

## **POLITICAL CARTELIZATION IN THE EMERGING DISCOURSE ON INDIRECT ELECTIONS**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This study examines indications of political cartelization in the emerging discourse on indirect elections in Indonesia using the cartel party model as its analytical lens. The study employs a qualitative approach through a literature review of conceptual works on cartel parties, empirical studies on political cartelization in Indonesia, and public discourse on indirect elections. The findings reveal three main arguments. First, cartelization has already appeared in direct elections through the formation of oversized coalitions that narrow political competition and reduce political alternatives. Indirect elections may intensify this tendency by shifting competition into parliamentary arenas with limited public oversight. Second, direct elections continue to function as a corrective democratic mechanism through which voters may reject candidates supported by cartel-based political arrangements. This form of public control would likely diminish under an indirect electoral system. Third, the fiscal-efficiency argument commonly used to justify indirect elections warrants closer scrutiny. The study finds that the costs of direct elections remain proportionate to the state budget while also generating significant economic multiplier effects at the local level. Rather than reducing political costs, indirect elections may instead shift open electoral spending into closed-door political transactions among political cartels in parliament.

**Keywords: political cartelization, cartel party, election mechanisms**

### **INTRODUCTION**

The collapse of the New Order political structure in 1998 not only marked a regime change, but also became a pivotal moment in Indonesia's electoral democratization. Triggered by the monetary crisis, the 1998 Reform movement ("*Reformasi*") emerged as a direct response to the accumulation of structural failures under the New Order regime, which for three decades had suppressed civil liberties and concentrated power within a narrow political elite. Public demands included the removal of military influence from politics through the abolition of the Dual Function of the Indonesian Armed Forces ("*Dwifungsi ABRI*") doctrine in order to uphold civilian supremacy. At the same time, the public pushed for the removal of press restrictions to ensure transparency and accountability in state governance. Demands to eradicate corruption, collusion, and nepotism likewise became increasingly urgent, as these practices were widely seen as a major cause of the national economic collapse. Mounting pressure surrounding these agendas forced the transitional government to undertake drastic democratic reforms, including guarantees of freedom of association for citizens (Crouch, 2010, pp. 15–21).

This democratization process, especially the guarantee of freedom of association, was reinforced by a party restructuring agenda aimed at restoring the political linkage between the state and society that had been severed for nearly three decades. Through the Reformasi movement, political parties regained their representative role as channels for articulating public aspirations. Public enthusiasm surrounding the 1999 election increased significantly, reflected not only in voter participation but also in the large number of participating political parties. Voter turnout reached 92.2%, one of the highest levels in the history of Indonesian elections (Surbakti, 2019). The democratic optimism of the period was also evident in the participation of 48 political parties in the 1999 election, signaling the restoration of freedom of association after decades of restriction under the rigid three-party system (Ulum, 2019, p. 32).

Drawing on the analysis of Hadiz and Robison (2017), the 1999 election was not merely an electoral procedure, but also part of a broader effort to dismantle authoritarian structures that had long shaped Indonesia's political order. This transformation shifted political practices from a state-controlled administrative process into a more open arena of political competition, in which political parties became the primary actors in the contest for power (Hadiz & Robison, 2017, pp. 492–493).

The 2004 election further strengthened Indonesia's process of electoral democratization through the introduction of direct presidential and vice-presidential elections. At the time, direct presidential elections were widely regarded as a historic milestone, not only because they allowed citizens to choose their leaders directly for the first time, but also because they served as an instrument of control by requiring presidential and vice-presidential candidates to articulate specific responses to major public issues such as poverty, healthcare, and unemployment (Cipto, 2004, pp. 38–44).

In this regard, direct elections transformed the position of the people from mere instruments of political mobilization into the central political subjects whose aspirations had to be understood and represented. This shift became an important mechanism for strengthening political accountability, as the legitimacy of political leaders increasingly rested on popular will rather than closed negotiations among political elites in the legislature.

Electoral democratization did not stop there. A year later, in 2005, under the spirit of decentralization embodied in Law No. 32 of 2004 on Regional Government, Indonesia began to experiment with direct regional head elections (*Pilkada*), which were held across 7 (seven) provinces, 174 regencies, and 32 municipalities. In its report, the National Legal Development Agency (BPHN) of the Indonesian Ministry of Law and Human Rights stated that the implementation of direct *Pilkada* was driven by several considerations. First, it was viewed as a reflection of the successful implementation of the 2004 direct presidential election. Second, it represented the fulfillment of

Reformasi's political promise by transferring the mechanism for electing regional heads from the Regional House of Representatives (Dewan Perwakilan Rakyat Daerah or DPRD) to the people directly. Third, it was regarded as a democratic means of selecting regional leaders after decades under the New Order regime, during which citizens were denied the opportunity to determine their own leaders (BPHN Ministry of Law and Human Rights of the Republic of Indonesia, 2009, pp. 5–7).

However, alongside this process of electoral democratization, a new political phenomenon also emerged: the formation of political party “coalitions.” Their early institutional foundation can, to some extent, be traced to Article 6A paragraph (2) of the 1945 Constitution, which states that “pairs of candidates for President and Vice President shall be nominated by political parties or coalitions of political parties participating in the general election prior to the election.” This provision later became closely associated with the presidential nomination threshold for presidential and vice-presidential candidates. In electoral contestation, party coalitions also became a common strategy for increasing electoral viability through cross-party alliances, particularly within Indonesia's multiparty presidential system.

Isnaini (2020) traces the development of political party coalitions in Indonesia following the 1999 election. During the early Reformasi period under President Abdurrahman Wahid, coalitions remained highly fluid and unstable. At the time, coalition politics largely reflected pragmatic arrangements for cabinet positions, commonly described as *politik dagang sapi*, or transactional bargaining politics. The impeachment of Gus Dur exposed the fragility of coalition politics in parliament. Although the president derived legitimacy through a legislative mandate, the absence of a disciplined parliamentary coalition left the executive highly vulnerable to both impeachment and policy obstruction.

This experience became an important lesson for subsequent administrations: coalitions had to be managed more systematically. During the 2004–2014 period under President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, coalition politics gradually became more institutionalized in an effort to overcome legislative deadlock. The establishment of formal bodies such as the Joint Secretariat (*Sekretariat Gabungan*) reflected efforts to maintain coalition-party loyalty. Coalitions were no longer formed solely for electoral purposes, but were maintained throughout the presidential term to ensure that government policies would not be blocked in parliament. It was also during this period that the practice of building oversized coalitions became increasingly prominent as a strategy for neutralizing political opposition (Isnaini, 2020: 93–97).

Expectations for the emergence of a more balanced system of checks and balances briefly appeared during the first term of Joko Widodo's administration, marked by sharp polarization between the Great Indonesia Coalition (Koalisi Indonesia Hebat or KIH) as the governing coalition and the

Red and White Coalition (Koalisi Merah Putih or KMP) as the dominant opposition bloc in parliament. Over time, however, Indonesia's coalition pattern shifted toward a more inclusive "big tent" model, particularly during Jokowi's second term. This transformation was reflected in the inclusion of former political rivals in the cabinet following the election (Sagala, 2025, pp. 188–190).

The appointment of figures such as Prabowo Subianto, who had previously contested the presidential election as an opposition leader, was widely viewed as the culmination of the oversized coalition model, in which broad coalition-building created an almost unrestricted space for political lobbying and consensus between the executive and legislative branches. On the one hand, oversized coalitions may be understood as efforts to maintain political stability and facilitate policymaking. On the other hand, they may also generate negative externalities by weakening parliament's role as a mechanism of political oversight. This pattern of oversized coalition-building continued through the 2024 election and its aftermath.

Max Lane (2025) offers a sharp critique of the negative externalities associated with oversized coalitions in Indonesia. He argues that the Advanced Indonesia Coalition Plus (*Koalisi Indonesia Maju Plus* or KIM Plus), which emerged following the 2024 election and has frequently been portrayed as a "permanent coalition," no longer functions as an ordinary political alliance. Consisting of 14 political parties, seven of which hold parliamentary seats, KIM Plus instead operates more like a political "cartel." Under this arrangement, political parties no longer compete ideologically through programmatic differentiation, but instead cooperate based on shared loyalty to the government's policy agenda.

This pattern is reflected in the political atmosphere that has developed under the KIM Plus coalition regime. Waves of protest against tax increases, budget-efficiency measures, deliberations surrounding the Indonesian National Armed Forces (Tentara Nasional Indonesia or TNI) Bill, which appeared to emerge abruptly, and various other policies attracted widespread criticism from extra-parliamentary actors, including students, civil society organizations, and social media activists. Yet these criticisms appeared to exert little influence on parliamentary decision-making. As a result, parliament increasingly projected an impression of near unanimity, with limited space for the diverse aspirations developing within the public sphere (Lane, 2025, pp. 3–9).

The challenge posed by the KIM Plus regime extends beyond socioeconomic issues to the strengthening of electoral politics that has developed since the Reformasi era, particularly through renewed discourse on returning the election of regional heads to the DPRD, commonly referred to as an indirect election mechanism.

The agenda-setting process surrounding indirect elections had already begun in December 2024, when the Deputy Chair of Commission II of the DPR from the Great Indonesia Movement Party (Partai Gerakan Indonesia Raya or Gerindra) faction stated that the idea of electing regional heads through the DPRD should be reconsidered as a solution to the high political costs and widespread money politics associated with regional elections, particularly in discussions concerning revisions to Regional Election Law (Wiryo, 2024).

The discourse on indirect elections has also been expressed openly in public forums and has involved central political figures within the governing coalition. For example, during the 27th anniversary celebration of the National Awakening Party (Partai Kebangkitan Bangsa or PKB) in July 2025, the party's chairperson emphasized the need to reform the national political system, including through an evaluation of regional head elections, which were considered excessively costly (Ulum, 2025).

The discourse did not stop there. During the 61st anniversary celebration of the Golkar Party (Partai Golongan Karya) in December 2025, the party chairperson directly proposed before the President that regional heads should be elected by the DPRD, once again citing the high financial cost of elections as the primary justification. The proposal received an immediate response from the President, who stated that he would invite political forces to formulate a democratic solution for regional elections that would avoid excessive public spending (Ulya, 2025).

Golkar appears to have played the most prominent role in advancing the discourse on indirect elections. This is evident not only from statements made by the party chairperson, but also from remarks delivered separately by the party's deputy chairperson. On another occasion, he rejected public criticism by arguing that indirect elections were not merely a matter of political pragmatism, but also concerned state ideology and national philosophy, particularly the principle that people's sovereignty should be exercised through deliberation and representation, as envisioned by the nation's founders (Rahmawati, 2026). In addition to Gerindra, PKB, and Golkar, other parliamentary parties within the KIM Plus coalition, such as the Democratic Party and the National Mandate Party (*Partai Amanat Nasional* or PAN), also expressed support for indirect elections (Nusrat, 2026). The arguments advanced by coalition figures were broadly similar, emphasizing budget efficiency, representative democracy, and electoral integrity through the reduction of money politics.

Although the discourse surrounding indirect elections has continued to gain momentum, it has also attracted criticism. Indonesian Corruption Watch (ICW) argues that the proposal lacks a convincing rationale and reflects a troubling political logic. According to ICW, the government has never presented a comprehensive study explaining how the DPRD would be capable of producing qualified regional leaders under an indirect election system.

These concerns are particularly significant given Indonesia's negative historical experience with indirect elections during the New Order era, as well as the vulnerability of DPRD members themselves to corrupt practices. In this regard, indirect elections may in fact expand opportunities for political transactions that remain hidden from public oversight rather than reduce them (ICW, 2025).

Criticism has also come from research institutions such as the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) Indonesia. According to CSIS Indonesia, indirect elections risk reinforcing political oligarchy because the selection of regional heads would take place behind closed doors and be determined by a small circle of party elites (Nastitie, 2024). These criticisms appear broadly representative, particularly in light of a Kompas Research and Development survey showing that 77.3% of respondents considered direct elections, in which citizens directly choose their leaders, to be the most appropriate system for regional head elections (*Pilkada*) (Akbar, 2026).

The various dynamics outlined above, from the early spirit of direct elections as part of the Reformasi mandate to the emerging discourse surrounding indirect elections, indicate a fundamental shift in the behavior of political actors in Indonesia. The emergence of oversized coalitions and controversial efforts to alter electoral procedures should not be viewed as isolated developments, but rather as reflections of how political parties adapt to preserve stability and maintain their political survival within a competitive multiparty system.

This shift requires a broader analytical framework to assess whether these patterns of consolidation reflect an institutional evolution in which political parties have become increasingly integrated with the structure of the state. To examine this phenomenon more systematically, it is necessary to revisit the conceptualization of the cartel party model. This concept offers a framework for understanding how political parties tend to collaborate collectively in order to mitigate the risks of political contestation and secure access to power. Accordingly, the cartel party model serves as the primary analytical lens for examining the extent to which cartelization operates within the evolving dynamics of Indonesia's electoral system.

Classical theories of political parties initially emphasized that political parties are essential instruments of democracy because they provide citizens with access to the state through electoral mechanisms. Particularly within newly democratizing states, political parties function as intermediary actors seeking public support in order to gain access to political power. Political parties are central to this process because they mediate various forms of linkage between society and the state, including resource allocation, political education, and, most importantly, electoral participation and mobilization (Pridham, 2005, pp. 145–147).

As Huntington argues (as cited in Fionna, 2010, p. 75), elections constitute the backbone of democracy, which requires the presence of political parties that function effectively and play a full role within a democratic system. Since political parties are considered a crucial precondition for democracy, and because their institutionalization is understood to originate from civil society in order to compete in elections, gain access to state resources, and shape public policy in accordance with the long-term interests of their constituencies, political parties are generally understood through their relationship with civil society. This understanding is closely associated with the mass party model (Katz & Mair, 1995, pp. 5–8).

It is precisely this model that Richard S. Katz and Peter Mair (1995) challenge as the sole framework for understanding political parties. Over time, the growing ability of dominant political parties to access state resources, combined with declining levels of public participation in party activities, where citizens increasingly prefer to engage in political arenas in which they perceive their influence to be more meaningful, gave rise to a new party model known as the cartel party model (Katz & Mair, 1995, pp. 15–16).

Within the cartel party model, political parties no longer rely primarily on traditional ties with their mass base through active participation or membership dues. Instead, they increasingly depend on state resources and gradually become integrated into the structure of the state itself. As a result, the defining characteristic of the cartel party model lies in the interpenetration between party and state. Within this arrangement, governing parties function collectively as a “cartel” by using state authority to shape rules that serve their shared interests, including public subsidies for political financing, restrictions on media access for new challengers, and the imposition of high electoral thresholds.

The primary objective of this arrangement is to minimize the risk of electoral defeat and ensure that, regardless of which party wins an election, the collective interests of cartelized parties remain protected. From the perspective of the cartel party theory, democracy is therefore no longer understood primarily as a mechanism through which citizens control the state based on ideological interests mediated by political parties. Instead, political parties increasingly collude to manage and stabilize themselves through resources provided by the state. As a consequence, interparty competition becomes increasingly limited because political parties ultimately share a common interest in preserving the status quo of access to state resources rather than competing on ideological grounds (Katz & Mair, 1995, pp. 15–20).

Dan Slater (2018) identifies this cartel-party phenomenon in his analysis of political party consolidation in Indonesia, particularly since the 2004 presidential election. According to Slater, the absence of a consistent opposition force in Indonesian politics over the past two decades is somewhat surprising, especially because the structural barriers that often hinder the

emergence of opposition parties, such as the dominance of a single ruling party or strict barriers to party formation commonly found in several European democracies, are largely absent in Indonesia. Indonesia has no dominant party and offers a wide range of political party choices, yet none of these parties has consistently positioned itself as a genuine opposition force.

This condition is more or less influenced by the pattern of power-sharing that characterizes party consolidation in Indonesia. Oversized coalitions are viewed not as a burden, but as a source of political strength. Within Indonesia's political landscape, oversized coalitions function as a mechanism through which ruling parties distribute access to state resources among coalition partners, thereby ensuring that collective access to power remains secure. This is what Slater refers to as "party cartelization, Indonesian-style" (Slater, 2018, pp. 42–43).

Cartelization does not occur only at the level of national political constellations and interests, but is also replicated at the regional level. During the 2024 simultaneous regional elections, for example, Burhanuddin Muhtadi (2024) observed that the declining number of candidates competing for top executive positions at the provincial and regency or municipal levels, combined with the increasing number of single-candidate elections featuring an empty-ballot option, popularly referred to as "empty-box" elections, signaled that cartel politics had penetrated local political dynamics.

The root of the problem lies in the reluctance of many parties within the governing coalition to nominate their own cadres. Instead, they chose to support candidates promoted by the party cartel in exchange for securing strategic positions within the national government structure. It is therefore unsurprising that the 2024 simultaneous elections lacked a strong sense of political competition. Political coalitions that had crystallized into cartels following the presidential election had already begun restricting electoral competition even before the regional elections took place (Muhtadi, 2024, pp. 3–11).

Over time, political cartelization has evolved beyond elite collusion aimed merely at reducing political rivalry within direct electoral competition. More fundamentally, it has extended into efforts to eliminate electoral competition altogether and replace it with parliamentary lobbying through indirect election mechanisms. From this perspective, the cartel party model provides an analytical framework for understanding that the tension between direct and indirect election mechanisms is not merely a matter of procedural efficiency, but also reflects the collective adaptation of political parties seeking to secure continued access to power.

Unlike the studies of Slater (2018) and Muhtadi (2024), which primarily examine the existence and effects of cartelization at the macro level in presidential and regional elections, this study offers a different contribution by comparatively analyzing electoral mechanisms as a key variable.

Accordingly, this conceptual review serves as an important foundation for assessing whether electoral procedures are capable of reducing cartelization practices in Indonesia or, instead, institutionalizing them.

## **RESEARCH METHOD**

This study employs a literature review method which, as defined by Creswell (2014, pp. 30–33), focuses on the in-depth description of phenomena through the analysis of secondary data without direct engagement with research subjects in the field. By excluding surveys, interviews, and direct observation, this study relies entirely on literature-based analysis. This approach was chosen because of its effectiveness in synthesizing theories and findings from credible sources, thereby enabling the development of a coherent argumentative framework and comprehensive analytical interpretation.

The data used in this study are grouped into three main clusters:

1. **Conceptual Literature Cluster.** This cluster serves as the conceptual foundation for understanding political cartelization at the macro level. The primary reference within this cluster is the cartel party thesis developed by Richard S. Katz and Peter Mair (1995), which examines the transformation of political parties from mass-based representation toward increasing interpenetration with the state.
2. **Empirical Studies on Indonesian Politics Cluster.** This cluster is used to contextualize global concepts of cartelization within Indonesia's national political dynamics. Key references include Kuskridho Ambardi's dissertation (2008) on "collective survival," which explains patterns of interparty collusion in Indonesia aimed at maintaining mutual political survival; Dan Slater (2018), who identifies Indonesia's oversized coalition phenomenon as a strategy for distributing resources in order to preserve access to power; and Burhanuddin Muhtadi (2024), who observes that the declining number of candidates and the rise of "empty-box" elections signal the expansion of political cartelization into local electoral politics. This cluster also includes various other relevant and credible sources concerning contemporary political dynamics in Indonesia.
3. **Documentary and Media Data Cluster.** To capture recent political developments, this study uses curated news sources from credible national media outlets, such as *Kompas*, *Detik*, and official government websites, particularly those documenting statements made by key political actors regarding the discourse on indirect elections.

In addition to examining secondary data on political cartelization and the discourse surrounding indirect elections, this study also draws upon empirical research related to fiscal financing and state effectiveness in order to evaluate efficiency-based claims that are frequently used to justify proposals for indirect elections. In this regard, the concept of "new public

service” developed by Denhardt and Denhardt (2000) provides an important analytical reference.

Data collection was conducted through a systematic search of academic databases, including Google Scholar, JSTOR, and ResearchGate, using the keywords “political cartelization in Indonesia,” “cartel party,” and “indirect elections.” The selected materials consisted primarily of literature published within the last 20 years, with the exception of classical theoretical works, as well as news articles from credible media outlets to ensure information validity.

Beyond data collection, this study employs dialectical analysis as its primary analytical approach. This method enables the study to map competing arguments by positioning the discourse on indirect elections as the “thesis,” representing the interests of political cartel stability, while direct elections are positioned as the “antithesis,” representing demands for public accountability. Through this dialectical process, various perspectives and findings from previous empirical studies are integrated in order to identify the most rational “synthesis” or resolution (Falah et al., 2022, pp. 149–151).

For analytical purposes, the study applies three stages of data processing:

1. Data reduction. Selecting and filtering literature relevant to political cartelization and the discourse surrounding indirect election mechanisms.
2. Data triangulation. Comparing and examining competing arguments regarding political cartelization and the discourse advanced by political actors concerning indirect elections.
3. Conclusion drawing. Synthesizing the findings to assess whether the discourse on indirect elections reflects a genuine technocratic necessity or merely a strategy for securing access to political and material resources by cartelized parties.

By combining literature review as the primary data collection strategy with dialectical analysis as the method of interpretation, this study aims to produce a deeper and empirically grounded discussion. Ultimately, the study seeks to contribute to debates concerning the future of public sovereignty amid increasingly institutionalized political cartelization.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

From a juridical perspective, both direct and indirect electoral mechanisms possess a strong legal basis and remain constitutionally valid. Article 18 paragraph (4) of the 1945 Constitution states that governors, regents, and mayors, as heads of provincial, regency, and municipal governments, shall be elected democratically.

The term “democratically” has become the central source of interpretive contestation, generating differing preferences and political tensions regarding

which electoral mechanism should be implemented. For those who believe that regional head elections remain sufficiently democratic when delegated to the DPRD, the main argument is that DPRD members are themselves products of democratic elections and therefore represent the will of the people. From this perspective, the democratic element is considered adequately fulfilled through representative mechanisms. This logic was also articulated directly by President Prabowo Subianto, who stated on one occasion: “If the district DPRD and provincial DPRD have already been elected by the people, why not simply let them elect the governors and regents as well? Problem solved” (Ulya, 2025). The president’s position on this discourse is unsurprising, given that he represents the principal political figure of the KIM Plus coalition that initiated the renewed discourse on indirect elections.

In contrast, groups consisting primarily of academics and civil society actors argue that the democratic element can only be substantively fulfilled through direct elections. From this perspective, transferring the election of regional heads to the DPRD contradicts the spirit of Reformasi and reflects democratic regression. For these groups, democracy is not merely a matter of institutional procedure, but also requires direct public participation, transparency, and responsive political relations between citizens and their representatives.

Given that both perspectives on electoral mechanisms possess strong foundations, at least constitutionally, this article seeks to examine and contrast them dialectically by tracing the arguments underlying each position in order to identify the most rational synthesis. Because the analytical framework employed in this study is dialectical, the discussion requires both a thesis and an antithesis. This study positions the discourse on indirect elections as the thesis. The reasoning is that although direct elections were implemented first during the post-Reformasi era, within the current discursive conflict indirect elections function as the thesis because they are advanced as a proposition by dominant political parties that possess access to state power and policymaking authority.

Meanwhile, support for direct elections is positioned as the antithesis because it operates as a counterargument representing civil society’s demand for accountability. The principal points of argumentative conflict are: (1) how the thesis of indirect elections confronts the antithesis of direct elections in interpreting the democratic principle; and (2) how both positions construct their arguments regarding efficiency and money politics as the central roots of the dispute.

### *Political Cartelization in the Emerging Discourse on Indirect Elections*

Electoral democracy, particularly at the subnational level, is currently at a critical dialectical crossroads. On the one hand, the system of direct elections that emerged during the Reformasi era has experienced a gradual

erosion of democratic substance due to the widespread practices of patronage and money politics, especially vote buying, which remain difficult to trace and rarely receive serious legal enforcement. The root of the problem is not merely economic. While economically vulnerable citizens may rationally perceive vote selling as a source of immediate material benefit, the problem also stems from political actors and candidates who fail to offer convincing programs or build meaningful connections with their constituents. As a result, candidates, often through their campaign networks, increasingly rely on vote buying as a pragmatic strategy for winning electoral competition (Aspinall & Berenschot, 2019, pp. 97–98). Although electoral outcomes are not always proportional to the resources expended, such practices continue to generate long-term consequences for electoral integrity, both for political contestants and for voters.

Against this backdrop, it is unsurprising that proposals have emerged to return the authority for electing regional heads to parliament through indirect elections. Within this perspective, the “democratic” element is interpreted through arguments emphasizing budgetary efficiency, representative democracy, and the need to strengthen electoral integrity by reducing money politics.

First, from the perspective of fiscal efficiency, proponents of indirect elections argue that direct elections impose substantial financial burdens on the state. Electoral logistics, including the procurement of voting materials; administrative costs; honoraria for election officials; and security expenditures, are viewed as placing considerable pressure on public budgets that could otherwise be allocated to infrastructure development or social welfare programs. Within this logic, elections conducted through the DPRD are considered procedurally more efficient because they reduce the lengthy and costly electoral bureaucracy associated with direct elections by concentrating the process within representative institutions.

Second, from the standpoint of leadership quality and electoral integrity, supporters argue that the DPRD mechanism allows for more substantive candidate evaluation. Rather than relying primarily on popularity, DPRD members are positioned as “expert voters” capable of assessing candidates’ visions, programs, and qualifications in a more deliberative manner. Decisions produced through representative deliberation are therefore claimed to be more consistent with the principles embodied in the Fourth Principle of Pancasila, where strategic decisions are reached through deliberation and representation rather than through purely numerical competition at the ballot box.

Third, supporters of indirect elections contend that elections conducted through the DPRD could weaken the chain of vote buying at the mass level, which has long posed a serious threat to democratic integrity. With a smaller and more concentrated electorate, oversight by law enforcement institutions and the public over transactional political practices is considered more

manageable than monitoring millions of voters across thousands of polling stations. From this perspective, indirect elections are framed not as a democratic setback, but as a form of institutional engineering aimed at creating a more integrity-based democratic system.

However, these proposals must also be examined critically, particularly because the actors most actively promoting indirect elections are largely political elites within the ruling coalition who possess extensive access to state resources. For this reason, the discourse surrounding indirect elections can be interpreted not merely as an effort to institutionalize local electoral governance, but also as a process that raises concerns regarding the cartelization of electoral politics. At this point, the discourse on indirect elections finds its theoretical grounding in the cartel party model developed by Richard S. Katz and Peter Mair (1995). Within this framework, political parties no longer function primarily as channels for civil society aspirations. Instead, they increasingly transform into semi-state actors that prioritize organizational survival through access to public resources.

The push toward indirect elections may therefore be understood as an attempt by political parties to mitigate the risks of open electoral competition. By limiting contestation to the parliamentary arena, namely the DPRD, ruling coalitions effectively deepen the interpenetration between party and state in order to reduce the uncertainty commonly associated with direct elections. Accordingly, the discourse surrounding regional head election mechanisms in Indonesia should not be understood merely as a technical or procedural matter. It must also be examined as part of a broader process of political cartelization.

The symptoms of political cartelization in local electoral contestation have already become visible when viewed through empirical data on recent regional elections. These trends can be mapped through three main indicators: (1) the escalation of single-candidate contests, which may be interpreted as a barrier to entry resulting from political parties' reluctance to nominate their own cadres or alternative candidates in the 2015–2024 regional elections; (2) the pattern of political party support behind candidate pairs endorsed by KIM Plus; and (3) the victory rate achieved by KIM Plus in the 2024 regional elections. The following section presents data on the increasing trend of single-candidate contests in regional elections between 2015 and 2024.

**Table 1.**  
**Trend in the Escalation of Single Candidate Contests in Regional Elections (2015–2024)**

Year	Number of Elections	Number of Single Candidates	Percentage
2015	267	3	1.1
2017	101	9	8.9
2018	171	16	9.4
2020	270	25	9.3
2024	545	37	6.8

*Source: compiled from KPU data and processed by the author.*

Meanwhile, the following data illustrate the pattern of political party support behind candidate pairs endorsed by KIM Plus in several key regions during the 2024 regional elections.

**Table 2.**  
**Pattern of Political Party Support for Candidate Pairs Endorsed by KIM Plus in the 2024 Regional Elections**

Type of Election	Candidate Pair (Region)	Supporting Political Parties (Number)	Vote Percentage (Status)
GOVERNOR AND VICE GOVERNOR	DEDI MULYADI – ERWAN SETIAWAN <i>(West Java)</i>	GERINDRA, GOLKAR, BURUH, GELORA, GARUDA, PAN, PBB, DEMOKRAT, PSI, PERINDO <i>(11 Political Parties)</i>	62.22% <i>(Won)</i>
	AHMAD LUTHFI – TAJ YASIN <i>(Central Java)</i>	PKB, GERINDRA, GOLKAR, NASDEM, PKS, PAN, DEMOKRAT, PSI, PPP <i>(9 Political Parties)</i>	59.14% <i>(Won)</i>
	KHOFIFAH INDAR PARAWANSA – EMIL ELESTIANTO DARDAK <i>(East Java)</i>	GERINDRA, GOLKAR, DEMOKRAT, NASDEM, PAN, PKS, PPP, PSI, PERINDO, GELORA, BURUH, PBB, GARUDA, PKN <i>(14 Political Parties)</i>	58.81% <i>(Won)</i>
	M. KAMIL – SUSWONO <i>(Jakarta Special Capital Region)</i>	PKB, GERINDRA, GOLKAR, NASDEM, GELORA, PKS, PKN, GARUDA, PAN, PBB, DEMOKRAT, PSI, PERINDO, PPP <i>(14 Political Parties)</i>	39.40% <i>(Lost)</i>

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MUHAMMAD BOBBY AFIF NASUTION – H. SURYA <i>(North Sumatra)</i>	GERINDRA, GOLKAR, PAN, DEMOKRAT, PSI, NASDEM, PKS, PKB, PPP, PERINDO <i>(10 Political Parties)</i>	64.47% <i>(Won)</i>
REGENT AND VICE REGENT/ MAYOR AND VICE MAYOR RUDY SUSMANTO – ADI RUHANDI <i>(Bogor Regency)</i>	GERINDRA, GOLKAR, DEMOKRAT, PAN, PKS, PPP, PKB, BURUH, UMMAT, GELORA, NASDEM, GARUDA, PERINDO, PSI, PBB <i>(15 Political Parties)</i>	72.23% <i>(Won)</i>
ERI CAHYADI – ARMUJI <i>(Surabaya City)</i>	PDI-P, GERINDRA, PKB, GOLKAR, PKS, PSI, DEMOKRAT, PAN, NASDEM, PPP, PERINDO, BURUH, HANURA, GELORA, UMMAT, PBB, GARUDA, PKN <i>(18 Political Parties)</i>	81.38% <i>(Won)</i>
H.A. SUKAWIJAYA - H. JOKO SANTOSO <i>(Semarang City)</i>	GERINDRA, DEMORAT, PKS, PKB, PSI, GOLKAR, PAN, PPP, NASDEM <i>(9 Political Parties)</i>	42.76% <i>(Lost)</i>
RICO PUTRA WAAS ZAKIYUDDIN HARAHAHAP <i>(Medan City)</i>	TRI BAYU – GERINDRA, GOLKAR, NASDEM, PAN, PSI, DEMOKRAT, PKB, PERINDO <i>(8 Political Parties)</i>	49.28% <i>(Won)</i>
H. MAESYAL RASYID - INTAN NURUL HIKMAH <i>(Tangerang Regency)</i>	MOCH. PKB, GERINDRA, GOLKAR, NASDEM, PKS, PAN <i>(6 Political Parties)</i>	65.14% <i>(Won)</i>

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*Source: compiled from KPU data and processed by the author.*

Overall, the following table presents the electoral victory map of KIM Plus in the 2024 regional elections, covering both gubernatorial and regency/municipal contests.

**Table 3.**  
**Number of KIM Plus Wins in the 2024 Regional Elections**

<b>Type of Election</b>	<b>Number of Elections</b>	<b>Elections Won by KIM Plus</b>	<b>Elections Won by KIM Plus Together with PDI-P</b>	<b>Elections Won by PDI-P</b>
GOVERNOR AND VICE GOVERNOR	37	26 (70.2%)	4 (10.8%)	6 (16.2%)
REGENT AND VICE REGENT/ MAYOR AND VICE MAYOR	508	219 (43.1%)	116 (22.8%)	89 (17.5%)

*Source: compiled from Kompas (Salam, 2025) and processed by the author.*

Several points may be drawn from the data presented in the three tables above to interpret the phenomenon of political cartelization. First, there has been a significant increase in single-candidate contests. Although the 2024 figure (6.8%) appears lower in percentage terms than those recorded in 2018 (9.4%) and 2020 (9.3%), the absolute number tells a different story. The 2024 regional elections recorded the highest number of single-candidate contests, occurring in 37 regions. This indicates that, within a much larger electoral scale involving 545 regions, the strategy of producing single candidates remains an effective pragmatic instrument for political parties seeking to secure victory without facing meaningful electoral competition.

Second, the data reveal the dominance of oversized coalitions. Political party support for certain candidate pairs appears highly concentrated and expansive. The phenomenon of *party sweeping* (near-total party consolidation), as seen in Surabaya, where the Eri Cahyadi–Armujji candidate pair secured support from 18 political parties, namely all parties participating in the 2024 election, constitutes a clear manifestation of an oversized coalition absorbing nearly all political forces in the region. The emergence of oversized coalitions and party-sweeping practices in strategic regions reflects an ongoing process of political cartelization, in which political parties no longer function as providers of electoral alternatives, but instead operate as a unified bloc that effectively closes off political competition.

Third, there is a clear pattern of national political consolidation being replicated at the local level. Certain parties, such as Gerindra, Golkar,

Demokrat, PAN, Indonesian Solidarity Party (Partai Solidaritas Indonesia or PSI), PKB, and others, consistently appear within the same political alignment across multiple regions. The persistence of these coalitions strengthens the argument that candidate nominations are no longer primarily shaped by distinct local political dynamics, but rather by negotiations conducted at the national level and subsequently transmitted to local political arenas. This phenomenon suggests that political parties, including major parties, increasingly prefer to join a single “big tent” coalition in order to secure electoral victory and maintain access to power, rather than develop alternative axes of competition. It is therefore unsurprising that KIM Plus won 70.2% of gubernatorial races, equivalent to victories in 26 provinces. A similar pattern of dominance was also evident at the regency and municipal levels.

Fourth, the data point to the phenomenon of collaborative opposition. One notable finding is the overlap between KIM Plus victories and support from the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (Partai Demokrasi Indonesia-Perjuangan or PDI-P). Although PDI-P positions itself as the primary opposition party at the national level, at the local level it continues to collaborate with the ruling coalition. This reflects a process of ideological blurring, in which the distinction between “government” and “opposition” becomes increasingly indistinct in pursuit of shared access to regional political power.

Fifth, anomalies remain visible amid this broader pattern of dominance. Although KIM Plus achieved considerable electoral success, several outcomes in strategically important regions present meaningful deviations from the broader narrative of cartelization. The defeats of candidates backed by oversized coalitions in DKI Jakarta and Semarang, for example, may be interpreted as forms of public corrective action against candidates perceived as products of cartel-style political negotiation. These outcomes demonstrate that within a direct electoral system, voters still retain space to exercise a form of political “veto” against attempts to homogenize political competition. Such urban anomalies suggest that public electoral sentiment remains capable of penetrating cartel party dominance when candidates are perceived as misaligned with local aspirations.

Despite these anomalies, the dominant victories achieved by large coalitions nationwide do not appear to have halted the consolidation efforts of cartel parties. Following the 2024 regional elections, a new wave of discourse has emerged among political actors within the KIM Plus coalition advocating a regressive shift from direct regional head elections to indirect elections.

To understand why the discourse on indirect elections can so easily consolidate political party power in parliament, it is useful to refer to Kuskridho Ambardi’s dissertation (2008, pp. 245–255) on the characteristic of *collective survival* among cartel parties in Indonesia. Ambardi explains that Indonesia’s party system is built upon the pragmatic need to share state

resources in order to ensure the collective survival of political parties. Within this model, parties tend to avoid zero-sum competition and instead prefer coalition arrangements that guarantee all actors a “share” of power. In the electoral context, for example, Ambardi observes that competition among political parties often ends shortly after elections conclude. Ideological differences that appear sharp during electoral contests can easily be set aside when parties form coalitions to secure positions in the cabinet or parliament. Meanwhile, parties outside the coalition frequently fail to function as an effective opposition. Ambardi describes this pattern of post-election political consolidation as the “end of opposition, the return of cartel.”

Given this pragmatic character of cartel parties, it is understandable that regional head election mechanisms may also be redesigned to preserve the continuity of collective power. From the perspective of cartel party politics, direct elections can be viewed as an obstacle to collective survival because they involve popular voting rights that cannot be fully controlled, thereby creating political uncertainty. By shifting the arena of contestation to parliament, political cartelization enables negotiations to occur through closed-door lobbying in order to determine regional heads through elite consensus. In this way, the risk of losing access to power can be minimized. Viewed through the lens of cartel parties’ collective survival, it is therefore unsurprising that the recent discourse supporting indirect regional head elections has been initiated by the ruling coalition shortly after the elections concluded, while its urgency and underlying arguments have been challenged by extra-parliamentary groups.

At the same time, it cannot be denied that the current direct election system is also vulnerable to transactional politics and cartelization. The rise of oversized coalitions, which became increasingly visible during the 2024 regional elections, demonstrates how established political parties tend to collude in homogenizing political choices. Rather than offering competing political alternatives, these large coalitions often present single candidates or candidate pairs that have effectively been screened through agreements among national-level party elites, thereby reducing meaningful electoral choice for voters at the local level.

The real challenge, however, emerges when these risks are compared with the indirect election model. Although direct elections have been distorted by cartel politics, the mechanism still preserves crucial space for public oversight. Within a direct electoral system, citizens continue to function as the final corrective instrument; they still retain the capacity to “punish” cartel-party collusion, whether through the empty-ballot option or by supporting candidates capable of disrupting cartel dominance meaningfully. Indirect elections, by contrast, risk deepening political cartelization by shifting competition from a relatively transparent public arena into the closed confines of parliamentary lobbying rooms. It is within these closed negotiating spaces

that political cartel consensus can be constructed without meaningful pressure from campaign promises, or accountability for fulfilling them.

Accordingly, the cartelization of electoral competition through indirect elections is feared not as a solution to the high cost of politics, but rather as a strategy through which cartel parties may lock the circulation of power fully under their control. In direct elections, the public can still observe how political cartels operate and attempt to resist them. Under indirect elections, however, the public risks losing even the ability to observe the process, let alone influence the direction of leadership in their own regions.

### *The Logical Fallacy of 'Efficiency' for Democracy*

Beyond the debate over the meaning of what constitutes a “democratic” electoral mechanism, this article also seeks to highlight the latent use of “efficiency” as a justification for shifting from direct to indirect elections. It would be dangerous if arguments centered primarily on economic calculations were accepted uncritically as grounds for reversing the trajectory of electoral democratization achieved through the Reformasi movement.

Within the discourse surrounding direct and indirect elections, this article argues that a conceptual confusion has emerged between the managerial logic of corporations and the democratic logic of the state. In its discursive construction, indirect elections are frequently framed through the language of “efficiency,” a technocratic concept generally understood as minimizing costs to achieve a particular output. However, in the context of public service, the primary purpose of policymaking is to articulate and fulfill the collective interests of the public rather than impose a new political arrangement that may not align with democratic aspirations, especially when the justification rests solely on economic calculations (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2000, pp. 553–556).

Accordingly, in a democratic state tasked with safeguarding fundamental principles such as people’s sovereignty, the primary standard of evaluation should not be efficiency alone, but effectiveness. In this context, effectiveness refers to the extent to which a political mechanism fulfills the constitutional purposes assigned to it. If the Fourth Principle of Pancasila and the 1945 Constitution are understood as affirming that sovereignty resides in the hands of the people, then electoral mechanisms should be evaluated according to their effectiveness in preserving that sovereignty. Pushing regional head elections into the DPRD under the banner of “cost efficiency,” while simultaneously weakening public oversight and potentially reinforcing political cartelization, reflects a serious flaw in democratic statecraft. From this perspective, the efficiency argument may reasonably be viewed as a form of “technocratic trap.” Through the lens of cartel party model, this narrative risks shifting democratic debate away from substantive questions of

sovereignty and accountability toward narrow administrative and accounting concerns.

Furthermore, arguments portraying direct elections as an unproductive fiscal burden often overlook key principles of Keynesian economics, particularly the idea that government spending can function as an economic stimulus at the grassroots level (Jahan et al., 2014, p. 53). Rather than constituting a sunk cost, electoral spending can generate substantial economic circulation across micro, small, and medium enterprises or MSMEs (*usaha mikro, kecil, dan menengah/UMKM*), including the food and beverage sector, logistics, transportation, and various election-support services, thereby creating significant multiplier effects (Purwowidhu, 2023). Estimates suggest that concurrent elections may contribute between 0.6 and 1.3% to Indonesia's gross domestic product (GDP), equivalent to approximately Rp118.9 trillion to Rp270.3 trillion in economic circulation within the national economy (Nurdiansyarani, 2024).

Claiming that direct elections constitute nothing more than a fiscal burden collapses once confronted with the realities of democratic effectiveness and their tangible economic contributions. Viewed through a dialectical lens, the "cost of democracy" should not be understood as wasteful expenditure, but rather as a necessary investment in preserving constitutional democracy and the rule of law. Drawing on the New Public Service framework developed by Robert and Janet Denhardt (2000), the state bears a moral obligation to ensure that citizens' sovereignty is meaningfully facilitated rather than merely managed according to the logic of corporate efficiency. Consequently, narratives portraying direct elections as excessively "costly" should be approached critically, as they may function primarily as a framing strategy serving the interests of political cartelization.

Within the dynamics of political cartelization, the language of efficiency often functions as a convenient justification for reducing barriers to elite collusion. By shifting elections into the closed arena of parliamentary selection, political actors may indeed reduce the "operational costs" of democracy. Yet such efficiency comes at a far greater democratic cost: the erosion of direct public oversight and accountability. At its core, this debate demonstrates that prioritizing administrative efficiency at the expense of voter sovereignty represents a dangerous democratic regression. A state that values budgetary savings more highly than constitutional accountability risks evolving into a "cartel state," in which political power is increasingly privatized via elite lobbying networks shielded from public scrutiny. Ultimately, preserving direct elections is an effort to ensure that democracy remains a public good, where popular sovereignty cannot be reduced to narrow economic calculations. This is particularly relevant considering that the cost of direct elections is estimated to account for only around 1.36% of state expenditure, assuming an electoral budget of approximately Rp41 trillion (Mantalean,

2024), compared with Indonesia's average annual state expenditure of roughly Rp3,000 trillion since 2022 (Trading Economics, 2025).

## **CONCLUSION**

In Indonesia, debates surrounding electoral mechanisms extend beyond merely technical or procedural concerns. They reflect a broader struggle over the future of popular sovereignty amid the continuing consolidation of political cartelization. Drawing on a dialectical analytical framework, this study identifies three principal findings.

First, political cartelization has already become evident within the direct election system through the rise of oversized coalitions that increasingly narrow political alternatives. Indirect elections, however, risk reinforcing this tendency by relocating electoral contestation into closed parliamentary lobbying arenas with limited public oversight. Such a mechanism would further entrench cartel-party dominance by allowing political actors to preserve access to power with minimal accountability to public aspirations.

Second, direct elections continue to function as the final corrective instrument available to voters in resisting candidates produced through cartel-party collusion. This corrective mechanism represents an essential form of democratic control and would largely disappear if the electoral mandate were returned to the DPRD.

Third, the efficiency-based rationale frequently advanced in support of indirect elections may reasonably be understood as a form of "technocratic trap." This argument not only overlooks the principled effectiveness of democratic governance, but also neglects the broader microeconomic stimulus generated through electoral spending.

This study does not deny that Indonesia's current direct election system continues to face serious structural weaknesses requiring urgent reform. Clientelism, transactional politics, and the consolidation of cartel-style coalitions remain persistent problems that undermine the integrity of electoral democracy. Nevertheless, replacing direct elections with an indirect electoral mechanism would constitute a disproportionate response that risks weakening the democratic reform agenda pursued since 1998. Restricting citizens' voting rights in order to address vote buying would be akin to "burning down the barn to kill a rat." A more rational and pressing response lies not in replacing the electoral system itself, but in strengthening regulation, deepening internal party democratization, and enforcing electoral law more progressively against electoral violations. Improvements in transparency and law enforcement are likely to be far more effective in restoring democratic integrity than pursuing a regressive institutional shift that may further reinforce political cartelization.

This article also opens avenues for future empirical research examining whether indirect elections would, in practice, intensify political cartelization if

fully implemented. Further studies are needed to assess whether shifting electoral contestation from the public sphere into parliamentary lobbying arenas would revive more destructive forms of cartel politics capable of undermining the quality of regional leadership. Ultimately, preserving direct elections represents an effort to ensure that the democratic sovereignty remains in the hands of the people rather than becoming privatized by a narrow group of actors who control access to state resources.

## **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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