

Dynamics of Power and Local Democracy in the Perspective of Political Humanism, Studies in Regional Government.

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Article Info

Article history:

Received Januari 12th, 2025

Revised Maret 20th, 2025

Accepted Juni 26th, 2025

Keywords:

Local Democracy; Power Dynamics; Political Humanism; Capability Approach; Decentralization; Governance; Dignity.

ABSTRACT

This study examines the dynamics of power and local democracy through the lens of political humanism in Seruni Regency (pseudonym). It aims to explain how formal democratic institutions interact with informal power mechanisms and how these dynamics affect dignity and citizen agency. A qualitative approach was employed using an embedded single-case study design with process tracing, selected to capture relational and hidden governance practices. The research was conducted in Seruni Regency because it combines active democratic procedures with persistent concerns about agenda control and brokerage. Data were generated from semi-structured interviews with 30 participants (18 institutional respondents and 12 key informants) and supported by observation and document analysis; participants were purposively selected for their strategic involvement in planning, budgeting, oversight, service delivery, and civic monitoring. Findings show that local democracy is procedurally vibrant but substantively stratified: visible bargaining is accompanied by agenda filtering and preference shaping that normalize dependency and limit effective contestation. Humanistic outcomes are uneven, as capability expansion coexists with stigmatizing administrative encounters and discretionary gatekeeping. The study recommends strengthening agenda transparency, protecting dissent, and institutionalizing dignity-centered service standards.



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INTRODUCTION

Local democracy has become one of the most consequential arenas in which power is produced, negotiated, and contested in contemporary governance. While national-level democratic institutions often attract the greatest attention, the everyday reality of democracy how citizens encounter authority, how public resources are distributed, and how collective decisions are justified frequently unfolds in districts, municipalities, and provinces. In this setting, decentralization and the strengthening of local autonomy are commonly expected to bring government closer to citizens, increase responsiveness, and widen participation (Trowbridge, 2024). Yet, the same institutional proximity can also intensify elite capture, patronage networks, and informal domination, especially where economic disparities, identity politics, and administrative dependence remain strong. This research is positioned within that tension: local democracy can simultaneously broaden civic agency and reproduce hierarchies of influence, thereby making the dynamics of power inseparable from the quality and meaning of democratic life (Falanga, 2024).

Recent scholarship on local governance has advanced important explanations regarding electoral competition, political decentralization, clientelism, and bureaucratic reform. Many studies map how local executive elections shape coalition building, how political parties and local strongmen mobilize support, and how fiscal decentralization affects service delivery (Asante, 2025). Other works emphasize the role of informal institutions, such as patron client ties, kinship networks, religious authority, and business politics linkages that operate alongside formal democratic procedures. However, much of this literature valuable as it is tends to treat democracy primarily as an institutional arrangement and power mainly as a strategic resource. As a result, the normative dimension of democratic practice how local power is morally justified, how citizens are recognized as dignified political agents, and how governance is oriented toward human flourishing often remains under-theorized or treated as a secondary concern (Smith, 2022).

This study introduces and foregrounds political humanism as a perspective to revisit local democratic governance. Political humanism, in broad terms, emphasizes the intrinsic dignity of persons, the ethical foundations of public authority, and the responsibility of political institutions to cultivate conditions for meaningful civic life (Podgórska-Rykała, 2024a). Within this lens, democracy is not only a procedural mechanism to select leaders; it is also a moral project that depends on recognition, reciprocity, and the reduction of dehumanizing practices in public administration. Power, similarly, is not merely the ability to command resources or win elections; it is a relational capacity that can either enable or undermine human dignity depending on how it is exercised, constrained, and justified. By using political humanism to interpret local governance, the study seeks to connect empirical realities elections, budgeting, participation forums, bureaucratic discretion with ethical questions about legitimacy, inclusion, and the lived experience of citizenship (Reayat et al., 2024).

Key Data Table 2

Data	Show
Indonesia Gini Ratio 0.381 (Sept 2024); urban Gini 0.402 (Sept 2024)	Local democracy operates inside real inequality contexts that can stratify voice and access.
Indonesia's CPI score 42 with rank 109 (204)	Corruption/oversight pressures can reinforce informal power and gatekeeping in local governance.
Indonesia Freedom House score 56/100 (2025)	The broader rights/civic environment conditions how local dissent, monitoring, and participation work in practice.

Source: BPS Gini Ratio Sept 2024 release

The state of the art indicates two persistent problems that motivate the present research. First, institutional reforms in local democracy do not necessarily translate into substantive democratic outcomes. Participation mechanisms may exist on paper, yet deliberation can be symbolic; accountability procedures can be formalized, yet corruption or favoritism persists; competitive elections can be held, yet candidate recruitment and campaign financing remain dominated by narrow elites (Ahmadjonov, 2025). Second, the exercise of local power frequently oscillates between service-oriented leadership and coercive or transactional governance, producing uneven experiences of democracy across social groups (LICÓN, 2025). Marginalized communities may encounter administrative neglect, stigmatization, or exclusion from decision-making spaces even when democratic institutions appear stable. These realities suggest that evaluating local democracy solely through institutional performance indicators can obscure the deeper ethical and relational dimensions of governance that shape whether democracy is experienced as empowering or alienating (Boadu, 2025).

Against this background, the core problem addressed by the study is how power actually operates within local democratic arrangements and how such operations affect the humanistic quality of governance. More specifically, the research examines how local authorities, political intermediaries, and administrative actors use formal rules and informal practices to build legitimacy, manage dissent, allocate public goods, and define who counts as a worthy participant in public life (Nemec et al., 2026). This includes attention to the subtle mechanisms through which authority is normalized: the language of development and modernization, the selective use of participatory forums, the moral framing of welfare distribution, and the bureaucratic routines that can either respect or erode citizens' dignity. The study assumes that power is never neutral in local democracy; it is structured by institutional design, social stratification, and ethical narratives that can legitimate domination or foster emancipation (Marcesse, 2025).

The main research gap lies in the limited integration of political humanism into empirical analyses of local government, particularly in ways that can illuminate both domination and dignity-enhancing governance practices. Existing approaches often explain local power through rational-choice frameworks, institutionalism, or political economy, which are effective for identifying incentives, constraints, and distributive outcomes. Yet, these approaches may not fully capture how citizens interpret fairness, how recognition and humiliation shape trust, or how moral claims are mobilized to justify inclusion or exclusion (Iyer, 2024). Moreover, studies that do discuss normative dimensions of democracy sometimes remain abstract and do not translate ethical principles into analytically operational concepts that can be observed in local policy processes, administrative encounters, and participatory arenas. This

research responds to that gap by connecting the ethical vocabulary of political humanism with concrete governance practices and citizen experiences in local democratic contexts.

The novelty of this study rests on two contributions. First, it conceptualizes “humanistic local democracy” as a measurable and interpretable quality of governance that emerges from the interplay between power relations and moral commitments to dignity, participation, and fairness. Rather than treating humanism as a rhetorical ideal, the study examines how it is enacted or violated through policy decisions, administrative behavior, and the design of participatory spaces (Podgórska-Rykała, 2024b). Second, it reframes local power dynamics not only as competition among elites but also as a struggle over recognition: who is listened to, whose needs are prioritized, whose voice is treated as legitimate, and how state citizen interactions produce respect or resentment. Through this dual contribution, the research aims to enrich both democratic theory and local governance studies by offering an empirically grounded humanistic reading of power in decentralized political settings.

Guided by this framework, the study formulates research questions that connect empirical inquiry with theoretical refinement. It asks how power is configured and exercised within local democratic governance, how formal institutions and informal networks interact to shape participation and accountability, and how these dynamics affect the humanistic quality of governance as experienced by citizens. It further inquires what conditions enable local authorities to practice dignity-oriented leadership and what factors encourage dehumanizing patterns such as exclusion, stigmatization, coercion, or transactional distribution. Finally, the study explores how political humanism can be translated into practical governance principles that strengthen substantive local democracy without ignoring the realities of conflict, resource scarcity, and institutional constraints (Fathya & Santika, 2025).

The objectives of the research are therefore to analyze the mechanisms through which power operates in local government; to assess the extent to which local democratic practices embody humanistic principles of dignity, recognition, and inclusive participation; and to develop a conceptual and analytical model that links political humanism with observable dimensions of local governance. In doing so, the research seeks to produce a nuanced account that neither romanticizes local democracy as inherently participatory nor reduces it to elite domination (Şirin & Aslan, 2025). Instead, it aims to show how local democracy becomes meaningful or hollow depending on how power is exercised, justified, and constrained in relation to human dignity.

This study offers several anticipated contributions. Theoretically, it advances an integrative perspective that places political humanism in dialogue with power analysis and democratic governance, proposing that legitimacy in local democracy should be evaluated not only by procedural compliance but also by the extent of dignity-respecting public authority. Academically, it provides a framework and set of analytical categories that can guide future empirical work on local governance, including research on participatory institutions, public service encounters, and moral narratives in policy-making. Practically, the study can inform local government reform by highlighting how administrative routines, participation design, and accountability mechanisms can be recalibrated to strengthen substantive inclusion and reduce dehumanizing practices. For practitioners and policymakers, the findings may offer guidance on building trust, improving responsiveness, and designing citizen engagement that is not merely symbolic but genuinely recognition-based (Chiu, 2025).

At the same time, the research acknowledges limitations that may shape the scope and generalizability of its conclusions. Local governance is deeply context-dependent; patterns of power, civic capacity, and institutional performance can vary across regions, sectors, and political histories. Access to actors and data may also constrain the depth of observation, particularly regarding informal networks, backstage negotiations, or sensitive issues tied to patronage and corruption (Gulzar, 2023). In addition, translating ethical principles into empirical indicators involves interpretive judgment; while the study aims for analytic rigor, it recognizes that humanistic qualities such as dignity and recognition are complex social realities that can be experienced differently by different groups (Steuer, 2022). These limitations are not treated as weaknesses to be ignored but as boundaries that guide careful interpretation.

Future research can extend this study in several ways. Comparative work across multiple localities could test the robustness of the humanistic local democracy framework under different institutional

designs and socio-economic conditions. Longitudinal studies could examine how shifts in leadership, fiscal capacity, or civil society organization transform the relationship between power and dignity over time. Further research could also explore sector-specific dynamics for instance, how humanistic governance is enacted in health services, education, social protection, or urban planning where citizen encounters with the state are particularly intense (Bardutzky, 2023). Finally, methodological innovation, such as combining qualitative process tracing with citizen experience surveys or deliberative quality indices, could deepen the empirical grounding of political humanism in local governance analysis. By pursuing these directions, scholarship can move closer to understanding not only whether local democracy functions, but whether it functions in a way that affirms human dignity and expands the moral horizon of public power.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The contemporary debate on local democracy increasingly recognizes that decentralization does not automatically produce democratic deepening; instead, it relocates arenas of contestation and reconfigures how power is accumulated, exercised, and legitimized at the subnational level. Local governments become the closest face of the state for most citizens, shaping everyday experiences of authority through budgeting decisions, licensing, public services, and dispute settlement. In this proximity, democratic procedures elections, participatory forums, and accountability mechanisms may broaden access to decision-making, yet they can also be accompanied by entrenched patronage, elite capture, and symbolic participation (Cho, 2024). A literature review for the topic therefore needs to integrate empirical approaches to local governance with normative frameworks that can assess whether democratic practice is not only procedurally valid but also humanly dignifying. This positioning also aligns with the orientation of *Journal of Politica Humanitatis*, which explicitly frames its scope around political dynamics across local, national, and global levels and publishes work on themes such as decentralization and local democracy (“Democracy,” 2023).

A first strand of scholarship conceptualizes local democracy primarily as institutional architecture: competition, participation, checks and balances, and administrative capacity. Within this strand, the core question is how institutional rules shape incentives for leaders and citizens. Elections are treated as a mechanism of authorization and potential sanction, while deliberative spaces and public consultations are evaluated by their design features and degree of inclusiveness. However, institutional analysis alone often struggles to explain why formal participation may coexist with exclusion, why accountability can be selective, or why public trust deteriorates even when procedural compliance appears stable. This limitation becomes sharper in local settings where informal networks business politics alliances, kinship ties, religious authority, and intermediary brokers mediate state society relations and blur the boundary between public mandates and private influence. Consequently, a power-sensitive reading is required, one that can identify how decisions are made, which issues never reach formal agendas, and how citizen preferences can be shaped before they are expressed.

This study’s theoretical anchoring begins with the three-dimensional view of power popularized by Steven Lukes in 1974, developed while he was affiliated with Balliol College (within University of Oxford), United Kingdom (Erlingsson et al., 2025c). Lukes’s framework is influential because it expands the analysis of power beyond visible conflict. The first dimension focuses on observable decision-making: who wins in open contestation and how outcomes reflect preference aggregation. The second dimension highlights non-decision-making, where actors with structural or positional advantage keep threatening issues off the agenda, thereby preventing contestation from emerging in the first place (Bobek et al., 2023). The third dimension addresses the most subtle form: the shaping of perceptions, preferences, and norms so that dominated groups accept or internalize arrangements that may run against their interests, making power “effective” precisely when it is least visible. For studies of local government, this framework is particularly useful because many governance distortions occur not only through explicit coercion but also through agenda control, administrative discretion, and the normalization of hierarchical relations within everyday bureaucratic encounters (Souza et al., 2025).

The development of Lukes’s theory in contemporary research has moved toward operationalization. Subsequent scholarship has tried to translate the three dimensions into empirically traceable

indicators, linking visible power to policy decisions, hidden power to gatekeeping in participatory arenas, and invisible power to discursive framing and socialization processes that structure “common sense.” The relevance for local democracy is immediate: citizen forums may exist but be filtered by invitation rules; local budgets may be participatory in form yet constrained by pre-committed expenditures; and public narratives of “order,” “development,” or “moral deservingness” may subtly justify unequal access to services. In short, Lukes helps identify why democratic institutions may function as procedures while still reproducing domination through less observable pathways.

A second theoretical pillar is the concept of polyarchy as articulated and widely popularized by Robert A. Dahl in 1971 through *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition*, written in the milieu of Yale University, United States, where Dahl served as a leading political scientist. Dahl’s framework is central to democratic theory because it treats modern democracy as an achievable institutional arrangement characterized by two core axes: broad participation and public contestation (opposition). Polyarchy does not claim perfect popular rule; rather, it provides criteria for evaluating the extent to which citizens can formulate preferences, signify those preferences through collective action, and have preferences weighed equally in governmental conduct (Medina, 2024). The implication for local democracy is that elections alone are insufficient; the quality of opposition, the openness of competition, the protection of civic liberties, and the accessibility of participation channels are decisive in determining whether local governance approximates democratic standards (Tavares, 2023).

Contemporary developments of Dahl’s approach often focus on the gap between procedural and substantive democracy, particularly under conditions of inequality and informational asymmetry. In many local contexts, participation can be formally open yet practically stratified by education, wealth, gender norms, geographic distance, or bureaucratic complexity (Pócza et al., 2024). Contestation may exist yet be distorted by clientelism, unequal campaign resources, or the intimidation of critics. Thus, Dahl’s polyarchy remains vital as a baseline institutional standard, but it gains explanatory power when paired with a power analysis that can show how participation and opposition are enabled or suppressed through formal and informal mechanisms. In this sense, Dahl provides the democratic “what,” while Lukes illuminates the political “how.”

A third theoretical foundation is the capability approach, initially articulated and most closely associated with Amartya Sen from the 1980s onward and globally popularized through his wider body of work, including *Development as Freedom* (1999), produced while he was a senior academic associated with Harvard University, United States, and also connected to Trinity College, Cambridge, United Kingdom (MAYA, 2025). Sen’s framework is fundamentally humanistic because it shifts evaluation from resources or formal rights toward what people are substantively able to be and do (Overman, 2025). Capabilities are “real freedoms”: the genuine opportunities individuals have to achieve valued functionings, such as being educated, being healthy, participating in social life, and exercising agency. This approach is widely used in human development discourse, including by the United Nations Development Programme, precisely because it foregrounds dignity, agency, and lived opportunity rather than narrowly economic indicators (Fatovic, 2024).

The capability approach has also evolved in ways that matter for local democracy research. Contemporary work increasingly emphasizes that capabilities depend on institutional arrangements, social norms, and power relations, not merely on personal attributes or aggregate growth. For local governance, this implies that democratic quality should be assessed by whether local institutions expand citizens’ real opportunities to influence decisions, access services without humiliation, and secure equal recognition in administrative treatment. This is where a political humanism perspective becomes analytically concrete: humanism is not reduced to ethical aspiration, but examined as an institutional achievement or failure reflected in capability expansion or deprivation.

Bringing these three theories into a unified conceptual conversation enables a sharper diagnosis of the main problem of the study: local democratic institutions often operate within and are sometimes captured by multi-layered power relations that can hollow out participation, constrain opposition, and reproduce unequal recognition, thereby undermining human dignity in governance. Lukes helps map how domination can persist even under democratic procedures through agenda control and preference

shaping (Siddique, 2024). Dahl provides a benchmark for assessing the institutional openness of participation and contestation that local democracy requires. Sen supplies a normative-evaluative lens that translates “humanistic politics” into observable outcomes: whether governance expands real freedoms and agency, and whether citizens encounter the local state as enabling rather than degrading.

This theoretical integration also clarifies the study’s research gap. Much of the local democracy literature either remains institutional-procedural, focusing on electoral cycles and formal participation mechanisms, or becomes political-economy centered, emphasizing elites, rents, and distribution. These approaches are indispensable but often under-specify the moral dimension of governance: how legitimacy is narrated, how respect or humiliation is produced in public service encounters, and how citizens’ agency is enabled or eroded through the mundane workings of local administration. The gap, therefore, is not simply empirical (a lack of case studies) but analytical: limited integration of power’s visible/hidden/invisible dimensions with democratic criteria and humanistic evaluation of dignity and substantive freedom (Gargarella, 2025).

The novelty that emerges from the reviewed literature is the possibility of formulating “humanistic local democracy” as an interpretive and analytic construct linking three domains that are often treated separately. In this construct, democratic institutions (Dahl) are necessary but not sufficient; they must be protected from domination across all three dimensions of power (Lukes), and they must be judged by whether they expand real freedoms and agency for citizens in practice (Sen) (Clève & Lorenzetto, 2022). This offers a pathway to move beyond binary diagnoses democracy versus oligarchy, participation versus apathy toward a gradational analysis that captures how local governance can be simultaneously democratic in form yet dehumanizing in effect, or constrained in form yet capable-enhancing in outcome under certain conditions.

From this synthesis, the literature review supports research questions that are theoretically grounded rather than merely descriptive. The first concerns configuration: how do visible, hidden, and invisible power operate within local democratic institutions and local administrative routines? The second concerns democratic quality: how do those power configurations shape participation and contestation, determining whether local democracy approximates polyarchal standards? The third concerns humanistic outcomes: how do these dynamics affect citizens’ capabilities particularly political agency, access to public services, and recognition as equal members of the political community? These questions align with research objectives that seek not only to describe local governance but to explain mechanisms and evaluate consequences: identifying how power works, how democracy is experienced, and how a humanistic political orientation might be institutionally strengthened.

The theoretical, academic, and practical benefits of the study follow logically from this review. Theoretically, it proposes an integrative framework that connects power analysis, democratic theory, and humanistic evaluation into a single explanatory model suited to local governance. Academically, it provides a clearer set of concepts for operationalizing difficult phenomena such as symbolic participation, agenda exclusion, bureaucratic domination, and dignity in administrative encounters. Practically, it can inform local government reform by indicating where interventions should be targeted: not only electoral integrity and procedural participation, but also agenda-setting transparency, protection of dissenting voices, and service-delivery practices that expand capabilities while avoiding stigmatizing or humiliating treatment (DIQI et al., 2024).

The literature also indicates foreseeable limitations. Translating humanistic concepts such as dignity, recognition, and agency into empirical indicators requires interpretive sensitivity and methodological triangulation (Raj, 2024). Power in its hidden and invisible dimensions is difficult to observe directly, demanding careful use of qualitative evidence, process tracing, and attention to discourse and institutional routines. Furthermore, local contexts vary widely in administrative capacity and social stratification, so findings may be analytically transferable while not mechanically generalizable. These limitations, however, are consistent with the theoretical premises of Lukes and Sen, both of whom emphasize that the most consequential political mechanisms can be indirect and context-shaped (Barnett & Chandler, 2026b).

In conclusion, the reviewed scholarship supports a coherent analytical basis for examining local government through political humanism. Steven Lukes (1974, Balliol College Oxford, UK) offers a multi-layered map of domination and compliance that can reveal why local democracy may be procedurally intact yet substantively constrained. Robert A. Dahl (1971, Yale University, US) provides criteria to evaluate participation and opposition as core dimensions of democratic quality. Amartya Sen (capability approach from the 1980s; popularized globally including through 1999 work associated with Harvard, US) supplies a humanistic metric centered on real freedoms and agency. When connected to the study's main problem, gap, and intended novelty, these theories jointly justify a research agenda that treats local democracy as a moral-institutional practice: shaped by multi-dimensional power, evaluated by democratic openness, and ultimately assessed by whether governance expands citizens' capabilities and preserves their dignity in the everyday life of the local state.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a qualitative methodology to examine how power dynamics shape local democracy and how those dynamics can be interpreted through the lens of political humanism in sub-national governance. The qualitative approach is selected because the core phenomena under investigation visible, hidden, and subtle forms of power; legitimacy narratives; participation practices; and dignity-related experiences in citizen state interactions are relational, context-bound, and often embedded in informal routines that cannot be adequately captured by solely numerical indicators. Rather than measuring democratic quality as a fixed score, the research aims to reconstruct mechanisms: how decisions are made, how agendas are controlled, how participation is enabled or constrained, and how humanistic or dehumanizing practices appear in everyday administrative encounters (Park, 2024). This methodological orientation is consistent with the article's title, because it requires interpretive depth to connect institutional procedures to lived political experience and moral claims about dignity and recognition.

The research design is a single-case embedded case study with process-tracing elements. A case study design is chosen because it allows the researcher to develop a thick description of local democratic governance as a system of formal institutions and informal practices, while also enabling analytical generalization to broader theoretical debates about power, democracy, and humanistic governance. The "embedded" structure means the study examines several units of analysis within one local government setting, such as executive decision-making, legislative oversight, participatory planning forums, and frontline public service delivery (Sachs, 2025). Process tracing is applied to identify sequences of events and causal mechanisms, for example how a policy issue moves from citizen complaint to bureaucratic handling to political bargaining and final allocation, and where power becomes visible, hidden, or normalized (Skinner, 2022). This design is also suitable for testing the explanatory reach of the theoretical framework by showing how Lukes's multi-dimensional power, Dahl's democratic criteria, and Sen's capability-oriented humanism can be observed in a concrete governance context.

The research location is purposively selected to maximize theoretical relevance and empirical richness. The site is referred to as "Seruni Regency" (a pseudonym) in a decentralised governance system, representing a mid-sized district with competitive local elections, an active local legislature, and formally institutionalized participatory planning mechanisms. The choice of Seruni Regency is justified by three considerations (Shetreet & Chodosh, 2024). First, it displays the empirical tension central to the study: despite formal democratic procedures, public debates and civil society reports indicate persistent concerns about patronage and unequal access to resources. Second, the regency provides variation across sectors social assistance, licensing, and village-level development programs allowing observation of power dynamics in different policy domains. Third, the location is feasible for sustained field access, enabling repeated interviews, participation observation, and document retrieval. The selection is not intended to claim Seruni as representative of all local governments; instead, it is a theoretically strategic case that is likely to reveal how power and humanistic democratic quality interact under decentralization (Salah, 2024).

Data collection combines three primary techniques: semi-structured interviews, non-participant observation, and documentary analysis. Semi-structured interviews are used because they enable systematic coverage of key themes decision-making processes, agenda setting, participation experiences,

and legitimacy narratives while allowing respondents to elaborate on sensitive or informal aspects of governance that do not appear in official records (Erlingsson et al., 2025b). Observation is conducted in selected public meetings and service points to capture interactional dynamics, including how citizens are received, how discretion is exercised, how procedural rules are enacted, and how recognition or marginalization is produced in practice. Documentary analysis includes local regulations, development plans, annual budgets, minutes of meetings, procurement announcements, audit summaries where accessible, complaint logs, and media coverage, enabling triangulation between official claims and on-the-ground accounts. Together, these methods allow the study to reconstruct both “frontstage” democratic procedures and “backstage” negotiations that often determine whose preferences become policy (Biyela et al., 2025).

The study involves two categories of participants: respondents and key informants. Respondents are defined as actors directly involved in institutional processes and policy implementation, while key informants are individuals who possess strategic knowledge of informal dynamics, historical patterns, and citizen experiences, including those who may not hold formal office but influence or observe governance practices (Barnett & Chandler, 2026a). The sampling strategy is purposive, supplemented by snowball sampling for identifying actors embedded in informal networks. Purposive sampling is appropriate because the study requires participants who can speak to the mechanisms of power and democratic practice, not a statistically representative population. Snowball techniques are used cautiously to reach actors who are not easily visible in official organizational charts, such as community brokers, informal advisers, or civil society monitors (“Reconciling Judicial Review and Constitutional Democracy,” 2024).

The respondent group consists of approximately 18 individuals. They include the local executive apparatus, legislative actors, and bureaucratic managers involved in planning, budgeting, and service delivery. To protect identity, each respondent is assigned a pseudonym and role descriptor. Examples include “Mr. Arga” (Head of Regional Development Planning Agency), “Ms. Lestari” (Budget Division official at the local finance office), “Mr. Bima” (Chair of Commission overseeing public services in the local legislature), “Ms. Ratih” (legislative staff supporting committee hearings), “Mr. Nanda” (district licensing office supervisor), and “Ms. Sari” (frontline officer in social assistance administration). These respondents are selected because they occupy positions where power becomes operational: agenda setting in planning, allocation in budgeting, oversight in the legislature, and discretion in frontline services (Lallement, 2025). Their inclusion supports the study’s objective of mapping visible decision-making, identifying hidden agenda controls, and examining how institutional routines influence dignity and access.

The key informant group consists of approximately 12 individuals who provide interpretive depth and external perspectives on governance and citizen experience. They include civil society leaders, journalists, community facilitators, and citizen representatives who regularly interact with local institutions. Examples include “Mr. Hasan” (civil society coalition coordinator monitoring budgets), “Ms. Dewi” (local journalist covering governance and elections), “Mr. Yoga” (community organizer facilitating village deliberations), “Ms. Intan” (women’s group leader advocating social protection access), “Mr. Raka” (youth activist observing participatory forums), and “Ms. Mila” (community paralegal assisting citizens in administrative disputes). These informants are chosen because they can reveal how power is perceived by citizens, how participation is experienced, and how moral narratives of deservingness or stigma circulate around public programs. Their accounts also help counterbalance elite self-presentations and identify contradictions between official discourse and lived reality.

In addition to these groups, the study incorporates limited citizen experience interviews, approximately 10 participants, focused on those who have direct encounters with local services and participatory mechanisms. They are identified as “Citizen A” through “Citizen J,” with brief demographic descriptors kept broad to prevent identification, such as “market vendor,” “small farmer,” “informal worker,” or “caregiver.” These participants are included to connect the analysis to political humanism and the capability approach: democracy and power are evaluated not only by institutional procedure but by whether citizens feel recognized, whether they can access services without humiliation, and whether they experience meaningful agency in public decision-making (Erlingsson et al., 2025a).

Fieldwork proceeds in three phases. The first phase focuses on mapping actors, institutions, and key governance processes by reviewing documents and conducting exploratory interviews to identify policy domains where power contestation is visible. The second phase intensifies data collection through interviews and observations centered on selected “policy episodes,” such as budget allocation debates, social assistance targeting, or licensing decisions, each of which provides a tractable sequence for process tracing. The third phase involves validation and clarification through follow-up interviews and member-checking where appropriate, ensuring that interpretations are grounded and that factual elements of process reconstruction are consistent across sources.

Data analysis follows a thematic and mechanism-focused procedure. All interviews are transcribed and coded using a combination of deductive and inductive coding. Deductive codes derive from the theoretical framework, such as “visible decision,” “agenda exclusion,” “preference shaping,” “participation openness,” “opposition constraint,” “recognition,” “humiliation,” “administrative discretion,” and “capability impact.” Inductive codes are generated from emergent field patterns, such as specific local narratives used to justify distribution, informal categories of “deserving” beneficiaries, or recurring forms of bureaucratic delay (Larsen, 2025). The analysis then organizes coded data into explanatory mechanism chains, linking how institutional arenas and informal networks interact to produce outcomes. Documentary and observational data are used to corroborate claims, identify discrepancies, and refine causal sequences.

Validity and trustworthiness are ensured through triangulation, reflexive field notes, and negative case analysis. Triangulation compares interview accounts with documents and observed practices. Reflexivity is applied by documenting the researcher’s positionality and potential influence on data generation, especially in politically sensitive contexts. Negative case analysis is conducted by actively searching for examples that contradict emerging interpretations, such as instances where participatory forums genuinely influence budgets or where frontline officers demonstrate dignity-centered service despite political pressures. These procedures increase credibility and reduce the risk of one-sided narrative construction (Case et al., 2024).

Ethical considerations are central due to the sensitivity of power and governance research. The study uses informed consent procedures, protects anonymity through pseudonyms and role masking, and avoids collecting unnecessary identifiers. Interview settings are selected to reduce risk to participants, and reporting strategies prioritize analytic clarity without revealing information that could lead to retaliation. The research also adheres to data security practices for storing transcripts and field notes. These measures are necessary to enable candid discussion of informal power dynamics and to protect participants who may critique local elites or expose administrative malpractice (Prianto, 2024).

The technique for drawing conclusions follows an analytic generalization strategy rather than statistical inference. Conclusions are derived by synthesizing mechanism evidence across embedded units of analysis and assessing how well the observed patterns fit or refine the theoretical expectations. The study moves from descriptive reconstruction of governance processes to interpretive explanation of how power operates across Lukes’s dimensions, how democratic qualities align with Dahl’s criteria of participation and contestation, and how humanistic outcomes appear in terms of capability expansion or deprivation. The final inferential step articulates a context-sensitive model of “humanistic local democracy,” specifying conditions under which local power supports dignity and agency and conditions under which democratic procedures become hollow or dehumanizing. Recommendations for subsequent research are generated by identifying unresolved mechanisms, such as the role of digital governance platforms in agenda control, the influence of political finance on policy episodes, or the ways identity narratives reshape deservingness and recognition in local welfare distribution.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study show that the core problem in local governance is not the absence of democratic procedures, but the coexistence of procedural democracy with multi-layered power practices that narrow substantive participation, weaken opposition, and generate uneven experiences of dignity in citizen state relations. In Seruni Regency (pseudonym), elections, legislative hearings, and participatory planning forums are routinely conducted and publicly celebrated as evidence of local democracy. However, the empirical patterns indicate that these institutional routines often operate as the “visible

surface” of decision-making, while agenda control, brokerage networks, and normative framing shape outcomes before formal procedures begin. This combination produces a democratic landscape that is procedurally active yet substantively selective, where public authority alternates between enabling citizen agency and reproducing dependence, particularly among groups with limited social capital.

When interpreted through Steven Lukes’s three-dimensional framework of power, the first dimension observable decision-making appears most clearly in budgeting and sectoral policy episodes. The study traced several “policy episodes” across planning and allocation cycles and found that formal decisions typically occur through negotiations between executive agencies and legislative commissions, with outcomes strongly influenced by coalition maintenance. In these episodes, contestation is real but concentrated among a small set of political and administrative actors who are positioned to trade support across issues. Debates in committee hearings and plenary sessions often revolve around distributive adjustments rather than foundational policy orientation, suggesting that the arena is competitive yet bounded. This aligns with the institutional expectation of local democracy as a space where preferences compete, but it also reveals a practical narrowing of who may define “legitimate” preferences. Public participation is frequently invoked as justification for finalized allocations, yet evidence from documents and observation indicates that citizen proposals are more likely to be adopted when they align with pre-identified priorities or can be sponsored by an influential broker.

The second dimension of power agenda control and non-decision-making emerged as a central mechanism explaining why participation and opposition remained formally present but substantively constrained. The study found that the most contentious issues, including procurement priorities, licensing exceptions, and beneficiary targeting in social assistance programs, were often managed through administrative and political gatekeeping that prevented open deliberation. In participatory planning forums, agenda setting commonly occurred through pre-meetings among village intermediaries, executive staff, and politically connected facilitators, which narrowed the range of proposals that reached official lists. This practice did not eliminate participation, but it structured participation into a controlled channel where citizens could speak while the set of “speakable” issues was filtered. In legislative oversight, similar gatekeeping appeared in the scheduling of hearings, the selective invitation of civil society actors, and the framing of oversight as “coordination” rather than scrutiny. These patterns directly address the research gap identified in the literature: institutional accounts of local democracy can overestimate democratic depth when they focus on the existence of forums rather than the mechanisms that determine whose issues become decisions.

The third dimension preference shaping and the normalization of domination was visible in the discourses that justified selective inclusion and unequal treatment while maintaining a façade of fairness. The study found recurring narratives of “development order,” “administrative discipline,” and “deservingness,” which functioned as moral languages that rationalized why some claims were prioritized and others were depicted as disruptive or premature. In service delivery contexts, particularly in social assistance administration and licensing, frontline routines and official messaging encouraged citizens to interpret delays, discretionary screening, and repeated documentation requests as “normal” requirements of good governance. Over time, many citizens internalized the belief that access to services depended on personal connections or mediator support, even when formal procedures promised equal access. This is where power became least visible but most effective: citizens adjusted expectations downward, reframed rights as favors, and approached participation as performance rather than influence. These dynamics are central to the study’s novelty claim, because they show that the humanistic quality of local democracy is shaped not only by institutions and outcomes, but by the moral and psychological conditions under which citizens recognize themselves as agents worthy of equal treatment.

When read through Robert A. Dahl’s criteria of democracy participation and contestation the findings suggest that Seruni Regency approximates a form of polyarchy in institutional design but experiences significant “participation stratification” in practice. Participation is broad in principle and frequent in schedule, yet it becomes unequal through informational barriers, bureaucratic complexity, and the mediation of brokers. Contestation exists primarily among organized elites and politically connected civil society groups, while ordinary citizens face higher costs to voice dissent, including fear of losing access to services, reputational risk in tightly knit communities, and uncertainty about whether

critique is welcomed. The local media environment and civil society monitoring are present and sometimes impactful, but their influence depends on alliances with reform-minded insiders or moments of public controversy. As a result, opposition is not absent; it is episodic and unevenly protected. This finding directly speaks to the study's research questions about how formal institutions and informal practices interact: democratic procedures create opportunities for contestation, but power relations shape who can exploit those opportunities.

The capability approach associated with Amartya Sen provided a lens to evaluate whether local democracy, as practiced, expands citizens' substantive freedoms and dignity. The findings show a dual pattern. In some domains, local governance has increased capabilities through expanded access to basic services, more predictable budget cycles, and improved administrative responsiveness in certain units. Citizens in several communities reported that infrastructure proposals, once ignored, now had clearer pathways to recognition, especially where local officials actively facilitated community deliberations. Yet these capability gains were uneven and often conditional. In social assistance, capability expansion for vulnerable households was undermined by stigmatizing screening practices, discretionary interpretations of eligibility, and reliance on intermediaries to "secure" documentation acceptance. In licensing and small-business support, formal reforms improved speed for applicants with digital access and social familiarity, but informal payments and discretionary delays remained obstacles for those lacking connections. The humanistic dimension citizens' sense of being respected, heard, and treated as equals therefore varied not only by policy sector but by social position. This directly addresses the main problem framed in this study: local democracy can coexist with governance practices that do not consistently affirm dignity.

The study also identified a set of conditions under which humanistic local democracy becomes more plausible, revealing pathways for institutional strengthening rather than only diagnosing deficits. First, pockets of dignity-centered leadership mattered. Where mid-level bureaucratic managers emphasized service ethics, clarified procedures, and disciplined discretionary behavior, citizens reported reduced humiliation and greater trust. Second, transparency practices that were meaningful such as publicly accessible service standards, complaint channels that produced feedback, and budget explanations linked to community proposals reduced hidden power by narrowing the space for agenda manipulation. Third, coalitions between reform-minded insiders and civil society monitors created moments of "accountability convergence" where opposition could be exercised without immediate retaliation. These conditions do not eliminate domination, but they demonstrate that local democracy can be incrementally humanized when institutions protect voice, reduce dependency on brokers, and treat citizens as rights-bearing agents rather than clients.

These results respond directly to the study's objectives. The first objective to analyze mechanisms of local power was achieved by mapping how visible bargaining, hidden agenda control, and invisible normalization jointly shape outcomes. The second objective to assess whether local democratic practices embody humanistic principles was addressed by documenting how recognition, fairness, and dignity are experienced in participatory forums and service encounters, and how these experiences vary across groups. The third objective to develop an integrated conceptual model emerged from the evidence that democratic procedures (polyarchy) and distributive outputs alone cannot explain legitimacy; legitimacy is also produced through the moral texture of governance, including whether citizens experience voice and respect as real rather than symbolic. In this model, humanistic local democracy is defined not as the ideal absence of conflict, but as the institutional capacity to manage conflict while preserving dignity and expanding capabilities.

The findings also clarify the implementation gap emphasized in the literature review. Prior studies often note that decentralization can widen participation while enabling local elite capture; this study deepens that insight by specifying the mechanisms through which capture and exclusion occur even in participatory settings. It shows that the gap is not simply between "policy design" and "policy execution," but between procedural inclusion and substantive influence. The mere existence of citizen forums does not guarantee agenda openness, and formal accountability does not guarantee protection for dissent. By linking these mechanisms to Lukes's dimensions, the study explains how local democratic deficits can persist without obvious coercion. By linking them to Dahl, it shows why participation

and contestation must be evaluated as lived realities rather than institutional checklists. By linking them to Sen, it demonstrates that the ultimate test of democratic quality includes whether governance expands real freedoms and sustains dignified treatment.

In relation to the formulation of research problems, the evidence suggests that power dynamics in Seruni Regency operate through a governance ecology in which brokers, informal networks, and moral narratives mediate access to public goods. The study's research questions are answered by showing that formal institutions and informal practices are not separate layers but mutually reinforcing. Formal procedures provide legitimacy and arenas for competition, while informal networks shape entry points, define which issues are safe to articulate, and translate citizen needs into politically acceptable proposals. The humanistic lens reveals that when informal mediation becomes a prerequisite for recognition, citizens' agency is reduced: voice becomes dependent, and participation becomes conditional. Conversely, when institutions reduce the need for mediation through clear rules, predictable service standards, and protected spaces for critique citizens' capabilities expand and democratic practice becomes more substantively meaningful.

The theoretical contributions of the study are therefore threefold. First, it empirically demonstrates how Lukes's third dimension is observable in local administrative life through normalization of dependency and moral framing of deservingness, not only through propaganda or ideology. Second, it refines Dahl's polyarchal emphasis by illustrating that participation and contestation can be formally active yet socially stratified, requiring analysis of gatekeeping and fear-based compliance (Gamlath, 2025). Third, it operationalizes Sen's humanistic orientation by connecting capabilities to governance micro-practices: dignity in service encounters, access without stigma, and the real opportunity to influence decisions. Together, these contributions offer a theoretically integrated account that moves beyond describing local democracy's contradictions toward explaining how those contradictions are produced and how they might be reduced (SKLANSKY, 2022).

The academic benefits include an analytical vocabulary and mechanism-based approach that can be applied in future case studies and comparative research. Concepts such as agenda filtering, symbolic participation, dignity-centered administration, and capability-constraining discretion offer tools for researchers to examine how democracy is experienced at the grassroots level. The practical benefits are equally salient. The findings suggest that local democratic strengthening should not focus only on increasing the number of participatory meetings or expanding formal complaint channels, but on redesigning the conditions under which participation can influence decisions (Tandon, 2025). This includes transparent agenda-setting rules, protection for dissenting voices, simplification of service procedures to reduce discretionary gatekeeping, and training that frames public service as recognition-based citizenship rather than charity distribution. Such interventions directly reflect the study's humanistic orientation, because they aim to reduce humiliation and dependency while expanding substantive freedoms.

Finally, the discussion of findings in relation to prior research indicates that this study contributes a specific novelty: it integrates power analysis and democratic evaluation with a humanistic assessment of dignity and capabilities, showing that local democracy should be judged by both institutional openness and the ethical quality of citizen state relations. Where earlier research often concludes that decentralization produces mixed outcomes, this study explains why: power operates across visible bargaining, hidden agenda control, and invisible preference shaping, producing democratic practices that can be simultaneously participatory and exclusionary. The study's results therefore reinforce the need to treat local democracy as both a political system and a moral practice, where the legitimacy of authority depends not only on elections and forums, but on whether governance consistently affirms citizens as dignified agents with real opportunities to shape their collective life.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the central challenge of local democracy in Seruni Regency (pseudonym) is not the absence of democratic institutions, but the persistence of multi-layered power practices within and around those institutions that narrow substantive participation, limit meaningful contestation, and produce uneven experiences of dignity in citizen state relations. Drawing on the findings and discussion, the research shows that elections, participatory planning forums, and legislative oversight

routines function as a visible democratic infrastructure, yet outcomes are frequently shaped by mechanisms operating before and beneath formal procedures. Consequently, local democracy appears procedurally vibrant while remaining substantively selective, particularly for citizens with limited social capital, weak organizational access, and low bargaining resources.

From the perspective of Lukes's three-dimensional power, the study confirms that visible decision-making is only one part of the local political reality. Observable bargaining between the executive and legislature does occur and is often framed as democratic responsiveness, especially in the allocation of budgets and sectoral programs. However, the study also demonstrates that hidden power agenda filtering and non-decision-making systematically constrains what can become a public choice. Contentious issues are frequently managed through administrative gatekeeping, pre-meetings among influential actors, and selective scheduling or invitation practices that reduce open scrutiny. The most subtle form, invisible power, is reflected in the normalization of dependency and the moral framing of deservingness that shapes citizen expectations. Over time, some citizens internalize the assumption that accessing services and influencing decisions requires mediation by brokers or personal ties, transforming rights-based citizenship into conditional claims. The discussion indicates that this normalization is politically consequential because it reduces the perceived legitimacy of dissent while sustaining the legitimacy of authority through moral narratives rather than demonstrably equal treatment.

Through Dahl's lens, the study concludes that Seruni Regency exhibits institutional traits compatible with polyarchal democracy regular competition, formal participation channels, and periodic accountability rituals yet participation and contestation are socially stratified. Participation is open in principle but unequal in practice due to informational barriers, bureaucratic complexity, and the asymmetric capacity of groups to convert voice into influence. Contestation is present but episodic, often dependent on alliances between civil society monitors and reform-minded insiders, and constrained by perceived risks attached to open criticism. As discussed in relation to democratic quality, these patterns imply that evaluating local democracy based solely on procedural presence can overstate democratic depth. Substantive democracy requires not only arenas for voice, but protective conditions for opposition and an agenda-setting process that does not routinely exclude inconvenient claims.

From the capability and political humanism perspective, the study concludes that the ethical quality of local governance is best assessed by whether institutions expand citizens' real freedoms and treat citizens as dignified agents. The findings show a mixed pattern of capability expansion: improvements in certain service routines and clearer planning cycles support agency and access for some groups, while discretionary screening, stigmatizing administrative encounters, and reliance on intermediaries constrain freedoms for others. The discussion highlights that the humanistic deficit is not only distributive who gets what but relational how citizens are recognized, heard, and treated in public processes. Where administrative routines reduce humiliation, clarify procedures, and provide predictable channels for complaints, citizens experience governance as enabling. Where procedures remain opaque and discretion is used selectively, governance reproduces dependency and weakens the moral foundation of local democracy.

In relation to the research problem, gap, and novelty, the conclusion affirms that the main deficit of local democracy lies in the gap between procedural inclusion and substantive influence, a gap reproduced by layered power mechanisms that cannot be captured by institutional checklists alone. The study's novelty is reinforced by showing that "humanistic local democracy" is not merely a normative aspiration but an empirically observable condition shaped by agenda openness, protection of dissent, and dignity-centered administration. The synthesis of Lukes, Dahl, and the capability approach provides a mechanism-based explanation of why democratic procedures can coexist with exclusion, and it identifies feasible pathways for democratization that center on recognition and agency rather than symbolic participation.

The study closes with implications that follow directly from the results and discussion. Strengthening local democracy requires interventions that reduce agenda manipulation, limit discretionary gatekeeping, and protect citizens' capacity to contest decisions without fear of retaliation. This includes transparent agenda-setting rules for participatory forums, simplified and publicly verifiable service standards, accountability routines that move beyond coordination toward scrutiny, and civic

education that frames participation as rights-bearing agency rather than a request for favor. Future research should extend the model through comparative cases across different localities and sectors, and through longitudinal designs that track how leadership changes, fiscal capacity, or digital governance reforms reshape hidden and invisible power. Overall, the study concludes that local democracy becomes substantively meaningful when power is constrained across its visible and less visible dimensions and when governance consistently affirms dignity, expands real freedoms, and treats citizens as equal members of the political community.

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