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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Explaining Indonesian Local Government Performance in Handling Natural Crisis: Local Politics and Government Capacity

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Abstract: By 2024, more than sixty percent of local governments in Indonesia were classified as high-risk for natural disasters, with none in the low-risk category. However, the level of local governments resilience to natural threats shows significant differences across regions. This study aims to examine the extent to which decentralization as measured by indicators of local democracy and capacity influences the resilience performance of local governments in facing natural crises. Using Ordinary Least Squares regression analysis across all Indonesian local governments, the results show that the higher the level of fraud in the election process of regional heads, the lower the level of resilience of local governments to natural crises. Regional heads serving in their second terms also tend to have lower levels of resilience than those in their first terms. Conversely, increasing fiscal capacity through larger regional budgets and improving bureaucratic reform contribute positively to increasing local government resilience. Therefore, strengthening budget governance and deepening bureaucratic reform are key strategies to mitigate the negative impact of undemocratic political behavior and second terms of regional heads on local government resilience in facing natural crises.

Keywords: Decentralization, Government Capacity, Resilience, Local Politics, Natural Crisis

1. Introduction

The implementation of decentralization has significantly improved governance, enhanced public service quality, more democratic regional elections, and local economic growth (Aspinall et al., 2021; Ostwald et al., 2016). Some local governments have even demonstrated global performance, such as Surabaya City, which received a 2019 award on sustainable city (Kompas, 2021), and Jakarta Province, which received a 2021 award on sustainable transportation (CNN Indonesia, 2021). This represents significant progress compared to the pre-1998 era, when local governments tended to be ineffective due to a highly centralized system (Bunnell & Ann, 2011). In general, this improvement is reflected in the increase in the Human Development Index (HDI) from 67.7 in 1996 to 72.29 in 2021, as well as a decrease in poverty from 34.01 to 26.5 million people during the same period (BPS, 2022).

Numerous studies have highlighted the positive impacts of decentralization in Indonesia. In the political sphere, decentralization strengthens local democracy and expands citizen participation, including for women (Aspinall et al., 2021; Ostwald et al., 2016). In the economic sector, decentralization contributes to reducing income inequality through a more equitable distribution of development funds from the central government (Siburian, 2020).



In public services, decentralization encourages service innovation as regional heads strive to deliver their best performance ahead of the next general election (Intentilia & Surya, 2021; Lewis et al., 2020; Naibaho, 2021; Sudrajat & Andhika, 2021). Socially, decentralization has also driven various policy innovations, including government service models for waste management (Adlin, 2021), local product development, and improved health services (Roziqin et al., 2021), and disaster mitigation (Herlina et al., 2021).

However, there is limited research specifically examining the impact of decentralization on the resilience of local governments in crisis situations. A crisis can be understood as a series of extraordinary circumstances that threaten security, safety, life, and property, accompanied by uncertainty and high pressure of time regarding the cause and severity of the impact (Drennan et al., 2014). In an organizational context, crises often have two forms of negative impact on social and institutional systems, which are essentially socio-cultural systems consisting of individuals with a shared goal of meeting the needs of their environment (Steen & Morsut, 2020).

The characteristics and dynamics of a crisis significantly determine the required crisis management pattern. Crises can be classified based on their speed of development (Badu et al., 2023). The first type is fast-burning crises which can arise suddenly and end quickly, such as hostage-taking and floods. The second type is cathartic crises which develop slowly but end abruptly, such as political tensions during an international war. The third type is long-shadow crises which emerge quickly but resolve gradually, namely climate change. The fourth type is slow-burning crises which develop and resolve slowly, namely poverty and overpopulation. In the context of this research, the crisis referred to refers to the first type which emerges suddenly and requires immediate response, particularly in the case of natural disasters that have a rapid and widespread impact on people's lives and the stability of local government.

Crisis situations demand an integrated response from various stakeholders. Within the resilience framework, this emphasizes the importance of collaboration between state and non-state actors, where resilience is understood as the synergy between people and state power that makes society to be able to manage emergencies by themselves, while complementing broader crisis management objectives (Cabinet Office, 2023). From an outcome perspective, optimal utilization of local and government resources will strengthen the government's resilience to threats and enhance its adaptability in emergency situations. This ultimately enables the government to play an effective role in assisting communities in the post-crisis response and recovery process (Drennan et al., 2014).

Resilience requires the government's capacity and ability to effectively face and manage crisis situations (Carayannopoulos & McConnell, 2018). Within the theoretical framework, resilience encompasses several key dimensions. First, adaptability, which is the government's ability to learn from experience, demonstrate flexibility in experimentation, and adopt new solutions and approaches beyond established plans (Drennan et al., 2014; Parker, 2024). Second, redundancy, which refers to systems that can be quickly activated when a primary system is disrupted or the replacement elements availability (Bruneau et al., 2003). Third, creativity, which is the ability to manage and mobilize human and material resources to reach goals despite disruptions (Bruneau et al., 2003; Parker, 2024).

Based on data from the Indonesian Disaster Risk Index, various types of natural disasters, namely floods, droughts, earthquakes, tsunamis, landslides, forest fires, volcanic eruptions, and tornadoes indicate that by 2024, 325 districts/cities will be categorized as high risk, 189 districts/cities as medium risk, and none will be categorized as low risk. However, not all high-risk local governments have adequate resilience to handle disaster crises. This raises a fundamental question: What factors explain the variation in local government capacity to respond to these crises?

2. Literature Review

This article argues that these differences are closely related to the Indonesian decentralization implementation. Decentralization is defined as the process of empowering local governments to have autonomy in governance through strengthening local democracy and increasing institutional capacity (Broekema et al., 2024). In this context, decentralization requires the implementation of direct elections for regional heads as a manifestation of local democracy, while simultaneously granting local governments authority to manage budgets and strengthening bureaucratic capacity to improve response and resilience to crises, particularly natural disasters.

Related to the above description, this study argues that the resilience of local governments in facing crises is determined by several key factors: the type of general election, the regional head's office term, regional budget capacity, and the bureaucratic reform process. These four factors are based on expert perspectives highlighting the interrelationship between local political dynamics, governance, and institutional capacity. First, in the Indonesian local politics context, the practice of politicizing the bureaucracy often has negative consequences for local government managerial performance. Politicians have a strong incentive to prioritize loyalty over bureaucratic competence, using bureaucratic positions as instruments to garner electoral support and strengthen control over public resources (Berenschot, 2018). Bureaucrats at the local level—particularly at the district and village levels—are often instrumentalized by political elites to mobilize support in electoral contests (Aspinall & Berenschot, 2019). This situation demonstrates that the bureaucracy has not fully functioned as a neutral and professional institution, but rather often becomes an extension of political power interests. An analysis of power in public policy is inevitable, given that the distribution of power in the policy arena is highly dependent on specific issues and contexts (Campbell, 2002; Nye, 2011).

Second, in terms of resources and bureaucratic capacity, the local government's ability to respond to crises is largely determined by the size and effectiveness of local budget management, as well as the bureaucracy's capacity to implement policies adaptively (Drennan et al., 2014). Adequate fiscal and institutional capacity play a crucial role in strengthening local capacities to face crises, as both support institutional learning processes and more efficient cross-sectoral coordination. In the context of natural disasters, budgetary factors and bureaucratic capacity are key determinants of how quickly and effectively local governments can mobilize resources to respond to emergencies and recover from post-crisis conditions.

Recent literature on crisis management in governance and public administration studies emphasizes that the effectiveness of a crisis response is significantly influenced by the capacity of local governments to formulate public policies and mobilize their resources. Local governments are often the primary actors on the front lines in facing various forms of crises, such as natural disasters, health crises, and socio-economic disruptions, making their institutional capacity a crucial determinant of successful crisis management. Numerous studies have shown that crisis management capacity at the local level is closely related to the ability of local governments to design mitigation policies, coordinate between actors, and build effective preparedness systems (Cvetković et al., 2021; Lee, 2019; Putra & Matsuyuki, 2020). Within the framework of modern crisis governance, this capacity encompasses not only administrative capabilities but also the ability of local governments to build collaborative networks and integrate various organizational resources to respond to crises quickly and adaptively (Boin et al., 2016; Cabane & Kuipers, 2025; Rosenthal & Kouzmin, 1997). Other studies also confirm that the success of local governments in managing crises is significantly influenced by the quality of the public policies they produce, particularly those related to risk mitigation, cross-sector coordination, and strengthening the institutional capacity of local governments (Bundy et al., 2017; James et al., 2011). Thus, local government policy capacity is a key element in determining the government's ability to anticipate and respond effectively to crises.



In addition to policy capacity, various studies also emphasize the importance of organizational resource availability and local governance capacity in determining the effectiveness of crisis management. The availability of internal resources such as budgets, staff, and the organization's ability to allocate resources strategically are critical factors determining the success of local government responses to crises (Park et al., 2022). The success of crisis response policies, particularly in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, is significantly influenced by the government's capacity to formulate responsive policies and the bureaucracy's ability to implement those policies effectively (Hartley & Jarvis, 2020). In the context of post-crisis recovery, the administrative capacity of city governments significantly influences the speed of recovery in crisis-affected areas (Rosas et al., 2021). Local government governance capacity, including inter-organizational coordination, public service management, and adaptability in uncertain situations, are important factors in increasing local government institutional resilience to crises (Abu & Mohamad, 2023; Duchek, 2020; Karpinskaia et al., 2025; Salvador & Sancho, 2023; Zardo et al., 2023). Therefore, the success of crisis management is not solely determined by emergency response but is highly dependent on the capacity of public policy, institutional strength, and the availability of local government resources to effectively respond, manage, and recover from the impact of the crisis.

Thus, this study proposes four main hypotheses as follows:

- H1: The more competitive and fairer the regional head election process, the better the quality of the resulting public policies that strengthen regional government resilience. This hypothesis is based on the fact that political practices in Indonesia are still characterized by rampant money politics. Regional heads elected through an electoral process rife with fraud and political transactions tend to incur "political debts" that must be compensated through patronizing policies. As a result, attention to public policies oriented towards increasing regional resilience in the face of crises, particularly natural disasters, is often neglected.
- H2: The less political pressure regional governments face to win subsequent elections, the less likely they are to prioritize public policies that support regional resilience. This argument stems from the patterns of political behavior of regional heads in Indonesia, which are influenced by the electoral cycle. During their first term, regional heads generally strive to build a positive image through public policies oriented towards service delivery and regional resilience in order to gain electoral support in subsequent terms. Conversely, in the second term, when the opportunity to run for reelection is no longer available, policy orientation tends to shift toward short-term interests, including recovering political costs incurred during the election.
- H3: The greater the fiscal capacity of a local government, the higher resilience level it is able to achieve. This hypothesis assumes that the regional budget size reflects the resource capacity available to the government to strengthen its resilience system in the face of crises. Local governments with larger budgets have greater opportunities to allocate funds to increase regional resilience.
- H4: The higher the level of bureaucratic reform achieved by a local government, the stronger its institutional resilience in the crises face. Bureaucratic reform is a crucial indicator of the government's institutional capacity to manage programs and respond effectively to emergency situations. Local governments with professional, transparent, and adaptive bureaucratic structures have a greater ability to consistently implement regional resilience policies, especially in the face of crises caused by natural disasters.

3. Research Method and Materials

This study employs a quantitative approach, with all 542 local governments in Indonesia as analysis units, consisting of provinces, regencies, and cities. Four new provinces in the Papua region were excluded because their local government resilience assessment process is still ongoing.



Table 1: Descriptive Statistics

Variables	Mean	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum	Total Units of Analysis
Period of head of local government	1.52	0.5	1.00	2.00	542
Electoral type	0.58	0.52	0.00	1.00	542
Local budget	2319.2	3826.77	434.0	69379.0	542
Bureaucracy reform	78.25	34.01	60	100	542
Human development index	73.6	6.57	38.68	87.72	542
Year of election	2020	1.76	2019	2022	542
Population number	6423345	2397845	24018	587345879	542
Total area	45712	15327	10.73	153444	542
Gross domestic product	1345	2786	5	3679	542
Local government resilience	0.79	0.14	0.49	0.89	542
Local government coalition	0.67	0.23	0	1	542

The dependent variable is local government resilience obtained from the Regional Disaster Management Agency. This resilience indicator ranges from 0 to 1 and encompasses the dimensions of risk and hazard exposure, institutional capacity, economic and social capacity, infrastructure and physical capacity, disaster risk management, environmental and spatial management, and financial and resource capacity. This study uses ordinary least squares (OLS) method using R Studio software.

First independent variable is type of regional head election. The categories were determined based on a review of Constitutional Court ruling archives and mainstream media reports. Elections were coded as 1 if there were indications of fraud, and 0 if there were no such indications. 321 local governments were recorded as engaging in vote-buying practices in the election process. Second independent variable is government period incentive, coded 1 for regional heads in their first term, and 2 for their second or final term. Third independent variable is regional budget, obtained from official data from the Central Statistics Agency. Fourth independent variable is bureaucratic reform conditions, based on data from the Ministry of Administrative and Bureaucratic Reform.

In addition, this study includes several control variables, referring to Stark and Taylor's argument, which emphasizes the importance of citizen capacity in influencing community participation in disaster management. To measure this capacity, the HDI for each region, sourced from the Central Statistics Agency, is used; a higher HDI is assumed to correlate with greater levels of citizen participation. This study also controls for the year of the regional head elections, given that the regional government resilience score uses data from 2024, whereas elections will not be held simultaneously before 2024. Other control variables include 1 if head of local government supported by political parties associated with national government coalition and 0 is otherwise, population, area, and regional gross domestic product.

4. Results and Discussion

Table 2 shows the results of regression estimation for each model in this study. In general, Model 1, the baseline model, and Model 2, which includes control variables, show consistent results.

In Model 2, the variable of regional head period has a statistically significant and negative effect at the 95% confidence level. The coefficient of -0.278 indicates that, assuming other independent variables remain constant, a one-unit increase in the variable regional head period is associated with 0.278 points decrease in the level of local government resilience. Furthermore, the variable of electoral type also has a significant and negative effect at the 95% confidence level. The coefficient of -0.731 indicates that a one-unit increase in this variable decreases local government resilience by 0.731 points, all other things being equal.

The variable of local budget shows a significant and positive effect at the 95% confidence level. The coefficient of 25.189 indicates that the regional budget increases in a one-unit, this is connected with an increase in local government resilience of 25.189 points, assuming other



variables remain constant. Similarly, the variable of bureaucratic reform has a significant and positive effect at the 99% confidence level. The coefficient of 23.577 indicates that a one-unit increase in the bureaucratic reform index increases local government resilience by 23.577 points, all other things being equal.

Model 3 tests the interaction effect between regional head tenure, local budget, and bureaucratic reform. The results show a positive and significant effect at the 95% confidence level, with a coefficient of 0.118. This indicates that the combination of these three factors collectively increases local government resilience. Model 4 shows that the interaction between election type, local budget, and bureaucratic reform has a significant and positive effect at the 99% confidence level. The coefficient of 0.102 indicates that a one-unit increase in the interaction of these three variables increases local government resilience by 0.102 points.

Table 2: The Effect of Period of Head of Local Government, Electoral Type, Local Budget, and Bureaucracy Reform on Local Government Resilience

	Local government resilience					
	(Model 1)	(Model 2)	(Model 3)	(Model 4)	(Model 5)	(Model 6)
Period of head of local government	- 1.944***	- 0.278**	-1.243***			-1.243***
Electoral type	- 0.924***	- 0.731**		- 0.836***		- 0.836***
Local budget	27.559***	25.189**				
Bureaucracy reform	43.559***	23.577***				
Period of head of local government: local budget: bureaucracy reform			0.118**			
Electoral type: local budget: bureaucracy reform				0.102***		
Local budget: bureaucracy reform					0.247**	
Period of head of local government: Electoral type: local budget: bureaucracy reform						0.002**
Human development index		0.547	0.437	0.366	0.765	0.987
Year of election		2.341	1.250	1.178	1.987	1.781
Population number		-1.770	-0.780	-0.567	-0.672	-0.643
Total area		-0.893	-1.814	-1.354	-1.181	-1.718
Gross domestic product Local government coalition		-0.765	-0.671	-0.569	-0.975	-0.774
Constant	13.981***	58.676	48.814	47.912	46.773	49.872
N	542	542	542	542	542	542
R ²	0.487	0.689	0.432	0.497	0.573	0.487
Adjusted R ²	0.498	0.579	0.358	0.421	0.447	0.571

Note: *** p < 0.01, ** p < 0.05, * p < 0.1, two-tailed test, standard errors in parentheses.

In Model 5, the interaction between local budgets and bureaucratic reform is also statistically significant at the 95% confidence level, with a coefficient of 0.247. This shows that the positive influence of regional budgets on local government resilience is stronger at higher levels of bureaucratic reform. Model 6 tests a more comprehensive interaction between regional head tenure, election type, local budgets, and bureaucratic reform. The results show a positive and significant relationship at the 95% confidence level, with a coefficient of 0.002, indicating that the combination of these four variables, albeit on a small scale, still makes a positive contribution to increasing local government resilience.

The results show that decentralization, which incorporates a local democratic framework and local capacity, explains variations in regional resilience in dealing with natural disaster crises. Regional heads elected through fraudulent electoral practices tend to lead regional governments with lower levels of resilience. This can be explained by the tendency of these regional heads to prioritize policies that recoup political costs incurred during the election process, rather than developing long-term programs oriented towards strengthening regional resilience. Similar findings also emerged for regional heads in their second terms. Lower electoral incentives in their final terms led them to focus more on compensatory interests for political investments in their first terms, resulting in relatively less attention to regional resilience programs. However, regional heads in their first term tend to prioritize policies



with electoral incentives, including those related to natural disaster crisis management. These policies are often viewed as strategic tools for building a responsive leadership image in the public arena, thereby increasing political support from voters in subsequent regional elections.

Conversely, regional governments with higher fiscal capacity tend to demonstrate higher levels of resilience. This is due to their ability to allocate a more significant proportion of their budgets to resilience-strengthening programs than regions with limited budgets. Furthermore, the quality of bureaucratic reform also plays a significant role; regions with higher levels of bureaucratic reform generally demonstrate greater resilience due to more effective, accountable, and responsive internal governance.

While electoral type and term length have detrimental effects on regional resilience in dealing with natural disaster crises, this study demonstrates that these negative effects can be mitigated through interaction analysis. The negative effects of regional heads winning elections through fraudulent means can be mitigated when regional governments possess substantial fiscal capacity and high-quality bureaucratic reforms. In other words, a strong regional budget and a well-functioning bureaucracy can mitigate the detrimental impact of an uncompetitive election process on regional resilience. A similar pattern emerges for regional heads serving their second terms. Although they tend to exhibit compensatory tendencies for the political investments made in their first terms, substantial fiscal capacity and strong bureaucratic reforms can still offset these negative effects and enhance regional resilience.

Other interaction findings indicate that regional governments with low budgets, which generally have lower levels of resilience, can increase their resilience capacity if supported by high-quality bureaucratic reforms. Thus, bureaucratic reform has a significant compensatory function in the context of fiscal constraints.

Furthermore, when all three negative conditions coexist—namely, regional heads elected through fraudulent electoral practices, serving a second term, and having low fiscal capacity—strong bureaucratic reforms still demonstrate the ability to mitigate these negative impacts and increase local government resilience. This finding underscores the central role of bureaucratic reform as a balancing factor in the context of electoral political dynamics and budget constraints. Thus, local governments with high levels of vulnerability in disaster crisis management, especially those led by second-term regional heads, with limited fiscal capacity, or emerging from less competitive election processes, require policy interventions oriented toward strengthening the institutional capacity of the bureaucracy. Bureaucratic reform is a crucial instrument for improving administrative capacity, the professionalism of the apparatus, and the ability of local governments to formulate and implement crisis management policies more effectively.

5. Conclusion

This study found that local democracy indicators—measured by the type of regional head election and the length of the regional head's term—had a significant and negative effect on local government resilience. These findings indicate that the more regional heads elected through uncompetitive or fraudulent election processes, the lower the level of local government resilience. Furthermore, regional heads in their second term tended to exhibit lower levels of resilience than those in their first term. The subsequent findings indicate that the local capacity dimension—represented by the size of the regional budget and the quality of bureaucratic reform—has a significant and positive effect on local government resilience. This means that regions with greater fiscal capacity are better able to allocate resources to strengthen resilience, while high-quality bureaucratic reform increases the effectiveness of local government responses to disaster risks. The interaction analysis provides several important implications for enhancing local government resilience. First, local governments led by regional heads who won elections fraudulently can still achieve high levels of resilience if they possess substantial fiscal capacity and strong bureaucratic reform. Second, local

governments led by regional heads in their second term can also increase their resilience if supported by a large budget and high-quality bureaucratic reform. Third, regions with low budgets can still achieve high levels of resilience if they are able to maintain strong bureaucratic reform. Fourth, even under the most adverse conditions—namely, regional heads elected fraudulently, serving in their second term, and having a low budget—local government resilience can still be enhanced through effective bureaucratic reform.

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