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Meritocracy-Based Legal Policy on Single Candidate Regional Head Elections and Asymmetric Democracy

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Abstract: Local democracy in Sukoharjo reflects a form of asymmetric democracy, namely a condition where democratic procedures run formally, but substantively do not provide an equal opportunity for all citizens to compete freely. This research is a type of sociological juridical research. The results of the study that from a democratic perspective, there are indications of an asymmetric democracy phenomenon, where the democracy does not run based on the values of democratic goodness. Meritocracy is a system in which individuals are awarded positions or promotions based on excellence, achievement, and competence, rather than wealth, power, relationships, or connections. The primary focus is ensuring leaders occupy positions commensurate with their competence and maintaining neutrality and integrity. Indonesian democracy is based on Pancasila democracy, anchored in the fourth principle: people's sovereignty guided by the wisdom of deliberation and representation. This concept is also based on noble values that align with Indonesian culture, differing from liberal or socialist democracy.

Keywords: Single Candidate Regional Election, Asymmetric Democracy, Meritocracy-Based.

INTRODUCTION

The implementation of regional head elections is normatively regulated in Article 18 Paragraph (4) of the 1945 Constitution, which states that "Governors, Regents, and Mayors, respectively as heads of provincial, district, and city regional governments, are elected democratically." The original intent in the 1945 Constitution amendment hearing or emphasized in the considerations of the Constitutional Court Decision No. 22/PUU-VII/2009, No. 11/PUU-IX/2011, and No. 97/PUU-XI/2013) is that regional head election is an open legal policy from the law makers, which is also closely related to respect and constitutional protection of the diversity of customs and culture of communities in various regions. For this reason, both direct and indirect election systems are equally democratic election system categories with all their pluses and minuses that could potentially lead to democratic contractions (Hasanuddin, 2011).

Empirically, the implementation of regional elections has had a positive impact on filling the positions of regional head and deputy regional head at the provincial and district/city levels. Through regional head elections, the people (voters) are involved in determining regional leaders, both as an implementation of political rights and as a manifestation of the principle of popular sovereignty. However, despite these positive impacts, it is recognized that there are problems with regional head elections, which are concentrated in three areas: Electoral Law, Electoral Process, and Electoral Law Enforcement. Regarding Electoral Law, changes to the rules often occur before or during the regional head election stages, which are effective from the date of their enactment (Kusuma & Budianto, 2025).

These changes gave rise to three main pillars of post-reform democracy. First, the birth of direct elections as a means for public participation in determining political leadership, both at the national and regional levels. Second, the emergence of a multiparty system that provides greater space for political representation while reflecting the heterogeneity of Indonesian society (Gunhar & Fakrulloh, 2025). Third, the implementation of decentralization through regional autonomy policies that distribute power from the central government to the regions, with the aim of increasing government responsiveness and accountability (Rahman, 2024).

However, on the other hand, Indonesian democracy still faces serious challenges. The practice of money politics, the oligarchization of political parties, and the weakness of democratic institutions demonstrate that the post-reform democratic consolidation is far from complete. This situation raises fundamental questions about the quality of Indonesian democracy after more than two decades of reform (Nugroho, 2023).

The phenomenon of single candidates in regional head elections has become one indicator that has sparked debate about the quality of local democracy. Normatively, the existence of single candidates is indeed permitted under Law Number 10 of 2016 concerning the Election of Governors, Regents, and Mayors. However, substantively, this raises questions about the extent to which political competition and public participation still reflect true democratic principles (Fernando & Mandala, 2025). Within the framework of the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (IDI), the emergence of single-candidates in regional head elections can have implications for declining scores on civil liberties and political rights, as the space for contestation that should be open is limited.

In the context of the regional elections in Sukoharjo Regency, the single candidate election is an indicator of serious challenges to the implementation of electoral democracy in Indonesia. Official data from the General Elections Commission shows that the trend of single candidates has increased over several election periods (Oktadini, Hartati, & Zarkasi, 2025). In the 2020 Simultaneous Regional Elections, 25 regions were recorded as having only one pair of regional head and deputy head candidates appointed by the General Elections Commission. This number increased compared to the 2017 Regional Elections, which recorded 9 regions with single candidates, and the 2018 Regional Elections, which had 16 regions (Wahyuni, 2022).

The increasing trend in the number of single candidates indicates a fundamental problem in the political recruitment system and nomination mechanisms at the local level (Coursey & Norris, 2008). Normatively, the existence of single candidates is indeed accommodated in Article 54C of Law Number 10 of 2016 concerning the Election of Governors, Regents, and Mayors. However, substantively, this phenomenon raises profound questions about the extent to which democracy still provides a healthy and equal competitive space for every citizen to participate in political contests.

Urgency of the research is because the phenomenon of single candidates can also be interpreted as a symptom of the declining quality of electoral democracy, as the limited

alternative choices for voters limit the essence of political participation. This situation demonstrates the dominance of certain political elites in the nomination process, weak party cadre development, and low public trust in the existing political system. In this context, democracy loses its meaning as a system based on open competition, active participation, and accountability of power.

More specifically, this situation can be categorized as a form of asymmetric democracy, where the formal right to vote remains available, but substantively lacks equal political competition. This situation also has the potential to erode the principles of representation and accountability in local government (Lestari, 2017). Thus, the increasing number of single candidates in regional elections, including those in Sukoharjo Regency, is a clear reflection of the challenges of Indonesian democracy, which remains at the "flawed democracy" stage, as reflected in the EIU report and the national IDI score.

The increasing number of single candidates in regional elections is a clear reflection of the weakening of political competition at the local level. When electoral contests are contested by only one candidate pair, the essence of democracy as an open and competitive leadership selection mechanism is diminished. This situation demonstrates that democracy in Indonesia faces not only challenges at the national level, as reflected in the IDI and Global Democracy Index scores, but also specific structural and cultural problems at the regional level.

In addition to the general issues of democracy at the national level, specific problems also arise in the regions, one of which is the strengthening role of dynastic politics. Many regional heads in Indonesia come from families of officials or long-standing political elites, creating a concentration of power within certain family circles. This phenomenon hinders the process of leadership regeneration and creates inequality in political opportunities in the regions. In the context of electoral democracy, dynastic politics has the potential to undermine the value of healthy competition and undermine the principle of citizen equality before the law and in politics (Mukhlis, Ilmar, Maskun, Aswanto, & Tajuddin, 2024).

Besides kinship, oligarchic relations in local politics also pose a serious challenge. Candidates with substantial financial capital tend to have an easier time securing political party support, mobilizing resources, and securing victory in regional elections (Yakub, Armunanto, & Haryanto, 2022). Consequently, leadership capacity and integrity are often not the primary factors determining victory, but rather financial strength and political networks (Mahroza, 2024).

On the other hand, regional political parties generally still adopt a pragmatic approach. They tend to nominate candidates deemed "safe to win," such as popular or economically influential figures (Purwaningsih & Widodo, 2021). This often results in potential alternative candidates with limited financial resources being excluded from the nomination process. This situation demonstrates that local democracy has not yet fully provided space for equal competition, but is still dominated by kinship, economic capital, and electoral calculations (Rahyu, Suryanef, Rafni, & Azizah, 2024).

Previous research is conducted by Arifin (2024), which expects to address this void in the existing literature. This research focusing on the legal implications of sole-candidate regional head elections, which have not been studied extensively from the perspective of Administrative Law (Aspinall & As'ad, 2016). Arifin research is discussed this phenomenon from political and sociological perspectives, but there is as yet no comprehensive study that specifically examines the legal aspects in the context of governance and regional head elections and analysis that focuses on the gaps in existing regulations and how these legal voids can disrupt fundamental democratic principles, such as legitimacy and accountability. Differentiation with this research because authors research focused on the real experiences on Sukoharjo Regency and the need of meritorious_legal based policy on this term

This phenomenon can also be seen in the context of the Sukoharjo Regency regional elections, where the dominance of certain political parties and the centralized support of a single candidate led to the formation of a single candidate. Thus, local democracy in Sukoharjo reflects a form of asymmetric democracy, a condition where democratic procedures are formal but do not substantively provide equal opportunities for all citizens to compete freely (Putra & Damanik, 2021).

Based on the background description that has been presented previously, it can be seen that there is a gap between *das Sollen* and *das Sein* in the implementation of local democracy in Indonesia, especially in the implementation of regional head elections in Sukoharjo Regency. In *das Sollen*, positive legal provisions, especially Law Number 10 of 2016 concerning the Election of Governors, Regents, and Mayors, guarantee the implementation of democratic, participatory, and competitive regional elections, as a manifestation of the principle of people's sovereignty guaranteed by the 1945 Constitution of the Republic of Indonesia. However, in *das Sein*, practice in the field shows the phenomenon of a single candidate which actually narrows the space for political competition and public participation, thus causing problems for the quality of democracy at the local level (Pratiwi, 2023).

This phenomenon shows that normatively, the regional election system in Indonesia has been designed to support substantive and meritocratic democracy, but empirically it still faces obstacles in the form of domination of political elites, dynastic politics, and weak party recruitment mechanisms which result in the emergence of asymmetric democracy. The gap between legal norms and the practice of organizing regional elections is the main focus of this research. Based on the background above, the problems can be formulated: (1) why is the Single Candidate Regional Head Election in Sukoharjo considered undemocratic and asymmetric? (2) How is the concept of the Regional Head Election viewed from a democratic life based on the values of democratic goodness (meritocracy)?

METHOD

This research is a type of sociological juridical research which is a legal research, in the form of collecting and reviewing legal regulations, principles, legal principles and doctrines in law to answer legal issues currently in society, namely the election of regional heads with a single candidate in Sukoharjo (Moleong, 2011). This research is primary data is observation and interview several respondent and also supported by documents as secondary data, data from the General Elections Commission and polling station officers and key informants who are considered to primary data. Primary data taken from Sukoharjo regional head elections. The secondary data is legal document as laws, regulation and legal commission decision, also report, etc.

This research uses a qualitative descriptive approach supported by document data and empirical data as well as interviews with polling station officers (Ruslan, 2003). Data collection that is the object of research comes from documents, books, scientific journals, magazines and interviews with informants based on needs (purposive) and using key informants (Bungin, 2007).

For the supporting the manuscript's factual conclusions. The Method section the report the number of village, roles of respondents, selection criteria for respondents in the 3 district, locations of informants 3 sub-districts and several 3 villages with several polling station; dates for interview is taken at 15-17 December 2025 and procedures for observation/interviews is deep interview; the interview guide is first authors and every interview had its approval from the respondent; recording or transcription is with electronic device to prevent error; informed consent is obtained for every respondent, ethics approval is granted by the committee of research at university, and researchers guaranteed anonymity protections;

The research location was carried out at the Sukoharjo Regency Regional General Elections Commission, by selecting several data collection locations in 3 sub-districts and several 3 villages with several polling stations. The locations used as research objects are 3 villages of Palur, Mojolaban District, Sukoharjo, Pucangan Village, Kartasura District, Sukoharjo and Baki Village, Grogol District, Sukoharjo.

Every sub-district had 5 respondent and selection based on profession on every sub district and authors had reproducible evidence trail and representative quotation in result and discussion and this article didn't use coded finding because it's a qualitative and not quantitative.

Data analysis that will be carried out in the study uses a qualitative descriptive approach by describing and analyzing documents or data that have been obtained. The analysis steps include data collection, data processing and then analyzed descriptively qualitatively. The process of analyzing data obtained by researchers must be correct and reliable, data analysis by conducting a systematic review activity regarding a matter in order to understand the parts, the relationship between parts, and the relationship between parts and the whole so that a complete picture of the Regional Head Election and Asymmetric Democracy in Sukoharjo will be obtained.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Single Candidate Regional Head Election in Sukoharjo and Asymmetric Democracy

The Regional Head Election of Sukoharjo Regency was participated by one pair Etik Suryani-Eko Sapto Purnomo because the candidate for regent and deputy regent from the independent route, namely the pair Tuntas Subagyo-Djayendra Dewa who filed a lawsuit to the Sukoharjo Bawaslu was rejected at the hearing on September 9, 2024 on the grounds that a number of required documents were declared incomplete. The decision of the Sukoharjo Regency Bawaslu received protests from a number of supporters by holding demonstrations carrying posters such as "Sukoharjo's Democratic Ethics Have Disappeared", "Democracy Is Damaged", and "The People Need Change". A number of demonstrators were determined to uphold democracy which was considered to have deviated from the good values of democracy so that future democratic learning would be better (Mahfud MD, 2012).

Thus, the Regional Head Election was held with a single candidate in Sukoharjo, namely only one pair of candidates, namely Etik Suryani-Eko Sapto Purnomo, because until the registration deadline no other pair dared to nominate so that only the pair Etik Suryani-Eko Sapto Purnomo declared themselves as the sole candidate and in the implementation of the regional head elections it was carried out by running against an empty box or by the local community known as running against an "empty box" (Kumolo, 2015).

However, even though in the regional head elections against the empty box, the Etik Suryani-Eko Sapto Purnomo pair did not win easily in a number of Polling Stations (TPS), such as in TPS 02 Demakan Village, Mojolaban District, the Etik Suryani-Eko Sapto Purnomo pair got 117 votes and the empty box got 123 votes. In TPS 03, Palur Village, Mojolaban District, the Etik Suryani-Eko Sapto Purnomo pair only got 180 votes, while the empty box got 225 votes. Even though in Mojolaban District it is known as a base for supporters of the PDI Perjuangan party which is a supporter of the Etik Suryani-Eko Sapto Purnomo pair (General Election Commission, n.d.).

Likewise, at TPS 04 Pucangan Village, Kartasura District, the pair Etik Suryani-Eko Sapto Purnomo received 153 votes, while the empty box received 221 votes. It is very surprising that at TPS 04, Kartasura District, which is an urban area in the northern region of Sukoharjo Regency, the pair Etik Suryani-Eko Sapto Purnomo received 134 votes while the empty box received 160 votes. At TPS 10, Kartasura Village, Kartasura District, the pair Etik

Suryani-Eko Sapto Purnomo received 148 votes and the empty box received 174 votes (Sukma & Arifin, 2024).

At TPS 05 in Makam Haji Village, Kartasura District, the Etik Suryani-Eko Sapto Purnomo pair received 205 votes, while the empty box received 215 votes. Meanwhile, at TPS 25 in Cemani Village, Grogol District, the Etik Suryani-Eko Sapto Purnomo pair received 118 votes and the empty box received 150 votes. At TPS 05 in Makam Haji Village. This is considered normal because Cemani Village and Makamhaji Village are known as green areas and are not fanatical about the PDI-P party supporting the Etik Suryani-Eko Sapto Purnomo pair (Hidayat, 2020).

The final results based on the Decree of the Sukoharjo Regency General Elections Commission No. 1490 of 20024 which was conveyed by the Chairman of the Sukoharjo Regional General Elections Commission, Syakbani Eko Raharjo, at the plenary session showed that the Etik Suryani-Eko Sapto Purnomo pair received 386,892 (66.8 percent) of the total votes of 579,179 (100 percent) while the empty box received 192,287 (33.2 percent). Meanwhile, the voter participation rate reached 73.80 percent. The participation rate is considered to have decreased compared to the previous regional head elections in 2020 which reached 80 percent.

The reason for the decline in the percentage of community participation according to the Chairman of the Sukoharjo General Elections Commission, Syakbani Eko Raharjo ("Profile Komisioner Periode 2023-2028," 2023) namely the people who do not exercise their voting rights, among others, because of news that forms the public's hoax opinion that democracy is no longer respected, as evidenced by the existence of independent candidates who were rejected by the Sukoharjo Regency Election Supervisory Agency (Bawaslu) to advance as candidates from the independent route for the Sukoharjo Regional Head election, so that their loyal supporters are determined to straighten out the democracy that is considered deviant, namely by choosing the empty box or not exercising their voting rights.

The Etik Suryani-Eko Sapto Purnomo pair was elected because they were supported by 12 political parties, including the major parties PDIP (42.74 percent) and Gerindra (13.95 percent), Golkar Party (12.40 percent), PKS (9.00 percent) which constituted a "fat coalition" and had no other competing candidates. The independent candidate who was expected to be a balance of democratic life in the Sukoharjo Regional Head Election was rejected by the Sukoharjo Election Supervisory Agency chaired by Rochmat Basuki (Kawul, 2023). Thus, the Etik Suryani-Eko Sapto Purnomo ticket won the Sukoharjo Regency regional election against an empty ticket. The election results were met with resistance from those who maintain a healthy democracy at the local level.

The implementation of the Sukoharjo Regional Head Election shows that democratic life at the regional/local level is not running well. If analyzed from a democratic perspective, there are indications of an asymmetric democracy phenomenon, namely a democracy that is not running based on the good values of democracy. Regional head elections and democracy in the view of experts who refer to the interpretation of Article 18 paragraph (1) of the 1945 Constitution show the existence of diverse implementations of democracy between regions and other regions within the unitary state of Indonesia. However, in the context of the general understanding of asymmetric democracy (MD, 2009), it is understood as a form of democracy that is not in line with the democratic system and order as known in a democratic society and state (Dimiyati et al., 2021).

The existence of an asymmetrical democratic configuration that is not parallel to the values of good democracy (meritocracy) in the implementation of the Regional Head Election can be seen in the following indications: **first**, there is an indication of a monarchical democracy, namely the elected regent Etik Suryani is an incumbent regent who has served as a previous regent. In addition, regent Etik Suryani is the wife of the previous regent, namely

Wardoyo, who has served as regent of Sukoharjo for 2 periods, even before serving as regent, he first served as Chairman of the Regional Legislative House (Grehenson, 2023).

Second, there are indications of a monotonous political monopoly, with the 12 political parties forming a "fat coalition." This clearly indicates political transactions between the supporting political parties, which have detrimental consequences for the development of democracy. This is because there is no balanced competition among the political parties in Sukoharjo, the pillars of democracy in the region.

Third, such transactional conditions will impact local parliamentary institutions, namely the Sukoharjo Regency Regional Legislative House, which will almost certainly unanimously support the elected regent in every policy and implementation of his programs. This will result in the loss of critical thinking among political parties in responding to the elected regent's government programs. Furthermore, the checks and balances that serve as oversight and balance will be absent from the running of regional government.

Fourth, high-cost politics: The joining of major political parties into a coalition supporting the Etik Suryani regent candidate pair will not easily result in a win in the Regional Head Election. Fear of losing to an empty ticket has led them to resort to all sorts of expensive means, including money politics during the campaign, the production of party and regent-vice regent candidate attributes, and the distribution of basic food packages to the public to encourage them to vote for their nominated pair (Mahendra, 2024).

The long-term impact of the single-candidate regional head election phenomenon in Sukoharjo Regency may extend beyond temporary electoral outcomes and potentially influence the future quality of local democracy. The emergence of public protests following the rejection of an independent candidate and the substantial support for the "empty box" option indicate latent dissatisfaction with the democratic process. In the long run, such conditions may gradually reduce public trust in electoral institutions and weaken perceptions of procedural fairness, particularly when citizens perceive limitations in political competition and candidate accessibility. If this pattern repeatedly occurs, democracy may increasingly be viewed merely as a procedural mechanism rather than a substantive process that genuinely accommodates public participation and political alternatives.

The causes of the high phenomenon of single candidates in the regional head elections which indicate asymmetric democracy include the problem of political recruitment that has not been implemented (Hidayat, 2020), the provisions of the threshold requirements that are burdensome for candidates, the high support requirements in the nomination and finally the permission of single candidates in the regional head elections by the Constitutional Court decision 100/PUU-XIII/2015 and 135/PUU-XXII/2024. In addition, there is a factor of too high electability, which is called a strong candidate, one of the existing candidates, can also have large funds needed to participate in the regional head elections (Alvian, 2024).

This results in only candidates with strong financial support and high electability daring to compete in regional elections. The pragmatism factor of political parties, where political parties form pragmatic cross-party coalitions, puts aside party ideology in favor of pursuing money and power in forming coalitions. The reason for the high number of single candidates in regional elections is due to the consideration of prioritizing rational, practical, and short-term reasons to remain in power by winning the election, even if it means setting aside party ideology.

Research conducted by M. Anwar Tanjung and Retno Saraswati, 2019 with the title "Single Candidates in Regional Elections Reduce the Quality of Democracy" (Tanjung & Saraswati, 2019) shows that philosophically the Regional Head Election is the implementation of people's sovereignty to be elected and choose in an election process that takes place democratically. In fact, there is an increase in the number of regions that hold Regional Head Elections with a single candidate. This study discusses the single candidate in

the Regional Head Election based on the Constitutional Court Decision 100/PUU-XIII/2015 and 135/PUU-XXII/2024. According to the researcher, the Constitutional Court's decision needs to be addressed by the stakeholders involved to keep this election process running democratically. The research is non-doctrinal. Regional Head Elections with a single candidate need to be monitored so that the election continues to take place democratically. The study concludes that a single candidate in the Regional Head Election requires appropriate legal construction to ensure democracy runs democratically after the Constitutional Court Decision 100/PUU-XIII/2015 and 135/PUU-XXII/2024. The legal framework must guarantee the maximum limit on the support of regional head candidates nominated by political parties or coalitions of political parties, so as to eliminate the monopoly of individuals or groups of investors on the requirements for support for regional head candidates (Desyani, 2014).

The Concept of Regional Head Elections and Meritocracy-Based Asymmetric Democracy

Evaluation of the implementation of the General Election, Legislative Election and Regional Head Election conducted by various parties, including Political Parties, shows that there needs to be a change in the system or concept of the Regional Head Election which is considered asymmetrical, because in practice various deviations are found, such as dynastic politics, money politics, transactional politics, high-cost politics. Therefore, Political Parties are of the opinion that the Implementation of Regional Head Elections at the Regency/City Level is needed not to be carried out directly but by the Regional Legislative House.

The results of such evaluations have drawn both pros and cons among political parties themselves. Gerindra, Golkar, Nasdem, PKB, and PAN have argued that regional elections should be chosen by members of the Regional People's Representative Council, arguing that the election process is costly and politically. Furthermore, competent candidates are unable to run due to financial constraints. Meanwhile, the candidates elected in the elections are not necessarily the best candidates, as evidenced by several elected regents and mayors being implicated in corruption and arrested by the Corruption Eradication Commission (Puspaningrum, 2024).

Meanwhile, the Democratic Party of Struggle (PDIP), through Said Abdullah (2025), argues that regional elections are a process and mechanism for achieving quality leadership elections at the local level. This is achieved through direct regional head elections, where the people can choose the candidates they desire according to their conscience. This is the true meaning of democracy: the guarantee and freedom of the people to choose their leaders directly, fairly, without pressure, and fairly. The hope is that qualified and popular leaders will be elected who will be able to fight for the aspirations of the people who elect them.

According to PDIP, if there are shortcomings and various practices of deviation from democracy that are not in accordance with the values of democracy (meritocracy), what must be fixed is the political parties and their actors, not changing the system which is the result of a long struggle since the reform era. If this change is made, it will be a step backward in democracy, besides weakening the checks and balances and diversity of political parties in the regions because the people's voice is only represented through a representative institution, namely the Regional Legislative House.

The desire of some political parties to have regional head elections be elected indirectly, namely through the Regional Legislative House, for reasons other than being in accordance with the spirit of deliberative democratic values as contained in the fourth principle of Pancasila, is also inspired by the interpretation of the separation between national and local elections as decided by the Constitutional Court (MK) No. 135 / PPU-XXII / 2024 which decided the separation of the implementation of national and local elections so that

elections can take place effectively and efficiently due to the division of tasks of the national and local election regimes.

Theoretically, democracy and meritocracy are two interrelated concepts but also have tensions: democracy is a system of government by the people, while meritocracy is a system that grants power based on ability, achievement (merit), and integrity, not wealth or social status, which should be an important foundation for creating a professional bureaucracy and effective leadership in a democratic state. However, the implementation of pure meritocracy also faces challenges, such as the risk of widening the gap if not balanced with equality of opportunity, it can even lead to the "tyranny of meritocracy" if it only measures individual value without considering the dignity of social work.

The basic concept of democracy is government of the people, by the people, for the people, with the principles of equality, freedom, and participation. Meritocracy: A system that awards positions and rewards based on merit, competence, and performance, rather than connections, wealth, or background. The relationship between democracy and meritocracy is synergistic, namely meritocracy strengthens democracy by ensuring competent, honest, and professional leaders and bureaucrats, which ultimately improves the quality of public services and clean governance.

Meritocracy is crucial to prevent democracy from being manipulated or filled by incompetent leaders who rely solely on popularity or money, thus undermining the country's effectiveness. Challenges and criticisms of a democracy without meritocracy include the existence of social inequality, such as the implementation of meritocracy without equal access to education and opportunities, which only benefits a certain established elite.

The tyranny of power without meritocracy is a system that focuses too much on achievement, leading to the hegemony of the ruling power, and can demean those deemed "losers" and create social polarization. The subjectivity of "merit" measurements is sometimes influenced by emotional bias or personal preferences, threatening fairness.

The implementation of meritocracy in Indonesia is key to bureaucratic reform to create professional civil servants through a merit system, ensuring recruitment and promotion based on competence and performance. The goal is to realize a clean, accountable, and effective government, and support the nation's aspirations to become a developed nation. Meritocracy is ideal for supporting a healthy democracy by ensuring competence in government, but it must be balanced with social justice and equality of opportunity to prevent tyranny or exacerbate inequality in democracy in society.

Meritocracy-based democracy in Indonesia is a system that prioritizes ability, competence, and achievement in the promotion of public office, especially ASN, as mandated by ASN Law No. 5/2014 as replaced by No. 20 of 2023, to create a professional, fair, and effective bureaucracy, although its implementation faces challenges such as the politics of favors, structural inequality, and issues of nepotism, which encourage the government to continue strengthening the digital talent management system to achieve superior human resource quality and national competitiveness.

Meritocracy is a system in which individuals are awarded positions or promotions based on excellence, achievement, and competence, rather than wealth, relationships, or connections. The legal basis for this is strengthened by Law No. 5 of 2014 on Civil Servants (ASN) as replaced by No. 20 of 2023, which mandates merit-based civil servant management for recruitment, promotion, and career development. Government Focus: The National Civil Service Agency (BKN) prioritizes meritocracy and talent management, ensuring civil servants occupy positions commensurate with their competencies and maintaining neutrality and integrity.

Term of "asymmetric democracy" should be understood as an analytical concept describing a mismatch between formally democratic electoral procedures and substantively

unequal opportunities to enter and compete in the electoral arena. It is therefore distinct from **asymmetric decentralization**, which refers to the constitutionally or legally recognized differentiation of powers, institutions, or autonomy among regions; asymmetry in decentralization may be deliberately designed to accommodate territorial diversity and is not inherently undemocratic. By contrast, democratic asymmetry arises when citizens formally retain the rights to vote and stand for office, yet nomination structures, concentrated party coalitions, financial barriers, or unequal access to political resources make those rights substantially unequal. The concept should also not be equated with **weak contestation**, which is an observable condition of limited electoral competition; **oligarchy**, which concerns the concentration of political and economic power; **dynastic politics**, which concerns the reproduction of political office through kinship networks; or **democratic backsliding**, which denotes a broader temporal deterioration of democratic institutions. These phenomena may operate as causes, manifestations, or consequences of asymmetric democracy, but they are not synonymous with it. This distinction sharpens the manuscript's existing argument that the Sukoharjo single-candidate election combined formally valid electoral procedures with restricted substantive competition.

Meritocracy based candidate quality mechanism would therefore be constitutionally defensible only if merit functions as a means of improving the quality and transparency of political recruitment rather than as an additional barrier to political participation. A proposed mechanism should satisfy four cumulative requirements: the criteria of competence, integrity, leadership capacity, and public track record must be objective, predetermined, publicly accessible, and relevant to the functions of regional office; they must apply without discrimination to aspirants nominated by political parties and those using the independent route; assessment procedures must not privilege wealth, incumbency, family background, party connections, or membership in established political elites; and any assessment must remain preparatory rather than determinative, because the final authority to choose among legally qualified candidates belongs to voters. In constitutional terms, meritocracy cannot displace popular sovereignty under Article 1(2), equal opportunity in government under Article 28D(3), or the requirement of democratic regional-head elections under Article 18(4) of the 1945 Constitution. Nor should a "merit commission" possess an unreviewable power to exclude otherwise eligible candidates, since such a body could reproduce precisely the elite gatekeeping that the proposed reform seeks to overcome. The independent route must likewise remain meaningful, consistent with the Constitutional Court's recognition of independent candidacy, while differences in nomination procedures may be maintained where they are objectively justified.

These principles can be translated into the existing legal framework through several differentiated reforms. First, transparent and competency-oriented party recruitment should supplement Article 40 of Law No. 10 of 2016, as reinterpreted by Constitutional Court Decision No. 60/PUU-XXII/2024, which replaced the previous nomination threshold with graduated thresholds based on valid votes; the DPR and President should establish the basic obligations by statutory amendment, while the KPU may operationalize disclosure, documentation, and nomination procedures through KPU regulations. Second, reform of independent candidacy should focus on simplifying verification and ensuring proportional administration of Article 41 rather than imposing additional "merit" thresholds, with Bawaslu and the administrative courts providing effective review of nomination disputes. Third, measures against excessive coalition concentration or nomination monopolies would require an amendment to the Pilkada Law and must be narrowly tailored so that they expand meaningful competition without unjustifiably restricting political-party association; their implementation should be supervised by the KPU and Bawaslu and remain subject to judicial and constitutional review. Fourth, Article 54C and Constitutional Court Decision No.

100/PUU-XIII/2015 should remain the baseline for single-candidate elections, preserving the electorate's ability to accept or reject the sole candidate rather than transferring the ultimate choice to party elites or an expert body. Importantly, Decision No. 135/PUU-XXII/2024 should not be used as authority for permitting single candidates: that decision concerns the separation of national and local election cycles, beginning with the post-2029 electoral design, rather than candidate nomination or single-candidate legality.

The initial inequality is the existence of structural inequalities in society (e.g., education), which can hinder fair competition if meritocracy is implemented without equal intervention. Issues of corruption, collusion, and nepotism (KKN) and nepotism remain a challenge. Military Culture: The revision of the TNI Law, which opens a path for active-duty officers to civilian positions, is feared to erode meritocracy if not pursued through equivalent civilian mechanisms.

The benefits of meritocracy include increasing public trust, creating a healthy work culture, encouraging positive competition, and fostering professional leadership. The strategy involves implementing digitalization (e-performance, applications) for monitoring, integrating personnel data, and standardizing systems. The goal is to create a world-class bureaucracy that is transparent, effective, and reliable.

The post-reform election and regional head elections system is considered problematic, both ideologically and empirically. Ideologically, the election system is considered inconsistent with the fourth principle of Pancasila, which emphasizes deliberative/representative democracy. In reality, the election and regional head elections system is considered high-cost and liberal. Elected leaders are not the best. Several regional heads, members of the House of Representatives, and members of the Regional People's Representative Council have been implicated in corruption, and several have been caught in sting operations by the Corruption Eradication Commission.

Liberal democracy has led to political contraction, and the public's mindset has become more pragmatic. Political oligarchy, played by capitalists, significantly determines the selection of leaders in elections, whether for heads of state, regional heads, or legislative members. The one-man-for-one-vote (one-man-for-one) election mechanism appears democratic and rational, but it also disregards a candidate's qualitative values, leaving image and money politics as the deciding factor.

The people are only addressed during the run-up to elections. Various image-building efforts, including the distribution of basic necessities, money politics, and material accessories, are conducted. In the run-up to elections, it is found that candidates and political parties merely exploit the people as a means to garner as many votes as possible. Campaign promises are quickly forgotten once the election is over. The people's celebrations are fleeting; the rest of the time, they are preoccupied with their own agendas, ignoring campaign promises.

In reality, political pragmatism has emerged, giving rise to asymmetrical democracy, characterized by transactional behavior among political actors and their supporting communities. Historically, democracy has been based on a rational, liberal, and individualistic society. If applied in a transitional society like Indonesia, it will create problems: political error, characterized by political behavior that is asymmetrical to the values of meritocracy and contradicts those values of democracy itself.

Therefore, it is urgent to reform the election and regional election systems, which are inseparable from changes in the democratic system, which of course requires legality produced by legitimate institutions. Democracy within the framework of civil society must guarantee the rights of individual citizens, an independent judiciary, free elections, freedom of expression, association, organization and opposition, a free and responsible press, and

civic education, including political education that educates the people so they know their rights and obligations in the nation and state.

Moving forward, it's important to consider reforming Indonesia's electoral and regional election systems to a democratic, participatory, and deliberative system. A new electoral system formula is needed, one that incorporates the values of Indonesian democracy, and its dissemination through political education, which will ultimately lead to the fulfillment of the ideals of a people-based democracy.

This requires hard work from all parties, involving all stakeholders, to work together to build a democratic Indonesian society based on the ideology, constitution, and culture of the Indonesian people. This is crucial in establishing a democratic order that leads to a dignified, progressive, and enlightened Indonesian nation.

Indonesian-style democracy is based on Pancasila democracy, anchored in the fourth principle: democracy guided by the wisdom of deliberation and representation. This concept is also grounded in noble values that align with Indonesian cultural characteristics, differing from liberal democracy or the socialist-style democracy of communist countries.

Pancasila-based democracy is based on five principles: divinity, humanity, unity, democracy, and justice. According to the nation's founding father, Sukarno, the essence of Pancasila, if summarized, is mutual cooperation. In the legal field, the manifestation of Pancasila ideology is outlined in the Pancasila legal ideals, which serve as the foundation and direction for the development and advancement of national law. The Pancasila legal ideals are interpreted as rules of societal behavior rooted in the ideas, feelings, desires, creativity, and thoughts of the people themselves. In this context, there are three elements: justice, effectiveness/benefit, and legal certainty.

In the dynamics of a democratic society, Pancasila serves as a general guiding principle, a critical norm, and a motivating factor in the administration of law (the formation, discovery, and application of law) and legal behavior. In this sense, the legal system is an exemplar of legal ideals, expressed in various legal rules structured within a system. Therefore, legal development and advancement should be based on and refer to these ideals.

In this context, Pancasila serves as the philosophical foundation for establishing the framework and basic structure of the state organization. Pancasila is defined as the nation's outlook on life, revealing the relationship between humans and God, humans and each other, and humans and the universe, rooted in the belief in the individual's place within society and the universe.

The implications of Pancasila democracy must be based on fundamental principles: first, the responsibility of the state as the holder of power, and second, strengthening the rights of the people as holders of state sovereignty. Therefore, state power is an organization of the people's power, not that of capitalists or entrepreneurs solely focused on profit. The power granted by the people to the state must not disregard its holders, namely the people, in the form of their rights to natural resources, including environmental rights, which have been established as part of human rights.

Indonesian democracy is a democracy that in addition to upholding the values of freedom of thought, opinion and assembly (Firdaus & Sulaeman, 2024), but on the other hand, Indonesian democracy also upholds the values of deliberation to reach consensus. The democratic values that became the reference of the nation's founders refer to the basic values of the state philosophy (*Philosophische Grondslag*), the nation's outlook on life (*Weltanschauung*) and the state ideology which is a great agreement and becomes the meeting point (Dimiyati, Rochman, Azhari, & Wardiono, 2023), the fulcrum and the point of destination of the Indonesian nation, namely Pancasila. The nation's founders placed the concept of democracy and our state order in the fourth principle of Pancasila where the principle is preceded by the third, fourth and concluded by the fifth principle of Pancasila.

Thus, Indonesian democracy relies on the spirit of unity (family) first, deliberation and in turn is expected to realize social justice.

The concept of democracy and our state system was laid down by the founding fathers in the fourth principle of Pancasila, "Democracy guided by the wisdom of deliberation/representation." This principle embodies several characteristics of Indonesian democratic thought, including the characteristics of "popular sovereignty" and "deliberation" (family). The ideal of democracy seeks to respect the voice of the people in politics by allowing them to play a significant role and influence in the government's decision-making process. The ideal of deliberation radiates the desire to create a unified state that can overcome individual and group ideologies, reflecting the spirit of family within Indonesia's pluralistic nationhood by recognizing "equality/sameness in diversity." In the fourth principle, Indonesian democracy also embodies the characteristic of "wisdom and wisdom." The ideal of wisdom reflects an ethical orientation, as mandated by the Preamble to the 1945 Constitution, that the structure of the Republic of Indonesia, with its sovereignty over the people, should be based on the values of divinity, humanity, unity, deliberation, and justice. This ethical orientation (wisdom and wisdom) is fostered through rationality, consensual wisdom, and a commitment to justice, which can foster positive tolerance and synthesis while preventing power from being controlled by "majorocrats" and "minorocrats." Yudi Latif further explained that in a deliberative democracy, a political decision is considered correct if it meets at least four prerequisites. First, it must be based on the principles of rationality and justice, not merely ideological subjectivity and self-interest. Second, it must be dedicated to the interests of the people, not the interests of individuals or groups. Third, it must be oriented toward the future, not for short-term interests through destructive transactional accommodations. Fourth, it is impartial, involving and considering the opinions of all parties inclusively, which can counteract the dictates of the minority ruling elite and businessmen as well as the claims of the majority (Firdaus & Sulaeman, 2024).

It is necessary to accommodate input into the formulation of lawmaking and democracy derived from ideas rooted in a participatory approach, as an implication of the strengthening of efforts to implement a people-based democratic development model. Therefore, the legal and democratic reforms that will be implemented must place law within the social community (society) and humanity (humanity) as the primary focus. The participatory approach is a deconstruction that places society in a decisive position in various dispute resolution roles involving political and legal interests.

A participatory approach to legal development, enforcement, and oversight of legal issues, democracy, and development. Democratization in lawmaking is characterized by the spirit of the people coming to the forefront, manifested in various forms, both directly and through representative institutions. A participatory approach positions the community as the determining subject in managing and resolving various legal disputes arising from the spirit of democratization, which places the people as the holders of sovereignty.

The primary step toward realizing a resilient, participatory society is to eliminate state policies that conflict with the protection of civil and political rights enshrined in state laws. The creation of new legislation and improvement efforts must be directed toward supporting the strengthening of civil society, such as the public's right to be involved in various decision-making processes, freedom of expression, freedom of the press and the public's right to information (Santoso, 2001).

The development of an active civil society, according to Giddens, is a fundamental part of third way politics as a construct of the old left politics that dismissed concerns about the decline of the quality of society. Meanwhile, the right tends to reject the above opinion, arguing that we cannot blame the welfare state for the erosion of social life or assuming that this can be resolved by allowing civil society to utilize all its institutions (Giddens, 1992).

Government and society must partner, facilitate each other, and exercise mutual control in the context of societal renewal. The theme of community is a monumental one for the new politics. Amidst the increasing prominence of globalization, the focus on community becomes increasingly important in fostering the social and material renovation of neighborhoods, cities, and larger local areas. There are no permanent boundaries between government and society; sometimes it is necessary to go deep into the community arena, sometimes to withdraw from it, depending on the context (Giddens, 1992).

A crucial aspect of providing input for legal and democratic reform is the need to better accommodate the role of communities and interest groups, such as Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and Community Organizations, by placing them in a more appropriate position to foster the growth of civil society. Therefore, it is essential that communities continue to be encouraged and empowered to increase and strengthen their bargaining power, including in resolving disputes that arise within diverse and complex communities.

The development of law and democracy must provide greater public access to strengthen the role of the community towards civil society. This public access includes access to public information, access to participation, and access to justice by better accommodating the community's rights to a clean and healthy environment and the state's obligation to ensure that these rights can be properly implemented. Public access has been less developed. This is due to: first, the lack of regulations and mechanisms to realize participation; second, the still unequal perception, intention, and culture of public officials in realizing genuine and meaningful public participation; third, the still unequal awareness of community members about the rights and urgency of participation in state governance; and fourth, the still low capacity and quality of community members and government officials to carry out the participation process (Sugianto, 2003).

The role of the community can be realized in various forms, from decision-making through management and oversight. Public access needs to be provided with sufficient space to access complete and accurate information. Public access to environmental management concerns the right to more substantial and detailed community participation, access to information, public participation, and access to justice (Effendi, 2010). Furthermore, regulatory instruments and institutions are needed to provide environmental protection and prevention, and to address damage to natural resources and the environment, as well as to enforce the law.

CONCLUSION

The implementation of the Single Candidate Regional Election in Sukoharjo shows that democratic life at the regional level is not running well. From a democratic perspective, there are indications of an asymmetric democracy phenomenon, namely democracy that is not running based on the good values of democracy. Referring to Article 18 paragraph (1) of the 1945 Constitution indicates the existence of diverse implementations of democracy between regions within the unitary state of Indonesia. However, in the context of general understanding, asymmetric democracy is understood as a form of democracy that is not in line with the democratic system and order as known in a democratic society and state. In this case, the configuration of asymmetric democracy that is not parallel with the good values of democracy (meritocracy) in the implementation of the Regional Head Election can be seen in the following indications: (1) Monarchical democracy, namely the elected regent has served as a previous regent. In addition, the elected regent is the wife of the previous regent who has served as regent of Sukoharjo for 2 periods; (2) There are indications of monotonous political monopoly which is suspected of having political transactions that have negative consequences for the development of democracy; (3) There are indications of transactional conditions, which means that the Regional Legislative House will almost certainly

unanimously support every policy of the regent. This has an impact on the loss of critical attitudes of political parties and the character of checks and balances; and (4) High-cost politics, the joining of large political parties into a coalition that supports a single candidate pair for regent will not easily win the regional election, causing them to spend all means at high costs.

The phenomenon of asymmetric democracy in the implementation of the Sukoharjo Regional Head Election therefore requires a meritocratic reform model as a corrective framework for strengthening local democracy. This model seeks to restore democratic competition based on competence, integrity, and public legitimacy rather than political dominance, family networks, transactional interests, or oligarchic coalitions. A meritocratic reform model in local electoral governance can be developed through several interconnected dimensions. First, political party recruitment should prioritize transparent and competency-based candidate selection mechanisms through measurable indicators such as leadership capacity, public track record, integrity standards, and community engagement rather than personal proximity or dynastic relations. Second, strengthening internal party democracy is necessary to ensure that candidate nomination processes become more open and participatory. Third, electoral regulations should encourage broader political competition by reducing barriers for independent candidates and preventing excessive coalition concentration that potentially creates single-candidate elections. Fourth, institutional strengthening of oversight mechanisms is essential to preserve checks and balances between regional executives, political parties, and representative institutions. Finally, civic education and democratic literacy should be enhanced to cultivate substantive political participation and strengthen citizens' awareness of leadership quality rather than merely political loyalty.

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