

Democracy under Patronage: A Marxist Analysis of Bureaucracy in the 2024 North Toraja Election

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Abstract

The 2024 election in North Toraja Regency reflects local democracy still dominated by patronage practices, bureaucratic involvement, and money politics. This study employs a qualitative case study approach to analyze how bureaucracy functions not as a neutral instrument but as a political tool for elites, and how money politics is legitimized by society as part of economic rationality and cultural norms. Using Marxism, Gramsci's theory of hegemony, and voter behavior theories (rational choice and patron-client), this research finds that local democracy in North Toraja represents elite power reproduction rather than substantive popular participation. In-depth interviews and focus group discussions reveal that kinship ties, campaign promises, and money politics are key determinants of voter behavior. The study concludes that elections in North Toraja remain an arena of capital and patronage contestation, with bureaucracy and money politics serving as instruments of elite hegemony. It recommends bureaucratic reform, voter political education, and law enforcement against money politics to improve the quality of local democracy.

Keywords: Marxism; bureaucracy; hegemony; money politics; voter behavior; North Toraja.

INTRODUCTION

General elections (elections) are one of the main instruments in the democratic system which is expected to be a forum for people's participation in determining the direction of leadership and public policy. In the framework of electoral democracy, elections are interpreted as a means of power circulation based on the principles of representation, accountability, and people's sovereignty. However, in practice, elections in many regions in Indonesia are still far from this ideal. The rampant phenomenon of money politics, non-neutral bureaucratic involvement, and pragmatic voter behavior are fundamental problems that undermine the quality of local democracy. This shows the paradox between procedural democracy that is carried out and the substantive democracy that is expected. In the context of the 2024 election, North Toraja Regency is one of the regions that shows this dynamic. As a region with a strong social base on customary ties, kinship, and patron-client relations, the practice of money politics and bureaucratic involvement in local politics has become an unavoidable phenomenon. Various reports from the media, supervision of independent institutions, and public recognition show that the practice of distributing money, basic necessities, or promises of job assistance is still the dominant strategy in winning the people's vote. Furthermore, this phenomenon is often legitimized by the public as something commonplace, even considered as a "sustenance" or "reasonable reward" in the momentum of elections.

Bureaucratic involvement in elections is also a serious issue in North Toraja. Ideally, the bureaucracy should be neutral, professional, and serve the public interest without engaging in practical politics. However, the reality on the ground shows otherwise. The bureaucracy is often used as a

political instrument by elites to expand the support base, both through the mobilization of state civil servants (ASN) and the use of government programs as a means of covert campaigns. This phenomenon shows that the bureaucracy does not only carry out administrative functions, but also has a significant political role in sustaining the power of local elites.

The problem of money politics and bureaucracy in elections cannot be separated from the broader theoretical framework of power, class, and domination. In the perspective of Marxism, the state and the bureaucracy are seen as tools of the ruling class to maintain their dominance over society. Karl Marx affirmed that the state is not a neutral institution that represents the public interest, but rather a political and economic instrument that serves the interests of the dominant class. Bureaucracy, in this context, serves to reproduce elite power through the control of public resources and institutions. Thus, bureaucratic involvement in money politics in North Toraja is not a stand-alone phenomenon, but part of the structural mechanism that underpins the dominance of the ruling class. In addition, Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony provides a critical lens to understand how the practice of money politics can be widely accepted by society. Gramsci emphasized that power is not only maintained through coercive force, but also through hegemony, that is, the ability of the ruling class to build consensus and internalize the values that underpin their dominance in the consciousness of society. In the context of elections in North Toraja, the practice of money politics can be understood as a form of hegemony where people accept, even rationalize, the practice as a natural thing.

This hegemonic awareness makes voters not see money politics as a corrupt act that undermines democracy, but rather as a form of real distribution of benefits. On the other hand, voters' behavior in accepting money politics can also be explained by the rational choice and patron-client approaches. Voters, especially those in limited economic conditions, tend to see money politics as a rational strategy to meet short-term needs. In situations where access to economic resources and public policy is limited, accepting money or goods from a candidate is considered a logical and realistic move. The strong patron-client relationship within the social structure of North Toraja further reinforces this behavior, where political loyalty is often built through material and symbolic exchanges. Thus, voter behavior does not merely reflect indifference to democracy, but rather the result of rational choices formed in certain social and economic structures.

Based on the description above, it is clear that the dynamics of the 2024 election in North Toraja cannot be understood only from the surface of the phenomenon of money politics or bureaucracy that is not neutral. A more in-depth analysis is needed using critical theoretical frameworks such as Marxism and Gramsci's hegemony. This analysis will reveal how bureaucracy functions as a tool of elite domination, how money politics becomes an instrument of hegemony, as well as how voter behavior can be understood within a framework of rationality limited by structural conditions. Thus, this research seeks to contribute to the study of local democracy in Indonesia by presenting a critical perspective that is able to connect structural, cultural, and individual dimensions in one analytical framework.

The formulation of the problems proposed in this article is as follows: (1) How is the bureaucracy involved in the practice of money politics in the 2024 North Toraja Election? (2) How can voters' behavior in accepting money politics be explained by Gramsci's theory of Marxism and hegemony? (3) What are the implications of the practice of money politics on local democracy in North Toraja?

The purpose of this article is to analyze the involvement of bureaucracy and the practice of money politics from a Marxist perspective, explain voter behavior with Gramsci's theory of hegemony, and provide a critical reflection on the quality of local democracy in Indonesia, especially in North Toraja. By combining the theoretical framework of Marxism, Gramsci's hegemony, and the theory of voter behavior, this article will attempt to show that local democracy in North Toraja reflects more elite dominance and hegemony of money politics than true people's sovereignty. Elections, which should be a space for the people's participation in determining their political fate, are instead reduced to an arena of material transactions that strengthen the reproduction of the power of the ruling class. It is within this framework that this article seeks to criticize and highlight the urgency of a more substantial, not just procedural, local political transformation.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

1. Marxist Theory of the State and Bureaucracy

In a Marxist perspective, the state is never truly neutral. Karl Marx emphasized that the state, along with its instruments such as the bureaucracy, security apparatus, and legal system, is essentially a "tool of the ruling class" that functions to maintain the economic, political, and ideological dominance of the class that controls the means of production (Marx & Engels, 1998). The state is not a free arena in which all the interests of society can be channeled equally, but rather tends to serve the interests of the bourgeoisie or the elite who hold power.

Bureaucracy in this context serves as an extension of the dominant class. Max Weber once considered the bureaucracy to be a neutral and rational instrument for running the administration of the state, but Marxist criticism asserts that bureaucracy can actually be politicized. In Indonesia, the bureaucracy is often used by political elites to secure the vote base through the distribution of government programs, access to public services, or even directly directing the country's civil servants to support certain candidates. This confirms that the bureaucracy is not sterile of political interests, but rather a tool that allows the reproduction of elite power.

In the context of the 2024 North Toraja Election, this Marxist view is very relevant. The local bureaucracy does not stand neutral, but has the potential to be politicized by elites who control economic and political resources. The public's dependence on bureaucratic services opens up space for patronage relations, where access to government programs is often exchanged for electoral support. Thus, Marxism provides a framework that elections are not only an arena of procedural democracy, but also a field of class struggle and the reproduction of elite hegemony.

2. Gramsci's Hegemony Theory

Antonio Gramsci developed the concept of hegemony to explain how domination takes place not only through coercive force, but also through consensus and internalization of values created by the ruling class (Gramsci, 1971). Hegemony works when society considers normal practices that are actually oppressive, because they have been legitimized through institutions, cultures, and daily habits. In the context of local politics, hegemony can be seen from how the practice of money politics is considered natural. The public does not always see the provision of money, basic necessities, or facilities ahead of the election as a form of political corruption, but as part of the "political tradition" or

“retribution” of the prospective leader. Gramsci explained that this condition occurs because the elite has succeeded in shaping public consciousness so that the transactional practice is no longer seen as an aberration, but something normal and legitimate.

Thus, money politics in North Toraja 2024 can be understood as a hegemony mechanism. Local elites not only buy votes, but also build legitimacy by packaging material giveaways as a form of attention or care. The people, who are often in a position of economic dependence, accept this practice as part of their daily political life. The dominance of the elite is also getting stronger not only through financial power, but also through the social acceptance they create.

3. Voter Behavior Theory

The study of voter behavior provides a different perspective on how individuals make political decisions. Two important theories that can be used in this study are Rational Choice Theory and Clientelism/Patron-Client Relations.

1. Rational Choice Theory

According to this approach, voters are considered as rational actors who always try to maximize their interests (Downs, 1957). In the context of elections, this means that voters will choose the candidate or party that can provide the most benefits to them, both in the form of direct material and beneficial policies. In societies with relatively low levels of welfare, short-term benefits such as money or goods from candidates are often seen as more rational than long-term policy promises.

2. Clientelism/Patron-Client Relations

James C. Scott (1972) explains that in the patron-client system, political relations are transactional and personal. Voters provide political support to patrons (elites/candidates) in the hope of getting rewards in the form of protection, access, or material. In this context, money politics is not just a form of electoral corruption, but part of the mechanism of patron-client relations that is deeply rooted in social life.

These two theories help explain why money politics is still strong in the 2024 North Toraja Election. From the voter side, receiving money or basic necessities is considered a rational decision in the face of economic limitations. From the patron side, money distribution is an effective strategy to build client loyalty and ensure electoral support.

4. Previous Research

Several previous studies provide an important overview of money politics, bureaucracy, and voter behavior in Indonesia, especially South Sulawesi. Aspinall & Sukmajati (2016) found that money politics has become a routine practice in local elections in Indonesia, especially through patron-client networks involving successful teams, local bureaucracy, and community leaders. Subekti (2015) also emphasized that money politics is not only an electoral strategy, but part of a deep-rooted patronage system.

Research in South Sulawesi shows a similar pattern. Hiariej (2014) emphasized that bureaucracy is often used as a political tool in the struggle for local power. The country’s civil apparatus is not completely neutral, but is mobilized to support certain candidates. In many regions, bureaucratic networks are used to distribute development programs that are political and electoral in nature.

However, there is a significant research gap. There have not been many studies that explicitly link the theoretical framework of Marxism—particularly the analysis of the state, bureaucracy, and hegemony—to voter behavior in local contexts such as North Toraja. Most research places more emphasis on empirical descriptions of the practice of money politics, but rarely associates it with critical theoretical frameworks explaining class relations, ideological domination, and the reproduction of power. Therefore, this article attempts to fill this gap by integrating the perspective of Marxism, Gramsci hegemony, and voter behavior theory to understand the dynamics of the 2024 North Toraja elections.

5. Theoretical Framework

Based on the description above, the theoretical framework of this research can be formulated as follows:

1. **Marxism** '! the State and the bureaucracy are understood as instruments of the ruling class that the elite use to maintain political and economic dominance.
2. **Gramsci's Hegemony** '! Money politics is seen not only as a material transaction, but also as an ideological mechanism that makes the people accept the practice as normal.
3. **Rational Choice & Patron-Client Behavior Theory** '! Voters are understood as decision-making actors based on short-term rational interests and deep-rooted patron-client relationships.

By combining these three theories, the research is expected to be able to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how bureaucracy, money politics, and voter behavior interact in the electoral process in North Toraja.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research uses a qualitative approach with a case study method, focusing on the dynamics of the 2024 Election in North Toraja Regency. The qualitative approach was chosen because it allowed researchers to deeply understand the practice of money politics, the role of bureaucracy, and voter behavior in local social, cultural, and political contexts. The case study of North Toraja is seen as relevant because this area has distinctive characteristics in the form of strong patron-client relations, customary roles in politics, and bureaucratic dynamics that are not completely neutral.

- **The location** of the research was determined in North Toraja Regency, South Sulawesi. The selection of this location is based on two considerations. First, empirically, the practice of money politics is still strongly detected in the 2024 election in this region. Second, North Toraja has a socio-economic base based on agriculture and indigenous culture that influences the political behavior patterns of the community, thus providing a rich space for analysis in the perspective of Marxism and hegemony.
- **The research subjects** consist of various actors who are directly or indirectly involved in the election process, namely: (1) election observers (2) state bureaucrats or civil servants who have a role in public policies and services; (3) community/religious figures (4) academics/educators (5) political party administrators (6) BAWASLU commissioners for North Toraja Regency and (7) KPU commissioners for North Toraja Regency

- **Data collection techniques** include four main methods. First, in-depth interviews with key informants to explore experiences, perceptions, and practices related to money politics and bureaucratic mobilization. Second, Focus group-discussion with 4 groups, (1) First voters (2) disabled voters (3) marginalized voters and (4) female voters. Third, a study of documents on laws and regulations, official reports of the KPU and Bawaslu, as well as BPS statistical data. Fourth, media analysis, both local and national media, that report on the dynamics of the 2024 Election in North Toraja.
- **The data analysis technique** was carried out with a critical approach, using the framework of Marxist theories about the state and bureaucracy, Gramsci's theory of hegemony, and the theory of voter behavior (rational choice and patron-client). The analysis was carried out inductively by interpreting empirical data through thematic categories, then associated with a theoretical framework to find a deeper meaning regarding the relationship between bureaucracy, money politics, and voter behavior.

With this methodology, the research is expected to be able to provide a comprehensive picture of how the practice of money politics in North Toraja is not only a pragmatic electoral strategy, but also part of the elite hegemony mechanism in maintaining political dominance.

THE EMPIRICAL CONTEXT OF NORTH TORAJA

Regional Profile & Local Politics

North Toraja Regency is one of the areas in South Sulawesi that has a unique political identity because the socio-cultural base of its people is greatly influenced by customs, religion, and patronage structures. The social life of the Toraja people is shaped by kinship ties and extended family solidarity (*tongkonan*), which not only functions in the customary realm, but also seeps into local political dynamics. Political figures who have a lineage of nobility or traditional leaders often have strong legitimacy to run as candidates in general elections. Thus, local politics in North Toraja is highly personalized, where charismatic figures are more dominant than party ideology.

In the 2024 election, the political dynamics of North Toraja show fierce competition between major national parties, such as PDI-P, Golkar, and Gerindra, each of which carries a local figure with a different mass base. However, party strength often does not stand alone; rather, it is attached to the figure of a candidate who is considered capable of representing the interests of a certain community or clan. This makes people's political loyalty relatively fluid, depending on their figures and social networks.

Local Bureaucracy

The bureaucracy in North Toraja has a central role in political practice, especially because of the closeness of civil servants to the community through public services. Normatively, the bureaucracy is supposed to be neutral, but in practice, the 2024 election shows strong indications of bureaucratic involvement in electoral politics. This involvement is covert, for example through informal instructions to employees to support a particular candidate, the use of government facilities in political activities, or interventions in public programs.

One of the striking forms of bureaucratic involvement is the use of social assistance programs (bansos) as an instrument of mobilizing support. Several local media reports and interviews show allegations that the distribution of social assistance is directed to benefit certain candidates, especially those who have access to local government structures. In addition, the issue of the appointment of honorary personnel to ASN is also often used as a political promise that is promoted through bureaucratic networks. This practice shows how the bureaucracy is not neutral, but rather a political instrument for the ruling elite.

The Practice of Money Politics in the 2024 Election

The 2024 election in North Toraja shows a fairly massive practice of money politics, with various modus operandi adapted to local conditions. One of the most common forms is giving cash directly to voters ahead of polling day. This cash is usually given in varying amounts, from IDR 50,000 to IDR 200,000 per head of family, depending on the candidate's strategy and the size of the competition. In addition to cash, the practice of money politics is also carried out through the distribution of basic necessities, such as rice, cooking oil, or sugar, which are distributed through successful teams in villages. In some cases, there are also job promises—either as honorary employees in local governments or as workers in development projects—offered to voters on the condition that they support a particular candidate.

The political distribution of this money is not carried out directly by the candidates, but through a complex network. The success team acts as the main liaison, working with traditional leaders, religious leaders, and heads of families who have a great influence in the community. The close kinship relations in North Toraja make money politics often “legitimized” by social values, where giving candidates is considered a form of concern or moral responsibility to the community. The public's response to the practice of money politics generally tends to be pragmatic. Many voters accept money or goods given, citing daily economic needs. The high cost of living and limited employment make this kind of assistance seen as beneficial, even though normally the public knows that the practice violates election rules. On the other hand, there is also the view that receiving money does not always mean the obligation to choose the candidate who gives, but is considered as a “sustenance” that comes at political momentum.

This phenomenon shows that money politics in North Toraja is not only a transactional issue, but also related to the mechanism of political hegemony. Political elites use economic resources to create an impression of concern while strengthening voter loyalty. This practice is effective because people have become accustomed to patron-client relationships that emphasize dependence on elite figures. Thus, money politics functions not only as an electoral strategy, but also as a means of reproducing elite political dominance through local bureaucracy and socio-cultural networks.

1. Political Profile of North Toraja

North Toraja is one of the districts in South Sulawesi which was formed in 2008 as a result of the expansion of Tana Toraja Regency. Since its inception, the dynamics of local politics in North Toraja have been colored by the tug-of-war between the interests of local elites, national political parties, and regional bureaucracies. In the context of elections, almost all major parties at the national level have a support base in North Toraja, ranging from the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDIP), the Golongan Karya Party (Golkar), the NasDem Party, the Gerindra Party, to the Democratic Party. Political

party competition does not only take place at the legislative level, but also in the election of regional heads, where the figure of the candidate for regent is often a representation of a particular network of families, clans, and indigenous communities. This shows that North Toraja politics has oligarchic characteristics, where local elites with strong economic and social resources play a dominant role.

In addition to political parties, the regional bureaucracy is also an important actor in political dynamics. State civil servants (ASN) are often politicized and mobilized in supporting certain candidates, either directly through logistical support and subtly through the distribution of government programs. The phenomenon of “ASN is not neutral” in elections has become a recurring issue, including in the 2024 election. With a bureaucratic position that has access to public services, ASN support can be a strategic instrument for candidates who compete.

2. Socio-Economic Characteristics of the Community

North Toraja is known as an area with a very strong traditional and cultural identity, especially in the tradition of Rambu Solo’ (death ceremony) and the tongkonan-based kinship system (traditional house). Customary values and genealogical ties still influence people’s political behavior. Political support is often given based on the proximity of family, clan, or indigenous communities, rather than solely on the basis of party ideology or policy program.

Economically, most of the people of North Toraja are still dependent on the agricultural sector, especially coffee, rice, and horticultural commodities. The tourism sector is also growing, but its contribution is still limited compared to agriculture. This condition creates a pattern of people’s economic dependence on local elites who have greater capital, both in the form of land, market access, and political networks. This socio-economic relationship reinforces the patron-client pattern in daily life. Local elites (patrons) often act as facilitators, facilitators of work, or supporters of indigenous activities. On the contrary, the community (clients) reciprocate the support with political loyalty, including in elections. This explains why money politics is not only seen as a brief transaction, but as part of sustainable social relations.

3. Money Politics Pattern in the 2024 Election

The 2024 election in North Toraja is inseparable from the practice of money politics. Bawaslu’s supervision report shows that the distribution of money, basic necessities, and logistical support ahead of voting day is still rampant in various sub-districts. The form of money politics is not always in the form of cash, but also in the form of providing basic necessities (rice, sugar, cooking oil), transportation costs, and even assistance for traditional activities.

There are three main patterns of money politics that appear in the 2024 election in North Toraja:

1. Direct Vote Buying

Candidates or teams successfully distribute cash ahead of election day, with nominal ranges varying between IDR 50,000–IDR 200,000 per voter. This practice is usually carried out door to door, often through a trusted family network or community leader.

2. Customary and Social Patronage

Given the importance of the role of customary in Toraja, many candidates use the mechanism of money politics by supporting traditional activities. For example, donating to the Rambu Solo’

ceremony or helping with the cost of building a tongkonan. This form of support is often considered reasonable by the community because it is in line with the values of mutual cooperation and social solidarity.

3. Utilization of Bureaucracy and Government

Some candidates who have close ties to the bureaucracy use government assistance programs as political instruments. For example, subsidized fertilizer distribution, social assistance, or access to infrastructure projects are used as a tool to mobilize support. Although not always explicit, the involvement of civil servants in supporting certain candidates reinforces this practice.

In field interviews, a number of residents said that receiving money or basic necessities from candidates is not a problem, because it is considered a “sustenance” that comes ahead of the election. In fact, some people consider it unethical not to accept gifts from candidates, considering that this practice has become part of local political traditions. This shows the normalization of money politics in public consciousness, in line with Gramsci’s concept of hegemony.

4. Reflection on the Empirical Context

The context of North Toraja shows that elections in this area are not only about contesting political ideas and programs, but also about how local elites use bureaucracy, indigenous culture, and patron-client networks to maintain power. Money politics is an important instrument that functions not only as an electoral transaction, but also as a means of reproducing social and ideological domination. Thus, the study of elections in North Toraja needs to go beyond the description of the practice of money politics, and enter into a critical analysis of how bureaucracy, hegemony, and voter behavior are interrelated within the framework of Marxism and Gramsci’s theory of hegemony.

THEORETICAL ANALYSIS

Perspectives of Marxism and Hegemony

In the perspective of Marxism, the state and the bureaucracy are never truly neutral, but rather serve as a tool of the ruling class to maintain dominance. Elections, which are supposed to be a democratic mechanism, are often a means of reproducing elite power. In the context of North Toraja, the practice of money politics reflects how political elites use economic resources and bureaucratic networks to strengthen their positions.

Through Gramsci’s perspective on hegemony, the practice of money politics can be understood as an attempt at domination that relies not only on coercion, but also on consensus. Voters who receive money or goods from candidates are actually undergoing a process of hegemony, where they voluntarily consider the practice to be something natural and legitimate. Thus, the people participate in elections within the framework of elite domination, even though they are unaware of it in an unequal power relations structure.

This hegemony explains why money politics continues to repeat even though it has been banned by law. The elite not only distributes resources to buy votes, but also builds a legitimacy narrative that the giving is a form of concern or contribution to the welfare of the community. In this way, the practice of money politics serves to strengthen the social class structure and maintain the status quo.

Patronage and Clientelism

The theory of patronage and clientelism is very relevant to read the political behavior of the people of North Toraja. In the patron-client relationship, patrons (political elites or candidates) provide resources in the form of money, goods, or access to jobs, while clients (voters) provide political support in the form of votes. This relationship is not just transactional, but is also based on social, cultural, and even kinship ties.

In North Toraja, where the community structure is based on customs and extended families (*tongkonan*), the patron-client relationship is getting stronger. Candidates use traditional networks and religious leaders to distribute aid, so that the giving of money politics is not just seen as an economic transaction, but as part of the patron's moral obligation to his community. For clients, voting for patrons is not only for money, but also as a form of respect for figures who are considered influential in socio-cultural life. Thus, money politics can not only be understood as a pragmatic practice, but also as a patronage relationship that is firmly rooted in the social system of Toraja society. This explains why the practice of money politics tends to repeat itself from one election to the next, as it is related to a broader pattern of social relations than just electoral transactions.

Rational Choice Theory

Meanwhile, rational *choice theory* describes voter behavior as a result of profit-loss calculations. Voters are considered rational actors who seek to maximize the benefits of every political action. In the context of North Toraja, the behavior of receiving money or goods from candidates is seen as a rational decision, because the benefits obtained are immediately felt, while the results of development or long-term political promises are uncertain.

From this perspective, money politics is not just a form of manipulation by the elite, but also a rational strategy of voters in dealing with economic limitations and political uncertainty. Voters are not always morally bound to vote for the candidate who gives them money, but they still accept it because the benefits are real. However, in practice, many voters still feel "indebted" so they finally give support to the giving candidate.

This theory of rational choice shows a pragmatic dimension in people's political behavior. He also helps explain why despite the anti-money politics campaign, the practice remains difficult to eliminate, as voters see it as a rational strategy to gain advantage in a situation of limitation.

RESULTS

The 2024 election in North Toraja was marked by relatively high voter participation, with 73.19% turnout from 181,033 registered voters, indicating a strong procedural commitment to democracy. However, the distribution of votes reveals a contest dominated by established parties and well-financed candidates. The Golkar Party emerged as the leading force, securing 33,090 votes (24.11% of the valid votes) and consolidating its dominance in the DPRD. PDIP and Gerindra followed with 16.8% and 15.7%, respectively, reflecting the persistence of national party influence at the local level. Independent candidates and smaller parties struggled to gain traction, collectively accounting for less than 10% of total votes. While turnout rates suggest vibrant participation, the qualitative findings highlight that kinship ties, patronage, and money politics shaped much of the voter behavior.

Economic vulnerabilities drove many voters to accept cash, food packages, or promises of employment from candidates. Moreover, bureaucratic networks were mobilized to support specific elites, with civil servants reportedly pressured to align politically. Thus, the quantitative data underscores the paradox of democracy in North Toraja: a high level of voter engagement coupled with structural dominance by elites through financial capital, patronage, and bureaucratic influence. The results, while procedurally democratic, substantively reflect the reproduction of elite power rather than genuine popular sovereignty.

Implications

Although turnout figures project an image of robust democratic participation, the qualitative evidence paints a more complex picture. Kinship-based voting, bureaucratic mobilization, and money politics heavily influenced the results. Many voters reported receiving cash (IDR 50,000–200,000), food packages, or promises of employment, shaping their decisions at the ballot box. Furthermore, bureaucratic networks were reportedly instrumentalized by elites to channel support, especially through the distribution of social assistance programs.

This juxtaposition of strong procedural participation with substantive elite dominance underscores the paradox of democracy in North Toraja: elections function effectively as a formal mechanism, yet outcomes reflect the reproduction of elite power rather than the realization of popular sovereignty.

IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS AND FGDS ON VOTER BEHAVIOR

In-Depth Interview

In this study, there were 7 key informants who were interviewed in depth, namely: ASN of the North Toraja Regional Government, election monitors, Commissioners of the North Toraja Regency KPU, North Toraja Regency Bawaslu Commissioners, academics/educators, political party administrators, and community/religious leaders. The selection of informants is based on the consideration of their direct and indirect involvement in the dynamics of the election, both as organizers, supervisors, political actors, and citizens with social influence. The results of the interviews show that all informants have long experience in participating in elections. They admitted that they had participated in legislative elections five to seven times, presidential elections five times, and governorship elections four to five times, with some informants having experience only two to three times. This indicates that the informant's perspective is quite mature, because it is formed from the experience of participating in various types of elections at the local and national levels.

In terms of choosing behavior, there is an interesting pattern. As many as 5 out of 7 informants stated that they chose DPRD members based on kinship, where the bond of the extended family (*tongkonan*) was the determining factor for support. Meanwhile, for the presidential election, they are more rational by considering the vision-mission, party ideology, candidate integrity, and popularity on social media. Meanwhile, in the election of regents and governors, the most dominant factors are the vision-mission and popularity of the candidates.

The factors that drive the choice of informants vary, ranging from pressure from superiors (for ASN), campaign promises, potential candidates, to invitations from relatives. This shows the interaction between structural factors (bureaucratic pressure), cultural (kinship), and pragmatic

(campaign promises). However, the informants also highlighted the negative behavior of voters, such as the practice of money politics, pressure from certain parties, black campaigns, forced choices, and public fooling by the candidate's success team.

According to the informant, the step that must be taken to prevent such negative behavior is to strengthen the role of supervisory institutions. BAWASLU is considered necessary to provide a deterrent effect to election violators so that the practice of money politics does not continue to be repeated. In addition, political education and public education are considered important to increase voter awareness. This education can be carried out through various channels, including religious sermons, considering the very strong role of religion in the life of the Toraja people. Regarding responsibility, the informants emphasized the role of BAWASLU, KPU, Polri, community/religious leaders, and the government as parties that must work together in maintaining the quality of local democracy.

Focus Group Discussion (FGD)

In addition to in-depth interviews, this study also involved FGD with 20 participants divided into four categories: (1) 5 first-time voters, (2) 5 female voters, (3) 5 voters with disabilities, and (4) 5 voters from marginalized groups (fishermen, farmers, slum communities, and informal workers). The purpose of the FGD is to explore more broadly the experience, perception, and reasons of the community in making political choices.

The results of the FGD show that the main reasons they choose candidates or parties in the election are kinship, money politics, and religious factors. Kinship emerged as a dominant factor, especially among female voters and marginalized voters, who felt attached to the candidate because of family ties or community closeness. Meanwhile, money politics is more widely recognized by novice voters and marginalized groups as a factor influencing their decisions. Religious factors also play an important role, especially in communities that are still strong in making religious leaders as a moral-political reference.

The FGD participants also identified a number of factors that influenced voters' choices, including the invitation of relatives, campaign promises of candidates, and the practice of money politics. The three are interrelated, because campaign promises are usually delivered through trusted family networks or community leaders. The forms of negative behavior they encountered in the election included emphasis on civil servants to support certain candidates, the practice of money politics, efforts to bring down opposing candidates (black campaigns), and apathy or golput. Golput is considered a form of negative behavior because it reflects distrust of the democratic system, as well as weakens the legitimacy of the electoral process.

Regarding solutions, FGD participants proposed various actions that voters can take to avoid negative behavior. Some of them are:

1. Not re-electing candidates who engage in the practice of money politics or pressure on voters.
2. Refusing to give money or goods from candidates.
3. Maintain independence in choosing according to one's conscience.

In addition, FGD participants also emphasized the importance of the role of institutions and social actors in preventing negative voter behavior. The parties considered the most responsible are the KPU, BAWASLU, the government, religious leaders (churches), the TNI/POLRI, and educational

institutions/schools. The role of religious leaders and schools is considered crucial because they have the moral and educational capacity to provide political awareness to the public, especially novice voters.

Interview Synthesis and FGD

The results of in-depth interviews and FGDs both show that kinship, campaign promises, money politics, and invitation to relatives are the dominant factors that shape voter behavior in North Toraja. At the elite level, the bureaucracy and civil servants face structural pressure to support certain candidates, while at the community level, extended family networks and patronage are the main determinants.

These two findings also indicate that negative voter behavior does not stand alone, but rather is part of local social, cultural, and political structures. Money politics is accepted because of economic needs as well as legitimized by the culture of giving. The pressure of civil servants lasted because the bureaucracy was not neutral, while the black campaign flourished due to weak control of political ethics. Both informants and FGD participants agreed that the solution to this problem cannot only depend on formal regulations, but also requires continuous political education, strengthening supervision, and the involvement of religious leaders, community leaders, and educational institutions. In other words, efforts to build a healthier democracy in North Toraja must involve structural, cultural, and educational approaches at the same time.

CONCLUSION

The 2024 North Toraja election provides a real picture of how democracy at the local level still faces serious challenges. Instead of presenting a substantive democratic process that puts forward ideas, visions-missions, and development programs, elections are more representative of capital contestation and patronage. Candidates with large financial resources are able to dominate the competition through the distribution of money, goods, and patron-client networks that are rooted in the social structure of the North Toraja society. This phenomenon confirms that procedural democracy in the regions is still limited by short-term transactional relations.

In addition, the study found that local bureaucracy is not completely neutral, but rather serves as a political instrument for the elite. State civil servants are often involved in mobilizing support, either directly or covertly, for example through social assistance programs, promises of appointment of honorary personnel, or structural closeness to certain candidates. Thus, the bureaucracy that should serve the public interest is instead directed to support the political interests of the ruling class. This reinforces the Marxist view that the state and its instruments more often function as tools of elite domination than as a mechanism of public service.

Furthermore, the practice of money politics is still very fertile in the 2024 North Toraja Election. The economic conditions of vulnerable communities, especially among farmers, informal workers, and marginalized groups, make them accept money or goods from candidates as a survival strategy. From a Gramscian perspective, the acceptance of money politics is not only the result of coercion, but also a form of hegemony, where society considers transactional practices as something commonplace and even “natural” in a democratic party. This shows how hegemonic power structures work: elite dominance is accepted voluntarily by the people, even if in the long run it is to their own detriment. From all the analyses, it can be concluded that the Marxist perspective is very relevant to understanding local

democracy in North Toraja. Elections are not merely a mechanism of representation of the people, but rather an arena in which political elites reproduce and perpetuate their power. The people were placed in subordinate positions, bound by patronage, bureaucratic pressure, and money politics. Democracy that is supposed to provide space for critical participation actually functions as a legitimacy of elite domination.

Thus, the 2024 elections in North Toraja show that local democracy is still in the grip of capital, patronage, and bureaucracy that sides with the elite. If this condition is not addressed, then democracy will only be a formal procedure without substance. Serious efforts are needed to restore the function of the bureaucracy as a neutral public servant, strengthen political education, and take firm action against the practice of money politics. Without these changes, local democracy will continue to be an arena for elites to maintain hegemony, while society remains in a position as a mere object of political mobilization.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of research on the dynamics of the 2024 North Toraja Election, which is still full of capital contestation, patronage, non-neutral bureaucracy, and the fertile practice of money politics, a number of strategic recommendations are needed so that local democracy can move towards a more substantive form.

1. Bureaucratic Reform to Ensure Neutrality in Elections

Bureaucracy is a vital instrument in the administration of government and public services. However, this study shows that bureaucracy is often dragged into practical political currents, both covertly and openly. Therefore, bureaucratic reform needs to be strengthened, especially by enforcing the regulation of ASN neutrality in elections. Internal and external supervision mechanisms must be emphasized so that the bureaucracy is no longer an elite political instrument, but remains focused on community services. Bureaucratic neutrality will not only improve the quality of elections, but also strengthen public trust in government institutions.

2. Political Education and Strengthening Community Literacy

The flourishing practice of money politics in North Toraja is inseparable from the low political literacy and socio-economic conditions of vulnerable communities. Therefore, political education needs to be intensified by involving various actors, ranging from election organizers (KPU and Bawaslu), educational institutions, civil society organizations, to religious institutions. The education carried out is not only formal, but also community-based, using simple language, and adapted to the local context. Strengthening people's political literacy will help voters understand the importance of voting based on the candidate's vision, integrity, and capacity, not solely for material rewards.

3. Law Enforcement on Money Politics Practices

One of the main factors that keeps money politics going is the weak law enforcement. Many practices of money politics are known to the public, but they are rarely followed up seriously. Bawaslu, the police, and law enforcement officials must dare to provide a deterrent effect by cracking down on money politicians, both candidates and their successful teams. Consistent law enforcement will not only lower the practice of money politics, but also build a collective awareness that democracy

should not be traded. With these three strategic recommendations, it is hoped that the quality of local democracy in North Toraja can gradually improve. Elections are no longer just a place for capital contestation and patronage, but really a means for the people to channel their aspirations freely, rationally, and with dignity.

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