

# THE POLITICAL STRUGGLE OF AUTHORITY OF CUSTOMARY VILLAGES IN INCREASING PUBLIC PARTICIPATION IN THE REGIONAL HEAD ELECTIONS OF GIANYAR REGENCY IN THE REFORM ERA

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## Abstract

As an autonomous organization, the traditional village cannot be intervened by any forces. However, with the direct election of regional heads, their autonomy has begun to be influenced by political interests, even traditional villages as political forces. This study aims to analyze the political struggle for traditional village power in increasing community participation in the Gianyar regency head election in the reform era and to analyze the implications for the dynamics of community participation in the Gianyar regency head election. The research method used is descriptive qualitative. This method aims to explore or describe in detail the political struggles of traditional village powers in increasing community participation in the Gianyar regency head election. The results of the study show that the traditional village struggle led by *Bendesa* (Traditional leader) has a very important role in increasing community participation in the Gianyar regency head election. The autonomy of traditional villages is more open. It provides support for candidates that have been mutually agreed upon, which has implications for democratization at the local level, and the political role of civil society is not optimal; even from a democratic perspective, local leaders or traditional leaders do not support democratization.

**Keywords:** Regional Head Election, Traditional village, Traditional Village Administrator.

## A. INTRODUCTION

Bali has two distinctive village governance systems, namely *desa adat* (customary village) and *desa dinas* (official village). According to Law No. 6 of 2014 concerning Villages, a village is a legal community unit with clearly defined territorial boundaries and the authority to regulate and manage its own government and local interests based on community initiatives, ancestral rights, and/or traditional rights recognized within the national system. Meanwhile, Bali Provincial Regulation No. 4 of 2019 concerning Customary Villages defines a customary village as a legal community unit in Bali possessing its own territory, traditional structure, rights, property, and customs inherited through generations, along with the authority to govern its own household. Recent studies indicate that this regulation strengthens the autonomy of customary villages, although administrative and institutional challenges persist in its implementation (Fauziyah, 2021). Furthermore, Rahmatunnisa et al. (2023) highlight that despite the increasing legal recognition of *desa adat*, state intervention in institutional and funding aspects remains significant.

Customary villages in Bali, also known as *desa pakraman*, exhibit distinctive social and religious characteristics, including *awig-awig* (customary rules) that govern the behavior of all community members. These *awig-awig* serve as living legal norms reflecting community

independence and local democratic values, functioning as social guidelines deeply rooted in Balinese tradition (Alamuddin, 2022). Moreover, Lesmana (2025) emphasizes that awig-awig act as a vital source of strength for Balinese customary communities in preserving local culture amid modernization while enabling flexible adaptation to social change.

Since their inception, customary villages (*desa adat*) in Bali have functioned as autonomous entities possessing their own territory, governance, and customary law. This indicates that they have fulfilled the essential principles of sustainable and independent local governance (Rahmatunnisa, Putra, & Sasmita, 2023; April, Alkadafi, & Said, 2023). However, Joniarta (2024) emphasizes that although the existence of *desa adat* has been formally recognized under Bali Provincial Regulation No. 4 of 2019, achieving full autonomy remains challenging—particularly regarding economic management and integration with *desa dinas* (administrative villages).

As institutions, traditional villages are highly autonomous and play a vital role in preserving Balinese arts, traditions, and culture. The customary village leader, known as the *Bendesa*, is elected by the village community through deliberation and consensus, while *pararem* and *awig-awig* at the *banjar* (community group) level strengthen governance structures (Sumada, 2024; Yoga, 2023). This traditional village governance system reflects an evolving form of autonomy that interacts with the political dynamics of its era, producing a dual structure—traditional/informal and formal/state administration—where politics, custom, and religion in Bali are deeply intertwined (Rahmatunnisa et al., 2023; April et al., 2023).

Table 1. Percentage of public participation in regional head elections during the reform era in Gianyar district

| No     | Kecamatan    | 2008             |                    |            | 2012             |                    |            | 2018             |                    |            | 2024              |                    |              |
|--------|--------------|------------------|--------------------|------------|------------------|--------------------|------------|------------------|--------------------|------------|-------------------|--------------------|--------------|
|        |              | Number of Voters | Voter rights users | Percentage | Number of Voters | Voter rights users | Percentage | Number of voters | Voter rights users | Percentage | Number of Voter s | Voter rights users | Per cent age |
| 1      | Gianyar      | 63.484           | 51.832             | 82%        | 69.191           | 54.713             | 79%        | 71.860           | 55.189             | 76.8%      | 76.834            | 58.148             | 76%          |
| 2      | Blahbatuh    | 47.437           | 38.619             | 81%        | 51.710           | 39.103             | 76%        | 52.812           | 41.463             | 78.9%      | 56.713            | 44.121             | 78%          |
| 3      | Tampaksiring | 33.612           | 30.360             | 90%        | 36.087           | 31.114             | 85%        | 38.115           | 32.094             | 84.2%      | 40.069            | 33.399             | 83%          |
| 4      | Sukawati     | 66.362           | 50.649             | 84%        | 70.851           | 54.267             | 86%        | 75.844           | 62.382             | 82.3%      | 84.796            | 69.844             | 82%          |
| 5      | Ubud         | 46.383           | 42.116             | 91%        | 50.376           | 42.584             | 84%        | 52.628           | 44.945             | 85.4%      | 55.951            | 47.598             | 85%          |
| 6      | Payangan     | 31.665           | 32.284             | 86%        | 33.964           | 29.181             | 86%        | 35.919           | 30.377             | 84.6%      | 36.504            | 32.466             | 89%          |
| 7      | Tegallalang  | 35.430           | 26.616             | 93%        | 37.471           | 34.160             | 91%        | 39.434           | 33.391             | 85.4%      | 41.475            | 38.070             | 92%          |
| Jumlah |              | 324.373          | 279.081            | 86%        | 349.600          | 285.122            | 82%        | 366.612          | 300.210            | 81.8%      | 392.342           | 323.746            | 83%          |

Source: processed from data from the Gianyar Regency Election Commission (KPUD), 2025

Direct regional head elections in Gianyar Regency during the reform era have been held four times, namely in 2008, 2012, 2018 and 2024. In the regional head elections during the

reform era, public participation in voting by coming to the polling stations to conduct direct elections was quite high, although there was a decline every five years.

- a. The 2008 direct regional head elections were contested by two pairs of candidates: Agung Bharata and Putu Yudany Thema, who received 134,527 votes (49.33%), against Tjok Oka Artha Ardhana Sukawati and Dewa Made Sutanaya, who received 138,182 votes (50.67%). According to data from the Gianyar Regency General Elections Commission (KPU), 324,373 voters were registered on the final voter list, while 272,476 (86%) correctly cast their votes.
- b. The second direct regional head election in Gianyar Regency, held on November 4, 2012, from the opening of registration on July 24 to the closing of registration on July 30, 2012, was contested by two pairs of candidates: Cokorda Gde Putra Nindya from Puri Peliatan Ubud, running with Anak Agung Ngurah Agung from Puri Gianyar, who received 83,838 (30.21%) votes. The second direct election was won by the Agung Bharata and I Made Mahayastra ticket, securing 193,643 (69.79%) votes and winning in all sub-districts, including Ubud, a stronghold of Cokorda Gde Putra Nindya. There were 349,600 registered voters on the final voter list, and 285,122 (82%) voted.
- c. The third direct regional head election was contested by two candidate pairs: Cokorda Gde Putra Nindia and Pande Istri Maharani Prima Dewi, who received 93,336 (32.49%) votes, while I Made Mahayastra and Anak Agung Gde Mayun won with 193,923 (67.51%) votes. There were 366,612 registered voters, and 300,021 (81.8%) voters cast their votes.
- d. The fourth direct regional head election was contested by I Made Mahayastra and Anak Agung Mayun, the incumbent pair, who received 255,492 votes (81.14%), defeating Anak Agung Kakarsana and I Wayan Tagel Arjana, who received 59,382 votes (18.86%). 392,652 voters were registered on the permanent voter list, and 323,746 (83%) voted.

The high level of community participation in Gianyar at the polling stations (TPS) to elect their leaders is an interesting study, which can answer the question of how the political power struggle of traditional villages took place in the Gianyar Regency head election during the reform era. What are the implications of the political power struggle of traditional villages for the dynamics of community participation in Gianyar Regency?

## B. LITERATURE REVIEW

Traditional villages are always interesting to study because they provide ample space, integrate both the spiritual and material dimensions, and allow significant freedom of movement. For example, studies on democratic culture in Balinese village life show that the democratic culture practiced in Balinese villages is, in essence, not markedly different from the features of modern democracy, especially empirical/procedural democracy. Research indicates that the parameters include rotation of power, open recruitment of traditional leaders, regular leadership changes, respect for citizen rights, tolerance for differences of opinion, and accountability of those in power (Arjawa & Rwa Jayantiari, 2017; Giantari, Sukawati, & Widiastuari, 2022).

Research by Agus Purbathin Hadi on the existence of traditional villages and local institutions found that: (1) the Balinese people strongly maintain and practice customs inspired by Hindu teachings, which constitute strong social capital for sustainable village development; (2) traditional village institutions are able to withstand government intervention through compromise and adjustment, despite the dualism between traditional villages and official villages; however, in terms of community engagement, traditional villages have a stronger emotional connection with their residents than service villages, which only perform administrative functions; (3) the institution of the Subak (the water-using farmer institution)

has managed to withstand standardisation trends and continues its functions of water allocation, facility maintenance, resource mobilisation, dispute resolution, and ceremonies/rituals (Astara, Wesna, Amerta, & Artawan, 2018; Suarjana, 2023).

### C. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study, addressing the issues outlined above, utilizes qualitative research methods to examine the political power struggles of traditional villages in the Gianyar Regency regional head elections during the reform era. This qualitative study aimed to explore the phenomena of regional head elections in Gianyar Regency in 2008, 2012, 2018, and 2024. Initial data collection was conducted through observation, followed by in-depth interviews with informants. Informants were selected using purposive sampling based on their knowledge of traditional villages and politics. Data were also obtained through documents from the Gianyar Election Commission (KPUD) and other institutions, as well as online data collection. Informants in this study included community leaders, traditional village heads (Bendesa Adat), palace figures, and political elites.

The theory used in this study is Foucault's Discourse of Power, which analyzes the power relations of influential forces among various forces in community political participation, involving political society, civil society, and the economic community. These three societal forces will converge in the public sphere of direct regional head elections. The Discourse Theory of Power helps uncover and understand the discourse behind the relations and interactions of various societal components in public political participation in direct regional head elections in Gianyar Regency.

According to Lubis (2014:158), current socio-political and cultural studies (postmodern) are almost inseparable from Foucault's controversial influence, for example, when he stated that "knowledge is power." There is a close relationship between "power," "knowledge," and "truth" (power-knowledge). From his research, Foucault observed that in cultural history, physical and mental (intellectual) power has always existed, with strong minority groups imposing their ideas as great or good on the majority. The traditional leaders, led by the traditional village head, as a minority group, always socialize and campaign for the regional head candidates they support. The traditional leaders, with their power relations and symbolic power, play a crucial role in increasing public participation in regional head elections in Gianyar Regency.

### D. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

#### Description of Research Area

Administratively, Gianyar Regency is divided into seven sub-districts, namely: Gianyar Sub-district with an area of 50.59 km<sup>2</sup> or 13.75% of the area of Gianyar Regency which is also the capital of the regency. Blahbatuh Sub-district with an area of 39.70 km<sup>2</sup> or 10.79%. Tampaksiring Sub-district with an area of 42.38 km<sup>2</sup> or 11.58%. Ubud Sub-district with an area of 42.38 km<sup>2</sup> or 11.52%. Tegallalang Sub-district with an area of 61.80 km<sup>2</sup> or 16.79%. Payangan Sub-district with an area of 75.88 km<sup>2</sup> or 20.62%. Sukawati District, with an area of 55.02 km<sup>2</sup>, or 14.95% of the total area, is the district closest to Denpasar City and the most densely populated.

The population of Gianyar Regency in 2017, based on population projections, was 503,900, consisting of 254,400 males and 249,500 females. The population density was 1,321 people/km<sup>2</sup>. The highest density was in Sukawati District (2,109 people/km<sup>2</sup>), while the lowest density was in Payangan District (553 people/km<sup>2</sup>).

Gianyar Regency geographically stretches from north to south, with the northern tip near the mountains and the southern tip along the coast. Northern Gianyar includes the districts of

Payangan, Tegallalang, Tampaksiring, and Ubud. These four districts are quite far from the regency government center. The table above shows that the political participation of the people in direct regional head elections during the reform era was higher than that of the people of South Gianyar. Mujani (2012:220) states that the difference in rural and urban residence may influence political participation because participation is likely linked to mobilization by political agents or actors.

South Gianyar includes Gianyar sub-district, which is also the regency capital, Blahbatuh sub-district, and Sukawati sub-district. These three sub-districts are connected by a provincial road and are close to Denpasar, the capital of Bali province. Religious harmony is quite good, despite the diverse religions and ethnicities. In the three regional head elections during the reform era, political participation among the people of South Gianyar was lower than that of North Gianyar. South Gianyar has a more heterogeneous population, especially in the sub-district centers, due to the large number of migrants from outside the regency and outside Bali who reside temporarily or permanently. South Gianyar tends to be an urban area. Piliang (2011:228) states that cities are a political phenomenon, namely urban politics, because various forms of power relations operate within cities, within which various groups dominate over other groups, and within which there is a continuous struggle for power among social groups. Cities are spaces in which human segmentation occurs based on social, political, professional, ethnic, and cultural groups. Mujani (2011:66) states that urban communities are not different in their commitment to normative democracy, both rural and urban residents, but residents who live in cities tend to be negative in assessing the implementation of democracy. Urban residents are more critical. They tend to demand better practices of freedom and equality.

## Discussion

The political struggle for power within traditional villages in the direct election of regional heads in Gianyar Regency plays a crucial role in increasing community participation. Traditional leaders, led by the Bendesa Adat (traditional village head), invite candidates to visit their villages (mesimakrama) to present their programs to the community, bringing them closer to the community. Simakrama, the arena used by candidate pairs and their campaign teams to build community support, often concludes with a unanimous decision. This unanimous decision, a result of an agreement within the customary community, becomes a binding rule for the indigenous community, and any violations are subject to sanctions. The crucial role of traditional leaders, particularly the Bendesa Adat (traditional village head), as local figures possess social and symbolic capital, strategically crucial for increasing community participation.

The efforts of traditional leaders to reclaim community trust in traditional village management are evident in the improvements to temples and other supporting facilities, as well as the ongoing ceremonial activities at the Kahyangan Tiga temple and other Panca Yadnya rituals. The customary leaders, tasked with managing the spiritual and spiritual aspects, also serve as liaisons between regional leaders and the community, ensuring the implementation of local government programs and community interests, and vice versa.

Traditional villages, which enjoy extensive autonomy in managing their territories, are beginning to be undermined by the direct election of regional heads. This is because prospective regional heads consistently fill every space within the traditional village with their political promises. These promises can infiltrate individual members of the community, given the numerous obligations indigenous communities must shoulder in maintaining traditional practices, such as repairing temples and other public facilities, as well as the costs of conducting traditional ceremonies. To alleviate this burden, government assistance through



social assistance programs is necessary. Therefore, to obtain social assistance, networks of power must be established by providing support for direct elections for regional heads. According to James Scott, as quoted by Gaffar (2006:109), this relationship pattern is called patron-client, with the prospective regional head acting as the patron and the indigenous community acting as the client. Both parties interact reciprocally through the exchange of resources. The patron possesses resources in the form of power, position or title, protection, attention and affection, and often also material resources (wealth, cultivated land, and money). Meanwhile, the client possesses resources in the form of manpower, support, and loyalty. Traditional ceremonial activities that frequently attract the attention of regional head candidates and political party elites include the Pedudusan Agung ceremony, Ngenteg Linggih, and mass cremation, as shown in the image below.



Traditional ceremonies are used as political activities

Source: balipost.com and tribunbali

more

event, including regional head elections. This situation is unavoidable for traditional leaders and their communities, as traditional villages rely on the government for social assistance in preserving customs and culture, which requires significant funding. The dependence of traditional villages on the executive, facilitated by the legislature, has transformed traditional villages into politically exploited territories.

Political party elites also struggle to secure the victory of their candidates in their respective jurisdictions. Each party elite collaborates with local elites to invite, direct, and persuade the public to vote for their candidates, as a candidate's victory in their respective jurisdictions signifies success for the party elite. The integration of political party elites with community and traditional leaders creates a well-established power relationship.

The implications of this political power struggle within traditional villages for the dynamics of community participation in direct regional head elections are that traditional leaders, with the power to rally the indigenous community, can be asked for their assistance in supporting a particular candidate. The power of traditional leaders and voters who are still easily influenced by primordial sentiments, makes democratization at the local level and the political role of civil society less than optimal. According to Aminah (2014:206) there is a tendency for their movements to be trapped in elitist political activities, less able to strengthen the political resources of the people to face the resources of local political actors. Hikam (1996:3) said, as a political space, civil society is an area that guarantees the continuation of independent behavior, actions and reflection, not confined by material living conditions, and not absorbed in official political institutional networks. The large role of prajuru adat as local figures in mobilizing and shifting public support in regional head elections in the reform era seen from the perspective of democracy, local political figures actually do not support democratization at the local level and even form an imperfect democracy. According to Piliang (2010:165) imperfect democracy is when the image of democracy does not match the reality of democracy. There is no freedom given to the community in making choices because there is

an agreement that has been approved in a traditional village meeting/paruman so that there are sanctions that must be accepted by the community who do not comply with the agreement.

The community's arrival at the polling stations to vote in support of their candidate is inextricably linked to their goal of obtaining promised assistance. This assistance is provided to preserve cultural and traditional activities and supporting facilities, such as repairs to temples, traditional houses (wantilan), village halls (balai banjar), and other public facilities. Indigenous communities, as voters, possess resources that attract the attention of regional head candidates. These resources are controlled by the traditional village head (Bendesa adat), which makes regional head candidates and traditional leaders mutually dependent. Regional head candidates need votes to win elections, and indigenous communities need various forms of assistance to ease their burden in maintaining and preserving the arts and culture within their communities. The ownership of these resources creates a mutual need, with the goal of maximizing the realization of their interests.

This rational choice follows the direction of the group's choice, namely the traditional village, coupled with an agreement based on the "Suryak Siyu" decision-making model, which obliges the community to comply. Individuals follow the group's choice not only to maintain community harmony in the village, but also to receive material benefits in the form of social assistance.

## E. CONCLUSION

The struggles of local elites, particularly traditional leaders, play a significant role in increasing community participation. The symbolic power of traditional leaders is their ability to persuade and direct the community to vote for specific candidates. Direct elections for regional heads have transformed the autonomous nature of traditional villages into more open organizations, providing support to candidates in accordance with agreed agreements, thus transforming traditional villages into political forces. The strong influence of traditional leaders has subverted local democratization and the political role of civil society. From a democratic perspective, local and traditional leaders discourage local democratization and even create an imperfect democracy. Decision-making is based on consensus, thus thwarting the freedom for every citizen to make their own choices.

Traditional villages should return to being autonomous organizations, free from interference by any power, let alone political forces. This allows community members to exercise democratic control in political activities, particularly regional head elections, without interference or intimidation. It would be better if the local government establishes regional regulations regarding the preservation of arts and culture so that all traditional villages receive regular funds every year to reduce the burden on the community in preserving arts and culture.

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