

# Decentralization and Regional Autonomy: A Historical and Conceptual Review

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## Abstract

The implementation of decentralization and regional autonomy in Indonesia still faces various challenges, although it has experienced significant developments. Various laws and government policies have been implemented to strengthen regional governance and improve community welfare. However, in practice, there are still obstacles in implementing these policies, such as the imbalance of authority between the central and regional governments and problems in resource management. Along with the dynamics of change from the Old Order era to the Reformation Era, decentralization continues to undergo adjustments to be more effective. Therefore, this study seeks to provide a deeper understanding of the development of decentralization and regional autonomy in Indonesia and to be a reference for improving future policies.

**Keywords:** Decentralization, Regional Autonomy, Regional Government, Reformation.



## A. INTRODUCTION

Indonesia has gone through a difficult historical journey in managing its regional government system. In the early Dutch colonial period, a centralized government with strong central authority was built. However, the paradigm has changed since the era of independence, when the determination to form a unitary state emerged. In the Old Order era, the formation of special regions marked the beginning of recognition of cultural diversity, but central control remained dominant (Nurrochmat, 2021). Indonesia experienced significant political changes in the Reformation era in 1998, which was marked by changes to the constitution and the ratification of Law Number 22 of 1999. This law provided greater decentralization and autonomy to regional governments, allowing them to manage government affairs more independently. Previously, in the New Order era, the decentralization policy had been established through a 1974 regulation. However, these changes did not result in significant autonomy for the regions, because the central government still had dominant control (Houten, 2021).

Revisions to laws such as Law Number 32 of 2004 and Law Number 23 of 2014 demonstrate the Indonesian government's commitment to addressing the challenges of decentralization. Through these changes, the government seeks to adapt policies to developments and needs in the regions. This step also reflects ongoing efforts to strengthen regional autonomy and improve the effectiveness of local government. Indonesia is still in the process of decentralization, which means that the country continues to adapt and innovate in managing local government (Rompuy, 2021). To understand the decentralization process in Indonesia, we need to trace its history in

its entirety, including policy changes, the difficulties faced, and its impact on local and national development and political dynamics (Jaelani, 2020).

## **B. LITERATURE REVIEW**

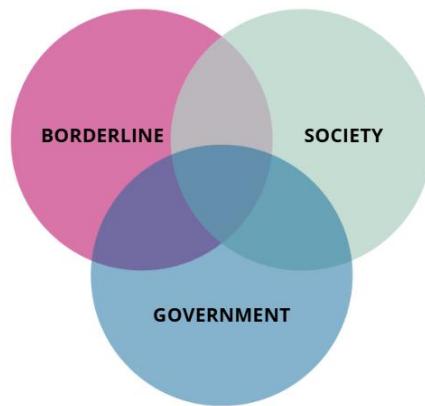
### **1. Decentralization**

The autonomy system can help the government improve people's welfare by dividing government responsibilities from the center to the regions. Autonomy gives authority and policies to local governments to manage government affairs according to local needs. This is expected to increase the efficiency, responsiveness, and accountability of government at the regional level, as well as support economic growth and community empowerment (Legler, 2020).

Decentralization is the process of transferring government responsibilities to regions that are autonomous from the central government. The central government divides its power to lower government entities in the regional hierarchy. The 1945 Constitution divides government affairs into two types: absolute government affairs held by the center, and concurrent government affairs divided between the center, provinces, and districts/cities (Bonal, 2023).

To ensure the rights of the community, Minimum Service Standards (SPM) are created to guarantee the implementation of mandatory government tasks related to basic services. In its implementation, government tasks are transferred from the central government or upper-level regional governments to lower-level regional governments, so that they become the responsibility of the regional government. These government affairs include mandatory and optional affairs that are divided between the central, provincial, and district/city governments. Thus, decentralization focuses on the implementation of local government tasks by local government apparatus, which are funded by the Regional Revenue and Expenditure Budget (APBD) (Anthias, 2022; Baier, 2020; Radiansyah, 2020).

Indonesia, the regional autonomy system gives authority to local governments to manage various local issues with the aim of improving welfare, development, and public services. Regional autonomy is part of the decentralization policy that gives freedom to local governments to manage regional potential and finances in order to improve the economy and public welfare. Through decentralization, local governments can also work together with the community and the private sector in various fields, thereby encouraging sustainable regional development and increasing regional competitiveness. The main objective of decentralization is to achieve national political stability through political participation at the regional level, as well as ensuring effective and efficient economic development. Thus, decentralization plays an important role in creating a more responsive, effective, and democratic government at the local level, although there are still various challenges in its implementation (Mega Christia & Ispriyarno, 2019; Pujiati, 2020; Reuchamps, 2021).



**Figure 1. Elements in Autonomous Government**

Source: STIPAN (2024)

The implementation of regional autonomy has a broad scope, both theoretically and practically, so that it can create a strong public participation space and have a positive impact. An example can be seen in Germany, where the concept of local autonomy is called "*kommunale Selbstverwaltung*" and is recognized as the fourth force in the division of power. German local autonomy is not formed from the state, but rather moves naturally and is recognized as a local entity with the authority to implement regulations (Josa, 2021; Nugraha, 2024).

#### Theory of State Constitution

The Nusantara Constitutional Theory offers a historical perspective that explores past constitutional values and their relevance in the life of the nation and state today. This theory has nine main dimensions that reflect aspects of community habits, living law, the power of leaders, the constitution of the kingdom, territoriality, government structure, legality of consensus, state regulation, and value transformation (Keuffer, 2021; Soloviov, 2022; Sudrajat et al., 2024).

The first dimension, people's habits, shows that the practices and traditions of the Nusantara community have long been the basis for building good governance. Positive habits in social life can be an example in building a healthy and transparent political culture. Furthermore, living law emphasizes that the constitution in Nusantara society is not only written, but also manifested in customs and traditions that have binding legal force. This shows that the legal system in Indonesia must take into account local values that have long developed in society (Sudrajat et al., 2024; Tanjung, 2021).

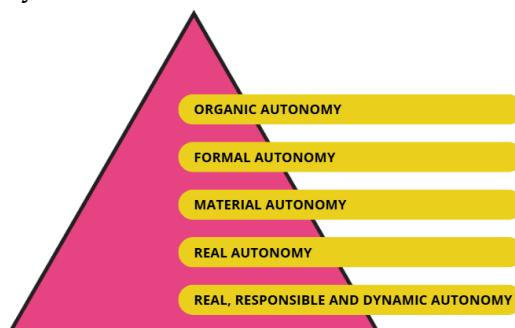
The third dimension, power of king or the power of the leader, emphasizes the importance of the role of the leader in forming an effective government. Although the concept of the kingdom is different from the current democratic system, the values of strong leadership, integrity, and orientation towards the interests of the people remain the essence of good governance. Furthermore, the royal constitution or the constitution of the kingdom highlights the diversity of laws that apply during the kingdom era in the archipelago, such as the Simbur Cahaya Law Book in Palembang and the Kutaramanawa Dharmasastra in Majapahit, which can be a reference in the development of national law (Amat, 2021; Mukhlis, 2024; Sudrajat et al., 2024).

In terms of territoriality, archipelago territory emphasizes that good governance must start from strong regional government, because effective governance at the local level will strengthen national stability. This is in line with the concept of regional autonomy in the current Indonesian government system. Meanwhile, the kingdom structure emphasizes that strengthening a democratic and law-based government system is an important foundation in creating good governance (Pahrudin, 2021; Potiker, 2023).

The next dimension, consensus legality, highlights the importance of agreement between the government and the people in running a transparent and accountable government. The government must act based on applicable laws and regulations, while the people must have a commitment to support policies that aim for the common good. In this context, state regulation plays a role in affirming the supremacy of law and ensuring that every policy made is in line with the principles of the rule of law (Negoro, 2020; Palullungan, 2023).

The last dimension, value transformation, emphasizes the importance of learning from Nusantara state practices that can be applied in a modern context. An example is the concept of regional autonomy that has been known since the Majapahit era, such as the granting of land to Sunan Ampel as a form of special autonomy. This value transformation shows that an inclusive and local wisdom-based government system can be the foundation for strengthening good governance in Indonesia (Geofrey, 2021; Wijayanto, 2023).

Overall, the theory of the Nusantara Constitution provides a perspective that good governance does not only depend on a modern legal system, but also on traditional values that have been tested in the history of the Nusantara. By understanding and adopting relevant principles, Indonesia can develop a more responsive government system.



**Figure 2. Types of Regional Autonomy**

*Source: STIPAN (2024)*

## 2. Development Administration Theory

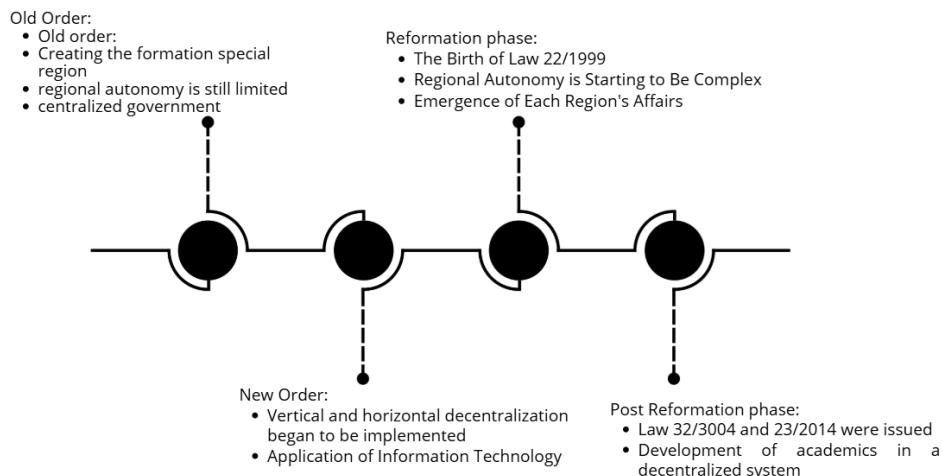
Sondang P. Siagian (2007) stated that administration and development are two main concepts that shape development administration. Administration is the process of making decisions to achieve goals. Development, on the other hand, is defined as a series of actions undertaken by a nation or state to achieve progress and planned, conscious change, with the ultimate goal of nation-building and attaining modernity.

Development administration has two main functions, according to Bintoro Tjokrohamidjojo (Ranjan, 2023). The first is the formulation of policies for improving state administration, which includes aspects such as organization, institutions, personnel management, procedures, and administrative facilities. The second function is the enhancement of administration to support the formulation of policies and development programs while ensuring their effective implementation. This function is referred to as the administration of the development process. Development administration has several distinctive characteristics (Lægreid, 2011; Suriadi et al., 2023):

- a. Administration that supports development.
- b. The role of administrators as development agents.
- c. The government's role and function in development.
- d. The advancement of knowledge and the implementation of development planning.
- e. Development administration still follows the principles of public administration but with more advanced and innovative characteristics.

There are two main functions of development administration. The first is "administrative development," which includes organizational improvement, institutional development, personnel development, work arrangement, and management of administrative facilities. The second is "development administration," which includes policy formulation, development programs, and their effective implementation in various sectors. According to Suminta and Anggara, several factors influence development administration in each country (Anggara & Sumantri, 2016):

- a. Political factors: Political stability is a crucial prerequisite for development.
- b. Economic factors: Economic development is a top priority for developing countries.
- c. Socio-cultural factors: Social and cultural foundations, motivation, and awareness of change influence the development process.
- d. Scientific, technological, and environmental factors: The development process is influenced by science, technology, and natural resources.
- e. Institutional factors: The establishment of institutions that support the development process is essential.



**Figure 3. Timeline of Regional Autonomy in Indonesia**

*Source: by writer (2025)*

### C. METHODS

In this paper, a literacy study approach is used which involves investigation, analysis, and in-depth understanding of literature relevant to the topic or problem discussed. This approach includes comprehensive research on various written sources, such as articles, books, scientific papers, and other reading materials related to the subject of this paper (Hardani, 2020).

### D. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

#### 1. Old Order

After its independence was declared on August 17, 1945, Indonesia adopted the 1945 Provisional Constitution, which emphasized the principle of a unitary state while opening up opportunities for the development of the concept of regional autonomy. In 1950, the government established special regions such as Aceh and Yogyakarta. Although the decentralization system has not been fully implemented, this step reflects the government's efforts to recognize diversity and provide special authority to certain regions (Andari, 2021).

During the Old Order, although the government recognized cultural diversity by establishing special regions such as Aceh and Yogyakarta, government control remained centralized, so the concept of decentralization had not been fully implemented. Several changes in the system of government and regional management did occur in the 1950s to early 1960s, but overall, this era has not fully implemented regional autonomy substantially. However, there were several steps that led to the recognition of diversity and the formation of special regions (Andari, 2021).

During the Old Order era, Indonesia made a second amendment to the 1945 Constitution in 1950. Although it maintained the principle of a unitary state, this amendment paved the way for the formation of special regions and became the basis for the implementation of the concept of regional autonomy. The government then established several special regions, such as Aceh and Yogyakarta, as an effort to accommodate the diversity of culture, religion, and customs in Indonesia.

These special regions received additional authority and special rights in the aspects of religion, customs, and local government. For example, Yogyakarta had special rights in the appointment of governors which were carried out directly by the Sultan. The formation of special regions during the Old Order era showed the government's recognition of the diversity of ethnicities, cultures, and religions in Indonesia. This step was intended to maintain stability and harmony between community groups (Jalil, 2020; Kohar, 2020).

However, although several regions were given special status, regional autonomy was still limited. Strategic decisions and major policies remained controlled by the central government. In addition, the management of national resources was still under the control of the central government centered in Jakarta. The Old Order era was the beginning of the recognition of diversity and the formation of special regions in Indonesia. However, the concept of decentralization and regional autonomy only developed further in subsequent periods, especially after the political upheaval and reform in 1998 (Jalil, 2020).

## 2. New Order

The New Order era marked the end of the Soekarno regime and the beginning of the Soeharto regime. This transition was marked by various important events at the national level, such as the 30 September Movement in 1965, the issuance of Supersemar (Letter of Command of March 11, 1966), and a wave of student demonstrations in Jakarta and other major cities in Indonesia. Various political, economic, and social events that occurred at that time caused Indonesia to experience a multidimensional crisis, which began with a political crisis due to a spike in inflation of up to 650%. The peak was the decline in public trust in Soekarno, which led to his resignation from power.

After Soeharto came to power, he gradually made improvements in various fields, including social, political, and economic, with different approaches and leadership styles. This reform covered various aspects of life, both at the central and regional levels, with the main principle of restoring the order of national life.

Meanwhile, decentralization politics in the Reform Order era developed dynamically, as seen from the emergence of three laws on regional government, namely Law Number 22 of 1999, Law Number 32 of 2004, and Law Number 23 of 2014. These three laws have a relatively short lifespan and have undergone various revisions through additional laws that changed them on a smaller scale. Based on this, the essence of decentralization politics in the Reform Order era can be compiled as follows.

Decentralization in the Reform Order era experienced high dynamics, causing the regulations that govern it to tend to be short-lived and often change. This has an impact on legal uncertainty and the potential for misunderstanding among regional government administrators.

Implicitly, there is a desire to implement a more balanced decentralization model, both vertically and horizontally. This approach marks a shift from the

paradigm that previously emphasized autonomy in districts/cities. Some indications are the strengthening of the role of the governor as a representative of the central government, the transfer of some authority from districts/cities to provinces, and the increasing role of the DPRD, especially in making regional regulations to carry out regulatory functions.

However, there are indications that democratization in the decentralization process is actually shifting towards plutocracy. This is indicated by the dominance of financially powerful individuals in political contests, both as regional heads and members of the DPRD, due to the high political costs that must be incurred.

A series of revisions to laws and regulations related to decentralization have encouraged a shift from procedural democracy to substantial democracy. One indicator is the increasingly widespread application of information technology by local governments, which contributes to the creation of the concept of open government.

### **3. Reformation Era**

The development of the situation, both at the national and global levels, has had a significant impact on the implementation of post-Reformation governance. This can be seen from various changes in policies related to regional governance. One example is the issuance of Law Number 32 of 2004 which replaced the previous regulation. Several years later, the government re-issued Law Number 23 of 2014 concerning Regional Government. However, in less than a week, this regulation has changed with the issuance of Government Regulation in Lieu of Law (Perppu) Number 2 of 2014.

The frequent changes in these policies reflect that the implementation of regional governance is greatly influenced by various interests, both from the central government, regions, the private sector, certain groups, and global interests. In addition, the dynamics that occur in society also indicate dissatisfaction with the ongoing government system. This can be seen from the turmoil that has occurred in several regions, such as Aceh, Riau, Bali, Papua, and other regions.

#### **a. Law Number 22 of 1999 concerning Regional Government**

This law is the first policy issued after the Reformation by the government together with the DPR to regulate regional government. This regulation replaces Law Number 5 of 1974, which was previously oriented towards a centralized government system. This law emphasizes the concept of regional autonomy as a whole.

In letter a, it is stated that the Government of the Republic of Indonesia, based on the 1945 Constitution, grants authority to regions to exercise their own autonomy. Meanwhile, Article 7 stipulates that regional authority covers all areas of government except for foreign policy, defense, security, justice, monetary, fiscal, and religious affairs. Each region works independently, without a hierarchical relationship, in carrying out its duties and authorities.

**b. Law Number 32 of 2004 concerning Regional Government**

This law was drafted as a form of correction to the weaknesses in the previous regulation. The principle of efficiency and effectiveness in the implementation of regional government is a primary concern, taking into account the relationship between various levels of government, the potential and diversity of regions, and the challenges of facing global competition.

The latest regulation regarding regional autonomy shows a change in the relationship between the central and regional governments. One significant change is the correction of the previous provision stating that regions stand alone without hierarchical relationships. In addition, this law emphasizes the importance of cooperation between regional governments, especially between governors and regents/mayors, to ensure more effective coordination. One aspect that attracts attention is the provisions in Articles 185, 186, and 187 which regulate the assessment of the upper-level government on the Draft Regional Revenue and Expenditure Budget (RAPBD). If the RAPBD is considered to be in conflict with the public interest or higher regulations, it can be revoked. This provision reflects the initial steps towards gradual recentralization, although the principle of the broadest possible autonomy remains the main basis of the current regional government system.

**c. Law Number 23 of 2014 concerning Regional Government**

This law has sparked much controversy. In less than a month after its enactment, this regulation has been revised through Perpu Number 2 of 2014 concerning the Second Amendment to Law Number 23 of 2014. After going through the revision process, especially in the articles related to regional head elections, this regulation was re-enacted as Law Number 9 of 2015.

The changes in the division of regional government authority have drawn various criticisms, especially related to the increasing number of authorities being withdrawn to the provincial or central level. One example is the provision in Article 14 paragraph (1) which states that government affairs in the fields of forestry, maritime affairs, and energy and mineral resources are divided between the central and provincial governments. As a result, several authorities that were previously the responsibility of the district/city are now transferred to the upper level government. This indicates a shift in policy direction that can have an impact on the effectiveness of regional autonomy in its implementation.

The shift in authority in regional government is increasingly visible in various sectors. The management of Senior High Schools (SMA) and equivalent, which were previously under the district/city government, is now the responsibility of the provincial government. Similar things also happened to extension workers in the Forestry Service and the P3AP2KB Service, whose status changed to provincial or central employees. In addition, the issuance of operational permits for cooperative legal entities which previously could be done at the regional level has now been transferred to the central government. These changes reflect the trend of recentralization of authority which limits the scope of movement of district/city governments in managing their own affairs.

This law also strengthens the role and function of the DPRD, including the obligation of regional heads to provide accountability to the DPRD. Several provisions which were previously considered to limit regional democracy have also been removed, providing greater space for community involvement in regional government.

## E. CONCLUSIONS

Discussion on decentralization and regional autonomy in Indonesia shows that this concept has developed dynamically since the Old Order era to the Reformation era. Although there have been efforts to recognize diversity and provide special authority to regions, regional autonomy is still limited and often changes. In the Old Order era, the formation of special regions such as Aceh and Yogyakarta showed the government's efforts to recognize cultural and religious diversity. However, government control remained centralized and the concept of decentralization had not been fully implemented. In the New Order era, the Soeharto government made improvements in various fields, including the implementation of regional government. However, the concept of decentralization has not yet been fully implemented. In the Reformation era, the government made changes to policies related to regional government, such as the issuance of Law Number 22 of 1999, Law Number 32 of 2004, and Law Number 23 of 2014. However, these policy changes often change and reflect that the implementation of regional government is still influenced by various interests.

Decentralization and regional autonomy in Indonesia are still developing and require improvements and adjustments to achieve their goals. This concept aims to improve the quality of regional government administration and encourage community participation in the development process. In its development, various challenges have emerged, including the adjustment of authority between the central and regional governments and the effectiveness of policy implementation at the local level. Therefore, evaluation and improvement are continuously carried out so that decentralization can run according to expectations and provide maximum benefits to the community.

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