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Revisiting Regional Head Elections in Indonesia: Direct Elections, Elite Power, And the Limits of Decentralization

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ABSTRACT: The debate regarding regional head elections in Indonesia has tended to be trapped in a dichotomy between direct elections by the people and indirect elections through the Regional People's Representative Council (DPRD). This article argues that this dichotomous framework masks deeper structural problems in local democracy. Drawing on the perspectives of democratic theory and political economy, this analysis examines how various regional head election mechanisms interact with elite power, high political costs, and the dynamics of government decentralization. Through a qualitative, comparative, and interpretive approach, this study demonstrates that neither direct elections nor elections through the Regional People's Representative Council (DPRD) can be understood as inherently democratic or undemocratic. Direct elections tend to generate symbolic legitimacy and high electoral participation, but are often distorted by clientelism, identity mobilization, and oligarchic domination. Conversely, elections through the Regional People's Representative Council (DPRD) offer procedural efficiency and political stability, but often weaken public legitimacy and strengthen elite control. These findings confirm that changes in election design alone are insufficient to deepen local democracy. Democratic outcomes are more determined by the power relations and institutional capacities that mediate the electoral process. By reviewing regional head elections beyond procedural debates, this article contributes to the discourse on decentralized democratization and elite adaptation in Indonesia.

KEYWORDS: regional head elections, democratic decentralization, elite power, local democracy, Indonesia.

INTRODUCTION

Regional head elections are one of the main pillars of local democracy in post-reform Indonesia (Dahl, 2001; Muhammad, 2015; Norris, 2014). Since the implementation of direct regional head elections in 2005, the people have been empowered to elect governors, district heads, and mayors through a voting mechanism. This reform is seen as a significant milestone in the democratization and decentralization process, with the hope of strengthening political participation (Helbing et al., 2023), government accountability, and policy responsiveness at the local level.

However, nearly two decades after their implementation, direct regional head elections have given rise to a number of new problems. These include high political costs, vote buying, identity-based mobilization, and the strengthening of political dynasties, which have become dominant features in many local contests. This phenomenon has revived discourse on re-examining the design of regional head elections, including the idea of returning the election mechanism to the Regional People's Representative Council (DPRD).

Building on a critique of the dynamics of regional head elections, this article will reexamine the regional head election process as a manifestation of democracy at the local level. By contrasting direct popular election and election by the Regional People's Representative Council (DPRD) as two mutually exclusive normative options, public discourse tends to ignore the structural factors that shape how local democracy currently operates. This article argues that the primary problem with local democracy in Indonesia lies not solely in the election mechanism, but rather in the power relations, political costs, and institutional capacity that accompany it.

This article examines how regional head elections are an arena of power relations, not simply a neutral democratic procedure. The theoretical framework used combines three main approaches: democratic theory, decentralization and local democracy theory, and a political economy approach to oligarchy and clientelism.

In democratic theory, the tension between participatory democracy and representative democracy is the starting point of analysis. Participatory democracy emphasizes direct citizen involvement, while the representative approach views democracy as institutionalized elite competition (Rambe & Zulkarnain, 2022). Most regional head elections in Indonesia have shown considerable tension, particularly among candidate supporters. This is due to the expansion of electoral participation, which is not always accompanied by a substantive redistribution of power (Muhammad et al., 2025).

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The decentralization literature shows that delegating authority to the regions does not automatically strengthen local democracy. In the context of weak political institutions, decentralization actually opens up space for the reproduction of elite power at the local level. A political economy perspective complements this analysis by showing how political costs, patronage, and the role of political institutions in the economy contribute to the growth of local democracy (Subandi, n.d.; Subandi et al., 2021) and elite adaptation allows democratic institutions to function without changing the underlying power structures.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Studies on regional head elections and local democracy in Indonesia have developed rapidly in line with the implementation of post-reform political decentralization. Relevant literature can be grouped into four main streams: theories of democracy and electoral legitimacy, studies of decentralization and local democracy, political economy approaches to oligarchy and clientelism, and comparative studies of direct and indirect elections. These four streams provide important theoretical and empirical foundations for this article, while also highlighting the progress and limitations of previous studies.

1. Electoral Democracy and Political Legitimacy

In classical democratic theory, general elections are understood as the primary mechanism for realizing popular sovereignty and generating political legitimacy. There are at least three primary purposes of general elections in Indonesia: first, to enable a peaceful and orderly change of government, second, to implement popular sovereignty, and third, to implement the fundamental rights of citizens (Kusnardi & Ibrahim, 1998). Meanwhile, Jimly Asshiddiqie formulated the objectives of holding elections into 4 (four), namely: a. to enable the orderly and peaceful transfer of government leadership; b. to enable the change of officials who will represent the interests of the people in representative institutions; c. to implement the principle of popular sovereignty; and d. to implement the principle of citizens' basic rights (Asshiddiqie, 2004).

The representative democracy approach views democracy as institutionalized elite competition, where elections serve to periodically provide mandates to political leaders (Rambe & Zulkarnain, 2022). Meanwhile, the participatory democracy approach emphasizes the importance of direct citizen involvement as a prerequisite for substantive democracy (Helbing et al., 2023).

Recent literature shows that high voter participation is not always directly proportional to the quality of democracy. Norris asserts that democratic legitimacy is determined not only by the level of participation, but also by the integrity of the electoral process and the level of competition (Hadiz & Robison, 1998). In the context of local elections, direct elections can generate strong symbolic legitimacy, but this legitimacy is often procedural if the electoral process is shaped by resource inequality and transactional practices (Dahl, 2001; Hadiz & Robison, 1998).

2. Decentralization and Local Democracy

Early studies on decentralization tended to position the devolution of authority to regions as a means to strengthen government accountability and responsiveness. However, more critical research has shown that decentralization does not automatically deepen local democracy, especially when local political institutions are weak and oversight mechanisms are ineffective (Hadiz, 2010).

In the Indonesian context, several studies have shown that local democracy develops unevenly and is heavily influenced by the configuration of power at the regional level. Fossati points out that local elections in Indonesia often generate high levels of participation, but this is not always accompanied by improvements in the quality of governance (Muhammad et al., 2020). This study marks an important advance in the literature as it shifts the focus from institutional design alone to the dynamics of multi-level governance and local power relations.

However, some decentralization literature still places the election mechanism as the main variable, while political cost factors and elite relations are often treated as supporting contexts, not as core analytical variables (Muhammad et al., 2020; Norris, 2014; Prasetyanta et al., 2024).

3. Oligarchy, Clientelism, and Political Costs

A political economy approach makes a significant contribution to explaining the paradox of electoral democracy in Indonesia. Hadiz and Robison show that post-authoritarian democratization occurs simultaneously with the reorganization of oligarchic power, in which political and economic elites adapt to democratic institutions without losing substantive control over strategic resources (Subandi, n.d.; Subandi et al., 2021). This perspective challenges the assumption that elections are inherently emancipatory.

Aspinall's study highlights how elections in Indonesia operate through networks of clientelism and political brokers, particularly in the context of local elections (Dahl, 2001). Aspinall and Berenschot's follow-up study shows that high political costs encourage transactional relations between candidates, supporting elites, and voters, which in turn influence post-election policy orientations (Aspinall, 2014). This literature represents an important advance because it explains the micro mechanisms of elite domination in electoral democracy.

However, most studies of clientelism still focus on direct elections, while systematic analysis of how oligarchic practices operate in indirect elections through representative institutions is relatively limited (Aspinall & Berenschot, 2019; Muhammad et al., 2025).

4. Direct Election versus Election by the DPRD

The debate over direct and indirect elections has been a significant theme in the literature on local democracy. Direct elections are generally positioned as more democratic because they involve direct popular participation, while elections by representative institutions are considered more stable but elitist (Muhammad, 2015; Norris, 2014). However, this dichotomous approach is increasingly being questioned in recent studies.

Reuter shows that the party system and executive–legislative relations at the local level greatly influence how the electoral mechanism operates in practice (Fossati, 2018). Meanwhile, Mietzner emphasized that differences in election mechanisms do not automatically change the power structure, because political elites are able to adapt their strategies to various institutional designs (Mietzner, 2015).

These studies show that direct elections tend to move political transactions into the public arena through campaigns and mass mobilization, while elections by the DPRD concentrate transactions in the more closed elite legislative space (Aspinall & Berenschot, 2019; Fossati, 2018). However, both mechanisms operate within the context of political costs and elite domination.

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5. Research Gaps and Article Positioning

Based on the literature review above, several research gaps remain prominent. First, there are still limited studies that explicitly compare direct elections and elections by the Regional People's Representative Council (DPRD) within a unified political economy framework (Fossati, 2018; Muhammad et al., 2025). Second, many studies assess local democracy based on procedural indicators such as voter participation, while substantive legitimacy and power relations have not been adequately analyzed (Hadiz, 2010; Muhammad et al., 2020). Third, the long-term implications of regional head elections on regional governance and accountability are still relatively under-explored (Diamond, 1999; Meliala & Permana, 2023; R. Pratiwi et al., 2021).

This article attempts to fill this gap by integrating theories of democracy, decentralization, and political economy to analyze regional head elections as an arena of power relations. By using Indonesia as an analytical case, this article contributes to the literature on decentralized democratization in Southeast Asia and enriches the debate on the limits of electoral democracy in the developing world.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This research uses a qualitative approach with a normative-critical and comparative analysis design. The primary objective of the research is not simply to test quantitative hypotheses, but rather to explain how and why regional head election mechanisms produce certain political consequences in the context of Indonesian decentralization. Data was obtained from international and national academic literature, previous empirical studies, and relevant policy documents (Abdillah et al., 2025). Data analysis was conducted thematically and interpretively by tracing patterns of legitimacy, accountability, governance, and elite dominance in various regional head election designs (Gulo, 1384; Moleong, 2017).

RESULTS

1. Strong but Procedural Symbolic Legitimacy

Normatively, direct regional head elections generate strong political legitimacy because regional heads receive a direct mandate from the people through voting. Voter turnout in regional elections is often used as an indicator of this legitimacy. Data from the General Elections Commission (KPU) shows that voter turnout in national regional elections tends to be in the range of 65–75 percent, with some regions reaching over 80 percent. This figure is often used to emphasize that direct regional elections represent the will of the people.

However, in many cases, this legitimacy is procedural, not having yet led to substantive outcomes. Several studies have shown that high participation does not always reflect political choices that are free from distortion. Inequality of political resources (Hadiz, 2010; Hadiz & Robison, 1998), financial capital, in particular, creates unequal competition between candidates. Candidates with substantial financial backing have an advantage in campaigning, mobilizing voters, and gaining greater access to the media.

The Election Supervisory Agency (Bawaslu) consistently reports high levels of campaign violations related to money politics. In various regional elections, the practice of distributing money or goods before election day remains a dominant violation. This suggests that voter engagement is not always driven by programmatic preferences, but rather by transactional relationships. Thus, the legitimacy generated by direct regional elections often reflects the success of electoral procedures more than the quality of political representation.

2. Shifting Accountability: From Voters to Supporting Elites

Theoretically, direct elections are expected to strengthen vertical accountability, namely the accountability of elected regional heads to voters. However, empirical findings show that this accountability often shifts solely toward the elites supporting the campaign.

The political costs of regional elections are a key factor in this shift. Various academic studies and statements from the Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK) indicate that the costs of nominating a regional head, including costs for party dowries, campaigns, and voter mobilization, can reach tens to hundreds of billions of rupiah, depending on the scale of the region. The larger the region and the more difficult the terrain, the more candidates will rely on local businesspeople, political sponsors, and elite party networks.

Consequently, once elected, regional heads tend to be more responsive to the interests of these groups than to the broader electorate. This pattern is reflected in various corruption cases involving regional heads handled by the KPK, particularly related to the procurement of goods and services, permits, and regional infrastructure projects.

In contrast, in elections by the Regional People's Representative Council (DPRD), accountability is not vertical to the people, but rather horizontal and elitist, namely to factions and legislative elites. Regional heads elected by the DPRD tend to maintain political relations with the DPRD to ensure government stability. However, public accountability is weakened because the public lacks a direct mechanism to impose electoral sanctions.

3. Governance Distortion and High Political Costs

The third finding shows that both direct elections and elections by the Regional People's Representative Council (DPRD) are correlated with distortions in regional governance, primarily through the mechanism of political costs.

In direct regional elections, high campaign costs often encourage the practice of "returning political capital" after a candidate is elected. Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK) data shows that the majority of regional head corruption cases relate to efforts to access regional budget resources, investment permits, and development projects. This indicates a structural link between political financing and corrupt practices.

In the DPRD election mechanism, political costs are indeed lower, meaning it does not involve large-scale public campaigns. However, political transactions do not disappear; they shift to the legislative arena. Lobbying, bargaining for positions, and behind-closed-door political deals become the primary mechanisms. Governance distortions persist, but are more difficult to detect because they occur in elite spaces with minimal public oversight (Muhammad et al., 2020).

Thus, the main difference between the two mechanisms lies not in the presence or absence of governance distortions, but in the form and location of political transactions.

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4. Social Polarization versus Political Alienation

Direct elections have significant social impacts, particularly in the form of social polarization and identity politics. In many regional elections, religious, ethnic, and regional issues are used as tools for political mobilization. The Elections Supervisory Agency (Bawaslu) and various research institutions have recorded an increase in hate speech, disinformation, and horizontal conflict during regional elections, particularly in regions with high levels of political competition.

This polarization occurs not only during the campaign period but often continues post-election, impacting social cohesion and the stability of local governments. This situation suggests that high electoral participation does not always align with strengthened social integration.

Conversely, elections by the Regional People's Representative Council (DPRD) relatively reduce open polarization in society because competition occurs at the elite level. However, analytical findings indicate that this mechanism risks creating public political alienation. When the public feels excluded from the process of selecting regional leaders, trust in political institutions declines, and political participation tends to be passive. This alienation has the potential to undermine the long-term legitimacy of local governments.

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DISCUSSION

The findings of this study strongly challenge the normative assumption that has dominated the discourse on electoral democracy: that expanding participation through direct elections automatically deepens democracy. In the Indonesian context, the experience of nearly two decades of direct regional head elections demonstrates that high electoral participation does not always translate directly into strengthened popular control over political power or improved quality of regional governance.

Direct regional head elections have indeed succeeded in fostering widespread citizen political engagement and generating strong symbolic legitimacy for elected regional heads. However, empirical findings indicate that this legitimacy is often procedural and substantively fragile. Inequality of political resources among candidates, particularly financial capital and elite networks, creates unequal competition, so election results often reflect the capacity to mobilize resources rather than voters' rational preferences for programs and performance.

these conditions, direct elections actually serve to strengthen local oligarchies. Economic and political elites are not eliminated by democratic mechanisms but instead adapt and utilize elections as an instrument to maintain or expand their influence. High political costs encourage clientelistic relationships between candidates and their donors, which then impact post-election policy orientations (Aspinall, 2014; Aspinall & Berenschot, 2019; Subandi et al., 2021). In practice, electoral democracy serves as a vehicle for legitimizing structured elite power, rather than redistributing power to the people.

On the other hand, regional head elections through the Regional People's Representative Council (DPRD) are often viewed as the antithesis of democracy because they eliminate direct public participation. However, this research shows that while this mechanism is relatively more politically stable and cost-efficient, it also offers no guarantee of reducing elite dominance (Fossati, 2018; Mietzner, 2015). While political transactions in direct elections occur in the public sphere, in elections to the Regional People's Representative Council (DPRD) are concentrated within the more closed sphere of the legislative elite and with minimal public oversight.

Thus, the difference between direct elections and elections by the DPRD lies more in the form and arena of elite domination, rather than in its existence. Direct elections produce oligarchies that operate through open political markets through mass mobilization and identity, while DPRD elections facilitate oligarchies that operate through elite negotiations and closed political compromise. Both mechanisms have the potential to undermine the substance of local democracy if not accompanied by strong supporting institutions.

This discussion confirms that the main problem with local democracy in Indonesia lies not in the election mechanism per se, but in the institutional capacity that frames the electoral process. The weak institutionalization of political parties, low internal party accountability, and the absence of programmatic differentiation make local political contestation easily reduced to competition based on money, patronage, and primordial identity. Under these conditions, both direct elections and elections by the DPRD fail to function as instruments for effectively representing the public interest.

Furthermore, ineffective political financing regulations are a key factor explaining the distortion of local democracy. As long as political costs remain high and campaign funding sources remain opaque, elected regional heads will face structural incentives to prioritize the interests of elite supporters over those of voters. Reforming the electoral mechanism without improving the political financing system risks simply shifting the locus of political transactions, not eliminating them.

The quality of political representation is also a central issue in this discussion. Weak representation, both in direct elections and through the Regional People's Representative Council (DPRD), creates a distance between citizens and local governments. In direct elections, this distance arises because the voter-leader relationship is mediated by money and patronage (Subandi et al., 2021). In the Regional People's Representative Council (DPRD) elections, this gap arises because the leader selection process takes place without public involvement. Both conditions have the potential to erode public trust in local democratic institutions.

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Therefore, this discussion concludes that changes to the regional head election mechanism, without accompanying structural reforms to political institutions and democratic governance, have the potential to be a false solution. The debate over direct elections versus elections by the DPRD needs to shift from procedural issues to substantive ones: how to build political institutions capable of limiting elite dominance, reducing political costs, and strengthening representation of public interests.

Within this framework, deepening local democracy in Indonesia requires a more comprehensive reform agenda, encompassing strengthening political parties, enforcing political financing regulations, transparency in decision-making processes, and expanding space for meaningful public participation beyond election time. Without such an agenda, local democracy will continue to be trapped in the paradox of high electoral participation and limited democratic quality.

CONCLUSION

This article concludes that regional head elections, whether held directly by the people or through the election mechanism of the Regional People's Representative Council (DPRD), cannot be understood as the sole solution to deepening local democracy in Indonesia. Both mechanisms, while procedurally distinct, operate within the same structural context: unequal local power relations, high political costs, and the incompletely consolidated capacity of democratic institutions (Diamond, 1999). In these conditions, changes in election mechanisms tend to influence the form and arena of power practices, but do not fundamentally change the substance of the underlying political relations.

Direct elections have successfully expanded electoral participation and conferred symbolic legitimacy on elected regional heads. However, this legitimacy is often procedural and easily distorted by imbalances in political resources, clientelism, and identity mobilization. On the other hand, elections through the Regional People's Representative Council (DPRD) offer political stability and procedural efficiency, but at the cost of weakening public legitimacy and strengthening the dominance of legislative elites. Thus, both mechanisms share structural limitations that hinder the realization of substantive local democracy.

This conclusion confirms that the primary limitation of decentralized democratization in Indonesia lies not in the design of regional head elections, but rather in elite power relations, which are able to adapt to various democratic mechanisms without losing substantive control over political and economic resources. As long as oligarchic structures remain dominant, electoral democracy risks functioning more as a means of legitimizing elite power than as an instrument of public accountability. High political costs further reinforce this tendency, as they create structural incentives for regional heads to prioritize the interests of elite supporters over the interests of the wider public.

Furthermore, weak oversight and law enforcement institutions limit the ability of local democracy to correct power distortions arising from the electoral process. Without effective oversight of political financing, conflicts of interest, and local government performance, accountability mechanisms, both vertical through elections and horizontal through legislative institutions, cannot function optimally.

Based on these findings and analysis, this article argues that the local democracy reform agenda needs to be directed at more fundamental structural improvements. Strengthening political parties is crucial for improving the quality of representation and shifting political contestation from one based on money and patronage to programmatic competition. Transparency and control of political financing must be strengthened to reduce political costs and break the transactional relationship between candidates and donors. At the same time, public participation needs to be interpreted substantively, not limited to participation in voting, but also through policy oversight, involvement in local policy formulation processes, and strengthening civil society.

Thus, the main conclusion of this article is that deepening local democracy in Indonesia requires a shift in focus from simply changing the design of regional head elections to institutional reforms that address the root causes of power and democratic governance. Without such a shift, changes to electoral mechanisms risk becoming a superficial solution that fails to address the long-term structural challenges of local democracy.

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