

## The Customary Institution of North Padang Lawas Regency as an Instrument of Bachrum Harahap's Political Power

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### Article Info

#### Article history:

Received: 8 December 2025

Publish: 1 January 2026

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#### Keywords:

Customary Institutions;

North Padang Lawas;

Local Politics;

Dalihan Natolu;

Symbolic Capital.

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### Abstract

*This article examines the formation, role, and transformation of the Regional Customary Institution (LAD) of North Padang Lawas Regency as a political instrument in local governance dynamics. Historically, the LAD was established to maintain the cultural values, customary structures, and social systems of the Mandailing-Angkola community, which still adheres to the principles of Dalihan Natolu. However, in the context of local politics, LAD not only carries out cultural functions, but also plays a strategic role in the formation of public opinion, political mobilization, and the legitimacy of candidates in electoral contests. Through a sociological approach and Pierre Bourdieu's capital theory, this article shows that LAD is an arena for the conversion of social, cultural, and symbolic capital utilized by local political elites. Thus, the existence of LAD not only functions as an institution for cultural preservation, but also becomes a significant political instrument in the local democratic process in North Padang Lawas Regency.*

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Political reform and decentralization in Indonesia have opened up greater space for local power in governance, including customary institutions as traditional social structures. In many regions, customary institutions serve not only to preserve culture but also as tools for political legitimacy and power. North Padang Lawas Regency is one area that demonstrates this phenomenon, a consequence of the still-strong cultural structure of the Mandailing-Angkola community.

The North Padang Lawas Regency Traditional Institution was officially established in 2018 by the local government as part of a harmonization effort between the formal government and traditional authorities. However, in practice, this institution has evolved into a socio-political actor inextricably linked to local power struggles. This situation has given rise to critical questions regarding power relations, the construction of legitimacy, and the use of cultural symbols in electoral politics.

## 2. METHOD

This article uses a qualitative descriptive approach aimed at understanding the local political dynamics of North Padang Lawas Regency through representations of social practices, power relations, and the interactions between customary and state institutions in the context of electoral contestation. The analysis in this article uses **Joel S. Migdal's theoretical framework**, especially through the concept of **State-in-Society**. This theory emphasizes that the state is not a single, homogeneous entity, but an arena of struggle between various social actors to define rules, legitimacy, and resources.

### 3. DISCUSSION

#### Historical Background and Formation of Traditional Institutions

The establishment of the Regional Customary Institution (LAD) of North Padang Lawas Regency in 2018 cannot be understood as a mere administrative process. Formally, this institution was established through a decree from Regent Bachrum Harahap, appointing Tongku Parlaungan Harahap as its first chairman. Normatively, the LAD's duties are formulated to carry out the function of fostering customs, strengthening the community's value system, and maintaining social harmony based on the philosophy of kinship and local culture. This function aligns with the mandate found in Law No. 6/2014 concerning Villages, which recognizes the existence of customary institutions as part of the local social structure that possesses normative and historical legitimacy.

However, the formation of LAD in the context of North Padang Lawas cannot be separated from the dynamics of local power and the configuration of social relations based on *kahanggi* (genealogical kinship). In the Batak Angkola–Padang Lawas community, traditional social structures are built through genealogical principles that map social relations based on clan lineage. Thus, customary institutions are not only cultural institutions but also social instruments that regulate access to resources, social legitimacy, and political authority (Simanjuntak, 2017).

In the theoretical framework of Joel S. Migdal (1988) regarding the relationship between strong *societies and weak states*, LAD can be understood as part of a "strong social organization" that has a more solid historical and symbolic legitimacy than the formal institutions of the modern state. Societies living within a strong genealogical system tend to refer to traditional authority structures to determine political action, the distribution of respect, and the allocation of resources. In this context, the formal state (local government) is no longer the sole source of legitimacy of power, but instead works alongside—or even depends on—non-state institutions such as LAD.

The formation of the LAD during the final period of Bachrum Harahap's leadership suggests that the institution served as a symbolic institutionalization of a long-standing patronage structure. The decision to appoint figures from the core genealogical network of Tongku Parlaungan Harahap further reinforced this impression. Sociologically, this reflects the political practice described by Scott (1972) as patron-client *embeddedness*, namely, a power relationship reinforced through the integration of formal government structures and traditional patronage structures. Through the formation of the LAD, Bachrum not only strengthened the basis of his political legitimacy but also created a formal channel for the reproduction of power based on genealogical networks. This causes the LAD to function not only as a cultural agent but also as a hegemonic instrument in local political contestation. The dominance of *kahanggi*-based power becomes more structured because the LAD acts as a "moral guarantor" for certain political actors who still have dominant genealogical affiliations.

This phenomenon has structural effects on local democratic practices. First, LAD provides a socio-political filter that determines who is considered representative and worthy of leadership. Second, LAD creates a political coalition system that is cultural before it becomes electoral. Third, LAD serves as a medium for reproducing genealogical-based solidarity, which then influences voter behavior (*electoral behavior*) in local communities. Thus, customary institutions in the context of North Padang Lawas are not only cultural entities but also political actors that play a role in the consolidation of dynasty-based power. This can be seen from the continuity of political leadership through Andar Amin Harahap, who ran for and won the regional elections as a sole candidate, a phenomenon that demonstrates the level of structural domination of local elites.

In the context of this article's main title, Kahanggi as the "Basis of Political Solidarity in the Contest for Power," the LAD serves as a formal representation of kahanggi solidarity. It serves as both a symbol and a political instrument that regulates power relations, access to resources, and the process of political legitimacy. LAD not only preserves customs but also reshapes the local political landscape through an institutionalized patron-client pattern designed to maintain the collective power of the dominant genealogical group.

### **Social, Economic, and Political Conditions of North Padang Lawas Regency**

North Padang Lawas Regency (Paluta) is a region resulting from the division of South Tapanuli Regency (Law No. 37/2007), which has developed rapidly administratively since 2007: the division of sub-districts has increased, by 2016 it was recorded as 12 sub-districts with hundreds of villages and several urban villages. Its geographical location on the trans-Sumatra corridor provides economic potential based on agrarian (oil palm and rubber plantations), agriculture, and livestock. These sectors are the basis of the livelihoods of the majority of village households, as well as sources of economic patronage in local political relations (e.g., project access, labor, aid allocation) (Bourdieu, 1986; Berenschot, 2018).

Despite administrative expansion, Paluta's economic structure remains vulnerable: dependence on primary commodities, concentration of plantation land, and limited economic diversification. This situation results in an unequal distribution of resources, a situation easily exploited by local political actors to strengthen patron-client networks by channeling economic access (jobs, projects, subsidies) to loyal client groups.

Socioculturally, the people of Paluta are generally concentrated in the Mandailing–Angkola/Batak community, which is relatively ethnically and culturally homogeneous. This homogeneity reinforces collective norms rooted in kinship systems, such as The Three Ways (kahanggi, anak boru, mora). This kinship system is not merely a mechanism of ritual or symbolic solidarity; it is a structure of daily social regulation that forms a habitus of cultural dispositions that influence citizens' preferences, moral obligations, and political behavior (Bourdieu, 1991; Geertz, 1973).

The existence of traditional figures, clan heads, and organized traditional leadership structures (e.g., traditional leaders in LAD) creates a dense and institutionalized social network. In this context, personal and genealogical relationships precede family relations. programmatic or ideological: clan solidarity (kahanggi) is one of the most effective political solidarity schemes because it guarantees relatively organized and predictable vote mobilization at the village-sub-district scale (Lubis, 2019; Harahap, 2022).

Politics in Paluta demonstrates a pattern in which political actors, both incumbents and new candidates, frequently activate customary and kinship networks as a primary strategy for victory. These tactics include: visiting customary communities, seeking blessings at customary halls, placing customary leaders within the LAD structure, and distributing symbolic material to clan groups. This process reflects a mechanism of conversion of *capital* (Bourdieu): social and symbolic capital based on custom is converted into political capital (votes, support, formal legitimacy) (Bourdieu, 1986).

The co-optation of political parties into local patronage networks is also common: party alliances are fluid and transactional (Berenschot, 2018). Parties serve as instrumental vehicles for securing legal access to state resources, while local elites supply the voter base through customary authority and clientelistic mechanisms.

By using a framework of **Almond (1988; 2001)** Paluta can be analyzed as an example of a "strong society" where local social institutions (LAD, clans, traditional leaders) have a significant capacity to regulate collective behavior and allocate social resources, while formal state capacity (regional bureaucracy, political parties as modern institutions) is relatively weak or interfered with by local networks. In such conditions, the local state often

becomes an arena for negotiation between state elites and traditional institutions; the state does not monopolize authority, but rather shares and often adapts policies to the demands of the local social structure (Migdal, 2001).

This practice has twofold implications: on the one hand, state-customary alignment can facilitate program implementation through local legitimacy; on the other hand, it opens up loopholes for patrimonial resource allocation and erodes public accountability mechanisms.

### **Regional Customary Institutions in Political Mobilization**

Field findings show that the **Regional Customary Institution (LAD)** in North Padang Lawas Regency not only functions as an institution for preserving customs and culture, but also plays a significant role in electoral political dynamics. Based on an interview with the Chair of LAD, this institution is actively involved in several strategic areas, such as:

1. *election socialization with the KPU,*
2. *post-election social stabilization, and*
3. *providing space for dialogue between political candidates and traditional leaders.*

LAD's involvement in the process shows that this institution is in a position of an intermediate *structure* which plays a dual function: as a guardian of traditional identity (*cultural custodian*) at a time as **local political actor**. From a theoretical perspective of **Joel S. Migdal**, this condition can be understood through an approach to *State–Society Relations* which sees the state not as a single entity, but as consisting of a variety of actors competing to gain authority, legitimacy, and compliance (*compliance*) in society (Migdal, 2001).

In the context of North Padang Lawas, as explained in the previous section regarding the ethnically homogeneous character of the community, strong kinship networks, and still dominant genealogical patronage patterns, the existence of the LAD is crucial because it possesses established symbolic and social capital before the formal presence of the state. This makes the LAD appear as a local entity operating within the realm of power negotiations between state structures and indigenous communities.

The LAD's involvement in election socialization, for example, is not merely a form of administrative collaboration, but can be interpreted as part of a legitimization exchange process. The state, through the General Elections Commission (KPU), borrows the LAD's symbolic authority to ensure the public accepts the election message, while the LAD gains a position as a formal political partner and vote mobilization center. Furthermore, the post-election stabilization function demonstrates how the LAD plays a role as a conflict mediator and provider. *political legitimacy* to the winning party. In Migdal's framework, this reflects the category of strongmen *brokers*—local actors who are able to maintain social stability because they have control over the social and normative networks of society.

Furthermore, when LAD becomes a location for dialogue between candidates and traditional leaders, this function emphasizes its transformation into a vote **getter** or vote collector through custom-based social networks. The existence of LAD, a political gatekeeper, shows the reciprocal relationship between political elites and traditional elites in the patron-client system, as is frequently found in Indonesian local politics. Therefore, LAD is not only a cultural representation but also a political instrument that produces, transmits, and secures electoral support. This process demonstrates that state power and local communities do not operate linearly, but are negotiated through customary norms, kinship symbols, and contestations for social legitimacy.

### **Kahanggi and the Mora–Anak Boru Network as Political Infrastructure: Migdal's Perspective on Local Power Negotiations**

In the Mandailing–Angkola social system, kinship relations not only reflect genealogical identity but also shape power structures and mechanisms of political

mobilization. Two crucial elements of this structure are the kahanggi, a horizontal solidarity unit based on shared clans, and the mora–anak boru network, which establishes a hierarchy of obligations and social exchanges. When integrated into the context of electoral political contestation, these structures serve as a basis for political legitimacy, a mechanism for vote mobilization, and an instrument of social control.

**1. Kahanggi as a Basis for Political Solidarity**

Sociologically, kahanggi can be seen a primordial *bond* that binds individuals within a broad patrilineal kinship group. In local political practices in North Padang Lawas, these ties are a significant source of electoral power. As emphasized in field interviews, supporting political candidates from the same clan is not simply a rational individual choice, but an expression of collective identity and moral obligation:

*"If a Kahanggi child runs, it's not just a political choice. It's a matter of self-respect and traditional obligations."* (Untung Harahap, interview, Gunung Tua 2024).

In this context, electoral support is no longer understood as an expression of individual preferences, but as a manifestation of clan honor (genealogical dignity). This phenomenon reinforces Joel Migdal's thesis that in societies with strong social structures, citizens' political behavior is determined more by entrenched social institutions than by modern political norms such as electoral rationality or program-based choices (Migdal, 2001).

If the kahanggi forms horizontal solidarity, the mora–anak boru network forms a vertical support mechanism based on a hierarchy of customary relations. This configuration creates a complex local political system in which:

- **Sea** has symbolic-based legitimate authority,
- **The main pipe** has operational functions as an implementer of support, mobilization, and distribution of patronage.
- **opposition becomes** the center for coordinating the clan's internal political policies.

In the dynamics of local elections, this network produces the following effects:

Structural Elements	Social Function	Political Function
Mora	Moral legitimacy, symbol of authority.	Endorsement of candidates as "worthy of support"
Kahanggi	Collective identity, social cohesion.	Homogeneous and consistent voter base
Anak Boru	Technical implementer of customary relations	Campaign mobilization machinery, distribution logistics

Thus, customary structures become informal political machines that operate parallel to and sometimes even surpass the effectiveness of formal political party structures.

### **Migdal Framework: Indigenous Power as a Challenger to the State**

Migdal explains that the state is not a single entity that completely controls social space; it must negotiate with local community structures that have regulatory, sanctioning, and legitimating powers (Migdal, 1988; 2001). In the context of North Padang Lawas, the Dalihan Na Tolu structure—which organizes kahanggi and the mora–anak boru network—acts as:

- **rule-maker:** determine the norms that citizens must comply with,
- **rule-enforcer:** provide social sanctions for violators of political solidarity,
- **power broker:** bridging the relationship between political actors and citizens.

Thus, within the Migdal framework, this customary structure can be categorized as a form of strong **society**, namely a social entity that has the ability:

- control individual behavior,
- directing collective political preferences,
- determine who obtains local political legitimacy.

The existence of LAD (Regional Customary Institutions) and clan-based political practices shows that the state and custom are in a relationship **not hierarchical**, but symbiotic- **negotiate** Political elites exploit customary structures to gain electoral support, while customary institutions gain formal positions and access to state resources.

### **Political Implications: Dynastic Consolidation and Unequal Contestation**

When kahanggi and the mora–anak boru network act as instruments of political mobilization, this structure creates:

- **fixed electoral base,**
- **structural barriers for candidates outside the dominant indigenous network,**
- **conditions that allow the emergence of a single candidate or the dominance of certain families in the cycle of government.**

This can be observed in the case of local politics in North Padang Lawas, where kinship networks support leadership reproduction despite formal electoral competition. The consolidation of political dynasties through kahanggi and mora–anak boru networks occurs not by chance, but through a series of relatively systematic socio-political mechanisms:

#### **1. Production of Symbolic Legitimacy**

- The family figure (or candidate from the dominant clan) obtains restorals from traditional leaders (mora/kahanggi). This blessing serves as a certificate of legitimacy that is difficult for outside actors to match. Within Migdal's framework, this is a way-strong *society* producing rules of legitimate recognition that run parallel to formal state rules.

#### **2. Co-optation of Customary Institutions and Bureaucracy**

- The placement of loyal figures in formal customary positions (e.g., LAD structures) or within local bureaucracies allows elites to domesticate state cultural and administrative instruments for the purposes of power reproduction. This co-optation concentrates access to resources (budgets, projects, jobs) within dynastic networks.

#### **3. Collective Voting Bloc Mobilization**

- Collective instructions via clan meetings, traditional ceremonies, or anak boru

meetings change voting behavior into collective action, so that dynastic candidates enjoy a fixed *electoral base*—a block that tends to have low volatility.

#### 4. Structured Patronage

- The distribution of material benefits (projects, direct assistance, honorary placements) to client networks strengthens loyalty and internalizes patron-client relationships. This institutionalizes transactional relationships to keep subsequent generations within the dynasty's orbit.

#### 5. Public Space Regulation and Candidate Politics

- Customary institutions as gatekeepers can close the space for public legitimacy for outside candidates by declaring them “unfit” according to custom, or facilitate single candidacy through social pressure and inter-elite negotiations.

## 4. CONCLUSION

This article demonstrates that the Regional Customary Institution (LAD) of North Padang Lawas Regency cannot be understood merely as a cultural preservation entity, but rather as a political institution with a strategic role in shaping local power configurations. The Mandailing–Angkola customary structure, based on Dalihan Na Tolu, particularly through the function of kahanggi as political solidarity, and the mora–anak boru network as a source of legitimacy and mobilization, has transformed into an effective political infrastructure in winning electoral contests.

Through analysis using perspective *State-in-Society*, Joel S. Migdal, it appears that the state and customary institutions are in a non-hierarchical power negotiation relationship. The state needs customary institutions to build social compliance and political legitimacy, while LADs gain formal authority and access to resources through these relationships. This reciprocal relationship creates a form of hybrid *governance*, where customary norms and modern political systems are intertwined in determining the direction of local power.

In practice, LAD acts as a political *broker*, *legitimacy gatekeeper*, and *vote generator*, especially through mechanisms connected to genealogical structures. As a result, local political competition does not take place on an equal footing (*unequal political arena*), but is conditioned by the power of patronage and institutionalized norms of customary solidarity. This structure encourages the emergence of dynastic power patterns that not only gain political legitimacy through elections but also cultural legitimacy through customary symbols and kinship structures.

Thus, LAD is not merely a complement to modern government institutions, but a political actor that shapes the direction of local democracy. Electoral democracy in North Padang Lawas Regency does not operate purely through deliberative mechanisms and program-based competition, but rather through a model-embedded *communitarian democracy*, where identity, customs, and patronage become dominant factors in the formation of people's political preferences.

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