



## **LOCAL DEMOCRACY IN INDONESIA: A COMPARISON OF DIRECT AND INDIRECT REGIONAL HEAD ELECTION SYSTEMS**

**Muhammad Gaus<sup>1\*</sup>, Farhanuddin<sup>2</sup>, Muhammad<sup>3</sup>, Asriani<sup>4</sup>, Rahmatullah<sup>5</sup>.**

Program Studi Ilmu Politik, Fakultas Ilmu Sosial, Ilmu Politik dan Hukum, Universitas Sulawesi Barat

E-mail: [muhammad.gaus@unsulbar.ac.id](mailto:muhammad.gaus@unsulbar.ac.id)

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### **Abstract**

This paper begins with the debate over direct and indirect elections in regional head elections in Indonesia. This study aims to compare the two electoral systems that have each been implemented in Indonesia, particularly in selecting leaders at the regional government level. The research method used is a qualitative descriptive approach, with the primary data source coming from a literature review of scientific journals, books, reports, official documents, and other relevant references. The results show that both systems have a legitimate basis to justify their adherence to democratic values. Ultimately, no system is perfect; the most important thing is to pursue the best strategy within whichever system is agreed upon.

**Keywords:** *Regional Elections, General Elections, Democracy.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Democracy in Indonesia has undergone a very complex process. The challenges of democracy have become a constant topic of discussion, from the grassroots to the elite. This is true of democracy, which is accessible to all groups, allowing all citizens to participate in discussing the direction the nation is headed, whether it will turn, go straight, or change direction altogether. There are many interesting aspects of a nation's democratic process, one of which is general elections. Elections are a crucial part of the democratic process because they shape the stakeholders, from the central to the regional levels. To support the smooth running of general elections, all levels of society are given the right to participate in the process, whether their votes are delegated or the public votes directly, depending on the electoral system implemented. Because elections are a complex process, their mechanisms need to be regulated, which is then known as the electoral system. This electoral system will form the basis for consensus on how a leader is chosen. As a sign of the importance of this electoral system, the mechanisms used in selecting leaders in various countries often change over time. There are many triggers, whether it is an effort to keep up with the times or a battle for political interests because this arena is full of interests and power relations.

As a directly identifiable indicator of democracy, elections also serve as a platform for the battle of ideas for anyone seeking to serve the nation. In the Indonesian context, the election process continues to exist as a platform for changing leaders, demonstrating a commitment to the chosen system. A nation committed to democracy must recognize that all power has limitations. The process of changing leaders through elections takes place not only at the central level but also at the provincial and district/city levels. In practice, direct democracy is not initially provided for provincial and district/city levels, but is granted based on the will of local communities to govern their own affairs and determine their own leaders. A historical review has illustrated how the dialectical process of the times led to the birth of two electoral systems: direct and indirect elections. Of course, these two systems did not emerge suddenly, but emerged from a complex discussion mechanism among the nation's thinkers. The history of the development of the Indonesian nation is in line with efforts to improve the quality of democracy, one of which is improving the system of changing leaders and representatives of the people which began in 1955, which was later known as the 1955 election and was divided into two stages, namely September 25 to elect the People's Representative Council and December 15 to elect members of the Constituent Assembly. The 1955 election became an important milestone in the history of Indonesian democracy because it marked the beginning of electoral practices nationally (Suryadinata, 2002).

At the regional government level, direct elections by the people to elect governors, district heads, and mayors are based on Law No. 32 of 2004 concerning Regional Government. Since then, the people have experienced a direct democratic celebration at the regional level because in their hands will be born their respective regional leaders, to regulate and manage the household as mandated by regional autonomy. In addition to an effort to bring leaders closer to the people, direct elections at the regional level are part of the process of democratic maturity (Wakhid et al., 2017). A crucial question we often hear related to elections is, how important are elections for a nation? According to Sigit Pamungkas, elections will determine for the nation, whether it goes straight, turns, or changes direction altogether (Pamungkas, 2009). If it goes straight, it remains on the corridor of democracy, but if it turns, it is close to transactional democracy, and if it changes direction, it is completely heading towards authoritarianism. Departing from this statement, it is very important to discuss elections, especially their mechanisms or systems. When discussing the Indonesian electoral system, we are always led to a comparative discussion of the two electoral systems mentioned earlier: direct and indirect. Therefore, this article will outline how the two systems compare. However, this article will focus more on the regional head election process, so we will examine the impact of this concept on the practical world at the regional level.

## METHOD

This study uses a qualitative descriptive approach to explore the impact of direct and indirect elections in Indonesia, particularly in the context of regional head elections. The primary data source is a literature review of scientific journals, books, reports, official documents, and other relevant references (Yin, 2011). Qualitative analysis is conducted by developing an in-depth understanding of the impact of both systems, thus demonstrating their comparison. This method allows researchers to holistically analyze the comparison of direct and indirect election systems in regional head elections in Indonesia, providing an in-depth picture of policy changes, institutional dynamics, and the impact on society as a whole (Creswell and Creswell, 2018).

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

General elections are one aspect of measuring the quality of democracy, and they are even considered the most up-to-date indicator because their practices can be directly identified. Based on a literature review and all relevant sources found, the author has obtained a comparison that will be reviewed narratively below. The mechanism for regional head elections in Indonesia is not merely a technical issue, but rather a choice regarding the upholding of democratic values and the realization of national and state goals. Edward Aspinall, in his study of clientelism, highlighted that direct regional head elections in Indonesia are often mired in patronage practices, with candidates relying on personal networks and money to buy votes. This is also due to the weak institutionalization of political parties (Aspinall, 2014).

Supporters of regional elections through the Regional People's Representative Council (DPRD) believe that the quality of candidates can be better determined through parliamentary elections. Those promoting regional elections through the DPRD often refer to Pancasila, particularly the fourth principle, which states, "Democracy guided by the wisdom of deliberation/representation." This is seen as a philosophical foundation that elections need not be conducted atomistically by each individual, but can be conducted through representative deliberation (Yusdiyanto, 2016). Meanwhile, Jimly Asshiddiqie (2009) explains that direct elections are a necessity of the presidential system implemented in Indonesia, where executive power must have a strong basis of legitimacy from the people. By obtaining a broad direct mandate from the people, the election of regional heads through the direct election mechanism will have implications for strong public support for the running of the region's government (Asshiddiqie, 2009).

Based on this issue, the two electoral systems being compared face the question of which system best represents the wishes or political will of the people. If elections are held using a direct election system, public participation is clearly visible in the process of determining leaders. Because they are elected directly by the people, their legitimacy is stronger, and it has been said that direct elections are a marker of post-democracy democracy because the people can participate in determining their leaders. From the perspective of supporters of direct regional head elections, they argue that a lack of participation will only foster authoritarian and corrupt governance. Meanwhile, from the community's perspective, participation is key to empowerment. Participation provides the space and capacity for communities to fulfill their needs and rights, develop local potential and initiatives, activate community participation, and build a self-reliant society (Nuryanti, 2006).

Besides the issue of legitimacy, regional elections (Pilkada) since their inception in 2005 have also produced populist regional leaders who rely on popularity and electability. While elections through the Regional People's Representative Council (DPRD) are seen as ensuring that voters and those elected are qualified and educated. In comparison, direct elections are considered a form of popular sovereignty, while regional head elections through a representative mechanism in the DPRD are considered more in line with the spirit of Pancasila, namely deliberation and representation. Furthermore, atomistic sovereignty is said to be born in direct regional elections, because it adheres to the principle of one man, one vote, one value. Sovereignty is considered to reside in each individual citizen. The people give their mandate directly without intermediaries, which theoretically strengthens the bond of accountability between leaders and voters. Meanwhile, regional elections in parliament are considered in accordance with Pancasila. Popular sovereignty is considered to have been delegated to representatives in parliament. The decision-making process is carried out through "deliberation," which is considered wiser and free from mass emotions.

Another interesting issue to discuss further, in an effort to win the regional elections with a majority of the people's votes, various methods are used by candidate pairs (paslon) and their teams, including money politics, which then has legal implications. Candidate pairs incur large costs, and when they achieve election victory, the candidate pairs try to recoup the costs incurred during the nomination period in various ways. Data from Indonesia Corruption Watch (ICW), cases of regional heads arrested by the Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK) and other law enforcement officers for corruption from 2010 - 2024 amounted to 356 cases, while after the 2024 regional elections, the number of regional heads arrested by the KPK from August 2025 - April 2026, in a 9-month period of 11 regional heads resulting from the 2024 regional elections were arrested by the KPK (Kompas.com). Based on this data, the two systems are again compared on the issue of financing.

In terms of costs, there is a difference in the costs of holding direct elections (Pilkada DPRD) and direct elections. The Ministry of Home Affairs released that the 2024 Pilkada requires a budget of IDR 41 trillion allocated for election administration costs across various sectors and areas, from the General Elections Commission (KPU), the Elections Supervisory Agency (Bawaslu) to the security personnel of the Indonesian National Armed Forces (TNI) and the Indonesian National Police (Polri) (Kompas.com). Although the costs of direct elections appear quite large, the costs of parliamentary elections are also not insignificant, especially for regional head candidates seeking party support. The costs of elections in the DPRD will result in "wholesale" political costs, where candidates will lobby members/fractions in the DPRD. Simply put, the costs may seem cheaper from an implementation perspective, but high-cost political practices will also occur massively in the DPRD. An important point to always note is that efforts to maintain elections through the DPRD due to the high level of money politics in direct elections should not be considered, but in reality, we are simply shifting the focus.

A comparison between direct regional elections and DPRD elections shows that direct elections are a costly investment in democracy, necessitating strong legitimacy. However, elections conducted through the DPRD can achieve a balance between cultural stability and fiscal efficiency. Ultimately, there is no perfect system or mechanism, whether direct elections or elections conducted through the DPRD. The main thing that needs to be continuously addressed is that if direct elections are to be continued, improvements to the system, from nomination to voter political education, must be continuously implemented. However, if elections are to be held through the DPRD, regional head elections must ensure public participation remains available.

## CONCLUSION

Based on the discussion above, it can be concluded that electing regional heads through the Regional People's Representative Council (DPRD) is superior in terms of budget efficiency, while direct elections ensure greater public participation in determining the chosen leader. Each system has its own implications. Furthermore, no system is truly perfect. Every system always operates in a binary opposition, with loopholes that cannot be covered, making it impossible to determine which system is best. However, more important than simply choosing an electoral system is thorough preparation for the chosen system. If the choice is to elect candidates through the Regional People's Representative Council (DPRD), the organizers and all stakeholders must ensure that there are no "wholesale" political practices by any candidate pair, ensuring they are financially prepared. If a direct election system is chosen, the organizers and all stakeholders must ensure that the election process is not merely ceremonial and creates electoral disconnects later on, but rather guarantees that the leader will become closer to the people. The most feasible solution currently is asymmetric regional elections. Regions that are ready, based on the HDI, can hold direct elections, while regions that are still lagging behind and lacking economic income can hold elections through the Regional People's Representative Council (DPRD). This solution must be designed with comprehensive indicators

to avoid a sharp difference in perception, suggesting that regions with a high HDI tend to be democratic and those with a low HDI are second-class.

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