

# THE RETURN OF ETHNICITY AS PROMINENT FACTOR IN INDONESIAN LOCAL POLITICAL DYNAMICS

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# THE RETURN OF ETHNICITY AS PROMINENT FACTOR IN INDONESIAN LOCAL POLITICAL DYNAMICS

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper based on research was in the community oh the Toraja Ethnic Group one of the ethnic group were also considered as Indigenous People in Indonesia. This paper focuses on analyzing the return of the customary law or *adat* as the ethnic group unique norms and foundation of their community identity is back to the political arena as an effort to be recognized by the state. A critical aspect of their struggle is to put its customary laws as influencing factors through the regional election as an event to vote for the regional government head. It became their response after experienced unfortunate conditions during the New Order Era ruling period (1966 – 1998) under Suharto. During this era, customary law as one of this ethnic group principle of life was eliminated from its usual position. It was part of the regime policies over the multi-ethnicities in Indonesia. Since the New Order regime fell in 1998, the condition seems to change. The indigenous community tends to return to play an important role, including in political recruitment. This paper showed how this ethnic group was utilized in the regional election was in 2015 as an effort to bring *local custom* as a crucial factor. Lastly, this paper shows how the Toraja ethnic group deals with the regional election as an important political event to assure the process and its result based on their ethnicity fundamental value. This study indicates that customary law or *adat* as local custom is return as a significant element in their land and succeeds in getting the state acknowledgment.

**KEYWORDS:** Indigenous People, Regional Election, Toraja Ethnic Group, Adat, Reform Era

## I. INTRODUCTION

When the New Order regime rules Indonesia for more than 30 years, the local communities' position in the regions tended to be marginalized from its essential role as a prominent factor in the socio-political dynamics of its area. Thru reason to minimize potentiality of conflict, the ruling regime, the New Order, has sought to exercise tight control over the diversity that exists within Indonesian society, including the existence of ethnicity and indigenous peoples as the formation basis of the community social identity.

During the period under Suharto's Leadership in the New Order era, the government tended to alienate local identities where was only seen as a typical phenomenon that had no significant influence on the local communities' political life. One of the regime strategies was to prove that the local communities, including indigenous peoples as the underdeveloped, powerless, and the undeveloped people. As its implication, the local communities were always dependent on the state and forced to obey the ruler (Alfred and Corntassel, 2005). This condition shows a systematic intervention of the central government to depoliticized local identities in order to revoke them from the political arena (Hooe, 2012). Thus, their existence does not become a significant factor in its territory where sees could have implications in a counter-discourse against regime dominance. It shows how the state views the local identities, including ethnicity and existence of indigenous peoples as a conflict trigger. The discrimination of local communities eventually ended when the New Order regime fell in 1998.

At the beginning of 1998, the massive demonstrations and strikes in most cities of Indonesia led by scholar-activists and university students demanded democratization. This political reform movement forced General Suharto to step down after ruled as president for more than 30 years. The post-Soeharto era is known as the reform era, provided political opportunities to local communities to actively get involved in local socio-political dynamics (Tyson, 2007). The reform era enables its existence as an essential part of its territory, including by indigenous community that is also attached to ethnicity-based identity. This condition generates

Indonesia local governments to provide a significant portion for the local community groups to get involved in various socio-political activities. Two critical policies offer an opportunity for indigenous peoples in the post-Suharto era, namely: regional autonomy and regional election.

<sup>6</sup> The policy of regional autonomy is a manifestation of the decentralization approach. Thru this policy, the local governments get overflow authority from the central government to regulate its territory based on their real context. Based on this policy, the state empowers local people able to participate in various dynamics of socio-political aspects in their region actively.

Another implication of democratization in Indonesia is the fundamental changes in the regional election mechanism to elect the regional government head. During the initial implementation of this policy, the regional government head were elected by the local people's representative council. Since 2005, local government policies have changed and allowed citizens to elect regional head elections directly. Through the election event, local people gain significant rights that legally allow them to put their existence as an essential part. The local election strengthens local custom as local communities' social identity, specifically for the indigenous communities in Indonesia.

This study focuses on Toraja ethnic group as one of the indigenous communities in the Province of South Sulawesi, Indonesia. The paper analyzes the regional election as an opportunity for the indigenous community to restrengthen their existence in the political arena. The presence of formalized opportunity for the Toraja's ethnic group in the elections reopened the gate for re-influencing the process. In turn, it provides an opportunity for a return to recognition of their existence in the land they acquired as sacred legacy land from their ancestors. Thus, their social identity as a unique ethnic group with distinctive local values has the opportunity to gain recognition by outsiders, including by the central government.

#### <sup>4</sup> II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Indonesia is one of the most ethnically diverse countries in the world where live in one of the largest archipelagos in the world, precisely in the Southeast Asian region. Based on the narrower category, Ananta (2014) shows that several ethnic groups in Indonesia based on the categories of a large group and small ethnic groups are ranging from nearly 500 ethnic groups. According to the Indonesian Central Bureau of Statistics (BPS) (2015), Indonesia has even about 1300 ethnic, sub-ethnic, and tribal groups. The Javanese ethnic group is the largest ethnic group. It has about 42 percent of the total Indonesian population. At the same time, there are about 14 ethnic groups whose members are less than one million people (Suryadinata et al., 2003). Until 2015, Indonesia has 255.461.686 population (BPS, 2015). That population of ethnic diversity exists in all areas in Indonesia that consisting of more than 17,500 islands.

Although ethnicity diversity is spreading in many areas, in some areas, the comparatively ethnic background compositions of the local population often indicate a dominant ethnic group. This group usually becomes the majority ethnic group due to its sizeable amount. Sometimes the ethnic group even becomes synonymous with their region. For example, the Sundanese in West Java province where they are very dominant. Meanwhile, in Central Java, Yogyakarta, and East Java dominated by the Javanese. The Bali and Madura Islands dominated by each ethnicity. Besides, there are still ethnic Minang who became a majority in the region of West Sumatera province. The *Batak* ethnic group in North Sumatera or the Buginese and Makassarese ethnic groups become the majority ethnic group in their regions each.

In some areas, some places consist of mixing ethnic groups such as in North Sumatra, South Sulawesi, and East Java. Although there is a majority ethnic group, they are not very dominating in political composition. Based on these facts, ethnic group diversity is Indonesia's objective condition. Thus, the diversity of ethnicity could not be separated as an integral part of the existence of Indonesia as a nation. The existence of Indonesia as a nation is closely related to various ethnicities' existence in its territory.

Based on Indonesian history, diversity had existed even before Indonesia became an independent nation on 17<sup>th</sup> August 1945 (Ricklefs, 2009; Simbolon, 2006; Lombard, 2000). Through interactions with other communities, geographic conditions, social dynamics, and political policy, each community develops in its context. The history of the communities in various parts of Indonesia holds its own various stories, which eventually become the pillars of their respective identities. It makes diversity is essentially an objective condition in Indonesia. Indonesian founding fathers also recognize the condition through the motto "*Bhinneka Ika*" or "diverse in unity." This motto is part of the Indonesian state symbols, the "*Garuda Pancasila*." This fact should be the basis for their existence as essential communities in the Indonesian development history as a nation. It means diversity in the socio-cultural aspect as like as ethnicity is part of Indonesian objective

condition.

3 Basically, according to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (Unesco, 2009), diversity of a nation related to cultural background, social identity, and other backgrounds can be an as positive aspect for a nation. Unesco (ibid.) considers the condition of cultural diversity in the world is one valuable resource that could benefit the country that owns it. However, General Soeharto's era saw diversity is a conflict source that will disrupt political stability. Therefore, during Soeharto's regime, the existence of an ethnic-based society is strictly controlled. The tight state control is framed through the propaganda of nationalism by alienated the ethnic groups from significant political participation. The existence of local values, usually called "*adat*", is marginalized and avoids its necessary existence for the local communities as a vital aspect of their life.

For centuries, the understanding of *adat* in Indonesia has always been associated with a set of social rules, habits, politics, perceptions of justice, and even individual habits (Tyson, 2010). It means the local values are part of the indigenous people's existence both in social and political dynamics. *Adat* is not only related to specific ritual systems or symbols but also becomes a belief system of people based on a particular belief system that promising better and harmonious life. Therefore, they intend to restrengthen their existence. Related to that intention, in some places outside of Java and Madura islands, the spirit of chance has generated enthusiasm of people that manifests itself in the form of a meaningful shift in seeing their living areas. In the rural areas, it used to rely on the common understanding of villages such as those in Java Island. They changed it by their interpretation of the socio-geographical conditions and context (Holtzappel and Remastedt, 2009); it includes placing ethnicity and local custom as an indicator of their existence.

The importance of *adat* and the fundamental role within the communities became marginalized by the new order regime. One crucial policy was by the Suharto regime that indicated efforts to marginalize local or *adat* values thru was through Law No. 5, 1974, about the Regional Government affairs. Within the law, a section on village uniformity policies applies to all kinds of villages in Indonesia. It had led a fundamental shift in the existence of local values where previously existed and was commonly founded in the context of rural communities.

That condition indicates the government's desire to marginalize the existence of local values, including the *adat* in the local community. The *adat's* crucial roles changed by the modern village government system, and Soeharto's regime fully controlled them. One significant effect of that law was the marginalization of *adat* or customary values. As a consequence, the marginalization of customary law had to influence leader requirements in the region. There was insufficient space for the participation of local community values based on their in determining the right leaders to lead their land formally. If there were a public effort to keep its local values, it would consider as a subversive action. Thru the regime activities, the state had a formal reason to use repressive institutions to force the existence of local values. Those conditions show a lack of state acknowledgment of the existence of diversity in ethnicity and *adat* values in Indonesia. Even the government recognition on *adat* was only becoming part of government policy related to tourism. It was the regime strategy to alienated *adat* from it determined position in the political arena that expected will disturb the regime authority and control of people.

### III. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Suharto's resignation as president of the Republic of Indonesia in mid-1998 ended the authoritarian regime in Indonesia. The presence of the reform era is considered as Indonesian pathway to be a more democratic country. In this era, people expect to increase the quality of democracy in Indonesia compared to the previous era (Diamond, 2010). Although in the New Order era, several symbols of democracy via the presence of election and political parties, but the tendency of authoritarianism of the regime was more dominated during this era.

Reform era where comes with the spirit of democracy has facilitated the emergence of a significant effect on the issue of decentralization, which has brought Indonesia from a highly centralized country to the most decentralized country (Palmer and Engel, 2007). It also triggered by the euphoria of the local people asking more opportunities to participate in political activities. In this condition, various region communities that tended to marginalize then find the right way to gain a more significant role to manage their community (Tyson, 2010). In some areas, such efforts provoke violent forms (Aspinall and Mietzner, 2010). It demonstrates a magnitude of people's desire to be actively involved in the political field. Furthermore, that phenomenon indicates indigenous communities' desires to gain recognition of their

existence. It related to being engaged in managing their territory according to their region objective conditions.

Spirit of democratization led the switch of focus in politics where was previously mainly controlled by the central government. It changed from the strong state model to a fragmented government model (Nordholt 2003). It is characterized by a desire of local people to have more opportunities to control local political power. Thus, local people who considered have a better understanding of the regional context have the legitimacy to improving their society. That condition is also seen as a moment of the revival of civil society in Indonesia (Aspinall and Fealy, 2003a; Antlöv, 2003; Usman, 2002), including ethnicity-based and customs. The indigenous people mainly promote the local awakening spirit through various actions and symbols based on the local values.

In the name of *adat* as part of their existence, some communities make massive efforts to show it. Indigenous people in Bali rejected the "mega-tourism" project and its development by contrasting *adat* to the necessity of maintaining the existence of *adat* as an essential identity of the region. Besides, the cultural and political awakening among the *Dayaks* ethnic group on behalf of local culture after long-marginalized in West Kalimantan has spawned a self-empowering movement and has caused mass violence against migrants. In the name of *adat*, small farmers in *Sulawesi* and *Flores* opposed the concept of national park boundaries, which were considered as formal boundaries of their local culture in farming. In the name of *adat*, some activists based in Jakarta and various regions have combined forces to form the first indigenous community in Indonesia. It called the "*Aliansi Masyarakat Adat Nusantara*" (AMAN) or the Alliance of Indigenous Peoples the Archipelago (Henley and Davidson, 2008). Those illustrations indicate the increase in efforts to express the indigenous people's existence.

The interests of their local identity and the uniqueness of local values are based on their socio-historical aspects. The existence of local values seems to rediscover how to play an essential role in the social, economic, and political fields again (Tyson, 2010). It then encourages many indigenous communities in the region and seeks to strengthen their position by exploring various socio-historical potential resources to legitimize their actions to get the respect of their existence within the new era in Indonesia (Hauser-Schäublin, 2013). Those various aspects are becoming factors that encourage efforts made by local people to strengthen their existence. It was by trying to incorporate their local values into the political sphere. It seems like an attempt to exploit the legal opportunities provided by a formal law of the state.

That condition has opened a new interaction space for the various political forces in the local community. It is also as well as a desire to show self-existence causes the various forces to adapt and take advantage of the new era. The vast sphere of power and authority formed local dynamics at the regional level produces a new contested field contested in the region to expand power, status, and wealth (Nordholt, 2003). At the same time, it also opens opportunities for involvement of local values based on social identity as a significant factor. The condition shows how it became an opportunity to show the rise of existence based on customary values. The resurrection has implicated in efforts to show the existence of local values that were marginalized during the Suharto era. Thru various ways, they could make some efforts to maximize the availability of opportunities provided by the democratization process within the reform era for their context.

Some phenomena of indigenous people's movement as effort to receive acknowledgment of its existence occur in various forms. Some phenomena indicate the violent acts that led horizontally and vertically conflicted between communities (Tyson, 2010; Wilson, 2008; Henley and Davidson, 2008). However, those cases do not exist similarly in all communities. Some communities try a different method to re-establishing their customs as part of their ethnic group's existence like as what was the Toraja ethnic group did.

The Toraja or tana Toraja is an area located in the northern part of *Sulawesi Selatan* Province, Indonesia. This region is located about 350 km from the capital city of the province, Makassar. Since earlier of Indonesian independence until 2008, this region is a unified administrative area called the district of Tana Toraja. However, since 2008, through the Law No. 28, 2008, the area has been blossoming in two districts, which are the *Tana Toraja* and the *Toraja Utara*. Toraja ethnic group predominantly inhabited in these regions. Therefore, they were known as "*orang Toraja*" or the Torajas.

Currently, the ethnic group population estimated ranges from 1 million people, with more than 500 thousand living in the Toraja region. Some others spread in various regions outside where some of them even in abroad. This ethnic group is one of the indigenous people in Indonesia. Various activities as their practices of customary guidelines became an indication of this ethnic group's existence as indigenous people (Adams, 1997). Not only in various cultural rituals, the presence of their local values, or called "*aluk*" presence in the

Toraja's daily life. For the Toraja people, *aluk* is set of belief system that formed from their subjective experience that usually called as "*adat*." Among the Torajas, *aluk* or *adat* is a word contains comprehensive meaning. It is related to various aspects of Torajas life (Kobong, 1992). Therefore, the existence of *adat* is not only seen as rituals or ceremonies but also refers to the political tenet.

Moreover, *adat* is a set of beliefs that are considered to contain a principle of truth that harmonizes their life. Therefore, *adat* also as rules and commands where rules Toraja life. It made *adat* ask obedience from the people due to it has implications. Violation will gain punishment, while respect will receive goodness where make *aluk* or *adat* is regarded as customary law. As customary laws, *adat* is seen as fundamental guidance for the Toraja's life.

When the spirit of democratization in the reform era came to their land, the Torajas consider *adat* as their principal behavior guidelines. It has implications in various aspects of the Toraja's attitude in the political field, including in the regional election event. *Adat* has a way to returns through the direct votes mechanisms in the regional election. By this mechanism, all qualified voters will determine the event using appropriate preferences for the appropriately regional government head in the Toraja region. Since *adat* as a fundamental pattern for most of the Toraja has its particular requirement for a leader who will lead the land. It became one crucial voter's preferences, especially among the Torajas.

Based on the *adat* direction, a leader in the land should own four essential conditions: a descendant of the Torajas noble family, well in ability, good capability, and wealth (see Sukri, 2018). All of those who want to be head of the region should be the Torajas because only the Toraja could fulfill the requirements. Moreover, since this ethnic group is the majority community in the region, then their preference will genuinely determine the concept of an appropriate leader. With more than 80 % inhabitant that closely related to the voter composition, then the Torajas' preferences were influencing the event process. Without adhering to *adat* requirements, a candidate is regarded as a loss of root persons who do not represent the real desire of the "landowner".

The compulsion for a leader relevant to *adat* actually within the regional election had become a screening mechanism by the torajas for the ideal leader of the land. It had simultaneously eliminated not only the non-Toraja people but also the Toraja's non-noble candidate. Nevertheless, the mechanisms were receiving as part of the Torajas effort to assure a leader is proper to lead this region. It has created indicators and an early warning for candidates and politicians related to those who will be supported by the majority voters in Toraja region. Thus, only appropriate candidates who have all four conditions will potentially win the election. The intention of the majority to ensure their territory to be led by the right person becomes a compressive force against the actors within the electoral process, including a political party. As an institution that has the right to nominate candidates in the election, political parties, especially in Toraja region, also influenced by that unique condition. They certainly do not want to nominate a candidate who does not fit the four requirements. The political party believes the candidate absolutely will lose when an absence of the conditions. Therefore, although formally, all qualified persons are potentially nominated even if they are non-toraja or non-noble, it is almost impossible for them to win the election. It because the majority of voters have their preferences related to who will lead their sacred land. This fact indicates that winning the regional election in the Toraja region must be the Toraja, who owns all four requirements based on *adat*. It means that although the electoral process is governed through formal law proposed by the state, the winning candidate is more determined by the customary law. That condition confirms how prominent *adat* was during the regional election. In this point, legitimacy provided by formal law to the winner in the Toraja regional election could be seen as essential recognition of the *adat* existence as a fundamental aspect, including in the political field. During the election was not manifested only through the candidate's eligibility requirements. It was also occurring through some activities where once again indicate the crucial roles played by *adat*.

During the process of regional election socialization and campaign, all candidates conduct various activities by considering it with the *adat* suitability. During the campaign and socialization process, each candidate had exploited some important cultural events that fully respected by the Toraja people as the majority of voters. Thru various events or customs ceremonies, all candidates were tried to convince the Torajas who attend the event to support them as the most proper Toraja leader. Therefore, there were various custom events in Toraja used by the candidates because they believed it was an essential and respectful event. Candidates who could represent themselves as the most appropriate candidate and emphasize by some cultural elites as apprehending the *adat* tenet may receive much support. It is once again confirming how the formal event follows precisely the customary laws.

Another example of customary law influence on the formally of the regional election was the used *tongkonan*

that represent the Toraja's concept of kinship. It was chosen due to kinship is one of the Torajas important concepts in family ties. *Tongkonan* is the typical house of Toraja ethnic group. In Toraja's language, *tongkonan* is also defined as a place to live. In this sense, *tongkonan* became a symbol of kinship among the torajas. *Tongkonan* usually reflects the bond of the noble families. The significance position of *tongkonan* had used by all candidates to influence people especially those who came from internal kinship. All candidates realize that through the *tongkonan* they could keep their kinship support and help them socialize their programs extensively. As prominent ties of kinship that socially fully respect by the Torajas, it showed how *adat*'s symbol was as fundamental tools to gain more supporters. Most candidates utilize *adat* symbols and practice to show their commitment to customary value. Even the event was regulated by formal law, but the Torajas have their own law that should be respected when a candidate intends to win. The event shows how the Torajas should respect two fundamental laws of their behavior, which is called a legal pluralism condition. For some communities that condition responded through some resistance actions to as an effort to be respected by state, the Torajas showed other ways to be respected. They would like to keep both laws in the event simultaneously. The Torajas keep respect to all processes in the election based on the formal law, but they used *adat* as a tool to influence voters to vote the right candidate based on what the *adat* wants. It was as their effort to make sure that proper leader that will be legitimized by formal laws a leader who was appropriate to *adat*. This condition showed the regional election was not only an event to formally vote for a leader but also a leader who deserves, according to the *adat* guidance, an essential aspect of the Toraja ethnic group's existence. Therefore, the electoral process in Toraja region in 2015 has become an event to restore the influencing of *adat* as a fundamental not only for their community but also in the land where they proclaimed as the sacred land.

The phenomenon indicates that the meeting of the two laws in the electoral process had essentially become space used by the Toraja ethnic group to return *adat* as a dominant factor in Toraja. Thru the process, the Torajas has been managed to regain recognition of its existence as a unique ethnic group. Without ignoring the presence of formal law, the Torajas demonstrate how *adat* playing a vital role very during the election. The election became a way to legitimize the influence of *adat* within their daily life. The existence of *adat* is presented cleverly through the formal stages of the regional election process. When the outcome justified through formal law as a legal process, it indirectly also recognizes the Toraja ethnic group *adat* as part of their existence.

Although formal law appears as standard to justify the election outcome in Toraja, the influence of *adat* remains an essential part in determining the merits of a leader. It means, the legal pluralism condition within the election gave two types of the legitimacy of propriety to the winner as the proper leader (Yunus and Tamma, 2015). The first legitimacy relates to *adat*, which is considered eligible as a leader according to the Toraja custom. The second refers to formal legitimacy as it meets the requirements of the law through the 2015 elections.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

The election of regional heads to elect regional heads in the Toraja regions (the *Tana Toraja* and *Toraja Utara* districts) indicates the existence of legal pluralism conditions that bring together two fundamental laws for Toraja ethnicity. This situation is possible because ethnic Toraja is also an indigenous community with a local legal system called *adat*. This condition indicates the existence of space that allows ethnic Torajas as indigenous communities to seek recognition from the state as a community that is influential and decisive in their socio-political life context. Thus, under that condition, the election of regional heads involving two basic norms for Torajans, namely formal and customary law, Toraja ethnicity is required to respond with two main reasons. First, ensure that it remains subject to state law as an Indonesian citizen. Secondly, to ensure the election results should be proper with *adat* as an attempt to demonstrate the existence of *adat* as essential aspects of people living in the region. The fact that the regional head position is crucial in the local government system. In the context of *adat*, being a regional leader is a way for ethnic Toraja to get back recognition of the influence of *adat* in life in its territory.

The head of the region, who was elected through a formal process - regional election - strongly influenced by customary values- indicates that the Toraja people show their existence to be recognized as the most influential community in the Toraja region. It also shows that indigenous peoples have used the existing formal law to show their ethnic existence through *adat* through a regional election process that has justified by the state.

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