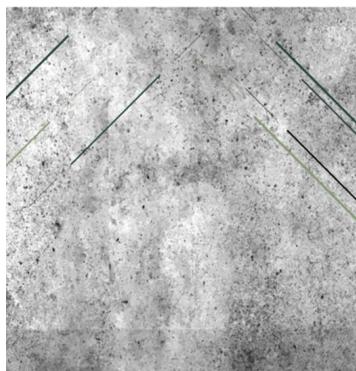

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The Trajectory of Bali Democracy Forum: Indonesia's Soft Power and Nation Branding

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The Trajectory of Bali Democracy Forum: Indonesia's Soft Power and Nation Branding

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Abstract

As one of the largest Muslim-majority countries with an emerging economy, the conversation regarding Indonesia's democracy has always been intriguing. The contemporary issues of this country's role in shaping the regional architecture of democracy have also expanded to the realm of international relations. In 2008, Indonesia initiated the Bali Democracy Forum (BDF) as an annual platform to promote dialogue-based cooperation and uphold the values of peace and democracy. Since its inception, the BDF has been conducted 15 times, with the latest forum held in 2022. This paper explores key features of the BDF's trajectory, including its topics, institutional approach, and the involvement of state and non-state actors. This research employs a qualitative method, drawing primary and secondary data sources. Primary data were obtained from an interview with the key informant. Secondary data were collected from the documents available on official websites, academic journals, and online news media. This paper found that BDF contributes to Indonesia's soft power and nation branding. The values of Indonesia are being promoted through BDF, including *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*, or Unity in Diversity; tolerance and harmony; as well as emphasizing the importance of dialogue in this Forum, without forcing any specific democratic system. In addition, BDF's contribution can be seen from sharing Indonesia's understanding of democracy to other participating countries. Albeit its leadership in promoting democracy has received recognition, the BDF continues to face criticisms, including on the impression that the approach of this Forum is overly "government-centric", as well as concerns regarding its tangible outcomes.

Keywords: Bali Democracy Forum; Indonesia; International Relations; Nation Branding; Soft Power

Introduction

"Is democracy in decline?" is a big question being asked all around the world. Democracy faces unprecedented challenges in the global stage today. Some would argue that democracy is declining because of several factors, including the problem of general election. Other causes of declining democracy are related to military intervention, political dynasty, and distrust of civil society to the current government. The COVID-19 pandemic has also contributed to the questions on the relevance of democracy in facing global challenge. As a country that upholds democratic values, Indonesia aims to contribute to shaping regional architecture through facilitating dialogue on democracy. This led to the establishment of a global forum on democracy called "Bali Democracy Forum" or BDF in 2008. BDF plays a role as "an avenue to push for a more progressive and robust democratic architecture in the Asia-Pacific region". BDF does not act as the "democratic police" or forcing democracy to countries that attend this forum. Rather, BDF serves as a forum that encourages sharing of experiences and best practices in understanding diverse point of views regarding democracy (Kedutaan Besar Republik Indonesia di Astana Kazakhstan, 2021). Indonesia is seen as an active player, by spearheading a democratic forum to facilitate cooperation, through BDF (Brigg et al., 2016).

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Scholars have addressed the issues of democracy in Indonesia. A study by Ulum (2020) describes the trajectory of Indonesia's democracy over the course of twenty years. Grzywacz (2020) wrote about democracy and its meaning in Indonesian strategic narratives, which also covered the BDF. International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA) provided an assessment towards Indonesia's democratization (International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA), 2000).

Recent development of the involvement of social networks and youth participation in Indonesia's democracy has been explored by Ida et al., (2025). Other scholarly works include the work that highlight family politics and democracy (Liddle et al., 2022); democracy promotion by Konrad-Adenauer Stiftung (KAS) in Indonesia (Khoirunnisa & Effendi, 2023); as well as transnationalism of democracy and its interaction with domestic structure in Indonesia (Wirasenjaya & Santoso, 2023). Beyond the political science and international relations, a study by Soeparno & Pratomo (2023) questioned whether democracy and economic growth have influence towards the human development in Indonesia.

As a challenge, Indonesia is also facing the issue of declining democracy. An article by Jati (2021) highlighted three key factors that can cause the declining democracy in Indonesia in 2021, namely: (i) the role of military in civilian matters; (ii) strained relationship with several groups and lack of opposition; and (iii) political favoritism and dynasticism. The current dynamics of Indonesia's democracy is affected by the military intervention in daily social life, which raises question about the neutrality of military officers. The second part is regarding lack of opposition that is important to maintain check and balances process in democracy. The last point is related to political dynasty. Indonesia faces a challenge where political figure nominates the family members or relatives in general election. These three factors contribute to the discussion on Indonesia's declining democracy (Jati, 2021). With the COVID-19 pandemic, the emerging trend of digital democracy enables the people to voice their criticism using technology and social media (Putra et al., 2024).

In projecting Indonesia's values to the global level, BDF can be seen as a representation of a culture of tolerance and harmony and a "home-grown" democracy from Indonesia. "Home-grown" democracy in Asian context has been understood as "the cultural foundation of democracy based on Asian values and norms" (Rosyidin, 2020). Indonesia asserted its intention to promote democracy without force through BDF and does not want to dictate other countries, which is influenced by the principle of "non-interference". Indonesia emphasized the value of democracy through *Pancasila* (Five Basic Principles), the motto of *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* (Unity in Diversity), and the intention to lead by tolerant example (Rosyidin, 2020). Previous studies have addressed the issue of democracy covered by BDF, for instance: the role of BDF as the agent for Myanmar's democratic transitions (Rizky & Zamzami, 2019); constructive engagement of BDF in democratic transition in Myanmar (Adjinegoro et al., 2023); and the use of Twitter for diplomacy to promote #BDF2019 (Madu, 2021). A study by Karim (2017) underscored Indonesia's effort to lead the promotion of democracy through BDF, and pointed out the growing number of BDF's participants and high-ranking officials attending this forum. Furthermore, Erawan (2024) addressed three commitments in BDF: strategic, mixed, and normative commitments. Strategic commitments are evident through the state actors' forum (inclusive forum and strategic themes); mixed commitments are depicted through democracy supports in Middle East and North African countries (grounding democratic processes); as well as normative commitments, which are reflected in the Bali Civil Society and Media Forum (freedom of expression and building solidarity).

Considering its purpose as a forum to discuss more about the opportunities and challenges of democracy, it is intriguing to delve more into the implementation of BDF after years of its establishment. This paper aims to seek the trajectory of BDF, such as the key topics, institutional approach, and the involvement of both state and non-state actors. The BDF's trajectory will be connected to the conceptual framework of soft power and nation branding. Therefore, the research question of this paper is: *what are the key features of the BDF's trajectory, including its main topics, institutional approach, and the involvement of both state and non-state actors, and its relations with soft power and nation branding?* The next section observes existing literature

regarding democracy, BDF, and the involvement of non-state actors.

Method

This paper uses qualitative method as the methodology, using the work of Creswell & Creswell (2023), which mentioned that "qualitative methods demonstrate a different approach to scholarly inquiry than methods of quantitative research. Although the processes are similar, qualitative methods rely on text and image data, have unique steps in data analysis, and draw on diverse procedures". By using qualitative method, the author collected data by examining relevant existing documents through literature study. To collect primary data, the author interviewed the Director of the Institute for Peace and Democracy, I Ketut Putra Erawan, PhD, as the key informant. The secondary data in this paper are based on qualitative documents. According to Creswell & Creswell (2023) qualitative documents are: "public documents (e.g., newspapers, minutes of meetings, official reports) or private documents (e.g., personal journals and diaries, letters, e-mails) gathered as a source of information in qualitative research". Qualitative documents in this paper are gathered from the documents available on the official website of government, academic journals, and online news media. It should be noted that this paper is a preliminary study on this topic. Further research should be conducted to gain a more comprehensive understanding on this matter.

Results

This paper utilized the conceptual framework of soft power and nation branding. Soft power, according to Joseph Nye, who first coined this term in 1990, is "the ability to obtain preferred outcomes by attraction rather than coercion or payment" (Nye, 2017). Despite being widely discussed in the field of politics and international relations, there are critics over the uncertainty of soft power. Soft power is seen as "difficult to measure and control" because of its nature, including relative, as well as intangible and uncontrollable (Fan, 2008). Furthermore, there are limitations of the soft power concept that might create confusion. The attraction generated from soft power is questionable, including the complexity of a country's state and non-state actors. Some of the actors might be attracted, whereas some might not. Hence, it is difficult to measure the influence of soft power (Fan, 2008).

A previous publication has noted the conceptual model of relationship building between a nation brand and consumers. Nation brand can include multiple aspects, such as the geographical location, economic and political situations, as well as its culture (Wu, 2017). Furthermore, this paper also used conceptual model of national brand identity, highlighting: (i) key components of nation-brand identity; (ii) communicators of nation-brand identity; and (iii) audiences of the nation-brand image (Dinnie, 2009). This paper argues that an understanding of the BDF can be reflected in how its key topics align with Indonesia's nation-brand identity. Local wisdoms and principles of Indonesian values are often being reflected in the implementation of BDF. Another important point relates to the communicators of BDF. This paper examines relevant stakeholders including state and non-state actors as the communicators of BDF. Audiences are those who are being involved in BDF and their reactions towards the implementation of BDF.

This section presents preliminary result and discussion on BDF's trajectory and the involvement of state and non-state actors. In terms of key features of BDF, this paper found that BDF depicted the issues of democracy in the context of its potentials and challenges. Furthermore, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the topic of BDF focused on the ways democracy handle global pandemic, including the state's response and involvement of civil society. BDF seeks to contribute to shaping the democratic architecture in Southeast Asia and beyond. Other than the political aspect of democracy, BDF has its own agenda called "Road to BDF", which includes the conversation on the economic pillar. BDF advocates the "home-grown" initiatives, accentuating the principles of dialogue-based; equality; mutual respect; and understanding (Yuniarto, 2022). In addition to BDF's key features, this paper observes the way Indonesia seeks to build its nation brand by utilizing local values of Indonesia's democracy in BDF, such as the spirit of unity in diversity called *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*.

ka Tunggal Ika (Sekretariat Kabinet Republik Indonesia, 2014), as well as the local wisdom from Bali called "Tri Hita Karana" or the three causes of harmony (Detiknews, 2013). This local wisdom consists of *Parahyangan* (harmony between human beings and God), *Pawongan* (harmony among human beings), and *Palemahan* (harmony between human beings and nature). The details of the BDF's key themes since its establishment in 2008 until 2022 are illustrated in Table 1. The data presented in Table 1 is the compilation of these key themes, derived from the work of Erawan (2024).

Table 1. Key Themes of Bali Democracy Forum (2008-2022)

Year	BDF Number	Themes
2008	1	Building and Consolidating Democracy as Agenda for Asia
2009	2	In Search of Synergy: Democracy, Rule of Law, and Development
2010	3	Democracy and the Promotion of Peace and Stability
2011	4	Enhancing Democratic Participation in a Changing World: Responding to Democratic Voices
2012	5	Advancing Democratic Principles at the Global Setting: How Democratic Global Governance Contributes to International Peace and Security, Economic Development, and Effective Enjoyment of Human Rights
2013	6	Consolidating Democracy in Pluralistic Society
2014	7	Evolving Regional Democratic Architecture: The Challenges of Political Development, Public Participation, and Socio-Economic Progress in the 21st Century
2015	8	Democracy and Effective Public Governance: Challenges, Choices, and Governance (Strategic Commitments) Prospects for Asia-Pacific
2016	9	Religion, Democracy, and Pluralism
2017	10	Does Democracy Deliver?
2018	11	Democracy for Prosperity
2019	12	Democracy and Inclusivity
2020	13	Democracy and COVID-19
2021	14	Democracy for Humanity: Advancing Economic and Social Justice during the Pandemic
2022	15	Democracy in a Changing World: Leadership and Solidarity

Source: Erawan (2024)

Furthermore, Indonesia's G20 Presidency in 2022 and ASEAN's Chairmanship in 2023 show Indonesia's effort to play crucial roles at the global level. These two momentums are supported by the existence of BDF, which depicts Indonesia's consistency to conduct a dialogue about democracy. The key communicator of BDF from the government official is the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Indonesia. In addition, other relevant stakeholders are being involved in BDF, including, among others, the Institute for Peace and Democracy (IPD), young people, civil society, and media. The involvement of young people can be seen from Bali Democracy Students Conference (BDSC), which focused on youth and inclusive digital democracy. Civil society and media involvement are related to Bali Civil Society and Media Forum as a platform to examine democracy from non-state actors' perspectives (Angreini & Indrawati, 2020).

The second BDF took place in 2009, where the then-President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono at that time emphasizes the spirit and optimism to discuss about democracy from various perspec-

tives. The forum is not meant to discuss the superiority of one particular democratic system over the other or debating the so-called "perfect democracy", but rather to establish a dialogue as well as regional and international cooperation related to democracy. Sharing best practices and lesson learned from each participant is one of the key elements of this forum's objectives. With key emphasis on democracy and development, the then-President Susilo Bambang of Indonesia aimed to portrayed three vital insights. Firstly, the notion that democracy and development require the accountability of the leaders in government. Good governance is paramount in implementing democratic values. Secondly, the active participation of people should be prioritized, particularly in the decision-making process. Therefore, the efforts of the government to understand people's aspiration is deemed necessary. Thirdly, the balance between economic and political development should be consider, towards achieving a fair and inclusive development based on democracy (Kementerian Sekretariat Negara Republik Indonesia, 2009).

The national motto of Indonesia, "*Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*", or Unity in Diversity, is being accentuated in the sixth Bali Democracy Forum, organized in 2013. Through the theme of "Consolidating Democracy in a Pluralistic Society", this motto reflects the diversity of Indonesia and the way people live in harmony amidst the differences in ethnicities, local languages, and religions. Indonesia's view the importance of the constitutional rights for all citizens, the supremacy of the rule of law, the society's participation in decision-making process, and enhancing mutual understanding and social cohesion (Kementerian Sekretariat Negara Republik Indonesia, 2013). In the ninth BDF held in 2016, the-then President Joko Widodo of Indonesia asserted the connection of democracy, diversity, and the value of peace. The concrete practice of synergy among religions, tolerance, and democracy in Indonesia is fundamental within the society (Tempo.co, 2016).

It is also intriguing to examine the responses of BDF's participants. The first one being Timor Leste, one of the closest neighbors of Indonesia, with a long historical connection. In the occasion of the fifth BDF in 2012, the Prime Minister of Timor Leste Xanana Gusmao, mentioned that "dialogue" facilitated by BDF is an essential part of democracy, which enables people to move forward together. Democracy cannot be forced into a country because each country is different, and we need to understand the local context that includes historical, cultural, and economic aspects. Timor Leste highlighted the importance of peace and democracy as the common agenda, and that BDF plays a crucial role in ensuring the inclusive way for development and democracy, proven by the rising number of participants (Gusmao, 2012). This statement by Timor Leste shows that Indonesia's effort is being appreciated to facilitate dialogue through BDF, without imposing a specific type of democracy towards the participants.

Democracy in Indonesia has always been connected to the diversity of people. Different religions in Indonesia make the society learn to how live together in harmony and implement the spirit of tolerance. In his speech on the occasion of the ninth BDF in 2016, Kofi Annan, the seventh Secretary General of the United Nations, complimented the national motto of Indonesia '*Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*', reflected in many ethnic groups, faith, and languages, yet managed to confirm that pluralism and democracy can work (Kofi Annan Foundation, 2016). BDF adapts its theme to the current global dynamics and contemporary issues. During the COVID-19 pandemic, for instance, the theme for the fourteenth BDF in 2021 is "Democracy for Humanity: Advancing Economic and Social Justice during the Pandemic". That occasion addressed the connection between democracy and global pandemic, considering that pandemic created multi-aspect crisis and challenged the way democratic countries deal with this problem. Pandemic enables more social injustice and discrimination, as well as creates more economic gap, which makes democratic countries need to find immediate solutions to solve these circumstances (Yuniarto, 2022).

As an effort to ensure the participation of young generation, the government conducted Bali Democracy Students Conference (BDSC) in 2017, as part of BDF. BDSC aims to foster dialogue among students related to democratic issues, as well as to receive insights from the younger generation. As a result, students from various countries attended BDSC and shared the best practices and discuss existing challenges of democracy in their respective countries (Indonesian House Slovakia, no date). The second BDSC encouraged young participants to accentuate education, politi-

cal participation, tolerance, and gender equality. Furthermore, with their energy, ideas, and creativity, young people are expected to be able to master the use of technology to create innovation for the greater good of the society (Surbakti, 2018). Political education is essential for young generation, in facing various contemporary problems, including money politics, from the global up to the local levels (Alina, 2022).

In addition to the involvement of students, media, and civil society, the then-Minister of Foreign Affairs of Indonesia, Retno Marsudi, asserted the role of women in democracy. Gender equality has always been an integral part of Retno Marsudi's agenda. She mentioned that in order to make democracy more inclusive, we need to start by involving women. Three other female Ministers at the twelfth BDF in 2019 attended the forum, namely from Australia, Kenya, and Namibia, also shared their experiences. Minister Retno Marsudi also delighted to note the research result stating that women's participation in politics has increased significantly in the last decade. Indonesia has supported the involvement of more women to get the access to peace. The panel of BDF took a theme of "Women Leadership, Inclusion and State Democracy", embracing the lesson learned from various countries (Muhajir, 2019). The following section connects the result of this paper with the key conceptual frameworks.

Discussion

This paper argues that Indonesia's leadership in Southeast Asia and the Indo-Pacific region, particularly through BDF should be profoundly recognized and appreciated. This effort depicts Indonesia's strategy to strengthen its soft power in "the power of attraction". Indonesia positioned itself as an emerging economy with keen interest in shaping regional architecture of democracy. The power of attraction is illustrated through multiple occasions of stressing the values of democracy, tolerance, and harmony to global audience. Indonesia showcases its way to thrive by upholding the core principle to live in diversity. With its large Muslim population, Indonesia continues to play a vital role in demonstrating that different religions can coexist peacefully and supportively, despite facing numerous challenges.

BDF has attempted to integrate other aspects as part of its execution, including from the economic aspect, arranged under the event of "Road to BDF: Economic Pillar", to further emphasize the importance of democracy to support economic growth. In 2021, the focus of this event was sustainable and inclusive creative economy, considering its role in creating multiple jobs and promoting national identity. The key highlights in connecting creative economy and democracy are, among others, ensuring protection of creative workers and providing equal access to both products and services. The then-Minister of Tourism and Creative Economy of Indonesia also stressed the importance of transitioning from "a resource-based economy" to a "knowledge-based economy", amplified by the growing attention on creative economy as a promising sector (UN Trade and Development, 2021).

Furthermore, using the brand of "Bali" island as a melting pot of various nationalities who enjoy the tranquil view combined with cultural heritage is another strategy of Indonesia's government to enhance the country's soft power. Using the element of cultural diplomacy as a way to attract participants to visit Bali and give nuances for cultural diversity during the implementation of BDF illustrate Indonesia's initiative to promote its peacefulness and harmony. Bali is well-known as a popular tourist destination with the richness of cultural heritage. Showing that Indonesia is a blend of cultural preservation amidst modern development and globalization strengthen its position to facilitate dialogue and collaboration through BDF. As mentioned by the Minister of Culture of Indonesia, Fadli Zon, this country should fully utilize its cultural wealth as an instrument of soft power. Cultural wealth in this context can be seen as cultural heritage and cultural identity. It is supported by Indonesia's Constitution in Article 32, which address the need to promote Indonesia's national culture in the world civilization (Nasution, 2024). It is aligned with the initiatives in BDF which promote democracy alongside the culture and way of life of the Indonesian society.

In the effort to increase the participation of civil society and media forum, one of the Bali Civil Society and Media Forums (BCSMF) upholds the theme of "Can Election Rejuvenate Democracy?",

aimed to discuss about the integrity of the election process to ensure the implementation of democratic values, sustainable democracy, and synergy among civil society organizations, media, and the State. Furthermore, with the involvement of media, BCSMF also addressed challenges of democracy, including the threats caused by disinformation. The necessity to boost women's participation in democracy, particularly in the context of leadership is among the key topics that are being recommended as the result of this forum (Ayudiana, 2023). Digital transformation affects democracy and requires the role of civil society and media. The use of digital space brings abundant of advantages, yet possessed its own challenge, for instance, the potential of misinformation and hoaxes that might cause detrimental effects towards democracy (Ahmad, 2022).

In addition to contribute to the conversation regarding democracy at the regional and global level, BDF is also considered as one of the ways to realize Indonesia's public diplomacy. A study by Djemat (2021) found that the number of participating countries in BDF continues to increase annually, ranging from Asia Pacific to Middle East and Africa. BDF is an opportunity for Indonesia to boost the country's self-image at the global level. The key strategy of BDF to improve Indonesia's public diplomacy is through the synergy with civil society, media, students and youth leaders. This paper argues that BDF can highlight positive image of Indonesia in implementing democratic values (Djemal, 2021).

This paper argues that the BDF contributes to enhancing Indonesia's soft power and nation branding. Considering the increase of each year's BDF participants and partnership, this forum serves as a place to have discussion about democracy, learn from each other, and the current and future challenges of democratic values. With the involvement of non-state actors, BDF attempts to illustrate the idea of inclusivity, which ensure the active participation of multiple stakeholders. Indonesia's objective to be an active key player at the regional and global levels in responding to current international dynamics is reflected through BDF. The core value of Indonesia's foreign policy is embedded in BDF: "*bebas aktif*", which can be translated to "free and active". Indonesia does not attempt to force any specific type of democracy to the participants, nor does it take sides with any specific country in the world. Instead, this State actively welcomes attendance with a range of perspectives and point of views on democracy, fostering a respectful setting to ensure that participants can share their insights and respects the existing differences. Strengthening Indonesia's soft power by promoting inclusivity and open dialogue are among the core values of hosting this forum. While this openness to diverse definition and type of democracy is considered an advantage, the measurable results of BDF remain ambiguous and questionable.

Additionally, as mentioned previously, soft power is also hard to measure. The concrete influence of Indonesia's soft power through the BDF is not measured in this paper, which is acknowledged as one of this paper's limitations. However, by the growing number of attendances, and the interests of various countries to attend BDF, this paper argues that BDF has established its own position as a democratic forum initiated by an emerging economy in the Global South. According to Dados & Connell (2012), the term "Global South" depicts "a shift from a focus on development or cultural difference toward an emphasis on geopolitical power relations". Many of the democratic forum and ideas have been heavily relying on the Western perspectives. Hence, the existence of BDF serves as a platform for Global South to show its leadership in talking about democracy and sharing best practices from emerging economies' point of views. In 2008, the first BDF was attended by 39 countries, increased to 83 countries in the fifth BDF in 2012 (Kementerian Sekretariat Negara Republik Indonesia, 2012). In the fifteenth BDF in 2022, with the theme "Democracy in a Changing World: Leadership and Solidarity", the number of participants being reported came from 112 countries (Wibowo, 2022). This paper argues that the growing number of BDF's participants depicts the regional and global interests to attend and observe the dynamics of the dialogue built through this forum. As an example, Marise Payne from Australia mentioned that this forum showcases Indonesia's vital contribution. Moreover, BDF serves as a platform to promoting peace, as well as advancing and protecting democratic values (Payne, 2019). In addition, the contribution of BDF to shaping global architecture of democracy extends beyond the quantitative measurement of the increasing number of participants. Based on an interview with the key

informant, the Director of the Institute for Peace and Democracy, BDF's contribution goes beyond mere number, and is reflected on the quality of its processes in assisting democratic transitions in other countries, such as Tunisia and Myanmar. The substantial impact of BDF is evident in its support for democracy: one of the ways is through supporting civil society and media actors, as facilitated by the Institute for Peace and Democracy (I. K. P. Erawan, personal communication, March 19, 2025).

Furthermore, Indonesia utilized BDF as an international agenda that showcases this State's responsiveness towards the global circumstances. As an example, the theme of the 13th BDF in 2020 is "Democracy and COVID-19 pandemic". Despite the pandemic situation, BDF was organized with limited on-site participants and more of virtual attendants. The on-site participants and organizers had to follow the strict health protocol. BDF was held to gain insights from the participants, particularly to share best practices of the democratic States in responding to the pandemic. It is expected that this can give recommendation and lesson learned to one another through BDF. In addition, organizing the 13th BDF in Bali was expected to help this island to recover, due to the suffering when the pandemic situation hits its tourism industry. This initiative was also aimed to give the opportunity for Bali to prepare itself to re-open for tourism, should the pandemic situation get better (Arbar, 2020). The intention to recover from the pandemic requires a global collaboration. Hence, it aligns with the theme of the Indonesia's G20 Presidency in 2022 "Recover Together, Recover Stronger". Indonesia has also incorporated the elements of cultural diplomacy to support its soft power and nation branding through its G20 Presidency in 2022 (Intentilia, 2022).

In the context of nation branding and relationship building, Indonesia utilizes BDF to strengthen its relationship with other countries. By emphasizing that this forum is not meant to dictate any democratic system, delegates from other countries are not reluctant to attend BDF. Indonesia underscored key components of nation-brand identity, highlighting mutual respect, trust, and harmony as the spirit of implementing BDF. Furthermore, multiple actors involve in BDF, including young generation, civil society organization, and media as the non-state actors. The audiences of the nation-brand image involve all participants, with the latest one being from 112 countries, attending in-person and virtually. Moreover, the relationship building aspect can be seen from the involvement of foreign institution to support a key agenda of BDF. The Indonesia office of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, a political foundation in Germany, was invited by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Indonesia to be the co-host of the Bali Civil Society and Media Forum (BCSMF) 2019, highlighting the connection between democracy and inclusivity (Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Indonesia office, 2019).

Albeit the aim of BDF to be a global forum for voicing concerns and fostering dialogue related to democracy, there are several criticisms emerged regarding its effectiveness. A study by Rosyidin & Kusumawardhana (2024) highlighted the "middlepowermanship" in BDF under President Joko Widodo. This study argued that BDF is used as an instrument to convey Indonesia's position as regional key player, rather than as a forum to promote of project democracy abroad. On one hand, Indonesia intends to show its leadership in Southeast Asia by organizing BDF as a forum of dialogue to foster democracy at the regional and global levels. On the other hand, while attempting to show its leadership, Indonesia faces criticism towards its own democracy. Therefore, it is challenging for Indonesia to build the nation branding of shaping regional architecture of democracy, while its own domestic democracy draws many critics. As an example, Indonesia's democracy index has dropped from the 79th rank to 87th rank (Tempo.co, 2024).

There are also questions over the tangible and practical results of BDF. Moreover, the insufficient involvement of people's voice in BDF, lack of civil society's representation, and the event's focus or overemphasis on the government's point of view, rather than broader viewpoints, are part of these criticisms (Kleden, 2012). In 2014, there were 11 out of 14 civil society organizations (CSOs) refused to attend Bali Civil Society Forum (BCSF) 2014 as part of BDF. The representatives of those CSOs claimed that both BDF and BCSF are only a "ceremonial forum" and "irrelevant". They questioned the position of Indonesia as a State that does not support the implementation of democratic values, proven by various regulations (kompas.com, 2014). The government official

responded by stressing that the BDF continues to develop over time, as demonstrated by the establishment of Bali Civil Society and Media Forum (BCSMF). The existence of BCSMF is a response towards the comments that mention BDF is only a forum for high-level government officials, such as Head of States (Ahmad, 2022). All these challenges and criticism towards BDF should be carefully taken into consideration, as one of the key essences of democracy is the inclusion of people's voice and feedback. Ensuring that BDF goes beyond the ceremonial procedure is a key reflection to all parties involved, so that the genuine dialogue built throughout years of execution of this forum can achieve meaningful outcomes.

Conclusion

This paper preliminary findings show that Indonesia attempts to contribute to the global discussion on democracy through Bali Democracy Forum (BDF). This paper argues that BDF contributes to enhancing Indonesia's soft power and nation branding, particularly showcasing this country's initiative to be one of the key players in promoting the values of democracy. The key feature of BDF can be seen from its effort in addressing potentials and challenges of democracy. The key communicator of BDF is the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Indonesia with the support of other relevant stakeholders, for instance, the Institute for Peace and Democracy. Furthermore, non-state actors are also being involved in BDF, including youth, civil society, and media. This paper argues that Indonesia attempts to strengthen its soft power through various initiatives, including Bali Democracy Forum. Through this forum, Indonesia disseminates its local values to global audience as a way to share best practices. These values include: *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* or Unity in Diversity; tolerance and harmony; and *Tri Hita Karana*. However, this paper noted that challenges remained in the implementation of BDF. Much like other government programs, the BDF implementation faces various challenges and criticism, namely: lack of participation from the civil society and the questions of real benefit and practical results of this forum. The domestic issue of declining democracy in Indonesia illustrates a problem of democracy at home. In addition to that, there are several criticisms on the concrete implementation and influence of BDF, such as the real contribution and measurable outcomes of BDF to strengthen democratic values. This paper recognizes that the arguments presented are still in the preliminary phase and therefore suggests further research to explore more about BDF. Given the argument that democracy is declining in many parts of the world, it is worth discussing the trajectory of Indonesia's democracy, particularly within the context of the BDF. Additional studies are crucial to provide a more comprehensive understanding of BDF's role for Indonesia. This future research would bring contribution to the field of politics and international relations, particularly in exploring more about democracy, soft power, and nation branding's initiative in the Global South.

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