POTENTIAL CONFLICT AND THE ABSENCE OF EFFECTIVE CONFLICT RESOLUTION MECHANISMS
(The Case of Bondowoso Village Election)

Moh Syaeful Bahar[1]
[1]UIN Sunan Ampel, Surabaya, Indonesia
kakbahar@uinsa.ac.id

ABSTRACT

This study examines the dynamics and potential sources of conflict emerging from the Village Head Election (Pilkades) in Grujugan Kidul Village, Bondowoso Regency, Eas Java. Following the decentralization era, village democracy has provided wider participation opportunities for local communities; however, electoral competition at the village level often generates social tensions due to strong emotional ties and close social relations among villagers. The research aims to identify conflict potentials, analyze conflict patterns, and evaluate the effectiveness of conflict resolution mechanisms within village political processes. This research employs a qualitative participatory approach to obtain a holistic understanding of social realities surrounding Pilkades. Data were collected through participatory observation, in-depth interviews with nineteen informants selected through snowball sampling, and literature review. Conflict theory perspectives were applied as the analytical framework to interpret social interactions, elite dynamics, and patterns of political contestation occurring before, during, and after the election process. The findings reveal that conflict originated from limited public understanding of democratic values and competition, resulting in emotional rather than rational political support. Such conditions encouraged blind fanaticism among supporters and intensified polarization within the community. Conflict developed through three stages: latent conflict before the election, manifest conflict during the election, and complex post-election conflict involving community groups and local government institutions. The study also finds that conflict resolution mechanisms were ineffective due to persistent elite tensions and the weakened mediating role of religious leaders. Consequently, latent social disharmony continued to shape community relations even after the electoral process ended.

Keywords: village politics, Pilkades, local elites, blind fanaticism, conflict

INTRODUCTION

Post–New Order Indonesia has witnessed a growing awareness of the importance of community participation in the development process (Chalik, 2010). Society is no longer positioned as an inferior object of development but plays an essential role as an autonomous subject capable of determining the direction of development. The centralized governmental pattern characterized by a top-down approach has proven ineffective and unsuccessful. As Indonesian society becomes increasingly educated, it recognizes that the desired public sphere is one grounded in responsible and autonomous freedom.

Consequently, the spirit promoted by post-reform governments consistently moves toward the strengthening of autonomy (Mendy, 2024).

The current governmental structure grants authority down to the lowest administrative level, namely the village. Village governments possess broad autonomous authority to manage governance in accordance with the local wisdom embedded in each village. Law No. 32 of 2004 on Regional Government explicitly mandates the decentralization of governance implementation to the village level. This mandate is reinforced by Government Regulation No. 72 of 2005 concerning Villages and Law No. 6 of 2014 on Villages, amended by Law No. 3 of 2024, demonstrating the continued consistency of village autonomization as a principle of governance administration.

Because the spirit of autonomy and decentralization emphasizes transparency and participation, village governments no longer operate independently in governing processes. Instead, they are continuously supervised by the Village Consultative Body (Badan Permusyawaratan Desa/BPD) as a form of community control. Through the existence of the BPD, communities maintain an open space to critically evaluate village head policies (Hidayat, 2023). The expectation is that governance based on the principle of from, by, and for the people, public sovereignty, can genuinely be realized. This meaning corresponds to the principle of participation, which fundamentally consists of three elements: voice, access, and control (Mao et al., 2024). These participatory principles will be strengthened and firmly institutionalized within society when supported by democratic principles.

For instance, community participation will be more effectively formed when citizens are actively involved from the initial stages of village government formation. The Village Head Election (Pilkades), as the initial gateway to establishing village governance, must therefore be conducted openly and honestly, emphasizing fair competition (contestation), freedom of association, and freedom of expression for community members.

The appointment of the BPD as the institution responsible for forming the Village Head Election Committee represents a practical application of expanded participatory space. The BPD not only establishes the election committee but also functions as a supervisory body during the Pilkades process.

In practice, the implementation of Pilkades requires patience and awareness from various stakeholders, given the lengthy and energy-intensive electoral process. Various stages, including candidate nomination through recruitment and screening processes, administrative verification, candidate introduction, campaign periods, and the direct election of the village head, constitute phases that may trigger social disharmony. Nevertheless, all these stages must be carried out as an expression of direct democracy at the village level.

Despite the extensive democratic framework applied within Pilkades, the process is far from free of obstacles. Consequently, several critical questions emerge. Are village communities, which traditionally prioritize harmonious social relations, prepared to engage openly in political competition? Or, under certain conditions, does Pilkades

become an effective instrument that stimulates conflict within society, where democratic contestation and competition facilitate escalating tensions and local political conflicts in villages? These questions are relevant considering that competition within Pilkades occurs in a close, narrow, and face-to-face social arena. Therefore, the possibility of chaos arising from conflict, competition, and political resistance at the village level is always present (Samaudin, 2018).

This situation contrasts sharply with political conflicts occurring during Legislative Elections (Pilleg) and Presidential Elections (Pilpres). These competitions operate on a national scale, resulting in relatively lower conflict intensity. They involve populations across vast geographical areas with highly diverse social identities, thereby weakening primordial and emotional bonds. Consequently, political tensions and conflicts are not experienced directly by communities. In contrast, Pilkades conflicts occur in close social proximity (Jary & Jary, 1991), involving strong primordial and emotional ties. Village communities do not merely witness conflict through media or cyberspace, as commonly occurs during presidential elections; instead, they experience real conflicts, their own conflicts, not those belonging to distant actors. Each community member becomes inevitably drawn into the conflict arena due to the strong social and emotional magnetism of Pilkades competition.

In a discussion forum, Sutoro Eko, a researcher at the Institute for Research and Empowerment (IRE), argued that conflicts emerging during Pilkades processes are partly caused by the implementation of a liberal democratic system that is resistant to local wisdom. Pilkades practices emphasizing liberal democratic procedures have collided with local traditions. Village social life, traditionally characterized by harmony, tolerance, openness, egalitarianism, mutual trust, and social solidarity, is increasingly replaced by procedural competitive dynamics.

Regardless of Sutoro Eko's perspective, conflicts arising from Pilkades remain an urgent issue requiring discussion and conflict resolution efforts. Pilkades conflicts constitute a real phenomenon within village social life. Conflict itself is omnipresent (Kaldor & Radice, 2022); it exists everywhere, embedded in social interaction, and cannot be entirely eliminated. Several factors contribute to concerns regarding Pilkades conflicts, including the emotional proximity among supporters, reinforced by latent factors such as a political culture shaped by zero-sum game orientations, weak sporting mentality, and structural factors, particularly the involvement of village administrative structures in supporting specific candidates. Conflict therefore becomes highly probable when election organizers display bias or collusion with particular candidates.

Learning from several Pilkades conflicts that escalated into criminal violence in various regions, such as the 2007 case in Lebakjabung Village, Jatirejo District, Mojokerto Regency; conflicts in Cilabanbulan Village, Menses District, Pandeglang Regency; Lentu Village, Bonto Romba District, Jeneponto Regency; and the burning of a candidate's house in Karanganyar Regency, the study of conflict potential and the anatomy of Pilkades conflict in Bondowoso Regency becomes highly significant. Several Pilkades conducted in Bondowoso have also been marked by incidents leading toward

social conflict, both latent and manifest. In fact, the Bondowoso local government, through Regional Regulation No. 7 of 2006 concerning Procedures for Nomination, Election, Appointment, and Inauguration of Village Heads, has provided a formal mechanism for resolving electoral disputes, particularly in Chapter XIV Articles 37 and 38. However, empirical realities demonstrate that Pilkades conflicts continue to occur with varying levels of escalation.

Preliminary findings indicate that several Pilkades conflicts in Bondowoso Regency, such as those in Grujugan Kidul, Karang Mellok, Jeruk Sok-Sok, and Tumpeng Villages, reflect local political conflicts threatening community social integration. It would constitute a serious mistake if stakeholders responsible for maintaining public security, stability, and social harmony allowed these conditions to persist without developing conflict resolution frameworks. Although numerous studies have examined village political conflicts (Agusintadewi et al., 2023; Tribuana & Lubis, 2023), research identifying the potential and anatomy of Pilkades conflict in Grujugan Kidul Village, Grujugan District, Bondowoso Regency remains highly urgent and necessary.

This study focuses on uncovering the potential sources of conflict within Pilkades in Bondowoso. It also aims to propose the utilization of local wisdom as an alternative approach to Pilkades conflict resolution. Therefore, both theoretically and practically, this research holds significant urgency and relevance.

METHODS

In research, objectivity is a principle that must be upheld, although achieving it is not easy (Earl, 1989:485). In this regard, Giddens (1989) argues that no individual observes reality entirely free from prejudice. Therefore, according to Giddens, objectivity in social research can substantively be achieved through criticism conducted by multiple parties. Consequently, the direct involvement of the researcher in this study becomes highly essential. The choice to employ a participatory approach is therefore expected to assist the researcher in addressing several fundamental questions formulated in the research problem.

This study employs a qualitative approach because it seeks to obtain a holistic understanding of field realities rich in information. Several considerations underlie the use of this qualitative approach. First, the research concerns the meanings behind actions performed by various components of village society during the Village Head Election (Pilkades) process; thus, interpreting facts behind observable facts becomes an absolute prerequisite. Second, the study does not merely examine observable behaviors and actions of village head candidates, supporters, families, and interest groups involved in the Pilkades process, but also explores beliefs, motives, consciousness, emotions, and needs underlying their actions. Third, qualitative research provides opportunities to examine phenomena comprehensively and holistically.

For data collection, the researcher applied three techniques. First, participatory observation, conducted through direct participation in the daily life of the studied village community to uncover deeper dimensions, enabling the researcher to obtain genuine data

reflecting what participants say, feel, do, and think regarding Pilkades. Second, in-depth interviews, carried out through a series of intensive interviews with various research informants. Third, literature research, in which the researcher carefully examined written sources, including books, academic articles, independent publications, and previous studies addressing similar themes.

This research was conducted in Bondowoso Regency, specifically in Grujukan Kidul Village, Grujukan District. The selection of this village was undertaken purposively, based on considerations related to the escalation of conflicts emerging during and after the Pilkades process. Through a snowball sampling technique, nineteen individuals were selected as research informants.

In the analytical process, this study employs conflict theory as its theoretical foundation. Numerous scholars have contributed analyses to conflict theory (Gurr, 1980; Dahrendorf, 1986). Albert F. Eldridge defines conflict as opposition among ideas, opinions, beliefs, and interests between two or more parties. Such opposition may take both non-physical and physical forms, may escalate at high or low levels, and may appear as latent or manifest conflict (Saefuddin, 1986).

Ted Robert Gurr identifies several criteria of conflict: (1) conflict involves two or more parties; (2) these parties engage in opposing and hostile interactions; and (3) they tend to employ coercive actions to confront or defeat opponents (Gurr, 1980).

According to Ralf Dahrendorf (1986), conflict, particularly political conflict, is inherent in every political system. Wherever a political system exists, political conflict inevitably accompanies it. No political system is entirely free from conflict. Maswadi Rauf advances a similar argument, asserting that conflict tends to escalate when ignored, eventually forming polarized extremes among social groups. Differences in interests among individuals or groups thus become primary triggers of conflict.

Karl Marx, the German scholar widely regarded as a central figure in conflict theory, argued that the most probable arena of conflict lies within the socio-economic structure of capitalist society (Spencer, 2024). Social integration, in Marx's perspective, represents the outcome of domination by one class over another, specifically the domination of the bourgeois class over the proletariat. Class-based society therefore constitutes the core of Marxian social analysis.

Marx further argued that human socio-economic life is continually shaped and determined by class struggle. The bourgeoisie represents the class controlling the means of production, while the proletariat lacks access to capital and production resources. The primary driver of class formation, therefore, lies within the economic system itself.

Another scholar contributing significantly to conflict theory is Lewis Coser (1959). For Coser, conflict possesses positive social value. Building upon propositions developed earlier by Georg Simmel (1904), Coser conceptualized conflict as a struggle over values and claims to status, power, and scarce resources aimed at neutralizing, injuring, or eliminating opponents. Coser's analysis focuses particularly on the positive functions of conflict, namely its capacity to strengthen social adaptation and cohesion within particular social relationships or groups.

In political studies, the primary source of conflict generally derives from struggles over power, particularly conditions of resource and positional scarcity. Power is continuously contested by actors at different levels of political hierarchy. Elites at each level compete to control limited positions of authority. Each village can only be led by one village head, each regency by one regent, and so forth. Beyond authority itself, elites compete for power because it also provides access to accompanying benefits such as networks, financial resources, strategic investments, and privileged information.

Maswadi Rauf clearly explains several motivations underlying struggles for power: (1) the high prestige attached to political office; (2) political positions provide broad opportunities to access scarce resources; and (3) the pursuit of pleasure as a fundamental human objective. Power thus becomes closely associated with wealth and the ability of individuals or groups to obtain advantages and facilities more easily (Sairin & Sumedi, 1998).

Ramlan Surbakti (1999) categorizes conflict patterns into two major types: horizontal conflict and vertical conflict. Horizontal conflict emerges from cultural, political, ethnic, and religious pluralism within society, whereas vertical conflict arises from struggles for power among political forces. Pilkades conflicts occurring in Bondowoso potentially display both horizontal and vertical characteristics.

The intensity of conflict patterns is determined by the fundamental issues triggering the conflict. Consequently, conflicts may manifest at either high or low intensity depending on underlying causes and the antagonistic interactions between parties. This antagonistic position can be identified through attitudes, behaviors, and contradictions, allowing conflict to be observed in its manifest form. Conflicts occurring during and after Pilkades can likewise be analyzed through the antagonistic positions adopted by conflicting parties.

POTENTIAL CONFLICT IN VILLAGE POLITICS

As is common in rural communities, the implementation of the Village Head Election (Pilkades) draws the attention of most villagers into the dynamics of local political contestation. The community perceives this electoral event as a decisive moment closely connected to their everyday lives. The village head represents the leader most directly engaged with the delivery of services required by rural society.

Consequently, this electoral event, conducted periodically every eight years, is considered highly significant. Based on several interviews conducted during the research, community members expressed stronger motivation to participate directly in Pilkades compared to other democratic processes such as regional head elections (Pilkada), gubernatorial elections (Pilgub), legislative elections (Pilleg), and presidential elections (Pilpres).

For villagers, Pilkades represents the most genuine process of selecting their own leader, the leader most needed by ordinary citizens. When community members face illness or hardship, it is not the regent or the president who provides immediate assistance; rather, it is the village head who directly attends to their needs.

Given this profound meaning attached to both the Pilkades process and the figure of the village head, the strong public enthusiasm surrounding Pilkades is unsurprising. One expression of this enthusiasm is the emergence of supporters aligned with particular candidates considered suitable and compatible with community expectations. Such support may take several forms. It may reflect a rational choice based on agreement with a candidate's programmatic proposals; it may arise from emotional attachment rooted in kinship ties, geographical proximity, or shared historical relations; or it may stem from social dependence on certain individuals. Among these forms, the second and third types were more frequently identified during field research. Rational-programmatic support was relatively rare, resulting in a tendency toward blind fanaticism among village head supporters, as observed in Grujugan Village, the site of this study.

Blind Fanaticism

Mutual support among community members becomes one of the primary seeds of blind fanaticism within society. Ideally, the democratic process of Pilkades should embody healthy competition, respect for differences, and adherence to democratic norms. However, these principles have not been fully realized in practice. Electoral choices that should remain confidential are often openly displayed. Community members publicly demonstrate their political allegiance through campaign attributes, such as displaying candidate images and openly mobilizing support among social groups.

The enthusiasm of supporters often provokes counter-mobilization from rival groups that fear losing political backing, thereby intensifying open campaigning practices. Friction among supporters, combined with limited public understanding of democratic values, has driven many villagers toward blind fanaticism toward their preferred candidates. Social sensitivity and mutual respect gradually erode, as individuals prioritize defending their group and candidate from perceived attacks by rival supporters.

Interviews with a fanatical supporter revealed that political support was predominantly emotional rather than rational. Supporters were willing to spend personal resources to secure victory for their candidate. Such support extended beyond political advocacy and was closely linked to personal prestige and social pride associated with publicly declaring allegiance to a particular candidate. This sense of personal prestige crystallized into collective fanaticism when reinforced by shared emotional identification among supporters of the same candidate.

The blind fanaticism exhibited by supporters became sufficiently strong to weaken long-standing social norms such as tolerance, politeness, and mutual compassion. In some cases, it even disrupted religious and familial relationships, including strained relations between in-laws or between parents and children.

The fear of social embarrassment should a supported candidate lose became a persistent psychological pressure that encouraged supporters to engage in increasingly aggressive acts of defense. These defensive behaviors often manifested in provocative actions directed at rival groups, prompting reciprocal reactions.

Similar to other forms of blind fanaticism, highly emotional supporter groups in Grujukan Village frequently abandoned rational judgment in their political behavior. One notable incident occurred on election day when vote counting had not yet concluded; a group of supporters who believed their candidate had already won celebrated by engaging in public nudity as an expression of triumph and ridicule toward opposing supporters. Such behavior would be unlikely among rational voters, as it clearly violates social norms and reason. However, the dominance of emotional impulses rendered such actions unavoidable.

Emotionally driven supporter groups confronted opposing supporters in increasingly confrontational expressions of political allegiance. They reacted rapidly whenever the honor or personal character of their candidate was criticized, perceiving such criticism as a personal insult. These reactionary responses created a continuous cycle of provocation among competing groups, in which each provocative act generated an equivalent counterreaction. At the time this research was conducted, such patterns of behavior remained observable, although they were no longer as overt as during the peak period of electoral contestation.

Local Village Elite Conflict

Local village elite conflict constitutes one of the major sources of Pilkades conflict observed in Grujugan Kidul Village. In this context, local elites primarily refer to religious leaders who hold significant influence within village society. The conflict originated from tensions in interpersonal relations among religious figures, which gradually produced negative relational dynamics among elites, particularly involving religious authorities with strong social influence.

Initially, poor communication among religious elites manifested as latent friction. Over time, however, these tensions intensified and evolved into open conflict. Both community members and religious elites became divided in responding to the situation. Some segments of society supported the actions of one religious figure, while others openly criticized and opposed them.

This polemic continuously circulated within the community, forming a vortex of conflict that polarized society into two opposing groups. The village head election subsequently became an arena that further intensified these tensions. Similar to a battleground, Pilkades provided a political space through which groups that had long been involved in conflict sought to express and resolve accumulated grievances through village-level political alignment.

Although elite polarization did not entirely follow rigid lines, patterns of elite support closely resembled the alignment of political support during the Pilkades. Conflict potentials that existed prior to the election gained momentum during the electoral process. The relationship between pre-existing conflict potential and supporting factors therefore demonstrates distinct characteristics. Based on the researcher's analysis, supporting factors operated somewhat outside the original conflict structure compared to the underlying conflict potential, although their influence proved stronger. This occurred

because supporting factors emerged simultaneously with the Pilkades conflict itself. Several supporting factors contributing to conflict escalation were identified through field observations.

CONFLICT PATTERNS AND THE ABSENCE OF RESOLUTION MECHANISMS

In examining the patterns of conflict, the researcher identified several recurring dynamics accompanying the overall conflict process. The first pattern emerged during the pre-election period. At this stage, conflict developed primarily along horizontal lines, appearing both openly and covertly. Open conflict occurred through direct confrontation between opposing groups, while latent conflict manifested through underlying tensions without explicit confrontation.

The conflict pattern prior to the Pilkades was stimulated by pre-existing conflict potentials within the community, reinforced by several supporting factors that intensified tensions. Based on interviews with multiple informants and field observations conducted by the researcher, no effective conflict resolution mechanism rooted in local wisdom was found in Grujugan Kidul Village, Bondowoso. The community tended to allow conflict to persist over time. Although conflict intensity no longer appeared in manifest form, latent horizontal conflict remained strongly embedded in everyday social relations.

Social disharmony continued to be easily observed within community interactions. In fact, attempts at conflict resolution were initiated by several religious leaders. However, these efforts failed midway because longstanding tensions also existed within the religious elite themselves. As a result, every reconciliation initiative was accompanied by suspicion from opposing groups.

Testimony from one religious leader reinforced the finding that tensions among religious elites in Grujugan Kidul Village became a significant supporting factor prolonging social conflict. Individuals who were expected to function as mediators and reconciliators instead became entangled within the conflict dynamics. According to Mukhlis, the involvement of religious elites sustained the embers of conflict within society. Community members perceived elite tensions as legitimizing ongoing disputes, thereby normalizing and reinforcing conflicts among villagers.

The absence of community-based conflict resolution efforts coincided with the limited effectiveness of mediation initiatives undertaken by local government authorities. The district administration, particularly the sub-district office responsible for territorial governance, had lost credibility in the eyes of both conflicting parties. Clear evidence of this mistrust emerged through accusations from both sides claiming that the sub-district head had shown partiality toward one of the village head candidates.

CONCLUSION

This study finds that several conflict potentials functioned as initial stimuli for the emergence of prolonged conflict in Grujugan Kidul Village in 2008. These potentials were closely related to the community's limited understanding of democracy and political

competition. The condition was primarily shaped by insufficient public knowledge regarding the substantive meaning of democracy. The community's lack of readiness to engage in local political competition resulted in the dominance of emotional expression in political support. Support tended to be emotional rather than rational, eventually transforming into blind fanaticism toward particular candidates. Supporters rarely considered candidates' programs or track records; instead, their primary concern was ensuring that the candidate they supported emerged victorious.

The conflict pattern identified in this study developed through three stages. The first stage occurred prior to the Pilkades implementation, during which conflict remained largely latent. The second stage emerged during the execution of Pilkades, when conflict shifted into an open or manifest pattern. The third stage marked a more complex phase of conflict escalation. Conflict was no longer confined to competing supporter groups but expanded to include local government institutions, which became targets of demands and accusations from both parties. Conflict potentials and supporting factors played significant roles in sustaining conflict during this third phase.

Meanwhile, conflict resolution efforts in the Pilkades conflict in Grujugan Village did not function effectively. Persistent tensions embedded within competing groups, combined with the weakened social role of religious elites, contributed to the continuation of conflict dynamics within the community

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