



# Oligarchic Shadows in Local Democracy: Analyzing the Dominance of Central Party Leaders in Regional Elections

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**Abstract:** This study highlights a significant gap in the analysis of direct local elections in Indonesia, revealing a concerning shift from democratic values towards oligarchic and authoritarian practices. This shift mainly stems from the dominance of central political party leaders in the candidate selection process. Through normative legal research based on 22 literature studies, the research uncovers substantial distortions in the implementation of direct elections since the reforms. The findings show that the authority to select regional head candidates remains centralized, which contradicts the principles of regional autonomy. This centralization fosters practices such as vote-buying, deviant behaviors, and abuse of power, leading to public apathy and increased pragmatism towards money politics, ultimately degrading societal moral standards. The study emphasizes the urgent need for legal reforms to reinforce democratic principles within political parties and candidate selection processes. The broader implication of this research reflects that if stringent legal frameworks are not implemented, then oligarchic influences would persist and therefore undermine democratic governance both in Indonesia and in similar political contexts globally. This means that whatever legal measures taken must be closely watched to protect the integrity of democracy.

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## 1. Introduction

The vibrancy of a democracy is often best showcased by its electoral processes. Elections are part and parcel of the principles of democracy, through which citizens get to exercise their right in choosing representatives and their executive leaders in accordance with the diverse wishes and expectations that they hold. All this is based on the democratic principle of ensuring that the ones who govern are only those who have succeeded in gaining majority support from the electorate. Since the reform era, Indonesia has carried out direct elections of leadership at the executive level, from president to the election of heads of local governments (Farida et al., 2020).

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election of heads of local governments (Farida et al., 2020).

However, the ideal of autonomy in local leadership elections has not been fully realized. Despite the electorate's role in selecting regional heads, the authority to determine who is eligible to run for these positions remains heavily centralized. Central political party boards hold the decisive power, often bypassing democratic procedures within the party structure (Zhao & Tang, 2019). This centralization of power within political parties, often controlled by influential figures, undermines the democratic process, reducing internal party democracy to a mere formality (Nonnemacher, 2021).

The autocratic control and influence exerted by party founders and leaders, in many cases treating parties as their personal enterprise and unilaterally making decisions about nominations, diminish democratic principles and marginalize the rest of the members, thereby turning the party into an oligarchic entity (Arlen & Rossi, 2020). This poses quality decision-making and power concentration problems. While political parties are important elements of representative democracy, such autocratic tendencies distort the function of political parties and deviate from democratic norms. It is argued that the relationship between the central actors and the local actors to a very great extent influences the kind of authoritarianism that may be said to be in a given party. Also, close relationships between political or economic elites and the dominant parties establish powerful power centres that are misaligned with democratic ideals \citep{Prajoko2024}.

Oligarchic practices within political parties significantly bear on the broader democratic terrain, eroding public trust and participation. When founding members and leaders of parties are autocratic and ignore the wider membership, this results in citizens losing faith in what they perceive to be a tainted and unresponsive political process. This results in lowered engagement and diminishing trust from the public. This leads to diminished levels of engagement and decreased public trust (Arlen & Rossi, 2020). Moreover, unchecked power endows leaders to show favoritism toward popular but possibly incompetent and corrupt nominees since the power is concentrated and there are no internal checks and balances, destroying democratic values further (Biezen, 2008). Further underlining internal dynamics as corruption levels within a political system are contingent upon parties with agenda-setting control and the imposition of legislative discipline, research reveals their scope of corrupt practices (Ayan, 2010).

The deviations from democratic norms within political parties underscore the need for a strong legal framework to address the arbitrariness and dominance of central party figures. Current Political Party and Election Laws are insufficient, often lacking provisions to regulate the autocratic control of party leaders, leaving gaps that party-specific regulations may not effectively fill (Bachmid & Rachmitasari, 2022). Enhancing the role of political party courts in resolving internal disputes can mitigate central dominance and promote internal democracy (Anggriawan et al., 2022). A normative legal approach, focusing on primary and secondary legal materials, can develop models for financial regulation that enhance transparency and accountability, reducing the concentration of financial power among a few leaders (Mamonto, 2022). Strengthening oversight of party activities through enhanced judicial review of party statutes and by-laws can ensure alignment with democratic principles and prevent power consolidation (Bachmid & Rachmitasari, 2022). This gap calls for comprehensive legal reforms to realign electoral laws with democratic ideals and prevent the shift from participatory to oligarchic governance.

The novelty of this study is the attempt to elaborate on internal power dynamics in Indonesian political parties and their effects on local elections. It creates an urgent need for legislated reforms that must institutionalize democratic norms in the structure of parties, including transparency and representative methods for the selection of candidates. This research attempts to emphasize the mechanisms through which central political party dominance undermines local democracy. It is an attempt to analyze these processes comprehensively so that they can inform policy and legal reforms in order to enhance more democratic participation and integrity in local elections in Indonesia.

## 2. Methodology

This research is library-based, which fits into the framework of normative legal research. Normative legal

research requires a full reading and analysis of the legal materials or secondary data sources, including primary, secondary, and tertiary legal data sources. The study uses these sources in an attempt to obtain an in-depth analysis of the relevant legal principles and frameworks concerning this area.

Review of the great amount of the legal literature and every kind of legal documents bring to the limelight. In the heart of this literature are primary law materials, consisting of statutes, regulations, and case law; put in other words, the very rules and basic principles of the law. There also come secondary law materials such as legal commentaries, journal articles, and books, which comprise views, interpretations, and analysis drawn from the primary sources. Finally, for tertiary sources of law, encyclopedias and legal dictionaries will add detail for a better understanding of more difficult legal notions.

After the relevant legal materials are collected, they are descriptively analyzed. It is a systematic analysis of content to identify major themes, principles, and legal arguments in the legal materials. The underlying procedure for analyzing it is to understand the normative legal framework and apply it to the research questions. Descriptive analysis of the legal material tries to give a clear and exhaustive explanation of the legal issues being investigated.

Thus, the final step of this methodology is to make conclusions that base on the descriptive analysis. The conclusions aim at answering the research questions by integrating the findings from the legal literature and secondary data. In so doing, the research is provided with a well-founded, fundamental understanding of the normative legal aspects related to the focus of the study in a well-arranged manner.

In summary, the research employs a very strong methodology by collection of primary, secondary, and tertiary legal materials through library research. Descriptive analysis of these materials has been carried out for an extensive assessment of the legal issues to end up with conclusions that are well supported and answer the research questions. This method is effective in providing a thorough and fully informed examination of the normative legal framework relevant to the study.

### **3. Result and Discussion**

This study picks up the thread regarding how candidates for regional head are selected through direct elections in Indonesia. Our aim is to determine the extent to which central political party leaders control this nomination process and what it suggests in terms of democratic values and regional autonomy. In this section, we presented our legal research findings and engaged in thoughtful discussion about the ways in which the control exerted by these central leaders impacts candidate selection, shapes political dynamics, and highlights the potential legal reforms necessary to tackle these challenges.

The party system in Indonesia operates in a top-down manner rather than a bottom-up approach. Ideally, party members elect the sub-district level leader, who in turn elects the district level leader. The district level leader then elects the provincial level leader, and finally, the provincial level leader elects the main level party leader (Harun et al., 2021).

In Indonesia, the structure of political parties is built from the top down rather than from the bottom up. Influential national figures with financial resources create political parties at the central level. These leaders then appoint individuals to represent the party in various regions, starting from the provincial level and extending down to the sub-district and village levels (Hillman, 2012).

Hence, the organizational structure of political parties in Indonesia is identical or mimicking that of the government, military, police, or corporations. Only a few political parties employ a bottom-up democratic approach, while the vast majority operate as top-down democracies. This top-down approach illustrates that Indonesian political parties do not genuinely represent the people; instead, they are essentially commanded by certain influential personalities and financial power (Mugiyanto, 2022).

At the heart of democracy and regional autonomy is the belief that people's participation should be central to all processes, especially in a bottom-up democratic approach. This principle has been fundamental to reforms since 1998, emphasizing that true sovereignty belongs to the people (Isra et al.,

2017). During the New Order era, the nomination of regional heads was primarily handled by the local Regional House of Representatives (DPRD), but the final decision rested with the central government, specifically the president. In the early reform period, however, the power to choose regional heads shifted to the local DPRD. Unfortunately, this era also witnessed a rise in money politics, where candidates resorted to financial incentives to sway members of the DPRD. Ultimately, the candidate who could offer the most money often emerged victorious in the elections (Jucá et al., 2016).

Direct elections for local leaders were introduced to tackle the problems associated with the previous system, where the Regional House of Representatives (DPRD) often fell prey to money politics. In theory, direct elections are a more democratic approach because they empower every resident in the region to take part in choosing their leader (Rajagukguk et al., 2021). This concept is not entirely new, as villagers have long been electing their village heads directly. Extending direct elections to district and provincial levels not only broadens regional representation but also engages a larger number of voters (de Archellie et al., 2020).

Regrettably, in the current local leaders' election system, the selection of candidates is not autonomously managed by regional political party leaders. Instead, it follows a tiered mechanism, with the ultimate decision resting in the hands of central-level political parties. In reality, those aspiring to become regional heads must navigate a challenging political lobbying process involving both regional and central political party leaders.

Lobbying, unfortunately, often involves financial contributions labeled as operational costs. Aspiring candidates must not only provide these funds but also support their bid with favorable survey results from polling institutions. Conducting these surveys is costly, and the candidates are typically responsible for covering these expenses.

When a candidate is popular within the community but lacks financial resources, entrepreneurs often step in to provide the necessary capital. These entrepreneurs fund the candidate, but this financial support comes with strings attached, involving specific political and economic agreements. Consequently, candidates who win elections find themselves indebted to these business interests. The funds channeled from entrepreneurs to political party leaders are not actually their own; rather, they often originate from the State Budget (APBN) or Local Government Budget (APBD).

Oligarchic practices in nominating local leaders extend into campaign financing, which is highly susceptible to voter bribery. With relatively small sums of money, businessmen can influence voters to choose their preferred candidates by employing "political intermediaries" in each village. For candidate pairs, using money to sway voters through these intermediaries is often seen as a "rational" strategy.

The formation of oligarchies and political dynasties often arises from the influence gained through elections. Once in office, leaders have the opportunity to position family members in various political roles by leveraging their power, financial resources, and relationships with wealthy backers. This cycle perpetuates itself at both central and regional levels (Timm, 2013). Electoral Law Reformulation Overcomes Political Party Leadership Oligarchy

The practice of elections through the direct democracy model has led to the emergence of oligarchic governments. This form of governance is controlled by a small group of individuals who maintain power for their own benefit, using their wealth to consolidate influence and control (Alexander, 2021).

Oligarchs are primarily focused on safeguarding their businesses, assets, and wealth. Their interests include protecting economic resources and channels, ensuring the smooth operation of their enterprises, and receiving favorable treatment from the government. In this way, democracy can be manipulated to serve the interests of the oligarchs (Zubytska, 2019).

So far, even though the constitution is supposed to be the highest law in a democracy, it hasn't stopped powerful oligarchs from taking over the country. These wealthy and influential elites, including political party leaders and business people, have twisted the democratic system, pushing it further away from its

original purpose of benefiting the Indonesian people. Essentially, this small elite group has seized control and transformed the democracy into an oligarchy. Their methods are pervasive, reaching deep into the political system like guerrilla movements, manipulating political parties, and even directly managing their operations (Bangsawan, 2022).

Behavioral deviations in the implementation of the law are inevitable. It is precisely in this case that the law plays a crucial role. Constitutional law is meant to regulate the deviant behaviors of political elites and oligarchic groups. The state should not lose the support of various resources and authorities. Unfortunately, constitutional law, especially the constitution, often stops at legal rules that are simply orders and prohibitions without any sanctions. As a result, constitutions are often regarded as "not law" since they lack enforceable consequences (Haußner & Kaeding, 2020).

One potential solution is to reformulate electoral law by incorporating criminal sanctions. However, before diving into the specifics of these sanctions, we must first reorganize the system for selecting candidates for regional heads. This reorganization should prioritize the principles of democracy and regional autonomy. Additionally, the party system itself should undergo significant restructuring to support these democratic ideals.

The recruitment of party members and administrators should start at the grassroots level, with a rule in place to prevent members from switching parties within a specific period. Additionally, the election of party administrators should be tiered, beginning from the bottom rather than the top. This approach should be considered when verifying new parties. Decisions regarding candidates for local leadership positions should be made at the regional level by party leaders, not at the central level. Furthermore, party officials should focus on the community's aspirations and the opinions of party cadres during the nomination process.

The law should properly guide the practice of internal party democracy. Where such a practice is not adhered to, political parties should be liable to civil and administrative and even criminal consequences. Most importantly, political party leaders who eschew democratic values and practices should be particularly subject to these criminal measures so that the system of party competition can come out with integrity and accountability.

Criminalization is the process of law making concerning the identification of criminal penalties. Mitchell et al. (2022) continued to state that it involves a move where legislators designate a given action as a crime whose breach can result in punishment. In addition, this is a policy choice that is paramount in the structuring of the law. In many cases, criminalization of certain behaviors is usually determined by a sense of morality and acquiescence by the people in a community.

By implementing criminal sanctions for political party leaders, it is hoped that administrators will adhere to democratic principles in both internal and external processes (Harun et al., 2021). The Election Law should encompass the management of political party finances, including income and expenses, with a focus on regulating external contributions that could be considered bribes (Mohr et al., 2022).

#### **4. Conclusions**

This study uncovers a significant distortion in democratic values during Indonesia's post-reform era of regional autonomy, marked by the central-level political party leaders' control in selecting regional head candidates. This shift undermines democracy, leading to public apathy, low voter turnout, and increased money politics, where pragmatic concerns overshadow democratic ideals. The study stresses the urgent need for legal reforms, particularly criminal sanctions, to ensure democratic processes within political parties are maintained both internally and externally.

The novelty of this research stands out for its detailed examination of Indonesia's internal party dynamics and their impact on local elections. It underscores the urgent need for robust legal frameworks to prevent oligarchic control and promote genuine democratic participation. Future research should investigate how these legal reforms affect political party behavior and examine similar oligarchic tendencies in other

emerging democracies. Such studies could help formulate comprehensive strategies to enhance democratic integrity worldwide.

## 5. Limitations, Implications, and Further Directions of Research

The study has a few notable limitations. Firstly, the analysis is restricted to Indonesia's political system, particularly in the context of regional elections, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other political contexts. The focus on normative legal research also constrains the exploration of practical, on-the-ground political dynamics that could provide a more comprehensive understanding. Additionally, the study relies heavily on literature and legal texts, which may overlook evolving political behaviors and contemporary electoral challenges that are not captured in existing legal frameworks. Despite these limitations, the research carries significant implications for policy and legal reforms. The findings highlight the urgent need for decentralization within political party structures and the introduction of legal frameworks that promote transparency and accountability. It suggests that reforms in party laws, including the democratization of candidate selection, are necessary to strengthen local autonomy and combat oligarchic control. Further research could expand on this study by investigating the impact of such legal reforms once implemented, as well as exploring similar oligarchic dynamics in other emerging democracies, providing a broader comparative analysis.

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