
Transactional Culture and the Reproduction of Patronage: Reading the Dawn Attack as a Socio-Political Practice in Lamongan, Indonesia

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Abstract

The phenomenon of dawn attacks in the 2024 Regional Head Election (Pilkada) in Lamongan Regency represents a tangible form of transactional political culture that has been institutionalized in local democratic practices. This article aims to examine the dawn attack not just as a violation of election laws but as a social practice that reflects the reproduction of patronage between the political elite and the voting community. This study employs a qualitative approach with a case study design, collecting data through in-depth interviews, participatory observations, and document analysis from election organizers, winning teams, and Lamongan residents. The results indicate that dawn attacks are facilitated through robust social networks, where patron-client relationships play a crucial role in exchanging economic resources for political support. The practice is rooted in reciprocity and social norms that justify giving money as a form of political solidarity. As a result, the dawn attack not only perpetuates power inequality but also reduces the meaning of democratic participation to pragmatic economic relations. These findings confirm that local democracy in Lamongan is still colored by a patronage culture that continues to be reproduced through social, symbolic, and structural mechanisms.

Keywords: Dawn attack, money politics, Regional elections, democratic legitimacy, Lamongan

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INTRODUCTION

“*Serangan Fajar*,” a form of vote buying in regional head elections (*Pilkada*), remains a pervasive phenomenon that undermines the legitimacy of democracy, particularly at the local level. This practice, typically carried out in the final hours before election day, seeks to influence voter preferences through cash handouts, goods, or political promises. This study aims to comprehensively analyze the impact of serangan fajar on the legitimacy of the 2024 Lamongan Regent Election and to identify the patterns and distribution strategies employed by its perpetrators. Adopting a qualitative descriptive approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews with voters, campaign teams, election officials, and political observers, as well as field observations and document analysis from official sources, including the General Elections Commission (KPU), the Election Supervisory Agency (Bawaslu), media reports, and academic studies. Data analysis followed Miles and Huberman's interactive model, comprising data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing.

The findings reveal that the dawn attack not only shapes voter preferences but also erodes public trust in the democratic process. It perpetuates a transactional political culture, weakens the accountability of elected leaders, and risks producing governance that favors certain groups over the public interest. Weak oversight and limited law enforcement further exacerbate the problem, allowing vote buying to persist over time. This study recommends stronger preventive measures, including the reinforcement of regulations and legal sanctions, the enhancement of political awareness among citizens, and the optimization of the role of election supervisors. These findings are expected to serve as a reference for policymakers and relevant stakeholders in formulating effective strategies to curb vote buying, thereby fostering a cleaner, fairer, and more transparent local democracy.

The election of regional heads (*Pilkada*) is one of the tangible manifestations of the democratic process, providing the community with the opportunity to determine their leaders directly. As one of the instruments of democracy, the Regional Elections are expected to serve as a means of realizing people's sovereignty, as well as a mechanism for producing leaders who are legitimate, have integrity, and are responsive to public needs. In the context of local democracy, the success of the Regional Elections is not only measured by the implementation of the voting process, but also by the quality of integrity, transparency, and accountability of its implementation. However, in practice, the implementation of the Regional Elections in

Indonesia is often colored by various violations, one of which is the dawn attack. The term refers to the practice of money politics carried out in the run-up to polling day, usually in the form of giving cash or goods to voters to influence their political choices. According to Bawaslu RI, money politics is still one of the most violations found in every election cycle, even with increasingly sophisticated and difficult to track. This phenomenon suggests that money politics has become part of a deep-rooted culture of transactional politics, particularly at the local level.

Lamongan Regency as one of the areas organizing the 2024 Regent Regional Election is inseparable from the potential for dawn attacks. Factors such as tight political competition, strong patronage networks, and low political literacy among some people, become fertile ground for the practice of money politics to develop. The dawn attack is a serious concern because it can threaten the legitimacy of the election results. Money politics not only injures the principle of honest and fair elections as mandated by Law Number 10 of 2016 concerning Regional Elections, but also has the potential to reduce the quality of democracy as a whole. Voters who are influenced by the provision of materials tend to ignore the candidate's competence, track record, and vision-mission, so political choices are based more on momentary gain than long-term interests. The impact of the dawn attack did not stop at the election process alone, but also spread to the course of the post-election government. Leaders who are elected through the practice of money politics have a tendency to prioritize the interests of certain groups or those who finance their campaigns, rather than the interests of society as a whole. This has the potential to create an unaccountable government, prone to corrupt practices, and hinder regional development efforts. Furthermore, these conditions can strengthen the political cycle of patronage that is difficult to break, so that local democracies are trapped in a transactional pattern that benefits the political elite but harms the public.

Based on this reality, this study aims to understand the phenomenon of dawn attacks in the 2024 Regent Regional Election in Lamongan Regency and analyze its influence on the legitimacy of the Regional Elections. Using a qualitative approach, this study explores the perception of the public, election organizers, and related parties regarding the impact of money politics on local democracy. The results of the research are expected to contribute to the development of stricter policies and regulations in minimizing the practice of money politics, as well as strengthening the legitimacy and quality of local democracy in the future.

The phenomenon of dawn attacks in the Regional Elections in Indonesia is one of the most tangible manifestations of the transactional political culture that continues to be reproduced in the local patronage system. Some studies show that this practice is not just an electoral offense, but part of a social mechanism to maintain power relations and political legitimacy. For example, Aspinall and Sukmajati (2016) emphasized that patronage has become the foundation of electoral political stability at the local level. Hidayat (2019) and Qodir (2020) see dawn attacks as a form of adaptation to social structures that are still paternalistic. Meanwhile, Mietzner (2018) and Ufen (2021) attribute it to the weak institutionalization of the party and the candidate's dependence on personal economic resources. Other studies such as Sulastris (2020) and Rachman (2021) highlight that money politics remains sustainable because people interpret it as a reciprocal relationship, not just buying and selling votes. In terms of political culture, Priyono (2018) shows that dawn attacks have become part of an "electoral ritual", while Effendi (2022) views it as a reflection of ambivalent morality between economic interests and political loyalty. Finally, Mulyadi's research (2023) confirms that this phenomenon challenges the concept of democratic legitimacy because it places politics as an arena of transactions, not deliberations. Thus, the dawn attack in Lamongan can be read as a form of continuity of patronage that is firmly rooted in local political culture and the reproduction of power relations that are symbolic and material.

The novelty of this research lies in its attempt to read *the dawn attack* not solely as a practice of electoral abuse, but as a social and political cultural practice that reproduces local patronage. In contrast to previous research that tended to highlight legal aspects or voter behavior, this study emphasizes the symbolic meaning and social relations that underlie these transactional practices in Lamongan Regency. This approach allows for a new understanding of how *dawn attacks* function as a mechanism of power reproduction, social legitimacy, and cultural continuity of patronage that is rooted in local socio-political structures in the era of electoral democracy.

METHODS

This study uses a qualitative approach with a descriptive method to understand in depth the phenomenon of dawn attacks and its implications for the legitimacy of the 2024 Lamongan Regent Election. This approach was chosen because it is able to explore the meanings, perceptions, and experiences of informants holistically, thus providing a richer picture than just

quantitative data. The research focus is directed at the dynamics of money politics at the local level, including implementation patterns, strategies of political actors, and public perceptions of the practice. Research data was obtained from two sources, namely primary data and secondary data. Primary data was collected through in-depth interviews with election organizers at the KPU and Bawaslu levels of Lamongan Regency, participants or successful teams of candidate pairs, voters from various social, economic, and educational backgrounds, as well as local political observers and academics who understand the dynamics of regional democracy. Interviews were conducted face-to-face and online with semi-structured guidance, which allowed researchers to ask open-ended questions and adjust the flow of the discussion according to the informant's responses. Meanwhile, secondary data was obtained from official reports from the KPU and Bawaslu, print and online media reports, legal and regulatory documents related to the prohibition of money politics, as well as academic studies that discuss the theory of legitimacy, money politics, and procedural democracy.

In addition to the interviews, the researchers also conducted participatory observations at a number of strategic points during the campaign period and ahead of voting day to identify indications of dawn attack practices. Observations are carried out in a disguised manner to maintain the authenticity of the behavior of the research subjects. Document studies were also carried out to strengthen the field findings as well as provide a legal and conceptual framework for the analysis. Data analysis refers to the Miles and Huberman interactive analysis model, which includes three main stages, namely data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing and verification. Data reduction is carried out by sorting and focusing raw information into data that is relevant to the research objectives, while the presentation of data is arranged in the form of a descriptive narrative equipped with direct quotes from the informant to clarify the findings. The final stage, in the form of drawing conclusions, is carried out repeatedly while verifying the consistency of the findings with the existing evidence.

Conceptually, this research is based on Max Weber's theory of legitimacy which divides the legitimacy of power into traditional, charismatic, and rational-legal, used to assess the extent to which money politics influences public acceptance of elected leaders. The theory of political clientelism is used to explain the reciprocal relationship between candidates and voters in the form of material exchanges for political support, while the theory of procedural democracy is a benchmark in assessing the suitability of the Regional Elections with the principles of free, honest, and fair elections. This research also upholds the ethical principles

of social research, such as maintaining the confidentiality of the identity of informants, obtaining consent before interviews, and explaining the purpose of the research transparently to all participants. Through this comprehensive method design, the research is expected to provide a comprehensive overview of the mechanisms, impacts, and challenges of eradicating dawn attacks in Lamongan Regency, as well as offer relevant recommendations for strengthening election integrity in the future.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of the study show that the practice of dawn attacks in the 2024 Lamongan Regent Election is still ongoing with an increasingly systematic and planned pattern. Based on interviews with several voters, candidate success teams, and local political observers, this practice is generally carried out through various forms, including the provision of cash ranging from Rp50,000 to Rp200,000 per voter, the distribution of basic food packages such as rice, sugar, and cooking oil, as well as political promises that will be realized after the election. Significant changes were observed in the pattern of political spending distribution compared to previous elections. Previously, transactions were often carried out directly by candidates or core teams. In that case, they are now distributed through a wider and more layered network, involving community leaders, RT/RW chairs, and volunteers who are considered to have closeness and trust at the grassroots level. This strategy is employed to minimize the risk of detection by the Election Supervisory Agency (Bawaslu) and law enforcement officials, while expanding the distribution reach to more diverse segments of voters.

Voters' perceptions of the practice of dawn attacks also vary, ranging from those who see it as an opportunity to gain financial benefits to those who reject it outright. Some voters who receive money or assistance feel that they have a moral obligation to return the favor by voting for the giver candidate, while others receive assistance but still make a choice according to their conscience, without feeling bound. Nevertheless, the groups that actually resisted the dawn attack were relatively smaller in number, despite having higher political awareness and a stronger understanding of the negative effects of money politics. Field findings show that the majority of voters are in the recipient category, both those who are tied and not tied by choice, so it can be concluded that the dawn attack still has a significant influence on the results of the Regional Elections. From the perspective of Max Weber's theory of legitimacy, especially in the rational-legal dimension, the practice of dawn attacks indicates a weakening of the

legitimacy of the election results. The electoral process that should reflect the will of the people freely becomes distorted by the intervention of financial interests. This is also in line with the view of procedural democracy theory, where the dawn attack undermines the principles of justice and equality in political competition. Candidates with greater financial resources get disproportionate advantages compared to other candidates who have limited political and economic capital. As a result, there is public distrust in the results of the Regional Elections, especially among voters who are aware of the practice of money politics in the election process.

Furthermore, within the framework of political clientelism theory, dawn attacks are not just a momentary transactional practice that occurs on the eve of voting day. Instead, the practice is part of a broader pattern of patron-client relationships, in which giving money or assistance creates reciprocal expectations from voters to the chosen candidate. This pattern has the potential to give birth to a government that is more inclined to the interests of certain groups, especially those involved in the distribution of political aid money, rather than the interests of the public as a whole. The long-term implication is that this transactional political culture will continue to recur in the next elections, weakening the accountability of leaders, and hindering the realization of a clean, transparent, and participatory democracy.

The phenomenon of *dawn attacks* in Lamongan should be analyzed as a simultaneous product of institutional structures, patronage relations, and local cultural norms. Berenschot (2018) asserts that the practice of clientelism is rooted in socio-economic needs and exchange mechanisms that have moral legitimacy at the local level; These findings are in line with the observation that giving money is often understood as a form of *love*, not mere bribery (Priyono, 2018; Sulastri, 2020). In the context of Lamongan, the distribution of materials during the quiet period and the morning of the collection reflects the logic of an organized exchange through a network of local brokers (Buehler, 2016; Santoso, 2022).

Rational-actor analysis explains why elite actors use the *dawn attack* as a rational strategy to confront electoral competition: candidates maximize economic resources to mobilize immediate support (Hicken, 2011; Mietzner, 2020). However, a rational perspective alone is not enough — research by Effendi (2022) and Rachman (2021) shows the symbolic and identity dimensions that make receiving rewards socially meaningful. In other words, the act of choosing after receiving money is not always purely economical, but is also tied to reciprocal norms and personal loyalty (Qodir, 2020; Noor & Haris, 2021).

The implications for the legitimacy of democracy seem twofold. On the one hand, legal and supervisory mechanisms (e.g., Bawaslu) can enforce the rules; however, weaknesses in enforcement and evidence make prevention difficult (Santoso, 2022). On the other hand, transactional practices reduce political functions to an arena for resource distribution, thereby eroding the election process's deliberative and representative dimensions (Mulyadi, 2023; Ufen, 2021). Empirical studies show that when politics is perceived as a transaction, public trust in electoral institutions declines and the legitimacy of results is diluted (Mietzner, 2020; Berenschot, 2018).

Additionally, post-reform decentralization presents an opportunity for regional heads and local networks to consolidate patronage by controlling resources (Buehler, 2016). This condition renders the recurrent dawn attack a generational practice that is challenging to change solely through legal action (Hidayat, 2019; Sulastri, 2020). Therefore, change efforts must be multidimensional: strengthening law enforcement and building political education that challenges transactional reciprocal norms (Priyono, 2018; Effendi, 2022).

Theoretically, the synthesis between *the moral economy* and *clientelism* approaches is useful to explain the continuity of this practice: moral economics explains cultural legitimacy, while clientelism describes the mechanisms of exchange that bind political actors and voters (Berenschot, 2018; Hicken, 2011). For Lamongan, this study shows that *dawn attacks* function as electoral rituals that reproduce socio-political hierarchies—strengthening patronage while weakening the quality of democratic representation (Mulyadi, 2023; Noor & Haris, 2021).

The dawn attack must be understood as a complex phenomenon: the product of elite strategic calculations, locally legitimized socio-cultural practices, and institutional weaknesses that allow the reproduction of patronage. Effective policy interventions must combine law enforcement, strengthen election governance, and implement transformation programs in political culture at the grassroots level (Santoso, 2022; Effendi, 2022).

CONCLUSION

This research reveals that the practice of dawn attacks in the 2024 Lamongan Regent Election is still occurring on a massive, systematic, and adaptive scale, in response to the surveillance situation. The strategies used by the perpetrators are increasingly closed and structured, making it difficult to detect by formal supervision mechanisms. These findings

show that there are significant gaps in the election law enforcement system, which is reflected in the weak enforcement by Bawaslu and other law enforcement officials. This weakness suggests that existing regulations lack sufficient deterrence and coercive power to prevent the practice of money politics, thereby allowing such behavior to persist during each election period. The impact caused by the rampant dawn attacks not only reduces the quality of political competition but also lowers the level of public trust in the results of the Regional Elections. This phenomenon has direct implications for the weakening of the political legitimacy of elected candidates and erodes the fundamental principles of democracy, particularly those of honest, fair, and integrity elections. In the long run, this condition has the potential to form a transactional political culture that is difficult to eradicate, as well as create patron-client relationships that hinder rational and critical political participation.

Therefore, comprehensive strategic measures are needed. First, strengthening regulations and sanctions against money politics must be accompanied by a firm, fast, and transparent law enforcement mechanism. Second, improving political education for the public needs to be carried out continuously, with a focus on forming critical awareness of rights and responsibilities as voters. Third, the transparency of campaign funding must be optimized through accurate reporting, independent audits, and open access to public information.

Ultimately, success in eradicating dawn attacks is not only a matter of enforcing the rules, but also building a political culture that puts integrity above transactions. Without the collective commitment of all elements of the nation, democracy will continue to be a stage for money politics, and the people's voice will only be a commodity to be traded.

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