# POWER CONTESTATION AND NEGOTIATION IN MERAUKE: INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES, LOCAL ELITES, AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF CUSTOMARY AUTHORITY

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**Abstract**
*Local politics in Merauke reflects complex relations among Indigenous communities, local elites, government institutions, and economic interests in the control of resources and public decision-making. Customary traditions function not only as sources of social and cultural identity but also as political legitimacy and authority over land and natural resources. This article analyzes power contestation and negotiation between Indigenous communities and local elites and examines their contribution to the transformation of customary authority. The study employs a qualitative approach through literature review and secondary data analysis, drawing on journal articles, theses, regulations, government publications, academic repositories, and online news reports concerning local politics, the Marind Indigenous community, customary institutions, agrarian conflicts, and large-scale food development in Merauke. Data were analyzed through issue categorization, actor-relations interpretation, and cross-source triangulation. The findings show that customary authority is not monolithic. Traditional kinship-based authority interacts with formal customary institutions, bureaucratic structures, and development interests. This creates opportunities for negotiation but may also produce inequalities in political representation. The transformation of customary authority occurs through institutionalization, identity politicization, and commodification of customary resources. Thus, local political change in Merauke represents an ongoing negotiation over legitimacy, resource control, and development direction.*

***Keywords:*** *local politics, indigenous communities, power constestation, power negotiation, marind indigenous community, merauke*

## Introduction

Local politics constitutes an important arena for understanding how power is exercised, negotiated, and contested beyond formal political institutions. At the local level, political authority is shaped not only by government regulations and bureaucratic structures but also by social networks, kinship relations, cultural identities, economic interests, and customary institutions. These different sources of authority interact in complex ways, influencing who participates in decision-making, whose interests are represented, and how political legitimacy is established. In Indigenous contexts, local politics therefore involves more than competition for formal political positions; it also

encompasses struggles over recognition, representation, access to resources, and the authority to make decisions affecting collective life.

These dynamics are particularly significant in Papua, where Indigenous communities maintain historical, cultural, and social relationships with their ancestral territories. Customary authority is closely connected to systems of kinship, collective identity, customary knowledge, and relationships with land and natural resources. However, the interaction between customary institutions and modern state structures creates a political environment in which different forms of authority may coexist, complement one another, or compete for legitimacy. Understanding local politics in Papua consequently requires an examination of how customary authority operates within changing institutional arrangements and how its legitimacy is negotiated among Indigenous communities, local elites, and government institutions.

Merauke provides an important context for examining these processes. The establishment of South Papua Province through Law No. 14 of 2022 has introduced a new provincial administrative framework in which Merauke serves as the provincial capital. This institutional transformation creates a relevant context for examining the relationship between regional governance, political representation, and Indigenous authority (Republic of Indonesia, 2022). Within the framework of Papua's special autonomy, Law No. 2 of 2021 establishes an amended legal framework for regional governance and the protection of Indigenous Papuans' rights (Republic of Indonesia, 2021). Nevertheless, formal recognition and institutional arrangements do not automatically determine how political influence is distributed in practice. The extent to which Indigenous communities can exercise meaningful authority depends, among other factors, on their access to decision-making processes, the legitimacy of their representatives, and their capacity to negotiate with state and non-state actors.

The relationship between political authority and customary land has become particularly important in Merauke's development trajectory. Earlier studies of the Merauke Integrated Food and Energy Estate (MIFEE) demonstrate that large-scale agricultural development involves competing claims concerning land, development priorities, and Indigenous rights. Ito, Rachman, and Savitri (2014) examine how development discourses surrounding food and energy security can legitimize the reallocation of customary land and reshape relationships among state institutions, corporations, and local elites. Similarly, Suryani (2016) analyzes the structural implications of MIFEE for the rights of the Marind Indigenous community, particularly in relation to land ownership and socioeconomic conditions. More recent research on food estate development in Merauke continues to examine the relationship between national development objectives, Indigenous land rights, and community resistance. These studies demonstrate that development is not merely an economic or administrative process; it is also a political arena in which authority, legitimacy, and access to resources are negotiated.

Although this body of literature provides important insights into Indigenous land rights, development policy, and the consequences of large-scale agricultural projects, the relationship between local elite influence and the transformation of customary authority requires further analytical attention. In particular, it is necessary to examine how authority is established and contested within Indigenous communities themselves, how customary representatives acquire legitimacy, and how their relationships with government institutions and economic actors affect their capacity to represent collective

interests. Indigenous communities should not be treated as homogeneous political actors. Clan leaders, customary figures, village officials, women, younger generations, and other community members may have different interests, resources, and opportunities to influence political decisions. The analytical challenge is therefore to understand how these differences shape the distribution of power and the legitimacy of customary representation.

To address this issue, this article draws on three complementary theoretical perspectives: Steven Lukes' multidimensional conception of power, C. Wright Mills' analysis of elite power, and Pierre Bourdieu's concept of symbolic power. Lukes (2005) provides a framework for examining how power operates through decision-making, agenda-setting, and the shaping of perceptions and preferences. Mills (1956) directs attention to the concentration of influence among actors with access to strategic institutional positions and resources. Bourdieu (1991), meanwhile, helps explain how authority becomes legitimate through social recognition, symbolic classifications, and the accepted right to represent others. Taken together, these perspectives make it possible to analyze not only who exercises influence in local political processes but also how that influence is established, justified, and challenged. They also provide a basis for examining the relationship between formal institutional recognition and the social legitimacy of customary authority.

Building on these perspectives, this article conceptualizes the transformation of customary authority as a political process shaped by the interaction between institutional recognition, elite influence, and community-based legitimacy. The institutionalization of customary structures may strengthen Indigenous communities' access to government institutions and provide opportunities to advance collective interests. At the same time, formal recognition may create new arenas of competition over representation, particularly when institutional positions and access to development-related resources become sources of political influence. The central issue is not simply whether customary authority is formally recognized, but who is recognized as having the legitimate right to represent Indigenous communities, how that legitimacy is maintained or contested, and how it influences the distribution of power in local governance.

Accordingly, this article addresses the following research question: How do power contestation and negotiation between Indigenous communities and local elites unfold in Merauke, and how do these processes transform customary authority? To answer this question, the analysis focuses on three interconnected dimensions: the distribution of influence in local decision-making, the strategies through which local elites and customary actors establish political legitimacy, and the implications of these interactions for the representation of Indigenous interests. These dimensions provide an analytical basis for examining the relationship between customary authority and formal political institutions without assuming that either structure is internally unified or inherently legitimate.

This article contributes to the study of local politics and governance in three ways. First, it connects the analysis of power contestation with the study of customary authority, demonstrating the importance of examining both institutional arrangements and the social processes through which legitimacy is constructed. Second, it brings local elite influence into the analysis of Indigenous representation, highlighting the possibility that differences in institutional access and political resources shape whose interests

receive recognition. Third, it develops an integrated analytical perspective for understanding how customary authority changes through interactions among Indigenous communities, local elites, and government institutions. By focusing on Merauke, the article seeks to deepen understanding of the political dynamics through which authority and representation are negotiated in a context where Indigenous customary structures interact with changing regional institutions and development priorities.

## Method

This study employs a qualitative research approach to examine power contestation and negotiation between Indigenous communities and local elites in Merauke, South Papua, Indonesia. The qualitative approach is intended to explore how political authority is exercised, negotiated, and contested through interactions among customary institutions, local elites, Indigenous communities, and government authorities. The study focuses on the relationship between formal institutional recognition, elite influence, and community-based legitimacy in shaping the transformation of customary authority. Data are drawn from primary and secondary sources, including [specify the data collection techniques actually used, such as semi-structured interviews, observation, or document analysis]. Relevant secondary sources include legislation, government policies, institutional documents, development planning materials, and scholarly publications concerning local politics, Indigenous governance, customary authority, and land-related development in Merauke. Research participants are selected purposively based on their relevance to the research questions and their involvement in local political processes, potentially including customary leaders, clan representatives, village government officials, local political actors, and members of Indigenous communities. The final description of participants and data collection procedures must reflect the research activities actually undertaken.

Data are analyzed thematically through data organization, coding, categorization, and interpretation to identify patterns of power relations, elite influence, political representation, and customary legitimacy. The analysis is guided by Lukes' (2005) multidimensional conception of power to examine decision-making and agenda-setting; Mills' (1956) theory of elite power to investigate the distribution of political influence; and Bourdieu's (1991) concept of symbolic power to understand how customary authority acquires social recognition and legitimacy. These theoretical perspectives are used to interpret empirical evidence concerning the interactions between Indigenous communities, local elites, and government institutions, rather than to predetermine the findings. Where multiple data sources are available, information is compared to identify converging evidence and competing interpretations. Ethical considerations include informed consent, confidentiality where necessary, and accurate representation of participants' perspectives, particularly in relation to customary leadership, community representation, and land-related disputes. Through this analytical process, the study seeks to explain how institutional recognition, elite influence, and community-based legitimacy interact in shaping the transformation of customary authority in Merauke.

## Result and Discussion

### Merauke as an Arena for the Convergence of Different Sources of Power

Merauke occupies a strategic position in Papuan politics, serving as an important administrative area, the center of government of South Papua Province, and a region targeted by various agricultural and food development agendas. The establishment of South Papua Province in 2022 reshaped Merauke's strategic position. Law No. 14 of 2022 designated Merauke as the capital of the newly established province, which comprises four regencies.

This administrative change created a new arena of power. Local actors no longer interact solely with the Merauke Regency Government but also with the provincial government, the central government, political institutions, business actors, and various community organizations.

In this context, Indigenous communities occupy a strategic position because the land and natural resources targeted for development are embedded in social spaces shaped by historical experience and customary ownership structures. However, Indigenous communities cannot be treated as a homogeneous group. Research on the PNPM RESPEK program in Merauke indicates the existence of internal stratification within Yei and Marind communities. Village elites, majority clans, and individuals possessing particular capacities tend to exert greater influence over decision-making processes than smaller clans and women's groups (Yuniarto, 2025).

These findings illustrate that local politics operates simultaneously at two levels. First, negotiations take place between Indigenous communities and the state or external actors. Second, internal negotiations occur over who has the authority and legitimacy to represent Indigenous communities.

### Customary Authority Is Not Monolithic

One important finding in the literature on Merauke is the plurality of customary authorities. Dewi (2017) shows that the Merauke Indigenous Community Institution (Lembaga Masyarakat Adat, LMA) began to be established in the early 2000s and subsequently expanded to the district and village levels. The LMA was intended to serve as an institution connecting Indigenous communities with the government. However, the establishment of this organizational structure also gave rise to tensions, as some community members regarded traditional customary leaders as the legitimate authorities (Dewi Rosita, 2017).

This issue is politically significant. When a formal organization is granted the status of representing Indigenous communities, questions arise regarding the sources of its legitimacy. Does its legitimacy derive from:

a) lineage and clan affiliation;

b) recognition by the community;

c) decisions made through customary deliberation;

d) government appointments;

e) the ability to access bureaucratic institutions;

f) the capacity to manage resources; or

g) a combination of these sources?

These questions demonstrate that "customary representation" constitutes a political arena in its own right.

Drawing on Bourdieu's theoretical framework, the legitimacy of a customary leader can be understood as a form of symbolic capital. However, when customary actors gain access to government institutions or corporations, this symbolic capital may be converted into political and economic capital. It is at this point that the transformation of customary authority takes place.

## The LMA and the Emergence of Power Brokers

Dewi's (2017) study provides important insights into the position of the Indigenous Community Institution (Lembaga Masyarakat Adat, LMA) in the relationships between Indigenous communities, the government, and corporations. The study shows that local governments encouraged the establishment of LMA structures at the village level and positioned them as government partners in development. In certain cases, the LMA subsequently became involved in negotiations over the use of customary land. The study documents the cases of Duku and Muli, illustrating the role of LMA actors in facilitating communication among corporations, the government, and local communities (Dewi Rosita, 2017).

This phenomenon can be examined through the concept of brokerage, or political intermediation. Brokers occupy a unique position because they operate between different groups. They can communicate government interests to communities and convey community interests to the government in return. This position may provide political advantages because brokers control access to resources and information. However, the broker's position also raises questions of representation. If a local elite derives legitimacy from the community while maintaining close relationships with the government or corporations, a fundamental question emerges: whose interests are actually being represented? It is at this point that power contestation takes place.

Customary authority, which was initially grounded in social and cultural relationships, may therefore undergo a transformation into a form of authority that also depends on the ability to access state institutions and economic resources.

## Land as the Center of Power Contestation

Land is one of the primary sources of political contestation in Merauke. For the state and investors, land constitutes a factor of production and a space for development. For Indigenous communities, however, land carries economic, social, genealogical, ecological, and spiritual significance. These different understandings of land give rise to competing interests.

Research by Alputila and Tajuddin on the customary land rights of the Marind people demonstrates the legal and social complexities surrounding the relinquishment of customary land and land registration. Land transactions and the relinquishment of customary land rights may lead to disputes when they fail to comply with either formal legal procedures or customary practices.

Another study on the resolution of customary land disputes in Merauke identifies the recording and mapping of customary territories as important challenges in resolving conflicts. This suggests that authority over land is determined not only by who is socially recognized as its customary owner, but also by who has the capacity to substantiate, map, document, and articulate those rights within the formal legal system.

This situation produces what may be described as a duality of legitimacy: customary legitimacy on the one hand and administrative-legal legitimacy on the other. Elites capable of connecting these two systems occupy a strategically important position.

## MIFEE and the Transformation of Relations Between Custom, the State, and the Market

The experience of the Merauke Integrated Food and Energy Estate (MIFEE) illustrates how large-scale development can reshape local power configurations. Suryani (2016) found that land requirements for the MIFEE project were closely related to issues concerning the Marind Indigenous community's customary land rights, as well as the project's socioeconomic and cultural impacts. Drawing on the perspective of structural violence, the study approaches the MIFEE issue not merely as a series of individual conflicts but as a broader structural problem (Suryani, 2016).

Research by Widiastuti et al. (2022) also demonstrates that Merauke has been targeted by various large-scale agricultural programs, beginning with MIRE, followed by MIFEE, and extending to the national food estate program. This literature emphasizes that social, cultural, economic, and environmental considerations, as well as land and water availability, must be taken into account in the development of large-scale agricultural projects.

From a local political perspective, these projects transform land from a space of customary life into an asset with substantial economic and political value. This transformation brings customary authorities into a new arena of engagement: negotiations with the state and the market.

## The Food Estate Program and the Reproduction of Long-Standing Contestations

The development of the food estate program in Merauke demonstrates that these issues remain unresolved. The government has officially designated Merauke as one of the key areas in its national food security agenda. The Ministry of Agriculture has highlighted Merauke's potential for food estate development and, in 2025, reported a land optimization program covering approximately 40,000 hectares (pertanian.go.id).

From the government's perspective, this development is associated with increased agricultural production and national food self-sufficiency. However, some Indigenous communities hold a different perspective. During a hearing with the Regional Representative Council (DPD) in December 2024, Indigenous representatives from several districts expressed objections to the National Strategic Project (PSN) food estate initiative and raised concerns regarding customary land rights, community consultation, and Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) (Tempo Witness, accessed September 29, 2026).

These two positions reveal different ways of defining the public interest. For the state, food development may be framed as a matter of national interest. For Indigenous communities, the protection of land, forests, local food sources, and living spaces may be understood as a matter of community interest. Therefore, conflict arises not only from competing material interests but also from differing understandings of who has the authority to determine what constitutes the public interest.

## Local Elites as Intermediary Actors

Within this power structure, local elites occupy an important position. They can play at least three roles. First, they act as community representatives. Customary elites can convey community interests to the government, corporations, or political institutions. Second, they serve as mediators. Elites can act as intermediaries between customary structures and formal governmental institutions. Third, they function as political actors. Local elites can mobilize identity, kinship ties, customary positions, and bureaucratic networks as forms of capital to gain influence.

These three roles do not always operate harmoniously. When elites act as mediators, they may expand communities' access to the state. However, when such relationships generate dependency, elites may also become centers of power concentration.

Yuniarto's findings concerning the dominance of village elites and majority clans in development programs indicate that representation is not merely an issue between Indigenous communities and the state; it is also an internal issue within Indigenous communities themselves. In other words, Indigenous communities have their own internal politics. Recognizing these internal political dynamics is essential to avoid reducing the analysis to a simplistic dichotomy between "oppressed Indigenous communities" and "the state or corporations as dominant actors." Power relations are considerably more complex.

## Identity Politics and Representation

Ethnic identity is also an important component of local politics in Merauke. Research by Alfarabi, Suardi, and Qodir (2021) on the 2020 Merauke regional elections indicates that ethnic identity was one of the factors involved in local political contestation. The study examines how identity was mobilized in the competition for political support (Alfarabi et al., 2021).

Meanwhile, Wuniyu's (2019) research on the representation of the Marind people in the Merauke Regency Regional House of Representatives (DPRD) demonstrates that identity politics is connected to the Marind people's position as an Indigenous group and to issues surrounding land exploitation (Wuniyu, 2019). Thus, identity functions not only as a cultural symbol but also as a form of political capital.

However, the use of identity also has consequences. Identity can strengthen solidarity, but at the same time, it can narrow the scope of representation if only certain groups are considered the most legitimate voices of Indigenous communities. This highlights the importance of distinguishing among Indigenous identity, customary authority, and Indigenous political representation. These three dimensions do not necessarily coincide. An individual may identify as a member of an Indigenous community without necessarily holding customary authority. Conversely, an individual who occupies a customary position does not automatically represent the full range of political interests within the community.

## Transformation of Customary Authority

Based on an analysis of various sources, the transformation of customary authority in Merauke can be understood through three primary processes:

1. Institutionalization: Customary authorities are increasingly integrated into formal institutional structures. The establishment and recognition of customary

organizations create opportunities for indigenous communities to have representation before the state. However, this institutionalization can also lead to competition with traditional authorities.

2. Politicization: Customary authorities serve as a source of legitimacy in local politics. Customary identity and status can be leveraged in general elections, local head elections (Pilkada), legislative representation (DPRD), and policy negotiations. Research on the Merauke local head election indicates that ethnic identity has become a component of local political dynamics (Alfaribi et al., 2021)
3. Commercialization: When customary land is incorporated into investment or development projects, customary authorities must contend with the economic value of the land. In such contexts, leaders or institutions capable of connecting the community with corporations can secure strategic positions. A study by Dewi (2017) illustrates how the *Lembaga Masyarakat Adat* (LMA—Customary Community Institution) in Merauke once acted as an intermediary in the process of utilizing or relinquishing customary land. This demonstrates that the transformation of customary authority is inextricably linked to the political economy of land

## Internal Contestation and the Problem of Representation

One important implication of the research findings is the need to understand Indigenous communities as pluralistic political spaces. When the government or corporations seek "representatives of Indigenous communities," the first question that should be asked is: Who has authorized these representatives to act on behalf of the community? The next question is whether the decisions have received broad community consent. Furthermore, do socially marginalized groups—smaller clans, women, younger generations, and groups without access to elite networks—have equal opportunities to participate in decision-making?

Yuniarto's findings indicate that non-elite groups may occupy weaker positions in community-based development processes. This suggests that the democratization of local politics must be distinguished from the mere existence of formal institutions.

A process may appear participatory because community leaders are involved, yet it may not necessarily be inclusive if decision-making remains concentrated in the hands of particular elites.

## From Conflict to Power Negotiation

Power contestation does not always lead to open conflict. In many cases, communities and elites engage in negotiation. Such negotiations may take place through:

a) customary deliberations;
b) government forums;
c) customary institutions;
d) the Regional House of Representatives (DPRD);
e) civil society organizations;

f) meetings with corporations;
g) legal advocacy;
h) the media;
i) customary territory mapping; and
j) identity mobilization.

Thus, Indigenous communities are not merely objects of policy; they also possess agency.

Recent research on Marind LMA authority indicates a weakening of the independence of customary authority in the context of large-scale agrarian development, while also documenting various forms of community response and adaptation (Wea et al., 2025). These findings are significant because they demonstrate that power relations are not unidirectional. When the state or corporations enter customary spaces, communities may accept, negotiate, modify, or reject the agendas being introduced.

**Conclusion**

Local politics in Merauke demonstrates that power is exercised not only through formal governmental institutions. Power is also produced through customary practices, clan relations, identity, land ownership, Indigenous community institutions, elite networks, and access to the state and the market.

An analysis of secondary data indicates that the Marind Indigenous community occupies an important position within this political configuration. However, Indigenous communities are not homogeneous actors. They encompass social and political structures that differentiate the positions of village elites, majority clans, customary leaders, non-elite groups, women, and younger generations.

The establishment and strengthening of formal customary institutions have created opportunities for Indigenous communities to interact with the state. At the same time, this institutionalization may generate contestation with traditional customary authorities. The experience of the LMA in Merauke demonstrates that the central issue is not merely the existence of customary institutions, but also how these institutions acquire legitimacy and to whom they are accountable.

Contestation intensifies when customary land becomes an object of development and investment. In the context of both MIFEE and the food estate agenda, land becomes a point of intersection between national interests, economic interests, governmental authority, and Indigenous land rights. This situation places local elites in a strategic position as mediators between communities, the government, and economic actors.

Accordingly, the transformation of customary authority in Merauke can be understood as a process involving the institutionalization, politicization, and commercialization of authority. Customary authority has not disappeared; rather, its forms and spheres of operation have changed. Customary legitimacy now operates alongside administrative, political, and economic forms of legitimacy.

These findings also indicate that the central issue in Merauke's local politics concerns not only who holds power, but also who has the legitimacy to speak on behalf of Indigenous communities and how that legitimacy is exercised in determining the future of land and natural resources.

Because this study relies entirely on online secondary data, further research should incorporate interviews and direct observations involving clan leaders, customary figures,

village government officials, members of the Regional House of Representatives (DPRD), LMA representatives, women's groups, younger generations, and community members living in development project areas. Such an approach is important for examining more closely how power negotiations unfold in everyday practice.

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