



Elite Power and Development Politics: An Analysis of Local Power Structures and Social Change in Indonesia

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ABSTRAK

Development is not only understood as a process of economic growth and physical infrastructure expansion, but also as a political and social process shaped by power relations among various actors within society. This article aims to analyze the structure of elite power in the dynamics of local development politics and its implications for development policy and social change in Indonesia. This study employs a qualitative approach with a descriptive analytical design through a literature review of various academic sources related to political elites, local power structures, and development politics. The analysis applies elite theory to explain how elite groups occupy dominant positions in public decision making processes and control the distribution of development resources. The findings indicate that local power structures are formed through interactions among political elites, government bureaucracy, economic actors, and community leaders who develop both formal and informal power networks, such as political patronage and patron client relationships. These conditions often lead to the phenomenon of elite capture, which can influence development policies and potentially reinforce social inequality. Therefore, more inclusive and participatory development policies are necessary to promote fair and sustainable social change in society.



INTRODUCTION

Development is fundamentally understood not only as an effort to improve the economy or physical development, but also as a political and social process involving the interaction of various actors and changes in societal structures. From a sociological perspective, development is related to the dynamics of social change, encompassing changes in values, norms, and social structures within society over time (Hatu & Hatu, 2022). Furthermore, development is also related to changes in political institutions, public policies, and the distribution of power within the political system, which influence the decision-making process and the direction of development policies. In the context of regional development, local governments, along with local actors such as political elites, bureaucrats, community leaders, and civil society groups, play a crucial role in determining the direction and priorities of development according to the needs of local communities (Nugroho & Dwipayana, 2017).

With the implementation of decentralization and regional autonomy policies, local political dynamics have evolved as regions have gained greater authority in managing governance and development within their territories, thereby opening up space for community participation and strengthening the democratization process at the local level (Nugroho & Dwipayana, 2017). In political and sociological studies, elites are understood as a small group of individuals within a society who possess certain advantages, such as power, wealth, knowledge, or strategic positions, enabling them to influence the direction of social and political life (Mariajang et al., 2024). This group generally occupies a top position in the social and political structure and has the ability to influence or control decisions that have a broad impact on society. Haryanto explains that elites are groups that have a greater role and influence than other members of society due to their particular advantages, thus being able to determine the direction of social and political life within the society (Haryanto, 2017). From the perspective of

classical elite theory, thinkers such as Vilfredo Pareto and Gaetano Mosca stated that in every society there is always a stratification between the elite group that holds power and the masses below them (Cinu et al., 2024). Elites are individuals who achieve the highest positions in the social hierarchy due to their superior qualities or abilities compared to other members of society (Tonde, 2023). In modern political practice, elites play a crucial role in public decision-making, as state policy is generally formulated by a small group that has access to resources of power, wealth, and strategic information, thus determining the direction of public policy (Salawu, 2023). Furthermore, elites also play a role in influencing public opinion through various political communication channels such as the media, political campaigns, and social networks, which can ultimately shape public attitudes toward a policy or political issue (Santoro et al., 2021). Elite dominance in government and societal structures is evident through their control of political institutions and policy-making processes, which aligns with Mosca's view of the ruling class, which is an organized minority group with the resources to control the majority of society in the political system (Pandor et al., 2024).

Local power structures in the context of regional government involve various key actors, such as political elites, bureaucrats, entrepreneurs, and community leaders or traditional leaders who possess resources and influence in determining the direction of public policy (Rasyid et al., 2024). These elite groups occupy strategic positions within the social and governmental structures, enabling them to influence development and decision-making processes at the regional level (Taroma & Aksu, 2025). From the perspective of elite theory, power in society tends to be concentrated in a small number of individuals with higher resources, capabilities, and social positions than the wider community, resulting in a stratification between the ruling elite and the larger but more influential masses (Haryanto, 2017). The power relationship between elites and the community is



often asymmetrical, with elites acting as decision-makers, mediators, and controllers of access to development resources, while the community plays a role as participants in the political process, often mobilized by local elites (Marlina et al., 2025). In the process of formulating regional development policies, the distribution of power is not always participatory because policies are often the result of compromises between local governments and economic actors or capital owners, which can reduce community involvement in the decision-making process (Winengan, 2016). Furthermore, local power dynamics also indicate that political elites and informal actors often build patronage networks, symbolic legitimacy, and utilize social, economic, and cultural resources to maintain or expand their influence in society and regional development (Haboddin, 2023).

The influence of elite interests in development policy formulation is often evident in the dominance of elite groups in the decision-making process and control of political and economic resources. In many development contexts, the phenomenon of elite capture occurs when elite groups are able to control the decision-making process and exploit development policies to gain greater benefits than the wider community (Musgrave & Wong, 2016). This situation is reinforced by the practice of political patronage and patron-client relationships, where political elites distribute resources, aid, or access to government programs to support groups in exchange for political loyalty (Bardhan & Mookherjee, 2023). Furthermore, power networks and political alliances among elites are often formed through relationships between government actors, business actors, and political figures who share a common interest in determining the direction of development policy (Nastain et al., 2025). This elite dominance can influence development program priorities because policies are often directed at strengthening the political power base or economic interests of certain groups, resulting in an unequal distribution of development benefits that does not reflect the

needs of the wider community (Falisse & Nkengurutse, 2022). More broadly, patronage and elite networks can also reinforce exclusive power structures, where political elites use alliances and patronage networks to maintain power and control the distribution of development resources (Gideon et al., 2026). Thus, elite interests, patronage practices, and power networks play a significant role in shaping the direction of development policy and determining the priorities of development programs at the local and national levels.

Development policies play a crucial role in shaping the social structure of society because they determine how resources, economic opportunities, and access to public services are distributed within society. In many cases, development oriented toward economic growth without inclusive social policies can widen social inequality, particularly in terms of income distribution, access to education, health care, and employment opportunities, thus reinforcing social stratification between the rich and the poor. This inequality is also related to the limited access of certain groups to resources and development opportunities, which ultimately affects the level of community participation in development decision-making processes (Muta'ali, 2025). In the context of public policy, community participation is a crucial element because citizen involvement in policy formulation can increase the legitimacy, quality, and accountability of government policies and help bridge the gap between the government and the community (Madekwe, 2025). Furthermore, community participation in development programs can also promote successful policy implementation because communities directly involved in the planning and implementation of development tend to develop a sense of ownership of the program. The interaction between elites and the community in the development process has the potential to generate social change, both in the form of increased welfare and equal opportunities, as well as the reproduction of inequality if development policies remain dominated by the



interests of certain elite groups. Therefore, the integration of economic and social policies oriented towards social justice is crucial for creating more inclusive development and reducing inequality within society.

Therefore, this study focuses on a deeper understanding of elite power structures, relationships between local actors, and their implications for development policy and social change. This is crucial given that previous studies on elite power at the local level generally suffer from limitations because they tend to focus on formal actors such as local government officials or specific political figures, without delving deeply into broader power networks involving economic, social, and kinship relations. As a result, the true dynamics of how development decisions at the local level are influenced by interactions between elites often remain under-represented. Therefore, an analysis of local power structures is crucial for understanding how political development processes unfold, including how resources, policies, and economic opportunities are distributed and which actors wield dominant influence in these processes. This study aims to examine in more depth the configuration and relations of elite power at the local level and how these relations influence the direction and practice of development. Thus, this study is expected to provide theoretical and empirical contributions to the study of local politics and development, particularly in enriching understanding of the role of elite networks and power structures in determining the dynamics of development policies and practices at the regional level in Indonesia.

METHODS

This study uses a qualitative approach with a descriptive-analytical design to understand the dynamics of elite power in the political development process at the local level. This approach was chosen because it is able to examine complex social and political phenomena, particularly power relations, elite networks, and interactions between actors in development decision-making. Methodologically,

this study was conducted through a literature review by examining various scientific sources such as books, journal articles, and research reports relevant to the study of political elites and local power structures. The analysis uses an elite theory perspective, which explains that elite groups have a dominant position in determining the direction of public policy (Haryanto, 2017; Tonde, 2023). Furthermore, a development politics approach is used to examine how elites control access to political and economic resources, thereby influencing development policies and public opinion (Salawu, 2023; Santoro et al., 2021). In the context of local power, interactions between political elites, bureaucracy, economic actors, and community leaders shape power configurations that influence the distribution of development resources, which is often asymmetrical between elites and the community (Taroma & Aksu, 2025; Marlina et al., 2025). This study also highlights the phenomenon of elite capture, namely the dominance of elite groups in the development decision-making process, which has the potential to reinforce social inequality if the distribution of development benefits is not equitable (Musgrave & Wong, 2016). Therefore, this study emphasizes that development is not only an economic process, but also a political process influenced by power structures and relations between actors in society.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Elite Power Structure

The elite power structure in the dynamics of political development at the local level can be understood as a configuration of power relations involving various actors possessing political, economic, social, and cultural resources that enable them to influence public decision-making processes. From the perspective of elite theory, power in society is not distributed evenly but tends to be concentrated in small groups holding strategic positions within the social and political structure. These groups are known as elites, individuals or groups that wield greater influence than other members of society due to certain advantages such as political office, wealth, access



to information, or extensive social networks (Haryanto, 2017). Classical elite theory, proposed by Vilfredo Pareto and Gaetano Mosca, explains that in every social system, there is always a stratification between the elite group holding power and the masses in subordinate positions, so that important decisions in society generally rest with this elite group (Jackson, 2022). In the context of development politics, elites play a dominant role because they are in a position to determine the direction of public policy and control the distribution of development resources (Salawu, 2023).

In Indonesia's regional government system, elite power structures are typically formed through interactions between various actors, such as political elites, government bureaucrats, local economic actors or entrepreneurs, and community leaders with social influence at the local level. These interactions shape power configurations that influence the formulation of regional development policies and the distribution of development resources. Political elites, such as regional heads, legislative members, or political party leaders, play a crucial role in determining development priorities because they possess formal authority in political decision-making. Meanwhile, economic actors, such as local entrepreneurs, often wield influence through economic relationships and business networks that can influence the direction of development policy, particularly in regional development projects (Chalik, 2017).

In addition to these formal relationships, elite power structures at the local level are often formed through informal networks such as patronage, kinship, and political alliances. In many cases, political elites establish patron-client relationships with communities or specific groups through the distribution of development resources, social assistance, and access to government programs in exchange for political support. This relationship pattern demonstrates that elite power is based not only on formal positions but also on their ability to build social and political networks that strengthen their

positions within local power structures (Gideon et al., 2026). Under these conditions, elites often exert strong control over development decision-making processes, resulting in policies that do not always reflect the needs of the broader community. This phenomenon is known as elite capture, a situation in which elite groups are able to control development decision-making processes and exploit public policies for their own interests (Musgrave & Wong, 2016).

Elite dominance within local power structures can also influence the level of community participation in the development process. Although regional development normatively encourages community participation in development planning and implementation, in practice, the decision-making process is often still dominated by political and bureaucratic elites who control government institutions and have access to development resources (Winengan, 2016). This situation can lead to an unequal distribution of development benefits and potentially reinforce social inequality within society if development policies favor certain elite groups over the broader community. Therefore, analyzing elite power structures is crucial for understanding how development policies are formed, how development resources are distributed, and how the dynamics of the relationship between elites and society influence the process of social change at the local level.

Relations Between Local Actors

Relations between local actors in the dynamics of development politics are essentially a process of interaction between various groups with different interests, resources, and positions within the regional social and political structure. In the context of local government, the main actors involved in the development process include political elites, government bureaucracy, economic actors or local entrepreneurs, as well as community leaders and civil society groups. The interactions between these actors form a network of power that influences the process of policy formulation, implementation of development programs, and distribution of resources at the local level. Development is not



only understood as an economic process, but also as a political and social process involving power relations between various actors in society. Therefore, the direction of development policy is often the result of interactions, negotiations, and compromises between these actors. Within the local power structure, political elites such as regional heads, legislative members, and political party leaders play a strategic role because they have formal authority to determine development policies and allocate public resources. However, development decisions are not entirely in the hands of formal political actors, as the government bureaucracy also plays a crucial role in the planning, implementation, and oversight of regional development policies. On the other hand, local economic actors or entrepreneurs often wield significant influence through business networks, investments, and economic ties with local governments. The interaction between political elites, bureaucrats, and economic actors shapes power configurations that influence regional development priorities and determine the development projects undertaken (Chalik, 2017).

Relationships between local actors also often develop in the form of patronage networks and patron-client relationships, where political elites distribute various resources such as social assistance, access to government programs, or economic opportunities to certain groups in exchange for political support. This pattern of relationships demonstrates that elite power is based not only on formal positions but also on their ability to build social and political networks that can strengthen their position within local power structures. In these circumstances, political elites often utilize patronage relationships to maintain political influence while expanding their support base within society (Gideon et al., 2026).

Furthermore, the relationship between elites and the community in the development process is often asymmetrical, with elites having greater access to information, economic resources, and political networks than the wider community.

This situation often results in communities being in a weaker position in development decision-making processes, often only participating in development programs determined by political and bureaucratic elites. Nevertheless, community participation remains a crucial element in the development process, as citizen involvement in policy formulation can increase the legitimacy and accountability of government policies and strengthen the relationship between the government and the community (Madekwe, 2025).

In the dynamics of development politics, relations between local actors are not always harmonious and can also be characterized by conflicts of interest between various elite groups. These conflicts often arise when various actors have differing interests in determining the direction of development policy, for example, between political elites oriented toward electoral interests, economic actors oriented toward economic gain, and communities seeking equitable distribution of development benefits. In some cases, the dominance of certain elite groups within power networks can give rise to the phenomenon of elite capture, where development policies benefit elite groups more than the wider community (Haque & Zulfiqar, 2024).

Implications for Development Policy and Social Change

The implications of elite power structures and relations between local actors on development policy and social change can be seen in how the public policy formulation process at the regional level is influenced by the distribution of power among elite groups with access to political, economic, and social resources. From a sociological perspective, development is not only related to economic growth or physical development, but also a social and political process involving changes in institutions, public policies, and power relations within society. Therefore, the direction of development policy often reflects the interests and influence of the elite groups involved in the decision-making process.



In practice, elite dominance in local power structures can influence the priorities of regional development programs. Political elites, bureaucrats, and economic actors with strong power networks often determine the direction of development policy based on their political and economic interests. This situation can lead to development policies being more oriented toward projects that benefit specific groups, such as infrastructure projects or investments with high economic value, but not necessarily directly addressing the needs of the wider community. In such situations, the development policy formulation process is often the result of compromises between local governments and economic actors with vested interests in specific development projects (Winengan, 2016).

Furthermore, the dominance of elite groups in the decision-making process can also give rise to the phenomenon of elite capture, a condition where elite groups are able to control the policy formulation process and exploit development policies to gain greater benefits than the wider community. In many development cases, elites have the ability to control access to information, economic resources, and political networks, allowing them to determine the distribution of development resources according to their interests. This condition can reinforce social inequality if the benefits of development are not distributed evenly within society (Haque & Zulfiqar, 2024).

Another implication of elite dominance in development policy is the emergence of social inequality within society. Development that is oriented more toward elite interests or solely toward economic growth often neglects aspects of social justice and equitable access to development resources. As a result, groups with limited access to education, employment, and economic resources become increasingly disadvantaged compared to groups with greater access to development opportunities. This situation can reinforce social stratification and widen the gap between the rich and the poor in society.

However, development policies also have the potential to drive positive social change if they are designed inclusively and involve community participation in their formulation. Community participation in the development process can increase the legitimacy of public policy, strengthen government accountability, and ensure that development policies are more responsive to community needs. Furthermore, community involvement in development planning and implementation can also increase the success of development programs because communities have a sense of ownership of the programs (Madekwe, 2025).

Thus, the implications of elite power structures on development policies and social change demonstrate that development is fundamentally a political process heavily influenced by power relations between various actors in society. If power is too concentrated in certain elite groups, development policies have the potential to reinforce social inequality. Conversely, if the development process involves broader community participation and is supported by inclusive social policies, development can be a vehicle for creating more equitable and sustainable social change in society.

CONCLUSION

Based on the discussion above, it can be concluded that development is not only an economic process, but also a political and social process influenced by the power structure and relations between actors in society. This study shows that in the context of development politics at the local level, power tends to be concentrated in elite groups who have access to political, economic, and social resources, thus playing a dominant role in determining the direction of development policy. The interaction between political elites, bureaucracy, economic actors, and community leaders forms a power configuration that influences the decision-making process and the distribution of development resources. In many cases, this elite dominance can give rise to political patronage practices and elite capture phenomena that have the potential to cause



development policies to favor certain groups and reinforce social inequality in society.

However, development also has the potential to encourage more equitable social change if development policies are designed inclusively and involve community participation in the planning and implementation processes. Therefore, understanding elite power structures and relations between local actors is crucial to explaining the dynamics of development politics and to encourage the creation of more participatory, equitable, and sustainable development policies in society.

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