

## POWER RELATIONS IN THE NEUTRALITY OF VILLAGE HEADS DURING REGIONAL HEAD ELECTIONS IN MAROS REGENCY

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### ABSTRACT

Abstract This study aims to: (1) analyze the neutrality of village heads in the implementation of the Regional Head Election in Maros Regency; and (2) analyze the factors influencing village head non-neutrality during the Regional Head Election in Maros Regency. This research employed a qualitative descriptive approach, with data collected through observation, interviews, and documentation. The informants consisted of 17 participants, including representatives from the Regency Election Supervisory Agency, village-level Election Supervisory Committees, community leaders, youth leaders, and teachers. Data analysis was conducted through three stages: data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing. The findings reveal that: (1) regarding the neutrality of village heads in the implementation of the Maros Regency Regional Head Election, there were two forms of non-neutral actions committed by village heads during the electoral process; and (2) the factors influencing village head non-neutrality consisted of: (a) external political pressure and influence, (b) village aspirations and interests, and (c) legal awareness and political culture. The study concludes that the neutrality of village heads in the implementation of the 2024 Regional Head Election in Maros Regency was compromised by two forms of non-neutral conduct committed by village heads during the election process.

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### INTRODUCTION

Regional Head Elections represent a form of democracy at the local level that provides opportunities for citizens to participate directly in determining regional leaders (Hindiawati & Soleh, 2025, p. 38). Regional Head Elections are a democratic process through which citizens directly elect regional leaders, namely governors and vice governors at the provincial level, as well as regents/vice regents and mayors/vice mayors at the regency and municipal levels.

The implementation of Regional Head Elections is often marked by various forms of electoral misconduct that undermine the integrity of the democratic process. Such misconduct may include money politics, voter intimidation, data manipulation, and the involvement of government officials, including village heads who are expected to remain neutral (Riwanto et al., 2021, p. 280; Hisan & Utami, 2025, p. 646). These practices not only violate the principles of fairness and honesty in elections but also risk producing leaders who lack strong legitimacy among the public. This phenomenon is closely related to the dynamics of local politics occurring in various regions of Indonesia, including Maros Regency. As one of the regions actively conducting five-year democratic elections, Maros Regency faces challenges in maintaining the integrity of regional election implementation.

Among the various forms of electoral misconduct, the issue of neutrality has attracted considerable attention. Data compiled by the Election Supervisory Agency (Bawaslu) indicate that during the 2024 Regional Head Election campaign, there were 195 alleged violations of village head neutrality across 25 provinces. The Chairman of Bawaslu of the Republic of Indonesia, Rahmat Bagja, stated that these cases had been identified since the beginning of the campaign period. Of the 130 officially registered cases, 12 were classified as electoral crimes, 97 constituted violations of other statutory regulations, and 42 were ultimately determined not to constitute violations following investigation (Rumah Pemilu, 2024). This situation presents an irony, considering that Indonesia is recognized as one of the world's largest democracies, yet its democratic process continues to be challenged by numerous cases of non-neutrality, particularly during regional head elections.

Maros Regency, located in South Sulawesi Province, possesses a relatively complex local political landscape. In addition to the phenomenon of the “empty box” candidate, several political and legal events occurred that were not experienced by the other 23 regencies and municipalities in the province. Subsequently, competition between Candidate Pair Number 02 (Chaidir Syam/Mue'tazim Manyur) and the “empty box” option became increasingly intense. This rivalry was characterized by incidents such as the assault of empty-box supporters, mutual reports of alleged election violations, and allegations regarding the lack of neutrality among government officials, including village heads, during the election process.

Village heads occupy a strategic position within the governmental structure. Although administratively they operate under the authority of the regency government, they maintain close and direct relationships with local communities (Haluana'a, 2020, p. 51). The obligation of village heads to maintain neutrality throughout the democratic process has a strong legal foundation. Law Number 6 of 2014 concerning Villages, together with Article 280 paragraph (2) and Article 494 of Law Number 7 of 2017 concerning General Elections, explicitly prohibit village heads and village officials from participating in practical political activities.

Nevertheless, previous studies have demonstrated that village heads frequently become instruments of practical politics for particular candidates, either through direct involvement in campaign activities or indirectly through the use of social influence and administrative authority to shape public political preferences. In this context, the neutrality of village government officials, particularly village heads, is essential for preserving electoral integrity and fairness (Ferdiansyah et al., 2025, p. 30). Previous research on village head neutrality indicates that despite regulations prohibiting their involvement in practical politics, violations continue to occur due to local political pressure, economic interests, and limited legal literacy (Ferdiansyah et al., 2025, p. 29).

Examples of non-neutral behavior identified by Ferdiansyah et al. (2025) include the misuse of village facilities and village budgets to support particular candidates. In some cases, non-neutral actions may also lead to abuses of authority, whereby village heads exploit their positions for personal political or economic gain. Such practices contradict the principles of good governance, which emphasize transparency, accountability, and integrity (Dwiyanto, 2021, p. 75).

Furthermore, according to a report published by Kota Nusantara News (2024), the Secretary of the NGO Pekan-21, Amir Kadir, S.H., stated that his organization had identified several village heads allegedly involved in supporting one of the candidate pairs. He further emphasized that the organization would report any village heads in Maros Regency who were proven to have provided support to a particular regent and vice-regent candidate pair during the 2024 Regional Head Election. Such actions were considered violations of existing laws and could potentially result in

criminal sanctions. This issue was also reported by Sorotanjurnalid (2024), which published information regarding an audio recording involving two village heads, namely Abdul Aziz, S.Sos. (Village Head of Allatengae) and Amiruddin, S.E. (Village Head of Mattoanging). The recording circulated widely and generated significant public concern. In the recording, both village heads were allegedly heard directing community members to support one of the candidates for Regent of Maros.

The researcher's motivation for conducting this study is to gain a deeper understanding of perspectives regarding village head neutrality in the Maros Regional Head Election and to examine the legal provisions that limit the involvement of village heads in the electoral process. This is important in order to comprehensively understand various viewpoints concerning electoral neutrality and to assess whether certain actions should be considered ordinary administrative conduct or forms of political involvement. In addition, this study aims to identify the factors influencing the neutrality of village heads in Maros Regency, particularly in Mattoanging Village and Allatengae Village, Batimurung District. The study is based on the premise that local democracy in Indonesia remains highly vulnerable to the dominance of village elites who may utilize elections as instruments for the reproduction and maintenance of political power.

Based on these phenomena, this study seeks to examine the non-neutrality of village heads and the implementation of such non-neutrality in the Regional Head Election of Maros Regency through a power relations perspective. Accordingly, this research employs Michel Foucault's theory of power relations as its primary theoretical framework, supported by Max Weber's theory of social action.

## RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a qualitative research approach. This approach was selected because the study aims to gain an in-depth understanding of the practice of village head neutrality in the context of Regional Head Elections by exploring perceptions, experiences, and the socio-political dynamics occurring in the field. Specifically, this research adopted a descriptive qualitative approach with a case study focus.

The research was conducted in Mattoanging Village and Allatengae Village, Bantimurung District, Maros Regency. These locations were selected because reports indicated that the village heads in these villages were allegedly not neutral during the Regional Head Election process. This indication was further supported by the researcher's preliminary observations, which suggested the existence of non-neutral behavior among the village heads. Research informants play a crucial role in qualitative studies, as they serve as the primary sources of data required by the researcher. This study was conducted from October 21, 2025, to November 21, 2025.

The study involved 17 informants consisting of several categories, namely: (a) community leaders, (b) youth leaders, (c) village-level Election Supervisory Committee (Panwaslu) members, (d) representatives of the Election Supervisory Agency (Bawaslu) of Maros Regency, and (e) academics. Informants were selected using a purposive sampling technique.

Data were collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and documentation. To ensure the validity and trustworthiness of the data, a dependability test was employed. Dependability was established by thoroughly documenting each stage of the research process, including research planning, data collection, data analysis, and conclusion drawing. In addition, the researcher involved academic supervisors as independent auditors to review and evaluate the overall research process.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Village Head Neutrality in the Implementation of the Maros Regional Head Election

Basic knowledge of village head neutrality refers to an understanding of how village heads should perform their roles and recognize the limitations of their authority during the implementation of Regional Head Elections. As public officials who lead village administrations, village heads are obligated to remain neutral and refrain from engaging in practical politics in accordance with prevailing laws and regulations.

The findings indicate that, in general, community members and election supervisors were able to explain

various aspects of village head neutrality. The study revealed that respondents not only possessed knowledge of neutrality but also demonstrated an understanding of village heads' obligations to remain neutral during the Maros Regional Head Election. They were able to explain the meaning of neutrality, the applicable regulations, and their personal views regarding the issue. This was reflected in the statement of one community member, Mr. Andi Anton (Interview, November 4, 2025), who stated: "Village head neutrality means not taking actions that benefit or disadvantage any candidate pair during the election process. Neutrality is important because it helps maintain harmony within the village community. When a village head remains neutral, social cohesion can be preserved." This finding is consistent with the study conducted by Ramadhani and Syafriyani (2025, p. 125), which found that most community members possess knowledge regarding village heads' obligation to remain neutral due to educational programs provided by election supervisory institutions.

An important finding of this study is that some community members lacked knowledge regarding the obligation of village head neutrality and even described themselves as politically uninformed. This was reflected in the statement of Ms. Nurul Sukma, S.Pd. (Interview, November 4, 2025), who stated: "As a woman, I do not really understand politics, including the issue of village head neutrality. However, in my opinion, village heads should remain neutral during Regional Head Elections so that people feel safe and are not pressured during the electoral process." This statement indicates that not all community members understand the obligation of village head neutrality, and some possess very limited political knowledge. This finding suggests that political education within village communities remains uneven and constitutes an important issue highlighted by this study.

Based on the findings, basic knowledge regarding village head neutrality in the Maros Regional Head Election is generally well established among village heads. Election supervisors stated that village heads receive education and training prior to assuming office and are regularly provided with information regarding neutrality regulations by election supervisory institutions. This was emphasized by Dr. Firman, Chairman of the Maros Regency Election Supervisory Agency (Bawaslu) (Interview, November 19, 2025), who stated: "After being inaugurated, village heads are required to participate in education and training programs where they receive materials concerning their obligation to remain neutral in all forms of elections." Thus, normatively, village heads understand that they are prohibited from engaging in practical political activities during Regional Head Elections.

Village heads' understanding of neutrality can also be observed through their awareness of legal restrictions governing the involvement of village officials in elections. According to election supervisors, village heads generally understand the applicable regulations and are aware of the consequences of violating neutrality provisions. However, such understanding is not always reflected in their actual behavior during elections.

Foucault further argues that knowledge can serve as a mechanism for producing compliance (Apriliyadi & Hendrix, 2021, p. 106). In this context, socialization programs concerning neutrality represent a form of knowledge production intended to encourage village heads to comply with legal regulations. However, when competing power relations offer greater benefits or exert stronger influence, such knowledge may no longer become the primary basis for decision-making. In other words, although village heads possess knowledge regarding neutrality, their political behavior may be shaped more significantly by local power relations.

Based on these findings, it can be concluded that knowledge regarding village head neutrality in the Maros Regional Head Election is generally adequate. Most community members and village heads understand the relevant rules, restrictions, and obligations. Nevertheless, this knowledge is not always reflected in practice, as some village heads choose not to comply with existing regulations. Several village heads in Maros Regency were found by Bawaslu to have violated neutrality principles by supporting particular regent candidates during the election. Therefore, in addition to strengthening legal knowledge, efforts are needed to enhance legal awareness, personal integrity, and effective supervision to ensure the consistent implementation of neutrality principles during Regional Head Elections.

### **Factors Influencing Village Head Non-Neutrality in the Maros Regional Head Election**

The processes influencing village head non-neutrality in the Maros Regional Head Election constitute a series of interconnected factors that shape the political behavior of village heads during the electoral process. Based on the

findings of this study, non-neutrality does not emerge suddenly; rather, it is influenced by various factors.  
External Political Pressure and Influence

Based on the findings of this study, external political pressure and influence constitute one of the factors that may affect village head neutrality in the implementation of the Maros Regional Head Election. Although election supervisors reported that no official complaints or reports regarding political pressure on village heads were identified during the 2024 Regional Head Election, informants argued that such conditions are theoretically and practically very likely to occur. This is primarily due to the position of village heads within the governmental structure, which maintains a close relationship with the local government, particularly the Regent, who is responsible for appointing village heads and possesses authority over various aspects of regional governance.

The findings indicate that the relationship between village heads and the Regent is not merely administrative in nature but also possesses a significant political dimension. Village heads have an interest in maintaining good relations with regional leaders to ensure the smooth implementation of administrative processes, budget allocations, social assistance programs, and village development initiatives. Conversely, regional leaders also have an interest in maintaining relationships with village heads because villages represent an important electoral base in Regional Head Elections. This reciprocal relationship creates conditions that may facilitate the emergence of political pressure and political influence from actors occupying stronger positions within the power structure.

An important finding of this study, based on interviews with election supervisors, is that village heads are structurally positioned in a manner that makes them vulnerable to political pressure due to their lower status within the governmental hierarchy compared to the Regent. This condition may generate concerns that a less harmonious relationship with the regional leader could negatively affect administrative processes, budget allocations, social assistance programs, and village development initiatives. Although no direct evidence of such practices was found during the Maros Regional Head Election, informants believed that the potential for political pressure remains present because of the unequal power relationship between the two parties.

This finding is supported by previous research conducted by Nisak et al. (2024, p. 2), which found that the Village Head of Tanjung played a strategic role in overseeing the implementation of the 2024 General Election at the village level. However, the study also revealed that the village head faced various challenges, including pressure and intervention from parties seeking to influence the electoral process within the village. These findings are consistent with the results of the present study, which indicate that one of the factors contributing to village head non-neutrality is their structurally subordinate position within the governmental hierarchy. As a result, pressures exerted from higher levels of authority may influence village heads and affect their ability to maintain neutrality during the electoral process.

In addition to pressure originating from government elites, external political influence may also come from campaign teams, political parties, and certain interest groups. The findings indicate that village heads occupy a highly strategic position because they are perceived as capable of influencing the communities within their jurisdictions. Consequently, various stakeholders involved in the Regional Head Election may attempt to approach village heads through different means, including offering certain benefits that could influence their political attitudes and decisions.

The findings also reveal that some community members perceive intense political competition during Regional Head Elections as increasing the likelihood of pressure being exerted on village heads. In highly competitive political environments, candidate pairs often seek support from various strategic groups, including village heads, who possess considerable social influence within their communities. As a result, village heads may become targets of political approaches because they are regarded as capable of helping to consolidate grassroots support.

This finding is supported by previous research conducted by Harmono et al. (2024, p. 112), which stated that external factors, such as support from community members or local entrepreneurs, as well as interventions from parties outside the village (for example, political parties at the regency/city level), can influence the attitudes of village heads within the context of local politics. These findings are consistent with the results of the present study, which identify external factors as one of the reasons for village head non-neutrality. Several informants also stated that the close relationship between village heads and regional head candidates, particularly incumbents, may constitute a form of

external political influence affecting neutrality. Village heads who have served for a long period are likely to have established both professional and personal relationships with incumbent regional leaders. Such closeness may create political loyalty or a sense of indebtedness, which ultimately influences the attitudes and behavior of village heads during the Regional Head Election process.

Nevertheless, not all informants agreed that external political pressure and influence were the primary factors causing village head non-neutrality. Several informants argued that more dominant factors actually originate from within the village heads themselves, particularly regarding their compliance with regulations and level of legal awareness. According to this perspective, if village heads possess a strong commitment to existing regulations and fully understand the consequences of violating neutrality provisions, external political pressure would not easily influence their behavior.

In Social Action Theory, Max Weber distinguishes social action from mere human behavior by emphasizing that individuals attach subjective meanings to their actions, which are oriented toward specific goals and expectations (Fathiha, 2022, p. 70). According to Weber's Social Action Theory, individual actions are fundamentally influenced by the subjective meanings attributed to particular social situations. In the context of this study, village heads who face political pressure or external influence may choose to act in a non-neutral manner because they consider the various consequences that may result from their decisions. When village heads perceive that maintaining good relations with the Regent or a regional head candidate can facilitate access to development programs, social assistance, and village administrative processes, such behavior can be understood as instrumental rational action (*zweckrational*), namely action undertaken based on calculations of costs and benefits in order to achieve specific objectives.

In addition to instrumental rational action, Weber's theory also explains that an individual's actions may be influenced by social relationships and the environment in which the individual is situated (Sabarudin, 2025, p. 42). In the context of this study, influences from campaign teams, political elites, and close relationships with regional leaders may shape the subjective considerations of village heads in determining their political stance. Therefore, village head non-neutrality arising from external political pressure or influence can be understood as a form of social action that does not occur spontaneously, but rather as the result of a process of considering the interests, benefits, and consequences encountered within the local political environment. Thus, Weber's Social Action Theory helps explain how political relationships and particular interests can influence village heads' decisions either to uphold or to disregard the principle of neutrality during Regional Head Elections.

Based on the findings of this study, it can be concluded that external political pressure and influence constitute factors that have the potential to affect village head neutrality through power relations, political proximity, administrative threats, and expectations of obtaining certain benefits. Although no empirical evidence was found indicating the existence of direct political pressure on village heads in Maros Regency, the structural relationship between village heads and local government, as well as the strategic position of village heads within local political contests, creates opportunities for external political influence that may encourage village head non-neutrality during Regional Head Elections.

#### Village Aspirations and Interests

Based on the findings of this study, village aspirations and interests constitute one of the factors influencing village head neutrality during the implementation of the Maros Regional Head Election. Most informants argued that village heads have a responsibility to advocate for the needs and interests of their communities. As a result, they often take into consideration issues related to development and community welfare when determining their political stance. Village aspirations concerning infrastructure development, agricultural assistance, increases in village funding, and community empowerment programs become important considerations that may influence the political behavior of village heads throughout the Regional Head Election process.

The findings indicate that village heads generally claim to remain neutral and understand the regulations governing neutrality. Nevertheless, according to election supervisors, there are still some village heads who have political interests linked to the elected regional leader. These interests arise because the relationship between village governments and local governments is very close, particularly in terms of administration, budgeting, social assistance,

and village development. Consequently, village heads have an interest in maintaining good relations with the elected regional leader in order to ensure the smooth implementation of various programs needed by village communities. This was expressed by Dr. Sufirman, S.IP., M.Si., regarding village head regulations, who stated: "Essentially, village heads have political interests in the elected Regent because, after all, village heads are directly elected by local residents, while their inauguration and formal appointment are determined by the Regent. Therefore, politically, village heads have interests in maintaining good relations with the Regent in order to facilitate administrative processes, budget allocations, and various forms of assistance, including social welfare programs." (Interview, November 19, 2025).

The findings also reveal that village development interests are often used as a justification for village head non-neutrality. Informants argued that village heads fundamentally seek to fulfill the aspirations of the communities they lead, such as the development of roads, healthcare facilities, educational infrastructure, and other development programs. Under certain circumstances, village heads may perceive that maintaining close relations with particular regional head candidates could create greater opportunities to secure development support after the Regional Head Election has concluded. As stated by Mr. Abdul Rahman: "Village heads will certainly strive to realize community aspirations, such as village development projects or road construction. They will also prioritize the welfare of their communities; therefore, by cooperating with higher-level authorities, it may become easier to obtain development projects and other forms of support." (Interview, November 3, 2025).

In addition to development interests, the findings indicate that political promises made by regional head candidates may also influence village head neutrality. Several informants stated that certain candidates are often perceived as having a greater capacity to provide benefits to villages, whether through infrastructure development programs, agricultural assistance, increased village funding, or community empowerment initiatives. Such conditions encourage village heads to develop closer relationships with candidates who are believed to be more capable of addressing the needs of village communities effectively compared to other candidates. As stated by Mr. Ansar: "In my opinion, village aspirations and interests are the main factors. Moreover, village interests and the interests of village heads can converge. For example, by helping a Regent candidate win the Regional Head Election, a village head may gain access to development projects that can improve village infrastructure, such as healthcare centers, irrigation systems, school buildings, and other development programs. In this way, community aspirations can be realized while, at the same time, serving the interests of the village head." (Interview, November 4, 2025).

The findings reveal that village aspirations and interests often place village heads in a dilemma. On the one hand, village heads are obligated to maintain neutrality in accordance with applicable legal provisions. On the other hand, they also bear a moral responsibility to advocate for the interests of the communities they lead. When opportunities arise to secure greater development benefits through closer relations with a particular candidate, some village heads may be tempted to disregard the principle of neutrality in pursuit of objectives that are perceived as beneficial to the village.

The findings also indicate that the relationship between village governments and local governments is an important factor in shaping the political interests of village heads. Many villages hope to maintain good relations with the elected regional leader in order to facilitate the implementation of village development programs. According to several informants, a harmonious relationship between village heads and regional leaders is believed to accelerate access to development assistance and other government programs. This situation creates a perception that political support for a particular candidate may provide benefits for the village in the future.

An important finding of this study is that, in addition to village interests, personal interests of village heads may also contribute to non-neutrality. Several informants argued that successful village development can enhance the positive image of village heads in the eyes of the community. When development programs are successfully implemented and community aspirations are fulfilled, village heads may gain stronger social legitimacy and greater opportunities to maintain their political influence in the future. Consequently, village aspirations and personal interests are sometimes interconnected and difficult to separate within the practice of local politics. As stated by Mr. Andi Ato: "I believe that village aspirations and interests are clearly factors contributing to village head non-neutrality. Politics

is always associated with interests. In my view, when a village head succeeds in developing the village, it can increase the likelihood of being re-elected as village head.” Similarly, Mr. Andi Anton stated: “I agree that village aspirations and interests are reasons why village heads may become non-neutral. However, it is not only about village interests; it may also involve personal interests, such as the desire to enrich oneself.” (Interviews, November 4, 2025).

Nevertheless, several informants emphasized that village development interests should not be used as a justification for violating the principle of neutrality. Community aspirations can still be pursued through legitimate governmental mechanisms without demonstrating support for any particular candidate pair. Village heads remain responsible for providing fair and impartial services to all members of the community, regardless of their political preferences. Therefore, professionalism and compliance with existing regulations should continue to serve as the primary guiding principles in carrying out village governance duties.

This finding is supported by previous research conducted by Harmono et al. (2025, p. 112), which stated that village heads are often confronted with the aspirations and interests of village communities that they seek to maintain or improve through support for particular candidates. Such conditions may influence village heads’ perspectives regarding existing political choices. This finding is consistent with the results of the present study, which indicate that village aspirations and interests constitute a significant factor influencing village head neutrality in the Maros Regional Head Election. The desire to secure development projects, government assistance, improved community welfare, and maintain good relations with the elected regional leader are frequently cited as reasons associated with the emergence of village head non-neutrality.

According to Max Weber’s Social Action Theory, individual actions are carried out based on the subjective meanings that individuals attach to those actions. In the context of this study, village head non-neutrality driven by village aspirations and interests can be understood as a form of instrumental rational action (*zweckrational*) (Tarom, 2025, p. 97). Village heads make calculations regarding the potential benefits and advantages that may be gained from supporting a particular candidate, especially in relation to opportunities to obtain development projects, budgetary assistance, or programs that can fulfill the needs of village communities. Therefore, such actions are undertaken consciously based on considerations of the objectives they seek to achieve.

Furthermore, Weber explains that social action is influenced not only by personal interests but also by the values and responsibilities that individuals perceive toward their social groups (Sumintak & Sumirat, 2022, p. 32). In the context of this study, some village heads viewed their support for particular candidates as an effort to advocate for community aspirations and promote village development. Although such actions may conflict with neutrality regulations, village heads may interpret their behavior as a means of achieving the welfare and prosperity of the communities they lead. Therefore, Weber’s Social Action Theory helps explain that village head non-neutrality during Regional Head Elections is not solely driven by personal political interests, but also by rational considerations related to village aspirations and development interests.

Based on the findings of this study, it can be concluded that village aspirations and interests constitute a significant factor influencing village head neutrality in the Maros Regional Head Election. The desire to secure development projects, government assistance, improved community welfare, and maintain good relations with the elected regional leader are frequently cited as reasons associated with the emergence of village head non-neutrality. Nevertheless, village aspirations and interests cannot be used as a justification for violating the principle of neutrality, as village heads remain obligated to comply with legal regulations and uphold the professionalism of their office.

#### Legal Awareness and Political Culture

Legal awareness and political culture are factors that influence village head neutrality in the implementation of the Maros Regional Head Election. The majority of informants argued that village head non-neutrality is influenced not only by political interests but also by low levels of legal awareness and the political culture that has developed within the local political environment. These two factors are closely interconnected, as limited legal awareness may encourage village heads to disregard neutrality regulations, while a political culture that is permissive toward non-

neutral practices can lead such violations to be perceived as normal or acceptable behavior.

According to the informants, low levels of legal awareness cause village heads to prioritize certain interests over compliance with regulations. Some village heads perceive involvement in politics as a strategy to advance village interests or maintain relationships with influential political elites. As a result, neutrality regulations are often not used as the primary guideline in their actions. Informants even emphasized that if village heads truly possessed a high level of legal awareness, the tendency to engage in non-neutral behavior would be significantly lower. This was expressed by Mr. Ansar, who stated: "In my opinion, legal awareness is clearly one of the main factors behind non-neutrality. The low level of legal awareness among village heads is caused by a lack of understanding of the regulations governing the neutrality of village officials. The village heads in this area who acted non-neutrally most likely did so because they lacked awareness of the applicable laws and regulations." (Interview, November 4, 2025).

An important finding of this study is that village heads who fail to maintain neutrality have essentially violated the applicable regulations, and such actions reflect a low level of legal awareness. In fact, village heads are generally aware of the regulations governing neutrality during Regional Head Elections. However, in practice, some village heads still choose to engage in certain political activities. This condition indicates that the primary issue does not lie in the existence of regulations, but rather in the level of awareness and compliance of village heads with those regulations. This was expressed by Dr. Sufirman, S.IP., M.Si., who stated: "As I have mentioned, there will always be some village heads in Maros who, despite knowing the existing regulations, choose not to comply with them. In other words, these village heads do not truly possess legal awareness regarding those regulations." (Interview, November 19, 2025).

Research conducted by Ramadhani and Syafriyani (2025, p. 184) revealed that "although socialization programs and guidance regarding regulations had been provided to village heads in Dungek District, the majority of village heads had not fully complied with the principle of neutrality in elections. Village supervisors noted that a number of village heads remained involved in political affiliations that had the potential to compromise their neutrality." This finding is consistent with the results of the present study, which indicate that village heads generally know and understand the regulations governing village head neutrality during Regional Head Elections. However, they still choose to act in a non-neutral manner throughout the election process for various reasons.

The findings also indicate that weak supervision and law enforcement contribute to the low level of legal awareness among village heads. Several informants argued that inadequate oversight and the lack of deterrent effects for violations of neutrality regulations have led some village heads to feel unafraid of breaching the rules. Under such circumstances, legal regulations lose their effectiveness as instruments for controlling behavior, thereby making village heads more willing to demonstrate political favoritism during the Regional Head Election process.

In addition to legal awareness, political culture is also an important factor influencing village head neutrality. Based on the findings of this study, the political culture that has developed in Indonesia tends to be oriented toward practical interests and political gains. Such a culture creates the perception that the involvement of village heads in supporting particular candidates is a common occurrence in every political contest. As a result, non-neutral behavior is often regarded as a normal practice and is no longer viewed as a serious violation.

The findings indicate that a political culture that is permissive toward non-neutrality has shaped certain habits among village heads. The large number of non-neutrality cases occurring in various regions has led some village heads to perceive political favoritism as a common practice. When a particular behavior is repeatedly carried out without receiving firm social or legal sanctions, it has the potential to become part of the political culture accepted within the local political environment. This was expressed by Mr. Andi Anton, who stated: "Political culture also plays a role. Among village heads, and even civil servants, non-neutrality has become something that is often considered normal because there are already many similar cases. For example, if I see a village head here acting non-neutrally, it is often regarded as an ordinary occurrence, even though it is clearly wrong." (Interview, November 4, 2025).

An important finding of this study reveals that local political culture is often shaped by close relationships between village heads and political elites. These relationships are not solely based on the interests of village development but are also influenced by personal ties, political loyalty, and expectations of obtaining certain benefits

in the future. Within such a political culture, the relationship between village heads and political elites develops into a reciprocal and mutually beneficial arrangement, resulting in neutrality often being set aside in order to maintain these relationships. As stated by Mr. Andi Ato, "It has become a common practice in Indonesian politics to do whatever is necessary to pursue interests and gain advantages, and the same applies to village heads" (Interview, November 4, 2025). This statement indicates that political interests and the pursuit of benefits frequently influence the behavior of political actors, including village heads, thereby contributing to the normalization of non-neutral conduct within the local political environment.

The findings of this study reveal that local political culture is often shaped by close relationships between village heads and political elites. These relationships are not solely based on the interests of village development but are also influenced by personal connections, political loyalty, and expectations of obtaining certain benefits in the future. Within such a political culture, the relationship between village heads and political elites develops into a reciprocal and mutually beneficial arrangement, causing neutrality to be frequently overlooked in order to preserve these relationships. As stated by Mr. Andi Ato, "It has become a common practice in Indonesian politics to do whatever is necessary to pursue interests and gain advantages, and the same applies to village heads" (Interview, November 4, 2025).

According to the Social Action Theory proposed by Max Weber, individual actions are influenced by the subjective meanings attached to those actions. In the context of this study, the non-neutrality of village heads resulting from low levels of legal awareness can be understood as an example of instrumental rational action, in which individuals consciously choose actions that are considered the most effective means of achieving specific goals (Purhanudin et al., 2022, p. 6). Village heads may be aware of the neutrality regulations that govern their position, yet they still choose to demonstrate political favoritism because they perceive certain benefits from doing so, such as maintaining political relationships, securing development support, or preserving their social and political standing. Therefore, such actions are carried out deliberately and are based on rational considerations regarding the objectives they seek to achieve.

Furthermore, a political culture that regards non-neutrality as a normal practice can be explained through the concept of traditional action in Weber's Social Action Theory. According to Weber, traditional action occurs when individuals act based on customs, habits, or practices that have been continuously maintained within their social environment (Fikria, 2024, p. 114). In the context of this study, village heads who engage in practical politics are often influenced by a local political culture that perceives political favoritism as acceptable and commonplace. As a result, non-neutral actions are carried out not only because of personal interests but also due to political traditions and practices that have been repeatedly reproduced within local political life. Therefore, Weber's Social Action Theory helps explain that the non-neutrality of village heads is the result of an interaction between rational considerations and the influence of political culture that develops within their social environment.

Based on the findings of this study, it can be understood that legal awareness and political culture are closely related in influencing the neutrality of village heads. Low levels of legal awareness contribute to a lack of compliance with existing regulations among village heads. This is evidenced by violations committed by two village heads concerning neutrality regulations during the 2024 Regional Head Election in Maros Regency, where both were found to have supported a candidate pair for Regent. Furthermore, a permissive political culture tends to normalize acts of non-neutrality, making such behavior socially acceptable within the local political environment. The combination of these two factors ultimately creates an environment that is less conducive to the consistent implementation of the principle of neutrality in the conduct of the Regional Head Election in Maros Regency.

## CONCLUSION

The neutrality of village heads during the implementation of the 2024 Regional Head Election in Maros Regency was challenged by two instances of non-neutral conduct committed by village heads during the electoral process. Furthermore, public knowledge regarding the principle of village head neutrality was generally adequate, although some community members were still unaware of the concept.

The factors influencing the non-neutrality of village heads in the Regional Head Election of Maros Regency consist of: (a) external political pressure and influence, (b) village aspirations and interests, and (c) legal awareness and political culture. These factors collectively contribute to shaping the attitudes and actions of village heads, thereby affecting their ability to maintain neutrality throughout the electoral process.

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