

Political Representation of Indigenous Papuans in the Special Autonomy Era: Case Study of Local Democracy in Southwest Papua

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ABSTRACT - This study examines the dynamics of political representation of Indigenous Papuans (OAP) within the framework of Special Autonomy, particularly following the revision of Law No. 2 of 2021, with a focus on local democratic practices in Southwest Papua Province. The special autonomy policy was designed as an affirmative mechanism to ensure Indigenous Papuans political participation through reserved seats in district legislatures, the empowerment of the Papuan People's Assembly, and inclusive political party recruitment. However, significant implementation challenges persist at both structural and cultural levels. This research adopts a descriptive qualitative approach, utilizing in-depth interviews with customary leaders, DPRK members, youth activists, Indigenous Papuan youth, village heads, and NGO staff, alongside policy document analysis and statistical data from the Central Statistics Agency. The findings reveal that Indigenous Papuans representation in the Regional People's Representative Council and Papuan People's Assembly remains largely symbolic. Structural barriers—such as elite domination by non-Indigenous Papuans actors, money politics, and weak local institutions—hinder substantive political inclusion. Conversely, active participation in elections and development forums reflects a strong aspiration for political justice and identity recognition. This study highlights the need to strengthen the institutional role of the MRP, reform political party recruitment processes, and enhance local governance capacity in order to promote a more inclusive democratic system for Indigenous Papuans.

Keywords: Indigenous Papuans; political representation; special autonomy; local democracy

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Introduction

The Special Autonomy policy for the provinces of Papua and West Papua represents the Indonesian state's political response to the long history of marginalization of Indigenous Papuans in the national political, economic, and social systems. Through Law No. 21 of 2001 on Special Autonomy for Papua Province, the Indonesian government has provided formal recognition and affirmative measures for Indigenous Papuans (*Orang Asli Papua/OAP*) to attain justice and equality in various aspects of national life, including political representation. This policy was amended by Law No. 2 of 2021, which strengthened several affirmative provisions, particularly the allocation of special quotas for OAP in the district/city legislative councils (DPRK), the creation of new provinces, and the empowerment of the Papuan People's Assembly (*Majelis Rakyat Papua/MRP*) as a cultural representative institution (Herjawan & Pratama, 2024; Wika, 2025).

Normatively, the legal framework of Special Autonomy acknowledges the importance of political representation for Indigenous Papuans through affirmative mechanisms. Article 6A paragraph (4) of Law No. 2 of 2021 stipulates that 25% of DPRK members must be Indigenous Papuans, appointed through a recommendation process involving local communities and the MRP. This provision aims to ensure that OAP have a tangible role in local political decision-making and are active participants in a local democracy that respects cultural and social justice (Alim et al., 2021; Rumbiak et al., 2024; Zain et al., 2023).

However, the implementation of Special Autonomy has not eliminated the structural and cultural barriers that hinder OAP political participation. In practice, OAP representation in institutions such as the DPRK, political parties, and the MRP is often symbolic. Their presence is not always accompanied by the substantive authority or capacity to influence public policy (Mietzner, 2020). This reflects a gap between formal and substantive representation, as theorized by Pitkin (2023), who argues that true representation is not measured solely by physical presence but by the ability to advocate meaningfully for the represented group's interests.

Recent studies indicate that, despite over two decades of Special Autonomy, local democracy in Papua continues to face power imbalances between non-OAP elites and indigenous communities. In Southwest Papua a newly established province fundamental issues such as party structure, competition over political resources, elite co-optation, and money politics obstruct the development of fair and meaningful political representation (Lefaan & Nugroho, 2012; Titeca & de Herdt, 2011).

The MRP, as a cultural representative body tasked with safeguarding Papuan authenticity in politics, also faces challenges in fulfilling its mandate. Despite its authority to provide recommendations for appointing OAP DPRK candidates, the MRP's influence is often sidelined by local political elites and central government interests. Budget limitations, institutional weaknesses, and unclear mandates frequently undermine its oversight and advocacy roles (Effendy, 2023; Luhukay et al., 2022; Salmawati, Purnomo, et al., 2024).

According to the collaborative governance theory developed by Ansell & Gash (2008), the success of local democracy requires a balanced partnership between state and non-state actors—including customary institutions, religious leaders, youth organizations, and women's groups. Power imbalances and weak local institutions hinder the development of inclusive governance in

Papua. Without fair deliberative spaces, OAP representation risks becoming a political formality devoid of substantive meaning (Feneteruma, 2023; Salmawati, Fikri, et al., 2024).

Moreover, OAP political representation is intrinsically tied to issues of historical justice and identity sovereignty. Many Indigenous communities see political representation not merely as a matter of quotas or presence in the DPRK, but as the recognition of their right to self-determination within the framework of the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia (Young, 2016). These aspirations are reflected in their active participation in development planning forums, elections, and civic actions calling for systemic reforms in governance.

In this context, Iris Marion Young's (2000) theory of differentiated justice is particularly relevant. Young asserts that social justice must account not only for the distribution of resources but also for the recognition of marginalized identities and historical experiences. In the case of Papua, political representation must be seen as part of a process of reconstructing power relations between the state and Indigenous communities—based on recognition, equal participation, and guaranteed political rights.

Although several studies have analyzed the Special Autonomy policy and political affirmative action for Indigenous Papuans, there remains a lack of empirical research specifically focusing on the implementation of OAP political representation in newly formed provinces such as Southwest Papua. This province, established in 2022, presents unique political and social dynamics in the post-division era. It has yet to become a focal point in affirmative policy studies, particularly regarding the implementation of the 25% DPRK quota for OAP and the MRP's role in safeguarding local political authenticity. According to BPS data (2023), of the total 546,728 residents of Southwest Papua, over 60% are Indigenous Papuans, yet their representation in strategic political positions remains below 30% in most districts/cities.

This study, therefore, occupies a significant position in filling the literature gap and providing a contextual understanding of the challenges and opportunities for strengthening OAP political representation in the second phase of Special Autonomy in newly formed provinces. It aims to analyze how OAP political representation mechanisms are implemented in Southwest Papua under the revised Law No. 2 of 2021, evaluate the role of the MRP, identify structural and cultural challenges in local democracy, and propose policy strategies to enhance OAP political participation in a fair and sustainable manner.

Method

This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach aimed at gaining an in-depth understanding of the dynamics of political representation of Indigenous Papuans (OAP) within the context of the implementation of Special Autonomy in Southwest Papua Province. This approach was chosen because issues of political representation involve meanings, experiences, and social interactions that cannot be adequately captured through quantitative methods alone (Cresswell, 2016).

The research design was structured to capture the complexity of local political contexts through purposive selection of three key districts/cities: Sorong City, Sorong Regency, and Tambrauw Regency. These areas were selected due to their representation of political diversity following the administrative division and the significant composition of Indigenous Papuan populations. The research subjects included: one member of the Regional People's Representative Council (DPRK), two customary leaders, two youth activists, two Indigenous Papuan youths, one

village head, and one NGO staff member. The research was conducted over a three-month period, from January to March 2025, encompassing preparation, field data collection, and analysis phases.

Informants were selected through purposive sampling based on their involvement and knowledge of OAP political representation issues, and supplemented with snowball sampling to identify additional relevant participants. Data collection was conducted using three primary methods: In-depth interviews: Employed to explore the views, experiences, and perceptions of informants regarding the effectiveness of affirmative quotas, the role of the Papuan People's Assembly (MRP), and structural and cultural challenges in OAP political representation. Participant observation: Conducted during formal events such as development planning forums, DPRK meetings, and advocacy activities involving Indigenous communities, in order to directly observe the political interaction dynamics. Document analysis: Included a review of regulations (e.g., Law No. 2 of 2021, Special Regional Regulations/*Perdasus*, General Elections Commission regulations), local news, NGO reports, and internal documents from DPRK/MRP as secondary data sources to support field findings.

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, as developed by Braun and Clarke (2006). The analytical stages included: Transcription and repeated reading of interview data, Coding based on key issues, Identification of recurring themes, and thematic interpretation using the theoretical frameworks of political representation Pitkin (2023), collaborative governance (Ansell & Gash, 2008), and differentiated justice (Young, 2000). To ensure the validity and credibility of the data, the researcher employed triangulation of sources and methods. Information obtained through interviews was cross-verified with documents and field observations, and compared across informants from different backgrounds. In addition, member checking was conducted by asking key informants to confirm the accuracy of the data interpretations.

Result and Discussion

Political Representation of Indigenous Papuans (OAP) at the Local Level: Representation in DPRK, MRP, and Political Parties; Quotas and Affirmative Mechanisms

Within the framework of the Special Autonomy policy, the political representation of Indigenous Papuans (OAP) is guaranteed through affirmative mechanisms such as special quotas in the District/City House of Representatives (DPRK), recommendations by the Papuan People's Assembly (MRP), and participation in political parties. In Southwest Papua Province, these provisions are regulated under Law No. 2 of 2021, which mandates that the special OAP seats in the DPRK be filled through appointments by local executives based on recommendations from the MRP. The primary objective of this policy is to protect the political rights of Indigenous communities, given their historical and structural vulnerabilities within formal political arenas.

Iris Marion Young's (2000) theory of differentiated justice is particularly relevant in understanding this affirmative policy. Young argues that justice in a plural society cannot be achieved solely through equal numerical distribution, but rather through the recognition of marginalized group positions. In the Papuan context, the affirmative quota policy reflects an institutional effort to ensure reflective representation of OAP cultural and historical identity in political decision-making. However, empirical data reveal tensions between descriptive and substantive representation, as distinguished by Pitkin (2023). A DPRK member from Sorong noted:

The allocation of special seats for *Orang Asli Papua* (OAP) in legislative institutions has indeed been accommodated normatively. However, field findings indicate that the dominance of majority groups—those who possess economic and political power—continues to be the decisive factor in key decision-making processes at the regional level. This suggests that symbolic representation does not necessarily guarantee substantive influence in legislation or public policy.

An indigenous leader in Sorong Regency noted that although indigenous communities are often invited to political meetings or deliberative forums, strategic decisions are usually predetermined by higher authorities. Their participation, he explained, tends to be ceremonial and does not allow for meaningful or equal deliberative engagement. This reinforces the finding that tokenistic participation remains a dominant pattern in local politics in Papua. From the perspective of collaborative governance (Ansell & Gash, 2008), this condition reflects the weakness of power sharing and the lack of trust-building between dominant actors and OAP communities. Political representation of OAP in various forums appears more as "window dressing" than as genuine partnership. Furthermore, the findings also indicate structural obstacles in the political cadre development process within political parties. Many political parties, both local and national, have not positioned OAP members as strategic political agents. A young activist illustrated that parties tend to prefer individuals with strong financial capital over those with integrity and grassroots support. This phenomenon reveals that social capital and local cultural legitimacy have not yet become primary foundations for elite recruitment (Portes, 2017; Rankin, 2002; Szreter, 2002).

Instead, the selection system is still driven by transactional logic, which reinforces the exclusivity of power networks. Within the framework of Putnam (1994) theory of *exclusive social capital*, this condition illustrates how OAP actors struggle to access closed and non-inclusive political networks. As such, despite the implementation of affirmative policies, they have not succeeded in addressing the structural barriers embedded in the local political culture. These findings affirm that transforming affirmative action must go beyond quantitative increases in representation; it must also focus on strengthening substantive capacity and institutional mechanisms. Only through such measures can the voices of OAP be meaningfully and equally involved in deliberative political decision-making that truly reflects their interests. The political cadre development process within political parties in Southwest Papua has yet to provide meaningful strategic space for the active participation of *Orang Asli Papua* (OAP). Field data indicate that OAP cadres are often positioned merely as symbolic figures within party structures, without substantive support to advance into decision-making roles. This suggests that their presence is largely tokenistic and not intentionally designed to cultivate genuine leadership capacity. From the perspective of collaborative governance (Ansell & Gash, 2008), the absence of local actors in political decision-making reflects a failure to create an inclusive, trust-based collaborative space. Ideally, collaborative governance requires equal participation from all stakeholders, including local communities that possess cultural and social legitimacy. However, in practice, unequal power relations between party elites and OAP cadres persist and are sustained by exclusive institutional arrangements.

Consequently, the current cadre development process has not become a platform for political empowerment for OAP. Instead, it reinforces a superficial structure of representation. Without deliberate efforts to integrate local actors into decision-making mechanisms, it will be difficult to achieve equitable and sustainable political collaboration. Meanwhile, the Papuan

People's Assembly (MRP) holds potential as a cultural institution to safeguard OAP political representation. However, limitations in authority and procedural ambiguity have hindered its ability to play a strategic role effectively. Therefore, the effectiveness of OAP political representation is highly dependent on the consistent implementation of affirmative policies, the strengthening of local institutional capacity, and a sincere political commitment to realizing a form of democracy that is responsive to cultural justice (Fraser, 2012; Young, 2018). Below is the procedural flow for appointing OAP representatives through the DPRK affirmative quota mechanism:

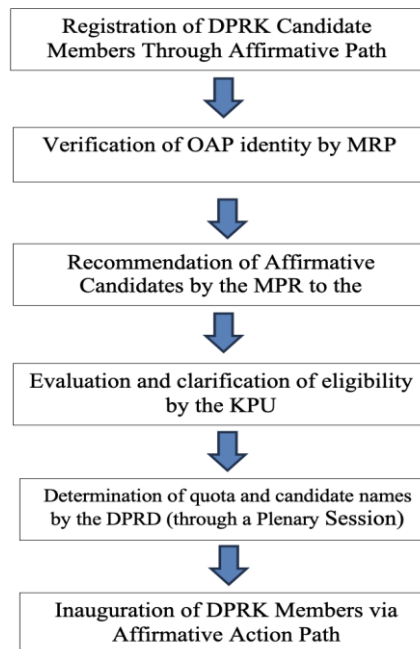


Figure 1. Flow of OAP Affirmative Quota Appointment Mechanism

Source: processed by the author, 2025

Structural and Cultural Challenges: Dominance of Non-OAP Elites, Money Politics, and Weak Local Institutional Capacity

Although the affirmative mechanisms under the framework of Special Autonomy have opened avenues for the political representation of Indigenous Papuans (OAP), local political dynamics in Southwest Papua Province remain heavily influenced by structural and cultural barriers that undermine the effectiveness of such representation. One of the most prominent obstacles is the dominance of non-OAP elites within local power structures. This has led to the concentration of control over strategic decisions in the hands of groups with stronger social and economic capital, as conceptualized by (Bourdieu, 1986).

Although OAP have gained formal representation within institutions such as the Regional People's Representative Council (DPRK), decision-making power remains largely concentrated in the hands of actors who possess political networks and financial resources from outside the region. Several informants noted that OAP representation often remains symbolic, while substantive power continues to be reproduced by those with access to national economic-political networks. A statement by an indigenous leader from Sorong Regency, which highlighted that

major decisions are still controlled by external groups, underscores the persistent imbalance in the distribution of power.

This analysis aligns with Pierre Bourdieu's theory, which emphasizes that social capital and economic capital are primary instruments for maintaining dominance within social and political spaces. In the context of Papua, non-OAP actors who possess both forms of capital are able to secure strategic positions, even amidst affirmative policies intended to promote representational justice. Representation quotas, therefore, do not automatically challenge entrenched power relations. Instead, they often serve as a normative layer masking the continuation of subtle exclusion. This problem is further exacerbated by practices of money politics and elite co-optation. In legislative candidate selection processes and electoral campaigns, financial power frequently becomes the decisive factor—overshadowing criteria such as integrity, track record, and connection to indigenous communities. A local election activist reported that many OAP candidates are unable to compete due to limited campaign funding, even before entering the formal political arena. This illustrates how transactional politics systematically undermines the effectiveness of affirmative policies and creates structural barriers for committed and capable OAP cadres who lack economic access.

Moreover, limited institutional capacity poses a serious challenge to fostering inclusive and deliberative representation (Hoppe, 2011; Rummens, 2012; Setälä, 2017). Local political institutions such as the DPRK and political parties have not yet fully performed their strategic roles in cadre recruitment, budget oversight, or development planning. In many cases, OAP legislators lack adequate training to carry out their duties effectively. An NGO staff member in Sorong described how low political literacy and insufficient technical training have resulted in many DPRK members being unable to read budgets or actively voice the concerns of their communities. From the perspective of collaborative governance (Ansell & Gash, 2008), this condition reflects a failure to build both institutional capacity and trust among actors—two essential prerequisites for equitable political collaboration. The poor quality of human resources, weak technical support, and systemic exclusion of local actors constitute major obstacles to realizing genuinely inclusive governance in Papua. Therefore, reform efforts must address not only the quantitative aspects of representation but also the systemic restructuring of political and institutional frameworks that underpin local democracy.

Within this situation, the prevailing control of non-OAP (indigenous Papuan) elites, combined with the fragility of local political institutions and the widespread practice of money politics, has created a layered system of exclusion that undermines the quality and effectiveness of political representation for OAP communities, even though affirmative action policies are in place. As a result, meaningful institutional reforms, efforts to strengthen political capacity, and the establishment of safeguards to ensure fair and transparent political processes are crucial steps that must be taken to build a more inclusive, substantive, and equitable model of local democracy.

OAP Communities and Local Democratic Processes: Participation in Elections and Development Planning, Aspirations for Sovereignty and Justice

The participation of Indigenous Papuans (OAP) in local democracy in Southwest Papua reflects a persistent dilemma between formal engagement and substantive exclusion. On the one hand, OAP involvement in elections and development planning forums such as Development Planning Meetings demonstrates procedural participation that aligns with democratic norms.

However, field data reveal that such participation often does not translate into meaningful influence over public decision-making.

Field findings reveal that the involvement of *Orang Asli Papua* (OAP) in development planning forums, such as *Musrenbang* (Development Planning Deliberation Forums), remains largely formal and has yet to provide substantive influence over regional development priorities. A village head from a coastal area noted that although OAP communities participate in such forums, their proposals are often excluded from the district's priority agenda. This indicates a clear imbalance in bargaining power and influence, where OAP representation in planning mechanisms is procedural rather than meaningful, and fails to impact the actual allocation of resources. This condition aligns with Hanna Pitkin's concept of substantive representation (2023), which distinguishes between symbolic presence and the actual ability of representatives to advocate for the interests of the group they represent. In the Papuan context, OAP participation in formal forums does not necessarily translate into real influence in development decision-making.

Public ambivalence toward electoral participation further reinforces this paradox. While some citizens view elections as a normative obligation, others display deep political apathy, stemming from a lack of trust in the outcomes of electoral democracy. This phenomenon resonates with Robert Putnam's theory (1994), which posits that the effectiveness of civic participation is largely determined by the quality of public institutions and the level of social trust. When institutions are perceived as unresponsive or incapable of channeling indigenous aspirations, public participation tends to decline or becomes ritualistic—devoid of substantive political meaning.

Moreover, the voices of younger OAP generations reflect a growing political consciousness centered on identity, distributive justice, and demands for political recognition. These youth are not merely asking to be acknowledged as citizens, but as landowners and political subjects who form an integral part of Papua's social history. A young person from Sorong City stated that democracy should provide a space to speak, not just a ballot box. This illustrates that procedural electoral participation alone is insufficient to meet the needs of a democracy that is inclusive of historical and cultural dimensions. From this perspective, local democracy in Southwest Papua has yet to fully embody the principles of social and political justice. OAP representation and participation remain overshadowed by bureaucratic formalities and have not been able to accommodate the collective aspirations rooted in a history of marginalization. Therefore, a reconstruction of political participation models is urgently needed—one that is both contextual and transformative. Such a model must account for the legacy of internal colonialism, the intersecting dynamics of ethnic and economic power, and the demands for cultural sovereignty and land rights that define indigenous identity.

Evaluating the Implementation of Special Autonomy in Ensuring Political Representation: The Role of the Papuan People's Assembly (MRP) and the Impact of the Special Autonomy Law Revision

Two decades after the implementation of Special Autonomy and following its revision through Law No. 2 of 2021, there is an urgent need to evaluate the effectiveness of affirmative policies in ensuring the political representation of Indigenous Papuans (OAP). Normatively, the revised special autonomy law strengthens affirmative action through the allocation of reserved seats for OAP in the Provincial and District/City Legislative Councils (DPRP/DPRK), and through

the strategic role of the Papuan People's Assembly (MRP) as a cultural institution mandated to provide input on policies concerning Indigenous Papuan communities.

However, field observations indicate a significant gap between policy design and political practice at the local level. A local activist in Sorong remarked:

The revision of the special autonomy policy in Papua had given hope that there would be a strengthening of the role of representative institutions such as the Papuan People's Assembly (MRP). However, field findings show that in practice, the involvement of the MRP is still not substantive. A number of informants revealed that although formally the MRP has an important mandate in the special autonomy government structure, in reality this institution is rarely involved meaningfully in strategic processes. Many major political decisions remain controlled by elites outside the OAP representation structure, reinforcing the impression that substantive power still lies in the hands of dominant groups outside the indigenous community.

This situation reflects the weak position of the MRP as an effective political actor, and can be analyzed through Hanna Pitkin's (2023) theory of political representation. Pitkin distinguishes between formal or symbolic representation, namely the presence of individuals or groups in official institutions without the capacity to influence substantive decisions, and substantive representation, namely when representation is actually used to fight for the collective interests of the represented group. In the context of Southwest Papua, the presence of the MRP and the fulfillment of the OAP quota in the DPRK or DPRP reflect more of a form of symbolic representation. Formal procedures have been implemented, but the substance of influence on public policy is still minimal.

Furthermore, this condition is also in line with the concept of misrepresentation put forward by Fraser (2009), within the framework of three dimensions of democratic justice: redistribution, recognition, and representation. In the context of Papua, although redistribution has been carried out through special autonomy funds and there is formal recognition of the cultural identity of the OAP, the dimension of political representation has not been running fairly. OAP still experience structural obstacles to playing a role as an active subject in decision-making that impacts their own community.

Conclusion

This study reveals that political affirmation through special autonomy in Southwest Papua, while providing a normative framework for the representation of Indigenous Papuans (OAP), has yet to yield substantive political representation. The quota mechanism in the District/City Legislative Councils (DPRK) and the role of the Papuan People's Assembly (MRP) are often reduced to procedural formalities, while the dominance of non-OAP elites, money politics, and weak political cadre development continue to reproduce structural inequalities within the local power arena.

Theoretically, this study affirms the importance of distinguishing between formal and substantive representation (Pitkin, 2023), and highlights how social and economic capital (Bourdieu, 1986) reconfigure the distribution of power even amidst affirmative policies. In the Papuan context—deeply marked by cultural identity and a history of internal colonialism—symbolic representation without political bargaining power serves only to deepen the alienation and disillusionment of Indigenous communities toward local democracy. These findings also extend the application of theories of distributive justice and recognition (Fraser, 2009) by

emphasizing that political justice cannot be achieved without institutional restructuring and meaningful recognition of Indigenous political agency.

The primary contribution of this study is its conceptual framework that links political affirmation to postcolonial representational dynamics in a localized context. From a policy perspective, the findings assert that quota-based affirmative action is insufficient without accompanying reforms in party recruitment systems, the strengthening of customary institutions, and effective oversight against elite co-optation. In the long term, local democracy in Papua requires a contextual, culturally grounded approach that creates space for alternative forms of representation beyond the formal structures of the state.

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