

The Spatial Inversion of Primordial Terror: Bureaucratic Neutrality in Indonesia's Local Elections

Ivone Patricia Rundengan¹, Muhammad¹, Gustiana Kambo¹

¹Department of Social and Political Sciences, Hasanuddin University.

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Abstract

This study examines why bureaucratic neutrality is vulnerable to identity politics during direct local executive elections (Pilkada) in Indonesia. Using a qualitative comparative explanatory case study design, it contrasts an urban, heterogeneous city (Kota Kotamobagu) with a rural, geographically dispersed regency (Kabupaten Bolaang Mongondow) in North Sulawesi during the 2024 Pilkada. Data were collected through confidential in-depth interviews with 19 informants, including civil servants (ASN), election supervisors (Bawaslu), personnel officials, and customary leaders, supplemented by digital ethnography and documentary analysis, and were analyzed using the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña. The findings show that identity politics disrupts local bureaucracies asymmetrically. In rural Bolaang Mongondow, politicization operates through the weaponization of kinship networks (kinalang), whereas in urban Kotamobagu it fragments the bureaucracy along religious and sub-ethnic lines within informal digital spaces. The study conceptualizes this pattern as spatial-based electoral bureaucratic terror: rural elites exploit vast terrain through punitive transfers to remote sub-districts, while urban elites rely on structural-financial intimidation through demotions and non-job designations. Both forms are reinforced by the cultural pressure of homeland social debt (lipu'), which normalizes in-group favoritism. Theoretically, the study proposes a spatial inversion of Castells' resistance identity and extends Weberian bureaucracy theory by treating geography as an instrument of coercion. Practically, it proposes an Ethical-Cultural Meritocracy model that combines the Mongondow philosophy of Mototompiaan, Mototabian, bo Mototanoban (Tri-M) as an internal ethical barrier with centralized oversight by the National Civil Service Agency (BKN) to prevent post-election retaliation.

Keywords: Bureaucratic Neutrality; Identity Politics; Local Elections; Spatial Coercion; Tri-M Philosophy.

1 Introduction

The preservation of bureaucratic neutrality is a cornerstone of electoral integrity and the democratic rule of law. In Indonesia, the decentralization policy initiated after the 1998 Reformasi shifted the arena of political contestation to the local level and placed considerable authority over regional bureaucracies in the hands of directly elected regional heads. While direct local executive elections (Pilkada) were envisioned to deepen democratic accountability, they have also intensified the vulnerability of the State Civil Apparatus (Aparatur Sipil Negara, ASN) to political co-optation (Ruslihardi et al., 2021; Tamma, 2016). Because incumbent regional heads simultaneously act as electoral contestants and as Personnel Guidance Officers (Pejabat Pembina Kepegawaian, PPK) with authority over appointments, transfers, and promotions, civil servants are structurally exposed to the electoral ambitions of their own superiors (Ramadhani et al., 2024; Ryu & Virindra, 2023).

Scholarship on Indonesia's patronage democracy has demonstrated that elections are fought primarily through personal networks, brokers, and the distribution of material benefits rather than through programmatic appeals (Berenschot, 2018; Berenschot & Aspinall, 2020). Within this system, the bureaucracy is both a resource and a prize: public sector positions are distributed as political rewards, and civil servants are mobilized as vote brokers and campaign machinery (Pierskalla & Sacks, 2020; Turner et al., 2022). Regional studies confirm that neutrality violations escalate during Pilkada cycles, ranging from open campaign participation and social media endorsements to the covert use of office resources, and that fragmented regulations and weak sanction mechanisms allow such violations to persist (Agustian et al., 2025; Mujiburrahman et al., 2025; Nadjib et al., 2022). The election supervisory agency likewise identifies ASN neutrality as a recurrent dimension of electoral vulnerability in the 2024 election cycle (Bawaslu RI, 2024).

Formally, Indonesian law leaves little ambiguity about the obligation of neutrality. The civil service legislation requires civil servants to be free from the influence and intervention of any political group or party, and regional heads are prohibited from replacing officials in the months before and after an election without central approval (Republic of Indonesia, 2016, 2023). The persistence of neutrality violations despite this dense regulatory framework suggests that the problem lies less in the absence of rules than in the social and political conditions under which rules are implemented. Civil servants confront a dilemma in which compliance with the law may

expose them to retaliation from the very officials who control their careers, while compliance with political demands exposes them to legal sanctions that are rarely enforced (Ryu & Virindra, 2023; Tamma, 2016).

Existing studies, however, predominantly treat neutrality violations either as a legal-administrative problem of regulation and enforcement or as a by-product of political dynasties and local oligarchic power (Kamaluddin et al., 2024; Muksin et al., 2024; Purwaningsih & Widodo, 2020). Comparative research beyond Indonesia shows that politicians use the threat of dismissal, transfer, and the loss of benefits to discipline both bureaucrats and voters (Frye et al., 2019; Mares & Young, 2016; Oliveros & Schuster, 2018). Yet little attention has been paid to how local political actors combine identity and geography to enforce bureaucratic compliance, and to how the form of coercion varies with the spatial and demographic character of a jurisdiction. A significant gap therefore remains in understanding how local political actors structurally manipulate identity and territory to secure the loyalty of the state apparatus.

This article addresses this gap by investigating the intersection of identity politics, regional geography, and bureaucratic vulnerability through a comparative analysis of two neighboring yet distinct localities in North Sulawesi: Kota Kotamobagu and Kabupaten Bolaang Mongondow. United by the shared ancestral roots of the Mongondow ethnic group and by a common administrative history, since Kotamobagu was carved out of its parent regency as an autonomous city, these two jurisdictions nevertheless present opposing demographic and spatial profiles. As research on district creation in Indonesia suggests, the partition of regions frequently produces new units with markedly different social compositions and political dynamics (Pierskalla, 2016). Kotamobagu represents a compact, urban, and heterogeneous center, while Bolaang Mongondow represents a vast, rural, and geographically dispersed agricultural landscape.

The theoretical contribution of this study is threefold. First, it reassesses Castells' (2010) concept of resistance identity. While Castells theorizes that communal or primordial identities are constructed by grassroots actors to resist domination, this study introduces the concept of the spatial inversion of resistance identity, arguing that local elites (mayors and regents) co-opt and institutionalize local resistance identities to enforce structural compliance within the state apparatus. Second, the study expands Weber's (1978) theory of legal-rational bureaucracy by introducing a new typology, spatial-based electoral bureaucratic terror, which demonstrates how regional heads exploit the spatial and geographic dimensions of their territory to enforce political alignment, a factor overlooked by administrative-centered Weberian scholarship. Third, it builds on Muhammad's (2019) theory of electoral integrity by showing how formal, legalistic election monitoring fails when confronted with regional patronage, and it proposes an Ethical-Cultural Meritocracy framework that fuses national structural safeguards with localized cultural values.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

To dissect the manipulation of bureaucratic institutions during subnational elections, this study first situates itself within two bodies of empirical literature, namely bureaucratic politicization and identity politics in Indonesia, and then establishes a multi-layered theoretical framework consisting of a grand theory, a middle theory, and an application theory.

Bureaucratic Politicization, Clientelism, and Coercion

A growing comparative literature shows that control over public personnel is one of the most important resources available to incumbent politicians. Studies in Brazil and Ghana demonstrate that politicians routinely reward supporters with public sector jobs and that political turnover triggers waves of bureaucratic replacement (Akhtari et al., 2022; Brierley, 2021; Colonnelli et al., 2020). Political appointees may at times improve service delivery by aligning bureaucratic incentives with political priorities (Toral, 2024), but they also become instruments of rent extraction when their careers depend on political patrons (Brierley, 2020). Research from India further indicates that politicians' capacity to monitor and discipline bureaucrats shapes public service outcomes at the local level (Gulzar & Pasquale, 2017).

The same mechanisms that allow politicians to reward loyal bureaucrats also allow them to punish disloyal ones. Mares and Young (2016) distinguish between positive inducements, such as vote buying, and negative inducements, such as threats and coercion, and show that the latter are especially effective when political actors control access to employment. Workplace mobilization in Russia illustrates how employers combine carrots and sticks to secure electoral compliance (Frye et al., 2019), while experimental evidence from the Dominican Republic shows that civil servants without tenure protection are significantly more willing to engage in political work for their superiors (Oliveros & Schuster, 2018). These findings suggest that the vulnerability of civil servants is less a matter of individual ethics than of the institutional design that links their careers to the electoral fate of their political principals.

In Indonesia, these dynamics are amplified by decentralization. Regional heads control recruitment, promotion, and transfers, which makes the bureaucracy a key arena for clientelistic competition (Berenschot, 2018; Pierskalla & Sacks, 2020). Efforts to reform this large bureaucracy through merit-based systems have achieved

only partial success because they repeatedly collide with entrenched patronage interests (Turner et al., 2022). Local studies show that civil servants engage in political activity out of pragmatic calculations about career security, rotation, and promotion (Ryu & Virindra, 2023; Tamma, 2016), and that politicization extends into the post-election period, when personnel decisions can be used to reward loyal officials and sideline others (Agustian et al., 2025; Mujiburrahman et al., 2025). The strength of political dynasties further intensifies this pressure, because dynastic incumbents can draw on family networks embedded throughout the local administration (Aspinall & As'ad, 2016; Kamaluddin et al., 2024; Muksin et al., 2024).

Identity Politics and Digital Polarization in Indonesia

The second body of literature concerns the resurgence of identity politics in Indonesian elections. Survey research shows that religious and ideological cleavages rooted in the *aliran* tradition continue to structure political behavior (Fossati, 2019). The 2016–2017 Islamist mobilization in Jakarta demonstrated how religious identity can be weaponized for electoral purposes (Mietzner & Muhtadi, 2018), and Islamic organizations have since become increasingly active in emotionally charged forms of electoral mobilization (Nastiti & Ratri, 2018). Scholars have linked these developments to a broader pattern of democratic regression, in which identity polarization and executive illiberalism reinforce one another (Mietzner, 2020; Power, 2018; Warburton & Aspinall, 2019).

Digital platforms have become a central arena of this polarization. Lim (2017) shows how social media create algorithmic enclaves that foster tribal forms of nationalism and hostility toward perceived outsiders, while Tapsell (2021) documents the rise of subversive, underground campaigning through closed messaging groups that escape formal electoral regulation. These insights are particularly relevant to civil servants, who are formally prohibited from campaigning but are embedded in dense networks of private WhatsApp groups. Taken together, both bodies of literature establish that the bureaucracy is politicized and that identity is mobilized; what remains under-theorized is how these two processes are fused and how their fusion varies across different spatial contexts.

Grand Theory: Castells' Identity Framework and Its Inversion

Castells (2010) conceptualizes identity construction through three distinct lenses: legitimizing identity, project identity, and resistance identity. Resistance identity is defined as the collective defense mechanism generated by actors who are marginalized or devalued by the dominant logic of domination, whether in the form of globalization or state power. It is, in essence, a defensive weapon of the marginalized, through which communal havens are built against hostile structures.

This study, however, posits a theoretical deviation termed the spatial inversion of resistance identity. In localized, subnational regimes characterized by ethnic homogeneity or deep kinship ties, the symbols of resistance, such as clan networks or indigenous solidarity, are frequently appropriated by local state actors. The regional executive transforms what should be a defensive communal identity into an offensive apparatus that demands political fealty from civil servants. The inversion is "spatial" because its form depends on the territorial configuration of the jurisdiction: in dispersed rural areas it operates through genealogical networks spread across villages, whereas in compact urban areas it operates through religious and sub-ethnic boundaries reproduced in digital spaces.

Middle Theory: Constructivist Political Culture

Kambo's (2021) constructivist approach to identity politics serves as the middle theory. Kambo argues that identity politics in democratic transitions is never static or naturally given (*primordial murni*). Instead, it is systematically manufactured, reproduced, and maintained by political entrepreneurs through symbolic manipulation within the local political culture. This perspective is consistent with comparative findings that identity cleavages are activated and intensified by elites for electoral purposes rather than simply reflecting pre-existing social divisions (Mietzner & Muhtadi, 2018; Nastiti & Ratri, 2018).

This study uses Kambo's framework to analyze how cultural narratives, such as ancestral loyalty and homeland social debt, are deliberately weaponized by local patrons to trap civil servants within a cycle of obligatory political favoritism (in-group favoritism), thereby eroding professional autonomy.

Application Theory: Weberian Impersonality and Substantive Electoral Integrity

Weber's (1978) legal-rational bureaucracy presumes that the modern state apparatus operates on the principle of impersonality, functioning strictly according to written rules and free from personal sentiments, lineages, or political interference. In direct tension with this ideal is Muhammad's (2019) framework of electoral integrity, which posits that substantive electoral justice requires not only formal legal compliance but also the absence of coercion and intimidation against all actors involved in the electoral process, including civil servants.

This study uses these two theories to evaluate the breakdown of bureaucratic impartiality under the weight of subnational clientelism, assessing how local executive power compromises both the rational state and electoral fairness. Weberian theory provides the normative benchmark of an impersonal bureaucracy, while the electoral

integrity framework provides the criteria for judging whether the conditions of a free and fair contest have been met.

Building on this framework, the study addresses three research questions: (1) How does identity politics manifest within the bureaucracies of urban Kota Kotamobagu and rural Kabupaten Bolaang Mongondow during the 2024 Pilkada? (2) How do regional heads exploit the spatial and structural characteristics of their territories to coerce civil servants into political alignment? (3) What model can safeguard bureaucratic neutrality against identity-based and spatial coercion? Accordingly, this study aims to explain the asymmetric manifestations of identity politics in the two localities, to construct a typology of spatial-based coercion against civil servants, and to formulate an Ethical-Cultural Meritocracy model that strengthens bureaucratic neutrality and electoral integrity.

2. METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative comparative explanatory case study design. The design was selected to explain why and how an identical structural requirement, namely the legal obligation of bureaucratic neutrality, collapses under different socio-spatial expressions of identity politics. The two cases were selected following a most-similar systems logic: both jurisdictions are located in the same province, share the Mongondow ethnic and cultural heritage, operate under the same national regulatory framework, and held their regional head elections simultaneously in 2024. They differ, however, in their spatial and demographic configuration, which allows the study to isolate geography and social composition as explanatory factors (Figure 1).

The unit of analysis is the relationship between regional executives and civil servants during the electoral cycle, observed through the experiences of civil servants and of the institutions that supervise them. The study does not seek statistical generalization; rather, it aims at analytical generalization, using the contrast between the two cases to develop and refine theoretical propositions about the conditions under which bureaucratic neutrality erodes and the forms that this erosion takes.

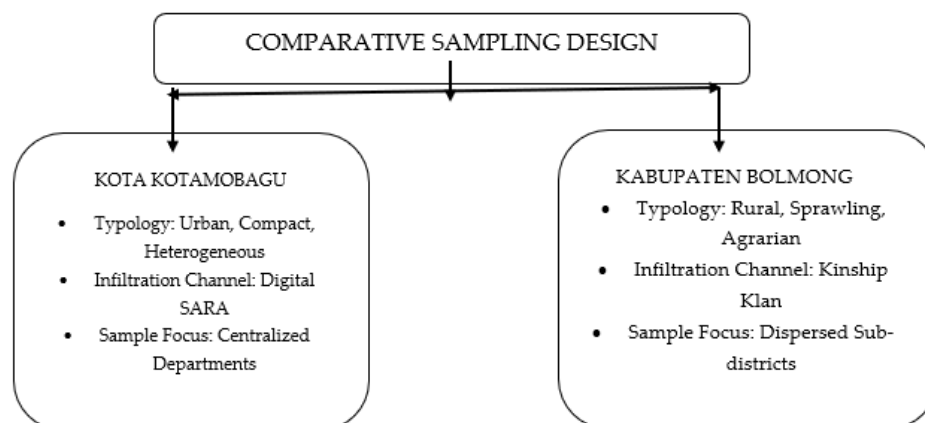


Figure 1. Comparative Sampling Design

Source: Authors' elaboration (2024)

Research Setting

Kota Kotamobagu is a compact urban municipality that functions as the commercial and administrative hub of the Bolaang Mongondow Raya region. Its government offices are concentrated within a small area, its population is religiously and sub-ethnically heterogeneous, and competition for strategic structural positions is intense. Kabupaten Bolaang Mongondow, by contrast, is the parent regency of the region, characterized by an extensive and rugged territory that stretches from coastal areas to remote interior sub-districts, an agrarian economy, and dense kinship networks that link villages to historically influential families. These contrasting settings provide a natural comparison for examining how the same political objective, securing bureaucratic loyalty, is pursued through different coercive repertoires.

Informant Selection and Purposive Sampling

Data collection relied on purposive sampling to recruit nineteen (19) informants, divided into three strategic tiers:

1. **Key informants:** election oversight commissioners from Bawaslu Kota Kotamobagu and Bawaslu Kabupaten Bolaang Mongondow, alongside senior officials from the local civil service personnel agencies (BKPSDM/BKPP) and regional inspectorates.
2. **Main informants:** civil servants (ASN) ranging from echelon III and IV structural officials to functional field officers and contract-based staff (PPPK) in highly vulnerable sectors, namely education, health, and the regional secretariats.
3. **Supporting informants:** cultural leaders from the Mongondow customary institution (AMABOM Raya) and senior political scientists specializing in North Sulawesi electoral dynamics.

Data Collection and Ethical Protocols

Data triangulation was achieved through semi-structured in-depth interviews, digital ethnography of civil service communications, and documentary analysis of Bawaslu violation registries. Triangulation across sources (civil servants, supervisors, personnel officials, and cultural leaders) and across techniques (interviews, digital observation, and documents) was used to strengthen the credibility of the findings. Interview excerpts presented in this article were translated into English by the authors.

Given the high political risks and the threat of professional retaliation faced by civil servants, a strict total anonymity protocol was implemented. No real names, civil servant registration numbers (NIP), or specific departmental subdivisions are disclosed, and all identities are replaced with codes (e.g., IU-ASN-BM-04). Interviews were conducted outside official working hours and in neutral public spaces to prevent structural surveillance by regional executives. Informed consent was obtained orally from all informants before each interview.

Data Analysis

Qualitative data were analyzed using the interactive model of Miles et al. (2014), which consists of three concurrent activities:

1. **Data condensation:** sifting through interview transcripts to isolate narratives that explicitly describe identity manipulation, institutional pressure, and career vulnerability.
2. **Data display:** structuring the findings into a comparative contrast matrix that juxtaposes urban structural coercion with rural spatial intimidation (Table 1).

Conclusion drawing and verification: cross-referencing field data against the theoretical frameworks of Castells, Kambo, Weber, and Muhammad, as well as against the documentary evidence, to verify the structural-spatial typology.

3. RESULTS

The field data demonstrate that although both regions share a common indigenous matrix, the operational deployment of identity politics during the 2024 Pilkada manifested asymmetrically and was shaped by the socio-spatial profile of each jurisdiction. The findings are presented in four parts: the channels of identity mobilization in each locality, the coercive instruments used against civil servants, and the cultural mechanism that sustains compliance.

Rural Kinship Mechanization: The Kinalang System in Bolaang Mongondow

In the agrarian landscape of Kabupaten Bolaang Mongondow, identity politics is structurally engineered through the revitalization of the kinalang system, a traditional network of kinship lineages centered on historically powerful local political families. During the 2024 Pilkada, political actors deliberately invoked genealogy to demand compliance from civil servants who shared their bloodlines. As a sub-district structural official in Kabupaten Bolaang Mongondow explained:

“In a rural setting like Bolmong, escaping the gaze of the ruling clan is nearly impossible. Political agents do not approach us with formal policy platforms; instead, they enter our private spaces and invoke our lineage. They say, ‘We are of one blood, one kinalang. If we do not protect our own family’s hold on power, who will?’ This places a massive psychological burden on us. To refuse to assist their campaign is not viewed as a legal choice to remain neutral; it is branded as an act of familial betrayal, resulting in social ostracization by our own community.”

This subversion of community norms was corroborated by a Bawaslu commissioner in Kabupaten Bolaang Mongondow, who highlighted the tactical difficulty of legal enforcement:

“The most pervasive neutrality violations in Bolmong are masked as traditional family gatherings, lifecycle rituals, or ancestral clan assemblies. Civil servants attend under the guise of customary obligations. However, behind closed doors, these gatherings function as highly effective political mobilization engines. Because the line between a cultural family obligation and an illegal campaign assembly is intentionally blurred, our enforcement mechanisms are tactically paralyzed.”

These accounts indicate that in the rural setting the boundary between the private sphere of the family and the public sphere of the bureaucracy is deliberately dissolved. Political mobilization does not take place in offices but in customary and domestic spaces, which are beyond the reach of formal supervision and in which refusal carries heavy social costs.

Urban Digital Identity Mobilization and Horizontal Fragmentation in Kota Kotamobagu

In contrast to the clan-based structures of Bolaang Mongondow, the compact urban environment of Kota Kotamobagu experienced identity politics through the manipulation of religious and sub-ethnic diversity, locally referred to as SARA (suku, agama, ras, dan antargolongan). Rather than relying on traditional lineage heads, political entrepreneurs manufactured polarization through informal digital networks, engineering a horizontal split within the city’s departments. A functional officer within the Kotamobagu city government described this digital fragmentation:

“As soon as the 2024 Pilkada began, the professional atmosphere in our office turned intensely hostile. Unofficial WhatsApp groups proliferated outside our official channels, dedicated entirely to spreading religious rhetoric and polarizing narratives regarding ‘indigenous sons of the soil’ versus ‘outsiders’ to back the favored candidate. Our department head, who shared the identity of the dominant political faction, initiated a pattern of silent exclusion. Those of us perceived as outsiders or belonging to different religious groups were systematically cut out from strategic projects and isolated within our own offices.”

The urban pattern therefore differs from the rural one in both its channel and its target. Mobilization takes place through private digital groups rather than through family gatherings, and its main effect is not the vertical subordination of relatives but the horizontal fragmentation of colleagues into competing identity factions.

Urban Structural-Financial Coercion: The Non-Job Threat

The two localities also differ in the coercive instruments used against civil servants who refuse to comply. In the geographically compact environment of Kota Kotamobagu, where government offices are centralized and professional advancement is highly competitive, the primary instrument of coercion is what this study calls structural decapitation. Regional executives use their legal status as PPK to execute demotions or non-job designations, which remove officials from their structural positions without dismissing them from the civil service. A mid-level official in Kota Kotamobagu explained the economic reality of this threat:

“In an urban center, space is small but the stakes for survival are high. Professional neutrality cannot defend your family from an executive decree that strips you of your rank. The threat of being put in a non-job status means an immediate loss of regional allowances, wiping out up to 60% of your income overnight. Therefore, civil servants adopt a pragmatic stance of compliance. We sacrifice legal neutrality to protect our livelihoods from an all-powerful political executive.”

Rural Spatial Coercion: Geographical Exile as Punishment

Conversely, in Kabupaten Bolaang Mongondow, the regional executive capitalizes on the regency’s expansive and rugged geography to enforce political compliance. Instead of simple demotion, non-compliant civil servants face what informants describe as geographical exile. A field administrator in Kabupaten Bolaang Mongondow recounted this form of spatial punishment:

“In Bolmong, the ultimate weapon used against non-aligned civil servants is the distance of your transfer. If you resist the mobilization orders of the ruling clan, you are not merely demoted; you are transferred to the most isolated coastal outposts or remote interior sub-districts, hours away from your home. This sudden, punitive relocation serves as an aggressive physical and financial terror. The daily travel costs and forced separation from our families break our resistance, forcing everyone else into submission.”

The comparison of the two localities is summarized in Table 1. Although the political objective is identical, the coercive repertoire is calibrated to the territory: where space is scarce and positions are valuable, coercion targets rank and income; where space is vast and connectivity is poor, coercion targets physical location and family life.

Table 1. The Spatial-Structural Dichotomy of Bureaucratic Coercion

Dimension	Urban: Kota Kotamobagu	Rural: Kabupaten Bolaang Mongondow
Spatial context	Compact territory; centralized offices; high-value structural posts	Vast, rugged territory; dispersed and isolated outposts
Identity channel	Religious and sub-ethnic (SARA) narratives in informal WhatsApp groups	Kinship lineage networks (kinalang) and customary gatherings
Effect on bureaucracy	Horizontal fragmentation into identity factions	Vertical subordination of relatives to the ruling clan
Coercive instrument	Structural decapitation: demotion and non-job designation	Geographical exile: punitive transfer to remote sub-districts
Cost to civil servants	Loss of rank and regional allowances	Travel costs, isolation, and separation from family
Reinforcing mechanism	Lipu' social debt and in-group favoritism	Lipu' social debt and in-group favoritism

Source: Authors' elaboration based on field data (2024)

Homeland Social Debt and the Limits of Formal Enforcement

In both localities, structural and spatial coercion is reinforced by a cultural mechanism: the manipulation of the traditional concept of lipu' (homeland or birthplace solidarity). Informants described how patrons present themselves as benefactors who facilitated a civil servant's entry into the bureaucracy or subsequent promotion. When the election cycle arrives, the patron demands repayment in the form of political support from the civil servant, his or her family, and his or her subordinates. The noble value of contributing to one's birthplace is thereby transformed into a mandatory political social debt.

This cultural pressure helps explain why formal enforcement mechanisms rarely succeed. Bawaslu commissioners in both localities reported that investigations frequently collapse because vulnerable civil servants refuse to provide formal testimony for fear of career retaliation. As a result, violations that are widely known within the bureaucracy rarely become legally proven cases, and the formal registries capture only a fraction of the pressure that civil servants actually experience.

Discussion

The central finding of this study is that the physical geography and structural characteristics of a territory shape the specific modes of coercion that regional executives deploy to enforce bureaucratic compliance. We conceptualize this phenomenon as spatial-based electoral bureaucratic terror. This section interprets the findings in relation to the three research questions and the theoretical framework.

The Spatial Inversion of Resistance Identity

The first research question concerns the manifestation of identity politics in the two bureaucracies. The findings show that in neither locality does identity function as Castells (2010) expects resistance identity to function, namely as a defensive resource of the marginalized. Instead, the kinalang network in Bolaang Mongondow and the "sons of the soil" narrative in Kotamobagu are appropriated by those who already hold power and are redirected against subordinates within the state apparatus. This is the core of what we term the spatial inversion of resistance identity: communal identity is not mobilized against the state but by the local state against its own employees.

This inversion is consistent with Kambo's (2021) constructivist claim that identity politics is manufactured rather than naturally given. Identity in our cases is not a passive historical remnant but a deliberately engineered tool. The rural pattern resonates with research on Indonesian political dynasties, which shows that family networks provide incumbents with electoral machinery embedded in local society (Aspinall & As'ad, 2016; Kamaluddin et al., 2024). The urban pattern resonates with research on digital polarization, which shows that closed messaging groups create enclaves in which exclusionary narratives circulate beyond the reach of regulation (Lim, 2017; Tapsell, 2021). What our comparison adds is that these two mechanisms are not alternatives that depend on the preferences of particular elites; rather, they are adaptations to the spatial and demographic characteristics of the jurisdiction. Where kinship networks are dense and territory is dispersed, genealogy is the most efficient channel; where society is heterogeneous and compact, digital identity boundaries are more effective.

The urban findings also show how national patterns of religious polarization (Fossati, 2019; Mietzner & Muhtadi, 2018) are translated into the micro-politics of the office. When department heads align themselves with a dominant identity faction, polarization becomes a principle of workplace organization, determining who gains access to strategic projects and who is isolated. This micro-level manifestation of the democratic regression identified in national-level studies (Mietzner, 2020; Warburton & Aspinall, 2019) suggests that the erosion of democratic norms in Indonesia extends into the daily routines of the bureaucracy.

Spatial-Based Electoral Bureaucratic Terror: Beyond the Weberian Hierarchy

The second research question concerns how regional heads exploit the characteristics of their territories. The findings reveal a significant blind spot in classic Weberian bureaucratic theory. Weber (1978) conceived of bureaucratic discipline as operating within an abstract administrative hierarchy of offices, rules, and ranks. In Kotamobagu, coercion indeed operates within this hierarchy, targeting rank and allowances through non-job designations. In Bolaang Mongondow, however, coercion operates through physical space: distance and isolation become instruments for punishing political independence. Geography, in other words, is not merely the setting of bureaucratic power but one of its instruments.

These findings extend the comparative literature on bureaucratic turnover and transfers. Research in Brazil and India has shown that political turnover is followed by large-scale bureaucratic reassignment and that politicians use transfers to reward and discipline officials (Akhtari et al., 2022; Gulzar & Pasquale, 2017). Our cases show that the punitive value of a transfer depends on territorial configuration: a transfer within a compact city imposes relatively low costs, whereas a transfer across a vast and poorly connected regency imposes heavy financial, physical, and familial costs. This explains why rural elites prefer geographical exile while urban elites prefer structural demotion. The findings also support the argument of Mares and Young (2016) and Frye et al. (2019) that negative inducements are most effective when the patron controls the employment of the target. Consistent

with Oliveros and Schuster (2018), civil servants in our study comply not because they share their superiors' political preferences but because their career protections are weak in practice.

From the perspective of electoral integrity (Muhammad, 2019), both forms of coercion represent substantive violations, even when they leave no formal legal trace. A non-job decree or a transfer can be issued in the name of routine personnel management, and therefore appears legally valid. This is precisely why formal, legalistic monitoring fails: the instruments of coercion are embedded in the ordinary administrative powers of the PPK, which earlier studies have identified as the root of ASN vulnerability (Ramadhani et al., 2024; Ryu & Virindra, 2023).

The limits of formal enforcement are therefore structural rather than incidental. Election supervisors depend on testimony and documentary evidence, yet both are controlled by the actors whose conduct is being investigated. Civil servants who testify risk exactly the sanctions they are reporting, while the decrees that impose those sanctions are drafted in the neutral language of personnel rotation. This explains why the documentary registries examined in this study capture only a fraction of the pressure that informants described, and why earlier studies have repeatedly found that sanctions for neutrality violations are weak and inconsistently applied (Nadjib et al., 2022; Ruslihardi et al., 2021). Strengthening electoral integrity in this context requires changing the evidentiary and institutional conditions of enforcement, not merely tightening the rules.

Cultural Co-optation: The Normalization of Lipu' Social Debt

The lipu' mechanism explains why coercion is often unnecessary in practice. The Weberian requirement of impartiality is undermined not only by fear of exile or demotion but also by a socially manufactured guilt of being labeled an ungrateful betrayer of one's own community. This finding aligns with research on Indonesian clientelism, which emphasizes that patron-client relations are sustained by moral obligations and reciprocity as well as by material exchange (Berenschot, 2018; Berenschot & Aspinall, 2020). It also helps explain the paradox of neutrality identified in earlier studies (Tamma, 2016): civil servants are formally required to be neutral, yet the cultural environment in which they live defines neutrality as disloyalty. The combination of structural coercion and cultural obligation produces a deep ethical paralysis that individual integrity alone cannot overcome.

Comparative Implications for Decentralized Indonesia

The comparison between Kotamobagu and Bolaang Mongondow carries implications beyond North Sulawesi. Since the early 2000s, Indonesia has created a large number of new districts and municipalities, frequently by separating urban centers from their rural hinterlands (Pierskalla, 2016). Our findings suggest that such partitions do not only redistribute administrative authority; they also produce jurisdictions with distinct socio-spatial

profiles, which in turn favor distinct repertoires of bureaucratic coercion. A newly created compact city and its large parent regency may share ethnicity, history, and political families, yet they offer incumbents very different instruments for disciplining civil servants.

This insight refines the comparative study of clientelism, which has emphasized variation across countries and party systems (Berenschot & Aspinall, 2020) but has paid less attention to variation across territorial units within a single country. It also adds a spatial dimension to research on bureaucratic turnover, which has typically measured the frequency of transfers rather than their geographical distance and associated costs (Akhtari et al., 2022; Gulzar & Pasquale, 2017). We suggest that the distance, isolation, and connectivity of possible postings should be treated as variables in their own right when analyzing how politicians control bureaucrats. Similarly, research on digital campaigning (Tapsell, 2021) would benefit from attention to how closed messaging groups reshape relations within public organizations rather than only between candidates and voters.

Toward an Ethical-Cultural Meritocracy Model

The third research question concerns how bureaucratic neutrality can be safeguarded. Our findings indicate that conventional, formalistic monitoring is insufficient because the evidence it requires, namely formal testimony from civil servants, is precisely what coercion and cultural obligation suppress. Indonesian law already contains important safeguards. Article 71(2) of Law No. 10/2016 prohibits regional heads from replacing officials from six months before the determination of candidates until the end of their term without written approval from the Minister of Home Affairs, and Article 162(3) prohibits replacements within six months after the inauguration of new regional heads (Republic of Indonesia, 2016). Law No. 20/2023 on the State Civil Apparatus further dissolved the Civil Service Commission (KASN) and transferred its merit-system oversight functions to central government agencies, including BKN (Republic of Indonesia, 2023). However, our findings suggest that these safeguards remain vulnerable when retaliation is postponed until after the restricted periods or disguised as routine personnel management.

We therefore propose an integrative framework, the Ethical-Cultural Meritocracy Model, which counters identity manipulation by combining centralized national legal protections with the re-functionalization of positive indigenous ethics (Table 2). The model responds to the call of earlier studies to transfer personnel authority away from politically affiliated local heads (Ramadhani et al., 2024) and to strengthen merit-based reforms that have so far been only partially implemented (Turner et al., 2022).

Table 2. The Ethical-Cultural Meritocracy Model

Pillar	Component	Function
Structural-legal (BKN centralization)	Decoupling of PPK authority during election periods	Removes local executives' unilateral power over transfers and demotions
	Central validation of post-election demotions and transfers	Prevents delayed retaliation against non-aligned civil servants
	Encrypted, centralized whistleblowing system	Protects reporters and bypasses compromised regional inspectorates
Cultural (Tri-M philosophy)	Mototompiaan (mutual improvement)	Frames merit-system defense as service to the homeland
	Mototabian (mutual love and protection)	Builds collective protection for non-aligned colleagues
	Mototanoban (mutual mindfulness)	Enables peer-to-peer ethical reminders and early warning

Source: Authors' elaboration based on field data (2024)

Structural-Legal Pillar: Decoupling and Centralized BKN Safeguards

The first pillar requires the decoupling of personnel management rights from local political offices during election cycles. It consists of two proposed instruments:

- a. **Extended anti-retaliation protection:** building on Articles 71(2) and 162(3) of Law No. 10/2016, BKN should be authorized to require central validation of any demotion, non-job designation, or inter-district transfer affecting civil servants during an extended post-election period, with particular scrutiny of officials suspected of political non-alignment.

- b. **Centralized whistleblowing system (WBS):** allegations of non-neutrality and retaliation should not be processed by regional inspectorates, which are easily controlled by local executives, but should be channeled through an encrypted, centralized WBS operated by BKN. If a regional head attempts to execute a punitive transfer or demotion without prior BKN validation, the national personnel information system should flag and suspend the decision, thereby limiting the local executive's capacity for political retaliation.

Cultural Pillar: Re-functionalizing the Tri-M Philosophy

To complement the centralized legal shield, the internal psychological vulnerability of civil servants must be addressed by reclaiming local cultural narratives from elite manipulation. In collaboration with the Mongondow customary institution, the model proposes the institutionalization of the ancestral philosophy of Tri-M:

1. **Mototompiaan (mutual improvement):** redefined from a vague notion of communal harmony into a mandate for systemic administrative reform, which frames the defense of the merit system and the rejection of clientelism as the highest form of improving and honoring one's homeland.
2. **Mototabian (mutual love and protection):** converted into an institutional pact of collective protection. In urban Kotamobagu, it acts as a barrier against religious polarization by mandating inclusive and impersonal public service; in rural Bolaang Mongondow, it serves as a collective shield against clan pressure, binding civil servants to protect non-aligned colleagues and thereby eliminating individual isolation.
3. **Mototanoban (mutual mindfulness and vigilance):** operationalized as a peer-to-peer ethical mechanism through which civil servants remind one another of their oath of office and call out the spread of divisive digital content or covert clan mobilization before it develops into statutory violations.

By embedding the Tri-M philosophy into the official local code of conduct, the model seeks to transform indigenous culture from a tool of nepotism into an ethical-cultural barrier that reinforces the legal-rational state. This approach acknowledges a lesson from the Indonesian dynasty literature: because local political power is embedded in social relations, purely legal restrictions are insufficient, and oversight must be accompanied by changes in the normative environment in which officials operate (Purwaningsih & Widodo, 2020). At the same time, the cultural pillar carries a risk: the same values that are reclaimed for meritocracy could be re-appropriated by elites. For this reason, the cultural pillar is designed to operate only in combination with, and never as a substitute for, the centralized legal safeguards.

5. CONCLUSION

This study set out to explain why bureaucratic neutrality is vulnerable to identity politics during Indonesian local elections and how this vulnerability varies across localities. By comparing urban Kotamobagu with rural Bolaang Mongondow, it concludes that the subversion of bureaucratic neutrality is an asymmetric phenomenon shaped by regional geography and demography. Local political actors fuse identity and territory into a repertoire of spatial-based electoral bureaucratic terror, while cultural notions of homeland debt normalize compliance. The study contributes to theory by proposing the spatial inversion of resistance identity and by extending Weberian bureaucracy theory to include geography as an instrument of coercion.

The broader lesson is that bureaucratic neutrality cannot be secured by legal prohibition alone in contexts where careers depend on local political executives and where cultural obligations are deliberately manipulated. Neutrality is a relational condition that depends on how personnel authority is distributed, how territory shapes the costs of punishment, and how cultural values are interpreted. Protecting it therefore requires interventions that address all three dimensions simultaneously, which is the rationale behind the Ethical-Cultural Meritocracy model proposed in this study.

This study has limitations. It relies on a relatively small number of informants in two localities that share a common ethnic heritage, and the sensitivity of the topic limited access to formal documentation of coercive decisions. Future research should test the proposed typology in other Indonesian regions with different geographic and demographic profiles, adopt mixed-method designs to measure the prevalence of spatial coercion, and evaluate the effectiveness of the Ethical-Cultural Meritocracy model once implemented.

The policy implications of this research call for a shift away from purely reactive, local-level election monitoring toward a dual structural-cultural intervention: 1) For the Ministry of Administrative and Bureaucratic Reform (PANRB) and BKN: codify the decoupling of personnel administration from subnational political executives during election periods, and require central validation of post-election demotions and remote transfers within the national personnel information system; 2) For Bawaslu: restructure investigative protocols to allow the legal use of encrypted, centralized digital evidence, bypassing potentially compromised regional inspectorates and ensuring robust whistleblower protection; 3) For regional governments: integrate local ethical frameworks, such

as the Tri-M philosophy, into formal public sector codes of conduct, transforming local heritage into an active defense mechanism for meritocracy and democratic fairness.

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