



# Populism and the Prospects of Local Democratic Consolidation: A Study of Dedi Mulyadi's Populist Politics in West Java from the Perspective of Democratic Theory

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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received:

Revised:

Accepted:

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## ABSTRACT

Post-reform Indonesian democracy has demonstrated procedural stability through regular elections, yet it continues to face serious challenges regarding the quality of substantive democracy, particularly at the local level. One of the major challenges is the strengthening of populist political strategies that are capable of increasing public participation and sympathy, while simultaneously possessing the potential to weaken deliberative democracy. This article discusses such a dilemma through a study of Dedi Mulyadi's political strategy within the context of local democracy in West Java. The study aims to analyze whether the populist practices employed are capable of strengthening the prospects for local democratic consolidation or instead reproducing democratic regression through the personalization of power and the weakening of democratic institutions. Theoretically, this study employs the frameworks of substantive and deliberative democracy to assess the quality of political participation, as well as populism theory, which views populism as a political strategy based on the dichotomy between the people and the elite, alongside the personalization of leadership. The concept of democratic regression is utilized to explain how

democratic practices may experience decline without eliminating electoral procedures. The research method applied is qualitative with a literature study approach, conducted through the examination and analysis of academic sources, policy documents, as well as secondary data derived from media sources and official reports. The findings indicate that Dedi Mulyadi's political populism has successfully mobilized the political participation of West Java citizens significantly through cultural symbols, emotional proximity, and the utilization of digital media. However, such practices tend to shift local democracy from a space of policy deliberation toward figural politics, thereby weakening accountability, the circulation of power, and the role of democratic institutions. The prospects for the consolidation of local democracy in West Java remain open, but they are highly dependent upon the strengthening of institutions, the quality of citizen participation, and the limitation of the personalization of power within local political practices.

### Keywords:

Local Democracy; Political Populism; Democratic Regression; Political Participation; Dedi Mulyadi

## 1. Introduction

Indonesia's democracy after the 1998 Reformasi has been regarded as procedurally successful due to the implementation of regular, competitive, and relatively peaceful elections over the past two decades. Many studies emphasize that the quality of democracy does not

merely depend on electoral mechanisms, but also on the quality of public deliberation, the strength of oversight institutions, and civil liberties (Lidya & Utama, 2021; Ramadhan, 2023). The phenomenon of procedural stability occurring in Indonesia does not fully reflect the quality of substantive democracy, as indicators of deliberation and institutional accountability have stagnated or declined in recent years.

Global democracy indicators demonstrate symptoms of democratic regression in Indonesia. The liberal democracy index and deliberative democracy index according to the V-Dem Institute show that Indonesia's scores declined during the 2018–2023 period, partly due to the personalization of power, the weakening role of legislative institutions in maintaining checks and balances, and increasing pressure on civil liberties (V-Dem, 2023). National studies also indicate a similar trend, namely the growing dominance of local elite power relations within regional political dynamics, which often marginalize participatory spaces based on public rationality (Prasetya, 2022; Firmansyah, 2021). Such conditions create space for personalistic politics that threaten the quality of substantive democracy.

Local democracy should serve as a testing ground for the quality of Indonesian democracy because, at this level, citizens and leaders interact directly through participatory mechanisms, regional development planning, and public deliberation forums. Demographic data from West Java demonstrate a significant number of voters, as the province is the most populous in Indonesia with more than 48 million inhabitants according to Statistics Indonesia data from 2022. Abundant natural resources, including agriculture, plantations, and local energy potential, make regional economic development highly strategic for public welfare. Such conditions should provide room for deliberative democratic strategies capable of connecting citizens' needs with public policy planning based on data and argument-based participation.

Populism constitutes one of the contemporary political phenomena that disrupts electoral democratic practices. Mudde and Kaltwasser (2017) explain populism as a political logic that frames society within a moral opposition between the “pure people” and the “corrupt elite,” while positioning the leader as the sole representative of the people's will. Populism occurs not only in new democracies but also in established democratic states, as reflected in the phenomenon of populism in the United States during Donald Trump's election (Norris & Inglehart, 2019). National studies on populism within the context of Indonesian local democracy demonstrate a connection between emotional political rhetoric and the decline in the quality of public deliberation alongside the strengthening of personalistic loyalty (Sutrisno & Suryadi, 2022; Hidayat, 2021). Populist demands frequently override substantive policy evaluation in the form of cost-benefit analysis, development program evaluation, and socio-economic welfare indicators.

The practice of populism in West Java can be understood through the symbolic and communicative approaches employed by Dedi Mulyadi. This figure is widely recognized by the people of West Java through his friendly style of communication, the use of the term “Bapak Aing” to position himself as a personal figure close to the people, and his high intensity of engagement on social media. The output of this public narrative became particularly significant when Dedi Mulyadi gained substantial support in the West Java regional election, including majority vote percentages in several regencies/cities and increasing electronic popularity in local surveys released by independent survey institutions in 2023. Such political narratives appear to emphasize emotional closeness rather than issues of infrastructure development, economic equality, or the strengthening of public institutions as the primary substance of policy.

The main dilemma faced by local democracy in West Java is that citizen participation appears high due to emotional mobilization and sympathetic support toward certain political figures, yet such involvement demonstrates limited forms of deliberative participation that emphasize rational argumentation regarding public policy. Substantive democratic values such as community-based empowerment, civil liberties, and the enforcement of social rights instead

experience distortion when political discourse focuses more on the dominance of political figures rather than the quality of public policy. The “Bapak Aing” narrative tends to reduce the complexity of democratic issues into an emotionally personal relationship that replaces the exchange of rational arguments within the public sphere.

Academic criticism of the assumption that popularity and mass participation alone indicate a healthy democracy must be elaborated more sharply. The concept of deliberative democracy emphasizes the importance of evidence-based argumentation, egalitarian public deliberation, and fair circulation of power (Habermas, 1996; Dryzek, 2010). Populism, which places the political figure as the center of legitimacy, instead weakens deliberative processes, creates personalistic loyalties, and obscures the boundaries between political representation and the cult of personality. Democratic regression in this context does not eliminate formal democratic mechanisms but weakens their substantive quality because public choices become more attached to symbolic figures than to rational considerations.

Previous studies on democratic regression and local democracy in Indonesia indicate that democracy may experience decline through the domination of local elites and personalistic loyalty without abolishing formal democratic structures (Prasetyo & Arifin, 2020; Haryanto, 2022). Other studies demonstrate that populism in the local sphere has the potential to reduce citizens’ capacity to exercise social control over public policy (Anwar & Malik, 2023). Meanwhile, research on deliberative democracy emphasizes that the quality of democracy is measured not merely by participation itself but by the quality of citizen interaction within the public sphere (Nasution & Yulianti, 2021; Firdaus, 2023). These findings indicate that discourse regarding populism and the quality of local democracy in Indonesia still requires sharp and contextual empirical study.

This study offers novelty by positioning local populism as a potential mechanism of substantive democratic regression. The focus of the study is not merely on the popularity of political figures but on how such populist rhetoric becomes an obstacle to deliberative democratic practices, including in public policy formulation, citizen involvement in formal forums, and sustainable development priorities. The primary research question addressed is whether Dedi Mulyadi’s political strategy strengthens the prospects of deliberative democracy at the local level or instead reproduces democratic regression within the practice of local democracy in West Java.

## 2. Literature Review

### The Prospects of Democratic Consolidation and Democratic Regression

Conceptually, democracy is understood as a system of government that places political sovereignty in the hands of citizens through mechanisms of participation, competition, and accountability of power. The minimal definition of democracy emphasizes free and fair elections as the means for the circulation of political power (Schumpeter, 1942). This approach was later criticized for being reductionist because it only portrays democracy from a procedural perspective without considering substantive qualities such as civil liberties, political equality, and control over power.

The substantive approach asserts that a high-quality democracy requires the protection of civil rights, the rule of law, and effective accountability of power (Dahl, 1989). Diamond and Morlino (2005) emphasize that democracy is not measured solely through electoral participation, but also by the extent to which institutions are able to guarantee governmental responsiveness and provide meaningful spaces for participation. This perspective views

democracy as a continuously evolving process rather than a condition completed once elections are held.

Recent developments indicate that many electoral democracies have experienced declining democratic quality without abolishing their formal institutions. This phenomenon is known as democratic regression, which occurs gradually through the weakening of oversight institutions, restrictions on civil liberties, and the concentration of power among political elites (Bermeo, 2016; Waldner & Lust, 2018). The Indonesian context demonstrates a similar pattern, in which procedural democracy persists while deliberative practices and control over power continue to weaken, including at the level of local democracy, which should serve as the foundation for democratic deepening (Mietzner, 2020; Aspinall & Berenschot, 2019).

### **Political Populism**

Populism constitutes a central concept in contemporary political studies and is generally understood as a thin-centered ideology that frames politics within a moral dichotomy between “the people” and “the elite,” while claiming that the will of the people should become the sole basis of political legitimacy (Mudde, 2004). This framework simplifies the complexity of democracy by rejecting pluralism and reducing politics into antagonistic relations that are personal and emotional in nature.

Populism maintains an ambivalent relationship with democracy. Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2017) assert that populism does not always reject electoral democracy; however, it possesses inherent tensions with liberal democracy because it rejects limitations on power and mechanisms of checks and balances. Claims of direct representation by populist leaders tend to weaken the role of intermediary institutions such as political parties, parliaments, and deliberative mechanisms that constitute the pillars of substantive democracy.

As a political strategy, populism operates through the personalization of leadership, emotional mobilization, and the creation of symbolic closeness between leaders and citizens. Moffitt (2016) emphasizes that populism functions as a political performance that utilizes crisis narratives and media to strengthen the image of the leader as the sole representative of the people. At the local level, populist strategies are often paternalistic and figure-centered, capable of increasing popularity and electoral participation, yet potentially shifting democracy from an arena of policy deliberation toward a politics of affection and the cult of personality, thereby opening space for local democratic regression (Törnquist et al., 2020; Pappas, 2019).

### **3. Research Method**

This study employs a qualitative method with a literature study approach to analyze the relationship between populism and the prospects of local democracy within the context of Dedi Mulyadi’s political strategy in West Java. The qualitative approach was selected because it is capable of exploring meanings, processes, and socio-political constructions that cannot be explained solely through quantitative measurement (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The literature study was utilized as the primary data collection strategy through a systematic review of academic sources, including books, nationally and internationally reputable journal articles, reports from democracy-related institutions, and policy documents relevant to the issues of local democracy, populism, and democratic regression. Sources were selected purposively by considering theoretical relevance, academic credibility, and publication recency in order to ensure the sharpness and validity of the conceptual analysis (Hart, 2018).

In addition to academic literature, data collection was also conducted through internet-based observation to capture populist political practices occurring within the digital public sphere. This observation included the examination of online media content, social media, and

mass media coverage representing Dedi Mulyadi's political communication style, symbolism, and populist narratives. The online observation approach is considered relevant given that contemporary populism is highly dependent upon media mediation and the logic of virality in constructing emotional closeness between leaders and citizens (Moffitt, 2016; Tapsell, 2017). The collected data were subsequently analyzed using thematic analysis by linking empirical findings to the theoretical frameworks of democracy, democratic regression, and populism. The analytical process was conducted interpretatively and reflectively to identify patterns of power personalization, political mobilization strategies, and their implications for the weakening of deliberative democracy at the local level (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018).

## 4. Results and Discussion

### Dedi Mulyadi's Political Populism

Political populism within the context of Indonesian local democracy finds its concrete expression through the figure of Dedi Mulyadi. He represents a populist leadership style grounded in symbolic closeness with the people, the utilization of Sundanese cultural identity, and anti-elite narratives packaged through everyday language. The populism literature categorizes such patterns as political strategies that construct a moral dichotomy between the "ordinary people" and the "established elite," while simultaneously positioning the leader as the personification of the people's will itself (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017; Norris & Inglehart, 2019).

Dedi Mulyadi's populist strategy is strongly reflected through the use of symbols, gestures, and non-formal language deliberately produced to construct an image of authenticity. The term "Bapak Aing" represents the most prominent example of political personalization that positions the leader as both an emotional and cultural representation of the people of West Java. This slogan functions as a tool of affective political articulation that negates the distance between leader and citizens, yet at the same time potentially shifts public policy discourse away from substantive issues toward personal loyalty. This phenomenon aligns with Moffitt's (2020) findings, which assert that contemporary populism operates more through performativity and emotion than through policy rationality.

As the most populous province in Indonesia, West Java possesses strategic significance within the landscape of local democracy. Data from Statistics Indonesia indicate that the population of West Java has surpassed 49 million inhabitants, supported by natural resources, industrial bases, and rapidly developing urban areas. These conditions make West Java a complex and heterogeneous political arena that is vulnerable to populist mobilization based on identity and collective emotion (BPS, 2024). Dedi Mulyadi's popularity within both digital public spaces and electoral politics reflects the success of populist strategies in reaching voter segments across social classes.

Dedi Mulyadi's vote acquisition in various local political contests demonstrates a significant level of electoral support, particularly in rural areas and peripheral regions. The high level of voter participation within his support base reflects an effective capacity for political mobilization through narratives of closeness and moral representation of ordinary people. The literature on local democracy notes that such populism often increases short-term political participation, yet simultaneously contains the risk of weakening democratic institutions in the long term (Aspinall & Berenschot, 2019; Hadiz, 2020).

Dedi Mulyadi's political populism is also supported by the optimization of social media as a medium for direct communication with citizens. Visual content displaying spontaneous interactions, criticism of bureaucracy, and symbols of alignment with ordinary people

reinforces the anti-elite image that characterizes populism. This pattern strengthens the thesis that digital populism is capable of expanding the reach of personalistic politics while simultaneously marginalizing the role of formal democratic institutions such as political parties and parliaments (Gerbaudo, 2021).

The dominance of the “Bapak Aing” narrative within the public sphere demonstrates how symbolic politics can overshadow substantive discourse regarding the direction of West Java’s development. Structural issues such as regional inequality, natural resource governance, public service quality, and local democratic consolidation are frequently submerged beneath the popularity of political figures. This condition reinforces the argument that populism has the potential to regress democratic quality when personal loyalty is prioritized over policy accountability (Diamond, 2020).

Ultimately, Dedi Mulyadi’s populism must be understood as an ambivalent phenomenon within local democracy. On the one hand, it expands political participation and strengthens the connection between leaders and citizens. On the other hand, it presents risks of power personalization, the weakening of democratic institutions, and the reduction of politics into emotional relations. This framework positions populism not merely as a leadership style, but as a serious challenge to the prospects of local democratic consolidation in West Java.

### **The Prospects of Local Democratic Consolidation in West Java**

Local democracy in Indonesia has developed alongside the strengthening of decentralization after the Reformasi era, particularly through the direct election of regional leaders. This mechanism opens spaces for citizen political participation while bringing public decision-making processes closer to the local level. West Java occupies a strategic position within this dynamic because it is the province with the largest population, a high level of urbanization, and layered socio-economic complexities. These conditions make West Java an important arena for assessing whether local democracy is moving toward consolidation or instead becoming trapped in regression.

Several regional leaders in West Java were elected through relatively competitive democratic processes and demonstrate indications of procedural democratic maturation. Ridwan Kamil, for example, obtained strong electoral legitimacy through narratives of innovation, urban governance, and intensive public communication during his tenure as Mayor of Bandung before being elected Governor of West Java. Dedi Mulyadi built a broad support base through politics of closeness, local cultural symbols, and populist leadership narratives that resonated with grassroots communities. Other figures such as Bima Arya in Bogor City and Ade Yasin in Bogor Regency also reflect patterns of local leaders emerging from open and participatory electoral competition. This phenomenon confirms that electoral democracy in West Java has undergone institutionalization at the procedural level.

Such procedural democratic maturation is reflected in increasing public acceptance of regional elections as mechanisms of political legitimacy, relatively stable voter participation, and the role of media in shaping the arena of local political competition. From the perspective of democratic consolidation, these conditions indicate that the rules of electoral competition have been widely accepted by both political actors and citizens (Diamond, 1999). However, acceptance of procedures does not automatically correspond to the deepening of substantive democracy.

The vulnerability of local democratic regression in West Java emerges from several structural and cultural factors. A paternalistic political culture remains strong, marked by the tendency of citizens to place their hopes in charismatic leaders rather than institutions. Political relations based on personal closeness are more dominant than rational evaluations of governmental policies and performance. This situation creates broad space for the

personalization of power, weakens control mechanisms, and shifts democracy from an arena of policy deliberation toward figure-centered politics (Aspinall & Berenschot, 2019).

The uneven quality of human resources and welfare levels across regions in West Java further intensifies such vulnerabilities. Areas characterized by poverty, unemployment, and limited access to education tend to be more susceptible to short-term political transactional practices. Money politics, patronage, and the distribution of electoral assistance remain effective strategies for vote mobilization in several regency and municipal elections. Such practices not only damage the principle of political equality, but also reinforce cycles of clientelism that hinder democratic consolidation (Hadiz, 2020).

Local democratic regression is also reflected in the weakening function of regional representative institutions. Regional legislatures (DPRD) often occupy subordinate positions vis-à-vis regional leaders who possess strong electoral legitimacy and high popularity. This condition creates imbalances in power relations and limits mechanisms of checks and balances. Democracy continues to operate formally, yet the quality of accountability and policy deliberation experiences decline, in line with patterns of gradual and legalistic democratic backsliding (Bermeo, 2016).

The prospects of local democratic consolidation in West Java depend upon the ability to overcome tensions between high electoral participation and the quality of substantive democracy. Consolidation cannot merely be measured through the continuity of regional elections, but also through institutional strengthening, the internalization of democratic values, and citizens' capacity to monitor power. Civic political education must be directed toward enhancing policy literacy and awareness of political rights, rather than merely mobilizing votes during elections. Strengthening local civil society becomes an important prerequisite for balancing the dominance of regional political figures.

In the future, local democracy in West Java has the opportunity to consolidate if it is capable of shifting political orientation from figures toward institutions, from emotional loyalty toward rational evaluation, and from short-term transactions toward long-term accountability. Without such improvements, local democracy risks stagnating at the level of electoral procedures while continuously experiencing substantive erosion. Thus, West Java represents a concrete example that democratic consolidation is not merely a matter of sustaining elections, but rather an ongoing struggle to preserve the quality, depth, and direction of local democracy itself.

### **Between Political Participation and Democratic Regression**

Political participation is often understood as a central indicator of democratic health, reflecting citizen involvement in political processes through elections and electoral contestation. High levels of participation are frequently associated with regime legitimacy and citizens' control over power. In the case of West Java, voter participation in the 2024 regional election reached approximately 68.06 percent of the total Permanent Voter List (DPT) of 35,925,960 people, or around 22,638,168 voters who exercised their voting rights (KPU West Java, 2024). This figure demonstrates active political engagement; however, when compared with previous periods in which participation rates reached approximately 70.3 percent during the 2018 regional election, there are indications of fluctuation that require deeper examination in understanding the dynamics of local democracy.

The deliberative perspective emphasizes that ideal political participation should not merely be quantitative, but should involve citizens in reflective discourse regarding public policy, accountability mechanisms, and the rational formation of collective interests (Habermas, 1996). Such participation requires dialogical spaces that enable citizens to critically consider policies, rather than merely expressing figural preferences toward particular

individuals. The phenomenon emerging in West Java demonstrates that high participation does not always lead to the quality of deliberative democracy, but is often automated through figural mechanisms that strengthen the relationship between personal image and citizens' emotional loyalty toward leaders.

Dedi Mulyadi represents a contemporary example of how political participation can become connected with figural mobilization. The electability of the Dedi Mulyadi–Erwan Setiawan pair in the 2024 West Java gubernatorial election demonstrated exceptionally high numbers, reaching approximately 75.7 percent according to an October 2024 survey by Indikator Politik Indonesia. Other data also recorded significant gains based on quick count results from the 2024 regional election, in which the pair obtained approximately 62.19 percent of votes from around 97 percent of counted ballots. This trend was supported by other surveys indicating that Dedi Mulyadi's electability had dramatically increased to 40.7 percent in an earlier survey, rising from 22.3 percent previously. Furthermore, his digital popularity base demonstrated considerable impact: according to recent reports, Dedi Mulyadi possesses millions of followers across various social media platforms, including more than 7.7 million on YouTube, alongside millions more on Facebook and TikTok.

Political mobilization through political figures and social media frequently generates what may be termed figural fanaticism, namely a form of participation that prioritizes emotional support for political leaders over involvement in the rational formulation of public policy. Such participation reflects citizens' tendency to connect affectively with certain leaders, while deliberative functions in the form of policy discourse, program evaluation, or constructive criticism become less dominant. This weakness indicates that high political participation does not automatically lead to the strengthening of substantive democracy at the local level.

Democratic regression may occur when public participation is directed by the logic of image-making and loyalty to political figures, causing citizens to focus more on personal representation rather than substantive issues such as governmental transparency, resource management, and equitable welfare distribution. This phenomenon is important to understand because populism frequently exploits citizens' dissatisfaction or hopes for change, then translates them into support for charismatic figures who promise images of closeness and rapid solutions without strong mechanisms of policy reasoning.

Deliberative democracy requires not only the presence of citizens in elections, but also their critical involvement in complex decision-making processes, including evaluating programs, questioning policies, and voicing alternatives based on data and rational argumentation. When public participation is driven more by affective rather than argumentative factors, there exists a risk of substantive democratic regression even though democracy procedurally continues to function normally. This constitutes an important dilemma in West Java, where voter enthusiasm remains high while the quality of participation reflecting critical thought regarding development agendas still requires strengthening.

Reflection upon these conditions demonstrates that political participation must be viewed more contextually: whether citizens are active due to deliberative aspects, namely the exchange of information, reflection upon policies, and social control over government, or rather because of emotional attachments and loyalty toward populist figures. Understanding this distinction becomes crucial in assessing whether political participation in West Java genuinely strengthens local democracy or instead becomes part of a subtle yet systematic process of democratic regression.

## **5. Conclusion**

Local democracy in West Java demonstrates a complex dynamic between the strengthening of political participation and tendencies toward the decline of substantive democracy. The populist political strategies employed by figures such as Dedi Mulyadi have

successfully activated broad citizen engagement through symbolic closeness, cultural narratives, and intensive political communication, thereby presenting a form of democracy that appears vibrant and responsive. However, the discussion indicates that such increases in participation are not always aligned with the strengthening of democratic quality, as public attention becomes more concentrated on political figures than on policy programs, institutional accountability, and deliberative decision-making processes. This condition encourages the personalization of power, strengthens figural loyalty, and weakens mechanisms of control and leadership circulation that constitute the foundations of democracy. Thus, populism within the context of local democracy can function as an effective means of political mobilization, while simultaneously possessing the potential to reproduce democratic regression if not balanced by institutional strengthening, civic political education, and the institutionalization of deliberative spaces that guarantee political equality and freedom on a sustainable basis.

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