

THE NEGATIVE IMPACT OF SOCIAL-POLITICAL ELITE TRANSACTIONS ON LOCAL DEMOCRACY IN GORONTALO

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Abstract

Democracy, as an ideal political system, is expected to ensure active public participation in the process of public decision-making. However, in the Indonesian context, the quality of local democracy is often distorted by transactional practices and the pragmatism of political elites. This phenomenon threatens the integrity of democracy, diminishes the quality of public participation, reinforces societal dependence on elites, and weakens democratic institutions. In Gorontalo, the practice of social transactions between political elites and the public has intensified, particularly during local elections and legislative campaigns. The case of the 2024 repeat voting (PSU) in the North Gorontalo Regency serves as a clear indication of the dominance of capital power and elite networks over candidates' visions and missions. This study aims to analyze the negative impact of social-political elite transactions on local democracy and to formulate policy recommendations for strengthening a healthy, participatory, and integrity-based democratic system. The research adopts a quantitative approach using a survey design. The study population includes the general public, political elites, party officials, and election management and supervisory bodies (KPU, Bawaslu, and DKPP) across three regencies in Gorontalo Province. The findings reveal that transactional political practices are a defining feature of every electoral moment in the region, especially in the lead-up to regional and legislative elections. These transactions include money politics, short-term social assistance, and project promises in exchange for electoral support. This highlights how political contestation is largely determined by financial capital rather than candidate vision or integrity. Spearman correlation tests indicate a significant negative relationship between the intensity of social-political transactions and the quality of healthy political participation ($r = -0.642$; $p < 0.01$). The higher the transaction intensity, the lower the quality of participation and public trust in local democracy. These findings strengthen the hypothesis that local democracy in Gorontalo is regressing due to transactional politics. Without knowledge-based and policy-oriented interventions, the negative consequences are likely to persist, including the erosion of local government legitimacy, declining public trust in electoral institutions, and the loss of the substantive meaning of political participation as a form of public control over power.

Keywords: *Local Democracy; Social-Political Elite Transactions; Public Participation; Democratic Quality; Political Reform.*

INTRODUCTION

Gorontalo is one of the provinces in Indonesia characterized by a unique political dynamic. The region is known for the strong influence of kinship ties and political dynasties in its local political processes. As a society deeply rooted in familial values, Gorontalo experiences a political phenomenon where power is often passed down within elite groups or close families through unhealthy and undemocratic means [1]. In the context of regional head elections in Gorontalo, there has been an increasing prevalence of elite-citizen social transactions, resulting from rampant political clientelism and transactional practices that distort local democratic processes. When political elites deploy money politics or material promises to gain support, the public tends to perceive politics merely as a transactional exchange in which votes can be "purchased" through direct compensation [2,3]. During local leadership succession, political party elites frequently use popular figures to consolidate political influence through elite-citizen transactions aimed at garnering electoral support [4-7]. Prior research has shown that patronage often leads to a decline in democratic quality, as citizens tend to prioritize

personal benefits from elite figures over engaging in democratic processes based on universal principles such as electoral freedom and justice [8]. In the Indonesian context—which upholds morality and civility—sustaining local democratic quality hinges on transparency, accountability, and active citizen participation [9]. However, in certain regions, particularly those with complex political dynamics such as Gorontalo, local politics are frequently disrupted by elite–citizen social transactions that undermine these core democratic values. This is evident in the case of the **Repeat Voting (PSU)** held in North Gorontalo Regency during the 2024–2029 regional head election [10]. Money politics represents one of the most damaging forms of elite–citizen transactions, as it fails to reflect a legitimate expression of the people's will [11]. Political elites engage in mutual exchanges to maintain power and enrich themselves by leveraging their political capital. Consequently, communities without access to elite networks become marginalized and excluded from political decision-making processes [12].

A healthy democracy requires transparency and accountability in governance. However, when elite–citizen transactions occur at the top levels of political power, local governments tend to become more opaque and unaccountable. The consequence is a decline in public trust and the reduced effectiveness of local government policies [13]. In a political system contaminated by elite–citizen transactions, the quality of regional elections (Pilkada) is distorted. Elections, ideally mechanisms for selecting competent leaders who represent the people's interests, often become tainted by money politics and other transactional practices. As a result, those elected are not necessarily individuals with clear visions and missions for regional development, but rather those capable of mobilizing financial resources and political-social networks to secure victory. The study *Democratic Backsliding and Participation in Indonesia's Local Politics* reveals that when communities are influenced by money politics and patronage, they tend to feel disempowered in choosing leaders who genuinely represent their aspirations. This leads to a decline in political participation as a result of unhealthy social-political transactions [14–18].

Research specifically focusing on the impact of elite–citizen transactions on local democracy in regions like Gorontalo remains limited. While there have been studies on political dynasties and oligarchies, few have examined how elite–citizen social transactions affect various dimensions of local democracy, such as transparency, accountability, and citizen participation. This study seeks to address this gap by analyzing the forms of elite–citizen political transactions in Gorontalo and their implications for the overall quality of local democracy—particularly in preventing internal conflict [19–22]. Previous research has shown that political elites can manufacture social conflict by exploiting group identities to gain political support. This pattern, although more identity-based in contexts like Australia, also occurs in local Indonesian settings such as Gorontalo, albeit through different mechanisms. In Gorontalo, political elites more commonly rely on social transactions—such as cash, government positions, or aid—as instruments of power consolidation. Both phenomena illustrate how unhealthy elite–citizen relationships, whether based on identity or transactions, can disrupt democratic ideals, foster polarization, and weaken critical public participation. In addition, some elites leverage their financial power as a political transaction tool. The strength of local elites, social relationships, and patron-client culture all shape how communities respond to local democratic crises. Short-term elite interests often worsen social inequality and damage the overall quality of life for citizens [23–26]. Therefore, this study adopts a **critical approach** to analyze the **negative impacts of elite–citizen social transactions** on local democracy in Gorontalo. It aims to uncover the **various forms of these transactions**, the **actors involved**, and the **long-term consequences** for the local democratic system and regional governance [27].

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The research findings demonstrate that transactional political practices have become deeply embedded in the local democratic processes in Gorontalo. Survey data revealed that over 68% of respondents acknowledged the prevalence of vote-buying, short-term social assistance, and promises of infrastructure projects during election periods. These practices are not isolated; rather, they have become systemic, particularly in the lead-up to regional head elections (Pilkada) and legislative elections (Pileg). A striking case is the Repeat Voting (PSU) incident in the 2024 local election in North Gorontalo Regency, which illustrated the dominance of financial capital and elite networks over substantive electoral debates. Respondents in this region reported higher exposure to political transactions, correlating with decreased trust in electoral institutions and skepticism toward candidate integrity.

Statistical analysis using Spearman's rank correlation confirmed a **significant negative relationship** between the **intensity of social-political transactions** and the **level of healthy political participation** ($r = -0.642$, $p < 0.01$). This correlation suggests that as transactional practices increase, public participation tends to become more passive, pragmatic, and short-term oriented, rather than being based on critical engagement with policies or candidate competencies. The

implications of these findings are far-reaching. First, transactional politics erode the **ideals of participatory democracy**, where citizens are expected to deliberate and make informed decisions. Instead, electoral participation becomes commodified, reducing democratic engagement to a marketplace of votes. Second, this practice nurtures **political dependency**, as citizens begin to perceive democratic participation as a means of receiving material benefits rather than exercising civic responsibility. Furthermore, this trend contributes to the **delegitimization of local democratic institutions**, including electoral commissions and oversight bodies such as the KPU, Bawaslu, and DKPP. The perception that these institutions are ineffective or complicit in transactional politics undermines their credibility and reduces public trust. The findings align with prior studies that warn against the normalization of transactional politics in emerging democracies (Aspinall & Berenschot, 2019; Mietzner, 2020). In such contexts, elections risk becoming formalities where political elites consolidate power through clientelistic practices rather than fostering genuine political accountability. To counter these trends, urgent policy interventions are needed. These include:

1. **Strengthening political education** to promote value-based voting and civic awareness.
2. **Enforcing stricter electoral laws** to punish money politics and campaign irregularities.
3. **Empowering civil society and media** to serve as watchdogs and sources of critical political discourse.
4. **Institutional reforms** that reduce the influence of oligarchic networks in candidate nominations and campaign financing.

Without such measures, the regression of local democracy in Gorontalo may deepen, with long-term consequences for democratic consolidation, citizen empowerment, and governance quality in the region.

Literature Review (Optional)

1. Local Democracy and Political Integrity

Local democracy, as discussed by Smith and Revell (2021), emphasizes grassroots participation, transparency, and representative governance. However, in many developing democracies, including Indonesia, the normative ideals of democracy are often distorted by political patronage and elite manipulation (Hadiz & Robison, 2020). These distortions undermine democratic consolidation and limit citizens' political agency.

2. Political Transactions and Elite Capture

The concept of *elite capture* refers to the domination of political decision-making by a small, privileged group that manipulates institutions for their own gain (Khan, 2022). Political transactions—such as money politics, nepotism, and the exchange of short-term material benefits—are manifestations of elite strategies to maintain control. Studies by Aspinall and Sukmajati (2019) show that in many Indonesian regions, political transactions are systemic and significantly reduce electoral competitiveness.

3. The Role of Patron–Client Relations

Patron–client relationships, where political elites provide resources in exchange for loyalty or votes, remain a central feature of political life in Indonesia (Mietzner, 2021). These relationships often perpetuate inequality and reduce citizens to passive recipients of elite favors, rather than active participants in democratic governance. Research by Tomsa and Ufen (2020) also points to the normalization of such practices in subnational politics, particularly in areas with entrenched kinship networks.

4. Impacts on Electoral Participation and Public Trust

Numerous studies have confirmed the detrimental effects of transactional politics on electoral participation and institutional trust. According to Pratikno (2020), when voters perceive elections as mere formalities dominated by money and elite influence, civic engagement declines, and skepticism toward democratic institutions increases. This creates a feedback loop that further entrenches elite dominance and weakens political accountability.

5. The Gorontalo Context

Gorontalo's political dynamics, as observed by regional scholars (Tilome, 2023; Achmad & Akbar, 2024), are shaped by a combination of familialism, economic dependence, and elite manipulation. The 2024 re-election (PSU) in North Gorontalo regency provides a recent case of how elite power and financial influence override substantive democratic competition, reinforcing concerns about declining democratic quality in peripheral regions.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employed a **quantitative approach** with a **survey research design** to analyze the negative impacts of elite–citizen social transactions on the quality of local democracy in Gorontalo. The quantitative approach was chosen

to allow systematic measurement and statistical analysis of the relationship between the intensity of political transactions and indicators of democratic quality, including citizen participation, trust in institutions, and electoral transparency.

Population and Sample

The research population comprised key stakeholders involved in the local political ecosystem, including:

- Citizens eligible to vote,
- Political elites (e.g., local politicians, incumbent officials),
- Political party administrators,
- Electoral management bodies such as the **Regional General Elections Commission (KPU)**, **Election Supervisory Body (Bawaslu)**, and **Election Ethics Council (DKPP)**.

The study was conducted in **three regencies in Gorontalo Province**: Gorontalo Regency, North Gorontalo Regency, and Bone Bolango Regency. These regions were selected based on the intensity of political contestation and previous electoral controversies.

A **stratified random sampling** technique was used to ensure representation across different stakeholder groups. The total sample size consisted of **360 respondents**, divided equally among the three regencies.

Data Collection Techniques

Primary data were collected using a **structured questionnaire** that included both closed-ended and Likert-scale items designed to measure:

- Perceived frequency of political transactions (money politics, material promises, symbolic exchanges),
- Public trust in democratic institutions,
- Levels of citizen participation and political engagement.

To complement the survey data, **semi-structured interviews** were conducted with selected political elites, election officials, and civil society representatives to enrich the contextual understanding of the transactional practices and their impacts.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using **descriptive statistics** and **inferential statistics**. Specifically:

- **Descriptive analysis** was used to summarize the frequency and patterns of elite–citizen transactions.
- **Spearman’s Rank-Order Correlation Test** was employed to examine the relationship between the intensity of transactional practices and the quality of democratic participation.

The significance level was set at $p < 0.01$ to ensure robustness of findings. Qualitative interview data were analyzed thematically to identify recurring narratives and validate the quantitative findings.

Ethical Considerations

All respondents were provided with informed consent forms, and their participation was voluntary. Identities were anonymized to ensure confidentiality and prevent potential political repercussions.

CONCLUSION

This study highlights the adverse effects of elite–citizen social transactions on the quality of local democracy in Gorontalo. The findings reveal that transactional political practices—such as vote-buying, short-term material incentives, and project promises—have become entrenched features of local elections, particularly in the lead-up to regional and legislative elections. These practices shift the essence of democratic participation from a values-based civic duty to a commodified exchange, thereby undermining democratic integrity. The Spearman correlation test confirmed a significant negative relationship between the intensity of political transactions and healthy democratic participation. The more frequent the transactions, the lower the quality of citizen involvement and trust in democratic institutions. Such patterns not only distort the electoral process but also perpetuate political clientelism, deepen social inequality, and reduce the legitimacy of local governance. The dominance of elite-controlled networks and financial power in determining electoral outcomes has weakened the role of vision, integrity, and accountability in leadership selection. Without immediate and knowledge-based policy interventions, the erosion of democratic norms will persist, leading to long-term consequences such as reduced public trust, weakened accountability, and the marginalization of politically unconnected groups. Therefore, strengthening democratic resilience in Gorontalo requires structural reforms that promote transparency, civic

education, institutional integrity, and mechanisms to deter transactional politics. Future research is encouraged to explore innovative policy models and civic engagement strategies to safeguard democratic values at the local level

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