



Climate Justice in an Age of Democratic Decline: Civic Space and Environmental Resistance

Mukhlis Arifin*

Universitas Riau, Pekanbaru, Indonesia
mukhlisarifin@unri.ac.id

Pratama Herry Herlambang

Universitas Negeri Semarang, Semarang, Indonesia
pratamaherryherlambang@mail.unnes.ac.id

Andi Zakaria

Universitas Sembilanbelas November Kolaka, Kolaka, Indonesia
andizakaria@usn.ac.id

Bùi Hoàng Nam

Hanoi University of Science and Technology, Hanoi, Vietnam
huangnam@gmail.com

Huang Wei

Singapore University of Technology and Design, Singapore
huangwei@hotmail.com

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.65815/bh22td17>

Submitted: 11-08-2024

Revised: 11-10-2024, 21-12-2024

Accepted: 10-01-2025

*Corresponding Author

Abstract

This paper explores the relationship between climate justice, civic space, and environmental resistance in the context of democratic decline, with a particular focus on Indonesia. As climate change intensifies, the struggle for environmental justice becomes increasingly intertwined with broader issues of political freedom, human rights, and democratic governance. In countries like Indonesia, where environmental degradation is often driven by extractive industries and unsustainable development, civic space for environmental activism is shrinking, especially as democratic institutions face growing challenges from authoritarian tendencies. This study examines how democratic backsliding affects the ability of civil society, activists, and marginalized communities to engage in climate justice movements and resist environmentally destructive policies. Through case studies, interviews with environmental activists, and analysis of political trends, the research reveals that the decline in democratic freedoms, such as restrictions on freedom of assembly, press, and speech, has led to the criminalization of environmental resistance and increased risks for those fighting for climate justice. The paper argues that climate justice must not



only address environmental and social inequities but also actively protect democratic principles that allow for meaningful public participation and environmental advocacy. By examining the intersections of climate change, civic space, and democratic governance, this research offers a nuanced perspective on how environmental resistance can continue to thrive even in the face of political repression, and how climate justice movements must adapt to an era of democratic decline.

[Tulisan ini mengeksplorasi hubungan antara keadilan iklim, ruang sipil, dan perlawanan lingkungan dalam konteks kemerosotan demokrasi, dengan fokus khusus pada Indonesia. Seiring intensifikasi perubahan iklim, perjuangan untuk keadilan lingkungan semakin terkait erat dengan isu-isu yang lebih luas tentang kebebasan politik, hak asasi manusia, dan tata pemerintahan demokratis. Di negara-negara seperti Indonesia, di mana degradasi lingkungan seringkali didorong oleh industri ekstraktif dan pembangunan yang tidak berkelanjutan, ruang sipil untuk aktivisme lingkungan semakin menyempit, terutama karena lembaga-lembaga demokrasi menghadapi tantangan yang semakin besar dari kecenderungan otoriter. Studi ini meneliti bagaimana kemunduran demokrasi memengaruhi kemampuan masyarakat sipil, aktivis, dan komunitas yang terpinggirkan untuk terlibat dalam gerakan keadilan iklim dan melawan kebijakan yang merusak lingkungan. Melalui studi kasus, wawancara dengan aktivis lingkungan, dan analisis tren politik, penelitian ini mengungkapkan bahwa penurunan kebebasan demokratis, seperti pembatasan kebebasan berkumpul, pers, dan berbicara, telah menyebabkan kriminalisasi perlawanan lingkungan dan peningkatan risiko bagi mereka yang memperjuangkan keadilan iklim. Makalah ini berpendapat bahwa keadilan iklim tidak hanya harus mengatasi ketidakadilan lingkungan dan sosial tetapi juga secara aktif melindungi prinsip-prinsip demokrasi yang memungkinkan partisipasi publik yang bermakna dan advokasi lingkungan. Dengan meneliti keterkaitan antara perubahan iklim, ruang sipil, dan tata pemerintahan demokratis, penelitian ini menawarkan perspektif yang lebih mendalam tentang bagaimana perlawanan terhadap lingkungan dapat terus berkembang bahkan di tengah represi politik, dan bagaimana gerakan keadilan iklim harus beradaptasi dengan era kemunduran demokrasi.]

Keywords: Climate Justice, Democratic Decline, Civic Space, Environmental Resistance, Human Rights

Introduction

Climate change and environmental degradation have emerged as defining challenges of the twenty-first century, producing profound ecological, economic, and social consequences across the globe. Rising temperatures, biodiversity loss, deforestation, ecosystem degradation, and increasing frequency of extreme weather events have intensified pressures on societies, particularly among communities whose livelihoods depend directly on natural resources (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change [IPCC], 2023). However, the

consequences of environmental crises are not distributed equally. Vulnerable populations, including Indigenous peoples, rural communities, small-scale farmers, and environmental defenders, often experience disproportionate exposure to ecological risks while possessing limited political and economic capacity to influence environmental decision-making (Newell et al., 2021).

The unequal distribution of environmental harms has contributed to the emergence of climate justice as a critical framework for understanding the relationship between ecological change, social inequality, and political responsibility. Climate justice extends beyond technical approaches to climate mitigation and adaptation by emphasizing questions of power, accountability, participation, and human rights. It challenges dominant climate governance approaches that often prioritize economic efficiency and technological solutions while overlooking historical inequalities and the voices of marginalized communities (Schlosberg & Collins, 2014).

At the same time, global environmental challenges are unfolding within a context of increasing democratic decline and shrinking civic space. Recent decades have witnessed democratic erosion in various regions, characterized by weakening institutions, restrictions on freedom of expression and association, declining accountability mechanisms, and increasing concentration of political power (V-Dem Institute, 2024). These developments have significant implications for environmental governance because democratic institutions and civic freedoms are essential for enabling public participation, holding governments and corporations accountable, and protecting communities affected by environmental degradation (Carothers & Press, 2021).

The intersection between environmental struggles and political freedoms has therefore become increasingly important. Environmental conflicts are rarely limited to disputes over natural resources; they often involve broader struggles over rights, representation, and access to decision-making processes. Around the world, environmental activists, Indigenous leaders, and community organizations have faced intimidation, legal harassment, criminalization, and violence when challenging extractive industries or environmentally harmful development projects (Global Witness, 2023). These patterns demonstrate that climate justice is inseparable from questions of democratic governance and the protection of civic space.

Climate justice provides an analytical framework for examining how environmental challenges intersect with social inequality, political power, and human rights. Unlike conventional environmental governance approaches that primarily focus on ecological outcomes, climate justice emphasizes three interconnected dimensions: distributive justice, procedural justice, and recognition justice (Schlosberg, 2007). Distributive justice concerns the unequal allocation of environmental risks and benefits; procedural justice focuses on meaningful participation in decision-making processes; and recognition

justice addresses the importance of respecting diverse identities, knowledge systems, and cultural relationships with nature.

These dimensions highlight the importance of democratic governance in achieving effective and legitimate climate action. Democratic institutions provide mechanisms through which citizens can participate in environmental decision-making, challenge harmful policies, and demand accountability from governments and corporations. Freedom of expression, access to information, independent civil society organizations, and legal protections for activists are therefore fundamental components of climate justice (Boyd, 2018).

However, democratic decline presents significant challenges to climate justice movements. When civic space becomes restricted, environmental organizations and affected communities may lose opportunities to influence policy processes, contest development decisions, or expose environmental violations. The weakening of democratic accountability may enable powerful economic actors, including extractive industries and large-scale infrastructure developers, to advance projects with limited consideration of social and ecological consequences (Temper et al., 2018).

Furthermore, the relationship between democracy and climate action is complex. While democratic systems do not automatically guarantee effective environmental protection, research suggests that accountable institutions, transparent governance, and inclusive participation create conditions that are more conducive to equitable and sustainable environmental policies (Treisman, 2020). Therefore, understanding climate justice requires examining not only environmental outcomes but also the political conditions that enable or constrain environmental resistance.

Indonesia represents a critical case for examining the relationship between climate justice, democratic governance, and environmental resistance. As one of the world's largest biodiversity-rich countries and a major contributor to global natural resource production, Indonesia faces significant environmental challenges associated with deforestation, mining expansion, fossil fuel extraction, industrial agriculture, and large-scale infrastructure development (World Bank, 2021). These activities have generated extensive environmental conflicts involving questions of land rights, Indigenous sovereignty, ecological protection, and community livelihoods.

Many environmental conflicts in Indonesia emerge from competing interests between state-led development agendas, corporate investment, and local communities seeking to protect their environments and livelihoods. Extractive industries, including mining, palm oil production, and energy development, have frequently been associated with land disputes, ecosystem degradation, and social conflicts involving Indigenous peoples and rural communities (Bebbington et al., 2018). These conflicts illustrate that environmental struggles are simultaneously ecological and political, involving

broader questions regarding whose knowledge, interests, and rights are recognized within development processes.

Despite Indonesia's democratic transition since 1998, recent studies have identified signs of democratic weakening, including declining institutional checks and balances, restrictions on civil society activities, and reduced protection for critical voices challenging government policies (Power, 2018; V-Dem Institute, 2024). The narrowing of civic space has implications for environmental resistance because activists and affected communities often depend on democratic mechanisms—including public participation, legal advocacy, and freedom of association—to defend environmental rights.

Indonesia is therefore a particularly relevant case for examining how climate justice movements operate under conditions of democratic decline. The country illustrates the complex relationship between economic development priorities, environmental protection, and political freedoms. While environmental movements continue to demonstrate resilience through community organizing, legal advocacy, and transnational networks, they also face increasing institutional and political constraints.

Existing scholarship has extensively examined climate change impacts, environmental governance, and social movements. However, limited attention has been given to how democratic decline influences the capacity of climate justice movements to challenge environmental injustice and protect vulnerable communities. Much of the climate justice literature focuses on inequality in climate impacts and adaptation processes, while studies of democratic erosion often examine political institutions without sufficiently considering environmental struggles as important sites of democratic contestation.

This study addresses this gap by analyzing the relationship between democratic decline, civic space restrictions, and climate justice movements. It argues that environmental resistance should be understood not only as a response to ecological degradation but also as a struggle for democratic rights, political inclusion, and social recognition. Accordingly, this study aims to examine how changing political conditions shape climate justice struggles and environmental resistance, with Indonesia serving as a critical case study. Specifically, the research addresses the following questions:

1. How does democratic decline affect climate justice movements and environmental resistance?
2. What are the impacts of shrinking civic space on environmental activism and marginalized communities?
3. How can climate justice be pursued under conditions of increasing political constraints and restricted civic freedoms?

By addressing these questions, this study contributes to interdisciplinary debates on climate justice, environmental politics, and democratic governance. It advances the argument that effective climate action requires not only

technological and institutional solutions but also the protection of democratic spaces where communities can participate, contest injustice, and defend their environmental rights.

Literature Review

A. Climate Justice and Human Rights

Climate justice has emerged as a critical theoretical and normative framework for understanding climate change as not only an environmental challenge but also a question of inequality, responsibility, and rights. Unlike conventional climate governance approaches that primarily emphasize emission reduction, technological innovation, and economic efficiency, climate justice highlights the unequal distribution of climate impacts, historical responsibilities, and differentiated capacities to respond to environmental change (Schlosberg & Collins, 2014; Newell et al., 2021).

The normative foundations of climate justice are rooted in principles of fairness, equity, accountability, and recognition. These principles challenge the assumption that climate change represents a universal problem affecting all populations equally. Instead, climate justice scholarship demonstrates that climate impacts are socially differentiated, with marginalized communities often experiencing the greatest environmental burdens despite contributing the least to global greenhouse gas emissions (Roberts & Parks, 2007). Such inequalities are shaped by historical patterns of colonialism, resource extraction, economic dependency, and unequal political power relations.

Climate justice is commonly conceptualized through three interconnected dimensions: distributive justice, procedural justice, and recognitional justice (Schlosberg, 2007). Distributive justice addresses how climate risks, adaptation resources, and environmental benefits are allocated among different groups. Procedural justice emphasizes meaningful participation, transparency, and inclusion in climate decision-making processes. Recognitional justice focuses on respecting diverse identities, cultural values, Indigenous knowledge systems, and the lived experiences of communities affected by environmental change.

Increasingly, climate justice scholarship has adopted a human rights-based approach, recognizing that climate change threatens fundamental rights, including the rights to life, health, food, water, housing, cultural identity, and a healthy environment (United Nations Human Rights Council [UNHRC], 2021). This perspective shifts climate governance from a purely technical challenge toward a rights-based framework that requires governments and corporations to protect vulnerable populations and ensure accountability for environmental harms.

The human rights dimension of climate justice is particularly relevant in contexts where environmental degradation is associated with development projects, extractive industries, and resource exploitation. Communities affected

by deforestation, mining, fossil fuel expansion, and large-scale infrastructure projects often experience not only ecological disruption but also violations of land rights, cultural rights, and political participation. Therefore, climate justice requires institutional mechanisms that protect environmental rights and enable affected communities to actively participate in decisions affecting their environments.

B. Democratic Decline and Civic Space

The pursuit of climate justice is deeply connected to the quality of democratic governance because environmental decision-making depends on transparency, accountability, and public participation. However, contemporary global politics has witnessed increasing concerns regarding democratic decline, democratic backsliding, and the expansion of authoritarian tendencies (Bermeo, 2016; V-Dem Institute, 2024).

Democratic backsliding refers to the gradual weakening of democratic institutions, norms, and accountability mechanisms by elected governments or political elites. Unlike traditional authoritarian transitions involving abrupt regime changes, contemporary democratic decline often occurs incrementally through institutional manipulation, restrictions on civil liberties, weakening of judicial independence, and limitations on opposition voices (Bermeo, 2016). These processes can significantly affect environmental governance because they reduce opportunities for citizens and civil society organizations to challenge harmful policies and demand government accountability.

A central dimension of democratic decline is the shrinking of civic space—the reduction of opportunities for individuals and organizations to freely organize, express opinions, participate in public debates, and influence policy processes (Carothers & Brechenmacher, 2014). Civic space is essential for climate justice because environmental movements frequently depend on freedom of association, access to information, independent media, and legal protections to advocate for ecological protection and community rights.

Freedom of expression and political participation are particularly important in contexts where environmental conflicts involve powerful economic actors, including mining corporations, plantation companies, and infrastructure developers. Without adequate civic protections, communities may face difficulties challenging environmentally harmful projects or reporting environmental violations. Research indicates that weakened democratic institutions often reduce accountability mechanisms and create conditions where environmental harms can persist with limited public scrutiny (Temper et al., 2018).

Therefore, democratic governance should be understood as an enabling condition for climate justice. While democracy alone does not guarantee effective environmental protection, inclusive institutions and protected civic spaces

provide essential mechanisms through which communities can participate in environmental decision-making and resist ecological injustice (Boyd, 2018).

C. Environmental Resistance and Social Movements

Environmental resistance represents a critical dimension of climate justice movements, particularly among communities confronting ecological destruction, resource extraction, and threats to traditional livelihoods. Environmental movements are not merely campaigns for conservation; they are broader struggles over political recognition, social justice, territorial rights, and alternative development pathways (Martinez-Alier, 2020).

Social movement scholarship demonstrates that environmental resistance emerges when communities perceive environmental threats as connected to broader forms of inequality and political exclusion. Such movements frequently involve Indigenous peoples, rural communities, farmers, fishers, and civil society organizations seeking to defend land, forests, water resources, and cultural identities (Temper et al., 2018). These struggles represent attempts to challenge dominant development models that prioritize economic growth while externalizing environmental and social costs.

The political context significantly shapes the strategies and outcomes of environmental resistance. In democratic contexts with relatively open civic spaces, environmental movements may utilize legal advocacy, public campaigns, elections, media engagement, and institutional negotiation. However, in authoritarian or increasingly restrictive political environments, activists often face greater risks, including surveillance, intimidation, legal harassment, and physical violence (Doherty & Hayes, 2019).

The criminalization of environmental defenders has become a major concern within global environmental governance. Environmental defenders—individuals and communities protecting ecosystems and environmental rights—are increasingly targeted when their actions challenge powerful political or economic interests. According to Global Witness (2023), many environmental defenders worldwide have experienced threats, judicial persecution, and violence while defending land and environmental resources.

The criminalization of environmental activism represents a direct challenge to climate justice because it restricts the ability of affected communities to participate in environmental governance. When activists are silenced or marginalized, environmental decision-making becomes less inclusive and more vulnerable to domination by powerful actors. Consequently, protecting environmental defenders is not only a human rights issue but also a fundamental requirement for democratic climate governance.

D. Research Gap

Although existing scholarship has significantly advanced understanding of climate justice, democratic decline, and environmental movements separately, limited research has examined the intersections among these three dimensions. Climate justice studies have primarily focused on inequality, vulnerability, adaptation, and responsibility, while democratic decline literature has generally concentrated on political institutions, electoral processes, and authoritarian tendencies. As a result, insufficient attention has been given to how changing political conditions influence the ability of climate justice movements to operate and defend environmental rights.

Similarly, research on environmental resistance has extensively examined social movements and environmental conflicts but has often paid limited attention to how democratic deterioration and civic space restrictions shape movement strategies, risks, and outcomes. Understanding environmental resistance requires greater attention to the political environments in which these movements operate, particularly where democratic institutions are weakening.

The geographical focus of existing literature also presents important limitations. While extensive research has examined environmental movements in Latin America, North America, and Europe, fewer empirical studies have investigated the relationship between climate justice, civic space, and environmental resistance in Southeast Asia. This regional gap is significant because Southeast Asia contains some of the world's most environmentally vulnerable ecosystems while simultaneously experiencing rapid economic development, resource extraction, and complex political transitions.

Indonesia represents a particularly important case for addressing this gap. As a democratic country experiencing both environmental pressures and concerns regarding civic space restrictions, Indonesia provides valuable insights into how climate justice movements operate under conditions of democratic uncertainty. Examining Indonesia allows for a deeper understanding of how environmental defenders, local communities, and civil society organizations negotiate political constraints while pursuing ecological and social justice.

Therefore, this study contributes to existing scholarship by developing an interdisciplinary framework that connects climate justice, democratic governance, and environmental resistance. By examining the relationship between shrinking civic space and climate justice struggles, the research advances understanding of how political conditions shape the possibilities and limitations of environmental action in contemporary societies.

Methods

A. Research Design

This study employs a qualitative interdisciplinary research design that integrates political, legal, and socio-environmental perspectives to examine the

relationship between climate justice, democratic decline, civic space, and environmental resistance in Indonesia. A qualitative approach is appropriate because the study seeks to understand complex processes of power, governance, rights contestation, and collective action that cannot be adequately captured through quantitative indicators alone (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The research is grounded in a critical socio-environmental framework that views environmental conflicts as deeply embedded within political and institutional structures. Rather than treating environmental resistance solely as a response to ecological degradation, this study examines it as a form of political engagement through which marginalized communities and civil society actors challenge unequal development models, demand recognition, and defend environmental rights (Martinez-Alier, 2020). This approach enables an integrated analysis of how democratic conditions shape the possibilities and limitations of climate justice movements.

The study adopts a qualitative case study strategy focusing on selected environmental resistance movements in Indonesia. Case study research is particularly suitable for investigating contemporary social and political phenomena within their real-world contexts, especially when the boundaries between political processes, legal institutions, and social struggles are complex and interconnected (Yin, 2018). The selected cases provide analytical insights into how environmental defenders and affected communities navigate conflicts involving extractive industries, development projects, and environmental governance.

An interdisciplinary approach is employed by combining three analytical dimensions. First, a political analysis examines democratic conditions, civic space restrictions, and the institutional environment influencing environmental activism. Second, a legal analysis investigates regulatory frameworks, rights protections, and mechanisms affecting environmental participation and advocacy. Third, a socio-environmental analysis explores community experiences, resistance strategies, and the social consequences of environmental conflicts.

B. Data Collection

This study utilizes multiple qualitative data sources to achieve methodological triangulation and strengthen the validity of the findings. Data collection consists of three complementary approaches: case study documentation, semi-structured interviews, and analysis of legal and policy documents. First, the research examines selected cases of environmental resistance movements in Indonesia. Case selection follows a purposive sampling strategy based on several criteria: (1) the presence of significant environmental conflicts related to extractive industries, infrastructure development, or resource exploitation; (2) involvement of local communities or environmental

organizations in resistance efforts; (3) relevance to climate justice concerns, including environmental rights, livelihood protection, and ecological sustainability; and (4) availability of sufficient documentation and stakeholder access.

The selected cases represent diverse forms of environmental resistance, including community struggles against land conversion, mining expansion, forest exploitation, and other development activities affecting vulnerable populations. These cases enable examination of how environmental movements operate under varying political, legal, and institutional conditions. Second, semi-structured interviews are conducted with key stakeholders, including environmental activists, representatives of civil society organizations (CSOs), community leaders, Indigenous representatives, legal advocates, and researchers involved in environmental governance. Participants are selected using purposive and snowball sampling methods to identify individuals with direct experience and knowledge of environmental conflicts and civic space conditions.

The interviews explore several key themes: experiences of environmental conflict, strategies of resistance and advocacy, perceptions of government and corporate accountability, experiences with legal and institutional mechanisms, challenges related to civic space, and pathways for advancing climate justice. Semi-structured interviews provide flexibility for participants to explain their experiences while maintaining consistency across research themes. Third, documentary analysis is conducted to examine laws, regulations, government policies, court decisions, institutional reports, and political developments affecting environmental governance and civic space in Indonesia. Relevant documents include environmental regulations, land-use policies, mining and resource governance frameworks, climate policies, human rights reports, and civil society documentation. This analysis provides insight into how formal institutions shape opportunities and constraints for environmental resistance movements.

C. Data Analysis

The collected qualitative data are analyzed through thematic analysis combined with critical discourse and policy analysis. Thematic analysis is used to identify recurring patterns, meanings, and relationships across interview transcripts and documentary materials (Braun & Clarke, 2021). This method allows the research to systematically examine how participants understand environmental justice, political restrictions, resistance strategies, and institutional challenges.

The analytical process involves several stages. First, interview transcripts and documents are reviewed repeatedly to achieve familiarity with the data. Second, initial codes are developed to identify significant concepts related to climate justice, civic space, environmental governance, political repression, and

community resistance. Third, related codes are organized into broader analytical themes that correspond with the research objectives.

Thematic findings are then interpreted through the theoretical framework of climate justice, particularly the dimensions of distributive justice, procedural justice, and recognition justice (Schlosberg, 2007). This allows the study to examine not only environmental outcomes but also questions of power, participation, rights, and inequality. In addition to thematic analysis, critical discourse analysis is employed to examine how environmental issues, development narratives, and political legitimacy are constructed within policy documents and public discourse. This approach investigates how language, institutional narratives, and policy frameworks shape understandings of environmental problems and justify particular development pathways (Fairclough, 2013).

Critical policy analysis further examines the relationship between formal regulations and their practical implications for civic participation and environmental protection. This enables identification of potential gaps between legal commitments to environmental rights and the lived experiences of communities and activists engaged in environmental struggles. The combination of thematic analysis, discourse analysis, and policy analysis provides a comprehensive understanding of how political structures and governance practices influence the pursuit of climate justice in contexts of democratic uncertainty.

D. Ethical Considerations

Given the politically sensitive nature of environmental resistance research, ethical considerations are central to the research design. Many environmental activists, community leaders, and civil society actors involved in environmental conflicts may face political pressure, legal challenges, intimidation, or other risks due to their advocacy activities. Therefore, the study adopts strict procedures to protect participants' safety, dignity, and autonomy.

Prior to participation, all participants receive clear information regarding the objectives of the research, data collection procedures, potential risks, and their rights as research participants. Informed consent is obtained before conducting interviews, and participants are informed that participation is voluntary and that they may withdraw from the study at any time without negative consequences.

To minimize potential risks, confidentiality and anonymity are strictly maintained. Identifying information is removed from interview transcripts, and pseudonyms or participant codes are used in reporting research findings where necessary. Sensitive information that may expose participants to political or legal risks is carefully managed and reported only in ways that protect participant security.

The research also follows principles of responsible engagement with communities affected by environmental conflicts. Particular attention is given to respecting local knowledge, Indigenous perspectives, and community experiences. Rather than treating communities as passive research subjects, the study recognizes participants as knowledge holders whose experiences contribute essential insights into climate justice and environmental governance. Through these ethical safeguards, the research aims to produce academically rigorous findings while ensuring that the study does not increase risks for individuals and communities engaged in environmental resistance.

Analysis and Discussion

The empirical findings reveal that climate justice struggles in Indonesia are shaped not only by environmental pressures but also by the changing political conditions within which environmental actors operate. The analysis identifies four interconnected dynamics: (1) the contraction of civic space and democratic participation, (2) the criminalization of environmental resistance, (3) the disproportionate impacts experienced by marginalized communities, and (4) the emergence of adaptive strategies among climate justice movements. These findings demonstrate that environmental conflicts are simultaneously ecological, political, and rights-based struggles.

The findings further indicate that climate injustice cannot be separated from institutional arrangements that determine whose voices are recognized, whose knowledge is considered legitimate, and whose interests are prioritized in environmental governance. In contexts where democratic accountability mechanisms weaken, communities facing environmental risks encounter increasing barriers to participation and resistance.

A. Democratic Decline and Shrinking Civic Space

The findings indicate that environmental resistance movements in Indonesia operate within an increasingly constrained civic environment characterized by declining opportunities for meaningful public participation. Although Indonesia remains formally democratic, several indicators suggest a gradual weakening of democratic institutions, particularly concerning freedom of expression, civil society autonomy, and mechanisms of accountability (Power, 2018; Warburton, 2020; V-Dem Institute, 2024).

The analysis of policy developments and stakeholder experiences demonstrates that environmental governance has become increasingly shaped by centralized decision-making processes and development-oriented priorities. While formal mechanisms of participation continue to exist through environmental impact assessments, public consultations, and administrative procedures, these mechanisms often provide limited opportunities for affected communities to influence final decisions. This condition reflects what Schlosberg

(2007) conceptualizes as a failure of procedural justice, where participation exists institutionally but lacks substantive influence.

The contraction of civic space has important implications for climate justice because environmental protection frequently depends on the ability of communities and civil society organizations to challenge dominant development models. Climate justice requires not only the redistribution of environmental benefits and burdens but also the democratization of decision-making processes (Schlosberg & Collins, 2014). When civic participation is restricted, marginalized communities lose essential channels through which they can articulate environmental concerns and demand accountability.

The findings suggest three interconnected mechanisms through which civic space has narrowed within environmental governance. First, regulatory and institutional arrangements increasingly privilege investment acceleration and economic development objectives over participatory environmental decision-making. Second, civil society organizations involved in environmental advocacy face increasing administrative and political pressures. Third, communities challenging environmentally harmful projects experience uncertainty regarding their ability to organize collective action without facing institutional consequences.

This pattern reflects broader global trends of democratic erosion, where elected governments may gradually weaken accountability mechanisms while maintaining formal democratic institutions (Bermeo, 2016). Unlike classical authoritarianism, contemporary democratic decline often operates through legal and institutional changes that appear legitimate but gradually reduce political contestation (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). In environmental contexts, such processes may produce what scholars describe as “authoritarian environmentalism,” where ecological decisions are centralized and justified through efficiency narratives while limiting public participation (Beeson, 2010).

The Indonesian case illustrates this tension clearly. Environmental governance frequently involves conflicts between state-led development strategies, corporate interests, and community-based claims for ecological protection. Large-scale projects associated with mining, plantations, energy infrastructure, and extractive industries often generate conflicts because communities perceive these developments as threatening their livelihoods, territorial rights, and environmental security (Bebbington et al., 2018; Li, 2014).

The findings therefore indicate that shrinking civic space does not merely represent a political problem separate from environmental governance. Rather, it directly influences the capacity of communities to pursue climate justice. When democratic mechanisms weaken, environmental decision-making becomes more vulnerable to elite capture, unequal power relations, and the prioritization of economic interests over ecological and social considerations.

B. Criminalization of Environmental Resistance

A second major finding concerns the increasing vulnerability of environmental defenders and community leaders to legal and political pressures. The analysis indicates that environmental resistance is frequently reframed by authorities and powerful actors as a disruption to development, public order, or economic stability rather than recognized as a legitimate exercise of environmental citizenship.

The criminalization of environmental resistance represents one of the most significant barriers to climate justice. Environmental defenders often operate in contexts where they challenge powerful economic and political interests, particularly those associated with extractive industries and large-scale development projects. As a result, legal instruments may become mechanisms through which dissent is controlled rather than protected (Temper et al., 2018; Global Witness, 2023).

The findings reveal several patterns of criminalization. First, activists and community representatives may face legal accusations following public protests, advocacy campaigns, or opposition to development projects. Second, environmental organizations experience pressure when their activities challenge government policies or corporate practices. Third, the possibility of legal consequences creates a deterrent effect that discourages broader community participation. This phenomenon demonstrates how law can operate ambivalently within environmental governance. On one hand, legal frameworks provide important mechanisms for environmental protection, recognition of rights, and accountability. On the other hand, selective enforcement and restrictive interpretations of legal provisions may transform law into an instrument that protects powerful actors while limiting grassroots resistance (Peluso & Lund, 2011).

From a climate justice perspective, criminalization represents a failure of recognitional and procedural justice. Recognitional justice requires acknowledgment of communities as legitimate political actors with valuable ecological knowledge and rights-based claims (Schlosberg, 2007). However, when environmental defenders are portrayed as obstacles to development, their identities, knowledge systems, and political agency are delegitimized.

The findings also demonstrate that criminalization has broader social consequences beyond individual activists. When community leaders face intimidation, prosecution, or surveillance, collective resistance becomes more difficult to sustain. This creates unequal conditions in environmental conflicts because corporations and state institutions generally possess greater financial, legal, and political resources than affected communities (Martinez-Alier, 2020).

The Indonesian experience reflects a broader global pattern. Research on environmental conflicts shows that defenders of land, forests, and natural resources are increasingly exposed to violence and legal persecution, particularly

in countries where economic growth depends heavily on resource extraction (Temper et al., 2018; Global Witness, 2023). Such dynamics demonstrate that environmental struggles are inseparable from struggles over democratic rights and political inclusion.

Moreover, the criminalization of environmental resistance creates a paradox in climate governance. Governments increasingly emphasize climate commitments, sustainability, and green development, yet simultaneously restrict some of the actors most actively protecting ecosystems. As Newell et al. (2021) argue, transformative climate justice requires not only policy commitments but also structural changes in power relations that enable marginalized communities to participate in climate decision-making. Therefore, the findings suggest that protecting environmental defenders should be considered a fundamental component of climate governance. Without safeguarding civic freedoms and political participation, climate policies risk reproducing existing inequalities and undermining the legitimacy of environmental transitions.

C. Impacts on Marginalized Communities

The findings demonstrate that the consequences of democratic decline and restricted civic space are not experienced equally across society. Rather, the burden of limited political participation and environmental degradation is disproportionately concentrated among marginalized communities, including Indigenous peoples, rural populations, small-scale resource users, and local environmental defenders. These groups frequently occupy vulnerable positions because their livelihoods, cultural identities, and social reproduction depend directly on access to land, forests, rivers, and coastal ecosystems.

The findings indicate that environmental conflicts in Indonesia are closely connected to broader patterns of socio-economic inequality and uneven development. Communities located in resource-rich areas often experience a paradox of development: they live in territories that generate significant economic value for national growth, yet they frequently receive limited benefits while facing substantial ecological and social costs. This condition reflects the concept of the “resource curse,” where resource abundance does not necessarily translate into improved welfare for local populations and may instead generate conflict, displacement, and environmental degradation (Bebbington et al., 2018; Ross, 2012).

From a climate justice perspective, these outcomes represent a failure of distributive justice. Climate and environmental policies frequently focus on aggregate national benefits, such as economic growth, energy security, or investment attraction, while insufficiently addressing how environmental risks are distributed among different social groups (Roberts & Parks, 2007). The findings suggest that communities with the least political influence often

experience the greatest exposure to environmental harm, despite contributing minimally to ecological degradation.

A particularly significant finding concerns the vulnerability of Indigenous communities. Indigenous peoples often possess sophisticated systems of ecological knowledge and sustainable resource management practices; however, these knowledge systems are frequently marginalized within formal governance structures. Development-oriented policies may prioritize scientific and technical expertise while overlooking Indigenous understandings of ecological relationships, territorial stewardship, and intergenerational responsibility (Whyte, 2017).

This marginalization reflects what Schlosberg (2007) identifies as a failure of recognitional justice. Environmental injustice does not occur only when resources are distributed unequally; it also occurs when certain groups, cultures, and knowledge systems are systematically ignored or considered less legitimate within decision-making processes. The exclusion of Indigenous and local communities from environmental governance therefore represents both a political and epistemic injustice.

The findings also reveal significant barriers to meaningful participation in environmental decision-making. Although environmental regulations often require consultation processes, participation is frequently limited by unequal access to information, technical knowledge, financial resources, and legal expertise. Communities affected by environmental projects may participate formally but remain unable to influence fundamental decisions regarding land use, resource extraction, or development priorities. This condition illustrates the difference between symbolic participation and substantive participation. As Arnstein's (1969) classic theory of citizen participation demonstrates, not all forms of participation represent genuine empowerment. In many environmental governance contexts, consultation mechanisms may create the appearance of inclusion while preserving existing power structures.

The vulnerability of marginalized communities is further intensified by their limited access to legal protection and institutional support. Environmental defenders from rural and Indigenous communities often lack the financial resources required for prolonged legal disputes against corporations or state institutions. Consequently, environmental conflicts frequently occur under highly unequal conditions, where communities must defend their rights against actors with significantly greater political and economic capacity (Martinez-Alier, 2020).

The findings also highlight the gendered dimensions of environmental injustice. Women in environmental conflict areas often experience distinct vulnerabilities because they are heavily involved in household resource management, food security, and community care work. However, their participation in environmental decision-making remains limited due to social

norms, institutional barriers, and unequal representation (Rocheleau et al., 1996). A climate justice approach therefore requires attention not only to environmental vulnerability but also to intersecting forms of inequality related to gender, ethnicity, class, and political status. Overall, the findings demonstrate that democratic decline amplifies existing environmental inequalities. When civic space becomes restricted, marginalized communities lose critical opportunities to defend their territories, influence policy decisions, and demand accountability. Thus, climate injustice is produced not only through ecological change but also through unequal political structures that determine whose voices are heard and whose interests are protected.

D. Adaptation Strategies of Climate Justice Movements

Despite increasing political constraints, the findings demonstrate that climate justice movements have developed diverse strategies to sustain environmental resistance. Rather than representing passive victims of democratic decline, communities and environmental organizations demonstrate significant political creativity and resilience by adapting their advocacy strategies to changing institutional conditions.

One major finding is the increasing importance of community-based resistance strategies. Local communities frequently rely on collective organization, traditional ecological knowledge, and social networks to defend environmental resources. These approaches represent forms of grassroots climate governance that operate beyond formal state institutions. Community-based strategies are particularly important in contexts where official environmental governance mechanisms provide limited opportunities for meaningful participation (Ostrom, 1990).

The findings indicate that local knowledge plays a central role in sustaining environmental movements. Communities affected by environmental degradation often possess detailed knowledge regarding ecosystem changes, resource management practices, and long-term environmental trends. However, these forms of knowledge frequently remain excluded from formal policy processes dominated by technical and bureaucratic expertise. Recognizing local knowledge is therefore essential for transformative climate justice. As the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC, 2023) emphasizes, effective climate adaptation requires the integration of diverse knowledge systems, including Indigenous and community-based knowledge. Such integration not only improves adaptation outcomes but also strengthens procedural and recognition justice.

A second important finding concerns the increasing use of digital activism. Under conditions where physical mobilization may face restrictions, environmental movements increasingly utilize digital platforms to disseminate information, organize campaigns, document environmental violations, and build public support. Digital activism provides new opportunities for marginalized

groups to connect local struggles with broader national and international audiences.

However, the findings also reveal the limitations and risks associated with digital strategies. Online activism does not eliminate political constraints; rather, it creates new forms of vulnerability, including surveillance, online harassment, misinformation, and digital repression. As Hintz et al. (2018) argue, digital technologies can simultaneously expand democratic participation and create new mechanisms of social control. A third finding relates to the role of transnational advocacy networks. Environmental movements increasingly operate through connections with international NGOs, human rights organizations, academic institutions, and global climate networks. These relationships provide resources, knowledge exchange, international visibility, and additional forms of protection for activists facing domestic political pressure.

The importance of transnational networks reflects Keck and Sikkink's (1998) concept of the "boomerang effect," where domestic actors facing institutional barriers seek support from international networks to pressure governments and corporations. In environmental conflicts, international attention can increase accountability by exposing violations and creating reputational costs for powerful actors. Nevertheless, the findings indicate that reliance on external networks also creates challenges. International advocacy may generate visibility, but it does not automatically resolve local power inequalities or guarantee long-term community empowerment. Effective climate justice requires that external support strengthens, rather than replaces, local agency and decision-making capacity.

Another important adaptation strategy involves legal mobilization. Despite facing legal challenges, some environmental movements strategically use courts, regulatory mechanisms, and rights-based arguments to contest environmentally harmful decisions. Legal strategies demonstrate that law is not only an instrument of control but also a potential arena for resistance and rights protection (Sikor & Newell, 2014).

The findings therefore reveal a complex relationship between repression and resistance. While shrinking civic space creates significant barriers for climate justice movements, it also encourages the emergence of innovative forms of collective action. Environmental movements adapt by combining grassroots organizing, legal advocacy, digital communication, and transnational solidarity.

However, these adaptive strategies should not obscure the structural challenges faced by environmental defenders. The ability of communities to continue resisting under restrictive conditions often requires significant personal sacrifice and organizational resilience. Therefore, sustainable climate governance requires not merely recognizing community adaptation strategies but also addressing the political conditions that make such adaptation necessary.

Conclusion

A. Summary of Key Findings

The study demonstrates that democratic decline significantly undermines the realization of climate justice by weakening the political conditions necessary for meaningful environmental participation. Although climate governance frameworks increasingly emphasize sustainability, resilience, and low-carbon transitions, these objectives cannot be achieved effectively when communities affected by environmental change lack sufficient opportunities to influence decision-making processes.

The findings indicate that shrinking civic space operates as a critical mechanism through which environmental inequalities are reproduced. Restrictions on freedom of expression, association, and public participation reduce the capacity of communities and environmental organizations to challenge environmentally harmful practices and demand institutional accountability. Consequently, environmental governance becomes more vulnerable to unequal power relations between state institutions, corporate actors, and marginalized communities.

Furthermore, the study highlights that environmental resistance movements increasingly face risks associated with criminalization, intimidation, and political pressure. Environmental defenders often experience disproportionate vulnerabilities because they challenge powerful economic and political interests involved in resource extraction and development activities. Such conditions demonstrate that protecting environmental rights requires recognition of environmental defenders as legitimate actors within climate governance rather than as obstacles to development.

The findings also emphasize that marginalized communities experience multiple forms of environmental injustice. Indigenous peoples, rural communities, and local resource-dependent populations frequently encounter unequal exposure to ecological risks while simultaneously facing limited access to political representation and legal protection. These challenges demonstrate that climate injustice is produced through the interaction between environmental vulnerability and institutional inequality.

However, the study also reveals the resilience and adaptability of climate justice movements. Despite restrictive political conditions, communities and environmental organizations continue to develop alternative strategies through grassroots mobilization, legal advocacy, digital activism, and transnational networks. These strategies demonstrate that environmental resistance remains a significant democratic practice through which marginalized actors assert their rights and challenge unequal environmental governance structures.

Theoretically, this study contributes to climate justice scholarship by arguing that democracy and civic freedom should be considered constitutive dimensions of climate justice rather than merely external political conditions.

Climate justice requires not only fair distribution of environmental risks and benefits but also political systems that recognize diverse voices and enable meaningful participation.

B. Policy and Advocacy Recommendations

Based on the findings, this study proposes several policy and advocacy recommendations for strengthening climate justice and environmental governance.

First, governments should strengthen legal protections for environmental defenders and communities engaged in environmental advocacy. Existing legal frameworks should be reviewed to ensure that environmental activism, public participation, and peaceful opposition to environmentally harmful projects are protected as legitimate democratic practices. The misuse of legal instruments against environmental defenders should be prevented through stronger accountability mechanisms, judicial independence, and transparent enforcement procedures.

Second, human rights safeguards should be systematically integrated into climate and environmental governance frameworks. Climate policies should move beyond technical approaches focused on emission reduction and adaptation capacity by incorporating principles of participation, recognition, accountability, and social equity. Environmental impact assessments, climate adaptation programs, and development planning processes should ensure meaningful participation of affected communities rather than relying on symbolic consultation.

Third, governments and international institutions should strengthen monitoring and solidarity mechanisms for environmental defenders. Because environmental conflicts frequently involve transnational economic interests, international organizations, civil society networks, and human rights institutions have an important role in documenting violations, supporting local movements, and promoting accountability.

Fourth, climate governance in vulnerable regions should prioritize community-centered approaches. Local and Indigenous knowledge systems should be recognized as valuable contributions to climate adaptation and environmental management. Policies should support community-based conservation, locally driven adaptation initiatives, and equitable benefit-sharing mechanisms.

Finally, climate justice strategies should recognize that environmental sustainability and democratic governance are mutually reinforcing. Policies that pursue ecological objectives while restricting civic participation risk creating unsustainable and socially unjust outcomes. A just climate transition requires institutional reforms that expand democratic participation while addressing environmental challenges.

C. Limitations and Future Research

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the research focuses primarily on Indonesia as a critical case study. While Indonesia provides important insights into the relationship between democratic conditions and environmental resistance, the findings may not fully represent political and environmental dynamics in other regions. Comparative studies across Southeast Asia, the Global South, and different political regimes would provide broader understanding of how civic space influences climate justice outcomes.

Second, the qualitative nature of this research provides in-depth insights into political experiences, institutional dynamics, and community struggles but does not aim to produce statistically generalizable findings. Future research could combine qualitative approaches with quantitative indicators of democratic quality, civic space conditions, and environmental vulnerability to develop more comprehensive comparative analyses.

Third, this study examines contemporary patterns of democratic decline and environmental resistance but does not fully capture long-term transformations in climate justice movements. Longitudinal research would be valuable for understanding how environmental movements adapt over time, how political conditions influence movement trajectories, and whether institutional reforms produce sustainable improvements in environmental governance.

Future research should also explore several emerging areas. First, comparative research examining climate justice movements across different political contexts could clarify how democratic institutions, hybrid regimes, and authoritarian systems shape environmental activism. Second, further research is needed on the role of digital technologies in expanding and constraining civic participation within climate movements. Third, greater attention should be given to gender, Indigenous rights, and intersectional dimensions of climate justice, particularly regarding how different social groups experience and respond to environmental conflicts.

Ultimately, advancing climate justice requires an integrated analytical and policy approach that recognizes the inseparable relationship between environmental sustainability, democratic governance, and human rights. The struggle for climate justice is therefore not only a struggle to protect ecosystems but also a struggle to protect the political conditions that enable communities to defend their environments and shape their futures.

References

- Arnstein, S. R. (1969). A ladder of citizen participation. *Journal of the American Institute of Planners*, 35(4), 216–224.
- Bebbington, A., Abdulai, A. G., Humphreys Bebbington, D., Hinfelaar, M., & Sanborn, C. (2018). *Governing extractive industries: Politics, histories, ideas*. Oxford University Press.

- Beeson, M. (2010). The coming of environmental authoritarianism. *Environmental Politics*, 19(2), 276–294.
- Bermeo, N. (2016). On democratic backsliding. *Journal of Democracy*, 27(1), 5–19.
- Boyd, D. R. (2018). *The rights of nature: A legal revolution that could save the world*. ECW Press.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2021). *Thematic analysis: A practical guide*. SAGE.
- Carothers, T., & Brechenmacher, S. (2014). *Closing space: Democracy and human rights support under fire*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.
- Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (4th ed.). SAGE.
- Doherty, B., & Hayes, G. (2019). *Environmental activism and political repression*. Routledge.
- Fairclough, N. (2013). *Critical discourse analysis: The critical study of language* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- Global Witness. (2023). *Standing firm: The land and environmental defenders on the frontlines of the climate crisis*. Global Witness.
- Hintz, A., Dencik, L., & Wahl-Jorgensen, K. (2018). *Digital citizenship in a datafied society*. Polity.
- Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. (2023). *Climate Change 2023: Synthesis Report*. IPCC.
- Keck, M. E., & Sikkink, K. (1998). *Activists beyond borders: Advocacy networks in international politics*. Cornell University Press.
- Levitsky, S., & Ziblatt, D. (2018). *How democracies die*. Crown.
- Li, T. M. (2014). *Land's end: Capitalist relations on an indigenous frontier*. Duke University Press.
- Martinez-Alier, J. (2020). *The environmentalism of the poor*. Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Newell, P., Srivastava, S., Naess, L. O., Torres Contreras, G. A., & Price, R. (2021). Toward transformative climate justice: An emerging research agenda. *WIREs Climate Change*, 12(6), e733.
- Ostrom, E. (1990). *Governing the commons*. Cambridge University Press.
- Peluso, N. L., & Lund, C. (2011). New frontiers of land control. *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 38(4), 667–681.
- Power, T. P. (2018). Jokowi's authoritarian turn and Indonesia's democratic decline. *Bulletin of Indonesian Economic Studies*, 54(3), 307–338.
- Roberts, J. T., & Parks, B. C. (2007). *A climate of injustice: Global inequality, North–South politics, and climate policy*. MIT Press.
- Rocheleau, D., Thomas-Slayter, B., & Wangari, E. (1996). *Feminist political ecology*. Routledge.
- Ross, M. L. (2012). *The oil curse*. Princeton University Press.
- Schlosberg, D. (2007). *Defining environmental justice: Theories, movements, and nature*. Oxford University Press.
- Schlosberg, D., & Collins, L. B. (2014). From environmental to climate justice: Climate change and the discourse of environmental justice. *WIREs Climate Change*, 5(3), 359–374.
- Sikor, T., & Newell, P. (2014). Globalizing environmental justice? *Geoforum*, 54, 151–157.

- Temper, L., Del Bene, D., & Martinez-Alier, J. (2018). Mapping the frontiers and front lines of global environmental justice. *Global Environmental Change*, 52, 48–58.
- Treisman, D. (2020). Democracy by mistake: How the errors of autocrats trigger transitions. *American Political Science Review*, 114(3), 792–810.
- United Nations Human Rights Council. (2021). *The human right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment* (Resolution 48/13).
- V-Dem Institute. (2024). *Democracy report 2024: Democracy winning and losing at the ballot*. University of Gothenburg.
- Warburton, E. (2020). *Resource nationalism in Indonesia*. Cornell University Press.
- Whyte, K. (2017). Indigenous climate change studies. *English Language Notes*, 55(1–2), 153–162.
- World Bank. (2021). *Indonesia country climate and development report*. World Bank.
- Yin, R. K. (2018). *Case study research and applications: Design and methods* (6th ed.). SAGE.

Acknowledgment

None

Funding Information

None

Conflicting Interest Statement

The authors state that there is no conflict of interest in the publication of this article.

Publishing Ethical and Originality Statement

All authors declared that this work is original and has never been published in any form and in any media, nor is it under consideration for publication in any journal, and all sources cited in this work refer to the basic standards of scientific citation.

Generative AI Statement

N/A