

Thuggery And Local Politics in Indonesia: A Legal Political Analysis of The Involvement of Individuals in Power

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ABSTRACT: This study examines the phenomenon of thuggery involvement in local politics as a form of informal power practices that threaten the integrity of democracy and the rule of law in Indonesia. Thuggery is not only present in the form of physical violence, but also in campaign security, mass mobilisation, and intimidation that are systematically used by political elites to maintain power. This study aims to analyse the dynamics of thuggery involvement in local political practices and evaluate the effectiveness of national legal policies in dealing with this phenomenon. The legal political approach combines normative legal and sociological legal perspectives to understand the interaction between formal regulations and informal power practices. The research method is qualitative with descriptive-analytical analysis techniques that utilize primary legal materials in laws, regional regulations, and election regulations, as well as secondary materials such as scientific journals, media reports, interviews, and case studies. Initial findings indicate that existing legal policies tend to be weak and indecisive in controlling the role of thuggery, which leads to distortion of the democratic process and serious challenges to the principles of the rule of law and good governance. This research provides an analytical basis for legal policy reform that prioritises enforcement aspects, strengthens regulations and transparency, and empowers civil society to suppress informal power practices in local politics. Thus, this research opens up space for more effective and equitable legal policy improvements in the context of Indonesian democracy.

KEYWORDS: Premanism; Local politics; Legal politics; Power; Criminal law

1. INTRODUCTION

The involvement of thug actors in local politics in Indonesia has become a serious concern in political and legal studies. In various political events such as regional head elections, legislative elections, community organisation (*ormas*) activities and campaign security, the involvement of thugs often appears in the form of mass mobilisation, intimidation of political opponents, and securing voter base areas. This involvement not only reflects the practice of violence in politics but also shows the existence of a patron-client relationship between political elites and thug groups to achieve and maintain power.

Research by Manji and Chalid (2020) revealed that in the 2019 Legislative Election in Makassar City, thugs were actively involved in expanding their winning networks, guarding their vote base, and intimidating political opponents. Their motivations vary, from instrumental rationality to traditional actions. Meanwhile, a study by Hasan (2012) in Blora Regency showed that the Blandhong group, which initially worked as loggers, transformed into local political actors who acted as hidden militias for political parties, without a fixed membership structure but had a strategic function in political mobilization. Furthermore, Saputra (2017) in his research on the 2012 Jakarta gubernatorial election highlighted how political elites mobilized thug groups such as Hercules to secure campaigns and vote bases and intimidate political opponents. This shows that thuggery has become part of the political strategy in electoral contests.

The involvement of thugs in local politics reflects the absence of law enforcement and weak democratic institutions. This practice damages the democratic order and threatens public security and order. Therefore, an in-depth study of legal politics is needed to overcome this involvement and formulate strategies that prioritise the supremacy of law and social justice.

In the context of local politics in Indonesia, weak legal control over regional power has opened up space for the infiltration of informal forces such as thug groups into the power structure. This phenomenon shows a symbiotic relationship between political elites and non-state actors who use violence or intimidation for electoral and economic gain. Local politics that should be run based on the principles of democracy and the rule of law are instead polluted by informal power practices outside the formal legal framework (Hadiz, 2003).

Thuggery as an informal force operates at street level and has become rooted in political processes, especially during the momentum of regional head elections (*Pilkada*). Political elites often use thug groups to secure campaigns, intimidate political opponents, and maintain their territory (Aspinall & Sukmajati, 2016). This involvement indicates the failure of legal institutions to

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stem the infiltration of illegal forces into local government. In addition, the weak capacity of law enforcement officers and their dependence on local authorities also worsen this situation. Officers tolerate or even collude with these informal groups in some areas for pragmatic and political reasons ([Mietzner, 2012](#)). This creates a condition of impunity, where perpetrators of political violence are not touched by the law, thus damaging the legitimacy of law enforcement institutions and threatening social justice.

This condition demands a reformulation of legal politics that integrates the principles of justice, the supremacy of law, and the eradication of informal power in local politics. Studying the involvement of thuggery in regional power is important to understanding how law can be a tool for social transformation that limits informal power and strengthens local democracy.

Premanism in Indonesia is not only a matter of street security, but has also become an integral part of the political patronage system, especially in local politics. In many cases, thug actors are transformed into part of an informal power network supporting regional political elites' sustainability. The involvement of thugs in local politics arises because of a mutually beneficial patron-client relationship; political elites obtain "security services", mass mobilisation, and even suppression of the opposition, while thugs obtain legal protection, access to resources, and strategic positions in power ([Hadiz, 2004](#)).

This phenomenon shows the co-optation of informal power into formal political structures, which weakens the principles of democracy and the rule of law. Political patronage based on thug power creates power relations that are not transparent and difficult to account for and often lead to political violence and the weakening of local legal institutions ([Tornquist, 2002](#)). In this context, thuggery is no longer just a matter of crime but has become an instrument of power that is systematically used in electoral and government mechanisms.

Patronage politics involving thugs also strengthens local oligarchies, where certain actors monopolize economic resources and political power with the support of informal forces. This situation complicates legal reform and local democracy because the law is practised selectively and subordinately to the interests of the elite. Therefore, it is important to examine the relationship between thugs and political patronage to formulate legal policies that are repressive and capable of reorganising the unequal and unfair local power structure.

This study aims to provide a deeper understanding of the relationship between the phenomenon of thuggery and the dynamics of local politics in Indonesia. Specifically, this study has two main objectives. First, to analyse how the practice of thuggery transforms and operates in the local political arena, in the form of involvement in campaigns, mass mobilisation, securing political activities, and in informal positions as protectors of local elites. Thuggery in this context is seen as a street crime and an instrument of power that works through patterns of patronage and political clientelism ([Aspinall & Sukmajati, 2015](#)).

Second, this study aims to evaluate the effectiveness of existing legal regulations and policies in overcoming informal power practices that damage the legal order and local democracy. Although normatively, some laws and regulations regulate criminal acts of violence and extortion, in practice, these regulations are often ineffective when the perpetrators are close to the political elite or even part of the local power network ([Schulze, 2017](#)). Therefore, it is important to assess the extent to which the law can function independently, fairly, and not be subordinated to the interests of power.

This objective is significant in formulating a legal policy that is not merely repressive but also able to touch the roots of structural and systemic problems caused by the rampant practice of thuggery in local politics. With an interdisciplinary approach, this study is expected to provide recommendations for more contextual and transformative legal reform.

The phenomenon of thuggery integrated into local political practices in Indonesia indicates a crisis in law enforcement and healthy democratic governance. Thuggery is no longer just an ordinary criminal act, but has developed into part of the informal power that supports political power, especially at the local level. The involvement of thug actors in political activities, such as campaign security, mass mobilisation, and even intimidation of political opponents, shows that state power is often compromised for the sake of electoral interests or the power of local elites ([Hadiz, 2010](#)). Therefore, a study of the relationship between thuggery and local politics is urgent.

The urgency of this research lies in the effort to understand the limitations of legal regulations in dealing with these informal power practices. Normative regulations have not sufficiently reached the structural aspects of this phenomenon, because the law is often subject to the power of political patronage ([Mietzner, 2018](#)). When law enforcement officers are not neutral, and the practice of power is transactional, thuggery gets room to operate under the guise of legality.

This research is important to urge reform in legal politics regarding substance, structure, and legal culture. Without a critical and contextual approach, overcoming thuggery will only be symbolic and repressive, not touching the root of the problem. This study is also relevant to building awareness that a healthy democracy requires strong legal control, not being controlled by informal forces that manipulate the law for the sake of power.

The study presents significant novelty in studying legal politics and political criminology in Indonesia. Most previous studies tend to view thugs as a law and order issue, which is responded to with a repressive approach through police operations or criminalization policies alone ([Sudaryono, 2012](#)). However, this study focuses on the structural relationship between thugs and local politics. It raises the dimension of informal power that infiltrates the bureaucracy and government institutions through patronage mechanisms and political loyalty.

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The novelty of this study also lies in the effort to analyse the phenomenon of thuggery not only as an individual act, but as part of a complex local political ecosystem. In this context, thugs are not just street criminals, but also shadow political actors who play an important role in forming and managing local power ([Bakker, 2015](#)). This perspective broadens the understanding of legal politics that are not neutral, but often become a tool of legitimacy for informal forces working behind the scenes. Furthermore, this study also provides conceptual contributions by integrating legal political approaches with critical criminology theories and the sociology of power. Thus, it offers a more holistic and structural perspective in dissecting the relationship between law, power, and informal violence. This enriches the legal literature, which has so far tended to be normative and separate from the fundamental socio-political dynamics.

From the background above, the author focuses the research on several questions, namely: How is thuggery involved in local politics? How is the legal political response to this phenomenon?

2. METHODS

This study uses a qualitative approach to explore in depth the dynamics of the involvement of thug actors in local political practices in Indonesia. This research type is normative and empirical, combining legal, political, and sociological approaches. The normative legal approach examines legal regulations that govern the relationship between power and informal power, while the empirical approach captures socio-political phenomena that occur in the field, including patronage relations and practices of political violence involving thugs.

The data sources in this study consist of two types of legal materials. First, primary legal materials, such as the Election Law, the Law on Regional Government, relevant Regional Regulations (*Perda*), and various technical regulations from the General Election Commissions (KPU) and General Election Supervisory Body (BAWASLU) related to securing and implementing the Regional Election. Second, secondary legal materials, namely scientific journals, media reports, results of interviews with academics, election activists, and community leaders, as well as documentation of case studies on the involvement of mass organisations and thugs in local political contests in various regions.

The analysis technique used is descriptive-analytical qualitative analysis, which identifies patterns, themes, and tendencies that emerge from normative and empirical data. In addition, this study uses a legal political critique approach, which aims to highlight how law can be used symbolically to legitimise power, and ignore the role of informal power that threatens legal justice and local democracy. This approach allows researchers not only to photograph reality, but also to offer more just and effective legal policy reforms.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. The Phenomenon of Thug Involvement in Local Politics

In the context of local politics in Indonesia, the involvement of thugs and community organisations (*ormas*) in power practice has become a striking phenomenon. Thuggery, which was initially understood as a form of street violence, has developed into an informal force that plays a strategic role in regional head elections (*Pilkada*). Thug involvement practices include campaign security activities, mass mobilisation for demonstrations or political support, and acts of intimidation against political opponents or voters.

One typical pattern of this involvement is an informal contract between regional head candidates and thug groups or mass organisations to ensure “security” during the campaign period and election day. Thugs are often empowered to guard campaign locations, distribute political logistics, or carry out pressure actions on residents to vote for specific candidates. In practice, this role often goes beyond the law and leads to human rights violations and threats to the integrity of local democracy ([Tanuwidjaja, 2012](#)).

Case studies in several regions show that semi-thuggish mass organisations play a significant role in regional elections. For example, in the Jakarta gubernatorial election and several regions in West Java and North Sumatra, certain mass organisations, such as the Betawi Rempug Forum (FBR) and Pemuda Pancasila, were given space by local political actors to mobilise the masses and secure the campaign ([Mietzner, 2013](#)). Their existence was socially accepted and institutionalized through cooperation with security forces or support from political elites.

This phenomenon reflects the weakness of institutional control over informal forces that enter the territory of power. Patronage politics becomes an entry point for thugs to obtain legal roles in electoral democracy. This distorts the rule of law principle because the actors of power allow or even facilitate violent practices wrapped in the name of local political “stability” ([Aspinall & Sukmajati, 2015](#)).

From a legal and political perspective, the involvement of thugs in the democratic process is not only a security issue but also a reflection of the failure of legal politics to create a healthy, just, and integral democratic order.

3.2. Legal politics in responding to informal power on the political stage

Legal politics reflects the direction, content, and strategy of legal policies formed by the state in responding to social realities, including in dealing with informal forces such as thuggery in the local political arena. In the Indonesian context, informal forces often operate outside the formal legal structure, but have a significant influence on the dynamics of electoral politics. The existence

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of thugs and semi-thuggery community organisations often gain political legitimacy through patronage from local elites who use them as a tool for mass mobilisation, campaign security, or even intimidation ([Mietzner, 2013](#)).

In responding to this phenomenon, national legal politics still tend to be reactive and symbolic. Legal instruments such as the Criminal Code (KUHP), the Election Law, or regional regulations have not effectively ensnared informal practices that disrupt substantial democracy. In fact, in some cases, informal power finds a place in the formal political structure, for example, by nominating mass organisation figures as legislative members or political party administrators ([Aspinall & Sukmajati, 2015](#)). This shows that Indonesian legal politics has not fully sided with the supremacy of law and procedural justice.

The legal political response should not stop with a legalistic approach that emphasises enforcement; it must be able to touch on the structural and cultural aspects of informal power. A transformative legal political approach is needed to encourage regulatory reform that emphasises the prohibition of using informal power in the political process and strengthens the supervision of local political actors who are indicated to have relationships with thug groups ([Hadiz, 2004](#)). In addition, it is necessary to apply a civil society empowerment mechanism so that coercive forces do not control the space for participation.

Weaknesses in implementing the law are also an important factor. The lack of coordination between election organisers, law enforcement officers, and local governments in anticipating the role of informal forces makes thuggery a latent part of local politics. Future legal politics must integrate efforts to deradicalise informal forces through political education, strengthening political ethics, and legal protection for the community from political intimidation.

3.3. State indecisiveness and regulatory loopholes exploited by local elites

The phenomenon of the involvement of thugs in local politics is inseparable from the state's indecisiveness in implementing the supremacy of law and the existence of regulatory loopholes that are often exploited by local elites. In this context, the state often fails to demonstrate a strong position in enforcing the law neutrally, mainly when practices of political violence, intimidation, and mass mobilisation by informal groups occur before and during the regional head election process (*pilkada*). Weak vertical control and low integrity of some law enforcement officers are the causes of ineffective action against violations involving thugs ([Buehler, 2010](#)).

Regulatory loopholes in election regulations, regional autonomy, and supervision of community organisations open up a grey area for local elites to establish transactional relationships with thug groups. For example, the absence of explicit provisions prohibiting the use of security services by informal groups in campaigns makes it challenging to criminalise such practices. Existing regulations, such as Law No. 7 of 2017 concerning Elections or Law No. 23 of 2014 concerning Regional Government, have not substantially regulated preventive mechanisms against the use of informal power in political contests ([Mietzner, 2013](#)).

Local elites exploit these loopholes to maintain power through a patron-client system. Thugs become part of a political network tasked with securing votes, suppressing opposition, and creating an aura of power for short-term political gain. Meanwhile, the state seems absent in providing legal protection to the community from such coercive and intimidating political practices ([Hadiz, 2004](#)). This reflects the disparity between ideal legal norms and the reality of implementation in the field.

This indecisiveness strengthens informal power in local politics. When thugs gain access to power through unofficial channels, the law loses its moral authority. Therefore, legal political reform needs to focus on regulatory reformulation that closes the transactional gap between elites and thugs and strengthens law enforcement mechanisms based on integrity and transparency.

3.4. Aspects of Criminal Law and State Administrative Law in Overcoming Thuggery in Local Politics

Thuggery in local politics raises a complex legal dilemma, especially in the categorization of actions: whether they fall into the realm of criminal acts or merely administrative violations. In the context of criminal law, actions such as intimidation, violence against political opponents, threats against voters, and coercion of support through mass mobilisation, are included in criminal acts as regulated in the Criminal Code Article 335 concerning unpleasant acts, Article 368 concerning extortion, or Article 170 concerning collective violence against people or goods. However, in reality, many of these acts of thuggery are not prosecuted as criminal offences. However, they are tolerated as a “social phenomenon” that is part of the dynamics of local contestation ([Setiawan, 2016](#)).

On the other hand, several other actions carried out by thug groups, such as the use of mass organisation symbols, taking over public facilities without permission, or raising funds without a legal basis, are more often processed as administrative violations. The sanctions are limited to the dissolution of activities, revocation of mass organisation permits, or written warnings from the local government. In the realm of state administrative law, these sanctions are regulated in Law No. 17 of 2013 concerning Mass Organizations, amended by Government Regulation instead of Law (*Perppu*) Number 2 of 2017, which gives the state the authority to disband mass organisations that conflict with Pancasila or carry out illegal activities. However, this mechanism is often ineffective due to weak supervision and the existence of local political interests that protect thug actors ([Farida & Haris, 2018](#)).

The effectiveness of the implementation of legal sanctions—both criminal and administrative—is often hampered by the power relations between law enforcement officers, local elites, and thug groups. Law enforcement officers often tend to be passive or compromising towards perpetrators close to regional heads or specific candidates. This creates impunity and strengthens the informal legitimacy of thugs in local power structures ([Kristianto, 2020](#)). Thus, criminal law and state administration reforms in

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responding to political thuggery must be directed at a clear separation between criminal and administrative acts and strengthen the integrity of legal institutions so that they are free from intervention by political power.

3.5. Impact on Democracy and Rule of Law in the Context of Local Political Thuggery

The involvement of thugs in local politics profoundly impacts the quality of democracy and the principle of the rule of law in Indonesia. Thugs who infiltrate the regional head election process, from campaign security to intimidation of voters and political opponents, are a form of systemic distortion of democracy. Within the framework of electoral democracy, community participation should occur freely, equally, and without pressure. However, the presence of thugs changes the logic of the contestation into an arena of informal power domination that uses violence and social pressure as political tools ([Aspinall & Sukmajati, 2015](#)).

This distortion of democracy not only impacts freedom of choice but also weakens the accountability of local governments. Regional heads elected with the support of thugs often return the support by giving access to informal projects, contracts, or strategic positions to the group. This creates a pattern of clientelism and political patronage that ignores meritocracy and erodes the principles of transparency and fairness in governance ([Buehler, 2013](#)). Furthermore, the dominance of thug power also poses a serious challenge to the supremacy of law and good governance. Law enforcement officers often do not act firmly against political thuggery due to pressure from local elites or direct involvement in informal power networks. This shows the weakness of the rule of law, where the law does not function as a tool for controlling power, but rather is subject to dominant political power ([Butt & Lindsey, 2012](#)).

The principles of good governance, which include participation, the rule of law, transparency, responsiveness, and accountability, become blurred when thug actors are integrated into the local political system. In this situation, the law loses its normative power, and democracy loses its substance as a mechanism for protecting people's rights and the separation of powers. Therefore, overcoming political thuggery must be seen as part of efforts to strengthen democracy and the rule of law, not just a matter of security or ordinary law enforcement.

4. CONCLUSION

This article concludes that the involvement of thug actors in the local political process, especially in regional head elections and campaign activities, reflects a serious deviation from the principles of democracy and the rule of law. Practices such as intimidation, mass mobilisation, control of territory, and alliances with local political elites indicate that electoral democracy at the local level has been distorted by informal forces that are coercive and transactional. This involvement not only damages the freedom and integrity of the political process but also creates a structural dependency between the power elite and thug actors, which ultimately hinders the realisation of clean governance that is oriented towards the public interest.

From a legal policy perspective, the state's response to this phenomenon is still normative, partial, and has not touched on the root of the problem. Indonesian legal politics is not yet strong enough to regulate informal power practices due to weak implementation of regulations, the indecisiveness of law enforcement officers, and loopholes in laws and regulations often exploited by local elites. In addition, criminal law and state administrative frameworks have not been fully able to provide a deterrent effect on the involvement of individuals in power through political thuggery practices. Therefore, a more progressive legal policy reformulation is needed, which not only focuses on the aspect of prosecution but also on improving local socio-political structures, enforcing fair law, and strengthening the democratic system and rule of law so that power is no longer controlled by informal actors outside the formal legal system.

5. RECOMMENDATION

Based on the findings in this article, several strategic recommendations can be put forward to strengthen local democratic governance that is free from thuggery and informal power practices:

First: Reforming Regulations Governing the Relations between Power and Informal Power. The state needs to revise and strengthen regulatory instruments that can explicitly limit and control the involvement of informal powers, such as mass organisations (*ormas*) and thug networks, in the political process. This reform must include affirming the limits of the authority of mass organisations in political campaigns, prohibiting forms of covert political violence, and imposing administrative and criminal sanctions for political elites who use informal power for electoral gain. In addition, the Election Law and KPU Regulations must be strengthened with more assertive clauses to prevent intimidatory practices that threaten the principle of free and fair elections.

Second: Strengthening the Capacity of Law Enforcement Officials and Transparency in Local Elections. Strengthening the capacity and independence of law enforcement officials, both the police and BAWASLU, is needed to anticipate and prosecute thugs' involvement in every stage of local elections. Supervision procedures must be transparent, accountable, and based on information technology to prevent political intervention. Reform of election supervisory institutions and local officials' training must also be prioritised to ensure that the law is enforced fairly and consistently.

Third: Political Education and Civil Society Empowerment. The community must be given a critical understanding of the dangers of co-optation of power by informal forces through community-based political education programs, participatory democracy

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training, and strengthening civil society organisations. This empowerment is important so that the community does not get caught up in patronage relations that maintain the dominance of thuggery in local politics, but instead becomes the leading actor in realising substantive democracy at the grassroots level.

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