analytical validity, this study applies source triangulation by comparing multiple documents and diverse academic interpretations (Engkizar et al., 2023, 2025; Heriyanto, 2018; Preiser et al., 2021). This methodological approach enables a more comprehensive understanding of the structural processes underlying changes in the national political system and the escalation of regional conflicts during the early period of the unitary state.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Socio-Political Factors in the Transition from a Federal State to a Unitary State

The Transition from the Republic of the United States of Indonesia to a Unitary State

Based on an examination of historical documents and secondary literature, the establishment of the Republic of the United States of Indonesia (Republik Indonesia Serikat, RIS) in 1949 was the result of a political compromise reached at the Round Table Conference. Although formally recognized as a legitimate state structure, the RIS faced political resistance from its inception, as it was widely perceived as a colonial legacy that risked undermining national integration and post-independence political cohesion. This perception was particularly prevalent among nationalist elites, who regarded the unitary state as more consistent with the ideals of the independence struggle (Mutawally, 2022).

In 1950, President Soekarno proclaimed the re-establishment of the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia (Negara Kesatuan Republik Indonesia, NKRI). This policy received broad support from nationalist parties at the central level; however, it simultaneously generated concern in several regions that had previously enjoyed greater autonomy under the federal structure. This dynamic indicates that the transition from a federal to a unitary state was not merely a constitutional adjustment, but also a process laden with complex socio-political implications.

Within this context, the role of Mohammad Natsir became particularly significant. As Chairman of the Masyumi Party faction in the RIS Parliament, Natsir proposed the Integral Motion (Mosi Integral), which provided the political foundation for the dissolution of the RIS and the establishment of a unitary state. The success of this motion was followed by Natsir's appointment as Prime Minister in the Natsir Cabinet (September 1950–March 1951). This appointment may be interpreted as an expression of President Soekarno's political trust in Natsir and the

Masyumi Party, as well as an indication of a temporary consensus among political elites regarding the unitary state agenda (Engkizar et al., 2024, 2025; Hossain, 2023; Nordensvärd & Poelina, 2022).

Divergent Political Orientations of Soekarno and Mohammad Hatta

Despite their shared role as Proclamators of Indonesian independence, Soekarno and Mohammad Hatta held differing views regarding the appropriate form of the state. Soekarno consistently favored a unitary state as a symbol of national integration, whereas Hatta was more receptive to the federal model as a means of managing regional diversity and accommodating local interests. Although these differences did not always surface explicitly, they constituted an important background to national political dynamics during the 1950s.

When the PRRI movement emerged, Mohammad Hatta firmly refused to become involved and opposed the movement, viewing it as a military action that posed a threat to national unity and democratic governance. Nevertheless, Hatta also criticized the central government's repressive approach to resolving regional conflicts, particularly the reliance on military operations that, in his view, marginalized political dialogue. This stance reflects Hatta's consistent rejection of separatism alongside his commitment to constitutional and political solutions to conflict.

Hatta's resignation from the office of Vice President on 1 December 1956 marked a significant turning point. The vacancy did not merely have administrative consequences, but also removed an important moderating figure within the national power structure. Hatta's absence contributed to the increasing concentration of power in the hands of President Soekarno and narrowed the space for political mediation between the central government and the regions.

Central-Regional Economic Disparities and Policy Centralization

An analysis of economic data from the period 1950–1957 reveals persistent disparities in resource distribution between the central government and the regions. While the absolute value of regional revenues increased, their proportion relative to central government revenues declined. This pattern reflects a growing tendency toward fiscal centralization at the national level.

These disparities had significant political implications, particularly for export-oriented regions such as Sumatra and Sulawesi. These regions increasingly perceived central economic policies as disproportionate and insufficiently responsive to their economic contributions. Tensions were further exacerbated by highly centralized decision-making processes in Jakarta, which limited meaningful regional participation in national policy formulation (Nugroho, 2025).

Political Instability, Party Fragmentation, and the Failure of Elite Consensus

The 1955 general election widely regarded as the most democratic multiparty election in Indonesia's early republican period did not result in a stable government. Post-election political fragmentation produced a relatively balanced distribution of power among major parties, including the Indonesian National Party (PNI), Masyumi, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), and the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI), preventing any single party from forming a durable governing coalition.

This instability was further compounded by internal fragmentation within the Masyumi Party following NU's separation in 1952. Disputes over the marginalization of traditional ulama, competition for influence within the Ministry of Religious Affairs, and divergent political styles between modernist and traditionalist Islamic groups contributed significantly to this split. As a result, Islamic political forces became increasingly fragmented and weakened within the national political arena.

The failure of political elites to build sustainable consensus led to frequent cabinet changes and diminished governmental effectiveness. This condition eroded

public confidence in the parliamentary system and created openings for political alternatives beyond the framework of liberal democracy.

The Emergence of PRRI and Permesta as Responses to Centralization

The PRRI and Permesta movements emerged against a backdrop of accumulated regional dissatisfaction with central government policies. PRRI was proclaimed in Padang on 15 February 1958, while Permesta had appeared earlier in North Sulawesi on 2 March 1957. Both movements demanded greater regional autonomy and economic reforms, particularly concerning the distribution of export revenues.

Unlike purely separatist movements, PRRI and Permesta did not explicitly declare an intention to secede or to alter the state ideology. Their primary claim was framed as an effort to “save the Republic” from what they perceived as a failing central government. The involvement of regional military commanders and local political elites suggests that these movements were rooted in structural tensions between the center and the regions rather than in narrow regional power ambitions (Rahmi & Asri, 2021).

Nationalization, Power Consolidation, and Subsequent Political Impacts

The large-scale nationalization of foreign-owned enterprises beginning in 1957 constituted a governmental response to economic crisis and mounting political pressure. However, the implementation of nationalization without adequate managerial capacity further deteriorated national economic conditions. Inflation rose, budget deficits widened, and confidence among economic actors declined.

Politically, nationalization strengthened the alliance between President Soekarno, the military, and the PKI, while simultaneously weakening parliamentary authority and opposition parties. Within the framework of Guided Democracy, the government dissolved the Masyumi Party and the Socialist Party of Indonesia (PSI) in 1960, citing the involvement of some of their leaders in the PRRI movement. This dissolution marked the end of significant parliamentary opposition and accelerated the consolidation of power under Soekarno’s leadership (Hasanah & Sukri, 2022).

Although figures such as Mohammad Natsir and Mohammad Hatta were not directly involved in the military actions of PRRI, their critical positions toward central government policies were sufficient to marginalize them politically. Hatta’s continued rejection of separatism alongside his criticism of repressive state practices reflects the moral and political dilemmas faced by moderate elites during this period.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the transition from a federal state to a unitary state in Indonesia in the late 1950s was not merely an institutional transformation, but also a catalyst for complex socio-political dynamics in center–region relations. The findings indicate that the emergence of the PRRI and Permesta is more appropriately understood as an expression of regional dissatisfaction with the centralization of power and the failure to accommodate regional aspirations, rather than as purely separatist movements. These conflicts unfolded within a broader context of elite fragmentation, the weakening of parliamentary consensus, and political rivalry during the early post-independence period.

Furthermore, the study demonstrates that the escalation of regional conflicts provided political legitimacy for the central government to consolidate power through the dissolution of the Masyumi Party and the Indonesian Socialist Party (PSI). This process ultimately contributed to the demise of parliamentary democracy and the strengthening of Guided Democracy. Conceptually, this study underscores that the consolidation of the unitary state in post-independence Indonesia proceeded in tandem with a restructuring of political power, which had significant implications for the survival of political opposition and liberal democratic institutions.

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