

IDENTITY INSTRUMENTALIZATION AND PANCASILA DEMOCRACY IN ACEH, WEST KALIMANTAN, NORTH MALUKU

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how identity was instrumentalized in local democratization through regional head elections in Aceh, West Kalimantan, and North Maluku during the 2017/2018 and 2024 electoral cycles, and how this process affected the substantive practice of Pancasila Democracy at the local level. Rather than treating identity politics itself as inherently polarizing, the article distinguishes between identity as a social fact, identity mobilization as the activation of group boundaries, and identity instrumentalization as the strategic use of ethnic, religious, and regional markers by political actors for electoral advantage. Using a qualitative comparative multiple-case design, the study analyzes institutional documents, election-related media archives, and peer-reviewed literature through qualitative content analysis and thematic comparison. The findings show three different patterns. In Aceh, Islamic identity and conflict memory were consolidated through local parties, former combatant networks, and clerical authority. In West Kalimantan, ethno-religious polarization in 2018 shifted toward cross-ethnic compromise in 2024, although primordial voting blocs remained politically relevant. In North Maluku, identity was mobilized situationally: elite resistance to a minority candidacy intensified religious appeals, yet many voters supported a more pluralist electoral outcome. The article argues that the instrumentalization of identity, rather than identity politics per se, weakens deliberation, inclusion, and civic equality, thereby reducing Pancasila to a normative symbol rather than an operational ethic of local democracy.

Keywords: identity politics; identity instrumentalization; pancasila democracy; regional head elections; post-conflict politics

INSTRUMENTALISASI IDENTITAS DAN DEMOKRASI PANCASILA DI ACEH, KALIMANTAN BARAT, MALUKU UTARA

ABSTRAK

Artikel ini mengkaji bagaimana aktor politik menginstrumentalisasi identitas dalam demokratisasi lokal melalui pemilihan kepala daerah di Aceh, Kalimantan Barat, dan Maluku Utara pada siklus elektoral 2017/2018 dan 2024. Artikel ini juga menjelaskan bagaimana proses tersebut memengaruhi praktik substantif Demokrasi Pancasila di tingkat lokal. Artikel ini tidak memandang politik identitas sebagai sesuatu yang secara inheren menimbulkan polarisasi. Sebaliknya, artikel ini membedakan identitas sebagai fakta sosial dari mobilisasi identitas dan instrumentalisasi identitas. Mobilisasi identitas mengaktifkan batas-batas kelompok, sedangkan instrumentalisasi identitas merujuk pada penggunaan strategis penanda etnis, agama, atau kedaerahan oleh aktor politik untuk memperoleh keuntungan elektoral. Penelitian ini menggunakan desain kualitatif studi kasus komparatif, selain itu juga penelitian ini menganalisis dokumen institusional dan arsip pemberitaan pemilu, serta menggunakan literatur ilmiah sebagai bahan pendukung. Temuan menunjukkan tiga pola yang berbeda. Di Aceh, partai lokal dan jaringan eks-kombatan bekerja bersama otoritas ulama untuk mengonsolidasikan identitas Islam dan memori konflik. Di Kalimantan Barat, polarisasi etno-religius pada 2018 bergeser menuju kompromi lintas etnis pada 2024, meskipun blok pemilih primordial tetap relevan secara politik. Di Maluku Utara, aktor politik memobilisasi identitas secara situasional. Resistensi elite terhadap pencalonan minoritas memperkuat seruan keagamaan, tetapi sebagian besar pemilih menghasilkan pilihan elektoral yang lebih pluralis. Artikel ini berargumen bahwa instrumentalisasi identitas, bukan politik identitas itu sendiri, melemahkan deliberasi, inklusi, dan kesetaraan kewargaan. Akibatnya, proses tersebut mereduksi Pancasila menjadi simbol normatif, bukan etika operasional demokrasi lokal.

Kata kunci: politik identitas; instrumentalisasi identitas; demokrasi pancasila; pemilihan kepala daerah; politik pasca-konflik

INTRODUCTION

The fall of Indonesia's New Order in 1998 marked the beginning of a political transition toward more competitive elections, constitutional reform, decentralization, and more open local gov-

ernment. Constitutional amendments from 1999 to 2002 aimed to limit executive dominance, strengthen legislative and judicial authority, and build electoral accountability at both national and subnational levels (Zulfaqaar & Azza, 2024). Reformasi thereby linked democratization to decen-

tralization as a single institutional project rather than two separate reforms. Policymakers expected that local elections would expand public participation, make local executives more accountable, and bring governance closer to Indonesia's diverse communities.

Practice has not matched this normative expectation. Local politics still operates largely through patronage, clientelism, elite brokerage, and uneven institutional capacity (Hadiz, 2004; Harsasto, 2020). The decentralization framework itself has also continued to shift rather than settle into a stable equilibrium. In 2017, for instance, the Constitutional Court struck down the central government's mechanism for reviewing regional regulations, a decision that effectively pulled regulatory authority back toward Jakarta even as electoral competition remained fully devolved to the regions. Karim & Kholid (2025) read this kind of recentralizing move as part of a broader pattern in which economic and administrative authority re-concentrates at the center while electoral rituals continue undisturbed at the periphery. Local democratization therefore proceeds inside an institutional architecture that keeps adjusting underneath it, which helps explain why procedural competition and substantive accountability have grown apart rather than together.

The post-Reformasi electoral arena has also strengthened personalistic and candidate-centered politics. A pivotal moment came in 2009, when Indonesia shifted its legislative election system to an open-list format. Candidates who could mobilize personal appeal, family networks, or local popularity began to outcompete those who relied mainly on party programs, and ideological competition receded as a result. Allen (2015) frames this shift through a neo-Marxist lens, arguing that Indonesian decentralization has allowed established oligarchic interests to capture local democratic openings for their own electoral advantage rather than for programmatic renewal. Hadiz (2004) reaches a compatible conclusion from a different angle, showing that decentralization gave many local strongmen and predatory officials a new institutional base rather than dismantling their power. Democratic institutions at the subnational level therefore absorbed old political networks instead of replacing them.

Symbolic and low-cost identity markers fit naturally into this patronage-heavy landscape. Religion, ethnicity, indigeneity, regional origin, and the collective memory of conflict all became useful electoral resources because they compress complicated policy questions into a simple emotional boundary between belonging and exclusion. Digi-

tal campaigning has intensified this dynamic considerably. Social media platforms reward simplified, emotionally charged narratives more than careful policy argument, and Indonesian identity-based campaigning has migrated onto exactly those platforms (Wingarta et al., 2021). Karmila et al. (2024) show that social media does not merely transmit identity narratives passively but actively constructs political identity through algorithmic amplification and repeated exposure, which deepens polarization well beyond what offline campaigning alone would produce. Asikin (2025) documents a similar fragmentation dynamic in the 2024 presidential campaign, where competing candidate narratives split online audiences along identity lines that then bled into down-ballot regional contests.

This article resists treating identity politics as inherently anti-democratic. Identity is a normal feature of political life in plural societies, and identity-based claims can support recognition, representation, and redress for historical marginalization rather than undermine democratic practice. A genuine democratic problem emerges only when political actors instrumentalize identity for strategic advantage. Actors do this when they deliberately activate ethnic, religious, or regional markers to delegitimize opponents, construct an us-versus-them boundary, or substitute symbolic loyalty for substantive policy debate. Identity instrumentalization therefore differs sharply from identity politics as a general category. It denotes the strategic and exclusionary deployment of group markers to gain electoral advantage rather than the ordinary presence of group identity in political life, and this distinction organizes the analytical approach of the present study.

Indonesian local elections carry particular stakes for this distinction because they test Pancasila Democracy as an ethical and political framework for managing diversity, not merely as a procedural mechanism for filling office. Pancasila has historically supplied an integrative foundation for unity in diversity, deliberation, civic equality, and social justice. Sujito (2022) warns that identity-based competition ahead of elections can quietly hollow out the inclusive role of national ideology whenever political actors detach Pancasila from civic equality and social justice in practice. Razuni (2023) adds that ideological resilience depends less on formal doctrine than on how political regimes and ordinary citizens internalize Pancasila in daily conduct, a claim that Danugroho (2024) sharpens further by arguing that Indonesian regional elections since Reformasi display a persistent defect,

namely elections that remain procedurally competitive while democratic substance steadily erodes underneath them.

A wider body of scholarship situates this defect within debates about democratic backsliding across Southeast Asia. Competitive elections in Indonesia can coexist with unmistakably illiberal tendencies, including the normalization of religious nationalism, exclusionary rhetoric, and affective polarization (Aspinall & Mietzner, 2019a; Bourchier, 2019; Diprose et al., 2019; Mietzner, 2020). (Warburton & Aspinall, 2019) trace this regression to an interaction between structural conditions, elite agency, and popular opinion rather than to any single cause, while Aspinall et al. (2020) show that ordinary Indonesian citizens are often considerably less illiberal than the political elites who claim to represent them, which widens the gap between elite-driven identity appeals and grassroots democratic sentiment. This elite-mass divergence raises a pressing question for the present study. Does Pancasila function as an operational ethic that shapes local political practice, or does it survive mainly as a formal symbol invoked only after polarization has already taken hold.

Existing scholarship already explains patronage, clientelism, identity mobilization, and democratic backsliding in Indonesia with considerable sophistication Aspinall & Mietzner (2010). Comparative analysis across local cases with contrasting historical cleavages nonetheless remains limited, and this gap matters more once the discussion connects identity instrumentalization directly to the substantive criteria of Pancasila Democracy rather than treating it as a generic governance problem. Aceh, West Kalimantan, and North Maluku offer productive cases for such a comparison precisely because each region combines post-conflict memory, religious and ethnic cleavage, regional identity, and local elite networks in a distinct configuration. Aceh brings together post-conflict autonomy, Islamic normativity, entrenched local parties, and the political legacy of the Free Aceh Movement. West Kalimantan reflects Dayak-Malay competition, religious segmentation, the position of Chinese and migrant minorities, and enduring memories of communal violence. North Maluku shows the interaction between Muslim-Christian conflict memory, archipelagic regionalism, sultanate authority, and a situational rise of religious exclusivism that only activates once a minority candidate enters the contest.

This article asks how political actors instrumentalized identity in the 2017 or 2018 and the 2024 regional head elections across Aceh, West Kaliman-

tan, and North Maluku, and what this process meant for the substantive practice of Pancasila Democracy at the local level. The study pursues this question along three intertwined lines. It compares the patterns of identity instrumentalization that emerged across the three provinces, and it explains how local historical and demographic contexts shaped the form and intensity of identity mobilization in each setting. It also evaluates whether local electoral practice strengthened or weakened the Pancasila-democratic principles of inclusion, deliberation, unity in diversity, and social justice. The novelty of the article lies in moving the discussion beyond a general critique of identity politics toward a more precise analysis of identity instrumentalization as both an electoral mechanism and an ideological stress test for Pancasila Democracy.

METHOD

This research applies a qualitative comparative multiple-case study design that follows established case study logic for analyzing bounded political processes across different contexts (Creswell, 2013; Hays & Singh, 2012). The study selected Aceh, West Kalimantan, and North Maluku purposively because they represent distinct identity cleavage configurations and different post-conflict trajectories rather than a random or convenient sample. Aceh represents a post-conflict autonomy setting in which Islamic identity, local parties, and conflict memory remain central to electoral legitimacy. West Kalimantan represents a multi-ethnic and multi-religious setting in which Dayak-Malay and Muslim-Christian cleavages shape electoral bargaining directly. North Maluku represents a post-communal-conflict and archipelagic setting in which religious identity, regional origin, and sultanate authority intersect only situationally. This documentary design follows qualitative research procedures that emphasize purposive source selection, interpretive reading, and contextual analysis (Azwar, 2007).

The study is documentary and desk-based rather than survey-based, so it does not use individual voters as its unit of analysis. It instead analyzes textual records of electoral contestation and public discourse, where textual records refer to written materials documenting electoral events, candidate positioning, public narratives, and post-election disputes, while public discourse refers to public statements, media narratives, organizational declarations, and elite claims that surfaced during or after each electoral process. This choice follows directly from the research question, since the study asks

how political actors instrumentalized identity rather than how individual citizens experienced or internalized that instrumentalization psychologically. A survey design would answer a different question entirely, one centered on voter attitudes rather than on elite strategy and public discourse. Materials were gathered from three categories of sources spanning institutional documents, archived online media coverage, and peer-reviewed scholarly literature, and each category served a different evidentiary purpose within the analysis rather than functioning as an interchangeable data pool. Cross-referencing these three categories against one another also allowed the study to check institutional claims against independent media reporting wherever both existed for the same event.

Institutional documents include election-related reports, official announcements, court-related materials, and monitoring reports from election bodies, conflict-monitoring institutions, and other public institutions relevant to the cases. The study selected online media materials when they directly reported identity-related campaign narratives, elite statements, intimidation, public rejection, or election outcomes in the three provinces. The study searched the scholarly literature using several keyword combinations. These keywords included “identity politics”, “identity mobilization”, “identity instrumentalization”, “Pilkada”, “Aceh”, “West Kalimantan”, “North Maluku”, “Pancasila democracy”, “local democracy”, “SARA”, and “post-conflict elections”. The search focused mainly on publications from 2004 to 2025 found through Google Scholar, Garuda/SINTA-indexed journals, and relevant international journal databases. The study also

retained older theoretical works when they provided foundational concepts.

The final corpus used in the analysis consisted of 33 textual items. These items included three institutional reports or official commentaries, two online media items directly related to identity-based electoral events, and 28 scholarly publications. The study included materials that met three criteria. First, the materials had to be directly relevant to one of the three cases. Second, they had to explicitly discuss identity, local elections, conflict memory, or Pancasila democracy. Third, they needed to provide sufficient empirical or conceptual material for coding. The study excluded materials that were purely opinion-based and had no empirical relevance. It also excluded materials that repeated the same event without adding new information or that did not relate to provincial-level electoral dynamics. Provincial demographic and electoral information served only as contextual material. The study used this information to interpret cleavage structures and electoral outcomes.

The study analyzed the data using qualitative content analysis and thematic comparison. First, the researcher read each text to identify references to identity markers, actors, campaign narratives, mobilization channels, and democratic implications. Second, the researcher coded the identified materials using the framework summarized in Table 1. Third, the researcher compared the coded materials across the cases to identify convergent and divergent patterns. The study used source triangulation to strengthen validity by comparing scholarly accounts, institutional materials, and media reports. It therefore treated triangulation as a validity strategy rather than as a data-collection technique.

Table 1. Coding framework for analyzing identity instrumentalization and Pancasila Democracy

Analytical dimension	Operational indicators	Examples of textual markers	Function in analysis
Identity markers	Religion, ethnicity, regional origin, indigeneity, conflict memory	Islamic/Sharia claims; Dayak-Malay labels; Muslim-Christian references; local-warrior or native-son narratives	Identifies which identities become politically salient in each case
Identity mobilization	Activation of group boundaries through campaign narratives or public endorsements	Calls to vote according to religion/ethnicity; clerical or customary endorsement; symbolic representation claims	Shows how identities are converted into electoral appeals
Identity instrumentalization	Strategic and exclusionary use of identity for electoral advantage	Delegitimizing rivals as outsiders; anti-minority claims; us-versus-them rhetoric; intimidation or coercive identity pressure	Distinguishes normal identity presence from polarizing political exploitation

Analytical dimension	Operational indicators	Examples of textual markers	Function in analysis
Pancasila Democracy	Inclusion, deliberation, unity in diversity, social justice	Cross-identity coalition; rejection of sectarian appeals; policy-based competition; equal citizenship	Evaluates whether local democracy operates substantively or merely procedurally
Democratic vulnerability	Polarization, intimidation, hoaxes, post-election disputes	SARA hoaxes; violent threats; identity-based protest; contestation before electoral courts	Assesses risks to local democratic consolidation

Source: Author’s synthesis from the conceptual framework and documentary corpus.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Political Patterns across Aceh, West Kalimantan, and North Maluku

Identity did not operate uniformly across the three cases. It became politically salient through markedly different mechanisms depending on conflict memory, demographic composition, local institutions, and elite strategy in each province, and the comparison confirms that identity instrumentalization follows no single template across otherwise similar post-conflict settings. Aceh demonstrates how local parties and clerical authority can consolidate religious identity together with conflict memory into a durable electoral machine. A different trajectory unfolds in West Kalimantan, where open ethno-religious polarization in one election cycle gave way to a more moderate cross-ethnic compromise in the next. North Maluku diverges from both patterns by showing religious identity remaining largely dormant until a minority candidate entered the race, at which point it surfaced quickly even though elite religious appeals ultimately failed to determine voter behavior. Reading these three trajectories together suggests that the intensity of identity instrumentalization tracks the underlying stability of local political structures far more closely than it tracks the mere presence of ethnic or religious diversity.

Aceh and the Consolidation of Islamic Legitimacy, Local Parties, and Conflict Memory

Aceh illustrates the strongest case of identity consolidation in the study because religious legitimacy intersects so tightly with post-conflict political authority. The Helsinki peace process, the province’s special autonomy arrangements, the institutionalization of Sharia, and the emergence of locally rooted parties together created a political field

in which Islamic symbolism and conflict memory became exceptionally valuable electoral resources. Sholeh (2015) reads Aceh’s autonomy and peace settlement as a democratic accommodation of conflict that continues to shape regional political authority long after the guns fell silent, and this settlement effectively wrote religious and combatant identity into the province’s institutional fabric rather than leaving it to informal politics alone. The Aceh Party draws directly on former GAM networks, and it routinely presents itself as far more than an ordinary electoral organization, claiming instead to embody Acehnese struggle, Islamic identity, and post-conflict autonomy in a single political brand. Syarif (2019) shows that local party identity in Aceh is closely bound up with Islamization issues and post-conflict political legitimacy, while more recent scholarship on Sharia, citizenship, and identity in Aceh underscores the continuing weight of Islamic identity in public space and recognition politics (Salim et al., 2025). Subregional identity remains relevant as well, as research on Uken-Toa identity politics in the 2017 Central Aceh Pilkada demonstrates that even within a broadly Islamic province, finer-grained territorial identities still compete for electoral salience (Irmansyah et al., 2019).

The 2017 election cycle and the 2024 gubernatorial election display clear continuity in this pattern rather than any meaningful rupture. Candidates connected to former combatant networks and local Islamic legitimacy have repeatedly converted historical struggle into electoral capital across both cycles. Muzakir Manaf and Fadhlullah were officially declared the winning pair in 2024 with 1,492,846 votes, equivalent to 53.27 percent of valid votes (Komisi Independen Pemilihan Aceh, 2025), a result that does not prove Acehnese voters act on religious identity alone but does show that Islamic legitimacy, local party infrastructure, and conflict memory still form a powerful mechanism for polit-

ical mobilization when combined. Documentary reports also indicate that the contest involved allegations of intimidation and pressure directed against non-local or rival candidates, which suggests that identity instrumentalization can travel together with coercive practice once political competition gets framed around the boundary between authentic and non-authentic representatives of Aceh (Dialeksis, 2024). Sahide et al. (2022) offer a useful comparative lens here, arguing that local elites across Indonesia play a decisive role in either transforming or entrenching intolerant values within their communities, and Aceh's *dayah* networks, *ulama*, and former combatants function precisely as the kind of elite infrastructure capable of consolidating an exclusive identity regime rather than opening it toward pluralism. Fossati (2024) similarly cautions that illiberal resistance built around political Islam does not require an external authoritarian sponsor to persist, since locally embedded religious and party networks can sustain it indefinitely on their own.

From the perspective of Pancasila Democracy, the Aceh case reveals an unresolved tension between recognition of local particularity and the constitutional principle of inclusive citizenship. Indonesia's decentralized framework constitutionally accommodates special autonomy and Islamic normativity within a single national order, and the underlying problem arises only when political actors convert religious identity into an exclusionary test of political authenticity. The same problem surfaces whenever minority citizenship gets placed below majoritarian symbolic legitimacy in practice rather than treated as an equal claim on the polity. Pancasila consequently functions less as an operational ethic of deliberation in this setting and appears instead as a formal national reference that coexists uneasily alongside a much stronger local identity regime, echoing the wider pattern of ideological hollowing that Danugroho (2024) describes for post-Reformasi regional elections generally.

West Kalimantan: From Open Polarization to Cross-Ethnic Compromise

West Kalimantan presents a markedly different pattern from Aceh's religious consolidation. Its identity configuration rests on Dayak-Malay relations, Muslim-Christian segmentation, the position of Chinese and migrant minorities, and the enduring memory of communal violence involving Dayak, Malay, and Madurese communities. Because of this layered history, ethno-religious appeals in West Kalimantan's elections carry an un-

usually high risk of horizontal polarization compared with more homogeneous provinces. Many observers interpreted the 2018 gubernatorial election through the stark opposition between the Malay-Muslim ticket of Sutarmidji and Ria Norsan and the Dayak-Christian ticket of Karolin Margret Natasa and Suryadman Gidot. Arifianto & Chen (2018) and Setijadi (2018) describe West Kalimantan as one of the clearest cases in which identity politics moved to the very center of a 2018 local election, as hoaxes, social media campaigns, and symbolic appeals repeatedly encouraged voters to read the contest through primordial identity boundaries rather than policy platforms. The Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict (IPAC, 2018) documented this high-risk environment in its own report on local election results in West Kalimantan and Papua, flagging the acute political sensitivity of identity-based contestation in the province well before the votes were even counted.

The 2018 contest therefore produced open identity polarization, yet the 2024 election suggests a genuine tactical shift rather than a simple repeat performance. Instead of intensifying direct Dayak-Malay confrontation, candidates in 2024 actively built cross-ethnic coalitions capable of bridging the province's deepest cleavage. The Ria Norsan and Krisantus Kurniawan ticket combined Malay-Muslim and Dayak representation on a single slate and won 1,364,563 votes, equivalent to 52.80 percent of valid votes (Kementerian Hukum Kalimantan Barat, 2025). This result that shows identity did not disappear from West Kalimantan's politics so much as get reorganized into a more inclusive representational bargain. Civil society also mobilized proactively ahead of the vote, as traditional leaders, religious figures, and local political elites jointly promoted an anti-identity-politics declaration intended to blunt exactly the kind of provocation that had defined the 2018 race, while an accompanying Hoax Crisis Centre worked to intercept identity-based disinformation before it could spread widely across social media. Sahide et al. (2022) note that West Kalimantan also contains Singkawang, frequently cited as one of Indonesia's most religiously tolerant cities, which suggests that the province's civic infrastructure for managing plurality is considerably more developed than its conflict history alone would predict. The shift from confrontation to compromise reduced the risk of open conflict without eliminating primordial voting patterns altogether, since ethnicity remained politically salient even as it became folded into an elite strategy of balanced representation rather than open antagonism.

West Kalimantan therefore shows an ambivalent relationship with Pancasila Democracy that resists any simple verdict. Cross-ethnic coalition-building reflects the Pancasila principle of unity in diversity insofar as it pushes candidates to bridge communal blocs rather than exploit them, yet the persistence of careful ethnic bargaining also shows that inclusion still depends heavily on elite calculation rather than on a fully internalized civic ethic among the broader electorate. Pancasila works here mainly as a stabilizing language and a workable coalition formula. It has not yet become a substantive force capable of transforming the underlying voter cleavage on its own.

North Maluku: Situational Mobilization and Pluralist Voter Agency

North Maluku shows the most situational North Maluku displays the most situational pattern of identity instrumentalization among the three cases. The province still carries the legacy of Muslim-Christian communal conflict from 1999 and 2000, yet its electoral politics is shaped just as much by regionalism, island-based affinities, sultanate authority, and elite patronage networks as by that older religious cleavage. Religious identity appeared far less explicitly in the 2018 gubernatorial election because the leading candidates were all Muslim, and under those conditions ethno-geographical identity, local dynastic ties, and regional patronage networks became considerably more visible than religion itself. Religious cleavage had not disappeared from the province. It simply lay submerged beneath regional competition and elite-network politics until circumstances changed.

The 2024 gubernatorial election altered this configuration decisively once Sherly Tjoanda, a Chinese-Indonesian Christian woman, entered the race as a serious contender. Her candidacy activated sharp religious and customary resistance from segments of the local elite, most visibly through the Moloku Kie Raha Indigenous Peoples' Alliance, which openly invoked ancestral will to insist that the governorship belonged only to a Muslim candidate, while leaders of the Tidore Sultanate went further still and issued a fatwa against electing a leader from a different religion altogether. Public discourse around this resistance illustrates identity instrumentalization with unusual clarity, since political and customary actors here framed religious belonging as an outright precondition for legitimate leadership rather than one consideration among many. Yet the final result exposed the limits of this elite pressure just as sharply. Sherly Tjoanda and

Sarbin Sehe were declared the winning pair with 359,416 votes, equivalent to 51.68 percent of valid votes, defeating Husin Alting, the Tidore Sultanate's own preferred candidate, who secured only 24.42 percent despite his considerable inherited legitimacy (Komisi Pemilihan Umum Provinsi Maluku Utara, 2025). Losing candidates challenged the outcome through the Constitutional Court on fraud allegations, but the Court rejected the lawsuit, and Sherly was inaugurated as North Maluku's first non-Muslim female governor, with media outlets explicitly framing her inauguration as a victory over identity politics itself (Pergerakan Indonesia untuk Semua, 2025).

Mietzner and Muhtadi (2020) offer a useful corrective against reading this outcome too optimistically, arguing that pluralist electoral results at the top of the ballot frequently coexist with considerable intolerance at the grassroots level, so North Maluku's result should be read as evidence of contested rather than settled pluralism. Aspinall and Mietzner (2019b) reach a compatible conclusion in their broader account of nondemocratic pluralism across Southeast Asia, noting that minority-identified candidates in Indonesia have periodically won decisive support from religious-majority electorates precisely when voters prioritized competence and coalition strength over sectarian loyalty. North Maluku fits this pattern closely, since many voters here appear to have evaluated Sherly Tjoanda on leadership grounds rather than through the religious lens that local elites tried to impose. The province is therefore analytically important because it blocks any deterministic reading of identity politics. Religious identity became salient only once a minority candidacy emerged, and even then voters did not respond in a fully monolithic way. From the perspective of Pancasila Democracy, this case captures both vulnerability and resilience simultaneously. Vulnerability appears whenever political and customary actors reject minority leadership purely on religious grounds, while resilience appears in the electorate's demonstrated capacity to support a more inclusive outcome despite sustained identity pressure from above. Pancasila Democracy is not absent from North Maluku's politics. It remains actively contested and unevenly practiced rather than either fully realized or fully abandoned.

Comparative Analysis and Implications for Pancasila Democracy

The comparison shows that local political structures shape identity instrumentalization. Aceh represents identity consolidation, West Kalimantan

Table 2. Comparative patterns of identity instrumentalization and implications for Pancasila Democracy

Province	Dominant identity configuration	2017/2018 pattern	2024 pattern	Implication for Pancasila Democracy
Aceh	Islamic identity, post-conflict memory, local parties, former combatant networks	Islamic legitimacy and conflict memory shaped the contest among local and national political forces.	Religious identity and former-combatant legitimacy remained influential; Muzakir Manaf-Fadhhlullah won with 53.27 percent.	Recognition of local particularity coexists with risks of exclusion when Islamic authenticity becomes a political test of legitimate leadership.
West Kalimantan	Dayak-Malay ethnicity, Muslim-Christian segmentation, communal conflict memory	Open ethno-religious polarization was visible in the Sutarmidji-Ria Norsan versus Karolin-Suryadman contest.	A Malay-Dayak coalition won with 52.80 percent, shifting identity politics toward cross-ethnic compromise.	Cross-identity coalition supports unity in diversity, but continuing ethnic bargaining shows that inclusion remains partly pragmatic.
North Maluku	Muslim-Christian cleavage, regionalism, island identity, sultanate authority	Religious identity was less explicit because all major candidates were Muslim; regional and patronage networks dominated.	A minority candidacy activated religious resistance, but Sherly Tjoanda-Sarbin Sehe won with 51.68 percent.	Pancasila values were both challenged and reaffirmed: elite exclusionary claims emerged, but voters produced a pluralist outcome.

Source: Primary Data Processed, 2026

represents identity compromise, and North Maluku represents situational identity activation. Table 2 summarizes these patterns. This substantive friction traces back to the foundational debates of Indonesia’s state-building era, particularly the deliberate rejection of Eurocentric political frameworks. Sukarno explicitly refused to emulate Western liberal democracy, arguing that uncritical adoption of individualistic, majoritarian voting systems would inevitably trigger social fragmentation and fail to capture the collective ethos of a plural society (Bourchier, 2015; Latif, 2011). The substantive deficit visible in these local electoral cycles today stems from a comparable departure from that founding logic. Western liberal democracy tends to foster majoritarian outcomes, individualistic competition, identity polarization, and capitalistic political brokerage almost by design, whereas Pancasila Democracy grounds political legitimacy structurally in *musyawarah*, or deliberation, and *mufakat*, or consensus, prioritizing social justice, civic equality, and the ethical management of pluralism over raw electoral majority. When contemporary subnational actors

deploy ethnic and religious identity instrumentally for short-term electoral gain, they end up replicating precisely the majoritarian pathologies Sukarno warned against, turning what was meant to be an inclusive consensus-building framework into an exclusionary, zero-sum mechanism for accumulating power.

Read together, the three cases refine the broader claim that identity politics threatens democracy by locating the real democratic problem more precisely. Identity politics is not inherently anti-democratic, since it can just as easily express recognition and representation as exclusion. The sharper danger is identity instrumentalization, which appears whenever political actors strategically construct identity boundaries that narrow the meaning of legitimate citizenship and leadership. This boundary centered on Islamic authenticity and conflict memory in Aceh, on ethno-religious representation in West Kalimantan, and on the eligibility of a minority candidate to govern at all in North Maluku. The three cases nonetheless produced different outcomes rather than converging on a single trajectory. Aceh shows durable identity consolidation because

local party infrastructure and conflict memory supply organizational continuity across election cycles. West Kalimantan shows elite moderation because the risk of communal violence pushes actors toward cross-ethnic bargaining and preventive civic action such as the Hoax Crisis Centre described above. North Maluku shows voter agency because elite religious resistance ultimately failed to block the victory of a minority candidate. These variations demonstrate that post-conflict societies are not permanently trapped in sectarian politics, since institutional design, civil society intervention, elite strategy, and voter evaluation can each intensify or dampen identity-based polarization depending on how they interact.

The Pancasila Democracy framework clarifies why these dynamics carry weight beyond the three provinces themselves. Assessing local democracy purely by whether elections occur successfully misses the deeper question entirely, since procedural competition can coexist quite comfortably with substantive deficits whenever campaigns normalize exclusion, reduce citizens to primordial blocs, or replace policy debate with symbolic antagonism. This condition resembles what Merkel (2004) calls a defective democracy, a form in which electoral institutions continue to operate even as democratic substance steadily weakens beneath them. In Indonesia, this defect is not merely institutional but ideological as well, since Pancasila is meant to supply a shared ethical horizon for a genuinely plural society. Once campaigns use religion or ethnicity to delegitimize rivals, Pancasila collapses into a ceremonial symbol rather than an operative standard of political conduct, which is exactly the erosion Danugroho (2024) has in mind when describing the defects of post-Reformasi regional democracy. Warburton and Aspinall (2019) would locate part of the explanation in popular opinion itself, given that religious nationalism retains genuine grassroots appeal in several regions, while Aspinall et al. (2020) would stress the elite side of the equation, since Indonesian political elites have repeatedly proven considerably less committed to pluralist norms than the citizens they claim to represent.

The three cases also point toward plausible ways of strengthening local Pancasila Democracy rather than merely diagnosing its weaknesses. West Kalimantan's move toward cross-ethnic coalition-building shows that electoral incentives can be deliberately designed or informally negotiated to reduce zero-sum identity competition between rival blocs. North Maluku's 2024 result shows that voters can reject exclusionary elite appeals outright

once a credible alternative leadership narrative becomes available to them. Aceh illustrates the ongoing need for a more careful balance between local autonomy and equal citizenship, particularly in a setting where religious identity and post-conflict authority continue to shape political legitimacy so strongly. Taken together, these lessons suggest that Pancasila Democracy should not be strengthened through authoritarian ideological instruction of the kind the New Order once relied upon, but rather through democratic practices that make inclusion electorally rewarding and exclusion politically costly for the actors who might otherwise exploit it.

Several concrete policy directions follow from this analysis. Electoral management bodies and supervisory institutions need to enforce rules against SARA-based hate campaigns consistently rather than selectively, extending that enforcement to cases where identity appeals travel indirectly through customary, religious, or local-authenticity language rather than explicit slurs. Bawaslu in particular would benefit from stronger authority to impose real sanctions, potentially including disqualification for candidates proven to have systematically spread discriminatory speech, provided such enforcement pairs with a cultural approach that engages community and religious leaders so that corrective messages land as protection of unity rather than as external repression (Klinken, 2007). Political parties, for their part, should recruit candidates and build coalitions across identity boundaries not merely to satisfy symbolic representation quotas but to genuinely broaden policy accountability, and modest incentives such as a minimum vote-distribution requirement or preferential treatment for cross-ethnic tickets could nudge parties toward exactly the kind of inclusive leadership that emerged organically in West Kalimantan (Brown, 2020). Civic education carries equal weight in this picture, since it needs to emphasize the difference between legitimate identity representation and exclusionary identity instrumentalization rather than treating all identity-based appeals as equally suspect. The Pancasila Ideology Development Agency could anchor this effort through an expanded civic curriculum delivered via Pancasila-aware village programs, and elevating the agency toward ministerial status would give it clearer authority to coordinate such programs nationally rather than leaving implementation to scattered local initiatives (Sahide et al., 2022). Social justice must remain central to this entire agenda as well, because economic inequality and perceived marginalization repeatedly supply fertile ground for sectarian or ethnic mobilization regardless of how strong formal anti-hate-speech

rules become (Klinken, 2007). Strengthening Pancasila Democracy in this fuller sense therefore requires ethical-political education and structural reform working together to reduce the very grievances that electoral entrepreneurs are otherwise so ready to exploit.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that local democratization through regional head elections in Aceh, West Kalimantan, and North Maluku has created opportunities not simply for identity politics in general, but more specifically for identity instrumentalization as a strategic electoral mechanism. This distinction carries real analytical weight. Identity politics reflects the ordinary presence of ethnic, religious, and regional identities within a plural society, whereas identity instrumentalization refers to the deliberate deployment of those identities by political actors as electoral resources, and the practice turns genuinely problematic once actors use identity to delegitimize opponents, erect exclusionary boundaries, or replace deliberative competition with primordial loyalty. The three cases yield three distinct patterns rather than one shared story. Aceh represents consolidated religious and post-conflict identity instrumentalization sustained by local parties, clerical networks, and former-combatant legitimacy. West Kalimantan shows a genuine shift from open ethno-religious polarization in 2018 to cross-ethnic compromise in 2024, even though primordial blocs remain politically relevant beneath that compromise. North Maluku shows situational identity activation, in which religious resistance intensified sharply once a minority candidate emerged, yet voters simultaneously demonstrated pluralist agency by delivering a cross-identity outcome at the ballot box.

From the perspective of Pancasila Democracy, these findings show that local elections can remain democratic in procedure while growing vulnerable in substance, since identity instrumentalization steadily weakens inclusion, deliberation, civic equality, unity in diversity, and social justice wherever it takes hold. The cases also demonstrate, however, that this vulnerability is not deterministic. Cross-identity coalitions, credible leadership alternatives, consistent law enforcement, and sustained civic education can all reduce the polarizing effects of identity exploitation when they operate together rather than in isolation. Revitalizing Pancasila Democracy should accordingly be understood as a democratic strategy for making local political competition more inclusive and deliberative, echoing the kind of institutional and civic reinforcement that

each associate with resisting illiberal drift from within a democracy rather than from outside it. It should never be mistaken for a return to coercive ideological control of the sort the New Order once imposed through top-down indoctrination. Future research could extend this comparative logic to additional post-conflict provinces and to national-level contests, testing whether the elite-mass divergence documented here narrows or widens as Indonesia's electoral cycles continue to unfold.

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