

DEMOCRATIC RESILIENCE AND ELECTORAL EQUILIBRIUM IN INDONESIA'S DIRECT ELECTIONS

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ABSTRACT

Debates on local democracy in Indonesia are often framed through normative criticism of high political costs. This article seeks to reexamine that perspective through a functional realist analysis. Electoral inefficiency is understood as a vital balancing mechanism for maintaining national stability while reshaping transactional political practices. Drawing on classical moral economy theory and recent empirical findings, this study examines the flow of campaign logistics from candidates as a form of informal redistribution that fills gaps in grassroots public services. Building on theories of oligarchy and party cartelization, the article argues that direct elections compel strategic actors to undertake massive capital investments, thereby reinforcing the sunk-cost fallacy in political decision-making. Actors burdened by astronomical political costs become materially tied to preserving state sovereignty in order to secure their political positions. Elections are further understood as a dramaturgical ritual that reinforces social cohesion, reflected in Indonesia's improving Fragile States Index (FSI) scores. This thesis is inversely illustrated through the deviant case of the Noken System in Papua, where the absence of mass direct elections has contributed to prolonged vertical conflict. This study concludes that direct elections continue to function as an effective social safety valve for maintaining national integration.

Keywords: democratic resilience, sunk-cost fallacy, informal redistribution, Noken System, Fragile States Index

INTRODUCTION

Since the beginning of the Reformasi era in 1998, Indonesia has undertaken one of the world's most ambitious experiments in political and fiscal decentralization. The culmination of this process of local democratization was the introduction of direct regional head elections (*Pilkada*) in 2005 (Pratikno, 2005). Two decades later, however, direct elections continue to face intense scrutiny due to high political costs, widespread money politics, and corruption. Studies indicate that securing a regency or mayoral office may require tens to hundreds of billions of rupiah in political spending (Mietzner, 2015). This condition has contributed to what scholars describe as a high-cost democracy (Fossati, 2016).

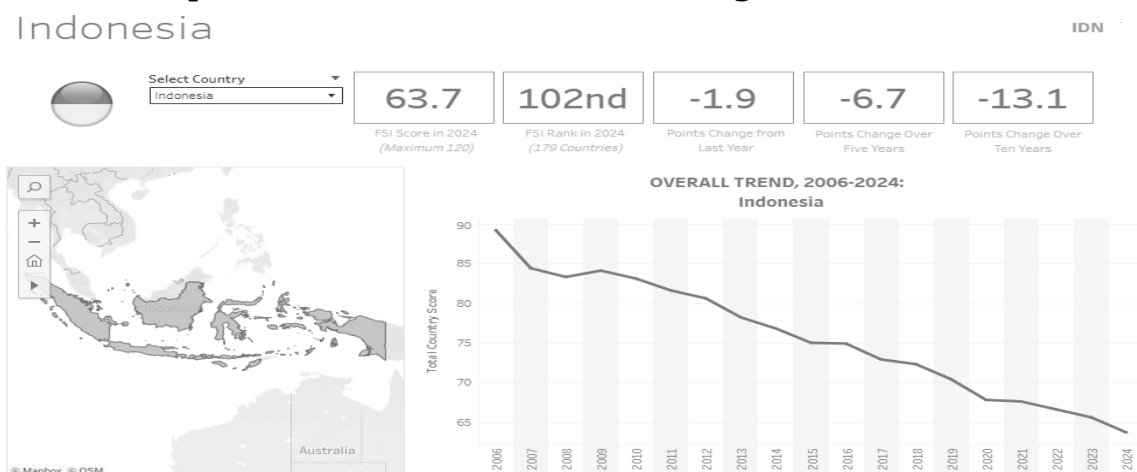
Before examining its implications for political stability, this study first clarifies the form of electoral inefficiency under discussion. Such inefficiency manifests in transactional arrangements in which capital is used to secure nomination tickets at the elite level, alongside intrusive clientelistic practices at the grassroots. In this context, clientelism refers to patron-client exchanges

that replace programmatic public goods distribution with personalistic allocation (Hicken, 2011). Campaign logistics distributed through cash handouts, basic necessities, and micro-level assistance function as instruments for securing voter loyalty, forming the underlying character of inefficiency within the system (Aspinall & Berenschot, 2019).

Existing literature on this phenomenon is generally dominated by two perspectives, both of which contain significant limitations. Institutional approaches tend to emphasize failures in regional autonomy design and the weakness of the rule of law, whereas normative-moralist perspectives largely interpret clientelism as a pathological sign of democratic decline (Power, 2018). Both perspectives, however, struggle to explain why a system widely viewed as flawed and corrupt has nevertheless managed to preserve national cohesion without experiencing systemic collapse or fragmentation, as predicted by classical theories of political transition (Huntington, 1968).

This paradox of democratic resilience can be traced through macro-level indicators in the Fragile States Index (FSI). During the turbulent early phase of decentralization in 2007, Indonesia recorded a fragility score of 84.4, placing it within the “warning” category. Yet amid increasingly capital-intensive and clientelistic electoral cycles, the country’s fragility score did not deteriorate; instead, it consistently improved, reaching 63.7 points in the 2024 release (Fund for Peace, 2024). The author fully recognizes that this aggregate improvement was also influenced by broader macroeconomic conditions and infrastructure development. Nevertheless, the coexistence of persistent electoral inefficiency and long-term stability remains a significant issue in political-science discourse.

Figure 1.
Improvement Trend in Indonesia's Fragile States Index Scores



Source: Fund for Peace (2024)

By addressing this gap in the literature, the article seeks to examine the following question: how can a capital-intensive and transactional direct election mechanism coexist with the preservation of national stability rather

than undermine it? To provide readers with a coherent analytical framework, the article approaches the phenomenon through five principal concepts: democratic resilience, equilibrium function, informal redistribution, the sunk-cost fallacy, and carnivalesque theatre.

To understand how electoral inefficiency may sustain national stability, this study examines the phenomenon through five interconnected conceptual pillars. The first is democratic resilience, which requires reconsideration beyond its mainstream interpretation. Within political-science literature, normative perspectives generally argue that Indonesian democracy has endured primarily because of the resilience of civil society, which consistently acts as a safeguard against authoritarian tendencies (Mietzner, 2012). This article, however, offers a realist interpretation. Democratic resilience is driven less by civic virtue than by elite collusion and political cartelization. Procedural democracy is maintained not because oligarchic actors possess ethical commitments to democratic values, but because participation in electoral procedures and power-sharing arrangements is far more profitable than provoking systemic collapse or returning to rigid authoritarian rule (Mietzner, 2024; Slater, 2018).

The continuation of this elite-driven accommodation system produces what systems theory describes as an equilibrium function. National stability emerges when competing elite factions and the economic demands of lower social groups reach a pragmatic balance point (Mietzner, 2021; Slater, 2018). However, this balance takes the form of a low-level equilibrium trap. The concept describes a condition in which macro-level political stability is successfully maintained over time, but at the cost of deteriorating governance quality, entrenched institutional corruption, and suboptimal public services for much of society (Mietzner, 2015; Ostwald et al., 2016).

At the grassroots level, the principal mechanism sustaining this equilibrium is informal redistribution. The concept draws on James C. Scott's (1976) classical moral economy thesis. Historically, subsistence farmers in colonial Southeast Asia expected landlords and feudal elites to guarantee their survival during periods of crisis or crop failure. In the contemporary political landscape, these subsistence expectations have evolved into the rationality of voters within modern *Pilkada* contests. Due to the limited reach, or even absence, of formal state social safety nets, lower-income communities use elections as opportunities to extract resources directly from candidates through money politics and the distribution of basic necessities. In this context, clientelistic practices function as an informal social safety net that responds immediately to voters' economic vulnerability (Aspinall & Berenschot, 2019; Berenschot, 2018).

In contrast, at the elite level, adherence to the hierarchy of the state system is strongly reinforced by the sunk-cost fallacy. Originating from behavioral economics and cognitive psychology through the work of

Kahneman and Tversky (1979), the concept refers to the irrational tendency of actors to continue pursuing a course of action because of the substantial investments of capital, time, and effort that have already been expended and cannot be recovered. Applying this theory to the rationality of local political elites in Indonesia offers significant theoretical contribution and analytical novelty. The *Pilkada* system compels candidates to expend enormous amounts of capital. These massive political transaction costs become sunk costs that generate an existential lock-in effect. Local oligarchs are therefore compelled to preserve the integrity of the state hierarchy, since separatism or attempts to delegitimize central authority would immediately erase the value of the offices they had effectively purchased through costly political investment.

Electoral cycles also function collectively as carnivalesque theatre, helping to relieve the pressures generated by this low-level equilibrium trap. Drawing on Mikhail Bakhtin's (1984) sociocultural theory of the medieval European carnival, the concept refers to a temporary social space in which hierarchical order, class norms, and structural boundaries are temporarily inverted to provide ordinary people with unrestricted expressive freedom and thereby prevent rebellion. In the context of *Pilkada*, mass campaign periods perform a similar psychological function. For several months, social hierarchies are symbolically reversed as ruling elites descend into public spaces, seek support, and attend directly to lower-class voters. This "festivalization" of politics (i.e., turning it into a public spectacle) functions as a crucial social safety valve. Structural anger and lower-class frustrations are channeled into a legal and collective emotional release, allowing society to ultimately reaccept the authority of the state order without escalating into open vertical rebellion (Geertz, 1980; Tapsell, 2020).

The central argument advanced in this article is that clientelism and extraordinarily high political financing operate as latent and interdependent functions that together sustain an equilibrium beneath the facade of normative decay. In this paradoxical sense, electoral inefficiency functions as a mechanism for preserving sovereignty by pacifying subsistence insecurity among lower social groups while simultaneously binding local elites to the sovereign hierarchy of the unitary state.

RESEARCH METHOD

This article is positioned as an analytical essay that adopts a qualitative-interpretive approach through a critical literature review design. Rather than testing deterministic causal relationships through rigid econometric regression, the study focuses on resynthesizing secondary data and contemporary literature findings to offer a theoretical reframing of the latent functions of elections. The inferential scope of this study is therefore carefully

framed as an exploration of analytical indications and pattern reading, rather than the verification of a singular causal relationship.

The primary data sources consist of academic literature on clientelism, patronage, and oligarchic cartelization in Indonesia. The study is also supported by empirical and institutional data drawn from enforcement reports issued by the Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK), studies conducted by the Election Supervisory Agency (Badan Pengawas Pemilihan Umum or Bawaslu), and documentation from the General Elections Commission (KPU). As a macro-level proxy instrument, the study employs Fragile States Index (FSI) data from 2006 to 2024, with particular attention to fluctuations in three micro-indicators: Factionalized Elites, Group Grievance, and State Legitimacy.

The inferential process is carried out through a disciplined writing structure that clearly separates field-level evidence from the author's theoretical interpretation. In interpreting FSI data, the author applies temporal lag analysis by tracing stability-score recovery during post-electoral phases (H+1 or H+2) to assess whether electoral conflict-resolution mechanisms are functioning effectively. The functional hypothesis is then evaluated through a dual comparative analysis. The first comparison examines the successful domestication of coercive actors within Aceh's asymmetric decentralization following the Helsinki Memorandum of Understanding (MoU). The second treats the Noken System in Papua as a deviant case in order to examine the disruptive dynamics that emerge when mechanisms of direct electoral competition are substantially removed.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Moral Economy of Regional Elections: From Transactional Politics to Informal Redistribution

Clientelism, manifested through the distribution of material incentives before elections, basic necessities, and direct vote buying, remains a persistent empirical feature of Indonesia's electoral landscape across multiple subnational levels. Recent field studies confirm that this phenomenon does not operate in a sociological vacuum and cannot be reduced merely to a sign of low political literacy among citizens. Instead, communal acceptance of transactional practices functions as an adaptive response to structural weaknesses in the state's provision of essential public services and persistent economic vulnerability (Adhinata, 2019). The local democratic ecosystem operates through pragmatic exchange mechanisms, in which grassroots voters actively use electoral moments to demand support for essential needs that the bureaucracy has failed to adequately provide, including emergency healthcare access, educational expenses, bereavement assistance, and small-scale neighborhood infrastructure repairs (Aspinall & Berenschot, 2019).

The penetration of electoral patronage is reflected in nationally representative research showing that approximately one-third of Indonesia's voter population has been directly exposed to money politics (Muhtadi, 2019). Demographically, recipients of clientelistic incentives are concentrated largely within lower-income communities experiencing persistent economic insecurity and uncertainty over daily income. Furthermore, clientelistic practices have adopted new channels of penetration that effectively reach younger voter demographics. This short-term economic rationality has increasingly displaced substantive public discussion concerning democratic institutional strengthening and governance reform in the eyes of voters (Rahmaddian et al., 2023).

From a theoretical perspective, this empirical reality can be examined through the framework of moral economy. Referring to Scott's (1976) classical sociological argument, social groups living near the poverty threshold or under conditions of acute economic vulnerability will consistently prioritize rational calculations aimed at securing short-term subsistence security. In the context of a developing state where universal social protection systems have not yet functioned effectively and food-price inflation remains a persistent threat, rejecting material incentives during elections in order to uphold the normative values of procedural democracy often conflicts with the economic rationality of vulnerable communities. For economically vulnerable groups concerned primarily with daily subsistence, accepting material incentives from political candidates is sociologically understood as the most rational survival strategy and a practical coping mechanism.

Within this framework, the massive circulation of capital during electoral campaigns is interpreted in this study not merely as a juridical violation or a form of electoral bribery. Instead, this material circulation has undergone a latent functional transformation into a mechanism for grassroots economic patronage circulation and an important process of social capital formation for competing candidates (Ananda & Valentina, 2021; Berenschot, 2018). This functional transformation has become increasingly institutionalized due to the weak ideological institutionalization of formal political parties. At the local level, political parties frequently experience structural limitations in consistently representing the interests of working-class and agrarian communities, tending to function primarily as administrative vehicles in the lead-up to electoral cycles.

Due to the limited organic penetration of political parties into the mass base, political candidates are compelled to adopt resource-mobilization strategies that rely heavily on renting or purchasing the loyalty of political broker networks, informal campaign teams, and volunteers (Hicken, 2011; Hicken et al., 2022). These intermediary networks play a crucial role in distributing financial incentives that secure communal loyalty at the grassroots level. Recent developments further show that the structure of

“political volunteers” has evolved systematically beyond the role of purely ideological supporters, transforming into organized professional units responsible for facilitating the smooth distribution of micro-level clientelism in the field (Putra et al., 2022).

Local political broker networks, commonly composed of customary community leaders, neighborhood-level administrative figures, and informal village power brokers, function as the front-line executors of distribution. They serve a dual role: ensuring that logistical incentives reach targeted groups effectively while simultaneously validating electoral commitments as part of transactional reciprocity. The cross-class patronage relations mediated by these intermediaries functionally indicate the formation of a temporary social equilibrium. Structural dissatisfaction with bureaucratic inefficiency and socioeconomic inequality can therefore be reduced and pragmatically contained, at least temporarily.

This tension-dampening function operates through the trickle-down effect generated by the circulation of campaign logistics, which floods regional economic structures in the lead-up to voting periods. Various sectors of the local informal economy experience significant short-term liquidity injections. Within this temporary equilibrium, elections are understood not merely as the operationalization of formal democratic procedures, but also as a regular mechanism of informal wealth redistribution. In this sense, clientelistic mechanisms pragmatically substitute for the functional shortcomings of the state’s social safety net.

To understand the persistence of this equilibrium, clientelism should not be viewed as an anomaly within the political order, but rather as a functional substitute for the failure of formal institutions. When state institutions fail to provide reliable healthcare services, educational guarantees, and equitable old-age protection, the electoral patronage machine assumes that role at the grassroots level. Instead of consolidating into class-based social movements demanding radical public-policy reform, lower-class communities become fragmented into competing patronage blocs struggling over access to leftover logistical resources from rival candidates. This structural fragmentation effectively prevents the consolidation of vertical resistance against the existing regime order, thereby maintaining macro-level national political stability despite being built upon fragile governance foundations. At the macro-analytical level, the absence of a comprehensive welfare state is paradoxically “rescued” by the material circulation of the vote-auction marketplace, which contributes significantly to preserving social stability against the potential escalation of interclass conflict.

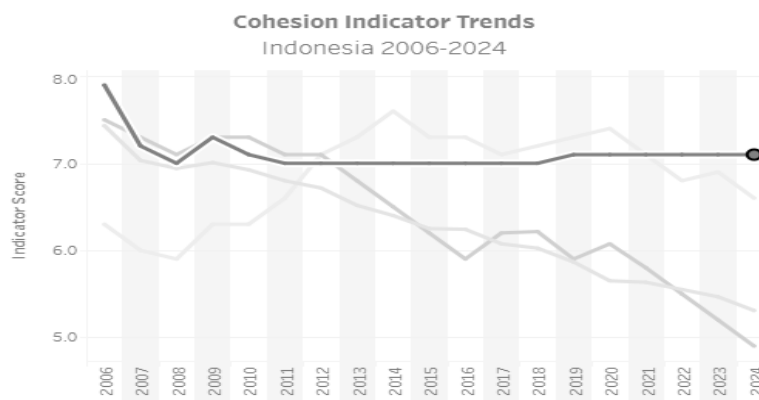
Elite Domestication Through the Sunk Cost Fallacy Effect

The institutional architecture of *Pilkada* requires an extraordinary level of financial-capital mobilization. These financing pressures stem from the

large electoral districts involved and the absence of fully state-funded campaign subsidies. An official study by the Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK) on conflicts of interest in political financing confirms that the actual cost of securing a regency head or mayoral position ranges from approximately Rp20 billion to Rp30 billion on average. Meanwhile, gubernatorial contests can reach hundreds of billions of rupiah (Komisi Pemberantasan Korupsi, 2016). Paradoxically, these political transaction costs often far exceed the total personal wealth disclosed in candidates' State Officials' Wealth Disclosure Reports (*LHKPM*). The logical and empirical consequence is clear: more than 82% of regional head candidates reportedly have little choice but to incur massive debt or surrender substantial control over campaign financing to oligarchic sponsor networks, commonly referred to as *cukong*.

The fluctuations of elite tension generated by this capital-intensive competition are consistently reflected in Fragile States Index (FSI) metrics. Historically, the Factionalized Elites indicator has repeatedly recorded sharp increases in factional tension during election years. For example, the factionalization score deteriorated to 7.0 during the peak polarization of the 2019 election. Yet despite escalating political tensions throughout campaign periods, these factional divisions have never culminated in systemic state collapse. Instead, the data indicate a recurring pattern in which the indicator gradually stabilizes during post-electoral reconciliation phases, declining to approximately 6.6 during the 2020–2023 period (Fund for Peace, 2024).

Figure 2.
Trends in the Factionalized Elites Indicator During Election Years



Source: Fund for Peace (2024)

This article applies the sunk-cost fallacy theory developed by Kahneman and Tversky (1979) to analyze escalating electoral costs and their relationship to elite domestication. The institutional design of direct elections compels local powerholders to lay down arms, dismantle coercive mass networks, and convert them into financial capital invested entirely in procedural electoral competition. Billions of rupiah borrowed, distributed, and expended during

campaigns are rapidly transformed into an existential lock-in cost. Hypothetically, this accumulation of political debt functions as one of the most effective instruments of oligarchic domestication in the post-authoritarian era. Local elites are therefore compelled to preserve the integrity of the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia, since separatism or armed rebellion would undermine the legitimacy of the constitutional order itself. The collapse of constitutional order would effectively erase the entire value of the political offices they had acquired through costly political investment.

The strongest historical illustration of this domestication hypothesis can be found in Aceh's asymmetric decentralization following the 2005 Helsinki Memorandum of Understanding (MoU). The peace agreement opened channels for local political participation and fundamentally redirected the trajectory of former Free Aceh Movement (GAM) combatants. The necessity of financing local political parties and winning direct *Pilkada* contests at both provincial and regency levels compelled former combatant factions to convert their remaining coercive capital, including weapons networks, into instruments of electoral capital accumulation (Aspinall, 2009; Mietzner, 2007).

Once these former combatant elites succeeded in securing executive positions through *Pilkada*, the lock-in effect of sunk costs began operating in a powerful and enduring manner. They rapidly transformed into elite actors with the strongest interest in maintaining the constitutional architecture of the unitary state. Continuing armed rebellion became politically and economically irrational because their offices derived legitimacy only under the sovereignty of the Indonesian state. In addition, adherence to the constitutional order ensured continued access to trillions of rupiah in Aceh's Special Autonomy (*Otsus*) funds. This pragmatic transformation from guerrilla commanders into bureaucratic cartel elites provides strong empirical evidence that electoral routines can function effectively as mechanisms for managing armed conflict and sustaining national resilience.

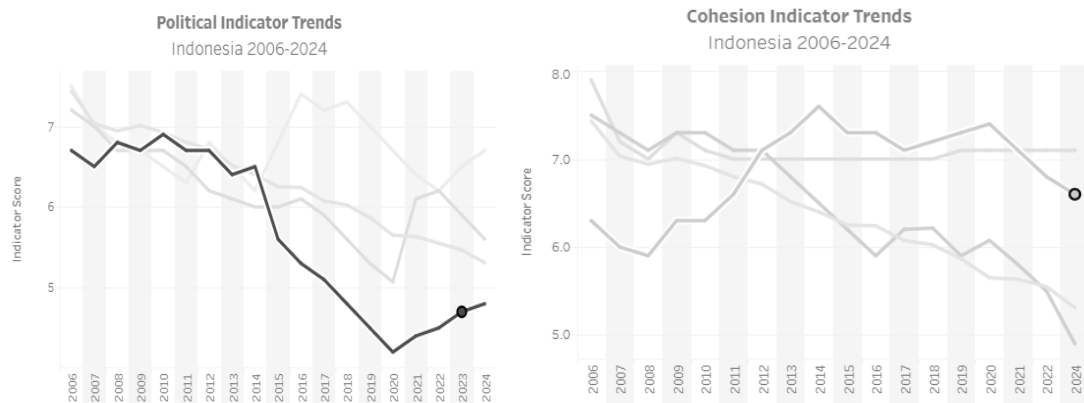
The broader national pattern of post-electoral recovery in the Factionalized Elites indicator therefore serves as analytical evidence that logistical resource depletion, particularly the exhaustion of campaign funds caused by intense competition among elite factions, pushes rival elites toward rapid power-sharing compromises. These elites tend to form oversized coalitions that prioritize political stability and security over democratic oversight and accountability (Mietzner, 2020, 2023; Slater, 2018). In practice, these pragmatic compromises aimed at repaying debts to sponsoring oligarchs frequently produce highly predatory and extractive post-electoral governance. In order to recover sunk political investments, winning elites often monopolize regional-budget infrastructure projects (*APBD*), manipulate spatial-planning regulations, and distribute rent-seeking permits in the mining and plantation sectors to campaign donors (Aspinall & Berenschot, 2019; Mietzner, 2015). As a consequence, constitutional stability and civilian security may be preserved

from the threat of inter-elite proxy conflict, but at the cost of widespread structural corruption within at the local government level.

Social Safety Valves: Carnavalesque Theatre and the Recognition of Sovereignty

Periods of electoral competition are often marked by massive mobilization that remains vulnerable to the exploitation of communal and religious sentiments. Tapsell's (2020) observations on the festivalization of politics suggest that campaign periods in Indonesia function less as spaces for substantive public-policy debate than as spectacles of staged performances, mass dangdut entertainment, and symbolic displays of regional identity. The risks of social polarization generated by these dynamics can be quantified through Fragile States Index (FSI) data. During election years, the Group Grievance indicator consistently records alarming increases, including the rise to a score of 6.5 amid the political tensions of 2019, driven largely by the extensive exploitation of ethnic and religious identity politics (commonly referred to as *suku, agama, ras, and antargolongan* or SARA in Indonesian context).

Figure 3.
Trends in State Legitimacy and Group Grievance Indicators, Indonesia 2006–2024



Source: Fund for Peace (2024)

Nevertheless, the data also reveal a structural anomaly. Despite escalating group grievances, the State Legitimacy indicator has remained comparatively resilient and has continued to demonstrate long-term stabilization, reaching a relatively stable score of 4.80 in 2024 (Fund for Peace, 2024). This pattern of macro-level resilience is consistent with sociopolitical findings suggesting that no matter how intense hate speech becomes during campaign periods, horizontal tensions rarely escalate into armed civil conflict or mass violence following electoral vote tabulation (Hicken et al., 2022).

This apparent dissipation of communal tensions without delegitimizing the state can be understood more comprehensively by combining Geertz's (1980) concept of the theater state with Mikhail Bakhtin's (1984) notion of the carnivalesque. Electoral campaigns function less as arenas for rational

evaluation of government performance than as instruments of participatory political dramaturgy. During campaign periods, social hierarchies are temporarily inverted in ways resembling a large-scale carnival. Political elites, who are ordinarily socially distant and economically privileged, must descend into traditional markets, crowded neighborhoods, and public gatherings in search of support from lower-class voters. This theatrical suspension of hierarchical distance, combined with the provision of collective spectacle, functions psychologically as a social safety valve that helps reduce the potential for physical revolt. Structural anger arising from poverty and the lingering residues of identity-based conflict is redirected into legal and institutionalized forms of emotional expression through public campaign events and entertainment stages.

Importantly, this emotional release remains tightly regulated through institutional mechanisms, including legally mandated quiet periods before voting. Conflict resolution is ultimately carried out through ballot procedures rather than armed confrontation in the streets. The relative stability of the post-electoral State Legitimacy indicator therefore reinforces the article's central argument: despite intense political contestation, both elites and the broader public ultimately continue to recognize electoral procedures as the only constitutionally legitimate mechanism for resolving struggles over political power.

Comparative Reflection: The Noken System and the Absence of National-Resilience Equilibrium

As a validation instrument for testing the article's central hypothesis, this study examines the Noken System practiced in Papua's Central Highlands as a deviant case through reverse comparative analysis. The objective is to demonstrate that the absence of direct electoral mechanisms may contribute to instability. Fundamentally, the Noken System represents a sociocultural adaptation for managing consensus within agrarian highland tribal communities (Diamond, 2012; Pamungkas, 2018). However, in its contemporary electoral implementation, the system inherently removes the principle of individual ballot secrecy and delegates collective sovereignty almost entirely to the singular authority of customary leaders through the so-called Big Man representational Noken System.

In examining this electoral anomaly in Papua's Central Highlands, it is crucial to trace the legal foundations underlying the legitimacy of the Noken System itself. The existence and legality of the Noken System as a substitute for direct voting procedures (*Luber-Jurdil*) are grounded primarily in Constitutional Court Decision No. 47-81/PHPU.A-VII/2009. Through this landmark ruling, the Constitutional Court granted constitutional recognition to both the tied-vote system (acclamation through Big Man representation)

and voting through *noken* pouches. The Court's legal reasoning (*ratio decidendi*) was based on Article 18B(2) of the 1945 Constitution, which obliges the state to "recognize and respect customary law communities along with their traditional rights as long as they remain alive and in accordance with societal development."

Nevertheless, the ruling also sparked significant debate regarding legal pluralism. From a philosophical and sociological perspective, the Constitutional Court argued that imposing modern voting procedures on indigenous communities unfamiliar with such mechanisms could disrupt communal harmony and trigger conflict both within and between tribal groups. On that basis, the Court granted exceptional status to the Noken system as an expression of Papuan communal values. However, when confronted with the empirical realities of high-cost electoral competition, this constitutional justification indirectly weakens individual participation and concentrates collective sovereignty in the hands of a small number of tribal elites. As a consequence, the disappearance of direct electoral competition at the grassroots level undermines local redistributive functions and eliminates the political-cost trap for competing elites. In turn, this condition creates broader opportunities for violent unrest when rival groups contest claims over acclamation-based voting outcomes. The result is disastrous. At the ground level a competitive arena disappears, dismantling the economic distribution function, and removing the political cost trap for challengers. This opens wide space for mass groups to trigger violent unrest when they contest claims over acclamation-based tribal vote outcomes.

In contemporary regulatory practice, the legality and technical procedures of the Noken System are governed through Decision of the General Elections Commission (KPU) of the Republic of Indonesia Number 810/PL.02.6-Kpt/06/KPU/IV/2019 concerning Guidelines for Voting Implementation Using the Noken/Tied System in Papua Province during the 2019 General Election. The regulation represents the state's recognition of legal pluralism by allowing communities in selected districts to depart from conventional ballot-voting procedures. Through this framework, the KPU formally administers two principal mechanisms: (1) the Hanging Noken System, in which voters place ballots into *noken* pouches allocated to each candidate; and (2) the Tied System, in which voting takes place through collective agreement represented by customary leaders or tribal chiefs (*Big Man*).

Although KPU Decision 810/2019 was intended to provide procedural certainty, it simultaneously institutionalizes the erosion of fundamental democratic principles, particularly ballot secrecy and the principle of one person, one vote, one value. Empirically, the institutionalization of procedures that concentrate sovereignty in customary elites instead indicates heightened local security vulnerability. The Election Vulnerability Index (*IKP*) compiled

comprehensively by the Election Supervisory Agency (*Bawaslu*) has consistently categorized Noken-based districts among the highest national risk areas. This vulnerability is reflected in the frequency of deadly physical clashes that emerge when mass groups contest the legitimacy of Noken vote claims. In such situations, mechanisms for conflict resolution are effectively redirected toward physical confrontation rather than transparent administrative vote-counting procedures (Badan Pengawas Pemilihan Umum, 2024).

The absence of direct regional head elections based on the principle of one person, one vote within territories implementing the Noken System theoretically indicates the collapse of the three equilibrium pillars sustaining state stability discussed in the previous section. First, the complete centralization of vote delegation through tribal-chief consensus removes the practical necessity for political candidates to maintain grassroots campaign networks and conduct direct door-to-door mobilization among local communities. Once this downward campaign mechanism disappears, the trickle-down circulation of informal capital, including pocket money, basic commodities, and social donations, either ceases altogether or becomes concentrated exclusively within customary elite circles. As a result, the election no longer functions as a mechanism of subsistence compensation for economically vulnerable communities, leaving growing economic grievances among ordinary citizens.

Second, the disappearance of mass-based electoral competition effectively frees challenger elites from the obligation to invest enormous amounts of political financing. Since grassroots logistical campaigning is largely absent, challengers are not trapped by the burden of mounting political debt. Without the lock-in effect created by sunk political costs, local elites retain substantial operational resources and political flexibility. Consequently, their pragmatic commitment to preserving the constitutional sovereignty of the central state never develops as strongly as that of political elites operating within conventional electoral systems. In practical terms, these actors face fewer financial disincentives against mobilizing mass resistance or rejecting decisions imposed by central electoral authorities.

Third, the abolition of open competitive spectacle effectively eliminates the carnivalesque safety-valve function of electoral politics. Ordinary citizens lose access to institutionalized spaces for collective emotional release and symbolic inversion of social hierarchy during campaign periods. Without these channels for managing electoral tensions psychologically, rivalries, distrust, and friction between local identity groups become more vulnerable to escalation in enclosed political settings. As a result, tensions surrounding committee plenary decisions can more easily transform into physical violence and destruction of public facilities rather than remaining limited to symbolic or verbal contestation.

The Papua case therefore offers an inverse form of validation. In the absence of mass electoral competition that compels elites to expend substantial political resources, the mechanisms of informal redistribution, the sunk-cost lock-in effect binding elites to the constitutional order, and the theatrical social safety-valve function all weaken simultaneously. This condition ultimately creates broader possibilities for prolonged regional security instability.

CONCLUSION

As an analytical essay grounded in macro-level literature synthesis and deductive interpretation, this study acknowledges several epistemological and spatial limitations. First, the qualitative-interpretive methodology adopted here is not intended to claim absolute causal determinism in the manner of quantitative econometric approaches. The relationship between high electoral costs and the architecture of national resilience is therefore framed as an explanatory probability analysis grounded in a latent-functionalist perspective. Second, fluctuations in Fragile States Index (FSI) recovery trends are also shaped by exogenous determinants beyond the *Pilkada* arena, including domestic macroeconomic conditions and the effectiveness of security operations. Accordingly, the FSI is positioned strictly as a proxy indicator for confirmatory pattern matching. Third, the dynamics of instability in Papua possess structural and historical roots that are too complex to be reduced to a single institutional explanation. Consequently, the discussion of the Noken System in this study is limited to the conceptual domain of electoral governance analysis. Fourth, this study assumes a degree of homogeneity in elite rationality regarding post-*Pilkada* rent-seeking behavior, despite the reality that extractive governance practices vary considerably and tend to become more extreme in resource-rich regions.

Through theoretical interpretation and comprehensive synthesis of the empirical literature, this article concludes that electoral inefficiency in Indonesia, manifested through extraordinarily high political costs and the institutionalization of clientelistic practices, should not be understood merely as a pathological condition corroding democracy. Beneath its normative distortions, this transactional inefficiency performs powerful latent functions in sustaining post-New Order state stability. This compromised equilibrium is maintained through three principal mechanisms: (1) the circulation of campaign logistics and cash-based patronage during electoral periods functions as an informal redistributive substitute that mitigates public anger arising from the failure of state welfare protections while pragmatically addressing subsistence pressures among lower-class communities; (2) the psychological lock-in effect generated by sunk political costs and campaign-financing debt compels oligarchs and regional elites to bind their loyalty to the constitutional hierarchy of the state in order to preserve access to political and

economic extraction; and (3) the sociopsychological dynamics of mass campaign spectacles operate as carnivalesque political theater that temporarily inverts social hierarchies and functions as a social safety valve, absorbing and diffusing communal tensions before they escalate into physical conflict.

Assessing the comparative cases presented at the end of this study provides strong support for the article's central hypothesis. The successful domestication of former combatant elites in Aceh and their subsequent integration into the state bureaucracy demonstrate the powerful lock-in effect generated by high-cost electoral institutions. By contrast, the anomalous case of the Noken System in Papua shows that the removal of direct individual electoral competition weakens the three pillars sustaining communal stability. In turn, this condition heightens the risk of physical conflict escalation through the disappearance of informal redistribution mechanisms, the absence of sunk-cost entrenchment, and the elimination of theatrical spaces for collective emotional release.

Revealing these latent functions behind the moral deterioration produced by clientelistic politics should not be interpreted as an ethical justification for the persistence of money politics. Recognizing electoral corruption as a pragmatic "safety mechanism" that temporarily suppresses horizontal conflict ultimately reflects the profound failure of the state's social-policy architecture. More importantly, these findings issue a crucial warning: the stability observed today represents the persistence of a low-level equilibrium trap. Frustration and logistical exhaustion following electoral campaigns, intensified by crushing political-financing debts, ultimately push elected elites toward highly extractive and predatory governance arrangements. Practices such as manipulation of spatial-planning permits, corruption in regional-budget (*APBD*) infrastructure procurement, and rent-seeking in mining concessions continue to be reproduced primarily to repay political financiers and oligarchic sponsors (*cukong*).

From a policy perspective, reactionary proposals aimed at reversing decentralization or eliminating public sovereignty in direct *Pilkada* procedures would carry severe risks of institutional destabilization. Accordingly, this study argues that regulatory reform must address the structural roots of the problem rather than merely punishing its symptoms. Any meaningful effort to eliminate the black market of vote buying must therefore begin with decisive state intervention through three essential measures: establishing a universal formal social safety net capable of reducing poor communities' dependence on local political patrons; radically formalizing, increasing transparency, and strengthening accountability in political-party financing and subsidy mechanisms; and narrowing opportunities for regional-budget exploitation through enforceable rule-of-law mechanisms specifically targeting post-electoral corruption carried out by victorious local political cartels.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

Generative AI tools were used in a limited capacity for language editing, translation refinement, and proofreading assistance. All scholarly interpretation, argumentation, and final manuscript validation remain the responsibility of the author(s).

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