Reasearch Article

Democracy and local political participation in Sumedang, Indonesia

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Indonesia is a country that implements a democratic political system. As such, the involvement of society in the political process becomes very important. The purpose of this article is to research the democracy and local political participation in Sumedang. The study uses qualitative methods with primary data obtained from field observations and direct interviews of several informants. Additionally, the researchers use secondary data as a complement to the analysis. The results of this study indicate that the community at the local level truly understands the importance of political participation. However, due to disappointment in government performance, a part of the community has become discouraged from participating in the political process conducted by local governments. Several factors hinder efforts to encourage political participation. These include limited access to political aspirations that are still rare and the process of political education that is still low.

KEYWORDS
- corruption
- development process
- political system
- public participation
- reform process

1 INTRODUCTION

Democracy is built based on a government chosen from the people, by the people, and for the people (Djuyandi, 2018). Since democracy requires the participation of the people, an absence of political activity or participation will harm the democratic process. The indicator of a democratic political system in a country is the implementation of the general elections (Nursyamsi, 2015). Through the elections, people are not only choosing their leader and representatives who will sit in the government bodies, but they are also actively evaluating them (Antoniuk, 2019; Kalashnikova, 2019). Active evaluation by the community also determines the sustainability of the political career of a person in the government. In other words, one’s position in the next elections, whether as a leader or as a representative of the people, will be determined from the results of the public evaluation.

The democratic process at the local level enables local people to participate more actively in the political process, this process encourages political institutions at the regional level to become more democratic institutions (Mariana & Husin, 2017). Democracy also has a strong connection with decentralization activities, where at the local scale it involves several political issues, such as fiscal and political decentralization, improving the quality of public services, control of government institutions at the regional level, local resources, and poverty alleviation (Dahinden, 2013). Because the people are the holders of the highest sovereignty, they have the freedom to influence the policies that are being formulated or implemented by the government. However, the same should be done in an orderly manner (Djuyandi, 2018; Joyce, 2015).

The reform process in Indonesia has brought so many changes to the implementation of the general elections. At first, people can only choose political parties. However, after entering the reform era, they can now directly vote for legislative members and even the president. Similarly, the position of regional heads from those previously elected by the Regional People’s Legislative Assembly (DPRD) can now be determined after the reform era. Thus, in 2005, regional heads were directly elected by the people. Local elections (Pilkada) that are directly held embody the spirit of reform and democratization at the local level. At the beginning of the local elections, people are very enthusiastic about welcoming and participating in the elections. This was due to their great expectations for the local leaders who emerged from their regions (indigenous people). This was likewise brought about by the people’s understanding of the needs of the community.
Local people consider the indigenous people to be more familiar with the desires and needs of the local community. Therefore, electing indigenous people as regional heads through the local election (Pilkada) mechanism was urgent at that time.

Aspinall and Mietzner (2019a, 2019b) also emphasized that one of the criteria of democracy is that the government is built based on the people’s support and direct participation. Some experts also have the same theoretical view that democracy is not only about how a government is formed because the people chose it but also how they participate in determining government policies (Bourchier, 2019; Somerville, 2011). The people’s participation in determining government policies becomes an important indicator for the direct and representative implementation of democracy (Adams, 2004; Irvin & Stansbury, 2004; Zakhour, 2020). According to Diamond (2016), democracy comprises four key elements: a political system for choosing and replacing the government through free and fair elections; the people’s active participation, as citizens, in politics and civic life; the protection of all citizens’ human rights; and law and rules, in which the laws and procedures apply equally to all citizens. Weak democracy can come from two main sources: there is inequality within the demos (people) itself; the demos’ weakness itself so that they cannot act effectively for their own sake (Aspinall & Mietzner, 2019a, 2019b).

Democracy at the local level and community political participation are linked. Public participation in political activities can be divided into two—active and passive participation (Kruikemeier et al., 2014; Surbakti, 2010). Active participation involves proposing general policy and public policy alternatives that are different from government policies, criticizing and refining policies, paying taxes, and electing government leaders. By contrast, activities included in the passive participation category are obeying the government and accepting and executing any government decisions. It is important for the community to participate actively in a political process, whether at the national or local level (Sholichah & Nurchotimah, 2020; Surbakti, 2010). A person with a high social and economic status is assumed to have not only political knowledge but also an interest in politics and trust in the government (Surbakti, 2010). In understanding how political participation is influenced, it can be analyzed from the five theoretical approaches or models that have been built. The five models are civic voluntarism, rational choice, social psychology, mobilization, and general incentives model (Bermeo, 2016; Brady et al., 1999; Tilaar, 2009).

The efforts to build the public’s political awareness toward the democratic process at the local level are crucial. This is true especially when this country is dealing with the problem of the low political participation of local communities. Building public awareness toward political participation is very important because people’s lives will very much depend on the political process that is run by the government. If the people neglect the political process, then it is highly possible that the person elected is not an ideal leader for the people. Moreover, the leader’s policy may not represent the public interest. The purpose of this article is to research the democracy and local political participation in Sumedang.

2 | MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study used a qualitative method. The data source used was divided into two types: primary and secondary data sources. Primary data were obtained directly through field observation and interviews with some informants. Conversely, secondary data were obtained through documents relevant to this study. Observations were made on the suburban community’s political participation in Sumedang, Indonesia. These observations went on for 6 months, from August 2017 to January 2018. As mentioned earlier, interviews were conducted with several informants. The informants were selected through a purposive sampling technique, in which the number of informant criteria were determined. These include the following: familiarity with the characteristics of the community (community leaders, leaders of youth organizations, and village government officials); understanding of the dynamics and political processes in the village (village government officials, community and religious leaders, and leaders of youth organizations).

Based on these criteria, the following are the informants who were interviewed: Community Leader (Founder of Madrasah Kurmatillah); Local Government Apparatus or Village Government (Mr. Mulyadi and Mr. Dedd); Head of Local Youth Organizations (Karang Taruna) in Jatinagor. The documentation analysis is conducted on various documents related to the suburban community political participation in Sumedang. These documents include the voter attendance list during the regional head and village head elections and spatial concepts of the land distribution and its demographic condition.

The data validity test is done by using a triangulation technique. In this study, triangulation is conducted to a data source. The researchers use various supporting references to prove that the data the researchers have found are valid. Invalidating data, the researchers cross-checked the information obtained from each informant. They likewise paid attention to whether the statements from the informants are according to the conditions that the researchers have observed. More particularly, the researchers observe the community support for government programs, whether they are active or not in political and government activities, and what activities are being conducted by the village government.

Research on political participation in suburban societies in a democratic process at the local level, particularly in Sumedang, is something new. From several similar research studies, the researchers have gained some information about suburban community participation. However, this obtained information are unrelated to the political aspect. Some of the research examined public participation in urban development contexts in Malang city (Sudibyo, 2006), as well as public participation controlling the land development in Tangerang Regency (Soehendy, 2017). If the same is not devoted to a suburban community of people, the study of political participation is not considered a new thing. This is because Al-Islami (2014) has researched the political participation of new or youth voters in the Sumedang Local Election.
3 | RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 | Community participation in the process of policy making

In the policy-making process, general stages to be followed include agenda-setting and policy formulation. In the agenda-setting stage, aside from the government, some communities become an important component in the running of democratic governance. In a democratic system, political participation (i.e., in the policy-making process), both active and passive, will greatly affect goal achievement. Anderson (2006) argued that public policy is a reciprocal relationship between a government unit and the environment. The environment here is a community environment that covers social, political, economic, cultural, and geographical aspects. Public participation in policy formulation is one form of active political participation. This is because people may provide feedback or criticize policies formulated by governments (Surbakti, 2010). Winarno (2007) also revealed that in preparing a public policy agenda, the government needs to encourage community questions. With these questions, the government can understand what is being desired by the community. In other words, to encourage the community’s active participation, there is also a need for encouragement from the government.

Through the researchers’ interviews with community leaders and youth organizations in Jatinangor dan Tanjungsari and from the observations they have done, it was found that local governments as stakeholders were not to optimal in involving a community to participate in the policy formulation process. Still, many residents are reluctant to be active in the political and government sectors. The consequences of the policy socialization process taken by the local government cannot be seen properly by local citizens.

The lack of aspirational channels provided by the local government also makes the development in the two suburban areas not appropriate to the resident’s needs. These are true for both physical and nonphysical aspects of development. Physical development involves the development of educational infrastructure, roads and bridges, clean traditional markets, irrigation of agricultural land, health facilities, and the availability of public spaces such as parks. Nonphysical development refers to increasing the intelligence level, as well as the health and happiness index of the public. This is exactly related to the work of Dye (2005), who defined public policy as anything that the government chooses to do or not to do. In this case, the development process tends to be stagnant because of the lack of aspirational channels intended for the people. Local governments as stakeholders are unable to absorb community needs.

Based on interviews with the head of local youth organizations, people who live in Jatinangor and Tanjungsari are already aware of the importance of political participation, both active and passive. Political participation can be realized simply, such as by participating in the local election while striving to become wise and intelligent voters. Suburban people are aware that election is important because it has become the embodiment of what the democratic process means—leading to a democratic government (Sadira, 2018). The policies formulated and implemented by the government are expected to be oriented toward the public interest and not for personal or group interests only. Hence, the low participation of suburban people in the policy formulation process was due to the lack of encouragement by the government.

3.2 | Public participation in the development process

In recent decades, several areas in Sumedang have been transformed into metropolitan areas, especially the Jatinangor and Tanjungsari sub-districts. In these suburban areas, there is a significant development process that touches almost all aspects of community life. Political participation, both active and passive, has a great impact on the policy and development process that is taken by the local government as a stakeholder. Active citizenship leads to real solutions and plays an important role in society rather than merely indulging in scapegoats (Nosko & Szeger, 2013). One form of passive political participation is the participation in programs and activities conducted by local governments (Surbakti, 2010). In this case, it is expected that every program proclaimed by the local government can be understood and well-implemented by the state apparatus and society. The development process requires the public’s political participation. Such is due to development programs being closely linked to the government’s political policies and public interest. The community’s indifference to the development process indicates that there is a problem in political participation, at least in the context of passive political participation.

Based on the results of the researchers’ observations and interviews, it can be seen that the ideas emerging from public figures and the public, in general, have not been optimally realized in the programs or development activities forming in this area. Moreover, many communities do not understand and know the development policy direction in their areas. With the majority of the people working as industrial workers who spend most of their time in the factory, creating a relationship between the socialization process and regional development becomes difficult.

Problems in growing community participation also exist among the youth. The role of the youth in the development process is also considered to be lacking. Such is based on the information obtained from the Youth Organization Chairman of Karang Taruna that young people living in suburban areas are generally indifferent to activities and programs that support development. This is not an ideal condition because the youth should have an awareness that their participation in development is important. They must likewise realize that they are the ones who will enjoy the results of development. Considering the youth who do not function properly, socialization efforts to emphasize the importance of the role of the youth in the regional development process have also been done. The results show that building the awareness of all youth has not changed significantly. Only some youth have been compelled to be a driver of change in their environment.

The lack of public participation in the development field, on the one hand, makes it difficult for the government to accelerate
development programs. On the other hand, the government also considers that they have difficulty in preparing the right development plan. Because of this constraint, the development pattern in the Jatinangor and Tanjungsari sub-districts became not well planned. However, the researchers found that these two parties mutually blame each other. The government blamed the citizens’ low participation. Conversely, the residents blamed local governments for not involving them in regional arrangements. To address this problem, having a communication forum is necessary.

To date, obstacles in encouraging youth’s and community’s participation are due to economic factors. Many people still think that it is better to earn money for a living than to deal with development and political issues. However, from the researchers’ interviews with the heads of youth organizations and community leaders, the researchers observed that some are becoming aware and are wanting to see a positive change. They desire a well-developed neighborhood. However, the way they are encouraging the change is still at the level of criticizing the government policy and the candidates of regional leaders who are only focused on having the power. In some cases, people are feeling tired of hearing empty promises from regional head candidates and legislative members who have said that they will build the area, which has never been done. Based on the data that the researchers have obtained, the area arrangement in Jatinangor sub-district in the last years has significantly changed. Here 65% of the total area has been transformed into the elite residential and industrial areas (Sumedang Regency Government, 2021). According to the local community leaders, the environmental change has certainly a negative impact on the residents. This is because, in the end, they are being marginalized in their area.

3.3 Importance of awareness on political systems

Political participation is one of the most important aspects of a democratic political system. General elections and the power periodic change manifestation are the most easily understood indicators in analyzing the people’s level of political participation. The higher political participation level in the elections reflects an increasingly open-minded society with people who are aware of their rights. The elite political paradigm, as a foundation in a democracy, should be avoided to prevent power oligarchy. Within the scope of the local government, the increasingly marginalized society cannot be separated from the political decisions of the leaders in government because of the non-pro-people development. Based on the authors’ data, the people’s political awareness toward politics have grown well. People now realize that a democratic political system provides them the opportunity to create an accountable and credible local government. However, their awareness is also confronted with the condition that local elections do not always give them prosperity. This condition becomes a challenge for the local government because the political socialization effort will not be sufficient to convince people to politically participate in local elections. Local governments and local elites must also show or publicize the results of their work. Only then can the public judge whether their political participation has not been in vain.

Election commissions and universities play a role in encouraging and assisting the community to become smart and rational voters. Such is what is currently being done by Universitas Padjadjaran in Jatinangor. Although done slowly, socialization techniques undertaken by the university gradually encourage community enthusiasm. The most important of which is routine socialization and obtaining a good approach. In the discussion process conducted with the government and community groups, the question of how to choose a good leader arises from the community. Moreover, people are interested to know how they can minimize the negative issues that may arise in local elections. They also want to know how they can send aspirations and ideas related to regional development efforts so that the regions can be independent and prosperous. Many people and informants who attended the focus group discussion agreed that elections are important. These participants consider the election as a manifestation of the democratic political system. Political awareness, which is already developing, can be an extraordinary tool in determining the future of politics and government. These are related to policies that can determine the fate of both the society and state, as well as to measure regional development.

Golput in Indonesia refers to the people who do not want to use their rights to vote and are boycotting the polls (Golput is an abbreviation of Golongan Putih—“the White Group”). The emergence of public awareness of the Golput (not to vote), as well as money politics, may undermine democratic political order. Thus, the hope of creating a better political life is being reinforced. Local people are beginning to hold that any vote given will affect elected leaders. As such, the people who do not vote will certainly deserve them. Local people also began to realize that the practice of money politics will make leaders dishonest, irresponsible, and corrupt. Such occurs because leaders who are elected through the practice of money politics use their power to earn back the capital they used during their campaign.

To succeed in both the 2018 local elections in Sumedang, West Java, and in the 2019 general elections, the citizens are encouraged to become smart and rational voters. They must likewise be driven to participate in any organizational activities that correlate with government programs. The citizens, including the youth, then gradually begin to be introduced with the importance of assisting the government programs and educating the public to choose good leaders who are faithful, honest, fair, responsible, trustworthy, integrous, and smart. After political socialization, knowledge and political awareness of the suburban society began to increase compared with before.

Society now is becoming increasingly open-minded in criticizing the backgrounds and programs offered by leadership candidates. Considering 2018 as a political year that will largely determine the future of policy direction and region, the community process to digest and criticize how any information appears becomes an important point that shall be emphasized in socialization.

Based on the researchers’ interviews with informants and the observations they have done, it became apparent that in the previous local election in 2013, the suburban people in Sumedang who lived in
Jatinangor and Tanjungsari often get information that the truth cannot be accounted for. In the present circumstances where information exchange can be so fast, people should be able to distinguish fake or false news from original news. The public must criticize the candidate’s program and his or her track record. However, they must first find credible and accurate information. Even nowadays, it seems easy to get political information. Nevertheless, people may still get false information that are very harmful to the democratic condition. Based on the discussion with some youth organizations and the government apparatus, suburban people who live in Jatinangor and Tanjungsari, Sumedang, are now open-minded about technology. However, although they may have smartphones, they spread fake political news at times. Consequently, many negative things hinder the progress of the political process. One of which is the public’s doubt in choosing the regional head candidate in the local elections because they are influenced by false news that defames the candidates.

4 | CONCLUSIONS

A public desire to at least be able to participate in policy formulation still exists. The researchers have likewise identified some issues, such as people’s desires to get involved in providing input on spatial planning policies, welfare related to wages, education, and health services. For example, in spatial planning, two suburban areas in Sumedang Regency (Jatinangor and Tanjungsari sub-districts) do not have a good spatial concept. The researchers demonstrate that the government is confused in formulating the development policy of the Jatinangor sub-district, which has become both an education area and an industrial area. There are still problems in government form that allows various apartments and shopping centers to operate without considering the residents’ needs of clean water and green open land, among others. This makes some residents feel reluctant to be involved in policy making because they see that the government implements affairs with no consideration of the Jatinangor residents.

Local elections (Pilkada), as a form of democratic political system implementation, are expected to significantly influence and create the best changes that cater to public interests. Therefore, political participation, both active and passive, has become an important aspect of regional development. Based on the present research, today, people in suburban areas such as in Jatinangor and Tanjungsari, Sumedang, are beginning to realize the importance of political participation. They are now more aware of its significance both during the election and in the policy formulation process. However, the lack of an aspiration channel that can accommodate the people’s ideas on development programs is a problem that may hamper the growth of political participation. Adding such to the community demographic condition, which is mostly occupied by industrial workers, makes the dynamics and the political education process more difficult to develop. However, the political education process can be pursued through alternative means with technological development and higher education in the suburban community.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author.

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https://www.republika.co.id/berita/koran/politik-koran/15/12/13/nzal7d1-maraknya-korupsi-picu-rendahnya-partisipasi-pilkada
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Dekan,

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