

Practices of Local Authoritarianism: Threats to Village Democracy in the Village Head Election in Pucangrejo

Mukhammad Akhmad Najich Alfayn, Fakultas Ilmu Sosial dan Ilmu Politik, UIN Walisongo Semarang*

Solkhah Mufrikhah, Fakultas Ilmu Sosial dan Ilmu Politik, UIN Walisongo Semarang

Aisya Dhefi Helmalia, Fakultas Ilmu Sosial dan Ilmu Politik, UIN Walisongo Semarang

Abstract

Village head elections (Pilkades) serve as a mechanism of local democracy to ensure representation and community participation. However, in Pucangrejo Village, practices of local authoritarianism have undermined the integrity of this democratic process. This study explores various violations of democratic principles, such as the manipulation of Computer Assisted Tests (CAT), pre-registration exclusion of candidates, and the use of political strategies to maintain elite dominance. Using a qualitative case study approach, the research analyzes the dynamics of power and the role of local elites in controlling the Pilkades process. The findings reveal that local elites exploit administrative regulations and patronage politics to restrict the participation of independent candidates, creating unfair competition, and eroding public trust in local institutions. These manipulations not only threaten the sustainability of village democracy but also contribute to declining political participation, the erosion of government legitimacy, and social polarization. The study recommends reforms for more transparent Pilkades regulations, stronger independent oversight, and community empowerment to strengthen democracy at the local level.

Keywords: Local authoritarianism; Pilkades; Village democracy, Local elites, Political participation.

INTRODUCTION

The decline of Indonesia's democratization process has been in the spotlight of academics in the last ten years. There are many dictionaries that describe the phenomenon, such as democratic regression (Smith 2022; Warburton & Aspinall 2018; Power & Warburton 2020), democratic decline (see Power 2018; Aspinall et al. 2020), and illiberal democracy (Mudhoffir 2020;

Mietzner 2021). The phenomenon of democratic decline is not only a unique challenge for Indonesia, but part of a global trend that is now sweeping many countries. In the last decade, major democracies such as the United States, Brazil, and the Philippines have also shown symptoms of democratic backsliding, marked by rising authoritarianism, politicization of identity, and the strengthening of right-wing populist forces.

*Correspondence:

FISIP, Universitas Garut, Jawa Barat, Indonesia

Email: fadlurrohmaniqbal@gmail.com

This phenomenon not only weakens democratic institutions, but also erodes public trust in the political process that has been a pillar of democracy. For Indonesia, known as the world's third-largest democracy and one with high ethnic and religious diversity, this setback presents its own dilemma. As a model of democracy in the Southeast Asian region, the challenges faced by Indonesia not only have domestic repercussions, but also serve as a mirror for developing countries in the region that are struggling to sustain their democratic systems (Aspinall, E. & Fealy, G. (Eds.). 2003). Therefore, understanding Indonesia's democratic backsliding in the context of global trends provides a more comprehensive perspective, highlighting that the challenges facing Indonesian democracy are part of a broader democratic crisis.

Some of the factors driving the decline of democracy in Indonesia are the return of state authoritarianism, the political elite's lack of attention to human rights, the rise of right-wing populist forces that use identity politics to gain power, and the amount of political corruption committed by public officials. In addition, it is considered that the behavior of most Indonesians is influenced by money politics, which is one of the main contributing factors to political corruption in Indonesia. Aspinall and Berenschot's (2019: 3) study explains how money politics and political clientelism strengthen Indonesia's democratic political system. In Indonesia, the practice of money politics is caused by the political culture of politicians who are quick to gain political support, as well as the increasingly pragmatic behavior of

voters and the lack of political literacy of the public (Smoke, 2003).

In addition to the problems caused by state elites, the political actions of the Indonesian people are also a contributing factor to the decline of democracy. Village democracy is a form of direct democracy that allows for full and active community participation in electing local leaders who are closest to their daily lives. Village head elections (Pilkades) are not only a means for villagers to express their political will, but also the foundation for a healthy and sustainable local democracy (Crenshaw, 1991). However, when democratic practices at the village level begin to be distorted by money politics, nepotism, and power manipulation by local elites, the consequences not only impact village governance, but also threaten democratic stability at large. According to a number of studies, declining public support for democracy in Indonesia indicates the decline of democracy from the people's perspective. On the other hand, public support for alternative authoritarian leaders is increasing (Aspinall et al., 2020: 3).

Village democracy, which is vulnerable to the influence of oligarchic power and patronage practices, reflects that Indonesia's political structure still faces fundamental challenges in implementing democratic principles as a whole. Village democracy, which should be an arena for clean and accountable political participation, is now under serious threat due to the lack of transparency and accountability in the electoral process. Failure to maintain the integrity of village democracy has the

potential to create public distrust of the democratic process as a whole, signaling the urgent need for reforms at the local level that are more effective and responsive to community needs.

This practice has caused the election process to regress and even become an embedded threat, as expressed by Johnson et al. (2020). Their study outlines the patterns of irregularities that often plague village elections in developing countries. His analysis emphasizes the need for independent oversight and transparency in addressing these issues and their impact on the legitimacy of local governance.

Furthermore, in recent years, village democracy has become a major concern due to concerns about the decline of local democracy. According to research conducted by Antlöv et al. (2012), the democratization process in Indonesian villages has not fully guaranteed equal and fair participation, especially for women. While factors such as accountability and transparency of village governance are evidence of the decline of village democracy, patronage and clientelism play an important role as mechanisms that allow political elites to maintain their influence and power at the village level. Clientelism, often manifested in the form of money politics, has become a key strategy for politicians to gain short-term support, but ironically undermines the democratic order in the long run (Ribot, 2003).

Patronage theory shows how this relationship based on material exchange between politicians and voters creates a bond that is not based on common values or visions, but on pragmatic transactions.

As a result, people's political loyalties are directed towards short-term personal interests, while collective interests and democratic values are ignored (Berinsky, 2002). This phenomenon reinforces a highly hierarchical political structure, where local elites retain full control over the distribution of village resources to consolidate their position.

With such practices, Indonesia's local democracy is in danger of stagnating and even regressing, as the interaction between politicians and villagers is more about transactions than genuine political participation. Tracing the impact of this clientelism in the context of village head elections Klinken, G. V. (2009) provides deep insights into how patronage practices can undermine public trust in democratic institutions and pose serious challenges to the sustainability of democracy at the local level. An article published in the *Journal of Government Science* by Suryono (2017) states that the factors that cause misuse of village funds to continue to occur are the lack of supervision and low community participation in overseeing the use of village budgets. This suggests that village governments have not effectively implemented democratic principles such as openness and accountability.

Village elections are an important milestone in realizing inclusive and transparent political participation at the local level. However, (Faguet, 2014) along with this progress, challenges arise that threaten the integrity and sustainability of the democratic system at the village level. The village of Pucangrejo, located in Pegandon Kendal, the focal point of this research, faces complex dynamics in

village head elections that can result in vulnerability to political manipulation and injustice. Yet, ironically, undemocratic practices and lack of accountability are often rampant, obscuring the essence of democracy that should encourage active participation and political justice in society (Ribot, 2002). This is an alarm for democracy watchers and researchers to understand more about this phenomenon.

In light of this literature, village head elections emerge as complex arenas influenced by a range of factors, from money politics to nepotism in *pilkades*. This research aims to deepen the understanding of these dynamics in the village context, and contribute to the development of inclusive and sustainable local democracy theory and practice.

Previous studies have highlighted the importance of understanding political dynamics at the local level as an integral part of the democratization process. However, research on village head election discourse that is in-depth and focuses on salient aspects in the village context is limited. Therefore, this study aims to fill this knowledge gap, by critically and systematically analyzing how such discourse affects political stability and the quality of democracy in this village.

Pucangrejo Village presents a dynamic portrait of how local political power can be concentrated in a single actor who consistently wins elections through manipulative means. In the last two election periods, only one dominant candidate has managed to win the village head election, using various means to eliminate potential opponents. In the first

period, power was maintained through the nomination of the wife as the only symbolic challenger, while in the following period, a more complex strategy was employed by hiring a third party to prevent other candidates from emerging.

This situation reflects (Yin, 2014) not only the concentration of power, but also the systematic ways in which local elites maintain their dominance, even if it means undermining democratic principles. This phenomenon suggests that while procedural democracy such as *Pilkades* continues to take place, the inclusive and competitive essence of democracy is increasingly threatened. Pucangrejo Village offers a concrete example of how practices such as money politics, nepotism, and blocking the participation of other candidates can create an exclusive political culture and curb people's political freedom. This research seeks to unravel these patterns of domination and how they impact the quality of democracy at the village level, as well as provide a deeper understanding of the dynamics of power and political practices that occur in local contexts.

The phenomenon of democratic backsliding at the village level, such as that in Pucangrejo Village, highlights the importance of policy reforms that support transparency, accountability, and community participation. Without adequate policy interventions, manipulative practices in village elections have the potential to become entrenched, undermining the legitimacy of village governance and ultimately eroding public trust in the democratic system as a

whole. Comprehensive reforms should include independent oversight of the electoral process, community empowerment through political education, and strengthened accountability mechanisms that enable villagers to play an active role in overseeing their governance.

In addition, increasing political literacy among village communities is essential so that they can understand their democratic rights and reject money politics and harmful clientelism practices. With policies that encourage healthy and democratic political participation, villages in Indonesia have the potential to become pillars that support national democratic stability, creating a local political environment that is truly inclusive and responsive to community needs. This research aims to not only diagnose the existing problems, but also offer policy recommendations that can be implemented to strengthen democracy at the grassroots level.

Theoretical Framework

This research is based on several key theories that are relevant for analyzing the dynamics of local authoritarianism in the context of village head elections (Pilkades). The following theories form the conceptual basis for understanding the phenomenon under study:

1. Democracy Theory and Democratic Regression

Regression refers to the process of weakening democratic values, principles, and institutions, including at the local level. Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) in *How Democracies Die* highlight that the weakening of democracy does not always occur through coups or drastic measures,

but often through a gradual process by political actors who control democratic mechanisms for their own interests. In the local context, this theory is relevant to understand how village elites use covert authoritarianism practices to maintain power by misusing regulations or weakening political competition.

2. Patronage and Clientelism Political Theory

Patronage and clientelism politics explain the reciprocal relationship between elites and communities in the form of providing material benefits in exchange for political support (Aspinall & Sukmajati, 2020). In the context of Pucangrejo Village, this patron-client relationship is seen in how local elites use people's economic dependence to influence their political choices. This theory is useful for understanding how power is consolidated through patronage practices and how this creates inequality in political competition.

3. Local Authoritarianism Theory

Local authoritarianism refers to authoritarian practices by political elites at the local level to maintain their dominance. Fox (2014) in *The Challenge of Rural Democratisation* explains that authoritarianism at the local level is often hidden behind formal democratic processes such as elections, but in reality, the control of power remains monopolized by certain elites. In Pilkades, this is seen through the manipulation of regulations, such as the implementation of CAT Tests and the blocking of candidates, which are used to limit the participation of political opponents.

4. Power Theory and Local Elite Influence

Local elites have significant power in shaping political outcomes at the village level. Grindle (2007) explains that this power is often used to control local institutions, including the election committee, so that the political process tends to favor certain elite groups. In the context of this research, this theory is used to analyze how local elites in Pucangrejo influence the dynamics of Pilkades through manipulation of rules and institutional control.

5. Political Participation Theory

Political participation is an important indicator in assessing the quality of democracy. Verba, Scholzman, and Brady (1995) explain that political participation includes not only voting, but also the active involvement of the community in the political process, including the supervision of elections. This research utilizes this theory to understand the decline in political participation of Pucangrejo residents due to manipulation by local elites.

6. Local Identity Theory and Exclusivism

Local identity plays an important role in shaping political preferences at the village level. Anderson (1983) in *Imagined Communities* explains that communities often create collective identities that influence their political decisions. In the case of Pucangrejo, resistance to candidates from outside the village reflects local identity-based exclusivism, which can hinder the emergence of competent and innovative leaders.

Integration of Theory into Research

This theoretical framework provides a conceptual foundation for analyzing the phenomenon of local authoritarianism in Pucangrejo Village. By combining theories of democratic backsliding, patronage politics, local authoritarianism, elite power, political participation, and local identity, this research can explain how hidden authoritarianism practices undermine democracy at the village level. In addition, the framework helps identify the impact of these practices on village government legitimacy, citizen participation, and local democratic stability.

RESEARCH METHOD

This research uses a qualitative approach with a case study design to explore local power dynamics and authoritarianism practices in Pilkades in Pucangrejo Village, Pegandon Sub-district, Kendal Regency. This approach allows for an in-depth analysis of the phenomenon of power manipulation that affects local democracy. Data sources consist of primary data, collected through in-depth interviews with key informants such as village head candidates, community leaders, Pilkades committees, and villagers; and secondary data in the form of official Pilkades documents, media reports, and related literature.

Data were collected through three main methods: in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis. Interviews were conducted with 10 purposively selected informants to obtain diverse perspectives, including from local elites and marginalized groups. Direct observation was conducted during the Pilkades process to

record interactions between political actors. Documents such as CAT Test results and Pilkades regulations were analyzed to identify indications of manipulation and abuse of power.

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis based on Braun and Clarke's (2006) method. The process included four main steps: data familiarization through repeated reading, coding to identify themes, grouping themes into main categories such as power manipulation and its impact on political participation, and interpretation of findings using relevant theoretical frameworks. Data validity was ensured through source triangulation by comparing information from interviews, observations and documents, while data reliability was maintained through cross-checking between informants.

This research adheres to ethical principles by maintaining informants' anonymity through the use of pseudonyms and providing full information to participants about the purpose of the research. Participants' right to withdraw at any time during the research process was also guaranteed. With this approach, the research seeks to explore a comprehensive understanding of the threat of local authoritarianism to village democracy.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

Analysis of Local Authoritarianism Practices in Pilkades

The village head elections (Pilkades) in Pucangrejo reflect a concerning trend of local authoritarianism, where democratic processes are systematically undermined by elite domination. This phenomenon is evident in the

manipulation of regulations, strategic candidate exclusions, and the pervasive influence of patronage politics. These practices reveal how local elites exploit their power to control political outcomes, often at the expense of democratic integrity and inclusiveness. Such actions not only weaken the electoral process but also erode trust in local institutions, undermining the foundational principles of democracy.

One significant manifestation of local authoritarianism is the deliberate manipulation of regulations governing Pilkades, particularly the strategic use of the Computer Assisted Test (CAT) as stipulated in Regional Regulation No. 113 of 2021. Although ostensibly designed to ensure fair and objective candidate selection, the CAT mechanism in Pucangrejo was exploited by local elites to exclude candidates deemed threatening to their dominance. By registering a large number of candidates, including strategically chosen individuals likely to outperform certain rivals, the elite ensured a favorable outcome through the test. This manipulation highlights how regulatory frameworks, when poorly monitored, can be weaponized to maintain elite control.

Beyond regulation manipulation, the pre-registration phase of Pilkades revealed systematic efforts to exclude rival candidates. Pre-registration practices in Pucangrejo were characterized by administrative barriers, misinformation, and subtle intimidation aimed at discouraging potential challengers from entering the contest. Such practices effectively limited competition, ensuring that only

candidates aligned with elite interests could participate. The exclusion of viable contenders not only undermines the competitive nature of elections but also weakens the legitimacy of the eventual victor, as the process fails to reflect genuine popular will.

The strategic use of patronage politics further consolidates local authoritarianism in Pilkades. Patron-client relationships dominate political dynamics in Pucangrejo, where local elites utilize economic dependency to secure electoral loyalty. For example, by providing financial incentives, employment opportunities, or community resources, elites establish asymmetric power relationships that influence voting behavior. This reliance on patronage creates a culture of dependency, where voters feel obligated to align with their patrons, effectively limiting their political agency and perpetuating elite dominance.

The reliance on patronage not only distorts electoral outcomes but also entrenches socio-economic inequalities. Candidates lacking access to substantial financial resources or elite networks are systematically disadvantaged, regardless of their qualifications or political platforms. This financial barrier reinforces the status quo, ensuring that political power remains concentrated among established elites. Consequently, the democratic principle of equal opportunity for all candidates is rendered ineffective, as economic disparities determine the extent of political participation.

Intimidation and coercion further compound the authoritarian tendencies

in Pilkades. Local elites employ direct and indirect methods of coercion, ranging from social pressures within the community to threats of economic reprisal against dissenters. For instance, individuals or groups perceived to oppose elite-backed candidates often face subtle threats, such as exclusion from community projects or loss of economic opportunities. Such tactics not only silence dissent but also instill fear among voters, significantly compromising the electoral process's fairness.

Moreover, the manipulation of local institutions highlights the institutional dimension of local authoritarianism. In Pucangrejo, election committees and administrative bodies tasked with overseeing Pilkades are often co-opted by elites. This co-optation undermines the impartiality of these institutions, enabling elites to influence critical decisions such as candidate eligibility, procedural rulings, and even vote counting. The lack of institutional independence exacerbates public distrust, as the perception of bias further delegitimizes the election process.

The influence of local elites extends to the post-election period, where governance is shaped to reinforce their dominance. For instance, policies and resource allocations are often directed toward maintaining elite support rather than addressing broader community needs. This governance style perpetuates a cycle of dependency and exclusion, where the benefits of local development are concentrated within elite networks. Such practices deepen socio-economic divisions and hinder inclusive growth, further eroding democratic norms.

Public perception of Pilkades in Pucangrejo has increasingly shifted toward skepticism due to these authoritarian practices. Many residents view elections as mere formalities, where outcomes are predetermined by elite maneuvering. This disillusionment discourages civic engagement and fosters apathy among voters, weakening the democratic fabric of the community. When citizens perceive that their participation holds little influence over outcomes, the foundational principle of democracy—popular sovereignty—is fundamentally undermined.

The case of Pucangrejo illustrates the broader implications of local authoritarianism for democracy. By undermining free and fair competition, restricting participation, and concentrating power within elite networks, these practices distort the democratic process. The persistence of such dynamics not only threatens the integrity of village-level governance but also sets a precedent for similar undemocratic tendencies at higher levels of government. This makes addressing local authoritarianism an urgent priority for safeguarding democratic principles.

The exclusionary practices observed in Pucangrejo not only suppress political competition but also marginalize certain groups within the community. Women, youth, and economically disadvantaged groups often find themselves excluded from meaningful participation due to a combination of systemic barriers and cultural norms. This exclusion not only limits the diversity of perspectives in the political process but also perpetuates existing social inequalities. As a result,

elections fail to represent the broader community's needs and aspirations, further entrenching the dominance of elite-backed candidates.

In addition to marginalizing specific groups, local authoritarianism in Pucangrejo fosters a culture of conformity and suppresses dissent. The fear of reprisal—whether social, economic, or political—deters individuals from openly challenging the status quo. For example, potential voters or candidates who oppose elite-backed individuals may face subtle ostracism or lose access to community resources. This climate of fear erodes the fundamental democratic right to freely express political preferences, reducing elections to a ceremonial exercise devoid of genuine competition.

The manipulation of election regulations, as seen with the strategic use of the CAT mechanism, demonstrates how elites exploit legal frameworks to consolidate their control. While regulations are ostensibly designed to ensure transparency and meritocracy, their selective application undermines these goals. In Pucangrejo, the CAT became a tool for excluding certain candidates by overloading the system with elite-aligned contenders. Such practices expose the vulnerability of democratic processes to subversion by those with sufficient resources and influence.

Another critical aspect of local authoritarianism is the erosion of institutional trust. In Pucangrejo, public skepticism toward electoral committees and administrative bodies reflects widespread doubts about the fairness and impartiality of these institutions. This

distrust not only delegitimizes the outcomes of Pilkades but also undermines confidence in local governance as a whole. When institutions are perceived as tools of elite control, their ability to mediate disputes and foster community cohesion is significantly compromised.

The lack of accountability mechanisms exacerbates the problem. In Pucangrejo, election-related grievances often go unaddressed due to the absence of independent oversight. This lack of redress perpetuates a sense of helplessness among marginalized groups, reinforcing their exclusion from the political process. Without robust accountability structures, elites can manipulate elections with impunity, further entrenching their dominance and weakening the democratic process.

The dynamics in Pucangrejo also illustrate the intersection of local and broader political systems. While village-level elections are nominally decentralized, they are often influenced by regional or national political actors seeking to extend their networks of control. In some cases, local elites align themselves with higher-level patrons to secure resources and political protection. This alignment creates a multi-tiered system of patronage that undermines the autonomy of local governance and distorts the intended goals of decentralization.

The entrenchment of elite dominance in Pucangrejo reveals a feedback loop between power and governance. Elite-backed leaders, once elected, use their authority to reward loyalists and suppress opposition, thereby

consolidating their influence for future elections. This cyclical dynamic not only perpetuates inequalities but also creates significant barriers for reform-minded candidates to challenge the status quo. Over time, the village's political landscape becomes increasingly insulated from meaningful change, undermining the potential for democratic renewal.

The social costs of local authoritarianism extend beyond the electoral process. In Pucangrejo, the prioritization of elite interests over communal welfare has led to the unequal distribution of resources and services. Public goods, such as infrastructure or community programs, are often allocated based on political loyalty rather than need. This selective distribution exacerbates social divisions and reinforces the perception that politics serves only the privileged few, further alienating disenfranchised groups.

Moreover, the perpetuation of authoritarian practices at the village level poses a broader threat to democratic governance. Pucangrejo's case demonstrates how local elites can exploit decentralization to entrench their power, undermining the goals of inclusive and participatory governance. If left unchecked, such practices may proliferate across other localities, creating a pattern of democratic backsliding at the national level. This underscores the need for systemic reforms to address the root causes of local authoritarianism and strengthen democratic accountability.

In conclusion, the practices observed in Pucangrejo highlight the fragility of democratic processes at the village level. By manipulating regulations, excluding

candidates, and leveraging patronage politics, local elites undermine the principles of fairness and inclusivity that underpin democracy. Addressing these challenges requires a multifaceted approach, including the reform of electoral regulations, the establishment of independent oversight mechanisms, and the empowerment of marginalized groups. Such measures are essential to restoring trust in local governance and safeguarding the integrity of democratic institutions.

The Impact of Local Authoritarianism on Village Democracy

Local authoritarianism, as observed in Pucangrejo, has profound implications for the stability and quality of village-level democracy. By undermining democratic principles such as fairness, transparency, and participation, these practices erode the foundations of trust in local governance. The immediate effects are reflected in the legitimacy of elected leaders, the declining political participation of citizens, and the growing polarization within the community. Over time, these dynamics weaken the broader democratic structure and hinder the potential for inclusive and sustainable development.

One of the most significant consequences of local authoritarianism is the erosion of institutional legitimacy. When electoral processes are marred by manipulation, such as the strategic use of regulatory mechanisms or the exclusion of rival candidates, public trust in the fairness of elections diminishes. In Pucangrejo, citizens have expressed skepticism toward the neutrality of election committees and local authorities,

perceiving them as tools of elite control. This distrust undermines the moral authority of elected leaders, as their legitimacy is questioned from the outset.

The erosion of legitimacy extends beyond elected officials to the institutions that govern the electoral process. In Pucangrejo, the perception of bias in the administration of the Computer Assisted Test (CAT) and the pre-registration phase has led to widespread doubts about the impartiality of local governance structures. These perceptions reduce the ability of these institutions to mediate conflicts, implement policies, or foster cooperation within the community. The weakening of institutional legitimacy thus poses a significant challenge to effective governance.

Another critical impact of local authoritarianism is the decline in political participation. When citizens perceive elections as predetermined or manipulated, their motivation to engage in the political process diminishes. In Pucangrejo, many residents have become apathetic, believing that their votes have little influence on electoral outcomes. This disengagement is particularly pronounced among marginalized groups, who face additional barriers to participation and feel excluded from decision-making processes.

The decline in political participation has far-reaching implications for the democratic health of the village. Active citizen engagement is essential for holding leaders accountable and ensuring that governance reflects the community's needs. However, in Pucangrejo, the dominance of local elites has created a sense of disempowerment among

citizens, reducing their willingness to demand transparency or advocate for their rights. This disengagement further consolidates elite control, creating a cycle of exclusion and inequality.

Local authoritarianism also exacerbates social polarization within the community. In Pucangrejo, the exclusion of certain candidates and the strategic manipulation of electoral regulations have deepened divisions between different groups. Supporters of rival candidates often view each other with suspicion, while marginalized groups feel alienated from the political process altogether. This polarization undermines social cohesion, making it more difficult for the community to collaborate on shared goals or resolve conflicts.

The unequal distribution of resources further reinforces social divisions and weakens democratic norms. In Pucangrejo, access to public goods and services is often contingent on political loyalty, with elite-backed groups receiving preferential treatment. This selective allocation not only entrenches economic disparities but also fosters resentment among excluded groups, who view the political system as inherently unjust. Such dynamics erode trust in governance and hinder efforts to build an inclusive and equitable society.

The cumulative impact of these practices is a weakening of the village's democratic fabric. Democracy thrives on competition, participation, and accountability, but local authoritarianism in Pucangrejo has disrupted these processes. By limiting competition, suppressing dissent, and excluding marginalized groups, local elites have

transformed elections into mechanisms for maintaining their power rather than promoting community representation. This shift undermines the village's potential for democratic renewal and innovation.

The persistence of local authoritarianism also hinders the development of leadership within the community. In a healthy democracy, elections provide opportunities for new leaders to emerge, bringing fresh perspectives and innovative solutions to governance challenges. However, in Pucangrejo, the monopolization of power by local elites has created significant barriers for reform-minded individuals. Aspiring leaders are often deterred by the high costs of entry and the risks associated with challenging entrenched interests, resulting in a stagnation of political leadership.

In the long term, the effects of local authoritarianism extend beyond the village level, contributing to broader patterns of democratic regression. Pucangrejo's case illustrates how undemocratic practices at the grassroots level can undermine national democratic structures by normalizing exclusionary and manipulative tactics. This trend highlights the interconnectedness of local and national governance, emphasizing the importance of addressing local authoritarianism to safeguard democracy at all levels.

The erosion of democratic principles in Pucangrejo highlights the fragile state of village-level governance under local authoritarianism. This fragility is most evident in the way power is consolidated among a small group of elites, effectively

sidelining alternative voices and perspectives. When democracy becomes a tool for reinforcing elite dominance rather than fostering inclusive participation, it loses its core function as a mechanism for collective decision-making. This deviation from democratic ideals not only weakens governance but also perpetuates a cycle of disillusionment and disengagement among citizens.

One of the most damaging consequences of this disillusionment is the rise of political apathy among voters. In Pucangrejo, many residents express a lack of faith in the electoral process, viewing elections as mere formalities designed to legitimize predetermined outcomes. This apathy creates a vacuum in civic engagement, which local elites exploit to further entrench their power. Without active citizen participation, the checks and balances that are critical to preventing abuses of power are effectively absent.

The decline in citizen engagement also affects marginalized groups disproportionately. Women, youth, and economically disadvantaged individuals face additional barriers that discourage their participation in an already skewed political landscape. In Pucangrejo, these groups often feel excluded from decision-making processes, not only because of structural inequalities but also due to cultural norms that prioritize elite-dominated governance. Their exclusion further diminishes the diversity and representativeness of local governance, reinforcing systemic inequalities.

Polarization within the community, exacerbated by local authoritarianism,

further undermines social cohesion. In Pucangrejo, the exclusionary practices employed by elites have deepened divisions between supporters of rival candidates and marginalized groups. This polarization manifests in mistrust and conflict, which impede the community's ability to work collaboratively on shared goals. Such divisions weaken the social fabric of the village, making it more vulnerable to external manipulation and internal discord.

The unequal distribution of public resources compounds these divisions, as those aligned with elite-backed candidates often receive preferential access to services and opportunities. In Pucangrejo, this favoritism creates a dual-class system within the community, where loyalty to elites determines one's access to development benefits. Such practices foster resentment among excluded groups, eroding trust in governance and amplifying calls for reform. However, these calls are often stifled by the same structures of power that perpetuate the inequities.

The lack of accountability in governance is another critical consequence of local authoritarianism. In Pucangrejo, leaders who gain power through manipulated elections often prioritize maintaining their political base over addressing community needs. This governance style undermines the principles of transparency and responsiveness, as leaders are not incentivized to act in the public interest. Instead, resources are directed toward sustaining the loyalty of elite networks,

further alienating the broader community.

Local authoritarianism also hinders efforts to address broader development challenges. In a democratic context, diverse voices and perspectives can contribute to innovative solutions for local problems. However, in Pucangrejo, the exclusion of reform-minded individuals and marginalized groups limits the scope of policy discussions and decision-making. As a result, governance becomes reactive rather than proactive, addressing immediate elite concerns rather than long-term community priorities.

The normalization of exclusionary practices in Pucangrejo poses a significant risk to the village's democratic future. When residents grow accustomed to manipulated elections and elite dominance, they may begin to accept these practices as inevitable or even legitimate. This normalization weakens the potential for collective action against undemocratic practices, further entrenching the power of local elites and diminishing the prospects for reform.

Furthermore, the interconnectedness of local and national governance amplifies the consequences of local authoritarianism. Pucangrejo's case demonstrates how undemocratic practices at the village level can set precedents for broader governance challenges. When manipulative tactics and exclusionary practices are tolerated locally, they risk being replicated at regional and national levels, contributing to systemic democratic regression. This ripple effect underscores the importance

of addressing local authoritarianism to safeguard democracy more broadly.

In conclusion, the impacts of local authoritarianism on democracy in Pucangrejo are far-reaching and multifaceted. From the erosion of institutional legitimacy to the decline in political participation and the deepening of social divisions, these practices undermine the principles of inclusivity and accountability that are central to democratic governance. Addressing these challenges requires systemic reforms that empower citizens, enhance transparency, and ensure fair competition in elections. By tackling the roots of local authoritarianism, it is possible to restore trust in governance and rebuild the democratic fabric of the community.

Resistance to Local Identity in the Dynamics of Village Democracy

The dynamics of local democracy in Pucangrejo are profoundly shaped by the community's adherence to localized identity politics, which often manifests as resistance to external candidates. This resistance is rooted in a deeply ingrained preference for leaders perceived as part of the local community, as opposed to those deemed outsiders. While this prioritization of local identity reflects a strong sense of communal belonging, it also introduces significant challenges to the principles of inclusivity and meritocracy in democratic governance.

One of the most prominent expressions of local identity politics is the rejection of candidates from outside the village. In Pucangrejo, this sentiment was evident during the candidacy of individuals from neighboring areas, who faced significant resistance from

residents. Local voters argued that external candidates lacked a sufficient understanding of the community's cultural norms, values, and priorities. This perspective underscores the role of

identity as a gatekeeper for political participation, where shared cultural and social ties are often prioritized over qualifications or policy platforms.

Figure 1 Aksi Demonstrasi



Source: Gurauan Chatting Perangkat Desa Pucangrejo Pegandon Picu Demo Warga – medianasional.id

The preference for local candidates also reflects a desire to preserve the community's autonomy. In Pucangrejo, many residents expressed concerns that electing an outsider could lead to external interference in village affairs. This resistance is rooted in historical experiences, where external actors were often associated with exploitation or disregard for local interests. Consequently, the preference for local leaders is seen as a protective mechanism to safeguard the community's sovereignty and cultural heritage.

However, the prioritization of local identity in elections has significant implications for the democratic process. By limiting the pool of eligible candidates to those who meet subjective criteria of "localness," the village effectively narrows the scope of competition. This exclusionary approach undermines the principle of equal opportunity, where all candidates should be evaluated based on their capabilities, visions, and

contributions to governance. In Pucangrejo, this dynamic has restricted the emergence of potentially transformative leadership, as external candidates with innovative ideas are often dismissed outright.

The resistance to external candidates also perpetuates a form of exclusivism that reinforces existing power structures. In Pucangrejo, elite families often leverage their longstanding ties to the community to consolidate their influence. These elites frame their candidacies as a continuation of local traditions, positioning themselves as the rightful stewards of the village's interests. Such narratives effectively marginalize external contenders and deter reformist voices, entrenching the dominance of established power blocs.

This exclusivism further exacerbates the challenges faced by marginalized groups within the community. Women, youth, and economically disadvantaged individuals often struggle to gain

recognition in a political landscape dominated by entrenched elites. In Pucangrejo, the emphasis on local identity disproportionately favors candidates with established social and familial networks, sidelining those who lack such connections. This dynamic not only limits the diversity of leadership but also perpetuates systemic inequalities within the community.

The emphasis on identity over merit also creates a paradox for the democratic process. While the preference for local candidates reflects the community's desire for self-determination, it simultaneously restricts the potential for inclusive and merit-based governance. In Pucangrejo, this paradox is evident in the community's reluctance to consider external candidates, even when such individuals offer substantive qualifications and innovative policy proposals. As a result, elections become less about selecting the most capable leader and more about affirming existing social hierarchies.

Another consequence of identity-based resistance is the polarization it creates within the community. In Pucangrejo, supporters of external candidates often face social ostracism, as their choices are perceived as a betrayal of communal loyalty. This polarization deepens divisions between different factions within the village, making it difficult to build consensus on governance priorities. Over time, these divisions can undermine social cohesion, hindering the community's ability to address shared challenges collectively.

The prioritization of local identity also influences governance outcomes, as

leaders elected based on communal ties are often more focused on preserving their social capital than implementing broad-based reforms. In Pucangrejo, leaders who ascend to power through identity-based politics tend to prioritize the interests of their immediate networks, reinforcing cycles of favoritism and exclusion. This governance style not only alienates marginalized groups but also limits the village's capacity for sustainable and inclusive development.

Despite these challenges, the resistance to external candidates underscores the complexity of balancing local identity with democratic inclusivity. In Pucangrejo, the emphasis on cultural and social ties reflects legitimate concerns about preserving communal values and autonomy. However, these priorities must be reconciled with the need for an open and competitive electoral process that encourages innovation and inclusivity. Striking this balance is essential to ensuring that local democracy serves the interests of the entire community rather than reinforcing exclusivist tendencies.

The challenges posed by identity-based resistance in Pucangrejo are further compounded by the strategic exploitation of local sentiment by political elites. Established families and long-serving leaders often manipulate communal loyalty to consolidate their power, framing external candidates as threats to the village's cohesion. By doing so, these elites not only reinforce their dominance but also redirect attention away from their governance shortcomings. This tactic leverages identity politics as a tool for self-preservation, prioritizing elite

interests over the broader needs of the community.

Such exploitation of identity politics undermines the principles of democratic inclusivity and equal opportunity. When external candidates are systematically excluded through narratives of cultural incompatibility, the electoral process becomes increasingly insular. In Pucangrejo, this insularity not only reduces the quality of competition but also diminishes the likelihood of meaningful political reform. As elections are dominated by candidates with pre-existing social capital, the space for innovation and alternative perspectives shrinks, leaving the village governance stagnant.

The exclusionary dynamics of local identity politics also hinder the integration of diverse voices in governance. In democratic systems, inclusivity is critical for ensuring that leadership reflects the needs and aspirations of all community members. However, in Pucangrejo, the emphasis on local identity often marginalizes individuals or groups who fall outside the dominant cultural or social framework. This marginalization reinforces existing inequalities, limiting the extent to which governance can address issues such as poverty, education, and social mobility.

Moreover, the resistance to external candidates often perpetuates myths about the superiority of local leadership. In Pucangrejo, the belief that only local candidates can effectively govern creates an echo chamber that reinforces traditional practices and hierarchies. This resistance to change stifles critical debate and discourages innovative approaches

to governance challenges. Over time, the village risks becoming isolated from broader regional or national trends, limiting its capacity to adapt to external economic, political, or social shifts.

The normalization of exclusionary practices in Pucangrejo also reflects broader trends in local governance across Indonesia. In many villages, the emphasis on communal identity over merit serves to entrench the power of entrenched elites while marginalizing reformist voices. This trend raises important questions about the interplay between traditional values and democratic principles, particularly in contexts where modernization challenges deeply ingrained cultural norms. Addressing these tensions is critical for fostering more inclusive and dynamic forms of local democracy.

Despite its challenges, local identity politics in Pucangrejo also highlights the enduring importance of cultural and social ties in shaping governance preferences. For many residents, the preference for local candidates stems from a legitimate desire to protect communal values and autonomy. This underscores the need for reform strategies that respect these priorities while promoting inclusivity and meritocracy. Balancing these competing demands is essential for preserving the integrity of democratic processes while addressing the community's concerns about external influence.

One potential avenue for addressing the tensions between local identity and inclusivity is through community-based dialogue and education. In Pucangrejo, efforts to raise awareness about the value

of diverse leadership could help challenge exclusionary attitudes and broaden the pool of potential candidates. By fostering discussions about governance priorities and the qualifications required for effective leadership, such initiatives could encourage voters to evaluate candidates based on their capabilities rather than their origin.

Institutional reforms are also critical for mitigating the impacts of identity-based resistance. For example, introducing measures to promote transparency in candidate selection and electoral processes could help ensure that elections are fair and open to all qualified individuals. In Pucangrejo, such reforms might include strengthening the role of independent oversight bodies, improving access to information for voters, and creating platforms for marginalized groups to voice their concerns.

The empowerment of marginalized groups within Pucangrejo is another essential component of addressing the limitations of identity politics. By supporting the participation of women, youth, and economically disadvantaged individuals in governance, the village could foster a more inclusive political culture. Initiatives such as leadership training programs, mentorship schemes, and community forums could help build the capacity of these groups to engage in the political process, challenging the dominance of entrenched elites.

Ultimately, the case of Pucangrejo underscores the need for a nuanced approach to reconciling local identity with democratic inclusivity. While the prioritization of local leaders reflects

important cultural values, it must be balanced with the imperative to foster open, competitive, and inclusive elections. By addressing the structural and cultural barriers that limit participation, the village can create a more dynamic and representative democratic system. Such efforts are not only essential for strengthening local governance but also for ensuring that democracy fulfills its promise of serving the entire community.

CONCLUSIONS

Implications of the Findings for Theory and Policy

The findings from the case of Pucangrejo highlight critical implications for both theoretical perspectives on local democracy and practical policy considerations. The dynamics of local authoritarianism, identity politics, and elite domination challenge established theoretical assumptions about decentralization and its potential to strengthen democracy. Instead of fostering inclusivity and accountability, decentralization in this context has enabled the consolidation of elite power, raising important questions about the conditions under which decentralization can deliver its intended democratic outcomes.

From a theoretical standpoint, the study underscores the limitations of decentralization as a universally positive mechanism for democratization. Classic theories, such as those proposed by Rondinelli and Cheema (1983), emphasize decentralization's potential to enhance local participation, improve governance, and empower communities. However, the findings from Pucangrejo

reveal that decentralization can also create opportunities for elite capture, where local power holders manipulate democratic mechanisms for personal or group interests. This nuance requires a re-evaluation of the conditions necessary for decentralization to function effectively as a democratizing force.

The case also contributes to the theoretical discourse on local authoritarianism by demonstrating how democratic processes can be subverted at the grassroots level. Scholars such as Levitsky and Way (2010) have argued that authoritarianism often coexists with democratic institutions, using them as tools to legitimize undemocratic practices. In Pucangrejo, local elites have adopted a similar approach, leveraging ostensibly democratic mechanisms like elections and regulatory frameworks to entrench their dominance. This finding highlights the need for more nuanced theories that account for the dualistic nature of democratic institutions in hybrid governance settings.

Another theoretical implication relates to the intersection of identity politics and democracy. The resistance to external candidates in Pucangrejo illustrates how local identities can shape political preferences and behaviors, often at the expense of meritocracy and inclusivity. This aligns with Anderson's (1983) concept of "imagined communities," where shared identities foster a sense of belonging but can also exclude those perceived as outsiders. The findings suggest that theories of democracy must better account for the role of identity in shaping political

dynamics, particularly in culturally homogenous or tightly knit communities.

On the policy front, the findings from Pucangrejo emphasize the importance of designing regulatory frameworks that minimize opportunities for manipulation. The strategic misuse of the Computer Assisted Test (CAT) highlights vulnerabilities in the current regulatory structure, which can be exploited by local elites. Policymakers should consider introducing stricter oversight mechanisms, such as independent monitoring bodies, to ensure the integrity of electoral processes. Additionally, greater transparency in candidate selection and evaluation criteria could reduce the potential for elite manipulation.

The study also underscores the need for capacity-building initiatives to strengthen local governance institutions. In Pucangrejo, the co-optation of electoral committees by elites has undermined public trust in these institutions. Training programs for committee members, coupled with clear guidelines on their roles and responsibilities, could enhance their ability to function independently and impartially. Such measures are essential for restoring public confidence in the fairness and integrity of local governance.

Empowering marginalized groups is another key policy recommendation emerging from the study. In Pucangrejo, women, youth, and economically disadvantaged individuals face significant barriers to participation in the political process. Targeted initiatives, such as leadership training programs, voter education campaigns, and

mentorship opportunities, could help these groups overcome structural and cultural obstacles. By broadening the base of political participation, these measures can contribute to a more inclusive and representative democratic system.

At a broader level, the findings suggest the need for a more integrated approach to addressing local authoritarianism. While decentralization is often promoted as a solution for strengthening local democracy, the Pucangrejo case demonstrates that it must be accompanied by complementary reforms to ensure accountability and inclusivity. For instance, policies that encourage civic engagement, promote transparency, and support independent media can create an enabling environment for democratic renewal.

The interconnectedness of local and national governance further reinforces the importance of addressing local authoritarianism as part of broader democratic reforms. In Pucangrejo, the alignment between local elites and higher-level political actors illustrates how power dynamics at different levels of governance can reinforce each other. National policymakers should prioritize interventions that promote accountability at the local level, as these efforts are essential for safeguarding democratic principles across all tiers of governance.

In conclusion, the findings from Pucangrejo provide valuable insights into the challenges of local democracy in the context of decentralization. By highlighting the interplay between local authoritarianism, identity politics, and elite manipulation, the study contributes to both theoretical and policy debates on

democratization. Addressing these challenges requires a multifaceted approach that combines regulatory reforms, capacity-building initiatives, and efforts to empower marginalized groups. Such measures are critical for fostering more inclusive, accountable, and resilient democratic systems at the local level.

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