

# “Who Shall Be Radja?”

## Local Elites Competition in the time of Decentralization in North Sumatra, Indonesia

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*Baris-baris ni gadja di rura Pangaloan*

*Molo marsuru radja ingkon oloan*

*Molo so nioloan tubu hamagoan*

*Ia nioloan dapot pangomoan*

[Rows of elephants in the valley of Pangaloan

When the Radja commands, people must obey

Those who do not, will suffer

Yet obedience will bring them their rewards]

-An old Batak proverb-

### **Patrimonialism, decentralization and elite competition: Introduction**

As a result of the financial crisis in 1997, Indonesia is forced to accommodate popular demands of governance reform. Indonesia's authoritarian-centralized state is seen as the cause of ineffectiveness in redistributive policies' implementation as well as a hindrance to the democratization process. The country is forced, primarily by international agencies such as the World Bank, to undergo decentralization, arguing that decentralization will empower the grass-roots' initiatives vis-à-vis the central state and consequently ensures a steady progress of democratization.

The paper shall question the argument that decentralization necessarily generates grass-roots initiatives/local participation and subsequently ensures democratization.



Neo-liberal versions of the concept suggest that a vivacious civil society contributes to good governance and democratization by ensuring greater public participation in development. Crucially, decentralization is thus assumed to provide better opportunities for participation by local communities in decision-making, lead to greater prioritisation of local needs in development policy as it encourages greater accountability of those who govern the local communities. It also enhances political stability, and subsequently, national unity<sup>1</sup>.

What was overlooked in the Indonesian case is the fact that there is a lack of professionalism/expertise in the regional level policy-making. As a result of decades of centralization, the local governments had been serving as mere executors of Jakarta's policies. Meanwhile, the grass-roots lack organizational strength to assume any major role in the local policy-making. The situation ultimately opens the door for regional/local ethnic or religious elites vying to control the local policy-making by filling the vacuum created by the incapacity of local governments. Under the banner of "the people" and benefited by their ability to mobilize followers based on ethnicity and religion, these elites engage in power struggle for local leadership. They may derive from descendents of old aristocracies during the colonial eras succeeding into conservative bureaucrats in the Soeharto regime, who are now vying to maintain strategic access to regional economy; or new political entrepreneurs and ethnic elites aiming at establishing a district of their own by collaborating with politicians in Jakarta.

Basically there are three assumptions on which the following discussion is based; firstly, that the Indonesian state is a patrimonial entity entailing elite-clientele networks, secondly, that ethnoreligious cleavages determine political loyalties, and thirdly, that there is a high congruence between the interests of central and local elites.

Using these assumptions as a pedestal upon which further exploration of sample cases is conducted, the research focuses on the local elites' power struggle within the decentralization process in North Sumatra. The region is home to many ethnic groups, the majority being Batak and Muslim Malay. The majority of governmental elites there are Muslim. Batak itself comprises of many sub-ethnic groups, of which ones are Toba and Karo. To shed light on the

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<sup>1</sup> As in the World Bank document entitled 'How We work with Civil Society', "... we now approach economic reforms and the development process in a much more decentralized fashion. Individuals and various social groups are now seen not only as beneficiaries, but also as active forces supporting development". The World Bank Group, 2003



elites' competition in securing power in North Sumatra, the research draws upon two sample cases each focusing on firstly, elites vying to get elected as district heads, and that which revolves around the discourse of dividing North Sumatra into two new provinces of Tapanuli (advocated by Toba) and East Sumatra (advocated by Karo, and to some extent, Simalungun). The latter clearly elucidates the competition between the two sub-ethnic groups. The difference between the kind of Protestantism and church affiliation which is directly connected to the ethnicity also increasingly determines individual's political preferences. Thus, the competition may also be traced back to the colonial era during which missionaries played an important role in the shaping of the ethnicity of Batak in North Sumatra.

### **Assumptions**

Three underlying assumptions will serve as a pedestal upon which an elaborate discussion on the above themes will follow. First, that the Indonesian state is basically a patrimonial entity in which elite-clientele relationship makes up the relationship between the state and the society. Patrimonialism in this case occurs in both its traditional and "modern" versions, the former one concurring to Max Weber's concept of patrimonialism, which entails that:

"The object of obedience is the personal authority of the individual which he enjoys by virtue of his traditional status. The organised group exercising authority is, in the simplest case, primarily based on relations of personal loyalty, cultivated through a common process of education. The person exercising authority is not a 'superior', but a 'personal chief'. His administrative staff does not consist primarily of officials, but personal retainers... What determines the relations of the administrative staff to the chief is not the impersonal obligations of office, but personal loyalty to the chief".<sup>2</sup>

The second assumption is that ethno-religious cleavages determine political loyalties. It should be noted that an ethnic identity assent to such constructed "feeling of belonging" to a particular group of people, common ancestor, or place of origin, whose continuity largely depends on entrepreneurial mobilization as well as the act of self-ascription and/or ascription by others<sup>3</sup>. The key word here is "constructed". Although the essence of ethnicity may be traced to somewhat objective common origin or ancestral past, its usage is largely an invention of various political actors, for the purpose to obtain and maintain power. In the

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<sup>2</sup> Max Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, (NY: Free Press, 1957), p.341

<sup>3</sup> to some extent a Barthian concept. See Fredrik Barth, *Introduction, Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: the Social Organization of Culture Difference* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1969), pp.9-38. By entrepreneurial mobilization I refer to state policies or the reproduction of stereotypes by leaders and other rhetorics. Barth discussed three levels in analysing the formation of identities in *Enduring and Emerging Issues in the analysis of Ethnicity* in Hans Vermeulen & Cora Govers, eds, *The Anthropology of Ethnicity: Beyond "Ethnic Groups and Boundaries"*, Amsterdam: Het Spinhuis, 1994, pp.11-32; in which he elaborates the influence of interpersonal relations as well as leaders' mobilization and state policies in forming the ethnicity.



Indonesian case, this began when the colonial government introduced ethnic identity for the administrative purposes (e.g. collecting taxes), at the same time assimilationist policies began as the government was concerned about hostility towards their rule. Ethnic policy was later reproduced by the post-colonial nationalist regime<sup>4</sup>. The state also uses religion/ religious orientations for the same purposes as ethnicity. Back to the second assumption, political loyalties maybe distinguished in the choice of political party adherence or positions one assumes within the issues of local politics.

Thirdly, there is a high congruence between central-local elites, in which central elites seek to designate local elites so as to extend central political control over the resources in the regions, and local elites pursue central allies in order to acquire access to state resources.

## **Patrimonialism and The Question of Elites in Decentralization project**

### **Regionalization and the Role of Elites – around the world**

The assumption that strengthened local governments produce better national governance is not solely a property of what modern political economy scientists term as neo-liberalists/institutionalists', for it had also been commonly shared across most of the Western nations starting as early as the 1970s in their pursuit of modern decentralization.

The Italian case recorded by Putnam<sup>5</sup> showed that proponents of different ideologies quite collectively supported the regional autonomy project starting June 1970, each arguing that it brings *democracy* (Populists), *administrative efficiency* (Moderates), speeds *social and economic development* (Southerners), is a way to secure a portion of power for those who are “outs” national politics (Communists, Catholics), secures *socio-economic planning* and leads to “new way of doing politics” (progressive technocrats).

Putnam showed that different historical trajectories between Northern and Southern Italy resulted in different kinds of “civic”-ness in the governance. From the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the whole Italy was indeed engulfed in autocratic politics, yet the northern patrons were more inclined to accept civic responsibilities than their counterparts in the South. The medieval heritage of the

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<sup>4</sup> For a discussion on the formation, and the usage, of ethnicity in Indonesia, see Gerry van Klinken, Ethnicity in Indonesia, in Collin MacKerras, *Ethnicity in Asia*, (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003), pp.64-87

<sup>5</sup> Robert Putnam, *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy*, (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1993)



South gave birth to authoritarian political institutions reinforced by vertical social networks, power asymmetries, exploitation, and personal patron-client politics that sustained through the centuries even after unification<sup>6</sup>. This is comparable to what is taking place in modern Indonesia, in which elites networking and clientelism mark the processes in local politics.

The endeavour towards better governance is also pursued in different parts of the world in which such institutionalist approach may prove to be irrelevant in explaining the success or failures of “democratization” through the strengthening of non-state powers. This is evident primarily within the nations where social pluralism plays a major role in the process of national policies. Not to over-simplify the argument that the liberties of democracy would inevitably inflame, for example, ethnic rivalries or necessarily pose the danger of political disintegration, it is non-debatable that ethnic differences do lead to strife whenever politicized. Thus the existence of social pluralism does serve as a necessary condition for disintegration when accompanied by a sufficient existence of elites’ quests for power and material benefits.

An example would be that of the African states. A prominent African expert observes that there has been several disturbing misconceptions persisting about the process of democratization in Africa<sup>7</sup>. One of them is the view that democratization necessitates “destatization”, which is in line with the neo-institutionalist’s viewpoint that democracy is somehow associated with minimal government. The core argument is that democracy can be promoted by *weakening the state*. This view is built upon the assumption that coercive monolithism of most of African political systems also means that those states possess massive penetrative capacity, while in reality African states are already weak.

Looking specifically to the implementation of decentralization in one of these states, namely Malawi, we will be able to discern the traces of a clientelist political system operating within the guise of a legal rational bureaucratic framework.

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<sup>6</sup> *ibid*, pp.121-162

<sup>7</sup> Claude Ake, Rethinking African Democracy in Larry Diamond & Marc F. Plattner, eds, *The Global Resurgence of Democracy*, 2nd ed, (Baltimore & London: The John Hopkins Univ. Press, 1996), pp.63-75



Decentralization in Malawi has been externally induced rather than organically generated<sup>8</sup>, thus the key elements for successful decentralization namely the effective articulation of demand at the local level and a strong, impartial administrative culture supported by several levels of capabilities simply do not exist. Civil society does subsist yet their associational structures and value systems do not automatically create a field for local-level initiative, nor is it simply a matter of finding the right measures to squeeze “corruption” out of the system. What is left is a patrimonial state in which elite-clientele relationship makes up the relationship between the state and the society. In this system, formal distinctions between public and private wealth are constantly emasculated by the need for patrons to maintain their client networks through payable rewards.

The outcome of it may best ascribed to an Africanisation of the colonial legacy whose main characteristic is the inclination of individuals to seek public office – as civil servants, party officials, politicians, primarily in order to acquire personal wealth and status. A receivable salary is not enough, while public office provides access to a number of sources of petty corruptions, which is considered as an privilege of office.

As with other cases of externally imposed decentralization, the Malawian case ignored the fact a local government is not necessarily more capable and more constrained in its patrimonial instincts than the central government. This is particularly true if we look at the ineffectiveness of Malawi’s fiscal decentralization. There has been – generally across Africa – very low levels of local revenue raising (less than 40% average) partly reflecting low administrative capacity and mainly revealing the essential nature of the patrimonial elite: their subsequent aim was to canalize and centralize public revenue flow rather than allowing it to stimulate potential rival centres of power. This case is somehow similar to the centralist character of Indonesia’s Law No.22/1999 against the backdrop of the decentralistic Law No.22/1999. Levels of deconcentration and even a devolution of political authority exist in Malawi, yet inter-governmental revenue transfers from the centre to the districts, or greater flexibility of local’s revenue-raising functions would collide immediately with the interests of the official class. In the midst of frozen central subsidies, the outcome of this process is a sort

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<sup>8</sup> whereby the donors who control the pipeline supplying aid and all the associated prerequisites have more to do with it than the popular pressure for political accountability or local demands for further subsidiarity in administration. See Sholto Cross & Milton Kutengule, *Decentralisation and Rural Livelihoods in Malawi*, LADDER Working Paper No. 4, September 2001



of a rent-seeking behaviour in the local level: decentralization brings new institutions, as well as repression, closer to the people.

Who constitute the new ruling class? Malawian decentralization was initiated by incorporating chiefs of the former Chewa kingdoms that were also used as mean of indirect rule during the British colonial administration. They had a role in collecting hut tax and their power was extended later on to include land rents, ivory sales, and small grants-in-aid. During the centralistic post-colonial government, the patrimonial authority of chiefs was incorporated within the new hegemonic form of party power. Their hereditary mode of appointment was retained with the incorporation of a top-down chain of command of the new ethos of elite control. Within this system, the chiefs still controlled land allocations and ritual ceremonies, while their loyalties were largely towards the central regime which later on, using the authority of the chiefs, ban agricultural workers to grow certain cash crop available to them. The introduction of formal decentralization in 1998 sparked a high level of demand and competition which led to “spontaneous” land invasion which is not being controlled through the political system, and may indeed even be fostered by patrimonial linkages between chiefs and politicians.

### **Patrimonialism and Elite Behaviour: Theoretical Considerations**

A patrimonial state according to Weber is “when the prince organizes his political power over extrapatrimonial areas and political subjects – which is not discretionary and not enforced by physical coercion- just like the exercise of his patriarchal power”<sup>9</sup>. In support to this view, Christopher Clapham recorded that a patrimonial state occurs when a government is made of sets of societies characterized by patron-client relationships, sustained and legitimated by traditional conceptions of personalized power, and by political cultures of deference embodied in religious and cultural values. The traditional patrimonial system requires a leader to supply security and protection for his followers, and this provision will be remunerated by the latter’s passive loyalty. In the more contemporary patrimonial system, the leader’s provision takes the form of material resources, while the followers react in an active political support<sup>10</sup>. From both views we are then able to extract important characteristics required of a

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<sup>9</sup> Weber, *Economy and Society*, edited by Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich, (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1978), p.1013

<sup>10</sup> see Christopher Clapham (ed), *Private Patronage and Public Power: Political Clientelism in the Modern State*, (London, Pinter 1982), also Christopher Clapham, *Third World Politics: An Introduction*, (London, Croom Helm, 1985)



“normal” patrimonial state, namely, the existence of patron-client relationships and that those relationships are not necessarily enforced by physical coercion, but sustained and legitimated by tradition and cultures.

Sharing a similar authoritarian disposition as many other Third World “democracies”, the Indonesian state has been widely and historically characterized as one in which a personalistic use of governmental power exists in combination with persistent elite factionalism, competition and power struggle. Notwithstanding the fact that the “modern” Indonesia has got all the necessary apparatuses required for a democratic state, it is important to realize that the Indonesian state developed out of traditional patrimonial entities whose characteristics fulfilled the Weberian classification. Sultanates and chiefdoms were established across the Archipelago, in the absence of one centralized supreme ruler. What held each systems of ‘government’ together is the more personal relations that are binding individual leaders and other elites whom he assigns to power status within the structure. These elites, in turn, each retains their own network of entourage attached to them by similar bonds of personal adherence. Within this type of social structure, the disparity of power, wealth, and intelligence are such that the “commoners” are deprived off a direct access towards the advantages of statehood other than through their consecration unto an immediate elite-patron who in return offer protection and security to their subjects.

The modern Indonesian state is the one who is now enacting a decentralization in which the central authority decides to transfer a considerable amount of autonomy to the regional governments. There are currently thirty-three provinces in the country and each has around 15 districts, under their jurisdiction. Both Laws on Decentralization empower regional executive governments, parliaments as well as local societies to manage their own affairs, which means that the Centre will not function more than mere facilitator.

While fitting into the neo-liberal popular lexicon of democracy, the notion of decentralization according to Weber, is rather an inescapable result of a patrimonial state that occurred as a consequence of appropriation and monopolization<sup>11</sup>. Weber wrote that the appropriation of the benefices by the officials could very effectively curtail the (central) ruler’s governmental power; and that these officials could attempt at rationalizing the administration through the

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<sup>11</sup> Weber, *Economy and Society*, p.1038





introduction of a well-disciplined bureaucracy while still preserving the traditionalist separation of political power.

In line with this view, we may focus the discussion of local rulers' behaviour with that of elites' formation according to Paul Brass<sup>12</sup>, who said that elites created and transformed ethnic communities in modernizing and in post-industrial societies undergoing dramatic social change. This process invariably involves competition and conflict for political power, economic benefits and social status between competing elite, class and leadership groups. Elites are actors generally desiring goods measured in terms of wealth, power and status. Joining ethnic or national communities helps to secure these ends either by influencing the state of in certain situations, through secession<sup>13</sup>

It is also deemed important to realize that the significance of elites identification revolves around the question of power and influence. Crewe claimed that “no satisfactory theory of elites is possible without a prior theory of power”<sup>14</sup>, thus it is certainly the case that an elite class is that which consists of those individuals linked to the means by which the “non-elite” (mass) moves in one direction rather than another, that the choices made by the mass are more or less influenced by the preferences of the members of the elite class. It also means that in order to constitute itself, an elite group must develop its own specific set of practices, norms and interest, mainly to differentiate itself from the mass and therefore achieve the “distinction” in Bordieu’s idea<sup>15</sup>. Putnam listed these elites’ “social capitals” as: interest in politics, political knowledge and sophistication, political skill and resources (particularly education), political participation, and political position<sup>16</sup>. The need to be distinguished out of a mass of commoners is so particularly essential for elites, that in some circumstances, they actively create the “masses” against which they distinguish themselves, as exemplified in the work of E.P Thomson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (1968), and to a large extent

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<sup>12</sup> Paul Brass, Ethnic Groups and Ethnic Identity Formation, in John Hutchinson & Anthony D. Smith, eds., *Ethnicity* (Oxford Univ. Press, London: 1996), pp.89-90

<sup>13</sup> *ibid.*, p.9

<sup>14</sup> Ivor Crewe, Introduction: Studying Elites in Britain in Ivor Crewe, ed, *Elites in Western Democracy*, (London: Croom Helm, 1974), p.34

<sup>15</sup> Bordieu, Pierre, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1986)

<sup>16</sup> He did not exactly term it as such, but referred to these variables as having a high correlation with political power, this, I believe, is comparable to Bordieu’s “social capitals”. See Robert D. Putnam, *The Comparative Studies of Political Elites* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1976), pp.8-9



potrayed by Meisel in his well-known observation on elites' development of the three C's: consciousness, cohesion, and conspiracy<sup>17</sup> to become visible to among themselves as well as to the mass.

Elites occupy the most influential positions or roles in the important spheres of social life; they are discernable as leaders, rulers or decision makers in the society, or custodians of the machinery of policy-making<sup>18</sup>. To distinguish elites from the mass of non-elites, Putnam provided six layers of political stratification consisting of, from top to bottom: proximate decision makers, then influentials- individuals with substantial indirect or implicit influence, with whom the decision makers consult or from whom they fear sanctions; then come activists – party members, middle-level bureaucrats or local editors; attentive public; voters; and lastly, non-participants<sup>19</sup>. I tend to consider the first three layers as “elites” due to the argument that they are directly or strategically connected with the struggle for, and usage of, political power. The fact that these top layers are also overlapping and interchangeable, making the positions of top elites principally situational as well as dynamic.

The question remains as to how elites establish political support. Elite mass relations is itself a complex subject to explore, yet for the Indonesian case, an assumption of patron-client networks is taken and already laid out in the beginning of the paper. Basically, clientelism exists when, in return for personal allegiance to his patron, the client receives material benefits and protection from the outside world. When the electoral democracy was born, political support in form of the ballot becomes part of the currency of the patron-client transaction<sup>20</sup>. Upon receiving support, the patron mediates between his client and the state, obtaining for him jobs, licences, welfare payments and other material benefits as well as providing protection from arbitrary damages that might occur in the political process. The service provided by the patron is not too be mistaken as “policies” as suppose in normal democratic governance, but as favours, that benefit only a certain class or group, and not

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<sup>17</sup> James H. Meisel, *The Myth of the Ruling Class: Gaetano Mosca and the “Elite”*, (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 1962) as cited in Putnam, 1976, *ibid.*, pp.4, 121

<sup>18</sup> Chris Shore, Introduction: Towards an anthropology of elites in Chris Shore & Stephen Nugent, eds, *Elite Cultures: Anthropological Perspectives* (London & New York: Routledge, 2002), p.4

<sup>19</sup> Putnam, 1976, *op cit.*, pp.8-12

<sup>20</sup> *ibid.*, pp.157-160



designed for the larger part of the society. The relationship is also asymmetrical, in which the patron possesses considerably more power and in a superior position than the client.

Local elites itself is not a recent phenomenon in Indonesia. During colonization, the Dutch used ethnic aristocracies to control the ordinary people. In the post-colonial period, under centralized nationalist governments, these aristocracies joined major political parties of the Soekarno and Soeharto eras. Today, with the rise of decentralization, many believe that the elites are reemerging to gain power.

Henk Schulte Nordholt listed three often-overlapping types of regional/local elites in today's Indonesia<sup>21</sup>: first, old aristocracies that succeeded into conservative bureaucrats in the old ruling Golkar party who now started to foster a local constituency in order to maintain strategic positions and get access to regional economic resources; second, political entrepreneurs who tried to exploit new opportunities. This is the case of Central Kalimantan's ethnic elites who stimulated recent ethnic conflicts in the province<sup>22</sup>. Third, local elites who want to establish a district of their own. They expect to make large profits from the new districts, whereas their supporters, who are elite politicians in Jakarta, aimed to broaden the regional constituencies of their parties. Elites' usage of ethno-religious identities in times of political crisis or opportunity is, according to Gerry van Klinken, mostly evident in the case of "communal contender"<sup>23</sup>. The elites aim at gaining benefits for themselves and their followers mainly by securing positions in public service because whoever controls the civil service controls a significant source of wealth. It is for this purpose, that they create followers by building networks of religion and/or "ethnic groups" based on presumed common place of origins. Today's demand for greater autonomy in some regions is rooted in the definition of ethnicity as connected to territory, a piece of land, from which the identification of insiders and outsiders developed into recognition of local attributes, rights over lands and other resources. These constructions become politically potent when they are used as legitimating ideologies for the control of contested resources and territories. An example of how Batak

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<sup>21</sup> Schulte Nordholt, *op cit.*, pp.577-578

<sup>22</sup> for an elaborate discussion on Central Kalimantan's elites, see Gerry van Klinken, Indonesia's New Ethnic Elites in Henk Schulte Nordholt and Irwan Abdullah, eds., *Indonesia: In search of transition*, (KNAW, 2002), pp.67-105

<sup>23</sup> one of Tedd Gurr's five categories of ethnic conflict. Tedd R. Gurr, *Minorities at Risk: A Global View of Ethnopolitical Conflicts*, Washington DC: US Institute of Peace Press, 1993, as quoted in Gerry van Klinken, *op cit.*, pp.75-80



elites ethnicize the Tapanuli land can be found in the paper by Nortier Simanungkalit, which was written and presented in the circle of Batak elites in Jakarta in 1999<sup>24</sup>.

To observe the elites tendency towards identity politics, it is necessary to trace Indonesian state's policy regarding ethnicity and religion back in the Suharto era. Under the New Order, the Indonesian state did not follow one rigid policy course concerning ethnic and religious identities. Despite its profound inculcation of Indonesian nationalism emphasizing national integration, on the implementation level, the state was using ethnicity and religion as marker criteria<sup>25</sup> for provincial identities. This made it easier for the state to control the society through policy-making towards each region. For example, ethnic Dayak was seen as the marker criterion for every province in Kalimantan, therefore policies there neglected the existence of other ethnic groups (i.e Madurese and ethnic Chinese). This imagination of "unified" ethnicity in each province later generated the arrogance of the elites of the major/marker elite group (i.e. Dayak), vis-à-vis other groups. It later erupted into elites' mobilization of Dayak against Madurese in Central Kalimantan, as recorded by Van Klinken. As for religions as marker criteria, the word "Malay" used to mean indigenous race, which also means "Muslim". In North Sumatra, "Malay" refers to "Muslim, non-Batak" as opposed to "Christian Batak". Thus there are "Malay provinces" in Indonesia (e.g. West Sumatra, Riau, Jambi), as well as "Christian provinces" (e.g. North Sulawesi, the Mollucas and North Sumatra). This categorization is, of course, an oversimplification of the vast ethnic and religious varieties in the said regions. The use of ethnic and religious identities as marker criteria by the state owes largely to the fear of class identity<sup>26</sup>. The state continuously suffers trauma of communist uprising in 1960s, thus, in an effort to curtail the birth of class identity, the state actively promotes "culture", which is blatantly termed in ethnicity and linked to religion.

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<sup>24</sup> Nortier Simanungkalit, *Tapanuli Sebagai Daerah Batak (Tapanuli as the Land of Batak)*, Jakarta, 1999. He quoted Lance Castles's idea that Batak is a "stateless nation", confirming that Batak is "used to Sisingamangaraja governance structure", and that Sisingamangaraja was "*primus inter pares, priesterkoning, raja imam, Koning Aller Bataks*", deliberately taking for granted that Sisingamangaraja is considered as the king of Toba by other Batak sub-ethnic groups.

<sup>25</sup> For an example of the state's use of ethnicity as a marker criteria in Indonesia, see Deasy Simandjuntak, "Foreign Orientals": The Question of Ethnicity of Chinese-Indonesians in the creation of Indonesian Nationalism", (MA Thesis, Universiteit van Amsterdam, 2003), p.47

<sup>26</sup> See Rita Smith Kipp, *Dissociated Identities: Ethnicity, Religion and Class in an Indonesian Society*, (Univ. of Michigan, 1993)



## **Ethnic and religious construction in the legacy of Indonesian Patrimonialism: the three assumptions and Indonesia's bureaucratic history**

Most of political scientists focusing on Indonesian politics would tend to agree that an experience of rigorously authoritarian and centralistic governance of the Soeharto regime has left Indonesian politics marred with patrimonialistic patterns, in which governmental decision-making processes constitute an array of dealings between elite patron and their dependent clients. The system brought partly power benefit for the former, and functioned generally as a means of survival for the latter. Little was taken into account that the pervasive nature of such patronage was originated in the pre-colonial period, sustained, improved and strengthened during the colonial time, and carried through the post-colonial "indigenous" rules.

Dominating the social landscape of Indonesian pre-colonisation were elites associated to particular pieces of land, whose legitimacy were hereditary and whose allegiance generated from a mass of subjects inhabiting the respective territory. Colonial administrative necessities compelled the new government to ally with such aristocratic families in order to maintain control, for central government lacked the ability to manage the national territory directly. Thus, the leaders of central state apparatus were obliged to seek out clients among these families for the purpose of governing in the name of the regime. Appointing traditional rulers to colonial positions benefitted the central government, yet also turned these rulers into repressors who also learned to use violence to maintain power over their own people. At the same time, colonial government transformed territorial boundaries into ethnicities while emphasizing differences in ways of life as distinctive "culture" or "*adat*".

This practice survived through the colonial era and found its manifestation within the new post-colonial governments, especially the New Order. Not necessarily direct descendents of the aristocracy, elites were at times individual who are members of, or who have access to, central state's apparatus. Local elites used the language of ethnicity, something that was created in the introduction of modern colonial state, to derive legitimacy for their ruling. They also enjoyed the backing of the central government owing largely to the support of their "ethnic" compatriots in the centre. Yet central government was always the supreme ruler, which had the legitimacy to use violence to direct and control the course of the society.



Consolidation of power was translated into forced assimilation. A special development in terms of the emphasis on the importance of religion took place partly as a means to counter communism after 1966, for communism was simplified as “god-less” in Indonesia<sup>27</sup>. Thus, religion, as ethnicity, became a tool by which support were derived and mobilized. For example, as the regime was weakening in the late 80’s, Soeharto gave extra attention to Islam, a religion with around 200 million followers in Indonesia: an organization for muslim intellegentsia *ICMI* was formed in the early 90’s, which was quickly responded by muslim leaders in a support for Soeharto’s candidacy for the following presidential term. As to the question of party-politics, ethnicity was not an indicator for any of the three political parties in the Soeharto regime, and there was only one Islamic party which did not even use syariah Islam as its foundation.

The fall of Soeharto marked the end of the period of strong centralism in Indonesian politics, which subsequently affected and transformed the nature of centre-local relations in the country. Around the world, centre-local relations in nation-states are largely unequal, regardless of their nationalist principles, nevertheless what is important is whether the nationalist ideology that is advocated by the central elite acts as a consolidating or countervailing force for this power assymetry<sup>28</sup>: for the Indonesian case, it was the latter. The decentralizing force in today’s Indonesia, granted by the two laws on Decentralization in 1999, provided a leeway for power struggle of the local elites’. By using the argument of “sons of the soil” as a requirement for local leaderships, for example, they exploit ethnicity and religious identities to reject central involvement in local politics. Some others, especially those deriving from the old aristocracies, romantize the memory of the prosperous years of the past sultanates for the purpose of winning support for the control of a specific territory, for themselves or members of their ethnic groups<sup>29</sup>. “Ethnic” tensions raised up between locals and new settlers on the right to inhabite specific pieces of territory<sup>30</sup>.

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<sup>27</sup> Religion itself has been a essential factor in the making of Indonesian nationalism since the founding of *Sarekat Islam* as the first trading organization, and was a prominent indicator in the making of political parties in Soekarno’s era.

<sup>28</sup> Vivienne Wee, *Political Faultlines in Southeast Asia: Movements for Ethnic Autonomy as Nations of Intent*, Working Paper Series No.16, City University of Hongkong, SEARC, 2001

<sup>29</sup> a good example would be Tengku Lukman Sinar, the youngest son of the last Sultan of Serdang, North Sumatra who is advocating a group called People in Waiting, vying to regain for local Malays the right to “cultivate land” held by the government. See an interview in Time, [http://www.time.com/time/asia/features/journey2001/southeast\\_asia2.html](http://www.time.com/time/asia/features/journey2001/southeast_asia2.html)

<sup>30</sup> on of the major conflict broke out in Maluku in 1999, partly revolving around the qestion of who had more rights to govern a new province of North Maluku which had been recently established.



Nevertheless, the relations between local and central elites flourish, as the former realize that the central government still control a considerable fiscal power and the latter see opportunity in getting into the rich resources at the local. Having central compatriots who would guarantee favourable policies towards their specific local areas are seen beneficial for local elites, as central-local elites linkages increasingly manifest along the ethno-religious lines, again creating a network of patron-client arrangement, this time with a more symmetrical relations and minimal dissensus.

### **The making of local politics in North Sumatra**

Local politics, loosely defined as the search and maintenance of power, influence and leadership by a certain group over other groups within the boundaries of an identifiable territoriality, is not a recent phenomenon within the trajectory of North Sumatra's history nor is it in the life of its prominent identity marker, the Bataks. The formation of Batak ethnicity as well as the positioning of the Toba at the superior level within the stratification of Batak societies particularly owes to the administrative necessities deriving from the expansion of the Dutch colonization as well as portraying the pressing need for local agents for the purpose of the dissemination of Christianity upon the expansion of missionary activities in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. It is for the purpose of illustrating the beginning of North Sumatra's encounter on local politics that the following sub-chapter shall provide a brief account on the ethno-politics of the Bataks.

Further, to elaborate on the three assumptions previously discussed in the paper as well as to prove that the regional autonomy/decentralization undertaken by the government does not lead to the empowerment of the civil society nor does it ensure a progress toward democratization, the research takes three case studies, which are the discourse of North Sumatra's division into two new provinces, the creation of new districts in the province, and the processes revolving around the election or district heads.

The first two cases fall into the category of *isu pemekaran wilayah* (in Indonesian: literally meaning "the issue of the 'blooming' of the district", insinuating that new districts, or a province, may "bloom" out of the older ones. The positive connotation embedded in the term hides the more politically intricate processes involved in each, supposedly popular, demand



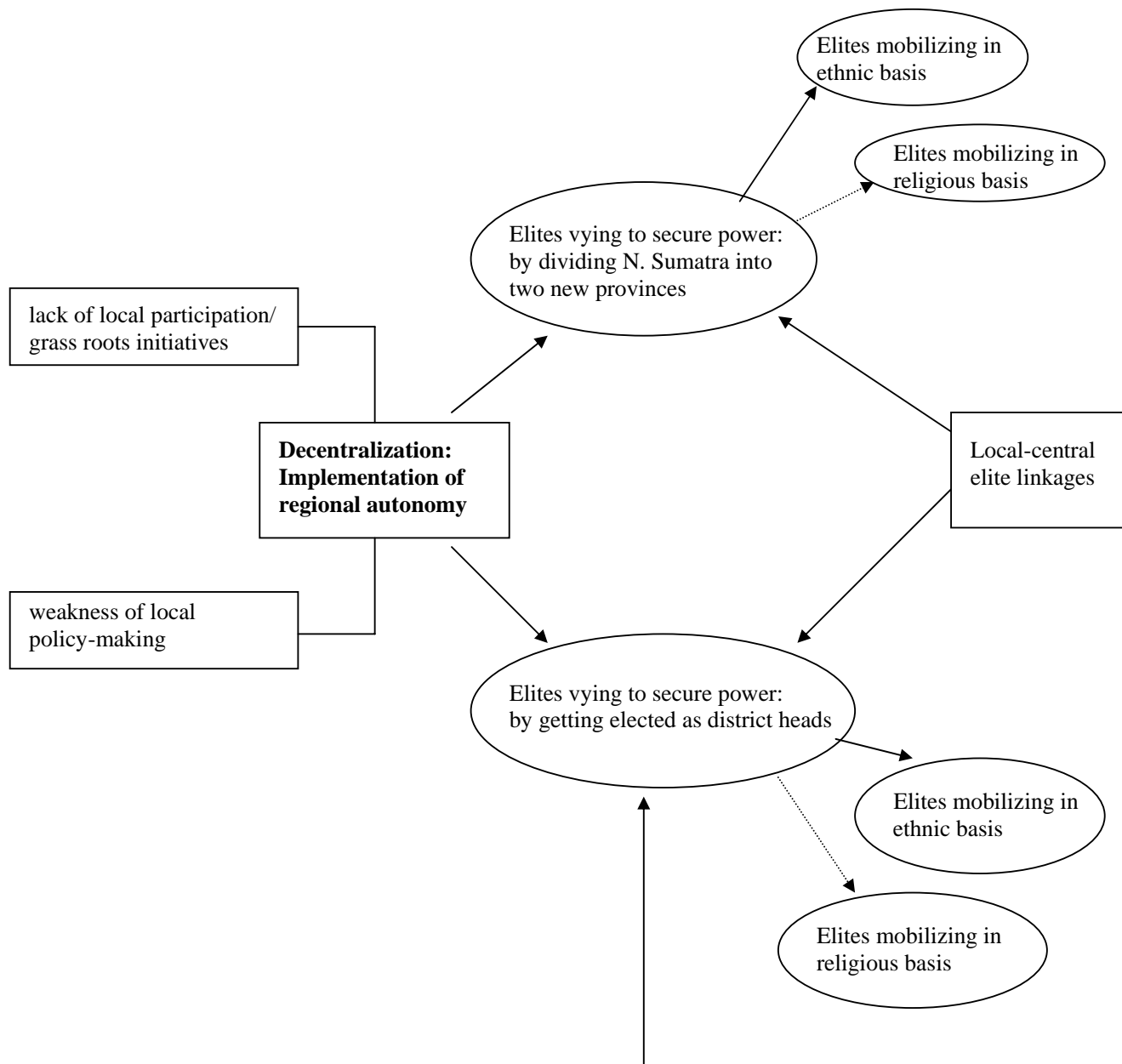
for a “blooming” of a district). These cases serve as examples of how prominent people within each districts, assisted by their Jakarta- connections, mobilize supporters by using pre-existing ethnoreligious identities. These identities, in turn, closely correspond to the adherence towards specific national political parties whose leaderships, or values, are regarded as representatives of the particular ethnoreligious groups.

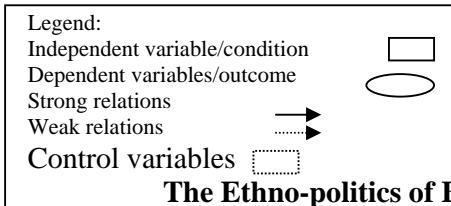
In addition to illustrating similar patterns on the connection between political allegiances and ethnoreligious identities, the third case also demonstrates the role of other, sometimes more influential, factors, such as money politics/bribery or the usage of coercion and other form of hostilities by networks of gangs and thugs connected to the power elites, as instruments to gain support for particular individual candidates for district heads. As the State of Indonesia prepares to hold its first-ever direct election of district heads simultaneously across the country in June 2005, individual candidates and their supporting parties/groups are already seen performing informal campaigns and mobilizations. This case is thus the strongest example so far illustrating the arguments of the research project, as well shedding light on the influence of central-local elites connection in determining local (and supralocal) loyalties within the province. Furthermore, the case also demonstrates the role of reputation as one of the prerequisites for the recognition of elite membership within the elite network, and -in the case of an individual’s upward mobility in politics- the degree of support by other members, as well as by the non-elites, for his/her becoming elite. Combined with the obvious patron-client relations manifesting between both elites and the supporters, the latter also expect the fulfillment of certain standard of achievement from the former. It shall be evident that this standard was formerly ingrained in Batak’s *adat of purposes of life* now translated into the modern measurement of wealth, education, decent family life, good upbringing, as well as morality/religious-ness.





**Figure 1. Causal Framework**





It has been evident that the North Sumatra province is experiencing administrative “unreadiness” in implementing decentralization, yet our focus the purpose of this paper is to notice the power struggle among the local elites. The region itself is home to various ethnic groups, among which the majority are Batak and Malay. Christianity and Islam exist in considerably equal numbers. Nevertheless, despite having a significant Christian population and being historical home of pioneering missionaries during the colonial era, the majority of governmental elites are Muslims, due to Jakarta’s New Order centralized decision-making for heads of regions that favoured Muslim elites so as to appeal with a wider preference for Muslim as governmental officials across the regions. Medan itself, as the seat of local government, was traditionally a Muslim city into which Batak immigrated in large numbers after 1942<sup>31</sup>.

It is necessary to look back into the historical vestiges of the creation of Batak as an ethnicity during the colonial era. Despite their long record in North Sumatra, the Batak people found themselves living in isolation up until the modern Indonesian state was taken over by indigenous rulers. Contacts during the thirteenth century with outside traders existed only through Batak traders who went down to the east and west coasts of the island. The VOC started trade relations around 1694 onwards, yet limited contacts existed only via couriers who went to the coasts<sup>32</sup>. Westerners did not enter the interior of Sumatra until 1824 when British missionaries reached the populated region of Silindung (Simalungun). In the nineteenth century, the Dutch colonial authority began. The central Batak land around Balige was formally put under Dutch rule in 1842. It took until 1872 before the Dutch power was really established. Christianity started to thrive in the region. In 1861, the German Rheinische

<sup>31</sup> see Johan Hasselgreen, *Rural Batak, Kings in Medan: the development of Toba-Batak ethno-religious identity in Medan, Indonesia 1912-1965*, Uppsala: Studia Missionalia Upsaliensa LXXXIX, 2000, pp.364-370

<sup>32</sup> Adriana Neeltje Rodenburg, *Staying Behind: Rural Women and Migration in North Tapanuli, Indonesia*, PhD. Dissertation, Univ. Van Amsterdam, 1993, p.21



Mission, with Nommensen as its prime missionary, began its work. The Dutch colonial power established an actual occupation of the total area of North Sumatra by 1907. The long process of the creation of Batak peoples by Europeans gave birth to Karo, Pakpak, Simalungun, Toba, Angkola, and Mandailing (from North to South) as sub-ethnic groups.

The Toba Batak area, the hinterland and around the lake, did not have plantations, industry, or any European established settlements. European tobacco planters settled in Deli in the East Coast in the 1860s and beginning 1890s the Deli region became the most profitable in the entire Dutch colony<sup>33</sup>. As an isolated terrain, the Toba Batak lands remained under control of local village and kinship groups. Yet noticing the ability of Toba Batak in making optimal use out of the limit of the agricultural potential, the Dutch began stimulating the Toba Batak people to migrate to the eastern coast of Sumatra to work on the plantation area. In contrast to the resident Simalungun Batak, the Toba knew how to cultivate wetland rice fields<sup>34</sup>.

Toba then became the definitive Batak for several reasons. First, they are more in numbers than any other kinds of Batak. Second, there is more literature on Toba than on any other sub-groups. Due to certain historical educational advantage they have been the most geographically and socially mobile of the whole ethnic groups, today occupying prominent positions in the central governments and the politics. Toba filled the first jobs opened as teachers and medical or clerical positions in the region populated by Karo, a second largest Batak group. Finally, Toba perceives themselves as the mythical source of all Batak, a claim confirmed to some extent by other Batak<sup>35</sup>. Ethnic consciousness emerged as a result of the daily encounter between Toba and Karo. Toba teachers had difficulties with Karo pupils, while these teachers were reported as using words that Karo considered rude in conversations. Missionary schools dismissed many Toba teachers because “they look down on the Karo”<sup>36</sup>.

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<sup>33</sup> see Lily E. Clerx, Wim F. Wertheim, *Living in Deli: Its Society as Imaged in Colonial Fiction*, Amsterdam: Vrije Univ. Press, 1991

<sup>34</sup> see Richard Paul Lando, *The Gift of Land: Irrigation and Social Structure in a Toba Batak Village* University Microfilm International, 1992.

<sup>35</sup> See Rita Smith Kipp, ed. *Beyond Samosir: Recent Studies of the Batak Peoples in Sumatra*, Ohio 1983, p. 5 in C.H.J.F Eijkmans, *Profitability or Security: Decision Making on Land Use Among Toba Batak Peasants in North Sumatra*, Saarbruecken, NICCOS, 1995.

<sup>36</sup> Rita Smith Kipp, 1993, *op cit.*, p.50



Aside from education, the difference on the kind of Protestantism (Toba's Lutheran German origin and Karo's Dutch Reformed counterpart) served as a stimuli of greater ethnic consciousness. An attempt to create one mission to serve both groups failed because the two groups engaged in intense competition in every sphere of social activities. Interestingly, the missionaries used the word "nationalism" for ethnicity, whenever they encountered the rising sense of identity formation among Karo. For Karo, it was more important that outside people could discern them out of the more numerous Toba Batak, making "nationality" more of a prominent identity rather than religion, as was the case with the Toba who did not make a distinction between being a Batak and a Christian.

Post-colonial church politics still reflected the competitions between sub-ethnic groups, mainly expressed as rejection to the influence of Toba and its ethnic church HKBP (*Huria Kristen Batak Protestan*) and others such as Karo's GBKP (*Gereja Batak Karo Protestan*) or Simalungun's GKPS (*Gereja Kristen Protestan Simalungun*). In many instances, Karo leaders expressed their concern about the use of the word "Batak" in the name of their church which according to them further outsiders' conflation of Karo with Toba, the assumed header of Batak<sup>37</sup>. Liddle's record on Simalungun's religio-political identities suggested that HKBP's immediate link to Parkindo (*Partai Kristen Indonesia*), the main national-based christian party in the fifties tore the Simalungun's protestan leadership apart between a desire to support Parkindo and opposing Toba's influence in their church<sup>38</sup>. To them, Parkindo was not more than a political extension of the HKBP church, while Simalungun's role in the party was not at all too significant.

Political interest is not an extraordinary trait for the Batak people. Lance Castles recorded that "who will become *kampung* or *negeri* chief, the drive of all Batak to be *radja* or obtain the status for their family play such prominent part in life ..."<sup>39</sup>. When the Dutch colonials began establishing its authority in the region, some *adat* chief were chosen by the new rulers to be *djaihutan* or leaders to head the *hundulan* or community grounded in indigenous term. Yet,

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<sup>37</sup> some Karo leaders even wrote to Hendrik Neumann, the youngest son of an early missionary to the Karo, to back their effort to take the term *Batak* out of GBKP. See *ibid.*, pp.160-167

<sup>38</sup> R. William Liddle, *Ethnicity, Party and National Integration*, (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1970), p.191

<sup>39</sup> Lance Castles, *Kehidupan Politik suatu Keresidenan di Sumatra: Tapanuli 1913-1940* translated from *The Political Life of Sumatran Residency: Tapanuli 1915-1940* Jakarta: KPG, 2001, p. 153-172.



this was not in principle hereditary and for the first time also Batak was exposed to salary as a means of reward for sitting in these positions<sup>40</sup>.

The colonial introduction of salary, prestige in formal governmental positions, Christian structure of levels in church leadership, all were conveniently in line with the Toba's *adat* of the three "purposes of life": *hasangapon* (glory), *harajaon* (power) and *hamoraon* (wealth). The leaders of Batak's major clans, *marga*, are called *raja* (kings) implying that each *marga* has its own kingdoms, although the existence of them is questionable. While most Batak are inclined to white-collar jobs, the struggle for desirable positions is not only limited in the governmental ones. The positions of clergymen are likewise considered as generating *hasangapon*, making jobs as priests, teachers and church administrators highly desirable. This may find its roots in the colonial era when religious leaders were exempted from compulsory *rodi* labour. Recordings of the general attitude of Batak towards their rulers, be that local indigenous or colonial, showed that the mass is highly subservient to the elite, an existence of minimum propensity towards rebellious drives, on the contrary, individual links between a member of the elite class and a "commoner" was highly desirable and brought prestige for the latter.

In addition, corruption has always been rampant in Batak's political trajectory. In the late 1920s, during one election of *kampung* chief, it was recorded that a bribery amounted to 2,000-3,000 guilders circulated among voters. Almost everyone who considered themselves elites participated in the election.

The politics of "haradjaon" (power to control the lives of the inhabitants of a *huta* or *kampung*; chieftainship) was thus nothing new in the traditional life of Batak even before the extension of colonial government structure. This prerogative was formerly given to the *marga* of the men who founded the *huta*, *sipungka huta*, and his descendants. In the case of today's region of Tobasa, we may be able to see that original *marga* there came from the clusters of *Sibagotnipohan* (which includes among others Tampubolon, Simanjuntak, Siagian, Pardede) and *Nairasaon* (Manurung, Sitorus, among others). Then the right of internal control in village matters is vested in the entire male line of the descendants of the founder, *radja huta*.

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<sup>40</sup> For an elaborate record on Batak's early politics, see Lance Castles, *The Political Life of Sumatran Residency: Tapanuli 1915-1940*, PhD. Dissertation, Yale Univ., 1972



He was charged with the management of the village and the maintenance of law and custom, order and discipline. He had the responsibility to maintain the village square and the walls, control the lands, guide the legal conduct of his dependents and represent the interest of his village and his lineage towards the outside world. The inhabitants then showed gratitude by giving him the *upa radja*, the gifts of homage<sup>41</sup>. Along with the enactment of the colonial structure, *huta* was no longer recognized as the lowest community. The government then established the *hundulan*, a territory larger, by which geographical proximity, number of people, etc served as a basis a new system which altered the genealogical relations basis of the old system. The radjas' responsibilities decreased as their function turned into mere administrative operators of the government. Nevertheless, respects for a *Djaihutan* (chief of *hundulan*) continued to exist and thus making this occupation a purpose sought for by the elites of each *marga*.

S.M. Siahaan listed the prerequisites of becoming a Radja<sup>42</sup>: firstly, he would have to possess wealth. Vergouwen wrote it as *hamoraan*, a necessary element by which a Radja may survive in time of a long duration of war, or in the occasion that he had to pay higher marriage payments for his daughters<sup>43</sup>. Closely connected to *hamoraan*, is *panggolongan* or *partamueon*, which literarily means "hospitality" yet refers to the expected attitude of Radja to be generous to people, to give gifts readily to people, as a fulfilment of obligations by an individual who has been bestowed with honour and respect, as well as a public demonstration of his wealth. Thirdly, he would have to be wise, *bisuk*, the one with whom people may consult their disputes. In short, the qualities of a Radja, *sahala haradjaon*, which was believed as deriving from the former Radjas that already passed away<sup>44</sup> played a very important role determining whether an individual was meant to be a Radja. A son may inherit the status of Radja from his father, but he would still have to prove he was worthy of it.

Early local party-politics life in North Sumatra suggests the continuation of horizontal cleavages based on ethnic and religious identities that serve as the focus of political loyalties

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<sup>41</sup> see J.C. Vergouwen, *The Social Organisation and Customary Law of the Toba-Batak of Northern Sumatra*, (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1964, pp.105-117)

<sup>42</sup> Pdt. Dr. S.M. Siahaan, *Peranan dan Kedudukan Raja Dalam Struktur Suku dan Masyarakat Batak*, (Medan: Pusat Dokumentasi dan Pengkajian Kebudayaan Batak Universitas HKBP Nommensen, Medan 1984)

<sup>43</sup> Vergouwen, *op cit.*, p132

<sup>44</sup> see for example Raja Patik Tampubolon, *Pustaka Tumbaga Holing*, Pematang Siantar, 1964, quoted in Siahaan, *op cit.*, p.7; and also Vergouwen *op cit.*, p.132



in competition to the more-desired centralized national allegiance. Liddle's finding in the region of Simalungun<sup>45</sup> shows that Simalungun inhabitants grew to identify more strongly with their ethnoreligious groups and loyalties became heavily influenced by the tendency toward ethnic self-identification. This is observable by looking at the patterns of individual loyalties by members of specific (sub) ethnic groups toward specific political parties in the 1955 parliamentary elections. For example: Toba Bataks and some Karo groups were apt to support Parkindo, a party regarded as the representative of Christianity, the main religion of both (sub) ethnic groups at the time; based on the same idea, Javanese descendants of "koeli kontrak" in the region preferred the "abangan" PNI (*Partai Nasional Indonesia*) or even PKI (*Partai Komunis Indonesia*) which were Java-based and non-religious. Those who regarded themselves devout-Muslims showed allegiance to *Masjumi*: these are Malays, Simalungun and South Tapanuli Bataks. Ethnoreligious loyalties, according to Liddle, seemed to have caused governance "immobilism", as an example of the outcomes was the creation of BAPOST (*Badan Penuntut Otonom Sumatera Timur*) in 1957 – an organization demanding for the autonomy of East Sumatra, a region that no longer exists at that time after its incorporation into North Sumatra as a whole; while North Tapanuli (Toba) and South Tapanuli Bataks and Javanese supported GAS (*Gerakan Anti Separatis*) clearly countering BAPOST. A proposal of dividing North Sumatra into two provinces of Tapanuli and East Sumatra raised again in the late 1960s. The demand toward greater autonomy and the creation of provinces were the two popular exigencies that were not articulated through a specific political party. The organization plummeted when the central government failed to grant its demand.

### **The Discourse on the Establishment of Tapanuli and East Sumatra Provinces**

The authority of the North Sumatra province today is, again, weakened by the demands to transfer power to the district level. There is debate concerning a possible establishment of autonomous East Sumatra Province; and Tapanuli Province, the latter being a union of districts inhabited by Toba. The two used to be colonially defined regencies in North Sumatra during the Dutch period, and the issue of dividing the province into two separate provinces was also raised during the 1960s and 1970s. Despite the often repeated reasons: "to manage their own natural and human resources" and "due to the fact that the present government is

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<sup>45</sup> Liddle, *op cit.*



not on their people's side"<sup>46</sup>, it is most interesting to notice the sense of sheer sub-ethnic competition behind the plans to establish the new provinces. Martin Sirait, a Toba who is leading the Forum of the Establishment of Tapanuli Province (*FPPT*) presented the idea to Panda Nababan, a member of Indonesian Parliament (*DPR*) who is also Toba. Whereas the head of the Forum of the Establishment of East Sumatra Province (*FPPST*), Budi Mulia Bangun, a Karo, claimed that his proposal was brought directly to the President.

A Toba-backed newspaper *Sinar Indonesia Baru* seem to be struggling to put the discourse of the new Tapanuli province, which would mainly be dominated by Toba, at the surface of the overall discussion on regional autonomy in the province. Reports, interviews, and articles published in the newspaper suggest that support of Tapanuli province come from the majority of local parliament (*DPRD*) members of North Sumatra, an institution swirling with predominantly Toba-elites. Interestingly, the making of Tapanuli province is also supported by the Javanese community in the province. The state ment of H. Sugeng Imam Soeparno, the chief of *Forum Komunikasi Putra-Putri Jawa Kelahiran Sumatra* (Communication Forum for Sons and Daughters of Java Borned in Sumatra) clearly stated that the creation of Tapanuli province would "bring prosper" to Javanese society in the region.

When the proposal was finally brough to the central parliament (*DPR*) in Jakarta, it was immediately supported by the prominent Toba member of the Democratic Party of Struggle (*PDI-P*), Panda Nababan, and some other leading Toba legislators, such as Prof. Tungggul Sirait, Anton Sihoming and Tagor Lumbanraja. The noted Nababan promised to solicit the support of 50 House members in Jakarta for the establishment of a Tapanuli province<sup>47</sup>. Surprisingly, the Interior Minister claimed that the government at the moment would not deal with any proposal for *pemekaran*, including that of Tapanuli, due to the fact that the discussion period for *DPR* would soon be over, and that all proposals concerning *pemekaran* must be recommended by local *DPRDs* as well as the Heads of the concerned districts or provinces. Meanwhile, the present government of North Sumatra disagreed with the idea of the new provinces. Governor T. Rizal Nurdin, a Muslim Malay, claimed that there is not enough money to fund this project and that the establishment of new provinces will only

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<sup>46</sup> Kompas, 2 July 2002

<sup>47</sup> The Jakarta Post, 10 April 2002





benefit the elites<sup>48</sup>. The blunt opposition is understandable for somebody who would prefer not to lose his position as the first man in the province. Nevertheless, in addition to that, it is worth mentioning that his candidacy as the governor had been supported by *PDI-P*, the party whose Toba elite in Jakarta are now increasingly predisposed toward the Tapanuli province.

Meanwhile, about 3,000 people from regencies of North Tapanuli, Toba Samosir, Central Tapanuli and Sibolga, attended a rally in Tarutung in April 2002 to support the establishment of Tapanuli province. A prominent campaigner who is also a regional parliamentarian, T.M Panggabean from PDIP, a Toba, maintained that the residents of the regencies wish that the idea be brought to the legislative councils. Around the same period, thousands of people, mostly Karo, attended the declaration of East Sumatra province. The planned territory would consist of 11 regencies, including Karo, Langkat, Simalungun and Medan city. In the Malay camp, there is Tengku Lukman Sinar, the head of *Lembaga Penelitian dan Pengembangan Seni Budaya Melayu*, (The Foundation of Research and Development of Malay Art and Culture), who is also the latest *Sultan* of the Serdang region, nowadays the district of Serdang-Bedagai in the eastern part of the province. He supports the establishment of East Sumatra. A local expert of North Sumatra's Malay historiography, Sinar had been anxiously in favour of the rebirth of East Sumatra which according to him will bring back the historical prosperous land of the eastern coast to the people as well as assuring that East Sumatra would be more thriving than Tapanuli<sup>49</sup>.

In the local context, opposition against *pemekaran* is voiced by the Secretary of *Majelis Ulama Indonesia (MUI)* of North Sumatra, the highest organization for ullemas in the province, S.L. Simbolon, who claimed that the making of Tapanuli Province (especially), would create problems in the ethnic, religious, and clutural relations in the society. He accused that the whole discourse is a program of a particular ethnic group, he most probably meant Toba, to dominate the new province. Further, he stipulated that the reason behind the creation of the new province was only due to none of the elites in 7 regencies joining Tapanuli had ever been elected as governor of North Sumatra, so the making of it would ensure new governmental positions for them. His claim has a degree of truth in it: since the independence of RI, only once was a Christian-Toba Batak ever elected governor, despite the

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<sup>48</sup> Koran Tempo, 11 March 2002

<sup>49</sup> Kompas, 6 May 2002



domination of Toba and Toba-oriented culture in the province and a somewhat balanced numbers between Christian and Muslim there.

Thus in this case, we may identify the role of ethnicity, religion and to some extent, party-politics. Although Malays constitutes also a majority, the competition seems to be evident among Batak's own Karo and Toba. Malay elites differ in their affiliation, in which non-governmental Malays supports the East Sumatra province while Malays in the government (represented by the governor) oppose the overall idea. As for religions, although Islam is one of the major religions, the competition exists not along Islam-Christian rivalry line, yet among the Christian Batak itself: between elites of the churches closely affiliated to each ethnicities.

The table below provides a brief and tentative classification of supporters and opposants of the *pemekaran* of North Sumatra Province.

**Table 1.**  
**Tentative Classification of Supporters and Opposants of *Pemekaran* of North Sumatra**

	<b>Prov. Tapanuli</b>	<b>Prov. East Sumatra</b>	<b>Oppose <i>Pemekaran</i></b>
<b>Ethnicity</b>	Toba, Javanese, Pakpak	Karo, Simalungun, some Malay	Some Malay elites
<b>Religion</b>	Christian	Christian, Muslim	Muslim
<b>Political Parties</b>	Local & central <i>PDI-P</i> , <i>Golkar</i> (former government's party), <i>PDS</i> (prominent christian party)	Local <i>PDI-P</i>	Local government
<b>Groups/individuals</b>	Javanese kin organization, <i>Koalisi Kebangsaan Sumatra Utara</i> (Toba <i>PDI-P</i> & <i>Golkar</i> coalition), <i>GAMKI</i> , elites from ethnic church	Malay kin organization (Lukman Sinar), <i>Partuha Maujana</i> (a Simalungun organization), elites from ethnic church	<i>Majelis Ulama Indonesia</i> , the Governor
<b>Districts</b>	North Tapanuli, Toba Samosir, Central Tapanuli, Sibolga, Nias, Dairi, Mandailing Natal	Karo, (Deli) Serdang-Bedagai, Pematang Siantar, Tanjung Balai, Asahan, Labuhan Batu, Langkat, Simalungun, Tebing Tinggi, Medan	[undecided districts]: Pakpak, Padang Sidempuan, Tapanuli Selatan



### **The Election of District Heads**

North Sumatra held simultaneous district head (Bupati) elections for its eighteen districts on 27<sup>th</sup> June 2005. Aside from vast administrative, financial, and security arrangement in the provincial level, leaders in the districts level are using the present period to boost support for their own, or their compatriot's, candidacy. Some political parties clearly exhibit their espousals to specific individuals, while others are preoccupied in indiscreetly criticizing or throwing unenthusiastic allegations concerning the candidates. One example of the former will be the support given by *Partai Amanat Nasional* and *Partai Persatuan Pembangunan* to the candidacy of Dartatik Damanik, the present vice-Bupati of Simalungun, to be the next Mayor of Pematang Siantar. Her supporters emphasized ethnic-Simalungun origin during the candidate's reception ceremony in Siantar, realizing that her being Muslim might pose a disadvantage amongst the predominantly Christian Simalungun voters. At the same time, the present mayor of Siantar, Marim Purba, is temporarily "deactivated" by the decision of the Ministry of Internal Affairs following an alleged criminal case against him. Around 8,000 people under the Komite of the People of Siantar (*Kemas*) are going to hold a massive demonstration protesting this decision, on 9-11 March. The local authority is apprehensive that this demonstration will hamper the Lake Toba Summit, a meeting involving 1,500 of the world's regional leaders in the Network for Regional Leaders for Sustainable Development (NRG4SD), that will be held on 10-12 March 2005.

The process unravelling in the period leading up to Pemilihan Kepala Daerah Langsung (Pilkadasung) in the district of Toba-Samosir (Tobasa) has been chosen as an example to discern the elite competition discussed in this paper. The Bupati position is won by Monang Sitorus, a church elder from Jakarta and his Vice Bupati Mindo Siagian, with the last Bupati Sahala Tampubolon and his Vice Arif Hutapea came in as a runner-up. Other candidates were Edison Manurung, an ex-chairman of KNPI, a youth organization related to Golkar and the Head of IPK (Ikatan Pemuda Karya), a youth-wing of the same party; Saut Pardede and Jonggara Simanjuntak.

Findings in the district suggest considerable importance attached to *marga* (clan) and clan clusters in determining one's political loyalties, meaning that a voter from the *marga* Sitorus would put a candidate that is also a Sitorus high in his priority list to be chosen as a Bupati.



Nevertheless, it is also evident that this consideration did not serve as the only manner in which a person construct his preference, for the concept of *Dalihan Na Tolu* also played an important role. Taking an example of a Sitorus man married to a Manurung woman for our discussion, he fell into the dilemma of whether to vote for the Sitorus candidate, which is his Dongan Tubu, or the Manurung candidate, which is his Hula-Hula (the *marga* of the “giver of offsprings” for him), that is culturally in a higher position in his *peradatan* realm. In addition, this Sitorus man has a mother who is a Simanjuntak, and that makes it even more problematic for it means that Simanjuntak is his Tulang, the Hula-hula of his father, which has an even higher position and thus demands higher priority.

Despite the influence of adherence of *marga* as a determinant of political preferences, empirical findings also show the importance of money during the period in which candidates were gathering supports. Yet, quite unlike what may be experienced in the cities like Medan, for example, the function of money in the campaigning period could not be put as simply as a means by which votes are bought. Money in Tobasa’s campaign performed as a symbol of *hamoraon*: a candidate that has a considerable amount of it proves the fulfilment of one of Batak’s three purposes of life. People expect the leader of their choosing to be literary wealthy, not plainly so that he would be generously distributing banknotes among the participants before and after their open campaigns, but because being wealthy is one of the prerequisites of becoming a king.

During one open campaign, for example, a man explained to me in a quite relax manner that people are given a minimum of 30,000 rupiah plus lunch, which is a complete *nasi* meal, only for showing up in the occasion. A particularly wealthier candidate, supported by a famous businessman, was said to be giving away 50,000 rupiah per person for the same kind of occasion. For the “ushers”, or in a popular language “Tim Sukses”, meaning the people that could “bring in” a number of other people to attend the campaigns, and guarantee that these people would actually vote for a particular candidate in the day of the election, one candidate was said to have been paying 300,000 rupiah per usher. Nevertheless, in spite of the fact that there seemed to be a competition between candidates on the sum of money distributed among their “followers”, we should not readily assume that the most generous candidate would have an easier time collecting followers. As has been explained earlier, money giving was seen as a normal gesture, a symbol of *hamoraon*. One should be very careful not to see too strong



correlation between the amount of money given and the chances of an individual to get the Bupati position.

In addition, we are also able to discern the concept of *marhara* in the meaning of the passing on of money during the campaign period. The campaign activities were seen as a festivity done by a “radja”, and summons were made to people to attend the said occasion. Thus the radja then would have to provide meals or payment (*upa ro*) to people present (*na hinara*). These gifts, even during the real campaigns in the district, were mentioned as *piso-piso*, a kind of voluntary gift that, despite its voluntary nature, are actually anticipated by the persons concerned. The day of Pilkada may then have been considered as a day of a greater festivity, for which the campaigns done beforehand served as preparatory events. Thus, money given to *na hinara* was perceived as *hepeng ingot-ingot*, a sum of money handed out during the events leading up to a great festivity, as a token of information – even for those that are not directly involve in the preparation – that a great occasion shall hold and thus people are expected to be present on that day.

It has also been evident that the election flurry did not only hit the elites in the local level, but also members of Batak’s top class in Jakarta who seem to realize an opportunity to secure power positions in the district of their origins. Even before the actual campaigning period started, which was on 10<sup>th</sup> of June 2005, this was already observable in the discourse hoisted within dominant clans’ gatherings in the capital city. An example will be that of the Simanjuntak clan organization (*Parsadaan Simanjuntak Sitolu Sada Ina*) which had been at the moment preparing to hold an election of its next chief. A Simanjuntak man who resides in Jakarta and spent most of his life doing business in East Kalimantan is running for the chief position, aiming to secure the chair of the next Bupati of Tobasa, the area from which Simanjuntak is one of the dominant clans. Despite residing in Jakarta, he was “officially” a village head in the area of Simanobak in Toba. A negative expression emerged concerning his alleged involvement in bribery and the accusation that he “bought” his doctoral title to attract votes in the organization’s election. Rumours concerning the allegedly fake academic titles were also unfolded among clan kinsmen in Tobasa, thus decreased his chance of gaining popularity in the target area. His later failure in securing the chief position in the clan organization then seems to prove his lack of popularity among his kinsmen, and this further declined his endeavour to run for the Bupati position of Tobasa.



A candidate from Simanjuntak clan turned out to be Jonggara Simanjuntak, an ex-military man (kolonel purnawirawan) who served as SBY's assistant in Pekanbaru and was born in Porsea, Tobasa. His brother is a high-ranking police officer in Jakarta. Despite having a considerably acceptable background for a Bupati, - Batak constituents tend to respect men with military experience-, he is a less known figure in Tobasa, especially within the surrounding area of Balige, the capital of the district, which also serves as a barometer for measuring candidates' popularity. A prominent clan leader emphasized that he cannot guarantee that a majority of Simanjuntak kinsmen would support Jonggara, on the contrary, people were more inclined to choose an individual that they consider "closest", thus "known", to them. This might sound particularly odd, considering that all five of the candidates in Tobasa do not actually reside within the district: most of them work in Jakarta and thus are only known to their Jakarta-based clan organizations, whilst their constituents who live in Tobasa might have never seen them at all. The decision to vote for which individuals then depends on how often they are seen, or heard of, conducting "good deeds" for the benefit of Tobasa. "Deeds" could mean a large range of feats, from financial assistance for the farmers, to simply be present in important ceremonies or having built a second family home within the vicinity of either Laguboti, Porsea, or Balige, the three major towns of Tobasa. A famous Batak businessman residing in Jakarta, by the name of Raja D.L. Sitorus, fulfilled all the requirements of good deeds, including having a family home (*ruma parsaktian*) in the village of Parsambilan within Balige, and he was supporting the candidacy of Monang Sitorus, also residing in Jakarta, as the Bupati of Tobasa. This fact played an important role in the forming of voters' positive opinion for Monang and thus considerably enhanced the support for his candidacy.

Clan support for Jonggara Simanjuntak came from the organization of Sihotang, the *Punguan Raja Sihotang-Sigodang Ulu*, which rally their support based on the historical kin-connection between Sihotang and Simanjuntak. The first king of Simanjuntak, Raja Marsundung, had a Sihotang woman as his second wife, and from thence Sihotang is always seen as *Tulang*, the mystical source of the whole Simanjuntak clan, and thus held the highest position in all clan ceremonies. Nevertheless, Jonggara's lack of support among his own kinsmen was more evident by the fact that *Pomparan Raja Sibagotnipohan* of Tobasa, which is a major clan cluster organization in which dwells the *marga* Simanjuntak, Pardede and Tampubolon turned



out to be supporting Monang Sitorus and his candidate Vice Bupati Mindo Siagian<sup>50</sup>. Despite the fact that Siagian is a part of *Sibagotnipohan* cluster, Sitorus is indeed a part of the competing *Nairasaon* cluster. It is considered quite special that a cluster is supporting a candidate that does not belong to its lineage. In addition to that, Monang Sitorus' candidacy was also naturally supported by the clan organization of Sitorus, *Pomparan Toga Raja Sitorus* in Medan and Tobasa itself. This particular clan organization seemed to be very influential in determining its members' political affiliation, for some Sitorus men that did not support him chose to temporarily leave the *peradatan* gatherings until the Pilkada euphoria dies down. Another example of the role of (cluster) clan organization would be the *Punguan Raja Sonakmalela* which supported Saut Pardede, who is directly within the lineage of the cluster.

It is most important to notice that Monang Sitorus is fully supported by Raja D.L. Sitorus, a Jakarta-based businessman who was born in the area of Parsambilan in Toba. The 67-year-old man is a prominent Batak elite in the capital, gained the title of "Radja" of his *marga* and thus also belongs to a top class of the cluster of *Nairasaon*, owing to the fulfillment of *hamoraon* and the two other elements. Concerning the first, this man is said to be the wealthiest Batak businessman of the country, with his business ranging from palm-oil plantations, education (he established Yayasan Yadika and Universitas Satya Negara Indonesia), and a life success story that is not so much of a mystery within the circles of Batak elites in big cities like Jakarta. He started as a labourer in the harbour of Jakarta and worked his way up until the opening of his first palm-oil estate in Torganda, Pinang, by the border area of Riau in 1979. This was supported by the then Bupati of the area, Jalaluddin Pane who gave him a concession of 7,500 Ha of land. In 1994 he was said to own 20,000 Ha of palm oil estates, more plantations of coffee, cacao, rubber, etc. plus other businesses including hotels and travel agencies as well as properties<sup>51</sup>. His friends in Jakarta include prominent people in the government, parliament and military. The man is also said to be very generous to churches and has a close relations to every Ephorus of the HKBP church. Blessings in the weddings of his children were always conducted by the Ephorus, and weddings are the most important ceremony in Batak's *adat*.

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<sup>50</sup> *Harian Sinar Indonesia Baru*, 23 June 2005. In his last campaign, the organization gave an ulos, atoken of a highest support for Monang Sitorus and his businessman friend, D.L. Sitorus who was also giving a speech in the open campaign.

<sup>51</sup> A brief summary of his life story was written by Permadi in a book entitled *Raja D.L. Sitorus: Sang Penantang*, published in August 1994. More than once the writer compared Sitorus with Don Corleone of *The Godfather*.



His support for Monang Sitorus could be seen in the man's campaign speech material, which is to provide land certification for the people, so that they could legally prove their ownership of the pieces of land; and also to activate lands that are not in optimum function (*lahan tidur*) while the government will conduct research on what kinds of plantation to be cultivated in Tobasa. Monang Sitorus gained the biggest support of the constituents in the Pilkada, despite the turmoil concerning his candidacy between the DPC and DPP of PDI-P, the party by which he entered the election<sup>52</sup>.

Another strong candidate was Sahala Tampubolon, Tobasa's last Bupati, which made him the only candidate residing in the area. From the beginning the main rivalry was seen manifesting only between Tampubolon and Sitorus, for the first's Bupati position also provided him with a quite strong basis for support especially in the three major towns. Naturally, he was supported by some of the civil servants and his clan organization. He was also supported by some Muslim communities in the area, for example *Ikatan Warga Islam Inalum Paritohan*. Support also comes from Christian communities, such as the *Gereja Methodist Indonesia* in Tobasa whose Bishop gave him an *ulos* bearing the prayer that he would be the next Bupati of the district. Other support came from local leaders of the youth organization of Pemuda Pancasila in Tobasa, such as Gunung Hutapea, this created a little confusion because the organization was said to have been supporting another candidate, Edison Manurung. Another local branch of IPK was also supporting him, the leaders like Jonal Tambunan, was among the few. Yet this time confusion emerged concerning the fact that the Chairman of IPK, Oloan Panggabean, was supporting Edison instead.

An important local newspaper recorded that Tobasa's Gross Domestic Regional Product (*Pendapatan Domestik Regional Bruto*) increased under the governance of Tampubolon, from around 1,2 trillion rupiah in 2000 to 1,4 trillion rupiah in 2004, quoting the data from Badan Pusat Statistik<sup>53</sup>. His campaign focuses on quite clear development projects such as the building of PLTA Asahan I and II starting in 2006 in Tobasa. Realizing that money is an

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<sup>52</sup> The candidacy of Monang Sitorus was espoused by DPC-PDIP, whilst the DPP had another candidate, Basar Simanjuntak, a grandson of an ex-Bupati of Toba in Soekarno years. The confusion led to DPP's decision to deactivate DPC-PDIP and other chaos followed including the involvement of Rudolph Pardede, North Sumatra's present vice-governor who is also a Head of PDI-P of North Sumatra, that came to one of Sitorus' campaign and generated protests from the DPP.

<sup>53</sup> Sumba Simbolon, *Harian Sinar Indonesia Baru*, 17 June 2005





influential factor forming public preference, Tampubolon's campaigns emphasized that people should refrain from accepting money from candidates.

A young candidate, Edison Manurung, had the support of young voters of Tobasa. He was also supported by some Pemuda Pancasila leaders and the central elites of Ikatan Pemuda Karya. An influential national-based clan organization of *Parsadaan Pomparan Raja Toga Manurung* fully supported his candidacy, together with extensive coverage of his campaigning activities and other *peradatan* by a national based Batak magazine, *Horas*. His campaigns started around last year with the holding of sport competition by the name of Edison Manurung Cup in Tobasa, followed by a *Pesta Rakyat* involving all the 11 kecamatan and 181 villages of the district. He also conducted a *try-out* for UMPTN 2005 for high school students there. His emphasis was on religion and how the church should perform as a partner for the local government, by which financial transparency would later be guaranteed, including the usage of DAU and DAK which should be openly informed to the constituents<sup>54</sup>.

Batak clan organizations are increasingly becoming essential as vote pools for the coming district heads' election due to members of clans' predominant inclination to vote for whomever candidates officially supported by the leadership of the clans, even if in some circumstances these candidates do not come from the respective clans. For example, the Munthe clan organization in Medan pledges support for the candidacy of the present mayor Abdillah in the election. Abdillah is a Malay, and Munthe is a Toba clan. In addition to that, support for him also comes from the Karo society – after his generous acknowledgement of Guru Patimpus Sembiring, a Karo hero, as one of the “official” founding fathers of the city of Medan – aside from the more obvious espousal from the *Majelis Adat Budaya Melayu*, the assembly of Malay' elites in Medan. Doing the same gesture, his opponent Maulana Pohan was seen to attend the opening ceremony of the Great Tomb (*Tambak*) of Raja Sibagotnipohan in Balige, a Batak king from whom descended the *marga* Pohan and Tampubolon.

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<sup>54</sup> An interview with Edison Manurung, 13 June 2005



## **Decentralization and elites trajectories in North Sumatra: a revival of tradition?**

Based on the above preliminary observation on elites' competition in the time of decentralization in North Sumatra, especially that among Batak's member of the top class in the area of Toba Samosir during Pilkada, we may detect the importance attached to ethnic loyalties, manifested in the support of *marga* lineage linkages and *Dalihan Na Tolu* in determining the formation of one's political adherence. This characteristic is readily embraced by leaders who used those elements of *adat* in mobilizing support in their strive to secure power positions. In a quite moderated manner, the usage of ethnic languages was also evident in the capital city of Medan, by a somewhat significant attention given to supports of clan organization to both of Walikota candidates. In the case of *Pemekaran Propinsi*, discourses raised based on colonial divisions of territories, East Sumatra and Tapanuli, in which alliances among sub-ethnic groups originated from both territories was seen to have emerged.

An interesting point to notice in the Tobasa Pilkada especially, local elites are mainly those who are renowned Batak men residing in other major cities of the country, such as Jakarta. Their struggle is also mainly supported by other elites who also come from the capital city. This is particularly bewildering if one returns to the underlying logic of decentralization which was aimed to stimulate local participation, of when one has to make sense of the notion of "putra daerah", for example, which echoed through the enactment of regional autonomy in Indonesia. This in turn poses a question into what had been the expected outcome of the whole process of substantial devolution of power, which is to prioritise grass-roots' initiatives. A problematic between what qualifies as local participation or central power further interference into local decision-making raises: if local elites (in this case the Bupati) are Jakarta-based elites, then what takes place is a mere re-centralization in new "centrals" in the local levels.

Another noteworthy aspect for further discussion would be the political economic by-product of elites' competition. Despite the fact that it is more evident in big cities like Medan, yet the role of material benefit in political preferences, in its more subtle understanding, is also observable in other, more rural, areas. In Tobasa, for example, the meaning of money seemed to have travelled through the *adat* tradition as a symbol of radja's quality, into a more



mundane function as a means by which ones' political adherence were determined and supports for elites are mobilized.

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