

# THE STRUCTURE AND STRATEGY OF LOCAL STRONGMEN IN THE DEFEAT OF INDEPENDENT CANDIDATES: A QUALITATIVE STUDY



 Lubis <sup>(a)</sup>  Budi Setiyono <sup>(b)1</sup>  Kushandajani <sup>(c)</sup>  Nur Hidayat Sardini <sup>(d)</sup>

<sup>(a)</sup> Research Scholar, Department of Social Studies, Diponegoro University, Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, Semarang, Indonesia; E-mail: [lubis.vharoso@gmail.com](mailto:lubis.vharoso@gmail.com)

<sup>(b)</sup> Assistant Professor, Department of Social Studies, Diponegoro University, Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, Semarang, Indonesia; E-mail: [budisetiyono@lecturer.undip.ac.id](mailto:budisetiyono@lecturer.undip.ac.id)

<sup>(c)</sup> Assistant Professor, Department of Social Studies, Diponegoro University, Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, Semarang, Indonesia; E-mail: [ningkisworo123@gmail.com](mailto:ningkisworo123@gmail.com)

<sup>(d)</sup> Assistant Professor, Department of Social Studies, Diponegoro University, Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, Semarang, Indonesia; E-mail: [nhsardini@yahoo.com](mailto:nhsardini@yahoo.com)

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## ABSTRACT

*The phenomenon of local strongmen is an integral part of understanding the dynamics of power and politics in peripheral regions such as Sumbawa, West Nusa Tenggara. Although the direct regional head election system has opened up broader opportunities for political participation, the dominance of local power often constrains the emergence of democratic alternatives. Independent candidates face various administrative and financial obstacles, as well as political pressure from deeply rooted local power networks. This study aims to examine the power strategies employed by Zulkieflimansyah, a prominent local figure in Sumbawa, in strategically utilizing formal and informal power to defeat independent candidates. This study used a qualitative case study approach with data collected through in-depth interviews with eleven purposively selected informants, including political actors, community leaders, and campaign team members. The findings show that the influence of local strongmen extends across various sectors, including politics, education, local government, and customary systems. This influence is exercised through control over strategic resources, dominance of formal authority, and the systematic expansion of social and economic networks that enable long-term consolidation of power and suppression of political alternatives. The study finds that strategic political positions and strong social ties are key factors in delegitimizing and defeating independent candidates. These strategies strengthen local strongmen's dominance within vertical and horizontal power structures, limiting fair political competition. Regulatory reform, resource transparency, and civic political education are needed to counter this dominance.*

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## INTRODUCTION

Regional head elections (Pilkada) are one of the important instruments in the democratization process at the local level. Ideally, Pilkada provides space for the emergence of alternative candidates, including the available independent candidates without the support of political parties. However, the reality of local politics reveals that independent candidates often face complex structural challenges, which become an integral part of the dominance of complex local power networks. In the global context, the defeat of independent candidates is not only happening in Indonesia but also in various countries, including both developed and developing nations. One important finding comes from the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe, which revealed that strict administrative and legal requirements often limit the nomination, campaigning, and media access for independent candidates. These restrictions not only reduce political pluralism but are also susceptible to manipulation to silence opposition to the ruling power. Onerous administrative requirements, high political costs, and the strong grip of elites and political parties become systemic mechanisms that indirectly exclude genuine independent candidates from equal political competition (Dinarto & Ng, 2021). The political system, which is generally unfavorable to independent candidates, tends to privilege those with elite affiliations, enabling

<sup>1</sup>Corresponding author: ORCID ID: 0000-0001-8988-0304

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only well-connected people to remain viable contenders. This is reflected in the Makassar regional election case, where dynastic politics and legal intervention became tools of political exclusion (Yakub et al., 2022). The withdrawal of numerous independent candidates, largely due to heavy administrative and financial burdens, underscores the influential role of entrenched local power networks in obstructing the emergence of democratic alternatives at the local level (Dinarto & Ng, 2021). Methodologically, this research adopts a qualitative approach with purposive selection of informants based on their relevance and experience. Data were collected through in-depth interviews and were analyzed thematically using the local strongman theory as the analytical framework.

The political dynamics of local strongmen behind the defeat of independent candidates in regional elections occur in various regions of Indonesia, including the peripheral area of Sumbawa, where organized power forms political, economic, and social networks that make it difficult for independent candidates to compete fairly. The 2020 Sumbawa regional election, where independent candidates experienced defeat not solely due to weak electoral support, but more because of the strong power dominance strategically and structurally executed by the authorities. Various research findings indicate that incumbents in the Indonesian regional elections do not merely serve as current public officials, but often act as local strongmen who have significant control over the political power at the regional level. According to Binns (2020), this phenomenon is referred to as "incumbents with attitude," meaning incumbents who not only exploit their positions but also build and consolidate power through bureaucracy, political parties, and extensive informal social networks. In line with the findings of other studies, it shows that in many cases, incumbents practice clientelism by directly distributing patronage to citizens, making them dominant actors outside the party structure. Post-reform regional heads are the "new local rulers" who rely on state resources, control over institutions, and patron-client relationships to maintain power. (Berenschot, 2020) In this framework, the incumbent not only acts as an election candidate but also as a central actor playing a strategic and structured role in eliminating political rivals, particularly independent candidates (Feber & Christover, 2021) Thus, based on these findings, it can be concluded that in the context of local politics in Indonesia, incumbents often transform into local strongmen. These strong figures dominate the regional political arena through centralized power, patronage networks, and extensive social and cultural influence. What distinguishes this research from previous studies, marking its novelty, is the use of the local strongman theory to explore the role of local strongmen in defeating independent candidates. In addition, the focus of the research is on the peripheral regions of Indonesia. Whereas previously, research has focused chiefly on the central government in presidential elections. This study aims to explore how local strongmen in the peripheral areas, such as Sumbawa, strategically and systematically suppress independent candidates in local elections.

This article is organized to provide a clear and logical flow for readers. The first section presents the conceptual and theoretical framework on local strongmen, which underpins the analysis in this study. The methodology section follows, detailing the research approach and data collection methods employed. The findings section explores how local strongmen build and utilize their power and strategies to undermine independent candidates in local elections. The final section concludes with a summary of key findings and offers reflections and recommendations for strengthening democratic practices at the local level.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The defeat of independent candidates in local elections is a multidimensional phenomenon shaped by complex socio-political and economic dynamics. Understanding this phenomenon requires examining institutional barriers, elite domination, and clientelism practices in peripheral regions. Independent candidates, who lack support from dominant political parties or elite patronage, often encounter administrative obstacles, limited access to resources, and systemic exclusion from political networks (Kamugisha & Swai, 2024; Gomes, 2022; Leonard Hijino, 2021). Clientelism and political cartelization are central themes in explaining the marginalization of independent candidates. Pierskalla and Sacks (2020) argue that clientelistic recruitment, especially in public service appointments, weakens meritocracy and favors those embedded in elite networks. Similarly, Berenschot (2020) emphasizes that local elites consolidate power through patron-client ties, using state resources to reward loyalty and exclude challengers. This pattern has been reinforced in post-decentralization Indonesia, where political competition is often personalized and rooted in informal structures (Fionna & Tomsa, 2020).

Dinarto and Ng (2021) identify that institutional requirements for candidacy, such as high support thresholds and bureaucratic hurdles, serve as legal mechanisms to restrict non-party contenders. Furthermore, Muhtadi (2024) outlines how cartel politics privileges elite-backed candidates, creating structural constraints for outsiders. In this system, political parties often function as gatekeepers, discouraging the emergence of alternative actors. Economic patronage further limits the viability of independent candidates. Contractors and business elites fund elite candidates in return for preferential access to public contracts (Hidayat et al., 2024). This patronage economy generates an unequal playing field, especially in rural areas where economic dependency on elites is more pronounced (Noak, 2024). Entrepreneurs strategically align with dominant figures, forming mutually beneficial coalitions that reinforce electoral dominance (Forquesato, 2022).

Socially, kinship ties and religious affiliations serve as informal but powerful tools of political mobilization. Hicken and Tan (2020) and Bullivant and Sadewo (2020) highlight how personal networks enable elites to shape electoral behavior and coerce compliance. Social resources, such as access to jobs or aid, are distributed selectively to ensure loyalty (Sabourin, 2022). Local strongmen operate as predatory brokers, a concept rooted in Sidel's theory of local bossism (Brierley & Nathan, 2022). These actors consolidate control by capturing formal institutions while leveraging informal networks to extend their influence (Casas & Kselman, 2024). They stress the role of intermediaries in mobilizing support through clientelist incentives, while Berenschot (2020) notes that violence and intimidation are occasionally deployed to neutralize opposition.

Research from Chile (Titelman & Sajuria, 2024) and the Philippines (Aspinall & Hicken, 2022) offers comparative insights, showing that party-affiliated elites replicate similar tactics across contexts, suggesting that local political structures are embedded in broader authoritarian legacies. Aminuddin and Ramadlan (2022) describe how Indonesian regional politics is characterized by elite continuity and the institutionalization of clientelistic power, even after democratic reforms. Thus, the literature converges on the idea that the defeat of independent candidates is not solely due to voter preferences but is systematically engineered through elite domination of political, economic, and social resources. Independent candidates are disadvantaged in all three domains identified by Weber's theory: economic capital, social prestige, and political authority (Higashijima & Washida, 2024). The purpose of this study is to analyze how Zulkieflimansyah, a dominant local political figure in Sumbawa, utilizes formal and informal mechanisms of power to sustain political hegemony and obstruct the candidacy of independent challengers.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

### Design

This study employed a qualitative research design using a case study approach to explore the defeat of independent candidates in the 2020 Sumbawa local election. The case study method was chosen to allow an in-depth understanding of the role and strategy of local strongmen in shaping political outcomes in peripheral regions (Nugroho, 2020)

### Theoretical Framework

This research employed the perspective of the defeat of independent candidates (Independent Candidate) by adopting the theory of Local Strongman and the theory of Local Bossism (Kristono, 2024; Handoko et al., 2020). These frameworks emphasize power consolidation through formal and informal institutions using dimensions such as power resources, incentives, social sanctions, and power accomplices. Local strongmen are informal actors who control a specific territory through social, economic, and political networks to maintain dominance and influence the community.

### Data Collection and Sources

Primary data were obtained through in-depth semi-structured interviews with 11 purposively selected informants. The selection criteria included individuals with direct experience or insight into the 2020 regional elections in Sumbawa. Informants in this study were selected purposively based on specific selection criteria, such as experience, role, and relevance to the research topic, to ensure the data collected were rich, contextual, and meaningful (Creswell, 2023). Informants included independent candidates, members of political parties, campaign teams, local journalists, civil society actors, and academics. Interview questions focused on the mechanisms of power used to weaken independent candidates, such as access to resources, coercive strategies, and social networks. All interviews followed an ethical protocol with informed consent and anonymity guaranteed. The interview guidelines were adapted from (Creswell, 2023), and interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes, recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

### Sampling Method

A purposive sampling technique was used to identify informants with critical knowledge of the election dynamics. The informants were selected based on their position, experience, and involvement in local political processes. The sample size was considered sufficient as data saturation was achieved after 11 interviews.

### Data Validation and Triangulation

To ensure credibility and trustworthiness, data triangulation was applied by comparing interview data across different types of informants (e.g., politicians, media, civil society). Researcher reflexivity, member checking, and peer debriefing were also conducted to validate the findings (Creswell, 2023).

### Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using NVivo 12 Pro qualitative analysis software. The process followed three stages: (1) Data Reduction, coding, and condensing raw data into meaningful units using inductive and deductive coding based on the theoretical framework. (2) Data Display – presenting themes and sub-themes using tables, narrative matrices, and visual diagrams (e.g., word cloud, hierarchy charts), (3) Conclusion Drawing and Verification – identifying recurring patterns, causal mechanisms, and propositions; verified through researcher discussions and audit trails.

## RESULTS

This study found that Zulkieflimansyah, as a local strongman, exercises power through multiple, interconnected strategies that span formal institutions and informal networks. The defeat of independent candidates in the 2020 Sumbawa regional election was not merely electoral but structural, orchestrated through deliberate domination of political, social, and economic spheres.

### Participant Demographic Information

Table 1. Participant Demographic Information (n=11)

Coding	Position	Age (Years)	Education	Length of Service (Years)
P1	Political Party	48	S2	5
P2	Independent Candidates	58	S1	2

P3	Independent Candidates	50	S1	2
P4	Success Team	57	S1	10
P5	Academics	45	S3	7
P6	Journalist	42	S1	9
P7	Academics	46	S2	5
P8	Member of a Political Party	37	S2	10
P9	Member of a Political Party	40	S2	10
P10	Success Team	43	S1	5
P11	Success Team	55	S1	5

Source: Primary research data source

Table 1 shows a total of 11 informants participated, including political party members, independent candidates, campaign team members, academics, and journalists. Their ages ranged from 37 to 58, with educational backgrounds from bachelor's to doctoral degrees and service lengths of 2–10 years. Notably, the independent candidates were among the oldest but had the least tenure, reflecting their marginal position in political experience. Conversely, actors from political parties and campaign teams had longer experience, underscoring their deeper entrenchment in the local political structure.

### Word- Cloud Defeat of Independent Candidates

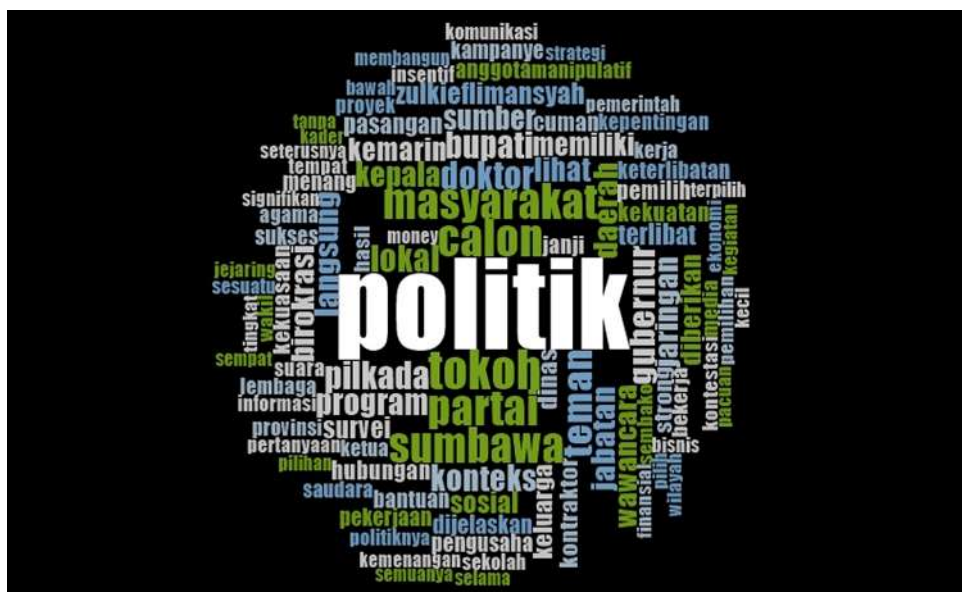


Figure 1. Word cloud of the independent Candidate's defeat, showing the dominance of political and social terms

Source: Primary research data source

The word cloud analysis (Figure 1) visually captures the thematic dominance of terms such as “politics,” “community,” “party,” “regent,” and “candidate.” These terms indicate the centrality of political discourse, with “Zulkieflimansyah” specifically appearing as a key node. Terms such as “friend,” “family,” and “relationship” suggest that personal ties are crucial in shaping political dynamics. Words like “bureaucracy,” “project,” and “contractor” point to the economic undercurrents of power, while “manipulative” and “influence” reflect perceptions of coercive or transactional politics.

### Synthesis of Data: Thema, Sub Thema, and Coding

Table 2. Synthesis of data: Thema, Sub Thema, and coding

Theme	Sub-Theme	Coding
Sources of Power	Political Networks	Positions, Regional Expansion Figures, Political Figures
	Social Networks	Friends, Religious Figures, Relatives, Horse Racing Hobby, Trust
	Economic Networks	Entrepreneurs, Contractors, Businesses
	Funding	Money
Power Operatives	Direct Actions	Violent Actions, Intimidation Actions
Incentives	Economic & Social Incentives	Jobs, Material Aid/Assistance
Social Sanctions	Reprimanding Actions	Social Sanctions, Reprimands

Source: Primary research data source

Table 2. The study reveals that local power is constructed through four primary sources: political, social, economic networks, and financial resources. Political networks include formal positions and influential figures who occupy strategic roles within local government structures. Social networks involve personal relationships such as friends, relatives, religious leaders, and community-based groups like horse-racing clubs, all of which cultivate trust and loyalty toward dominant actors. Economic networks consist of contractors, entrepreneurs, and business entities that financially support incumbent



candidates, often through covert campaign funding. These networks operate synergistically, enforced by "power accomplices" who employ various mechanisms, including direct actions (intimidation, coercion), incentives (job allocation, material assistance), and social sanctions (public reprimands, exclusion). This interconnected structure enables the systematic exercise of power through the mobilization of resources and social relations, effectively creating a closed and exclusive political arena that marginalizes independent candidates.



Figure 2. Hierarchy chart illustrating the power structure in the defeat of independent candidates  
Source: Primary research data source

As illustrated in the Hierarchy Chart (Figure 2), the power structure in Sumbawa's local politics is vertically layered yet horizontally expansive, allowing influence to permeate across institutions and communities. Electoral dominance was primarily secured through the occupation of strategic positions within political networks, enabling the distribution of favors and control over administrative procedures. Social networks, particularly ties with friends and kin, were systematically mobilized to build legitimacy and silence opposition. Incentive-based strategies, especially job allocations, emerged as powerful tools to secure loyalty and reinforce allegiance. Manipulative practices such as vote buying and bureaucratic obstruction became routine and widely accepted. Moreover, sanctions and social reprimands were not simply deterrents but operated as deliberate tools of exclusion, fostering a culture of conformity, dependency, and fear that further entrenched the power of dominant actors.

### Independent Candidate Defeat Project Map

The Conceptual Project Map (Figure 3) consolidates how political, social, and economic networks form an interlocked mechanism of predatory power. Contractors and entrepreneurs channel funds to campaigns in return for future access to government contracts, creating economic dependency. Political actors leverage their formal positions to orchestrate manipulative strategies—often disguised under the guise of administrative norms. Social actors, including religious leaders and family members, act as informal brokers of loyalty and behavior. This ecosystem is held together by a system of rewards and punishments that ensures the exclusion of outsiders—especially independent candidates who lack institutional and financial backing.

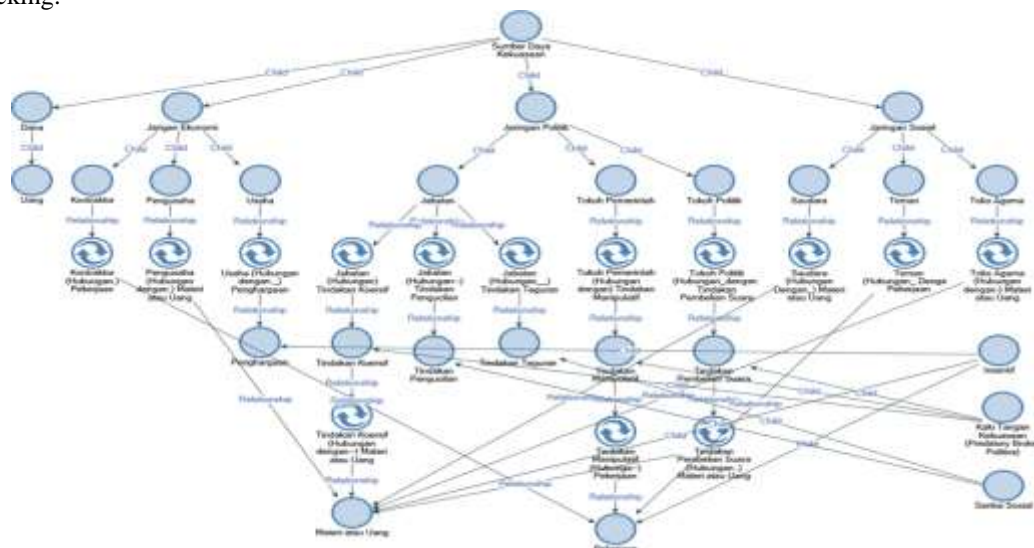


Figure 3. Conceptual project map showing resource flows and predatory power structures  
Source: Primary research data source

## DISCUSSIONS

This study's findings provide strong support for the primary hypothesis that local strongmen structurally orchestrated the defeat of independent candidates in Sumbawa's 2020 regional election through interconnected political, economic, and social networks. The secondary hypothesis, which posits that these networks operate through coercive, manipulative, and clientelistic strategies, was also supported by empirical data drawn from interviews with political actors, candidates, journalists, and academics. The dominance of political networks, particularly the occupation of strategic bureaucratic positions, emerged as the most influential factor in electoral outcomes. This finding is consistent with Berenschot (2020), who highlights the central role of incumbents in Indonesian local politics as "brokers of power" who distribute patronage to ensure loyalty. Similarly, Fossati (2025), Noak (2024), and Sari (2024) have noted how local candidates frequently exploit state resources to offer personalized benefits, which are often disguised as infrastructure or social welfare projects, in exchange for political support. This confirms the entrenchment of clientelism as a normalized feature of political mobilization in Indonesia's periphery (Fajri et al., 2024).

The influence of economic networks further amplifies the role of patronage in reinforcing power asymmetries. The study shows that entrepreneurs and contractors, reliant on access to public procurement channels, campaign funds to dominant candidates in exchange for project allocations post-election. This mirrors (Forquesato, 2022; Sabourin, 2022) observations in Latin America, where clientelist ties between business elites and political actors distort fair competition. In the context of Sumbawa, these relationships create an entrenched system of economic dependency that disadvantages candidates lacking such networks. Social networks, including kinship, religious ties, and communal affiliations (e.g., horse-racing groups), serve as informal mechanisms of control. These findings resonate with (Hicken & Tan, 2020; Bullivant & Sadewo, 2020), who emphasize the strategic deployment of personal relationships in shaping voter behavior and loyalty. The data suggest that these informal affiliations are not merely symbolic but play a direct role in political exclusion, resource distribution, and public recognition. This reinforces previous studies (Jusup et al., 2022; Fionna & Tomsa, 2020; Bullivant & Sadewo, 2020) that describe local politics as operating through socially embedded systems of favoritism.

Crucially, this research demonstrates how the combined effects of these three networks, political, economic, and social, form a predatory ecosystem of power maintained by "accomplices of power." These actors use coercion, incentives, and social sanctions to delegitimize independent candidates. Max Weber's stratification theory (Higashijima & Washida, 2024; Rocha, 2023; Dinarto & Ng, 2021) is especially relevant in this context. Independent candidates, unlike those affiliated with dominant parties, suffer from triple disadvantage: lack of economic capital, limited social prestige, and absence of institutional power, making them structurally incapable of competing on equal footing. Compared to previous studies, this research contributes a novel analytical lens by applying the Local Strongman theory in the specific context of peripheral Indonesia, rather than national elections or urban centers. It highlights the continuity of authoritarian legacies in local politics and underscores how democratic institutions can be captured by informal, personalized power. Looking forward, this study suggests that reforms are urgently needed in three areas: first, the regulation of campaign financing and procurement to prevent economic collusion; second, the strengthening of independent institutions to resist political manipulation; and third, the promotion of civic education to reduce community dependency on elite figures (Lipcean & Casal Bértoa, 2024). Future research should consider comparative studies across other peripheral regions to assess the generalizability of these dynamics and examine potential strategies for countering the entrenchment of local political oligarchies.

## CONCLUSIONS

The primary purpose of this study was to investigate how local strongmen in peripheral regions, specifically Zulkieflimansyah in Sumbawa, strategically consolidate and exercise power to defeat independent candidates in local elections. Using a qualitative case study approach, this research collected data from purposively selected informants to uncover the complex interplay of political, economic, and social networks that shape electoral outcomes. The findings reveal that the defeat of independent candidates was not simply the result of weak electoral support but stemmed from a structurally entrenched system of domination. Local strongmen secured control over strategic political positions, enabling them to manipulate bureaucratic processes, distribute patronage, and influence electoral procedures. Social networks, including kinship ties, religious affiliations, and community-based organizations, were systematically mobilized to legitimize their dominance and suppress opposition. Economic networks comprising contractors, entrepreneurs, and business actors provided essential financial backing in exchange for post-election rewards such as procurement contracts. These interlinked networks operated in synergy, reinforced by coercive measures, incentive-based strategies, and social sanctions that marginalized independent candidates and limited fair political competition.

This study makes a unique contribution to the literature by applying the Local Strongman theory within the underexplored context of Indonesia's peripheral regions, rather than focusing on national or urban-level politics. It deepens the understanding of how informal, personalized power can capture and manipulate formal democratic institutions. Moreover, it highlights the persistence of authoritarian legacies in local politics, showing how decentralization has not fully dismantled entrenched elite control but has instead allowed it to adapt and thrive in new forms. Theoretically, the findings reinforce Max Weber's stratification framework by demonstrating how independent candidates face a triple disadvantage, lacking economic capital, social prestige, and political authority, making equal competition virtually impossible. From a policy and practical perspective, the research underscores the need for targeted reforms to strengthen democratic resilience at the local level. These reforms should include stricter regulation of campaign financing, greater transparency in public procurement to disrupt clientelist economic networks, and institutional safeguards to prevent political interference in bureaucratic appointments. Expanding civic political education is also essential to reduce community dependency on elite patronage and foster grassroots democratic participation.

This study has several limitations. The analysis is based on a single case study in Sumbawa, which may limit the generalizability of its findings to other contexts. The reliance on interview data introduces the potential for subjective bias, although triangulation methods were used to enhance validity. Additionally, the absence of longitudinal data restricts insights into how these power structures evolve. Future research should conduct comparative case studies across multiple peripheral regions in Indonesia and beyond to test the broader applicability of these findings. Further studies could also evaluate the effectiveness of anti-clientelism measures such as participatory budgeting or independent electoral monitoring in weakening entrenched local political networks. By broadening the scope and employing diverse methodologies, scholars can develop a deeper understanding of, and more effective responses to, the resilience of local strongmen in shaping democratic outcomes.

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**Informed Consent Statement:** Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

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