

THE EROSION OF ELECTORAL DEMOCRACY AND VOTER RESISTANCE IN SINGLE-CANDIDATE REGIONAL HEAD ELECTIONS: A CRITICAL INSTITUTIONAL ANALYSIS OF THE 2024 MAROS REGIONAL ELECTION IN INDONESIA

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ABSTRACT

The 2024 Maros Regional Head Election (Pilkada), contested by only one candidate pair, reflects the substantive decline of local democracy in Indonesia. While procedurally legitimate, the absence of authentic competition, the dominance of political party coalitions, and structural obstacles to nomination have transformed the election from a deliberative arena into a mere formal mechanism. This research uses a qualitative approach with transcendental phenomenology through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis. Informants include election organizers (KPU, Bawaslu), political party elites, civil society organizations monitoring the election, survey institutions, and the sole candidate pair.

The research findings reveal five key dynamics: first, restrictive nomination rules that narrow the competitive space; second, the failure of party cadre regeneration that strengthens local oligarchies; third, the erosion of voter agency as reflected in the high number of white groups and invalid votes; fourth, the fragility of electoral legitimacy as more than half of voters do not provide explicit support; and fifth, polarization at the grassroots level manifested through organized movements to vote for the empty box.

Theoretically, this study contributes to the discourse on democratic decline by emphasizing the role of institutional design and the weaknesses of political parties in sustaining oligarchic structures, paralleling similar trends in Southeast Asia. Practically, this study emphasizes the urgency of local political reform, including revising the nomination threshold, providing public funding for independent candidates, revitalizing the party cadre system, ensuring transparency in political financing, and strengthening civil society oversight. Thus, the existence of single-candidate elections cannot be considered merely an electoral anomaly, but rather a structural symptom of weakening democratic institutions that require comprehensive reform.

Keywords: 2024 regional elections; local democracy; single candidate; weakening of democracy.

INTRODUCTION

General elections (pemilu) are a key pillar of modern democratic systems, serving as a formal mechanism for establishing a legitimate government and gaining popular legitimacy. In many democratic countries, including Indonesia, elections are a vital means of realizing the principle of popular sovereignty, both at the national and local levels. In the context of local democracy in Indonesia, regional elections (Pilkada)—the election of regional heads—are a crucial instrument for channeling the political aspirations of the people and strengthening decentralization. However, the emergence of Pilkada with a single candidate pair (paslon satu) has given rise to new discourse on the quality and substance of local democracy.

The phenomenon of single-candidate pairs is not unique to Indonesia. Similar practices are also found in other democracies such as Singapore, Japan, the Philippines, and the United States, albeit with different legal configurations and electoral requirements. In Indonesia, regulations require a single candidate to obtain more than 50% of the valid vote to be declared the winner, unlike Singapore and Japan, which automatically declare a single candidate the winner without a vote. This provision demonstrates that Indonesia implements a "conditional competition" model that has the potential to create democratic anomalies, particularly when the empty column, a symbolic alternative, actually gains significant votes or even wins.

The development of post-reform electoral democracy has enabled a more open regional election design, including the recognition of independent candidates, adjustments to the stages, and the implementation of simultaneous elections. A critical milestone was the ratification of Constitutional Court Decision No. 100/PUU-XIII/2015, which legitimized the existence of single candidate pairs. Since then, the number of regions with single candidate pairs has continued to increase, from only three in the 2015 regional elections to 36 in the 2024 elections, including Maros Regency.

The increasing number of single-candidate pairs is an indicator of the crisis of competition in local democracy. Theoretically, democracy requires real political choices, healthy competition, and active participation (Dahl, 1971; Held, 2006). Regional elections with a single candidate pair reduce this substance to mere procedure. A blank slate cannot replace the substantive function of alternative candidates who convey visions, missions, and programs. On the other hand, the dominance of political parties in nominating a single candidate pair, without providing space for alternatives, indicates a stagnation in the function of political recruitment and a tendency towards pragmatism that weakens the vitality of democracy.

The 2024 Maros Regency regional election is a clear example of how political dominance, minimal contestation, and high abstention rates can undermine the quality of local democracy. Although a single candidate legitimately won, the drastic decline in voter turnout compared to previous elections indicates a decline in citizen engagement in the political process. This phenomenon requires a comprehensive study to understand its implications for the institutionalization of local democracy, the effectiveness of political parties, and the legitimacy of regional leadership.

This research aims to critically examine the dynamics of the single-candidate regional elections in Maros Regency, particularly in terms of competition, participation, and their impact on the quality of local democracy. This approach is expected to lead to the development of more adaptive policies to strengthen the institutionalization of democracy in the region.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Critical Democracy Paradigm as a Theoretical Lens

This research adopts a critical democracy paradigm rooted in Critical Theory and the discourse of deliberative democracy pioneered by Jürgen Habermas (1996) as its primary conceptual framework. This approach does not limit democracy to procedural and legal electoral mechanisms, but emphasizes substantive democratic values—such as deliberative participation, communicative rationality, and equal access to political discourse (Habermas, 1996; Held, 2006).

In the context of regional head elections with a single candidate pair, particularly in Maros Regency, this paradigm serves as a critical lens for analyzing the weakening of political contestation, the erosion of public deliberation, and elite domination. Habermas's concept of the public sphere is highly relevant, as the absence of alternative electoral candidates weakens citizens' capacity to engage in rational debate and express pluralistic political preferences (Habermas, 1987; 1996).

This paradigm also critiques the minimalist model of democracy (Schumpeter, 1942; Przeworski, 1999), which defines democracy narrowly as a method of selecting leaders through elections. The critical view emphasizes that democratic legitimacy arises from inclusive and undistorted deliberation. In single-candidate elections, the dominance of candidacy by the dominant coalition reflects what Habermas calls the "colonization of the lifeworld," which limits citizen agency through institutional exclusion.

This paradigm is both analytical and emancipatory, aiming to dismantle structural power asymmetries and encourage more inclusive institutional design and increased citizen participation at the local level.

Minimalist and Maximalist Perspectives on Democracy

The democratic theory in this study draws on two main schools of thought: minimalism and maximalism. The minimalist approach, as formulated by Schumpeter (1942), views democracy as an electoral method for selecting leaders, in which citizens have limited influence through periodic delegation (Sholikin, 2021; Surbakti, 2024). However, elections with a single candidate pair violate the basic premise of this model, namely the existence of competitive choice.

Similarly, Vanhanen (1997) and Przeworski (1991) emphasize two key requirements for democracy: meaningful political participation and uncertainty of outcome. These two requirements are not met in uncontested elections, thus exposing the democratic deficit hidden behind formal legality.

In contrast, the maximalist framework developed by Robert A. Dahl (1971, 1998) broadens the notion of democracy through the concept of polyarchy—which encompasses competition, civil liberties, participation, and influence over policy. This broader model aligns with the critical democracy paradigm and asserts that single-candidate elections erode pluralism and deliberation in democracy.

In support of this view, Freedom House's (2023) indicators emphasize the simultaneous importance of political rights and civil liberties. Electoral monopolies and elite power grabs in such contests pose a direct threat to the quality of democracy.

Local Democracy and Election Practices in Indonesia

The implementation of direct regional head elections (Pilkada) in Indonesia since 2005 has been viewed as a crucial institutional reform in deepening democracy and strengthening regional autonomy (Rasyid, 2002). This mechanism allows citizens to directly elect their regional leaders, theoretically increasing legitimacy and accountability.

However, the emergence of single-candidate elections, such as the one in Maros in 2024, highlights a paradox in Indonesia's decentralized democracy. While procedurally valid, such elections often lack real competition or meaningful citizen participation. Public responses, such as the "blank column" campaign, reflect public dissatisfaction and symbolic resistance to limited political options.

This situation creates a legitimacy crisis, where perceptions of procedural injustice and political exclusion override the legality of the election itself (Fogg, 2002). Therefore, single-candidate elections reflect a disconnect between democratic norms and political practices in decentralized governance.

Electoral Institutionalism and the Reform Imperative

From the perspective of new institutionalism, electoral systems are not neutral mechanisms, but rather frameworks that shape political behavior and outcomes (North, 1990; Norris, 2004). Norris's concept of electoral engineering suggests that institutional designs—such as nomination barriers and party coalitions—can either enable or suppress competition.

In single-candidate contests, restrictive nomination rules and party dominance stifle political diversity and hinder democratic consolidation. For meaningful pluralism to be realized, the electoral system must provide a fair opportunity for independent candidates and minority groups.

Therefore, reform is needed not only to ensure procedural integrity but also to rebuild public trust. This aligns with the argument of Diamond and Plattner (2006), who call for a democratic system that reflects the will of the people, encourages accountability, and rejects elite monopolies.

Political Participation Theory

Political participation is a fundamental component of democracy, encompassing the voluntary engagement of citizens in activities aimed at influencing political decision-making. McClosky (1968) defined political participation as voluntary actions through which citizens contribute to the selection of rulers and the formation of public policy. This includes activities such as voting, campaigning, party activism, petitioning, demonstrations, and direct contact with public officials.

Of these various forms, voting is the most visible and common form of participation. It not only reflects individual civic engagement but also serves as a mechanism of political legitimacy. McClosky emphasized that high levels of voter participation strengthen the authority of elected governments and the vitality of democratic systems.

Miriam Budiardjo (2008) expands on this concept by recognizing both formal and informal forms of participation—from electoral activities to citizen discussions and grassroots mobilization. Therefore, political participation reflects both personal preferences and collective agency and political accountability.

Ramlan Surbakti (2017) distinguishes between conventional participation (e.g., voting and party membership) and non-conventional participation (such as protests and civil disobedience). He asserts that every individual has the normative right to advocate for their interests in public policy.

Pippa Norris (2004) also expanded this framework by introducing digital participation or e-participation, such as social media activism, online petitions, and digital forums. These forms demand inclusiveness and institutional responsiveness to evolving political expressions.

In the context of regional elections, voter turnout is a crucial metric. High participation reflects public trust and strengthens democratic legitimacy, while low participation can signal political alienation. Article 54D of Law Number 10 of 2016 even requires a minimum threshold of 50% to declare a single candidate the legitimate winner. This emphasizes the link between participation and electoral validity in the absence of competition.

Thus, political participation theory provides an important normative and empirical foundation for understanding citizen engagement in ensuring democratic legitimacy, especially when electoral choices are constrained.

RESEARCH METHODS

Research Design

This research uses a qualitative approach with the transcendental phenomenology method as developed by Moustakas (1994). This method allows for exploration of the essence of the subjective experiences of political and social actors in single-candidate regional elections, by suspending the researcher's preconceptions through the practice of *epoché*. The transcendental phenomenology approach is relevant for uncovering how local actors in Maros Regency interpret the limitations of electoral competition, while also placing these findings within the context of regional comparisons of Southeast Asian democracy (Creswell, 2013).

Subject and Participant Selection Strategy

Participants were selected using purposive sampling, focusing on direct experience with the single candidate phenomenon in the 2024 regional elections. Informants included: a) Leaders of political parties (both supporting and non-supporting parties); Election organizers (KPU and Bawaslu), Chairman and Members of the DPRD, Election monitoring organizations, Survey institute, Single candidate pair.

The number of participants was not determined at the outset, but rather followed the principle of data saturation: interviews and observations were stopped when new information no longer added to the analysis categories or themes, typically after repetition of responses in the last 2–3 interviews (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). In this way, data depth was prioritized over the number of participants.

Data Collection Techniques

In-depth Interview

Semi-structured interviews were conducted both in person and online. Questions focused on: a) Actor's perception of the political legitimacy of a single candidate; b) Party strategy in building a dominant coalition; c) Public response included the phenomenon of “blank columns”; d) Comparison with democratic practices at the national and regional levels.

To avoid bias, interviews were conducted in several rounds: initial interviews for exploration, follow-up interviews for clarification, and confirmation interviews for member checking.

Participatory Observation

Researchers conducted participatory observation during the Maros regional election (Pilkada) activities, including the campaign, public debate, and voting process. Field notes focused on interactions between actors,

elite-local dynamics, and forms of citizen participation. To minimize observational bias, researchers used a daily reflective journal that separated descriptive notes from initial interpretations.

Documentation Study

Official documents (KPU/Bawaslu reports, regulations, voter attendance data), election observer reports, media coverage, and party documents were analyzed to enrich the data. Document analysis was conducted thematically to validate the findings from interviews and observations.

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014): a) Data Reduction – selecting data relevant to the research focus; b) Data Condensation – developing categories and themes from participant experiences; c) Data Presentation – thematic and narrative matrices to connect patterns between actors; d) Conclusion Drawing – establishing the essence of the phenomenon and verifying it through source triangulation and member checking.

Theme saturation was ensured by double-cycle coding (initial coding then focused coding), so that no new categories emerged even with additional data.

Researcher Credibility, Reflexivity, and Bias Control

To increase credibility and minimize researcher bias, the following strategies were implemented: 1) Triangulation of methods and sources (interviews, observations, documents; elite and non-elite actors); 2) Member checking by providing a summary of findings to participants for clarification; 3) Audit trail, namely complete documentation of the research process (interview notes, codes, analytical memos); 4) Peer debriefing, by discussing codes and themes with colleagues to test the consistency of interpretation; 5) A reflective journal, containing notes on the researcher's position, potential biases, and steps to maintain the separation of analysis from personal experience.

With this approach, the application of epoche goes beyond theory and is combined with the practice of reflexivity and systematic auditing mechanisms. This strengthens the validity of research results and ensures that findings represent participants' experiences, not researchers' preferences.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Electoral Paradox in Local Democracy: Between Hegemony and Political Resistance

Interviews with representatives of election monitoring organizations described the 2024 Maros regional elections as "elections without choice." They explained that all political parties holding seats in the Regional People's Representative Council (DPRD)—PAN, Golkar, PKS, PKB, Demokrat, NasDem, Gerindra, Hanura, and PBB—united in support of the incumbent pair. "The public lost the opportunity to choose alternative political representation," they said. This situation demonstrates a sharp contrast between the fulfillment of legal procedures and the absence of democratic substance, which should be characterized by real political competition. Within the framework of critical democracy (Habermas, 1996), elections cannot be understood simply as compliance with formal rules, but also as an arena for deliberation that opens up space for rational citizen participation. The absence of contestation, as election monitors complain, makes elections merely a ritual of legitimacy, so that the continuation of legal procedures does not automatically produce substantive legitimacy.

Several party officials at the local level also acknowledged that full support for the incumbent was based on pragmatic considerations. One party cadre stated: "If there's a candidate with the best chance, why would we waste our energy supporting another?" This view demonstrates how political parties, instead of carrying out their functions of cadre development and political education, prefer short-term electoral logic. The 2024 Maros Regency election, which featured only one candidate pair, also raised a fundamental issue: the lack of competition, an essential characteristic of democratic elections. Although formally permitted by regulations, the phenomenon of single candidates raises substantial problems related to electoral legitimacy and the quality of representation.

On the other hand, Maros residents interviewed by researchers expressed disappointment. "We can only vote, we can't decide," said a community leader, emphasizing the lack of alternative political space, which deprives the community of the opportunity to test different ideas and programs. This situation suggests that the phenomenon in Maros is not isolated, but rather similar to experiences in Cambodia—where the main opposition was disbanded ahead of the 2018 elections (HRW, 2019)—or in Laos, where a single party consistently dominated the formal political space (Büntje & Dressel, 2021). In all these cases, elections still took place, but the public's deliberative space has become increasingly constrained.

The implication is that this type of political configuration has the potential to create a climate of dependency between party elites and executive actors, thereby weakening the principles of institutional control and checks and balances. One local academic asserted: "Democracy can function without opposition, but what is missing is an open public space for debate." This statement illustrates a serious risk to the quality of local democracy in Indonesia, as the public loses a legitimate channel for correcting policy direction. If the phenomenon of single candidates continues to be considered normal, the degradation of local democracy is inevitable.

1.2 Structural Barriers and Non-Inclusive Electoral Politics

Interviewed figures from non-nominating parties and members of the Regional People's Representative Council (DPRD) emphasized that the 8.5% support requirement for independent candidates on the final list (DPT) is "almost impossible to meet without significant logistical support." Furthermore, the party nomination threshold of 20% of DPRD seats or 25% of valid votes closes the door for alternative candidates. With nine parties holding seats (PAN, Golkar, PKS, PKB, Demokrat, NasDem, Gerindra, Hanura, and PBB) all joining forces to support the incumbent, there is virtually no longer a party-based nomination route for alternative candidates. Thus, while legally valid, the regulatory framework actually narrows the space for political competition and reinforces the incumbent's dominance.

From the perspective of electoral institutionalism (Norris, 2004; North, 1990), the design of an electoral system is never neutral, but rather becomes an instrument that shapes the incentives and behavior of political actors. High thresholds encourage parties to form coalitions with dominant forces rather than open up space for pluralistic contestation. These structural barriers are exacerbated by the high costs of campaigning, logistics, and informal politics, creating an exclusive competitive arena accessible only to elites with substantial economic resources. Independent candidates or local figures without strong financial backing have no realistic chance of competing on equal terms. As one local activist acknowledged, "politics here has become a matter of capital, not ideas."

The situation in Maros demonstrates how strict candidacy regulations and local political economic realities work together to block the emergence of alternative candidates. The multi-layered factual verification process for independent candidates often creates a biased political selection process, creating disincentives for potential candidates. Consequently, effective candidacy access is available only to elite groups with structural ties to power. This situation aligns with experiences in Malaysia, where Barisan Nasional maintained its dominance through manipulated electoral rules and access to state resources (Case, 2017), and in post-2014 Thailand, where the new constitutional design was exploited to weaken the opposition (Chambers & Waitoolkiat, 2016).

The implication is that without reform of candidacy regulations, local democracy in Indonesia risks becoming trapped in an electoral oligarchy. Structural barriers make democracy increasingly elitist, accessible only to well-capitalized actors, while grassroots community leaders lose the opportunity to compete. The consequence is a loss of political diversity and alternative representation in the electoral process. When access to candidacy is filtered through exclusive legal and financial mechanisms, the space for local leaders with strong social bases is severely limited. Reform of the candidacy system is absolutely necessary for local democracy to remain inclusive and competitive.

4.3 Failure of Political Party Regeneration and Candidacy Oligarchy

Interviewed leaders of the supporting political parties admitted that their support for the incumbent was based on their "chance of winning" and direction from the central elite, not on internal cadre development. This confirms that the party's function as a political recruitment institution is increasingly neglected. Instead of producing new cadres, the party reinforces elite dominance through pragmatic calculations. According to Habermas (1987), this condition reflects the "colonization of the lifeworld," where parties cease to be spaces of deliberation. Yet, as Dahl (1971, 1998) reminds us, democracy can only survive with continuous political regeneration.

The emergence of a single candidate pair in the Maros regional elections not only reflects the dominant power of the incumbent but also demonstrates the systemic failure of political parties in carrying out their cadre-building function. Rather than serving as a vehicle for articulating interests and producing new political leadership, parties tend to act more as opportunistic electoral vehicles. This phenomenon demonstrates the party's minimal investment in developing the capacity of internal cadres capable of substantively competing in local political contests. The literature on democratic institutions and critical democratic theory confirms that the failure of cadre-building reflects a weakening of internal democratization. Habermas (1996) emphasized the importance of political forums as spaces for articulation and regeneration of leadership that are not distorted by elite dominance. When parties fail to provide deliberative spaces for the struggle for positions, the public loses access to substantial influence on power structures. Thus, the absence of internal regeneration is not only an organizational failure but also a form of colonization of the public sphere by political elites (Habermas, 1987; 1996).

The phenomenon of weak cadre development is not unique to Indonesia. In the Philippines, political parties function solely as electoral vehicles for populist candidates without investing in cadre development (Curato, 2017). A similar pattern suggests that weak party regeneration is a systemic problem of democracy in Southeast Asia, which tends to be oligarchic and transactional. Centralized, patronage-based party systems make nomination decisions more determined by calculations of electability and proximity to the central elite, rather than by a meritocratic cadre development process. As a result, parties fail to fulfill their function as liaison institutions between citizens and the state, instead becoming intermediaries for elite interests, strengthening local political oligarchies.

The implication is that the failure of parties to carry out their cadre-building function weakens the quality of local democracy while strengthening electoral oligarchies. Within the framework of Dahl's polyarchy theory (1971, 1998), democracy requires open competition and participation. When political regeneration fails and alternative candidates are unavailable, one of the main pillars of polyarchy collapses. This means that even

though electoral procedures continue, the substance of democracy suffers a serious setback. Therefore, revitalizing the role of parties in cadre-building is an urgent agenda so that democracy does not stop at electoral procedures alone but truly opens up space for substantive competition.

4.4 Erosion of Voter Agency and Ambiguity of Participation

General Elections Commission (KPU) data shows that voter turnout in Maros in the 2024 regional elections reached 69.64%, but 35.99% voted blank, and 30.36% were absent from polling stations. Survey institutions noted that blank ballots were more prevalent in urban areas like Turikale, while abstention rates were higher in rural areas. Election monitoring organizations interpreted this pattern as a form of political resistance: young urban voters tended to channel protests by voting blank, while rural residents preferred to express dissatisfaction through absentee voting. This phenomenon suggests that attendance at polling stations does not always reflect active legitimacy, but can instead be a form of administrative coercion or a passive expression of disappointment with the available political options.

From the perspective of political participation theory (McClosky, 1968; Surbakti, 2017), abstaining or voting for the blank column can be understood as unconventional forms of participation. The blank column and golput, particularly in the context of regional elections with a single candidate pair, represent symbolic articulations of critical politics. This perspective is reinforced by Habermas's (1996) deliberative democracy paradigm, which believes that the absence of alternative candidates reflects a crisis of representation due to the lack of space for public deliberation. Thus, voting for the blank column and the decision to golput are not merely deviations from procedural norms, but rather substantive expressions of citizen resistance to an exclusive electoral structure.

This phenomenon of resistance through unconventional participation is consistent with alternative participation patterns in other countries, such as the student movement in Thailand (Chan & Sinpeng, 2021) or the digital protests in Hong Kong (Veg, 2020). Both cases demonstrate how limited formal competition drives citizens to seek alternative political channels outside conventional electoral mechanisms. A similar trend was seen in Maros, where the absence of electoral competition encouraged the public to articulate their political stance through symbolic mechanisms such as voting in the blank column and abstaining from voting.

The implication is that the quality of democracy cannot be measured solely by voter turnout. Healthy democracy demands substantive choices and deliberative space, not merely symbolic participation. Within Habermas's (1996) deliberative framework, meaningful participation must emerge from a process of rational communication and open competition of ideas, not from procedural coercion. Regional elections with a single candidate pair actually reduce voter agency and transform citizens into mere appendages of electoral procedures. Thus, the erosion of voter agency in Maros reflects an epistemic crisis in local democracy, where citizens lose their role as active political subjects. To restore this role, the local political system needs to ensure the availability of equal alternative candidates and a deliberative space that allows for substantive citizen involvement in the political process (Held, 2006; Norris, 2004).

4.5 Electoral Legitimacy and Leadership Dilemmas

The General Elections Commission (KPU) results show that the sole candidate pair in the 2024 Maros regional election obtained 64.01% of the valid vote. However, when combined with the blank vote (35.99%) and the abstention rate (30.36%), more than half of voters did not actually provide explicit support. Election monitoring organizations interpret this situation as a form of "procedural legitimacy," not substantive legitimacy. This means that, although the results are legally valid, the basis of political support for the winner is very fragile, as it is not based on equal competition or clear majority approval.

In the literature on democracy, Przeworski (1999) asserts that true legitimacy only emerges from competition with uncertain outcomes. Meanwhile, Habermas (1996) emphasizes that the absence of public deliberation means that legitimacy stems not from rational citizen communication, but from structural domination. Regional elections with a single candidate pair essentially close off the space for deliberation and turn elections into acclamation rituals with minimal public accountability. Thus, high turnout does not necessarily indicate strong legitimacy, as behind it are expressions of resistance in the form of empty votes and abstentions.

The legitimacy crisis in Maros parallels experiences in other countries. In Singapore, the long-standing dominance of the People's Action Party (PAP) has raised questions about the quality of political legitimacy (Rodan, 2018). In Cambodia, the Cambodian People's Party's (CPP) landslide victory post-2018 was seen as not reflecting the free consent of the people (HRW, 2019). These cases demonstrate that democracies that rely solely on electoral procedures without substantive competition risk producing regimes that are legally legitimate but politically fragile.

The implication is that the government elected in the 2024 Maros regional elections will face a heavy moral and political burden. The lack of substantive legitimacy can trigger a decline in public trust, resistance to policies, and low community participation in development. As emphasized by Diamond and Plattner (2006), a competitive election design is an absolute requirement for creating sustainable democratic legitimacy. Without real choices and a space for public deliberation, local democracy will remain only a formal-legal procedure, while its substance is eroded by structural domination that ignores citizen aspirations.

4.6 Local Polarization and Grassroots Political Fragmentation

The blank column movement in Turikale and Mandai sub-districts was led by former regional heads and civil society activists. Information from the head of an election monitoring organization indicates that this action involved the consolidation of communities that felt deprived of formal political channels. "We no

longer have a way to express our choices other than through the blank column," said one local activist. This fragmentation marked a social divide between supporters of the status quo and informal opposition groups. Its complexity became even more apparent when local factors, affiliations of community leaders, and a history of political disillusionment became determinants of electoral attitudes.

Furthermore, field data shows that the presence of blank votes was influenced by at least three main factors. First, public disappointment with the incumbent's leadership during the previous period, particularly regarding campaign promises that were deemed not fully realized. Second, public disappointment with Hj. Shartina Bohari's ineligibility (TMS) as a candidate for Deputy Regent of Maros, which some residents considered a form of closing political space for potential candidates. Third, the absence of alternative choices due to all parties joining forces to support the incumbent pair. A community leader asserted, "If there were other candidates, perhaps we could consider them, but because there is only one, the blank vote is the choice."

Theoretically, this phenomenon can be understood through Dahl's (1998) pluralism framework, where counter-aspirations expressed through the empty space reflect citizens' political vitality. Although formal channels are closed, these aspirations are still channeled through non-institutional channels. From Habermas's (1996) perspective, this situation demonstrates a disconnect between the formal political system and the deliberative public sphere, as citizens' aspirations lack legitimate channels of representation.

The phenomenon of community-based resistance in Maros shares similarities with the contexts of pre-2021 Myanmar (Farrelly, 2022) and post-2014 Thailand (Chambers & Waitoolkiat, 2016), where limited formal channels fostered counter-movements outside official institutions. Similarly, in Maros, the empty column became a symbolic platform uniting citizens who felt marginalized by the formal system of political representation.

The implication is that polarization without formal mediation channels has the potential to deepen social fragmentation and reduce local democratic cohesion. A healthy democracy is not characterized by the absence of conflict, but rather by the political system's ability to manage differences in a deliberative and inclusive manner. Regional elections involving a single candidate pair not only impact the configuration of the political elite but also give rise to social polarization at the grassroots level. "If all doors are closed, people will ultimately seek their own path," said one election observer. Therefore, opening up deliberative spaces and alternative representation is essential to prevent fragmentation from developing into latent conflict. Democracy can only survive if differences are accommodated within a fair and open institutional framework, so that opposing aspirations are not forced to resort solely to informal channels.

4.7 The Urgency of Local Political Reform and Revision of Regional Election Design

Informants from the General Elections Commission (KPU), the Elections Supervisory Agency (Bawaslu), and election monitoring organizations emphasized that the current nomination system "locks the doors on competition," allowing only candidates from dominant coalitions or well-funded elites to enter. This demonstrates that the current legal framework actually narrows the space for political participation and hinders the emergence of alternative leadership. The repeated occurrence of single-candidate regional elections in various regions, including Maros, is a clear indication of the weakness of checks and balances and the fragility of local democracy.

From an electoral engineering perspective (Norris, 2004), the design of an electoral system determines the extent to which democracy is inclusive or exclusive. The nomination threshold of 20% of DPRD seats or 25% of valid votes for a party, and 8.5% of the DPT support for independent candidates, have created incentives for elite consolidation and simultaneously become structural barriers to electoral pluralism. North (1990) asserts that institutions shape political behavior according to dominant interests, so it is not surprising that parties prefer to join the incumbent rather than open up opportunities for alternative contestation.

The situation in Maros is consistent with experiences in other countries. Malaysia, for example, maintained the dominance of Barisan Nasional through rigged electoral systems and control of state resources (Case, 2017). Similarly, in Vietnam, the Communist Party controlled political representation by closing off opportunities for opposition candidates and fielding only a single candidate (Thayer, 2014). These cases highlight that when electoral institutions are designed to benefit the dominant party, democracy risks becoming trapped in an electoral oligarchy.

The implication is that electoral reform is an urgent need. There are at least five main agendas: (1) lowering the nomination threshold to be more proportional, (2) a public financing scheme for independent candidates, (3) revitalizing party cadre development, (4) transparency in political funding, and (5) empowering civil society. These reforms are both technical and emancipatory. In the spirit of the critical democracy paradigm (Habermas, 1996; Diamond & Plattner, 2006), revising electoral institutions is not merely a matter of procedural technocracy, but rather a political project to dismantle structural inequalities and build a more inclusive, deliberative, and sustainable local democracy.

CONCLUSION

This research shows that the 2024 single-candidate regional elections in Maros Regency reflect a substantive decline in local democracy. Although electoral procedures were conducted legally, the absence of political competition, the dominance of party coalitions, and structural barriers to nomination have transformed elec-

tions from a deliberative space into a mere formal mechanism. This situation highlights the paradox of electoral democracy: legally valid, but substantively fragile, lacking legitimacy, and rife with social fragmentation at the grassroots level. This crisis includes the hegemonic dominance of incumbents, the failure of political party regeneration, the erosion of voter agency, and the declining quality of public deliberation.

Theoretically, these findings enrich the literature on democratic backsliding by situating the Indonesian case within regional trends in Southeast Asia. Combining Habermas's critical democracy perspective, Dahl's polyarchy, and Norris's electoral institutionalism, this study demonstrates that institutional design and the weakness of political parties actually strengthen local oligarchies while eroding citizens' political agency. The Maros case parallels patterns in Cambodia, Laos, Malaysia, Thailand, and the Philippines, where procedural democracy persists but its substance is weakening.

Practically, this research underscores the need for local political reform that is both structural and emancipatory. High candidacy thresholds and high-budget politics need to be reviewed to be more inclusive. Public financing schemes for independent candidates can be instrumental in opening up access to participation. Revitalizing party cadre formation is absolutely necessary so that parties become not merely pragmatic electoral vehicles, but democratic institutions capable of producing new leadership. Furthermore, transparency in political funding and strengthening the role of civil society are crucial for maintaining accountability and expanding deliberative space.

Based on these findings, this study recommends several strategic steps: (1) revising the nomination threshold to allow for the presence of alternative candidates; (2) providing a public financing scheme for independent candidates; (3) increasing transparency and accountability in political funding; (4) strengthening internal political party cadre development mechanisms; and (5) expanding the role of civil society in election monitoring and political education. Comprehensive reforms that guarantee inclusivity, pluralism, and deliberative participation are key requirements for the formation of a more meaningful, resilient, and sustainable local democracy. Thus, the single-candidate regional elections cannot be viewed simply as an electoral anomaly, but rather as a structural symptom of the weakening of democratic institutions that require fundamental overhaul.

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