

RETHINKING DIRECT ELECTIONS IN PAPUA: INDIRECT ELECTIONS AS SOCIOCULTURAL STABILITY INSTRUMENT

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ABSTRACT

Papua faces complex challenges in the implementation of the 2024 simultaneous elections, following the establishment of New Autonomous Regions (DOB) based on customary territories. Constitutional Court Decision No. 135/PUU-XXII/2024 has sparked debate over the possibility of shifting from direct elections to indirect elections in response to security dynamics in Papua. This qualitative descriptive study examines legitimacy and popular sovereignty through a comparative analysis of direct and indirect electoral systems as risk mitigation strategies in Papua. Empirical data were analyzed through literature reviews and interviews concerning horizontal conflict, casualties, infrastructure destruction, and the high financial burden of previous elections. The findings indicate that direct elections within Papua's vulnerable social structure carry a high risk of generating immeasurable social costs and regional instability. In contrast, an indirect electoral system integrated with Papua's mechanisms of cultural representation, and grounded in consociational democracy theory may help reduce conflict and improve budget efficiency without undermining popular sovereignty. This study concludes that an indirect election model may provide a viable approach to strengthening representation while maintaining sociocultural stability in conflict-prone regions.

Keywords: Papua, indirect elections, legitimacy, popular sovereignty

INTRODUCTION

The implementation of the 2024 Regional Head Elections (*"Pilkada"*) in Papua Province differed from previous electoral cycles following the establishment of New Autonomous Regions (*Daerah Otonomi Baru* or DOB) based on customary territories. These include Papua Province, which covers the Tabi-Saireri customary territory; Central Papua, corresponding to the Mee Pago customary territory; Highland Papua, covering the La Pago customary territory; and South Papua, corresponding to the Animha customary territory. The formation of these new regions was intended to bring public services closer to local communities. However, the residual effects of direct democratic mechanisms remain evident, particularly in the form of social fragmentation within Papuan society resulting from electoral conflict.

Following Constitutional Court Decision No. 135/PUU-XXII/2024, a new space for debate emerged regarding the format of simultaneous national and local elections, particularly the possibility of separating their implementation by a period of two to two and a half years. In the Papuan context, this debate has opened discussion on the possible adoption of an indirect election model in response to security dynamics and the high social costs of direct democracy, which in several cases have resulted in bloodshed. During the 2024 Regional

Head Election in Puncak Jaya Regency, clashes occurred between supporters of competing candidate pairs, resulting in 12 deaths and hundreds of injuries. The violence escalated following the Constitutional Court's order for a vote recapitulation in 22 districts involving two candidate pairs (Yunus, 2025). In resolving the conflict, customary law was applied more prominently than national positive law, particularly through compensation negotiation mechanisms known as *bayar kepala*, or "head payment," for parties who suffered social and economic losses (Purwanto, 2021; Taga & Hakim, 2024).

The discourse surrounding a transition toward an indirect election system is not entirely new. As early as 2014, public discourse had emerged regarding the incompatibility of direct elections with Papua's communal culture and strong kinship-based social structure, a view voiced, among others, by former Papua Governor Lukas Enembe (JPNN, 2014). In practice, electoral mechanisms need to align with local cultural traditions, given that political behavior is often shaped by power relations within social structures (Mansoben, 1995, p. 13). However, political decentralization in the post-Reformasi era has also increased the risk of conflict, particularly in regions with fragmented social structures such as Papua (Anwar, Riwanto, & Hidayat, 2025, p. 801).

More recently, President Prabowo Subianto proposed a similar idea, emphasizing budget efficiency given that the cost of the 2024 simultaneous elections reached Rp37 trillion (Lubis, 2024). This argument is further supported by the Election Vulnerability Index (*Indeks Kerawanan Pemilu/IKP*) issued by Bawaslu (2023, p. 82), which consistently classifies Papua as a high-risk province, with a score of 80.53 in the social and political dimension. Conditions during the 2024 simultaneous elections further reinforced this vulnerability. Horizontal conflicts occurred in several regencies, including Puncak Jaya, Central Mamberamo, Tolikara, and Lanny Jaya. The violence resulted in dozens of deaths, the destruction of hundreds of public infrastructures, and the displacement of local residents. These conflicts may be understood through the factors outlined by Nugroho (2022, pp. 35–39). First, some political actors and their supporters were unwilling to accept electoral defeat. Second, the application of standard regulatory procedures remained problematic in local contexts. Third, election organizers had not yet become fully professional and independent from political and community interests. Fourth, administrative barriers continued to undermine the electoral process. These elements indicate that conflict surrounding direct local elections in Papua cannot be reduced to a single cause. Rather, it emerges from the interaction between political actors, institutions, and the electoral regulatory framework itself.

Beyond security concerns, the fiscal burden of organizing regional elections in Papua is exceptionally high, particularly in relation to regional government budgets (APBD) compared with many other regions in Indonesia.

Papua's geographical conditions require the General Elections Commission (Komisi Pemilihan Umum or KPU) to allocate substantial funding for election logistics distribution. For example, logistics distribution costs in Papua average approximately Rp150 million per polling station (*tempat pemungutan suara* or TPS) (JPNN, 2024). By comparison, the average logistics distribution cost from district level to TPS during the 2024 elections in Central Java Province was approximately Rp160,000 per TPS (KPU Provinsi Jawa Tengah, 2023).

A notable example is Mamberamo Raya Regency, where logistics distribution costs reached approximately Rp10 billion due to heavy dependence on air transportation such as helicopters and chartered aircraft. In some areas, election logistics still had to be carried on foot through forest terrain for several days (ANTARA News, 2024). This situation contrasts sharply with Cilacap Regency, where logistics distribution for the 2024 elections required only around Rp1 billion (KPU Provinsi Jawa Tengah, 2023). However, these extremely high expenditures do not necessarily translate into political stability. Expensive elections may still be annulled and followed by repeat voting (*pemungutan suara ulang* or PSU), further exhausting state resources and social energy.

The approach adopted in this study draws upon Arend Lijphart's theory of "consociational democracy" (Barry, 1975; Lustick, 1997), which posits that in deeply fragmented societies, political stability is more effectively achieved through cooperation among representative elites than through open competition at the mass level. By minimizing grassroots tensions, political institutions are positioned not as sources of division, but as safeguards of social harmony. In Papua, many implementation challenges stem from the mismatch between national electoral rules and local sociocultural realities, resulting in disputes over electoral legitimacy. Drawing on Norris (2014), legitimacy can be assessed through four indicators: first, satisfaction with democracy; second, confidence in political institutions, including government, parliament, and political parties; third, perceptions of human rights performance; and fourth, voluntary obedience to the law. Similarly, Gutmann and Thompson (2004) argue that policy legitimacy within representative systems requires reason-giving, whereby citizens and their representatives, including members of the Regional Legislative Council (DPRD), must be able to explain transparently the rationale behind public decisions. This principle is essential for ensuring accountability among both political elites and the broader public.

Previous studies have examined various problems surrounding regional elections in Papua. Anwar, Riwanto, and Hidayat (2025), in their study on direct regional head elections in Papua, highlight systemic democratic challenges while proposing both short-term and long-term reforms. Their recommendations include strengthening oversight institutions and integrating

digital verification systems, alongside broader structural reforms through adaptive electoral design suited to local conditions. Ibnu Nugroho (2022), in his study on electoral conflict transformation in Papua, proposes conflict-transformation approaches at the individual, organizational, and systemic levels. Abdul Razak (2025) examines regional head elections under the *noken* system in Papua and argues that the system requires prudent governance arrangements because it functions not only as an electoral mechanism, but also as a sociopolitical symbol for Papuan communities. Meanwhile, Rahakratat, Jusmin, and Andriyan (2025), in their study on the role of the Papuan People's Assembly in the Southwest Papua gubernatorial election, emphasize the need for regulatory harmonization to strengthen legal certainty and protect the political rights of Indigenous Papuans within special autonomy regions. Witriah (2025), in a study on post-election conflict resolution from the perspective of Pancasila democracy, argues that electoral governance in Papua Highlands should prioritize dialogue, reform, and civic education.

These studies have mapped a range of problems and proposed reforms through conflict transformation, institutional strengthening, electoral system improvement, and evaluation of direct local elections. However, most remain focused on improving the existing direct election model. This study adopts a different approach by examining the urgency of transforming Papua's electoral system itself. The central question is whether an indirect election model can function as an effective instrument of risk mitigation without undermining the essence of popular sovereignty. Accordingly, this article analyzes how indirect elections may serve as a middle path for reducing sociocultural tensions while strengthening electoral governance and democratic integrity in Papua.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative descriptive approach to provide a systematic, factual, and in-depth analysis of the electoral system in Papua. A qualitative method is considered the most appropriate because the issues under examination involve interconnected sociocultural, political, and legal dimensions within a special autonomy region. The study focuses on a comparative analysis between the current direct election system and an indirect election model as a potential future policy alternative.

The primary data were collected through literature review, document analysis, and content analysis of legal instruments and official reports. The principal legal instruments examined in this study include Law No. 10 of 2016 concerning the Second Amendment to Law No. 1 of 2015 on the Enactment of Government Regulation in Lieu of Law No. 1 of 2014 concerning the Election of Governors, Regents, and Mayors into Law; Law No. 21 of 2001 on Special Autonomy for Papua Province; Law No. 2 of 2021 as its amendment; and the laws concerning the establishment of the DOB, namely Laws No. 14, 15, and

16 of 2022. In addition, important Constitutional Court jurisprudence is examined, particularly Constitutional Court Decision No. 135/PUU-XXII/2024 concerning electoral simultaneity and Constitutional Court Decision No. 47-81/PHPU.A-VII/2009 concerning the *noken* system, in order to assess the juridical possibilities for implementing asymmetric democracy.

To strengthen the analysis, this study applies cross-check validation across official reports and scholarly publications to ensure the consistency and accuracy of information. Source and method triangulation are employed by comparing data from official state institutions, including the General Elections Commission (Komisi Pemilihan Umum or KPU), the Election Supervisory Body (Badan Pengawas Pemilihan Umum or Bawaslu), and the National Commission on Human Rights (Komisi Nasional Hak Asasi Manusia or Komnas HAM), alongside publications produced by civil society organizations working on electoral issues. Data concerning election budgets, fatalities, infrastructure destruction, and electoral result disputes were collected and categorized to provide stronger evidence regarding the social and economic burdens generated by the current electoral system. This documentary analysis is further complemented by in-depth interviews with key informants, including representatives from KPU, Bawaslu, the Papuan People's Assembly, and election observers in Papua.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The implementation of *Pilkada* in Papua, whether for governors and deputy governors, regents and deputy regents, or mayors and deputy mayors, has generated several critical concerns. These include the substantial fiscal burden, horizontal conflict, and broader social costs associated with direct democracy. After years of direct regional elections, an important question remains: should direct *Pilkada* continue to be maintained in Tanah Papua? Direct local elections in Indonesia have been implemented since 2005. Yet electoral conflict has persisted, even after the recognition of customary values through the *noken* system. Accordingly, an indirect election model may be considered an effective instrument of risk mitigation without abandoning the principle of popular sovereignty. From a sociocultural perspective, the fulfillment of community needs and the formation of social institutions are closely connected to cultural values, which serve as a means through which local communities preserve and reinforce their traditions and social practices. Within the electoral context, this sociocultural foundation is important because it may strengthen the legitimacy of election outcomes (Herdiawanto et al., 2025, p. 7).

Customary Territories and Traditional Political Systems in Papuan Society

Papua Province was reorganized into several New DOB under Law No. 14 of 2022 concerning the establishment of South Papua Province, Law No. 15 of 2022 concerning the establishment of Central Papua Province, and Law No. 16 of 2022 concerning the establishment of Highland Papua Province. The formation of these new regions took into account the division of customary territories, namely Papua Province as part of the Tabi-Saireri customary territory, Central Papua as part of Mee Pago, Highland Papua as part of La Pago, and South Papua as part of Animha.

The House of Representatives (*Dewan Perwakilan Rakyat* or DPR) and the Government argued that the establishment of the three new provinces in Papua was urgently needed. The policy was framed as an effort to accelerate public service delivery, enable more focused development through closer administrative reach, and create a more effective and efficient system of governance. It was also intended to strengthen the role and existence of customary and cultural territories as forms of social capital, while addressing continuing development challenges and improving public welfare in Papua (Seskab, 2022).

Image 1.
Customary Territories of Papua Island



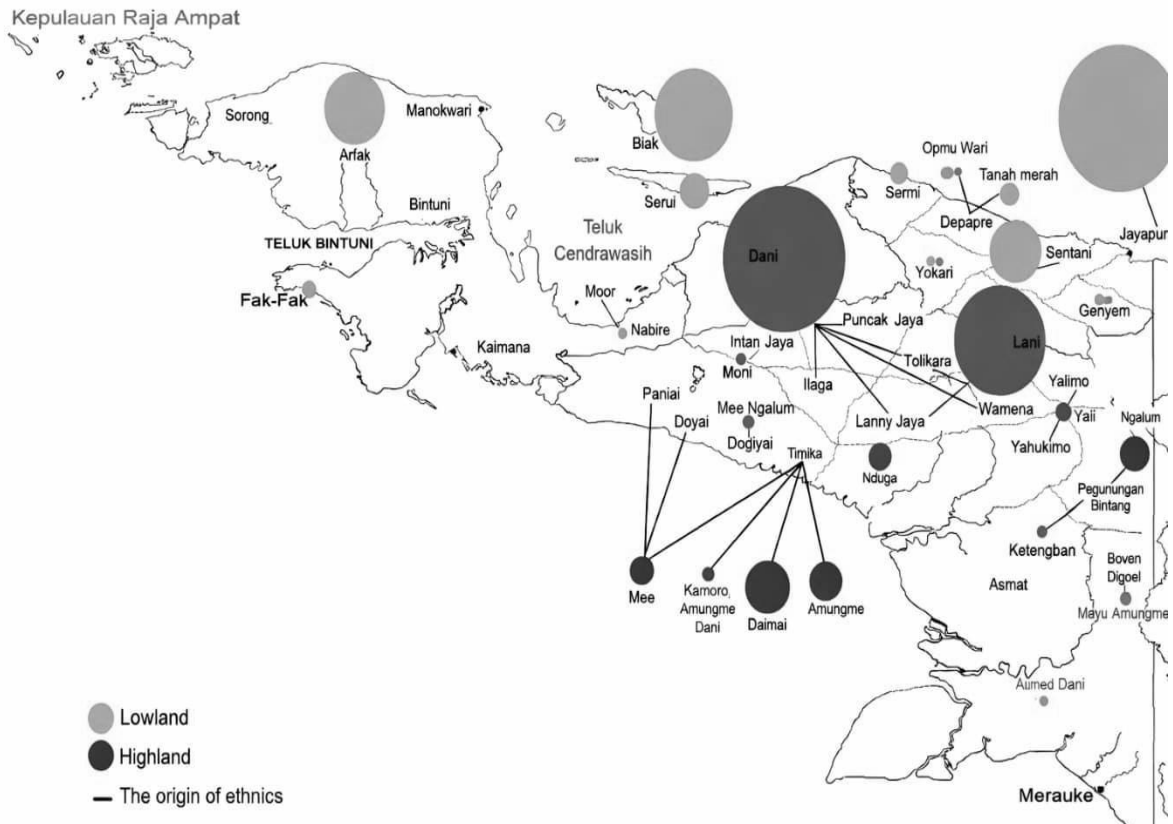
Source: id.scribd.com/aryonugroho93 and ITB Digital Library, 2019

According to Mansoben (1995, p. 46), traditional leadership and political systems in Papua can be classified into four main types:

1. Big Man system, or the influential man system. In this political structure, authority is derived primarily from individual capability. Leaders gain influence through visible achievements, such as the ability to allocate and distribute material wealth, skill in diplomacy and public speaking, courage in leading warfare, a physically imposing presence compared with other community members, and generosity. Authority within this system is generally exercised by a single individual. Communities associated with this leadership model include the Dani, Asmat, Me, Meybrat, and Muyu peoples.
2. Kingdom system. The defining characteristic of this system is hereditary leadership, typically determined by seniority based on birth order or clan lineage. This system is found in communities across regions such as the Raja Ampat Islands, the Onim Peninsula in Fakfak, MacCluer Gulf (Berau Bay), and the Kaimana region.
3. *Ondoafi* system. The principal characteristics of the *ondoafi* political system are hereditary leadership and a traditional bureaucratic structure, making it broadly comparable to the kingdom system. The main distinction lies in its territorial scope and political orientation. The *ondoafi* system is generally limited to a single village, while its social unit consists of only one ethnic or sub-ethnic group. This system is practiced by communities in Sentani, Genyem (Nimboran), Tabla, Yaona, Yakari-Skou, Arso-Waris, as well as among communities surrounding Jayapura Bay and Humboldt Bay.
4. Mixed leadership system. In this system, leadership is acquired through both inheritance and personal achievement. In other words, individuals may become community leaders not only because of lineage, but also because of demonstrated capability and accomplishment. This system is found among communities in the Cenderawasih Bay area, including the Biak, Wandamen, Waropen, Yawa, and Maya peoples.

The following image shows the distribution of ethnic groups within each customary territory in Papua:

Image 2.
Papua ethnic groups distribution



Source: Karwur et al., 2025

The Fiscal Burden, Horizontal Conflict, and the Social Costs of Direct Democracy

The implementation of the 2024 elections in Papua revealed substantially higher electoral costs compared with other regions, largely due to the province's extreme geographical conditions. As a result, regional elections in Papua are considerably more expensive and place a heavier burden on regional government budgets (*Anggaran Pendapatan dan Belanja Daerah* or APBD) than elections in many other provinces.

Table 1.
Ratio of the Regional Election Expenditure to the APBD

Province	Total APBD 2024	Total 2024 Pilkada Budget (KPU)	Percentage of Election Expenditure Relative to APBD	Notes
Papua (Parent Province)	Rp4.25 trillion	Rp248 billion	5.84%	A repeat voting (<i>pemungutan suara ulang</i> or PSU) was conducted following the Constitutional Court decision.
Central Papua	Rp4.80 trillion	Rp247.8 billion	5.15%	The 2024 APBD figures are used because regional election financing for the three DOB provinces was funded through the state budget (<i>Anggaran</i> <i>Pendapatan dan Belanja</i> <i>Negara</i> or APBN).
South Papua	Rp1.90 trillion	Rp138.5 billion	7.26%	
Highland Papua	Rp2.23 trillion	Rp346.1 billion	15.52%	
Central Java	Rp28.5 trillion	Rp791 billion	2.78%	
South Sulawesi	Rp10.22 trillion	Rp408 billion	3.99%	

Source: compiled from various reports and media sources.

In Central Java and South Sulawesi, which represent the western and central regions of Indonesia, geographical conditions are not as extreme as those in Papua. Although the value of the Regional Grant Agreement (*Naskah Perjanjian Hibah Daerah* or NPHD) for the KPU as the election organizer is also relatively large, the ratio of election costs to the regional government budget (APBD) remains comparatively small. This is different from Papua, Central Papua, South Papua, and Highland Papua. In these provinces, where the regional budget is more limited, an allocation of Rp200–300 billion may absorb around 5–15% of total regional expenditure. This means that fiscal space for infrastructure development and basic public services, such as education and health, can be affected in the relevant fiscal year.

In Papua, high electoral costs are not primarily the result of inefficiency, but rather of geographically driven “fixed costs,” particularly those associated with logistical distribution. In many regencies and municipalities, election

logistics must be transported across districts using costly modes of transportation such as aircraft and sea vessels, while operations also remain highly dependent on weather conditions and vulnerable to disruptions in access routes. During the Papua gubernatorial election, for example, the cost of distributing logistics from the warehouse to Rufaer District in Mamberamo Raya Regency reached approximately Rp200 million. The largest expenditure involved distribution from Fona Village to individual polling stations, which alone cost nearly Rp100 million because the logistics had to be transported by helicopter and then carried on foot to remote locations (KPU Provinsi Papua, 2025). Similarly, in Central Papua Province, logistics distribution during the regional election from the warehouse to the farthest district in Mimika Regency, namely Mimika Barat Jauh, required approximately Rp300 million in sea transportation costs (Dishub Mimika, 2023).

A similar situation can be observed in Highland Papua Province. In Jayawijaya Regency, logistics distribution to Trikora District required helicopter transportation, with rental costs exceeding Rp 30 million. The process also remained highly dependent on weather conditions (Amatus, 2024). Meanwhile, in South Papua Province, according to an official from KPU Provinsi Papua Selatan, logistics distribution from the regency capital to Ti Zain District cost approximately Rp 75 million using small boats.

This contrasts sharply with conditions in Central Java Province, where logistics costs are considerably lower due to better road infrastructure, fewer extreme geographical areas such as mountainous terrain and dense forests, and the absence of conflict-prone zones requiring expensive transportation modes such as aircraft, helicopters, or large sea vessels. For example, during the 2024 elections in Cilacap Regency, logistics distribution from the warehouse to Binangun Subdistrict using trucks cost approximately Rp 30 million, while in Demak Regency distribution from the warehouse to Wedung Subdistrict cost only around Rp 3 million (KPU Provinsi Jawa Tengah, 2023).

The logistics budget, which may reach hundreds of billions of rupiah for a single province in Papua, should therefore become a serious matter for public reflection. During the same fiscal year, several sectors may experience disruption because regional spending for public services and development becomes increasingly constrained. At the same time, local governments have also been instructed by the central government to improve budget efficiency (Purnamasari & Basyari, 2025). In this situation, local communities ultimately bear the consequences through reduced access to regional development programs, public services, and other strategic policies. If such funds were redirected toward education and healthcare infrastructure in underserved regions, the public could receive more meaningful democratic dividends rather than merely experiencing five-year electoral contests that frequently end in social conflict.

In addition to being a fiscal burden, horizontal conflict during regional elections has also become both a political residue and a tangible threat to the continuity of Indigenous communities in Papua. The collective and consensus-oriented structure of Papuan society, together with strong loyalty to tribal identity, often clashes with the competitive principle of direct democracy based on “one person, one vote.” When political competition becomes personalized through candidates associated with particular clans or regional identities, electoral defeat is no longer perceived merely as the loss of an individual candidate, but as a loss of dignity for the wider community group.

Table 2.
Local Election Conflicts in Papua (2017–2024)

Year/Location	Type of Incident	Impact	Conflict Triggers
2024 - Puncak Jaya	Clashes between supporters of rival candidate pairs.	Twelve people were killed, 658 injured, 201 buildings set on fire due to clashes between supporters of the candidate pairs.	Tension during the vote recapitulation process at the district level.
2024 - Mamberamo Tengah Region	Riots among supporters.	Resulting in injuries to one of the victims, the Mamberamo Tengah Police Chief, who was hit by an arrow.	The presence of the Acting Regent of Central Mamberamo sparked anger during the vote recapitulation process at the district level.
2024 - Tolikara Region	Clashes between supporters who attacked each other using machetes, stones and arrows.	Escalating tensions in the regency capital and causing injuries and destruction of public facilities.	Tension during the vote recapitulation process at the district level.
2024 - Lanny Jaya Region	Clashes between supporters	Up to 114 buildings and vehicles were burned and around 557 residents, particularly non-local residents,	Tension during the vote recapitulation process at the district level.

Year/Location	Type of Incident	Impact	Conflict Triggers
		sought refuge at a TNI-Polri post.	
2024 – Intan Jaya Region	Two groups of supporters of the Pilkada candidate pairs clashed with each other	Resulting in injuries and burning of residents' kiosks.	One of the candidate pairs did not accept the vote count results.
2024 – Jayapura City	Riots between supporters of the Jayapura mayoral candidate	Hotel windows were damaged.	Tension during the vote recapitulation process at the city level.
2024 – Paniai Region	A witness of one candidate pair threw a chair at a member of the Paniai KPU.	Chaos during the vote recapitulation plenary session.	Tension during the vote recapitulation process at the district level.
2020 – Asmat Region	A number of people carried out acts of vandalism at the Regent's office, the Regent's official residence, the KPU, and Bawaslu buildings.	Damage and looting.	Disappointed with the election results.
2020 - Yalimo	Mass riots following the Constitutional Court's decision	Destruction of infrastructure, burning of houses and government offices.	Mass dissatisfaction with the disqualification of the candidate pair by the Constitutional Court.
2017 - Intan Jaya and Puncak Jaya	Dispute over results and clashes between residents	There were casualties, persecution, and burning of buildings.	Alleged misuse of the <i>noken</i> system and the lack of neutrality of the organizers.

Year/Location	Type of Incident	Impact	Conflict Triggers
2017 – Tolikara Region	Dispute over results and clashes between supporters	Up to 11 deaths, 201 injuries, and the burning of 21 houses and office facilities.	Not accepting the results of the regional elections.

Source: compiled from various reports and media sources.

Viewed through the broader pattern of electoral conflict in Papua, highland regions such as Highland Papua Province (La Pago) and Central Papua Province (Mee Pago) have frequently experienced violence resulting in deaths, injuries, and the destruction of public facilities. From a sociocultural perspective, highland communities are generally characterized as socially integrated and relatively homogeneous, with strong emphasis on collective solidarity and kinship ties (Partnership for Governance Reform, 2012, p. 46).

The Big Man leadership system remains one of the dominant traditional political structures within the customary territories of La Pago and Mee Pago. Under this system, clan leaders possess the capacity to mobilize ethnic sentiment and distribute or redistribute their “wealth” to clan members in order to build and maintain political patronage networks (Sudira et al., 2020). In the context of regional elections, Big Man figures often mobilize communities to support particular political candidates. Problems emerge when the candidate being supported (or the Big Man figure himself) rejects the election results and perceives the process as fraudulent. As noted by Nugroho (2022), supporters may be willing to sacrifice everything in pursuit of what they perceive as justice and electoral victory because the contest is closely tied to tribal dignity and kinship identity.

Such a dynamic was visible during the 2024 regional election in Intan Jaya Regency, where clashes erupted between supporters of candidate pair number 1, Aner Maisini–Elias Igapa, and supporters of candidate pair number 3, Apolos Bagau–Tetairus Widigipa. According to Mujiono (2024), the violence involved supporters chasing one another with arrows and machetes following suspicions that votes had been lost or diverted to rival candidates.

Apart from the violence, these conflicts demonstrate how direct elections conducted within socially vulnerable environments may generate profound instability and substantial social costs. Although difficult to quantify, the risks are clearly tangible. According to a report by Komnas HAM Papua, armed conflict throughout 2025 resulted in 132 deaths, including civilians and members of armed groups. Of these fatalities, 77 were civilians and 40 were members of armed criminal groups (*Kelompok Kriminal Bersenjata* or KKB). Areas identified as particularly vulnerable included Yahukimo, Intan Jaya, Puncak Jaya, and Pegunungan Bintang (Katingka, 2025). Although these incidents were not directly related to elections or regional elections, they

illustrate the fragility of security conditions in regions simultaneously tasked with implementing national political agendas. For election organizers in Papua, the challenge therefore extends beyond physical and logistical burdens to include persistent security pressures and personal safety threats.

Indirect Elections as an Instrument for Sociocultural Stability

Indirect elections conducted through local legislatures (DPRD) are positioned as a risk-mitigation strategy aimed at shifting the arena of political contestation from open mass confrontation to a more controlled space of representative deliberation. A similar view was previously expressed by former Papua Governor Lukas Enembe, who argued that direct elections were not well suited to Papua because Papuan society is strongly communal and rooted in kinship-based social structures. According to Enembe, direct elections tend to cause conflict in such sociocultural context (Rastika, 2014).

Regarding the underlying causes of instability in Papua, an interview with a Papuan election observer and former member of KPU Provinsi Papua for the 2018–2023 period revealed that conflicts arising from general elections and regional elections are often driven by intense political competition and tend to repeat over time. Residual tensions from previous electoral periods frequently remain unresolved and resurface whenever a new contest begins. In this context, local political elites play a particularly significant role. Within Papua's highly diverse tribal and cultural landscape, social relations are generally structured around hierarchical relationships between leaders and followers. As argued by Mansoben (1995, p. 13), social and political behavior is shaped by power relations, which form an important basis for understanding how social order is maintained.

Cooperation among political elites is thus expected to contribute to political stability. This aligns with Lijphart's (1997) theory of consociational democracy, which argues that in sharply fragmented societies, political stability is more effectively achieved through elite cooperation than through open competition at the mass level. By minimizing friction at the grassroots level, elite cooperation may help reduce tensions within highly competitive political contests. Problems arising during both general elections and regional elections, as noted by a commissioner of KPU Provinsi Papua for the 2023–2028 period, indicate that political resentment continues to persist and may trigger further conflict. In plural societies, primordial ties may deepen social divisions and make conflict resolution more difficult (Haryanto, 2017, p. 72).

In addition, the Papuan election observer noted that political education for the public has not yet been delivered optimally. Political understanding also includes understanding the potential for conflict. Political education is intended to encourage citizens to become politically aware and actively participate in political and development processes (Handoyo & Lestari, 2017). If political education is properly understood and internalized by the

community, conflicts that may lead to fatalities, injuries, or destruction of public facilities can potentially be minimized. An official from KPU Provinsi Papua Tengah stated that political education during the implementation stages of elections and regional elections has not yet been supported by a sustainable long-term work program. Time allocation during electoral stages also remains limited and insufficient. At the same time, Central Papua Province is still a newly established province, meaning that institutional infrastructure, including human resources capacity, remains limited amid the challenges of administering elections in a new autonomous region.

From a regulatory perspective, the recognition of Papuan cultural values through the use of the *noken* system in regional elections has been viewed as an effort to reduce conflict. In Constitutional Court Decision No. 47-81/PHPU.A-VII/2009 concerning an electoral dispute in Yahukimo Regency, the Constitutional Court acknowledged and respected the distinctive cultural values of Papuan communities in conducting elections through collective voting mechanisms, such as community consensus and acclamation. The Court expressed concern that imposing a uniform electoral model could potentially generate conflict and social division.

However, during the 2024 regional elections, conflicts continued to occur in several regencies within Highland Papua Province (La Pago) and Central Papua Province (Mee Pago), where the *noken* system is dominant. These areas include Jayawijaya, Lanny Jaya, Nduga, Tolikara, Central Mamberamo, Yahukimo, Puncak, Puncak Jaya, Intan Jaya, Deiyai, Dogiyai, and Paniai Regencies. Conflicts in several of these regions, including Lanny Jaya; Tolikara; Central Mamberamo; Puncak Jaya, and Intan Jaya, resulted in fatalities, injuries, and destruction of public facilities, as shown in Table 2.

Conflicts in areas implementing the *noken* system cannot be attributed solely to the system itself. Rather, they arise from a combination of intense political competition, communal social structures, weak electoral governance in remote regions, and the politicization of local elites. Fundamentally, the *noken* system represents a customary and deliberative democratic mechanism. However, when it intersects with highly competitive modern electoral contestation, the potential for conflict increases significantly. In addition, the Big Man mechanism within the *noken* system tends to reinforce local oligarchic structures, resulting in unequal distribution of development benefits across communities (Yuwono et al., 2025).

Through an indirect regional election mechanism, popular sovereignty would continue to operate through representatives who had previously been elected in general elections. As argued by Sartori (1987), indirect elections may still be regarded as a derivative form of popular sovereignty as long as the electoral process remains transparent and accountable. This process should also reflect overall public aspirations. Deliberation among political factions representing different tribal groups within the DPRD is therefore expected to

produce more peaceful consensus-building than direct mass confrontation at polling stations or TPS, which are often vulnerable to provocation.

The indirect election model should not be interpreted as the elimination of the people's voice, but rather as a reorganization of how public aspirations are channeled so that electoral mechanisms better align with Papua's sociocultural realities. As Sugandi (2024, p. 4) argues, social and cultural realities are not "constructed" but "discovered." Through its special autonomy status, Papua has room for asymmetric political arrangements. As explained by Pratikno (as cited in Pasalli, 2023, p. 61), special autonomy constitutes a strategic policy option for preserving national unity while maintaining the distinctive characteristics of each region, allowing social and political problems to be resolved peacefully through collective agreement among the relevant parties.

In proposing an indirect election model that remains aligned with Papua's sociocultural context, the strategic role of the Papuan People's Assembly (Majelis Rakyat Papua or MRP) becomes particularly important. Under Article 1 of Law No. 2 of 2021 on the Second Amendment to Law No. 21 of 2001 on Special Autonomy for Papua Province, the MRP functions as a cultural representative institution for Indigenous Papuans and possesses authority related to the protection of Indigenous Papuan rights. The MRP provides consideration and approval regarding prospective candidates for governor and deputy governor submitted by the KPU, particularly in verifying their status as Indigenous Papuans. This role requires careful attention to ensure that it does not become a new source of conflict. During the 2024 regional election in Southwest Papua Province, for example, demonstrations were organized by several community groups because the KPU was perceived as failing to implement the MRP's recommendations, considerations, and approvals. The MRP regarded this as an affront to its institutional dignity and authority (Kogoya, 2025).

The MRP also acts as a representative institution of Indigenous communities by conducting strict verification of candidates' customary integrity and Indigenous identity before their names are submitted to the DPRD. A member of the MRP for the 2023–2028 period stated that the MRP's role in direct regional elections is not comprehensively regulated under the Regional Election Law. Instead, its authority is primarily regulated under the Special Autonomy Law, particularly concerning consideration and approval related to the authenticity of Indigenous Papuan identity. In addition, the MRP is involved in political recruitment processes conducted by political parties under Article 28 of Law No. 2 of 2021, which states that political parties may request consideration and/or consultation from the MRP in political selection and recruitment processes. In practice, however, political parties rarely involve the MRP through formal consultation or consideration during direct regional elections because the provision merely states that parties "may" consult the

MRP and does not provide any legal sanctions for noncompliance. Consequently, following Constitutional Court Decision No. 135/PUU-XXII/2024, there is growing momentum to strengthen the role of the MRP in protecting the rights of Indigenous Papuans while helping reduce social tensions and horizontal conflict.

The DPRD also plays an important role as a holder of the people's mandate, both at the provincial and regency/municipal levels, through its authority to elect regional heads. Affirmative policies concerning appointed seats in the Papuan Provincial House of Representatives (Dewan Perwakilan Rakyat Papua or DPRP) and the Papuan Regency/Municipal House of Representatives (Dewan Perwakilan Rakyat Kabupaten/Kota or DPRK), as regulated under Articles 6 and 6A of Law No. 2 of 2021, provide formal representation for Indigenous Papuans within representative institutions. According to Safiudin (2022, p. 132), citing Nelwan, Nandang, and Rahman (2020), this arrangement represents one effort to strengthen local democracy, particularly in relation to public deliberation and the formulation of regional regulations. The current composition of DPRD in Papua, which includes appointed seats reserved for Indigenous Papuans, provides assurance that customary voices remain represented within parliamentary-based regional head election mechanisms.

Assessing Legitimacy and Popular Sovereignty in Indirect Elections

Skepticism toward indirect elections often stems from concerns about decline in the quality of democracy. However, popular sovereignty should not be understood merely as the physical act of casting a ballot. Article 18 paragraph (4) of the 1945 Constitution stipulates that regional heads must be elected democratically. The Constitutional Court has interpreted this provision to mean that both direct and indirect elections, including those conducted through the DPRD, are constitutional as long as they uphold democratic principles (Johan, 2021, pp. 86–87).

There is a more substantial conception of sovereignty: the people remain the sovereigns, but their aspirations are safely channeled through skilled leaders who can minimize post-electoral social tensions and trauma. Referring to Arend Lijphart's consociationalism theory (1997), discourse on indirect elections through the DPRD may be understood as an effort to build broad coalitions among representative elites at the regional level in order to reduce the horizontal conflicts that frequently emerge within majoritarian direct-election systems. Nevertheless, to prevent sovereignty from being reduced to mere elite bargaining among political parties, the DPR as the legislative body must ensure meaningful public participation mechanisms within the selection process.

An indirect election mechanism must also continue to uphold the principles of proportionality and local representation, including the

involvement of customary leaders and community figures, as reflected in Lijphart's (1997) pillar of segmental autonomy. Through broad public participation in the formulation of technical regulations, parliamentary mechanisms within the DPRD should not necessarily be viewed as democratic regression, but rather as a transformative instrument for achieving sociocultural stability.

In the Papuan context, the role of Indigenous institutions and actors, such as the MRP; customary institutions; and Papuan community leaders, needs to be strengthened further. Their involvement should extend beyond merely verifying Indigenous Papuan identity. They should also play an active role in maintaining social harmony and accommodating the diverse aspirations of communities within autonomous regions.

To avoid repeating these conflicts, an electoral system which is sensitive to the country's local socio-cultural conditions is key. A more stable electoral system may also be understood as an effort to protect the "right to life" and the "right to security," both of which constitute fundamental human rights that must be safeguarded before political rights can be meaningfully exercised. In principle, democratic elections should enable citizens to exercise their sovereignty in determining the future direction of their region. In practice, however, repeated electoral conflict may instead generate collective social trauma and gradually weaken public trust in democracy itself.

The 2020 regional election in Yalimo Regency provides a clear example of these challenges. The voting process had to be repeated three times and was estimated to cost approximately Rp100–115 billion. The Yalimo case illustrates how local political contestation in regions with communal social structures can generate far-reaching consequences, including social conflict and collective trauma toward democratic processes (Affan, 2021).

The legitimacy of regional heads elected through the DPRD would no longer rest primarily on the quantity of votes cast at polling stations. Instead, this legitimacy would depend more heavily on the quality of deliberative participation throughout the screening and selection process. In line with Gutmann and Thompson's theory of deliberative democracy (2004), policy legitimacy in a representative system depends significantly on reason-giving, namely a transparent exchange of arguments and justifications between political elites and the public.

In the Papuan context, this mechanism may be realized through widespread public consultation and hearings involving customary institutions. The role of the MRP thus becomes crucial as a sociocultural anchor of accountability capable of rigorously evaluating candidates' track records. Such an approach shifts the meaning of participation away from mass mobilization, which is often vulnerable to conflict escalation, toward more substantive forms of engagement that ensure elected candidates possess tested moral and cultural integrity. This approach is consistent with the

principles of consociational democracy, which emphasize consensus-building among social groups (Lijphart, 1977). The DPR, as the legislative body, must also formulate regulations carefully so that the perception that indirect elections merely serve elite interests can be challenged. In this way, democratic legitimacy may still be preserved because elected leaders would emerge through consensus among legitimately elected representatives while also obtaining cultural legitimacy through the presence of Indigenous Papuan representatives.

According to Norris (2014), legitimacy can be assessed through several indicators. The first is satisfaction with democracy. If indirect elections can improve budget efficiency and allow public funds previously allocated for elections to be redirected toward regional development, particularly public services such as healthcare and education, public satisfaction with democratic performance may increase.

The second indicator is confidence in political institutions, including trust in government, parliament, and political parties. An indirect election model that prioritizes sociocultural stability may strengthen public trust in local institutions. By reducing grassroots tensions, political institutions are less likely to be perceived as sources of division and may instead be regarded as guardians of social harmony.

The third indicator concerns perceptions of human rights performance. Indirect elections may strengthen local systems of social and customary representation, thereby increasing public legitimacy.

The fourth indicator is voluntary obedience to law. If the transition toward indirect elections can reduce the potential for physical confrontation and improve social stability, political legitimacy may also be strengthened through the creation of a more stable social environment.

Nevertheless, several community figures have argued that indirect elections should be implemented asymmetrically only in certain parts of Papua, particularly in Highland Papua or the La Pago customary territory and Central Papua or the Mee Pago customary territory. Based on the historical implementation of direct elections, the Tabi customary territory, which includes Jayapura City; Jayapura Regency; Keerom; Sarmi; and Mamberamo Raya, as well as the Saireri customary territory, which includes Biak Numfor; Supiori; the Yapen Islands; and Waropen, have not experienced major electoral conflicts resulting in fatalities.

These sociocultural differences in the context of regional elections may be understood through leadership typologies. In the Tabi and Saireri customary territories, where hereditary leadership systems are more prevalent, power structures tend to be hierarchical and relatively stable. By contrast, the Big Man system predominates in the La Pago and Mee Pago customary territories, where political competition is highly personalized and closely tied to the collective honor and dignity of clans, thereby increasing the

potential for physical conflict (Sahlins, 1963, pp. 288–290; Anderson, 2015, pp. 4–5).

In contrast, the Big Man system in the Anim Ha customary territory, differs from that found in the central highlands. Conflict resolution mechanisms in Anim Ha tend to be more moderate and comparatively more peaceful than those commonly observed in the central mountainous regions of Papua (Aziz, 2024).

CONCLUSION

Based on a comprehensive analysis of electoral dynamics in Papua, this study concludes that the current direct election system remains vulnerable to sociocultural instability and may undermine the sustainability of special autonomy. The substantial fiscal burden imposed by regional elections, particularly the high logistical costs, combined with security risks that have resulted in dozens of deaths and the destruction of public infrastructure, demonstrates that competitive liberal-democratic mechanisms are difficult to be fully adapted within Papua's unique and fragmented Indigenous social structures.

Constitutional Court Decision No. 135/PUU-XXII/2024 provides an important legal momentum for reorganizing electoral governance in Papua. By mandating the separation of national and local elections to reduce the burden of election administration, the legislature now possesses both moral and legal grounds to move toward a more asymmetric electoral model. Indirect regional head elections conducted through the DPRD, when integrated with the verification and approval authority of the MRP, may offer a practical mechanism for reducing horizontal conflict without denying the fundamental rights of Indigenous Papuans.

This indirect election model offers not only the possibility of significant state budget efficiency, but also broader opportunities for more collaborative leadership grounded in customary consensus. At the same time, some perspectives argue that indirect elections should be implemented asymmetrically only in certain regions of Papua, particularly within the La Pago and Mee Pago customary territories. This study therefore recommends that the government and the DPR immediately formulate an indirect election policy for Papua as a long-term risk mitigation instrument. Through such a framework, the sovereignty of the Papuan people may be realized in a more meaningful form through an electoral process that is safer, more efficient, and capable of producing leaders with dual legitimacy, both political and cultural, for a more peaceful and prosperous future for Papua.

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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