DYNAMICS OF RURAL SOCIETY JOURNAL
Vol. 5, No. 1 January 2027, pp. 128–146
E-ISSN 2987-0844
Journal homepage: https://drsj.fis.ung.ac.id/index.php/DRSJ

Salbia-based ethical resilience and village bureaucratic neutrality: Evidence from the 2024 regional head election in Bone Bolango, Indonesia

Ramli Mahmud[1*)], Sastro M. Wantu[1)], Intan Tiara Kartika[1)], Nurul Mawahda[1)]

[1]Department of Pancasila and Civic Education, Universitas Negeri Gorontalo, Gorontalo, Indonesia
[*]Corresponding Author: ramlimahmud33@ung.ac.id

Article Info

Research Article

Article History

Received: 16 August 2026
Accepted: 11 November 2026
Published Online: 17 November 2026

Keywords

Bureaucratic Neutrality; Conditional Obedience; Electoral Supervision; *Salbia*; Village Government.

To cite this article

Mahmud, R., Wantu, S. M., Kartika, I. T., & Mawahda, N. (2027). Salbia-based ethical resilience and village bureaucratic neutrality: Evidence from the 2024 regional head election in Bone Bolango, Indonesia. *Dynamics of Rural Society Journal*, *5*(1), 128–146. https://doi.org/10.37905/drsj.v5i1.191

Abstract

Village officials occupy a position of unusual electoral value in rural democracies, yet the conditions under which they sustain or abandon administrative impartiality remain inadequately specified. This article examines how village officials in Bone Bolango Regency, Indonesia, responded to political demands during the 2024 Regional Head Election, and assesses the operation and limits of *Salbia*, a Gorontalo customary order, as an analytical framework for impartial administrative conduct. The study employs a qualitative case study design. Twenty-eight informants, comprising seven village heads, fourteen village officials, and seven community leaders from seven villages in three subdistricts, were interviewed in July 2025, and the material was analyzed thematically alongside observational and documentary sources. Political alignment extended across the village administrations examined and was directed predominantly toward the candidacy of the serving regent. It was produced by hierarchical expectation transmitted without written instruction, by duties allocated during the electoral period, including the *Bunga Desa* program, and by kinship ties. Officials identified their own conduct as a departure from obligations they were able to state. The normative content of *Salbia*, including conditional obedience and *ta'uwa*, was articulated explicitly by community leaders and attributed to *adat*, whereas officials expressed the same conflict in the vocabulary of office without invoking customary grounds. The article argues that impartiality failed not through the absence of a normative framework but through its subordination to structural dependence, and that the enforcement problem is more accurately described as a deficiency of complaint than as a deficiency of sanction. *Salbia* is accordingly proposed with its institutional conditions specified, namely insulation of the village office from district discretion, rule-bound governance of programs during electoral periods, and a complaint procedure not dependent upon residents who themselves depend upon the official concerned.

Introduction

In electoral democracies where state administration reaches deepest into rural life, the lowest tier of government has become a recurrent object of political capture. Village officials occupy a position of unusual electoral value: they administer population records, distribute development assistance, convene residents, and mediate between households and the state. This combination of administrative authority and social proximity renders them efficient instruments of electoral mobilization. The resulting problem is not an absence of rules but a persistent distance between the formal requirement of administrative impartiality and the observable conduct of officials during electoral periods. Across developing democracies, the village and its equivalents have accordingly become the sites at which the claim of bureaucratic neutrality is most frequently tested and

Copyright © 2026 The Author(s).
Dynamics of Rural Society Journal published by Department of Sociology, Gorontalo State University, Indonesia
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License

most frequently found wanting. The consequences of that failure are borne by citizens whose access to public goods may come to depend on their perceived political alignment.

Comparative scholarship has advanced two broad explanations for this pattern. Research on bureaucratic politics in competitive systems attributes departures from impartiality to institutional design, holding that the insulation of appointment and promotion processes from political control determines whether officials are able to resist partisan demands (Dahlström & Lapuente, 2022). Studies conducted in rural settings qualify this account by demonstrating that the orientation of local officials toward the regime is shaped by institutional position rather than by social trust or material advancement, with the consequence that those embedded within the state apparatus become its most reliable supporters (Guan, 2018). A parallel literature on decentralization argues that the transfer of authority to local government does not of itself produce accountable local democracy, since devolved power may be absorbed by existing local hierarchies rather than subjected to popular control (Johnson, 2001). These contributions together establish that the conduct of local officials during elections is an institutional outcome, yet they leave unexamined the question of how officials themselves reason about the demands placed upon them.

Evidence drawn from other developing democracies points in the same direction. Patronage appointments in Brazil have been shown to operate through relations of bureaucratic accountability rather than merely against them (Toral, 2024). Electoral administration in Nigeria and Ghana remains exposed to the influence of political parties (Sekpe et al., 2025), and local political consolidation in Bangladesh proceeds through informality and patronage rather than through formal institutions (Lewis & Hossain, 2022). The Bangladeshi bureaucracy itself departs from the Weberian model in ways that comparative theory has yet to absorb (Zafarullah & Kaiser, 2025). Where administrative institutions are weak, moreover, the separation between political and administrative roles is itself unstable, and organizational capacity suffers accordingly (González & Sanabria-Pulido, 2026). Politicization is therefore better understood as a contested and context-dependent process than as a uniform condition of the state (Staronova & Knox, 2024), which is the understanding adopted in this article.

In Indonesia, the position of village government within electoral competition has been shaped by the democratic framework established after 1998. Antlöv (2003) documents how the restoration of village autonomy produced an office that was simultaneously accountable to residents and dependent on the district administration for development resources. This dual position has proved durable. Subsequent research on Indonesian elections has shown how this position is mobilized in practice: village brokers form the operative layer of the patronage networks through which candidates reach voters (Aspinall & As'ad, 2015), while the exchange of material benefits for electoral support constitutes a structural feature of local competition rather than an aberration within it (Aspinall & Berenschot, 2019). The village head consequently enters each electoral cycle holding resources that candidates require, while facing superiors who control the resources that the village requires.

Empirical studies of village bureaucratic conduct in Indonesian regional elections converge on three recurring patterns. The first concerns the instrumental use of incumbent authority, through which serving executives direct village officials toward their own candidacies (Husain & Nasir, 2021) and extend that direction to campaigning on digital platforms (Indiahono, 2022). The second concerns relations of patronage, in which village officials enter reciprocal arrangements with local political elites in exchange for position security and program allocation (Atmojo et al., 2023; Gusniar et al., 2026). These arrangements are frequently reinforced by kinship networks that bind officials to particular candidates (Saragih & Ivanna, 2024; Siswandani & Prasetyo, 2022). The third concerns the limited efficacy of enforcement. Violations continue to recur despite being documented and sanctioned (Ganesha et al., 2026), are often not formally reported (Gusniar et al., 2026), and are difficult to address because of ambiguities in the governing regulations themselves (Mumtaz et al., 2026; Suswanta & Setiawan, 2023). Procedures for handling violations vary across districts (Rizal et al., 2025), and the most serious cases have required judicial annulment of electoral results (Maulana et al., 2025). Studies conducted at the local level have further shown that the intensity of political competition bears directly on the ethics of local bureaucracy (Abdi, 2026) and that officials experience the electoral period as an ethical dilemma rather than as a straightforward choice (Rifai & Haeril, 2024). The regulatory response, including the circular issued by the Election Supervisory Agency for the 2024 simultaneous elections (Bawaslu RI, 2024), has not altered this pattern (Angkasa & Pelangi, 2024; Bela & Rahmawati, 2026; Nadzirin et al., 2025). The case examined in this article presents that limitation in a distinctive form: the record of violations handled by the district election supervisory body for the election studied here, which was consulted in the course of this research, contains reports concerning money politics and the documentation of candidacy but none concerning

the neutrality of village heads or village officials, notwithstanding the conduct described by officials themselves.

These findings sustain an unresolved disagreement concerning causation. One position holds that non-neutral conduct is produced by the structural location of the village office, so that officials comply to avoid transfer or demotion and the possible withholding of program funds. Their conduct is therefore best explained by the incentives attached to that position (Lee & Park, 2021; Ryu & Virindra, 2023). The opposing position holds that structural pressure is mediated by the cultural orientation and role perception of officials, who interpret competing demands through normative frameworks and arrive at divergent responses under comparable constraints (Park & Han, 2018). The disagreement is consequential because the two positions imply different remedies, the first directing attention toward institutional insulation and the second toward the normative repertoires available to officials. Research on Indonesian village bureaucracy has developed the structural position considerably while leaving the second position largely unexamined, with the result that the ethical reasoning of village officials is inferred rather than documented.

The concept of resilience offers a means of addressing this omission, provided that it is specified rather than assumed. Within the study of public administration, resilience denotes the capacity of agencies to maintain professional standards when subjected to political pressure, and it is located in organizational structure, collaborative arrangements, and professional norms rather than in individual disposition alone (Stauffer et al., 2024). Recent scholarship has examined the structural integrity of administration subjected to political pressure (Bertelli & Falletti, 2026) and the conditions under which the democratic resilience of public administration is weakened (Raiu, 2026), while work on public service values holds that ethical conduct is sustained by institutional support rather than by exhortation (Renaldi et al., 2025). Research on rural communities cautions further that the symbolic and normative resources on which communities draw are unevenly distributed, so that resilience cannot be presumed uniform across rural settings (Jaraíz Arroyo et al., 2025). Ethical resilience, as the term is employed in this article, denotes the capacity of officials to sustain impartial conduct by reference to normative commitments recognized within their own community. It is distinguished from bureaucratic integrity, which concerns the absence of corrupt conduct, from professional ethics, which derives from occupational codes, and from regulatory compliance, which requires only the avoidance of sanction.

Gorontalo provides a setting in which such normative commitments are articulated within a documented customary order. The customary arrangements of Gorontalo society, recorded in the classical ethnographic account of Haga (1981), include the institution of *ta'uwa* and a conception of obedience qualified by conformity to *adat* norms and collective welfare. Together, these features indicate that deference to authority has historically been conditional rather than absolute within this normative order. Research conducted within the province has documented the political conduct of the local bureaucracy across successive electoral cycles and has identified the influence of political culture, patronage, and hierarchical pressure on officials at the village level (Mahmud et al., 2022; Mahmud, Adjie, et al., 2024; Mahmud, Djaafar, et al., 2024).

Bone Bolango Regency is selected for examination on four grounds. The election conducted in the regency on 27 November 2024 was contested by four candidate pairs and produced a closely divided result. The winning pair received 36,991 valid votes (34.72 percent); the pair led by the serving regent received 33,605 valid votes (31.55 percent); and a third pair received 29,965 valid votes (28.13 percent). The first- and third-place pairs were separated by 6.59 percentage points, while the margin between the first two pairs was 3,386 votes. Voter turnout reached 87.88 percent of the 123,739 registered voters (Keputusan KPU Kabupaten Bone Bolango, 2024). A contest of this kind, fragmented among several competitive pairs and marked by high voter turnout, raises the marginal value of mobilization at the village level and intensifies the demands placed on village officials. Village officials across the regency's subdistricts were also involved in implementing district development programs during the electoral period. These programs sustained their administrative contact with the district executive. The customary order described above remains in use as a normative reference within the village communities of the regency. Finally, the regency presents a discrepancy that the study seeks to explain: the conduct described by village officials themselves is absent from the official record of electoral violations for the same election.

This article argues that the departure of village officials from impartial conduct in Bone Bolango is not explained by the absence of a normative framework, since the relevant framework is recognized and articulated by the actors themselves, but by the subordination of that framework to the structural dependence of the village office on the district hierarchy and program resources. The outcome of the election lends further weight to this argument. The pair led by the serving regent was defeated despite the alignment of village officials documented in this study. This outcome suggests that compliance reflected dependence on the hierarchy within which

officials were positioned rather than a strategic calculation aimed at the anticipated victor. This discrepancy further indicates that the problem of village bureaucratic neutrality is not confined to the inadequacy of sanctions: the conduct at issue did not enter the formal record at all. An explanation of that conduct must therefore be sought in the normative reasoning and structural position of the officials concerned rather than in the enforcement history of the case. Two questions follow from this argument. The first asks how village officials interpreted and responded to the political demands placed upon them during the 2024 Regional Head Election. The second asks how the normative content of *Salbia* operates within that reasoning and which conditions limit its capacity to sustain impartial conduct. The article accordingly pursues two objectives: to analyze the interpretive and practical responses of village officials to political demands during the election, and to examine the operation and the limits of *Salbia* as a normative framework for impartial administrative conduct.

Method

Research design

This study adopts a qualitative case study design. The case concerns the conduct of village officials in Bone Bolango Regency during the 2024 Regional Head Election, examined as a bounded instance of a wider phenomenon in order to establish how officials interpreted and responded to the political demands placed upon them (Neuman, 2014). A case study design was preferred to other qualitative designs because the object of inquiry is not the structure of subjective experience considered in itself, but the relation between the structural position of the village office, the demands transmitted through that position, and the normative reasoning through which officials accounted for their conduct. Examining these relationships requires sustained attention to the institutional and electoral context in which the reasoning occurred (Babbie, 2021). The analysis accordingly proceeds from accounts given by village officials and community members, read together with documentary material concerning the election and the regulatory framework governing the conduct of village government.

Research location

The study was conducted in Bone Bolango Regency, Gorontalo Province, Indonesia. Fieldwork was conducted in seven villages across three subdistricts: Tanggilingo, Dutohe, and Poowo in Kabila Subdistrict; Keramat and Langge in Tapa Subdistrict; and Timbuolo and Luwahu in Botupingge Subdistrict. The study area is shown in Figure 1.

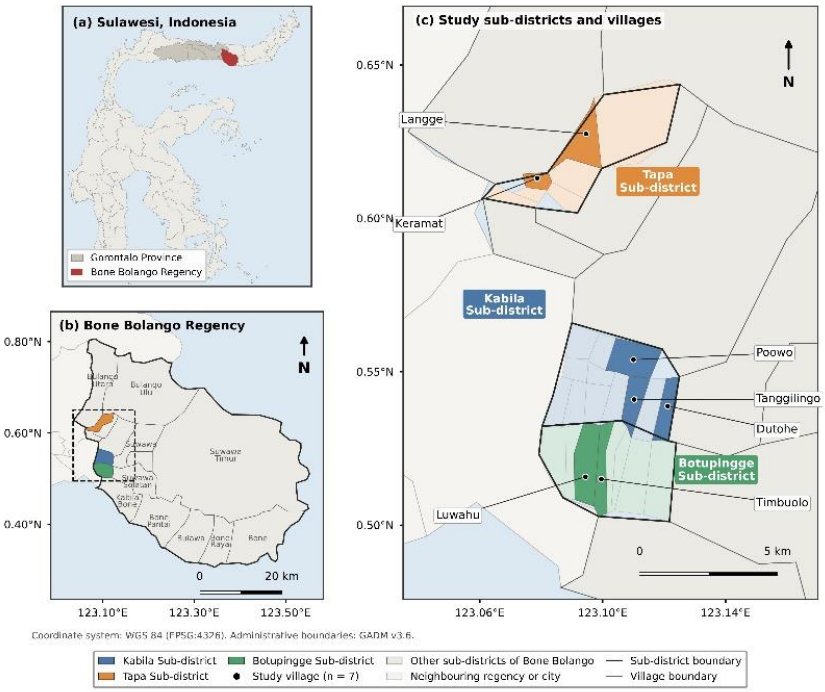


Figure 1. Research Location Map
Source: Administrative map of Bone Bolango Regency, National Unity and Political Agency (*Kesbangpol*) of Bone Bolango Regency, 2025

Informant selection and characteristics

The study involved 28 informants selected through purposive sampling, combining criterion and maximum variation strategies (Babbie, 2021; Neuman, 2014). The sample comprised seven village heads, fourteen village officials, and seven community leaders. Each village was represented by one village head, two village officials, and one community leader, allowing accounts of hierarchical pressure from within the village administrative structure to be compared with those from outside that structure.

Three inclusion criteria were applied. First, informants were required to have held office or occupied a recognized position of community leadership throughout the 2024 Regional Head Election period, so that their accounts were based on direct experience rather than secondary knowledge. Second, informants drawn from village government were required to have been involved in administrative duties during the electoral period, including the implementation of government programs channeled through subdistrict and village structures. Third, informants were required to consent to discussing politically sensitive experiences, since disclosing hierarchical pressure carries professional risks. No informant was excluded on the grounds of tenure, as all those interviewed had assumed their positions before the election was held.

Twenty-one informants were male and seven were female. All village heads and community leaders were male, while the fourteen village officials were evenly divided between men and women. This distribution reflects the composition of the offices and positions concerned in the villages studied rather than any criterion applied in the selection of informants. The informants ranged in age from 37 to 61 years, with a mean age of approximately 46 years. Village heads ranged from 40 to 52 years, village officials from 37 to 46 years, and community leaders from 50 to 61 years. Informants are identified in this article by codes denoting their categories: VH for village heads, VO for village officials, and CL for community leaders. A register recording the code, position, sex, and age of every informant has been retained as part of the audit trail and is available from the corresponding author upon request. Neither the names of informants nor the villages from which they were drawn are reported in order to preserve confidentiality in communities of the size studied here.

Field access and recruitment

Fieldwork was conducted under a research permit issued by the National Unity and Political Agency (*Kesbangpol*) of Bone Bolango Regency. Initial access was obtained through a political education program convened jointly by *Kesbangpol* and the Election Supervisory Agency (*Bawaslu*) of Bone Bolango Regency during the non-electoral stage. The program was held across Tapa, Kabila, and Botupingge Subdistricts. It provided the setting for initial contact with village heads and village officials. Individual interviews were subsequently arranged through direct visits to each informant once communication had been established. The seven community leaders were approached on the recommendation of village heads and *Bawaslu* officers, a referral procedure appropriate to politically sensitive subject matter in which trust mediates access (Marvasti, 2004).

Before each interview, informants were informed of the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of their participation, their right to withdraw at any stage, and the use of pseudonymous codes in reporting. Verbal consent was obtained from every informant before the interview commenced. The adequacy of the sample was assessed on two grounds rather than by a predetermined number. The first was coverage of the structural positions through which the demands under investigation were transmitted. This required the inclusion of village heads, village officials subordinate to them, and community leaders outside the administrative hierarchy in each of the villages studied. The second was thematic saturation: interviews continued until accounts of the mechanisms of pressure and the normative grounds invoked became repetitive and no further themes emerged (Neuman, 2014). The ethical procedures governing the study are described in the Ethical Considerations section below.

Data collection

Data were generated through in-depth interviews, observation, and documentary analysis. Interviews were conducted between July 3 and 13, 2025. Each interview lasted approximately one hour, was conducted in Indonesian, and took place at a location chosen by the informant. Interviews were audio-recorded and documented concurrently in written notes. The recordings were transcribed, and the written notes were incorporated into the resulting interview records, which served as the basis for analysis. The interview guide was organized around four topics: the duties performed by the informant during the electoral period; the demands and expectations encountered from superiors, candidates, and residents; the considerations that informed the informant's responses to those demands; and the normative references invoked in accounting for

that conduct. Questions were framed openly, and follow-up questions were determined by the course of each interview. All quotations presented in this article were translated into English by the authors, and the translations were verified against the original interview manuscripts to preserve the meanings conveyed by the informants.

Documentary material comprised the decision of the General Elections Commission of Bone Bolango Regency, Number 1545 of 2024, on the determination of the result of the 2024 election of the Regent and Deputy Regent; the Circular Letter of the Election Supervisory Agency of the Republic of Indonesia, Number 92 of 2024, concerning the handling of violations of village head neutrality in the 2024 simultaneous regional elections; and the statutory provisions governing the neutrality of village government, namely Law Number 7 of 2017 on General Elections, Law Number 10 of 2016 on the Election of Governors, Regents, and Mayors, and Law Number 3 of 2024 on the Second Amendment to Law Number 6 of 2014 on Villages. The record of violations handled by the Election Supervisory Agency of Bone Bolango Regency in connection with the 2024 election was consulted as an additional source to establish which categories of violations were entered into the formal record. These documents were selected on three grounds: they establish the legal requirements against which the conduct under examination should be assessed; they record the official result and therefore the electoral context within which officials acted; and they constitute the formal record against which informants' accounts could be compared. The documents were analyzed to establish those requirements and that context, and were read alongside the interview material to identify points at which reported practices departed from stipulated requirements.

Observation and researcher position

Observation was conducted in two settings, with participant observation taking place in the first. The first setting comprised the political education sessions convened jointly by *Kesbangpol* and *Bawaslu* of Bone Bolango Regency in Tapa, Kabila, and Botupingge Subdistricts during the non-electoral stage, at which the first author was present as an invited resource person. In that capacity, the first author addressed the sessions and interacted directly with the village heads and village officials in attendance. Observation focused on the attendance and conduct of those officials, the manner in which the convening agencies presented the requirement of neutrality, and the responses elicited by that presentation. The second setting comprised the village offices visited in the course of arranging and conducting the interviews. There, observation focused on the administrative setting in which village officials work, direct interactions between officials and residents seeking services, and the presence of materials relating to the district development programs administered through the village. Observation took place concurrently with the interview period, between July 3 and 13, 2025, and was recorded in written field notes supplemented by photographic documentation. The photographs were retained as part of the audit trail and are not reproduced in this article in order to preserve the confidentiality of the informants.

The position occupied by the first author requires explicit acknowledgment because it both enabled the research and bears on the interpretation of the material obtained. Participation as a resource person in political education sessions provided direct access to village officials across three subdistricts and established the communication through which individual interviews were subsequently arranged. It also positioned the first author before those officials as an authority on the very requirement under investigation, which may have led them to provide accounts conforming to the normative expectations articulated during the sessions. Three considerations bear on the extent of this influence. The individual interviews were conducted separately from the sessions, at locations chosen by the informants and on subsequent dates. The questions focused on the duties performed and the demands encountered rather than on normative self-assessment. Most significantly, the accounts obtained include descriptions by officials of their own conduct that departed from the requirement presented during those sessions. This suggests that the accounts were not confined to reproducing normative expectations. Nevertheless, the material is interpreted in this article with that influence in view, and the accounts of community leaders approached independently through referral serve as a point of comparison.

The observational material was not treated as independent evidence of political conduct, which could not be directly observed during the fieldwork period. Instead, it was used to situate the interview accounts within the administrative and social settings to which they referred and to compare the normative statements made by officials in the formal setting of the sessions with the accounts the same officials gave in individual interviews.

Data analysis

Transcripts were analyzed thematically in three stages. In the first stage, each transcript was coded openly, with codes assigned to segments describing duties performed, demands received, responses given, and

normative references invoked. In the second stage, the codes were grouped into categories corresponding to the forms of pressure reported, the responses adopted in relation to them, and the normative grounds offered for those responses. In the third stage, the categories concerning normative grounds were examined against the dimensions of *Salbia*, and each dimension was retained only when supported by statements in which informants themselves articulated the corresponding normative content. The resulting correspondence is reported in the findings as a matrix relating forms of pressure to responses and the normative grounds invoked.

Trustworthiness

Four procedures were applied to establish the credibility of the analysis. The interview manuscripts and preliminary findings were returned to the informants for confirmation before the final analysis was compiled, allowing informants to verify, correct, or qualify the accounts attributed to them. Triangulation was conducted across informant categories, with accounts given by village heads and village officials compared with those given by community leaders situated outside the administrative hierarchy, and across data collection techniques, with interview material examined alongside observational and documentary material. Two members of the research team independently coded the interview manuscripts separately from the initial coding, and the resulting code assignments were compared, with discrepancies resolved through discussion until agreement was reached. This procedure ensured that the thematic categories reported here did not rest on the interpretation of a single analyst (Neuman, 2014). An audit trail comprising interview manuscripts, coding records, and analytical memoranda was maintained throughout the research process.

Limitations

Three limitations require acknowledgment. Interviews were conducted in July 2025 concerning an election held in November 2024. The accounts analyzed are therefore retrospective and subject to the limitations of recollection, particularly because informants already knew the election outcome at the time of the interviews. The study covers seven villages within a single regency. Consequently, the findings establish the relationship between structural position and normative reasoning within this setting rather than its distribution across other settings. The study also does not establish the proportion of village officials who departed from impartiality, since its data consist of accounts rather than an enumeration. Initial contact with informants occurred within a program at which the first author was present as a resource person, and the implications of that position for the accounts obtained are discussed in the preceding section.

Ethical considerations

Given the sensitivity of the subject and the need to protect the study population, established ethical procedures guided the research throughout. Every participant was given a clear account of what the study sought to establish and was assured of the right to withdraw at any time. Verbal informed consent was obtained before each interview. This approach was adopted in consideration of the participants' educational backgrounds and the manner in which they expressed their willingness to participate. Confidentiality was protected by anonymizing all collected materials and removing identifying information. Referral to psychological support was available to participants throughout the study, and the researcher remained available to assist when needed.

Findings

Patterns of political alignment among village officials

The accounts obtained in this study describe a pattern of political alignment extending across the village administrations examined. Informants holding the office of village head reported that alignment was general rather than exceptional during the election and that it extended upward to the subdistrict level of administration. One village head described the pattern in the following terms.

> “In principle, village heads must remain neutral during elections. However, it can be confirmed that during the Regional Head Election in Bone Bolango, all village heads were involved in supporting candidate pairs, and most of them supported the incumbent candidate. In reality, this involvement was not limited to village governments, as subdistrict authorities also played a similar role in supporting the candidate’s victory.” (Interview with Informant 1, July 3, 2025, 11:00–12:00 WITA)

The characterization offered in this account, namely that all village heads were involved, is the informant’s own and is reported here as such. The present study did not enumerate the officials who aligned themselves with candidates, nor does its design permit such a determination, since the material consists of accounts given by informants rather than observations of conduct or records of it. What the accounts establish is that alignment

was described as the ordinary course of the electoral period by informants drawn from the village administrations themselves and by community leaders situated outside them, and that no informant described it as exceptional.

Alignment of this kind acquires its electoral significance from the position that village officials occupy within the social organization of the village. Community leaders interviewed for this study described that position as one characterized by daily contact and practical dependence, in which officials are approached for assistance and are therefore well placed to influence residents' political preferences.

> "Village officials have a different level of closeness with the community compared with higher-level government authorities. They interact with residents every day, understand community conditions, and often become the place where people seek assistance. Therefore, their presence is often considered influential in shaping community political choices." (Interview with Informant 2, July 5, 2025, 20:00–21:00 WITA)

Two features of this pattern require attention before the mechanisms producing it are examined. The reported alignment was directed predominantly, though not exclusively, toward the candidacy of the serving regent, and it was described by officials as general practice rather than individual deviation. It was also reported as extending through the administrative tier above the village, indicating that the village constituted the terminal point of a chain of expectations rather than its origin.

Mechanisms through which political demands were transmitted

Three mechanisms emerge from the accounts. The first operated through hierarchical expectations unaccompanied by written instructions. Informants consistently stated that no written direction to support a candidacy had been issued. They were equally consistent in describing an apprehension that withholding support would affect the standing of the village in its dealings with the district administration.

> "There was no written instruction to support the Regent's candidacy. However, most ayahanda (village heads) and village officials supported the incumbent candidate because there was an implicit form of indirect pressure. There was concern that if we did not support the incumbent, our working relationship with the regency government would deteriorate, which could affect the continuity of development programs and public services in the village. Therefore, village heads chose to demonstrate support for the incumbent, although we also understood that, as village government officials, we should remain neutral in accordance with applicable regulations." (Interview with Informant 3, July 13, 2025, 10:00–11:00 WITA)

The second mechanism operated through the administrative duties assigned to village officials during the electoral period. Officials reported being assigned responsibilities at polling stations in connection with vote targets. They also reported that the *Bunga Desa* program, conducted during the same period, provided information through which communities favorably disposed toward a particular candidacy could be identified.

> "As subordinates, we are naturally expected to carry out the instructions of our superiors. We were assigned responsibilities at each polling station to ensure that the candidate's votes reached the predetermined targets. Furthermore, through the Bunga Desa program, we were able to identify voter bases and communities that could be encouraged to support candidates according to the direction of our superiors." (Interview with Informant 4, July 6, 2025, 09:00–10:00 WITA)

Materials relating to the district development programs were present in the village offices visited during fieldwork, and the statutory provisions consulted establish that the duties described fell within the administrative responsibilities of the village. The observational and documentary material therefore corroborates the administrative character of those duties, although it does not independently establish the political use to which, according to the accounts, they were put. That aspect rests on the accounts themselves.

The third mechanism operated through kinship. Where a candidate was related to a village head, the demands of the administrative hierarchy and the obligations of kinship were reported as competing claims. In at least one instance, the latter was reported to have prevailed.

> "As the head of village government, I was certainly placed in a dilemma. Various pressures were experienced, both structurally and through kinship relations, because one of the candidates was a family member. The choice was between siding with the superior administrative structure or maintaining family relationships. Under these circumstances, family ties became the primary

consideration rather than supporting the incumbent." (Interview with Informant 5, July 11, 2025, 14:00–15:00 WITA)

The three mechanisms differ in one respect that bears on the analysis. The first and second were transmitted through the administrative relationship between the village and the district and had consequences for the village as an institution, whereas the third arose from the personal position of the official and concerned obligations owed entirely outside the administration. The accounts indicate that the three mechanisms were encountered simultaneously rather than in isolation from one another.

Interpretation and negotiation of political demands

The accounts do not describe officials who complied without deliberation. Informants identified the conflict between the obligations attached to their office and the demands transmitted to them, articulated the terms of that conflict with precision, and, in several instances, characterized their own conduct as a departure from what their office required.

> "As village government officials, we are fully responsible for all stages of the election process. We are not allowed to support or favor any particular candidate. However, in terms of conscience, this principle often conflicts with actual practices. Demonstrating independence does not automatically eliminate our obligations as subordinates. Under these circumstances, there is indeed a violation, but supporting a candidate becomes a choice, especially when the candidate is the incumbent." (Interview with Informant 3, July 13, 2025, 10:00–11:00 WITA)

Deliberation of this kind produced different outcomes. One village head described the choice as difficult whichever course was taken, with consequences arising from both giving and withholding support. The informant located the conflict in the relationship between an instruction received and an oath taken.

> "Ideally, it would be better not to choose or support anyone because the situation is highly dilemmatic. Whether one supports or does not support a candidate, there are logical consequences that must be accepted. Obedience to orders conflicts with the oath of office. Meanwhile, it is extremely difficult for village government officials to escape political intervention from either incumbents or other candidates." (Interview with Informant 5, July 11, 2025, 14:00–15:00 WITA)

The same pattern was reported by several sources within village government. One village head described recognizing a possible conflict with the regulations while performing the duties assigned to him, while simultaneously characterizing himself as a subordinate obliged to carry out the instructions he received.

> "When we were given the responsibility of accommodating the community in the Bunga Desa activity during the stages of the Regional Head Election, our intuition indicated that the step conflicted with the regulations. Even so, as subordinates, orders must be carried out, including responsibility for the acquisition of votes at the polling stations." (Interview with Informant 6, July 4, 2025, 16:00–17:00 WITA)

The terms of this account merit attention. The informant occupies the office that formally heads the village administration, yet describes his position as that of a subordinate bound by instructions. This indicates that the hierarchical relationship reaches into the office at the apex of village government rather than terminating above it.

Two findings follow from these accounts. The demands transmitted to village officials were not encountered as unintelligible pressure but were assessed against a standard that officials were able to articulate in their own terms. That assessment did not, however, determine their responses. Officials who identified their conduct as a departure from the standard nevertheless proceeded with it, while the single instance in which hierarchical expectations were not followed was resolved by reference to kinship rather than to the standard that officials themselves had identified.

Normative reasoning and the articulation of *Salbia* values

The normative grounds invoked in the accounts were not distributed uniformly across the categories of informants. Community leaders articulated an explicit normative position and attributed it to customary tradition. One described the proper limits of official influence and located loyalty in regulations and commonly held values rather than in the individuals holding office.

> "In community life, the village head and his officials do indeed hold considerable influence. That influence, however, ought to be used to serve the community and not to direct the political choices of

residents. A village head must uphold the regulations and must not display partiality toward any particular candidate or political group, still less mobilize the community to attend political activities or to lend support to a given candidate. In our customary understanding, loyalty must be placed in the regulations and in the values held in common, and not merely in the person who holds office or power. Regrettably, in practice there remain village officials who neglect this very principle." (Interview with Informant 7, July 8, 2025, 19:30–20:30 WITA)

A second community leader stated the same position in terms of obedience, distinguishing obedience owed to legitimate regulations from obedience owed to a superior or to whoever holds power, and attributing that distinction to customary teaching.

> "A village head is elected to attend to the interests of the whole community, not only to the interests of particular persons or groups. For that reason, when the moment of a general election or a Regional Head Election arrives, the village head and his officials must be capable of restraining themselves. They must not use their position, their social relationships, or their influence to mobilize the community for particular political interests. There is a value taught in our customary tradition, namely that obedience and loyalty are owed to legitimate regulations and not to a superior or to whoever happens to hold power. Yet neither can we ignore that there remain village heads and officials who prefer to follow the political interests of their superiors rather than to maintain neutrality. This is where the problem lies, because the village government office may ultimately be used as an instrument of political interest." (Interview with Informant 8, July 10, 2025, 20:00–21:00 WITA)

These two accounts correspond to identifiable dimensions of *Salbia*. The location of loyalty in regulations and commonly held values rather than in individuals corresponds to the dimension of conditional obedience. The insistence that the village head is elected to attend to the interests of the community as a whole corresponds to *ta'uwa*. The stipulation that influence be exercised in service to the community rather than to direct political choices corresponds to propriety. Both informants explicitly invoked *adat* as the source of these commitments, establishing that the normative content at issue is present within the moral vocabulary of the communities studied and was not introduced by the analysis.

The accounts of village officials present a different configuration. Officials articulated the normative conflict in the language of their office rather than that of custom, referring to the oath of office, conscience, regulations, and the obligations attached to a subordinate position. They did not invoke customary categories when accounting for their conduct. The normative standard was therefore available to officials in a form that enabled them to identify their conduct as a departure from it, while the customary repertoire through which that standard is grounded in the community was articulated by those situated outside the administrative hierarchy rather than by the officials themselves. Both community leaders also described the discrepancy between the normative position they articulated and the conduct they observed, noting that officials continued to follow the political interests of their superiors and that the village government office was consequently liable to be used as an instrument of political interest.

The five dimensions of *Salbia* and the evidentiary status of each within the present study are set out in Table 1. The table identifies where each dimension was articulated, which category of informant articulated it, and whether it was reflected in conduct, thereby distinguishing dimensions supported by the empirical material from those that were recognized but not acted upon.

Table 1. Dimensions of *Salbia* and their evidentiary status in the present study

Dimension	Content of the norm	Status in the present study
Conditional obedience	Obedience is not absolute but is conditional upon conformity with legal and customary norms	Articulated explicitly by community leaders and attributed by them to adat; not invoked by officials, who complied while recognizing the conflict between the demand and the obligations of their office
Steadfastness of principle	Maintenance of ethical commitments under pressure	Present in the accounts of officials as an unresolved tension between the oath of office and the

		instructions received; not realized in conduct
Consistency with regulations	Action is governed by legal norms, and residents are treated alike irrespective of political preference	Recognized by an official at the time of acting, who recognized a possible conflict with regulation and nevertheless proceeded; recognized but overridden
Ta'uwa, the wisdom of leadership	Leadership is grounded in the common interest and maintains the balance between government and residents	Articulated by a community leader as the basis upon which a village head holds office; not invoked by officials when accounting for their conduct
Propriety	Conduct that contravenes neither state law nor customary law, and that establishes the ethical limits of official loyalty	Articulated by a community leader as the limit of official influence; contested in practice, since kinship supplied a competing claim that prevailed in one instance

The relationship between the forms of pressure reported, the responses adopted in response to them, and the normative grounds invoked to account for those responses is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Forms of pressure, reported responses, and normative grounds invoked

Form of pressure	**Channel of transmission**	**Reported response**	**Normative ground invoked by informants**	**Corresponding *Salbia* dimension**
Hierarchical expectation without written instruction	District administration through the subdistrict tier	Demonstration of support for the serving regent	Apprehension regarding the continuity of programs and services; acknowledged obligation of neutrality	Conditional obedience, recognized but not applied
Duties allocated during the electoral period, including vote targets and the Bunga Desa programme	Administrative assignments	Performance of the duties allocated	Recognition at the time of performance of a possible conflict with regulation	Consistency with regulations, recognized but overridden
Kinship relation to a candidate	Familial obligations	Departure from hierarchical expectations in favour of kin	Obligation owed to family	Propriety, contested between competing claims
Expectation of impartial service held by residents	Daily interaction and practical dependence	Articulation of a normative position by community leaders	Loyalty owed to regulation and to commonly held values rather than to individuals holding office; leadership exercised for the community as a whole	Conditional obedience, ta'uwa, and propriety, articulated explicitly as adat

Taken together, these findings establish three matters relevant to the argument of this article. Political alignment among village officials was described as general and was directed predominantly toward the candidacy of the serving regent. It was produced by demands transmitted through the administrative relationship between the village and the district, supplemented in individual instances by kinship obligations, and occurred without written instructions. The standard against which this conduct may be assessed was recognized by officials and articulated in customary terms by community leaders. Nevertheless, the conduct departed from that standard. This locates the explanatory problem in the relationship between the standard and the conditions under which officials acted, rather than in the availability of the standard itself.

Discussion

Structural conditions as an interconnected system

The three mechanisms described in the findings are more adequately understood as components of a single arrangement than as separate sources of pressure. The electoral context provided the occasion for that arrangement to operate, since a contest divided among several competitive pairs and conducted with high voter participation raises the marginal value of any resource capable of delivering votes in blocs. The office of village head constitutes such a resource by virtue of the dual position established by the post-1998 framework of village government: the office is accountable downward to residents while remaining dependent upward on district administration for the resources through which village development proceeds (Antlöv, 2003). Program implementation provided the channel through which that dependence was converted into electoral service, consistent with studies of Indonesian elections showing how government programs are designed and routed to serve electoral purposes (Aspinall & Berenschot, 2019). The administrative authority that officials exercise over residents completed the arrangement by making their endorsement consequential, since officials who control access to services and allocations are positioned to influence the preferences of those who depend on them (Aspinall & As'ad, 2015).

The absence of written instructions is a feature of this arrangement rather than an incidental characteristic. Demands transmitted through apprehension concerning future administrative relations require no documentary form and leave no documentary record. Consequently, the conduct they produce has real effects while remaining unavailable to procedures that depend on documentary proof. Studies of bureaucratic conduct in Indonesian elections have described the pressures officials face (Nadzirin et al., 2025; Ryu & Virindra, 2023), while comparative literature has identified the mechanism through which such pressure operates, namely officials' exposure to transfer, demotion, and the withdrawal of resources when directions are not followed (Dahlström & Lapuente, 2022; Lee & Park, 2021). The present case indicates that this exposure need not be actualized, or even explicitly stated, to be effective.

The outcome of the election bears on the interpretation of this arrangement in a manner that merits attention. The candidacy toward which alignment was predominantly directed was unsuccessful, and the alignment described by officials therefore did not secure the continuation of the relationships whose disruption they feared. Had compliance been governed by a calculation directed toward the anticipated victor, a closely contested election involving several candidate pairs would have encouraged restraint or the division of support, since the identity of the incoming executive could not have been known in advance. That officials nevertheless aligned with the serving executive suggests that the operative consideration was the authority to which they were currently subordinate rather than the authority to which they would subsequently be answerable. Dependence in this arrangement attaches to the office currently exercising discretion over village resources, giving it a force that the literature on position security, framed in terms of anticipated consequences, does not fully capture.

The pattern of reporting in the regency illuminates the mechanism through which the conduct described here escaped formal attention. The reports and findings recorded by the district supervisory body in connection with this election, as established through consultation with that body during this research, concerned money politics and the authenticity of documents submitted in support of candidacy, including educational and medical certificates. By contrast, the neutrality of village heads and village officials generated no reports at all. The supervisory channel was therefore available and in use, and the absence of reports concerning village officials cannot be attributed to the inaccessibility or disuse of that channel. This absence is better explained by the distribution of complainants. Allegations of money politics and defective candidacy documents are more likely to generate complainants with a direct interest, since rival campaign organizations have both the incentive and the capacity to compile and submit them. Such allegations also concern discrete acts for which documentary evidence can be assembled. The partisan conduct of village officials, by contrast, benefits a candidate without necessarily producing an identifiable injured party with the standing and incentive to report it. Moreover, such conduct is transmitted through directions issued without a written record, leaving residents who might wish to report it with little evidentiary basis on which to proceed.

This distribution carries a further implication. The residents best placed to observe the conduct of village officials are also those who depend on those officials for administrative services and access to the programs administered by the village, and who are, in many instances, bound to them through kinship. The embeddedness that makes village officials valuable to candidates as instruments of mobilization is therefore the same embeddedness that makes their conduct difficult to report, since the cost of reporting falls on

individuals who must subsequently continue to live under the authority of those they report. The problem of village bureaucratic neutrality is accordingly mischaracterized when treated as a deficiency of sanctions. It is more accurately described as a deficiency of complaints, which no increase in the severity of available sanctions would, by itself, remedy. The expectation that community participation will supplement institutional supervision, which informs the design of electoral oversight in Indonesia, consequently requires qualification in the rural setting examined here. Participation in supervision presupposes a reporting subject whose relationship with the official concerned allows the cost of reporting to be borne. That condition is not met when the official in question controls access to the services and allocations on which the reporting subject depends.

Agency within structural constraint

The accounts obtained do not support a description of village officials as passive recipients of pressure. Officials stated the standards applicable to their conduct, identified the ways in which the demands transmitted to them conflicted with those standards, and characterized their own actions as departures from them. One official located the conflict in the relationship between an instruction and an oath, while another acknowledged being aware of a possible regulatory violation while performing the duty in question. Deliberation of this kind is incompatible with an account in which structural position determines conduct entirely, and it confirms the proposition that cultural orientation and role perception mediate the pressures to which officials are subject (Park & Han, 2018). Comparative research on civil servants facing undemocratic pressure has established, however, that resistance depends less on individual disposition than on the organizational protections officials perceive themselves to have (Cingolani et al., 2026), that the propensity to resist varies with the organizational setting in which officials are placed (Silveira et al., 2026), and that acts of moral courage occur when officials can draw on professional and associational support (Kucinskas & Silveira, 2026).

The form that this mediation took, however, requires a qualification of that proposition. Agency was exercised in the case examined here, and in one instance it resulted in a departure from hierarchical expectations. Yet that departure was based on kinship rather than on the standard of impartiality that officials themselves had articulated. Studies of rural political practice in Indonesia have shown that kinship networks sustain the legitimacy of local political support (Saragih & Ivanna, 2024; Siswandani & Prasetyo, 2022), and the present findings indicate that such networks function as an alternative claim on loyalty rather than as a counterweight to political capture. What the accounts describe, therefore, is the exercise of choice among competing loyalties, with impartiality being one that officials recognized without adopting. The mediation of structural pressure by normative orientation does not, in itself, produce impartial conduct and may instead redistribute partiality among its possible objects.

This qualification is consistent with evidence from rural settings elsewhere, where the orientation of local actors toward the governing authority has been found to follow from their institutional position rather than from the social and material attributes commonly assumed to generate independent political judgment (Guan, 2018). According to this evidence, those situated within the apparatus of the state are among its most dependable supporters. The village officials examined here occupy precisely such a position at the point where the state apparatus meets the population it administers.

The distinctiveness of *Salbia* among local normative orders

The proposition that a local normative order bears on bureaucratic impartiality cannot rest on the local origins of that order, since values of local origin have been shown to operate in support of political capture as readily as against it. The distinction required is therefore structural and concerns the object to which the normative claim attaches and the direction in which it operates, rather than the strength with which it is held.

Research on village official neutrality in the 2024 elections in Bantul Regency identifies *ewuh pekewuh* as one of the factors driving non-neutrality, alongside kinship relations and pressure exerted by district political elites (Bela & Rahmawati, 2026). The normative content of this orientation operates in the direction of compliance, since it provides reasons for avoiding the discomfort associated with refusal. It therefore reinforces precisely the hierarchical expectation that impartiality would require officials to resist.

The case of *siri' na pacce* in South Sulawesi is even more instructive because the two documented aspects of this value converge in the same direction. Studies of its operation in customary dispute settlement describe *siri'* as an internal mechanism of shame that restrains conduct liable to disgrace the individual and the family, and *pesse* as a disposition of empathy and solidarity that binds the actor to kin. Together, these values orient disputes toward settlement within the family and away from formal or public adjudication, since recourse to the latter is itself regarded as bringing disgrace upon the household (Hartono & Wijaya, 2025). Research on

political dynasty formation in the same province documents the mobilization of these values to legitimize the hegemony of a family over local office and to sustain the patron-client relationships on which that hegemony rested (Sofyandi et al., 2019). On this evidence, the restraining force of *siri'* attaches to conduct that would bring shame upon the actor and the household, while the solidarity of *pesse* binds the actor to kin and patron. Neither provides a basis for rejecting a direction issued by a superior or a claim asserted by a relative. Where the superior is also a patron or relative, these same values bind the official even more closely. The orientation away from formal complaints also bears directly on the analysis advanced above, since a normative order that treats recourse to formal procedures as itself disgraceful compounds the deficiency of complaints rather than remedying it.

Salbia is distinguished from both in the structure of its normative claim. The customary order recorded for premodern Gorontalo society conditions obedience to *ta'uwa* on conformity with customary norms and collective welfare, so that the order itself provides grounds on which a direction may be refused (Haga, 1981). The claim attaches to the relationship between authority and norms rather than to the relationship between the actor and personal honor or kinship, making its operation limiting rather than binding. The accounts of community leaders reported above articulate this structure directly, locating loyalty in regulations and commonly held values rather than in those who hold office, and attributing this position to customary teaching. Comparative evidence from the Korean civil service similarly indicates that cultural orientation may dispose officials toward obedience when they face competing political demands (Park & Han, 2018). This further underscores that the direction in which a cultural orientation operates is not determined by its local character.

Three qualifications attend this comparison. First, it is structural rather than evaluative and establishes no ranking among the normative orders considered. Each performs functions in its own setting that the present comparison does not address. Second, its reach is partial, since conditional obedience addresses the vertical relationship between an official and a superior but provides no corresponding limit on horizontal claims. The findings reported above include an instance in which hierarchical expectations were displaced by kinship rather than by the standard of impartiality, indicating that the Gorontalo setting is not exempt from the mechanism documented for South Sulawesi. Third, its distribution is limited, since the normative resources on which rural communities draw are not held uniformly. The presence of a customary order in the ethnographic record does not establish that it has equivalent currency in every village subject to it (Jaraíz-Arroyo et al., 2025).

The limits of *Salbia*-based ethical resilience

The central difficulty revealed by the findings is that the normative repertoire was present, yet conduct departed from it. Community leaders stated the position precisely and attributed it to customary teaching, while officials identified the conflict between the demands they received and the obligations of their office. Nevertheless, alignment extended across the village administrations examined. The availability of a normative framework is therefore insufficient to produce the conduct that the framework prescribes, and any proposal that treats the articulation of local values as a remedy for non-neutrality misunderstands the nature of the problem.

Three features of the case explain this insufficiency. The repertoire was articulated most fully by those situated outside the administrative hierarchy, with the consequence that the individuals who stated the norm were not those subject to the demands, while officials expressed the conflict in the language of their office without drawing on the customary grounds that would have supported refusal. Furthermore, the costs of invoking the norm fall on the individual official, since the apprehension described in the accounts concerned the standing of the village in its dealings with the district and, consequently, the resources available to the official's own constituents, whereas the benefits of impartial administration are distributed across the electorate. Finally, the arrangement generated no complaints, as the preceding analysis of the supervisory record indicates, so that the normative claim was never translated into a procedure capable of imposing consequences.

It follows that the conditions under which *Salbia* could influence conduct are institutional rather than pedagogical. Comparative research on the resilience of public agencies under political pressure locates that capacity in organizational structure, collaboration between institutions, and the maintenance of professional standards, rather than in the disposition of individual officials considered in isolation (Cingolani et al., 2026; Stauffer et al., 2024). Applied to the setting examined here, the relevant conditions include insulating the village office from district discretion over the resources on which it depends; governing programs such as *Bunga Desa* through rules specified and published before electoral periods; providing complaint procedures that do not require initiation by residents who depend on the official concerned; and invoking customary norms collectively rather than individually, whether through village deliberative institutions or associations of village heads, so that the cost of refusal is distributed rather than borne alone. In the absence of such conditions, *Salbia*

provides a vocabulary through which departures from impartiality may be described and regretted. It is proposed here with this limitation explicitly acknowledged, rather than as a sufficient instrument of reform.

Theoretical contribution

The analysis advances three propositions. The first concerns the nature of the enforcement problem. The conduct examined here generated no complaints, although the supervisory channel was used for other categories of violation. The explanation lies in the distribution of complainants rather than in the severity of available sanctions, since partisan administration benefits a candidate without producing an injured party with both the standing and the incentive to report. The failure of village bureaucratic neutrality is accordingly better described as a deficiency of complaints than as a deficiency of sanctions, and measures directed toward the stringency of penalties address a condition that is not operative in cases of this kind.

The second concerns the relationship between normative orientation and conduct. The literature on cultural orientation has established that officials mediate political pressure through the normative frameworks available to them (Park & Han, 2018), and the present case specifies the limits of that mediation by distinguishing the availability of a normative framework from its efficacy. A recognized local repertoire was shown to coexist with systematic departures from the conduct it prescribes. This indicates that normative orientation shapes the vocabulary through which officials account for their conduct without necessarily determining that conduct when structural dependence is pronounced.

The third concerns the conceptual resources available for studying administrative impartiality outside the settings in which the concept was formulated. Conditional obedience, as articulated in the customary order of Gorontalo, constitutes a normative limit on authority that is internal to a local tradition rather than imported from a professional code. It therefore offers a basis for impartiality that is intelligible to officials in their own terms. The value of this resource is not that it dispenses with institutional reform, but that it identifies a normative basis on which such reform might be justified locally. This is particularly relevant in settings where decentralization has transferred authority to local hierarchies without subjecting it to effective popular control (Johnson, 2001).

Conclusion

The question pursued in this article concerned how village officials interpreted and responded to the political demands placed upon them during an electoral contest, and what bearing a local normative order had on that response. The evidence establishes that the failure of impartiality in the case examined did not result from the absence of an applicable standard. Officials stated the standard, identified their conduct as a departure from it, and acted contrary to it, while community leaders articulated the same standard in customary terms and attributed it to *adat*. The evidence identifies the structural dependence of the village office on district administration for the resources through which village government operates as a decisive factor. This dependence was transmitted through expectations rather than instructions and therefore left no record on which procedures based on documentary proof could act. The defeat of the candidacy toward which alignment was directed further indicates that this dependence attached to the authority then exercising discretion over village resources rather than to the authority that would subsequently hold office.

Three boundaries confine these conclusions. First, they describe seven villages within a single regency during one electoral cycle and establish a relationship between structural position and normative reasoning within that setting rather than its distribution elsewhere. Second, they rest on accounts given approximately eight months after the events described and on the willingness of officials to characterize their own conduct as irregular. The convergence between those accounts and those of community leaders supports these accounts without placing them beyond question. Third, they concern a customary order whose currency in the villages studied is evidenced by informants' accounts but is not thereby established for the province as a whole.

It follows that proposals to strengthen village bureaucratic impartiality through the cultivation of local values will not succeed unless they are accompanied by changes to the conditions under which officials act. Three such conditions are identified in this article: the discretion exercised by district administration over resources on which villages depend; the governance of programs implemented through village structures during electoral periods; and the dependence of complaint procedures on individuals who are themselves dependent on the officials whose conduct they would report. Each of these conditions can be addressed through institutional design, and none is addressed by measures directed toward the severity of sanctions. Two lines of inquiry follow from the analysis. The first concerns whether the deficiency of complaints identified here also occurs in settings with different supervisory structures. The second concerns whether normative orders that condition

obedience on conformity with a norm, of which *Salbia* is one example, become more effective when invoked collectively through village institutions rather than by officials acting alone.

Acknowledgements

The authors express their gratitude to the National Unity and Political Agency (*Kesbangpol*) of Bone Bolango Regency for issuing the research permit and facilitating access to the research sites, and to the Election Supervisory Agency (*Bawaslu*) of Bone Bolango Regency and its representative, Sofyan Djama, for providing institutional documentation and facilitating contact with community leader informants. The authors also thank all informants for the time and candor with which they contributed to this study.

Funding Statement

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Authors' Contributions

Ramli Mahmud: Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Data curation, Formal analysis, Writing – original draft, Writing – review and editing, Project administration, Supervision. **Sastro M. Wantu:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Validation, Writing – review and editing, Supervision. **Intan Tiara Kartika:** Resources, Formal analysis, Validation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review and editing. **Nurul Mawahda:** Data curation, Formal analysis, Validation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review and editing. All authors have read and approved the final version of the manuscript and agree to be accountable for their respective contributions to the research.

Statement on the Use of Artificial Intelligence in Article Preparation

During the preparation and the subsequent revision of this manuscript, the authors used Claude (Anthropic) as an assisting tool for language editing, for the English translation of the article and of the interview material, and for the restructuring of the manuscript in response to the reviewers' comments. Following the use of this tool, the authors reviewed and revised the manuscript as necessary and remain fully responsible for the content, interpretation, and materials presented in the published article.

Statement of Originality and Plagiarism-Free Declaration

The authors declare that this article is an original work that has not been published elsewhere and is not under consideration by any other journal, and that it is free from plagiarism. All sources consulted have been properly acknowledged in accordance with the applicable standards.

Declaration of Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest in relation to this research, its authorship, or its publication. Access to the research locations was facilitated by the National Unity and Political Agency and by the Election Supervisory Agency of Bone Bolango Regency, neither of which had any role in the design of the study, in the collection or analysis of the data, in the preparation of the manuscript, or in the decision to submit it for publication.

Transparency Statement

The corresponding author affirms that this manuscript provides an honest, accurate, and transparent account of the study reported, that no important aspects of the study have been omitted, and that any departures from the study as originally planned have been explained.

Data Availability Statement

The data underlying the findings of this study consist of interview manuscripts containing information that could compromise the privacy of the research participants, and they are therefore not publicly available. Anonymised extracts may be obtained from the corresponding author upon reasonable request, subject to the conditions under which informed consent was given.

References

Abdi, A. (2026). Local political competition and bureaucratic ethics: An analysis of the local government integrity index in South Sulawesi. *Journal of Contemporary Local Politics*, *5*(1), 137–149. https://doi.org/10.46507/jclp.v5i1.761

Angkasa, N., & Pelangi, I. (2024). Implementation of village heads' neutralism in the general election campaign based on Law Number 6 of 2014 concerning Villages. *Muhammadiyah Law Review*, *8*(1), 42–48. https://doi.org/10.24127/mlr.v8i1.3178

Antlöv, H. (2003). Village government and rural development in Indonesia: The new democratic framework. *Bulletin of Indonesian Economic Studies*, *39*(2), 193–214. https://doi.org/10.1080/00074910302013

Aspinall, E., & As'ad, M. U. (2015). The patronage patchwork: Village brokerage networks and the power of the state in an Indonesian election. *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde*, *171*(2–3), 165–195. https://doi.org/10.1163/22134379-17102004

Aspinall, E., & Berenschot, W. (2019). *Democracy for Sale: Elections, Clientelism, and the State in Indonesia*. Cornell University Press. http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7591/j.ctvdtphhq

Atmojo, M. E., Sulaksono, T., Hanif, N. A., & Fridayani, H. D. (2023). The problem of neutrality of the State Civil Apparatus (ASN) in the 2020 regional head election. *Jurnal Aristo (Social, Politic, Humaniora)*, *11*(2), 220–237. https://doi.org/10.24269/ars.v11i2.6101

Babbie, E. R. (2021). *The practice of social research*. Cengage Learning. https://www.cengage.com/c/the-practice-of-social-research-15e-babbie/9780357360767

Badan Pengawas Pemilihan Umum Republik Indonesia. (2024). *Surat Edaran Nomor 92 Tahun 2024 tentang Penanganan Pelanggaran Netralitas Kepala Desa pada Pemilihan Kepala Daerah Serentak Tahun 2024*.

Bela, B. A., & Rahmawati, D. E. (2026). The neutrality of village officials in the 2024 simultaneous regional elections in Bantul Regency. *Jurnal Aristo (Social, Politic, Humaniora)*, *14*(2), 1195–1210. https://doi.org/10.24269/ars.v14i2.12716

Bertelli, A. M., & Falletti, V. (2026). Bureaucracy under pressure: Structural integrity and the ethics of democratic administration. *International Review of Administrative Sciences*, *92*(3), 350-368. https://doi.org/10.1177/00208523251406200

Cingolani, L., Lotta, G., Silveira, M. C., Gomide, A. A., Masson, P., Miranda, P. dos S., & Guedes-Neto, J. (2026). The agency of (public) agencies: How perceived organizational protections shape civil servants' resistance to democratic backsliding. *International Review of Administrative Sciences*. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1177/00208523261440169

Dahlström, C., & Lapuente, V. (2022). Comparative bureaucratic politics. *Annual Review of Political Science*, *25*, 43–63. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-051120-102543

Ganesha, G., Adnyani, N. K. S., Fajar, N. M. A. P., & Dantes, K. F. (2026). Utilitarian analysis of the enforcement of village head neutrality. *Awang Long Law Review*, *8*(4), 984–990. https://doi.org/10.56301/awl.v8i4.2173

González, C. I., & Sanabria-Pulido, P. (2026). When politics shapes administration: Bureaucratic autonomy, policy role separation, and organizational capacity in an institutionally weak public administration. *Public Administration and Development*. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1002/pad.70050

Guan, Y. (2018). Demand for democracy in resilient authoritarianism: Evidence from rural China. *Democratization*, *25*(7), 1073–1092. https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2018.1445086

Gusniar, A., Maryanah, T., & Kurniawan, R. C. (2026). Strategies for preventing vote buying and enforcing village apparatus neutrality in the 2024 elections. *Journal of Social Politics and Governance*, *8*(1), 209–226. https://doi.org/10.24076/bqh1vw61

Haga, B. J. (1981). *Lima Pahalaa: Susunan masyarakat, hukum adat dan kebijaksanaan pemerintahan di Gorontalo*. Djambatan.

Hartono, C., & Wijaya, A. (2025). Tinjauan yuridis terhadap siri' dan pesse sebagai asas moral dalam penyelesaian sengketa waris adat Bugis. *Jurnal Ilmu Hukum, Humaniora dan Politik*, *6*(2), 1101–1110. https://doi.org/10.38035/jihhp.v6i2.6774

Husain, M. N., & Nasir, M. (2021). Bureaucracy involvement in local election in Konawe Selatan District. *Indonesian Journal of Innovation and Applied Sciences*, *1*(1), 52–58. https://doi.org/10.47540/ijias.v1i1.157

Indiahono, D. (2022). Bureaucratic neutrality index in direct regional head elections: Optimism in developing professional bureaucracy in Indonesia. *Public Policy and Administration*, *21*(3), 249–261. https://doi.org/10.5755/j01.ppaa.21.3.31788

Jaraíz-Arroyo, G., Ruiz-Ballesteros, E., and García, M. (2025). Eco-esteem and depopulation: Broadening the perspective on the demographic challenge in the rural world. *Rural Sociology*, *90*(1), 46–63. https://doi.org/10.1111/ruso.12575

Johnson, C. (2001). Local democracy, democratic decentralisation and rural development: Theories, challenges and options for policy. *Development Policy Review*, *19*(4), 521–532. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-7679.00149

Keputusan Komisi Pemilihan Umum Kabupaten Bone Bolango Nomor 1545 Tahun 2024 tentang Penetapan Hasil Pemilihan Bupati dan Wakil Bupati Bone Bolango Tahun 2024. https://jdih.kpu.go.id/kepkpukabkot/download_abstrak/118115

Kucinskas, J. L., & Silveira, M. C. (2026). Acts of moral courage among civil servants under democratic backsliding: A comparison of the Trump and Bolsonaro administrations. *International Review of Administrative Sciences*. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1177/00208523261477053

Lee, D. S., & Park, S. (2021). Bureaucratic responsiveness in times of political crisis: The case of presidential impeachment. *Public Administration*, *99*(3), 563–580. https://doi.org/10.1111/padm.12701

Lewis, D., & Hossain, A. (2022). Local political consolidation in Bangladesh: Power, informality and patronage. *Development and Change*, *53*(2), 356–375. https://doi.org/10.1111/dech.12534

Mahmud, R., Adjie, Z., Wantu, A., & Yunus, R. (2024). Penguatan perilaku rasional politik birokrasi (ASN, kepala desa beserta perangkat desa) di Kecamatan Kabila dan Kecamatan Bulango Timur. *Journal of Human and Education*, *4*(5), 1159–1164. https://garuda.kemdiktisaintek.go.id/documents/detail/4640869

Mahmud, R., Djaafar, L., Wantu, S. M., & Adjie, Z. (2024). Netralitas birokrasi (ASN, kepala desa beserta perangkat desa) di Kecamatan Botupingge dan Kecamatan Suwawa Selatan. *Journal of Human and Education*, *4*(5), 1144–1151. https://jahe.or.id/index.php/jahe/article/view/1707

Mahmud, R., Yunus, R., & Adjie, Z. (2022). Alternative in strengthening bureaucratic neutrality through political culture in the 2019 election in Boalemo Regency. *Inovasi: Politik dan Kebijakan*, *19*(2), 187–199. https://doi.org/10.33626/inovasi.v19i2.597

Marvasti, A. B. (2004). *Qualitative research in sociology*. SAGE Publications. https://us.sagepub.com/en-us/sam/qualitative-research-in-sociology/book224943

Maulana, M. A., Nurfaisal, M. D., & Al-Ra'zie, Z. H. (2025). Restoring integrity: Re-voting of the 2025 Serang Regent election and its transformative power for local democracy. *Journal of Contemporary Local Politics*, *4*(1), 81–91. https://doi.org/10.46507/jclp.v4i1.708

Mumtaz, E., Fatimah, B. W. N., Al Farisi, Y., Sari, T., Laksintya, A. C., & Budiono, A. (2026). Legal analysis of civil servant neutrality in general elections. *Journal of Human Interaction and Social Studies*, *1*(2), 97–105. https://doi.org/10.65310/735fy090

Nadzirin, A., Sukmariningsih, R. M., & Mashari, M. (2025). Does the State Civil Apparatus violate neutrality during elections? *Journal of Sustainable Development and Regulatory Issues*, *3*(2), 400–433. https://doi.org/10.53955/jsderi.v3i2.112

Neuman, W. L. (2014). *Social research methods: Qualitative and quantitative approaches*. Pearson. https://www.pearson.com/en-gb/subject-catalog/p/social-research-methods-pearson-new-international-edition/P200000005113/9781292033617

Park, C.-O., & Han, S. (2018). Bureaucratic responses to the cross pressures of political neutrality in relation to cultural orientation and role perception: The case of Korean civil servants. *The Korean Journal of Policy Studies*, *33*(3), 47–71. https://doi.org/10.52372/kjps33303

Raiu, C. (2026). Cutting too close to the bone? Fragilizing the democratic resilience of public administration. *International Review of Administrative Sciences*. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1177/00208523261478274

Renaldi, I., Halawa, H. S., Wahyuni, N., & Fajri, H. (2025). Empowering public administrators: Ethics and public service values. *Journal of Public Affairs Education*. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1080/15236803.2025.2500688

Rifai, R., & Haeril, H. (2024). Dilema etis dan imparsialitas birokrasi pada Pilkada serentak Kota Bima 2024. *Journal of Governance and Local Politics*, *6*(2), 293–303. https://doi.org/10.47650/jglp.v6i2.1554

Rizal, A. N., Al-Zahra, K. K., & Agustina, A. V. A. (2025). Implementasi penanganan pelanggaran netralitas Aparatur Sipil Negara pada Pemilihan Kepala Daerah 2024 di Kabupaten Mojokerto. *Jurnal Administrasi Pemerintahan Desa*, *6*(2), 1–13. https://doi.org/10.47134/villages.v6i2.259

Ryu, S., & Virindra, N. (2023). Impaired neutrality: A propensity that occurs among Indonesian bureaucrats in the election. *Policy & Governance Review*, *7*(1), 38–53. https://doi.org/10.30589/pgr.v7i1.622

Saragih, A. Y., & Ivanna, J. (2024). Politik kekerabatan dalam pemilihan kepala desa di Desa Dolog Huluan Kabupaten Simalungun. *Journal on Education*, *6*(4), 20619–20626. https://doi.org/10.31004/joe.v6i4.6114

Sekpe, S. S., Upav, F. S., & Joseph, O. I. (2025). Political parties and electoral administration in Nigeria and Ghana: Exploring the nexus, 2015–2024. *Journal of Contemporary Social Research*, *9*(1), 14–42. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19946057

Silveira, M. C., Lotta, G., Cingolani, L., Guedes-Neto, J., Gomide, A., & Souza, P. (2026). The organizational dynamics of bureaucratic resistance to undemocratic pressures: A conjoint experiment in Brazil. *Public Administration Review*. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1111/puar.70097

Siswandani, D., & Prasetyo, K. B. (2022). Kuasa jejaring kerabat dalam praktik politik lokal pedesaan (kajian antropologi politik). *Umbara*, *7*(1), 50–60. https://doi.org/10.24198/umbara.v7i2.39131

Sofyandi F., A. G., Erawan, I K. P., & Bandiyah. (2019). Rekonstruksi nilai siri' na pacce dalam pembentukan dinasti politik Yasin Limpo. *Politika Udayana*, *1*(2). https://ojs.unud.ac.id/index.php/politika/article/view/56470

Staronova, K., & Knox, C. (2024). Politicisation of the civil service: Contestation and context. *NISPAcee Journal of Public Administration and Policy*, *17*(2), 215–237. https://doi.org/10.2478/nispa-2024-0019

Stauffer, B., Sager, F., & Kuenzler, J. (2024). Public agency resilience in times of democratic backsliding: Structure, collaboration and professional standards. *Governance*, *37*(1), 21–40. https://doi.org/10.1111/gove.12802

Suswanta, S., & Setiawan, A. (2023). Regulatory ambiguity and its implications for the neutrality of the State Civil Apparatus in the vortex of practical politics. *Cosmogov: Jurnal Ilmu Pemerintahan*, *9*(1). https://doi.org/10.24198/cosmogov.v9i1.45371

Toral, G. (2024). How patronage delivers: Political appointments, bureaucratic accountability, and service delivery in Brazil. *American Journal of Political Science*, *68*(2), 797–815. https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.12758

Zafarullah, H., & Kaiser, Z. R. M. A. (2025). Beyond Weber: The Bangladesh bureaucracy and the limits of theoretical models. *Asian Journal of Comparative Politics*. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1177/20578911251363717