



Political Alienation of Citizens' Sovereignty in The Election of Village Heads

Analius Giawa^{*1}, RY. Gatot Raditya², Junior Hendri Wijaya³, Jaka Tri Widaryanta⁴

^{1,2,3,4}APMD College of Village Community Development, Indonesia

*Email: giawalius@gmail.com

Abstract: The Village Head Election (Pilkades) is a local democratic mechanism that guarantees the political sovereignty of villagers. This is in line with the principles of the constitution of the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia that "sovereignty is in the hands of the people and is exercised according to the Constitution". However, in practice, the Regional Elections often take place in asymmetrical power relations, thus producing politics of alienation and weakening the sovereignty of citizens substantively. This article analyzes how political alienation works in the Pilkades and its implications for the quality of village democracy. This research uses a critical qualitative approach with a case study design, based on in-depth interviews, observations, and document analysis. The analytical framework integrates the concepts of political alienation, power relations, and elite hegemony to read the Pilkades as a non-neutral arena of contestation. The findings show that the practice of money politics, the dominance of local elites and the limited bargaining space for villagers have created a distortion of citizens' participation in the election of village heads into meaningless procedural participation. The contribution of this article is as a source of literature on local democracy which has an affirmation that the quality of village democracy is not only measured by procedural participation but how power relations become an instrument in realizing the sovereignty of villagers.

Keywords: Political Alienation, Citizen Sovereignty, Village Head Election, Local Democracy, Power Relations



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1. Introduction

Villages are a new arena in the political process and the development of a democratic culture. This is in line with the mandate of Law Number 6 of 2014 concerning Villages and Law Number 3 of 2024 Second Amendment to Law Number 6 of 2014 concerning Villages. The process of electing the village head is a political education process that normatively also has a relationship with culture and traditions, values and norms that have become the identity of a village. Through the Pilkades, villagers are positioned as political subjects to be able to give birth to leaders of government implementation at the village level. The political culture of justice and rationality is the hope of the democratic process in the village. The election of the Village Head (Pilkades) is the main instrument

of local democracy that normatively guarantees the political sovereignty of villagers as mandated in Law Number 6 of 2014 concerning Villages. Through the Pilkades, villagers are positioned as political subjects who have the right to determine the direction of leadership and implementation of village government. However, these idealizations are often not fully realized in empirical practice, especially when the Regional Elections take place in an unequal power relationship and full of elite interests.

The Special Region of Yogyakarta (DIY) presents an interesting and problematic context in the study of village democracy. On the one hand, Yogyakarta is often perceived as a region with a relatively good tradition of democracy, political education, and community participation. This is inseparable from the condition of DIY which has a barometer of education and national culture. DIY as a barometer of education, this has relevance to the level of education and political participation of citizens. In the study, Azhari and his colleagues found that the level of education was in line with the level of political participation [1]. On the other hand, the socio-political dynamics of Kalurahan in Yogyakarta show the existence of a pattern of local patronage, strong kinship relations, the influence of informal elites, and the practice of money politics that subtly but systemically shape the political preferences of residents in Pilur. In a study of the village elections in Yogyakarta, it was stated that the relationship between local identity and programmatic strategies and populism became political instruments for candidates in the political campaign process [2]. The use of land resources is also an elite means of winning the hearts of residents [3]. This condition has the potential to create a politics of alienation, in which citizens formally participate in elections, but substantively lose control of the political process and outcome.

In addition, the peculiarities of the social structure of the village (Kalurahan) in Yogyakarta, which is marked by the strength of cultural symbols, the moral authority of local figures, and the normalization of power practices, often closes the space for criticism and weakens the bargaining position of the people of Kalurahan (Village). PWPNI Ideology (*Piro Wani Piro Number*) has contributed to the destruction of the democratic order because the elected candidates are more focused on returning the capital that has been spent during the political process [4]. Pilur (Pilur) then became not only an arena for electoral competition, but also a mechanism for the reproduction of the dominance of the local elite that obscured the principle of people's sovereignty. Until now, the study of Pilur in Yogyakarta is still dominated by administrative and participatory approaches, while critical analysis of political alienation and power relations at the village level is relatively limited. Therefore, this research is important to fill this void by critically examining how the politics of alienation works in Pilur in Yogyakarta and its implications for the political sovereignty of the villagers.

Although the Village Head Election (Pilkades) in the Special Region of Yogyakarta or specifically called the Village Election (Pilur) is normatively designed as a space and mechanism of local democracy that guarantees the political sovereignty of villagers, but in empirical practice it shows that there is an imbalance in power relations that has the potential to give birth to political alienation. Citizens' participation in the Pilkades is often procedural, formal, mobilizing and does not always reflect substantive control over the political processes and results that occur in the village. The dominance of local elites, the practice of patronage, transactional politics, and the normalization of the influence of informal and cultural figures form a power configuration that limits the political autonomy of citizens. The main issue in this study lies in how the mechanism of political alienation works in Pilur in Yogyakarta and the extent to which the practice of the local democratic process actually erodes the political sovereignty of the residents in the village.

The objectives of this study are:

- 1) Critically analyze the distortion *of the value of the* Pilur (Village Election Election) process in the Special Region of Yogyakarta.
- 2) Analyze the process of political alignment that occurred in the community during the Pilur process in the Special Region of Yogyakarta.

This study has a framework that focuses on the theory of political alienation initiated by Marx and Seeman and an analysis of power relations built by Mikhel Foucault. This is seen as not only an electoral procedure but also an arena in producing power so that political sovereignty for the villagers can be realized properly. Here's a brief frame of mind about this research:

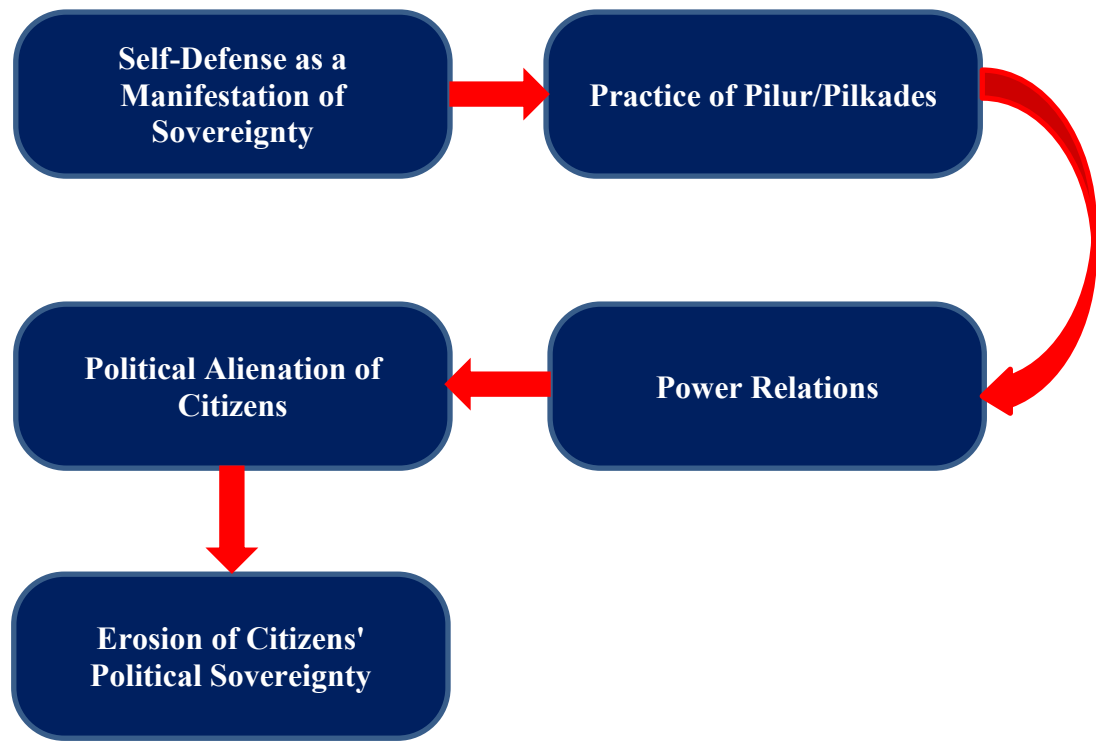


Figure 1. The Thought Flow of Studies

2. Literature Review

Studies on Selection village heads (pilkades) especially in Indonesia show that village democracy often operates in an unequal power structure. A number of empirical studies confirm that the elections are not just an arena for citizens' electoral competition, but a space for the reproduction of patronage relations, clientelism, and the dominance of local elites. Brokers become actors in electoral politics and the breakdown of the candidate's relationship with the citizens due to the existence of a dominant broker [5] and [6]. In this case, the political sovereignty of citizens often experiences *Political Alienation*, that is, the disconnect between the formal right to vote and the substantive capacity to determine political outcomes.

Previous studies on Post-reform village politics affirms the strong dominance of local elites through patronage, money politics, and control over village socio-economic resources [5]. The process of political practice during the elections political alienation for villagers, this Because citizen involvement is a formal action, but in substantive matters they are marginalized, especially in making decisions [7]. Studies in various regions show that the intervention of supra-village officials, networks of informal political parties, and village family oligarchs limit the autonomy of citizens' choices in the democratic process that occurs in the village [8], [9].

In general, the picture of empirical data in various regions of Indonesia finds that the intervention of external actors including district elites, local businessmen, and party networks systematically shape voter preferences through resource mobilization, information control, and money politics practices [10] and [11]. These studies confirm that the process of selecting village heads is often controlled by local oligarchs who marginalize non-elite citizens from the decision-making process.

The discussion of village decentralization in some literature shows the paradox of local democracy: the expansion of village authority actually opens up new space for the concentration of power in the hands of a few actors. The broad authority of the village is in accordance with Law No. 6 of 2014 but is not in line with the practice of the village government which is elitist, dominative. The village democratic process through the election of village heads is precisely an arena for power production for oligarchs and local elites [12]. This situation results in citizen participation in the elections being procedural, symbolic while political sovereignty is reduced by the dominance of interests. These empirical findings emphasize the importance of reading the election as an arena for power conflicts, not just an electoral democracy mechanism.

3. Results and Discussion

Pilur/Pilkades as a Manifestation of Citizens' Sovereignty

The election of the village head (pilkades) or the village head election (Pilur) is a tangible manifestation of the constitution to realize the sovereignty of the citizens at the local level, where the villagers have the right to choose and determine their leaders in a democratic and dignified manner. Village residents are political subjects who have influence and are very decisive in the leadership selection process in the village as the central actor who holds the top of village leadership. Law Number 6 of 2014 concerning Villages emphasizes that the election process or other names is a democratic mechanism in guaranteeing the rights of citizens to be directly involved, have equality and have rights in determining their political rights. However, various empirical studies show that the sovereignty that is echoed is only limited to narrative but in its implementation is still formal procedural.

For the context of the Special Region of Yogyakarta, the election of the village head (Pilur) in practice takes place in a configuration of values and norms that are typical of the people of Yogyakarta. Pilur in practice takes place colored by the involvement of the power of kinship networks, social patronage and the influence of traditional and religious leaders which tend to be practical political practices and mobilization. The politics of rationality has become neglected and prioritizes political practices of the citizens which incidentally provide momentary comfort by the narrative and emotional encouragement of political actors. In several Pilur in Yogyakarta such as in the areas of Sleman Regency, Bantul Regency, Kulonprogo Regency and Gunungkidul Regency, it shows that political preferences are more formed and influenced by asymmetrical social relations through community leaders and village officials. Javanese cultural values such as *ewuh pakewuh* and hesitation became instruments that helped color the political attitudes of the villagers.

Pilur in DIY has peculiarities that are directly related to values and norms as well as wisdom that has become the basis for the actions of every citizen. So in the political contestants of the village hall election in Yogyakarta, the existence of local elites and informal figures such as elders, old village heads, religious leaders, those who have closeness to bureaucrats actually become actors who frame and indirectly or directly participate in creating social, moral and economic pressure for residents when using their voting rights in choosing village heads in their respective areas. In other cases, it shows that race-based social capital, status as a religious leader or traditional leader, and proximity to the village apparatus are the determining factors for the candidate's victory. This creates what can be called *bounded choice*, a situation in which citizens are formally free to choose, but substantively their choices have been limited by social structures and symbolic pressures. This situation shows that the villagers are unable to exercise their political rights rationally and healthily but they are shackled by the social ties and local values that exist in the local community.

The various phenomena that occur in the Pilur process in DIY show the practice of subtle political alienation. Social capital, which has been believed and become a value in the attitude and order of life of citizens in Yogyakarta, has become a weapon that can be used in political practices to weaken the position of residents in villages or villages. Subtly, the political process of alienation is created slowly and unconsciously has weakened the capacity and affected the critical outcomes of the community in the village (kalurahan). The village election process in Yogyakarta shows that in some cases residents are reluctant to voice different political preferences due to concerns about social

sanctions, such as being excluded from the gotong royong network or losing access to village assistance (Kalurahan). This kind of alienation does not appear in the form of open apathy, but in social obedience wrapped in a narrative of harmony, togetherness, mutual cooperation, and solidarity.

Power Relations

Power relations in the Pilur or Pilkades in Yogyakarta in practice operate through the dominance of local elites who have social, economic, and symbolic capital. They in this case such as the incumbent village head, village elite families, traditional leaders, religious leaders, landlords, blue blood derivatives (kraton) and influential actors in informal bureaucratic networks are often *Gatekeeper* politics that determine the direction of the contestation. Past studies have shown that networks of patronage and political brokers play an important role in consolidating support, not through articulating citizens' interests, but through resource exchange, personal loyalty, and social pressure [5]. When compared to the situation that occurred in Yogyakarta, it was found that these practices were further strengthened by social ties that were communal and hierarchical, so that residents were reluctant to express political preferences that were different from the village elite. Traditions and values of togetherness that have been built in culture *Breeds* It becomes a space for political actors to be able to enter citizens' political spaces freely.

In addition to local elites, power relations are also mediated by external actors of the village, such as the network of political parties that have currently entered the political process of electing village heads (lurah), local businessmen, and supra-village bureaucratic actors (pamong kalurahan). Although the Pilur is formally non-partisan, a candidate's political affiliation with external actors often affects the distribution of campaign resources and access to administrative legitimacy. [12] shows that after the implementation of the Village Law, villages have greater fiscal autonomy, but at the same time open up new space for the penetration of external interests. In addition, the Speciality of DIY is a unique phenomenon that colors the political dynamics in the election of the village head in the DIY area. In addition, in the current real context, it shows that control of village funds and development projects becomes an instrument of power used to build electoral support, so that citizens' political choices are distorted by economic dependence. The inadequate economic situation of the village residents also affects the situation of the village election process in Yogyakarta.

Power relations in Pilur in DIY also work through cultural and symbolic mechanisms. The moral authority of indigenous leaders, religious leaders, and local cultural figures is often used to frame certain candidates as representations of "village harmony" or "continuity of tradition". Candidates who are recommendations from figures or kyai have become a frame of power in mobilizing the votes of voters. This practice creates normative pressures that limit the space for critical deliberation of citizens. Thus, citizens no longer fully participate as autonomous political subjects, but as part of a community that is required to maintain social consensus, mutual cooperation, community harmonization and the continuity of local traditions. Within the framework of Foucault's theory of power, this relationship shows how power works productively and subtly not through direct coercion, but through the internalization of social norms and disciplines [13].

The result of this asymmetrical power relationship is the emergence of alienation politics in the Pilur in the DIY area. Alienation is not always manifested in the form of voter attendance, but in the involvement of citizens that are procedural and symbolic. Citizens are present in the election process, but they do not have the real capacity to influence the agenda, candidates, or political results. Citizens are present only as the embodiment of a formal process for legitimacy and a meaningless invisible process. Citizens are directed and mobilized but are not given space to have critical, objective and rational voting rights but rather as objects of power legitimacy.

Thus, Pilur, which has always been practiced as a standard precedent in the DIY region, shows the paradox of village democracy (kalurahan): on the one hand, it becomes a legal instrument of citizen sovereignty; On the other hand, it operates in a power relations structure that limits the political autonomy of citizens. Citizens' sovereignty becomes biased and invisible because of the power that imprisons the rights of citizens as political subjects themselves. Thus, the sovereignty of

citizens in Pilur cannot be understood solely as a right to choose or vote for the candidate who will lead them but as the collective ability of citizens to challenge the dominance of the elite and shape political decisions substantially. The practice so far will be an instrument that creates political alignment for citizens at the local level.

The political sovereignty of the citizens is increasingly squeezed by the unequal power relations between the elite and the citizens of the community in the village. Residents are only used as a means of reproducing power and formal legitimacy against the ruler but ignore the bargaining space and political rights of villagers as a political issue that occurs in the village (kalurahan). Political alienation is the fruit of the process of political practice in the village which is full of the interests of elites and political middlemen to assert the rights of citizens through the village election process. This practice continues to weaken the deliberative political space of citizens in fighting for their votes as the holder of the highest sovereignty.

Erosion of Citizens' Political Sovereignty

The political sovereignty of citizens is the most fundamental principle in the culture of modern democracy. Citizens as holders of sovereignty as well as a source of legitimacy for the highest political power. Sovereignty is not only seen as a political right in voting in the political process but rather as a meaning of the ability of citizens to influence political agendas and directions, supervise the rulers and have the capacity to be actively involved in the decision-making process by policy makers. The meaning of sovereignty in this case is more about the meaning of the presence of citizens which is not only symbolic but has a meaning that is measured by the existence of space for access to the process and in decision-making, the existence of space for voice and the space to control decision-making processes or political policies for their own interests. Various studies and findings show that there is a shift in the meaning of the democratic process at the local level. The tendency of the erosion of citizens' political sovereignty in local political processes can be illustrated by formal participation that is not directly proportional to the substantive control of power that occurs within the citizens themselves [14]; [15].

In the political process in the midst of society, the process of erosion of sovereignty generally occurs through the structural and cultural processes of society that are interrelated with each other. This attachment arises due to the inequality of political and economic resources between citizens in general and local elites which in the end creates a dominant group for intervention and the ability to influence the rational politics of citizens. In a study, Masturi and Rao argued that citizens' participation in local institutions is often deliberately reduced to symbolic participation, this is because the process of power distribution is monopolized only by elite groups in a community [16].

In the context of Pilur in the Special Region of Yogyakarta, the dominance of local elites and the power of kinship networks and patronage have distorted citizens' political participation into meaningless. In the study [10] elaborated in detail and showed that the electoral political process at the local level in Indonesia is greatly influenced by the existence of political brokers as a link between the interests of voters and candidates in a political contest process. In the process of selecting the village head in the Istmewa Region of Yogyakarta, this political broker emerged from community leaders, village leaders, elite groups or landlords who have so far had social and economic influence among the villagers. Thus, the political actions of citizens are no longer rational politics or sovereignty politics but are the result of the political process of dependence, mobilization politics, revenge politics and kinship politics.

The erosion of citizens' political sovereignty is further exacerbated by the intervention of power stakeholders at the village level who often use power as a means of influencing the political attitudes of villagers. Financial resources that continue to flow to the village are one of the attractions for local elites to seize and occupy the position of village head or village head. Villages today since Law Number 6 of 2014 concerning Villages have experienced a significant order. The village head was often interpreted as the spearhead and the spearhead, but at this time there has been a very significant shift. Residents' dependence on development in the sub-district as well as various social assistance whose entrance through the sub-district government has contributed to weakening the bargaining position of the residents so that they are vulnerable to political mobilization.

Therefore, the erosion of the political sovereignty of the village community in the village election process cannot be explained from the high or low level of participation, but the erosion of the sovereignty of the residents can be seen from the absence of ideological contestation, rationality, and criticism from the residents as the highest sovereignty holder in the local political process, in this case in the village election process. Thus, the erosion of the political sovereignty of villagers in the village village elections in Yogyakarta is the result of a systemic process wrapped up through local culture, social life of local residents and the developing political economic structure of the village community.

4. Conclusion

This study concludes that the election of the village head (Pilur) in the Special Region of Yogyakarta (DIY) does not fully represent the substantive realization of citizens' sovereignty. The village election process that is practiced is more interpreted as a normative practice. The village election process is designed as an instrument of local democracy based on participation, rationality, and criticism in practice this process is often framed by asymmetrical power relations. The intervention of local elites, the influence of patronage networks, and the symbolic position of traditional authorities and village bureaucracy create conditions in which citizens' political choices are formed, directed, and even limited. This eventually gave birth to the politics of alienation where villagers (kalurahan) were alienated in political decision-making. The involvement of residents is only limited to symbolism but weak in being critical and bees in taking a rational political stance in the process of selecting village heads in their area.

These findings show that village democracy (kalurahan) in Yogyakarta operates in tension between the values of electoral democracy and the layered local power structure. In addition, *the values* and culture that are the instruments of the residents' lives have colored and contributed to weakening the critical value of the community towards the political dynamics in their area. Citizens' sovereignty tends to be procedural, limited to electoral participation, symbolically without substantive control over the political process and outcome. The dominant power relations and the narrow deliberative political space that became the arena of power competition and reproduction.

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