



**DECENTRALIZATION AND BUREAUCRATIC DYNAMICS: IMPLICATIONS FOR THE QUALITY OF LOCAL DEMOCRACY IN SIMALUNGUN REGENCY, NORTH SUMATRA**

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**Abstract**

This study aims to analyze how decentralization and the dynamics of local bureaucracy affect the quality of local democracy in Simalungun Regency, North Sumatra. Using a descriptive qualitative approach, data were collected through document studies, field observations, and in-depth interviews with bureaucratic actors, community members, and academics. The findings reveal that the implementation of decentralization in Simalungun has not been fully effective in fostering substantive local democracy. The regional bureaucracy remains stuck in hierarchical and unresponsive patterns, marked by politicization of positions and weak adherence to transparency and accountability principles. Public participation through the Musrenbang (development planning forums) tends to be procedural and symbolic. The weak oversight mechanisms worsen governance quality and hinder the realization of participatory democracy. Therefore, merit-based bureaucratic reform and institutional capacity strengthening are essential to improve the quality of local democracy.

**Keywords:** decentralization, local bureaucracy, democracy, public participation, accountability.

**Abstrak**

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis bagaimana desentralisasi dan dinamika birokrasi lokal memengaruhi kualitas demokrasi lokal di Kabupaten Simalungun, Sumatera Utara. Dengan pendekatan kualitatif deskriptif, data dikumpulkan melalui studi dokumen, observasi lapangan, dan wawancara mendalam dengan para pelaku birokrasi, anggota masyarakat, dan akademisi. Temuan penelitian menunjukkan bahwa implementasi desentralisasi di Simalungun belum sepenuhnya efektif dalam mendorong demokrasi lokal yang substantif. Birokrasi daerah masih terjebak dalam pola hierarkis dan kurang responsif, ditandai dengan politisasi jabatan dan lemahnya kepatuhan terhadap prinsip transparansi dan akuntabilitas. Partisipasi publik melalui Musrenbang (musyawarah perencanaan pembangunan) cenderung bersifat prosedural dan simbolis. Mekanisme pengawasan yang lemah memperburuk kualitas tata kelola pemerintahan dan menghambat terwujudnya demokrasi partisipatif. Oleh karena itu, reformasi birokrasi berbasis meritokrasi dan penguatan kapasitas kelembagaan sangat penting untuk meningkatkan kualitas demokrasi lokal.

**Kata kunci:** desentralisasi, birokrasi lokal, demokrasi, partisipasi publik, akuntabilitas.

**Introduction**

Decentralization in Indonesia began in 1999 with the enactment of Law No. 22/1999 which was later updated with Law No. 23/2014 concerning Regional Government. The main objective of decentralization is to improve the efficiency and responsiveness of government, as well as strengthen democracy by giving more power to local governments in managing resources and policies. Simalungun Regency, located in North Sumatra Province, is one example of a region that has implemented a decentralization policy in local governance.



However, despite changes in the government structure, the implementation of decentralization in Simalungun Regency has not fully achieved the desired goals. The bureaucracy at the local level still faces a number of problems, such as low community participation, politicization of positions, and weak government accountability. Therefore, it is important to examine how bureaucratic dynamics interact with decentralization and their impact on the quality of local democracy.

This study aims to explore the relationship between decentralization and bureaucratic dynamics in the context of the quality of local democracy in Simalungun Regency. The main focus of this research is to understand the extent to which local bureaucracy plays a role in supporting the creation of transparent, participatory and accountable governance after the implementation of decentralization policies.

### **Method**

This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach with a library research method. This approach is used to explore in depth the phenomenon of decentralization and bureaucratic dynamics and their implications for the quality of local democracy in Simalungun Regency through tracing and analyzing relevant literature sources, both in the form of books, scientific journals, policy reports, official government documents, and applicable regulations. The data analysis technique used in this study is content analysis.

### **Discussion**

Since the enactment of Law Number 22 of 1999 (which was later updated to Law No. 23 of 2014), Simalungun Regency has become one of the regions in North Sumatra Province that implements regional autonomy within the framework of decentralization. The delegation of authority from the central government to the regions provides space for the district government to manage government and development affairs according to local needs and characteristics.

In Simalungun, the implementation of decentralization brings two faces. On the one hand, there is progress in terms of infrastructure development, management of public services, and increasing regional fiscal capacity. The Simalungun Regency Government has the authority to regulate the education, health, and administrative service sectors, which were previously highly centralized at the provincial or national level.

However, on the other hand, the implementation of decentralization has not been fully optimal. Based on a study conducted by Lumbanraja (2021), there is still inequality in the distribution of public services between sub-districts in the Simalungun region. Urban areas such as Siantar District are developing faster than rural areas such as Silimakuta or Dolok Pardamean which still lack basic infrastructure.

In addition, the problem of coordination between agencies within the local government is still an obstacle to the implementation of decentralization. The Simalungun Bappeda report (2022) states that local bureaucracy is often trapped in overlapping policies, weak monitoring, and the absence of integration of information systems between sectors.

Another important aspect is the lack of human resource capacity, especially at the sub-district and village levels. The delegated authority is not followed by adequate training for local government officials, so that policy-making is often reactive and not based on data. This is emphasized in the findings of Simanjuntak (2020) which shows that around 40% of ASN at the sub-district level do not have an adequate understanding of the principles of good governance in decentralization.

### **Decentralization in Simalungun Regency**

Decentralization gives greater authority to the district government in managing government affairs, such as budget management, education, health, and infrastructure. Simalungun Regency, which has a



fairly complex government structure, has tried to adapt to the decentralization policy. However, obstacles in coordination between the district government and the village government, as well as the lack of technical capabilities at the regional level, often hinder the effective implementation of the policy.

### **Dynamics of Local Bureaucracy**

The local bureaucracy in Simalungun Regency still relies on old patterns that are structured hierarchically. Politicization of positions, although regulated in a merit system, is still a significant issue. Many strategic positions are influenced by local political interests, thus reducing the quality of public services. In addition, a bureaucratic culture that does not fully prioritize the principles of transparency and accountability worsens the situation.

One of the main problems is the politicization of bureaucratic positions, especially in high-ranking positions (echelon II) to other structural positions in regional apparatus. Although formally Indonesia has adopted a merit system in the management of human resources for state civil servants through Law No. 5 of 2014 concerning ASN, in practice the selection and promotion process in Simalungun Regency is often influenced by political affiliation and closeness to regional heads or local elites. This is in line with the findings of Hasibuan (2020) which states that political loyalty is more dominant than competence in many appointments of regional officials.

This condition has a serious impact on the quality of public services. Bureaucrats who are not selected because of their competence tend not to have innovation in carrying out service tasks. In addition, a sense of security in a low position makes bureaucrats reluctant to make risky or innovative decisions, for fear of being removed when there is a change in regional heads. As a result, public services become stagnant and unresponsive to the needs of the community.

### **Implications for the Quality of Local Democracy**

A bureaucracy that is not transparent and not participatory hinders the quality of local democracy expected from decentralization. Musrenbang, which should be a forum for community participation, often becomes a mere administrative procedure. Meanwhile, supervision of local government policies and programs is still weak, resulting in low public accountability.

The result of the combination of closed bureaucracy, pseudo-participation, and weak supervision is a decline in the quality of local democracy. Democracy, which should be a means for the community to collectively determine the direction of development, has turned into a procedural practice that does not touch on the substance of democratization.

### **The Role of Decentralization in Increasing Community Participation**

Decentralization implemented in Simalungun Regency aims to provide greater opportunities for communities to take part in decision-making related to local policies. This process is expected to strengthen democratic principles, such as participation, accountability, and transparency. Community participation is the core of local democracy, which allows for social control over government and public policy. However, in reality, despite efforts to involve the community through forums such as the development planning meeting (Musrenbang), many challenges are faced in improving the quality of such participation.

One of the main problems is the limited awareness and knowledge of the community regarding the development planning process. In addition, participation is often limited to formal meetings, which do not provide enough space for in-depth dialogue between the government and the community. This leads to the phenomenon of participation that is more ceremonial than substantive, where important decisions are often pre-determined by key stakeholders.

According to Nasution (2018), quality public participation requires continuous learning from both



parties: the government and the community. In the context of Simalungun, it is important to increase public understanding of the importance of their involvement in the governance process.

### **Bureaucratic Dynamics and the Influence of Politicization on Service Quality**

One of the main challenges in implementing decentralization is the dynamics of the bureaucracy which is often influenced by local politics. In Simalungun Regency, the politicization of the bureaucracy is often seen in the placement of officials who prioritize political considerations over technical competence. This results in inefficient bureaucratic management and a decline in the quality of public services. When the local bureaucracy is colored by excessive politicization, the accountability mechanism is disrupted because officials focus more on political loyalty than on the needs of the community.

This practice leads to low bureaucratic performance, which in turn has an impact on the quality of public services received by the community. An inefficient and non-transparent bureaucracy will worsen the public's perception of the government and reduce their level of trust in government institutions. According to Haryanto (2012), bureaucratic reform is needed to ensure that government officials at the local level are selected based on merit, not political connections. This is important to create a bureaucracy that is more professional and responsive to public needs.

### **Conclusion**

The implementation of decentralization in Simalungun Regency has provided space for local governments to manage public affairs independently, but the reality on the ground shows that decentralization has not fully resulted in improvements in the quality of local democracy. The dynamics of local bureaucracy are still overshadowed by old, inefficient practices, such as politicization of positions, weak transparency, and minimal accountability. Regional bureaucracy tends to maintain a hierarchical pattern that is less adaptive to the demands of fast, accurate, and community-based public services.

On the other hand, the implementation of participatory forums such as Musrenbang is still symbolic and administrative. Community aspirations have not substantially influenced policy, while the monitoring mechanism for local government performance is not optimal. This shows that local democracy has not been running substantively and is still trapped in a procedural framework.

Decentralization, which should strengthen local democracy, is actually hampered by bureaucratic governance that has not undergone significant reform. In the context of Simalungun, democracy has not fully become a space for dialogue between the people and the government, but rather a formality with minimal substantive meaning. Therefore, inclusive, participatory, and merit-based bureaucratic reform is an urgent need to ensure that the spirit of regional autonomy truly has an impact on improving the quality of local democracy

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