

# The Dynamics of Northern Maluku Local Politics after the Birth of Law No. 46 Year 1999

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## ABSTRACT

This research discusses the dynamics of local politics in North Maluku Province Indonesia after the birth of Law Number 46 of 1999 which stipulates the division of the region from Maluku Province. This division became the starting point for significant changes in the structure of local government, the configuration of political elites, and the pattern of power relations at the local level. The purpose of this study is to analyze how the process of government transition, traditional and modern elite contestation, and regional autonomy policies affect the development of local politics in North Maluku. The research method used is qualitative research with a descriptive-analytical approach through literature studies, documentation, and in-depth interviews with a number of key informants. The results showed that the formation of North Maluku Province opened up space for more intense political competition, especially in the struggle for strategic positions, both at the provincial and district/city levels. In addition, the role of the sultanates - especially Ternate and Tidore - is still visible through political symbolism and cultural support that influences the local power map. The regional autonomy policy also provides opportunities for regions to develop self-governance, but at the same time gives rise to political practices of patronage, elite fragmentation, and competition based on economic interests and natural resources.

This study concludes that the dynamics of North Maluku local politics after the birth of Law No. 46/1999 is a complex and evolving process, influenced by the interaction between new government structures, local cultural identities, and diverse political interests. Understanding these dynamics is important to strengthen local governance that is more democratic and responsive to community needs.

**Keywords:** local politics, North Maluku, regional expansion, Law No. 46/1999, regional autonomy.

## INTRODUCTION

The enactment of Law No. 46/1999 on the Establishment of North Maluku Province became an important milestone in the political and governance journey in eastern Indonesia. This regulation officially separated North Maluku from Maluku Province and marked the beginning of a new independent government structure. The establishment of the province not only had implications for administrative aspects, but also led to significant changes in local political dynamics, elite configuration, and inter-group relations in the region.

Historically, North Maluku is a region with strong cultural and political uniqueness, characterized by the existence of four major sultanates-Ternate, Tidore, Bacan and Jailolo-that have long played an important role in shaping the region's political identity. With the creation of North Maluku Province, the local political arena became increasingly open to various interest groups, including traditional elites, bureaucratic elites and modern political figures who began to compete for influence in the new government structure.

On the other hand, the expansion of the province also brought consequences in the form of increased political competition, especially in the struggle for the positions of governor, regent and other strategic positions. The transition period since 1999 has seen various forms of dynamics, ranging from the reconstruction of local government institutions, the tug-of-war between elites, to the emergence of political fragmentation at the

district/city level. These changes became more complex after the implementation of regional autonomy through Law No. 22/1999 and later Law No. 32/2004, which gave greater space for regions to govern themselves.

In addition, various economic interests, especially related to the potential of mining, fisheries and other natural resources, have also increased the intensity of local politics. Inter-elite competition for control of strategic resources triggered political conflicts, shifting coalitions, and the emergence of patronage that strengthened transactional political practices.

Thus, the dynamics of North Maluku local politics after the birth of Law No. 46/1999 is a multidimensional phenomenon that includes changes in power structures, elite contestation, the role of local identity, and the influence of regional autonomy policies. Understanding these dynamics is important to see how local politics in North Maluku developed from the transition period of the new province to become part of a more established local government system today.

## **RESEARCH METHODS**

### **Research Type and Approach**

This research uses a qualitative approach with a descriptive-analytical research type. This approach was chosen to describe, understand and analyze the dynamics of North Maluku local politics after the enactment of Law No. 46 of 1999 in an in-depth and comprehensive manner. The qualitative approach allows researchers to explore the experiences, views, and interactions between local political actors involved in the expansion process and political developments after the formation of the province.

### **Research Location**

The research was conducted in North Maluku Province, focusing on areas that play an important role in the development of local politics, such as Ternate City, Tidore Islands City, West Halmahera Regency, North Halmahera, and South Halmahera. The selection of locations was based on historical, political and administrative considerations related to the expansion process and post-1999 power dynamics. Informants were selected using a purposive sampling technique, which determines informants based on their knowledge, experience and involvement in the local political dynamics of North Maluku. The main informants included: (1) Former and current local government officials, (2). Political figures and DPRD members, (3). Customary/sultanate leaders, (4). Academics, (5). Civil society activists, (6). Community leaders and local journalists.

### **Data Collection Technique**

Data collection techniques include: (1). In-depth interviews to gather information on changes in political structures, conflicts of interest, and the role of elites in local politics. (2). Observation, both direct observation of government and political activities and participatory observation in community forums. (3). Documentation studies, through the review of official documents such as Law No. 46/1999, local regulations, local election data, academic publications, and archives of North Maluku's political history.

### **Data Analysis Technique**

Data analysis uses the Miles and Huberman model, which includes: (1). Data reduction, selection, focusing, and simplification of data from interviews, observations, and documentation. (2). Presentation of data, organizing data in the form of narratives, tables, and schemes of relationships between political actors. (3) Drawing conclusions/verification, formulating patterns, dynamics, and power relations in North Maluku local politics after expansion. To ensure the validity of the data, this research uses the techniques: (1). Source triangulation, comparing data from various informants. (2). Triangulation of techniques, comparing interview data, observation, and documentation. (3). Member check, by asking for clarification or confirmation to informants. 4). Peer debriefing, consulting with local political experts or academics to ensure the accuracy of interpretation.

## **DISCUSSION**

### **Provincial Expansion and Transformation of Government Structure**

The enactment of Law No. 46/1999 on the Establishment of North Maluku Province brought fundamental changes to the structure of local government. The division of the province is part of the reform agenda to bring public services closer and accelerate regional development. This transformation led to the establishment of new government institutions, such as the governor's office, provincial DPRD, and other regional apparatus.

In the early days of formation, there was a complex adaptation process, especially because most of the government infrastructure was not yet available. The relocation of the provincial capital from Ternate to Sofifi then became an important political issue that affected the dynamics of inter-elite relations. The contestation over the selection of a strategic location for the center of government became part of the local political dynamics that showed the tug of administrative, economic and symbolic interests.

Regional expansion is one of the instruments of decentralization sought by the Indonesian government to improve the effectiveness of governance, accelerate regional development, and strengthen regional capacity in managing economic and socio-cultural potential. In the reform era, the demand for expansion is getting stronger due to the push for democratization, increased community participation, and the desire for regions to gain greater authority in regulating local affairs. The transformation of government structure is an integral part of the expansion process, because the formation of a new province will affect the pattern of center-local relations, bureaucratic structure, and local political configuration.

In the context of North Maluku Province, the division of the region from Maluku Province is the result of social, political and historical dynamics that have been going on for a long time. Aspirations to separate have emerged since the 1950s, marked by the desire of people in the Halmahera, Ternate and Tidore regions to have their own provincial government. This aspiration was motivated by the imbalance of development, the distance of the center of government in Ambon, and the feeling that the needs of the people of North Maluku have not been accommodated optimally in the policies of the parent provincial government.

The enactment of Law No. 46/1999 was the central government's response to these aspirations, as well as part of the post-reform decentralization policy. The establishment of North Maluku Province not only marked the birth of a new government entity, but also had major implications for the transformation of government structures in the region. The establishment of a new province required the rearrangement of bureaucratic apparatus, the division of authority, the establishment of regional legislative and judicial institutions, and the adjustment of relations between local governments that were previously within the Maluku provincial structure.

The expansion process also gave rise to intense local political dynamics. The emergence of contestation between political elites and traditional leaders regarding the location of the provincial capital, the division of power, and the determination of the organizational structure of government became part of the major transformation that accompanied the birth of the new province. In addition, the 1999-2000 Maluku communal conflict also became one of the factors accelerating the expansion policy, because it was considered to create new stability through structuring more independent government institutions in North Maluku.

With the establishment of North Maluku Province, the central government hopes to accelerate development, improve the quality of public services, and foster more effective governance. However, the success of expansion is highly dependent on institutional readiness, human resources, and the ability of local governments to manage local economic and socio-cultural potential. Therefore, a study of the division of North Maluku Province and the transformation of its governance structure is very important to understand the dynamics that accompany changes in regional administration, the impact on society, and the challenges faced in the process of regional development.

## **Contestation of Local Political Elites after Expansion**

The expansion of North Maluku Province through Law No. 46/1999 opened a new chapter in regional political dynamics. The formation of a new province not only marked administrative changes, but also created a wider political arena for local actors to engage in the process of power struggle. In the context of local governance, expansion often presents opportunities for the emergence of new political elites who previously had no significant space in the structure of the parent province's government. This was also the case in North Maluku, where expansion expanded the stage for political contestation, changed the configuration of power, and revived social and cultural bases that became sources of local political legitimacy.

Post-division, political elite competition in North Maluku flourished along with the establishment of new government institutions, such as the governor, deputy governor, provincial DPRD, and regional bureaucratic institutions. The process of determining the location of the provincial capital, establishing regional apparatus, and filling government positions became the starting point for contestation between local political figures from various regions such as Ternate, Tidore, West Halmahera, North Halmahera and South Halmahera. Each region brings its own interests, supported by patronage networks, cultural power, customary structures, and proximity to national political actors.

In addition, the division of North Maluku took place during Indonesia's post-reform political transition, when the national political system was moving towards decentralization, democratization, and increased regional autonomy. In this situation, local elites had greater space to organize political support, control resources and influence development policies in their regions. Contestation became sharper, especially in the elections of governors, regents and legislators, which began to be implemented more democratically through direct election mechanisms.

Post-expansion political elite contestation is also influenced by socio-cultural identity factors. In North Maluku, relations between regions are often supported by the history of local kingdoms such as the Sultanates of Ternate and Tidore, which still have symbolic influence in contemporary politics. Political elites use this historical identity as a source of legitimacy, as well as a tool for political mobilization. Patterns of patronage and clientelism also strengthen the position of certain actors in maintaining their political support base.

In addition to more open political space, pemekaran also brings challenges in the form of power fragmentation, political polarization, and potential conflicts of interest between regions. Some contestations even have an impact on administrative dynamics such as the struggle over the location of Sofifi's capital city, budget distribution, and competition for infrastructure development. This shows that expansion not only increases regional autonomy, but also deepens political rivalries that can affect the stability of local governance.

Thus, a study of local political elite contestation after the expansion of North Maluku Province is important to understand how the democratization process works in the region, how local elites use expansion as a political opportunity, and how power dynamics affect development and governance. This analysis is also relevant to identify challenges and opportunities in realizing a more stable, inclusive and public interest-oriented local government.

The expansion of the province opened up a wider space for political competition among local elites, including bureaucrats, modern politicians and traditional (sultanate) elites. The election process for governors, regents and mayors became the main arena for power struggles, especially after the introduction of regional autonomy and direct local elections.

### **a. Modern Elites**

Modern elites such as party politicians, academics and former bureaucrats dominate formal politics. They utilize national political party networks and economic capital to influence local policies.

## b. Traditional Elite

The Sultanates of Ternate and Tidore retain significant cultural influence. The sultanate's support for certain candidates, while not formal, often influences public opinion and political legitimacy. Cultural symbols become an important instrument in strengthening candidates' political identity.

## c. Elite Conflict and Fragmentation

Inter-elite competition often creates fragmentation within parties and community groups. Several regional political contestations in North Maluku were marked by conflicts of interest, leadership dualism, and disputes over election results that were resolved through the Constitutional Court. This kind of fragmentation shows that political consolidation at the local level has not been stable after the expansion.

### **The Role of Cultural Identity and Sultanates in Local Politics**

North Maluku has four historic sultanates - Ternate, Tidore, Bacan and Jailol - which have long shaped the political character of the community. Although a modern government system has been implemented, the influence of the sultanates remains strong in terms of social and cultural legitimacy. The presence of sultanate figures in various political contestations shows a blend of traditional and modern values.

Cultural symbols such as customs, sultanate titles and historical narratives are used to increase public trust in political candidates. This creates a unique pattern of local politics, where institutional modernization does not completely erase the influence of local socio-cultural structures. Cultural identity is one of the most important elements shaping local political dynamics in Indonesia. In societies with ethnic diversity, tradition and a long history of customary or sultanate rule, cultural identity is a strong source of political legitimacy. Traditional sultanates that were centers of power in the pre-colonial and colonial periods, such as the Sultanates of Ternate, Tidore, Bacan and Jailolo, still have significant symbolic and social influence in contemporary political practice. In this context, local politics cannot be separated from the role of history, tradition and cultural values in society.

In the period after the reformation and the implementation of decentralization, regional political space is increasingly open for local actors to use cultural identity as a political strategy. The connection between political elites and customary institutions or sultanates is often used to build legitimacy in the eyes of the community. Customary titles, noble lineage, kinship with the sultanate, and the involvement of the royal family in government become symbolic capital that can strengthen certain political positions. In societies that still value customary structures, sultanate symbols such as language, customary rituals, historical narratives, and the position of soa or bobato can be instruments of mobilizing political support.

In North Maluku, the sultanates are not only a cultural heritage, but also act as social institutions that remain respected. In political contestation, many actors associate themselves with sultanate history or claim proximity to adat structures to increase legitimacy. Support from sultans or customary leaders can influence people's political preferences, especially in regional elections. Thus, cultural identity becomes an important element in the formation of political coalitions, mass mobilization, and the process of policy legitimacy.

In addition to providing a basis for legitimacy, cultural identity also plays a role in maintaining social stability and preventing conflict. Sultanates often function as mediators in disputes between regions or between citizens, as they are considered to have moral and cultural authority. However, the role of cultural identity in politics is not always positive. In some cases, the politicization of identity can lead to social fragmentation, intergroup rivalry, or even horizontal conflict if it is used to strengthen the interests of certain elites.

Post-reform local political transformation also shows how the sultanate has adapted to the modern government system. Although it no longer holds formal power, the sultanate still plays a role through social networks, cultural legitimacy, and historical symbols that are strongly embedded in the collective memory of the community. The relationship between modern political elites and customary elites creates a new pattern in the political arena: collaboration, competition, and mutual use of each other's legitimacy.

Therefore, the study of the role of cultural identity and sultanates in local politics is important to understand how local politics is formed and run. This analysis helps explain how cultural values, social structures and traditional institutions interact with modern systems of governance, and how the influence of these identities contributes to power dynamics, policy formation and social stability at the local level.

### **The Impact of Regional Autonomy on Local Political Configurations**

Cultural identity is an important element shaping social and political dynamics in Indonesia's pluralistic society. In areas with a long history of traditional governance, such as sultanates or kingdoms, cultural identity is a strong source of political legitimacy and continues to be influential into the modern era. Once the main political authority, sultanates are now respected as customary institutions and cultural symbols with high social appeal and historical value. In the context of local politics, cultural identities and sultanates often interact with contemporary political practices, forming distinctive patterns of power relations.

Since the reform era and the implementation of decentralization, regional political space has become increasingly open for local actors to utilize cultural symbols in building political legitimacy. Political elites often associate themselves with noble lineages, adopt traditional titles, or establish links with sultanate structures to strengthen their support base. In societies that still uphold traditional values, legitimacy based on cultural identity is considered important in building public trust, especially in the process of regional head elections or the struggle for strategic positions in government.

The existence of the sultanate as a cultural institution has a significant role in influencing public opinion, shaping people's political orientation, and becoming a moral reference in conflict resolution. In some regions, symbolic support from sultans or traditional leaders can change the map of political coalitions and mobilize the masses. Historical narratives, customary rituals, and traditional social hierarchies are often used as political instruments to assert group identity and gain legitimacy.

However, the use of cultural identity in politics has two sides. On the one hand, identity can strengthen social cohesion, maintain the continuity of tradition and promote harmony between citizens. Sultanates can also act as mediators in political or social conflicts as they are considered to have moral authority. On the other hand, the politicization of identity can lead to fragmentation, intergroup rivalry or horizontal conflict if it is used exclusively or exploited by certain elites for short-term political interests.

In a region like North Maluku - with the history of the Sultanates of Ternate, Tidore, Bacan and Jailolo - the influence of cultural identity is very real in shaping people's political behavior. The sultanates function not only as cultural symbols, but also as informal actors that can influence political decisions, the electoral process and the direction of regional development. This dynamic shows that cultural identity and the sultanate remain important forces that interact with modern political structures.

Thus, the study of the role of cultural identity and the sultanate in local politics is important to understand how local politics works, how legitimacy is established, and how traditional values adapt in a modern democratic system. It is also important to analyze their impact on social stability, inter-regional relations and the development process at the local level.

The implementation of Law No. 22/1999 and Law No. 32/2004 on Regional Autonomy strengthened regional authority, including in the management of budgets and strategic resources. This has had two main impacts:

a. Opportunities for Government Consolidation

Regional autonomy provides space for provincial and district/municipal governments to establish development programs according to community needs. Public policy becomes more responsive and accountable. Local governments have greater authority in regulating services, education, health, and infrastructure.

## b. Increased Patronage Politics

On the other hand, regional autonomy has led to the practice of patronage politics, especially in the management of budgets and development projects. The reciprocal relationship between political elites and support groups often leads to transactional politics. This hampers transparency and strengthens people's dependence on certain figures.

### **Political Economy and Natural Resource Management**

Natural resources are one of the main foundations of economic development in many developing countries, including Indonesia. Wealth in the form of minerals, oil and gas, forests, and marine products has a strategic role in supporting economic growth, increasing state income, and expanding employment opportunities for the community. However, natural resource management is not only a technical economic issue, but is also closely related to power structures, political policies, and the interests of certain actors in government and the private sector. Therefore, the relationship between politics and economics in natural resource management is an important issue that must be studied in depth.

In the Indonesian context, natural resource management is often influenced by national and local political dynamics. Policies related to mining licenses, forest area allocation, spatial planning, and regional revenue sharing are strongly influenced by power relations between the central government, local governments, businessmen, and local political actors. Decentralization and regional autonomy that have been in effect since 2001 give greater authority to regions in regulating the use of natural resources, but at the same time open up opportunities for corrupt practices, conflicts of interest, and overlapping regulations. This shows that natural resource management cannot be separated from broader political economy dynamics.

The political economy of natural resources is also related to who gets access, who controls the resources, and who gets the biggest economic benefits. In many cases, local elites and capital owners are the ones who benefit the most, while local communities - especially indigenous communities - often do not get welfare that is proportional to the environmental exploitation that occurs. Inequality in land tenure, mining conflicts, and ecological damage are evidence that natural resource management has the potential to create social tensions if not regulated fairly and sustainably.

In addition, natural resource utilization is often linked to the government's long-term development strategy. Sectors such as nickel mining, gold, petroleum and forest management contribute significantly to the national economy. However, dependence on primary commodities can create economic vulnerabilities, especially when global prices fluctuate. Therefore, natural resource management must be integrated with strategies for economic diversification, environmental sustainability and local community empowerment.

In the regional context, especially in regions such as North Maluku, Sulawesi and Kalimantan, the political economy of natural resources is becoming increasingly complex. These regions are rich in strategic minerals, such as nickel and gold, making them an arena for contestation between local governments, mining companies and local political elites. Regional expansion and increased regional autonomy have also strengthened these political economy dynamics, as each region competes to attract investment and manage natural resources to increase local revenue. However, without good governance, exploitation of natural resources can lead to environmental damage, tenurial conflicts and the strengthening of local oligarchies.

Thus, a study of the political economy and natural resource management is important to understand how power and interests determine the direction of resource management in Indonesia. This analysis helps explain the structural challenges in natural resource governance and the importance of building a transparent, accountable, participatory and sustainable management system to achieve community welfare and environmental sustainability.

North Maluku has abundant natural resources, such as nickel, gold and fisheries. These natural resources are an important factor in local political dynamics.

#### a. Competition over Resources

Local political contestation is often influenced by interests in controlling mining licenses, industrial sites and access to investment. Local elites and investors often forge political alliances to perpetuate economic interests.

#### b. Socio-Political Impacts

Unequal mining management has created social inequality and triggered horizontal conflicts in several areas, such as in Central Halmahera, East Halmahera and South Halmahera. This conflict shows the close relationship between politics and economics in shaping regional stability.

### **Consolidation of Local Democracy**

Local democracy is one of the important pillars in the democratization process in post-reform Indonesia. Following the introduction of decentralization and regional autonomy in 1999, local governments gained greater authority to manage their own affairs, including resource management, public services, and political decision-making. These changes opened significant space for the development of democracy at the local level through mechanisms of community participation, direct elections of regional heads, and the involvement of local actors in government processes. However, this expansion of democratic space also raises new challenges that require a more serious consolidation of local democracy.

Consolidation of local democracy refers to the process of strengthening political institutions, increasing government capacity, and instilling democratic values in society so that democracy can be stable, effective and sustainable. In the Indonesian context, local democracy is not only measured by the holding of regular elections, but also by the quality of governance, transparency, accountability, and the extent to which people can participate in decision-making. This consolidation process is important as many regions face challenges such as money politics, the dominance of local elites, weak oversight institutions and low bureaucratic capacity.

In many regions, local democracy is also influenced by socio-cultural dynamics and traditional power structures. Political elites, patronage networks, and the influence of traditional and religious leaders often play a major role in shaping people's political behavior. This can strengthen or weaken democratic consolidation, depending on how these formal and informal institutions are managed. Competition between elites can encourage competitive democracy, but it can also lead to political fragmentation if not balanced with strong rules of the game and a healthy political culture.

In addition, the consolidation of local democracy is also closely related to the ability of local governments to provide quality and equitable public services. People will have stronger trust in democracy if local governments are able to demonstrate good performance, transparency and responsiveness. Conversely, the failure of local governments to deliver equitable development can erode public trust and lead to apathy towards the democratic process.

In the context of post-regional expansion, as in the case of many new provinces in Indonesia, the consolidation of local democracy becomes even more complex. Expansion often opens up new spaces for political contestation, gives birth to new elites, and demands the establishment of effective government institutions in a short time. Without a strong democratic foundation, expansion regions are prone to problems such as elite conflict, weak bureaucracy, and the use of cultural identity as a political tool.

The study of local democracy consolidation is therefore crucial to understand the extent to which local democratic practices are stable and substantive. This analysis not only helps to see the strengths and weaknesses of local democracy in Indonesia, but also provides an overview of the strategic steps needed to strengthen democracy at the local level—from strengthening political institutions, improving governance capacity, to shaping an inclusive and public interest-oriented political culture.

Since its division, local democracy in North Maluku has continued to develop. Elections and local elections are held periodically and openly, the level of public participation is relatively high, and local media is growing quite

rapidly. However, democratic consolidation is still constrained by: (1) money politics, (2) weak political party institutions, (3) lack of public political education, (4) dominance of certain elites, (5) and dependence on strong figures.

These constraints indicate that democratization has not fully matured, despite significant progress in local political governance. The dynamics of North Maluku local politics after the birth of Law No. 46/1999 were characterized by structural changes, elite competition, cultural influences, and strong interactions between politics and economics. Regional expansion opened opportunities for democratization, but also presented challenges in the form of elite fragmentation and patronage politics. The combination of political modernity and cultural identity creates a distinctive and evolving local political character.

## **CONCLUSION**

The dynamics of North Maluku local politics after the birth of Law Number 46 of 1999 show that provincial expansion does not only bring administrative changes, but also triggers major transformations in the structure of power, patterns of elite relations, and the direction of regional development. The birth of a new province opened up a wider space for political competition and encouraged the emergence of various political actors, both from among bureaucrats, modern elites, and traditional elites who still have cultural influence in the political life of the community.

The transition process of local government after expansion showed the tug-of-war between elites in filling strategic positions at the provincial and district/city levels. The regional autonomy policy that accompanied this process further strengthened local political competition, as well as creating patronage practices, fragmentation of political power, and competition for influence over the abundant natural resources in North Maluku. This makes local political dynamics more complex and often influenced by economic interests and informal power networks.

In addition, cultural identity and the role of the sultanate are still important elements in the North Maluku political arena, especially in shaping legitimacy and support bases. The interaction between modern political structures and traditional values produces a distinctive pattern of local politics, where cultural symbolism also determines the direction of political contestation.

Overall, the dynamics of North Maluku local politics after the enactment of Law No. 46/1999 were the result of a combination of changes in government institutions, inter-elite competition, local cultural influences, and political-economic incentives for natural resource management. Understanding these dynamics is important as a basis for strengthening governance that is more democratic, transparent and responsive to the needs of the people in North Maluku Province.

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