

INDONESIA: ELECTION CREDIBILITY IN PAPUA REQUIRES ENDING “NOKEN”

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I. INTRODUCTION

The November regional executive elections in Papua’s three provinces were as chaotic as anticipated, but the results defied expectations. Dark horse gubernatorial candidates prevailed in highly competitive races in Papua, Highland Papua, and Central Papua, the three largest provinces that make up 70 per cent of the population of the territory collectively known as the “land of Papua” (*Tanah Papua*). These wins now hang in the balance as allegations of widespread electoral fraud and violence threaten to overturn the results. With Constitutional Court challenges from all defeated candidates underway, the region is bracing for potential renewed conflict.

The *noken* system – a proxy voting method used in most areas of Central and Highland Papua provinces – has become a primary mechanism for manipulation. This system creates perverse incentives for candidates and their supporters to make sweeping claims of unanimous local support, effectively allowing them to seize and register all the ballot papers allocated to a particular polling place, village or even subdistrict as their own. In these two provinces, winners of the races for governor secured more than 90 percent of the vote in their respective home bases, a feat achieved amid vehement protests from their rivals and outbreaks of violence.

Unauthorised noken voting was reported in regions where direct voting should have been the norm – including Mimika, Nabire, Yalimo and Pegunungan Bintang. Illegal use of noken was also found in Mamberamo Raya. In these areas, where the one-person, one-vote principle was mandated, suspiciously uniform 100 percent turnout rates and the entire use of allocated ballots for a single candidate suggest the widespread and illegal implementation of noken.

The problems that Papua faced in November have little to do with the pro-independence insurgency and everything to do with the way that Jakarta treats Papua as a backward province that cannot be held to the same standards as the rest of the country. Until this attitude changes, and the noken system is disallowed, fraud and violence in Papuan elections will continue to be rampant. The answer is not a return to the Soeharto-era practice of indirect elections as some in the current government have proposed. It is to make a concerted effort to ensure that enough resources are allocated from Jakarta to ensure that a credible election process takes place.

II. PAPUA PROVINCE

In Papua province, former Jayapura mayor Benhur Tomi Mano (BTM) clinched a narrow victory by defeating Mathius Fakhiri by just 7,000 votes, with 50.3 percent to Fakhiri’s 49.3 percent. The highly contested race was mired in controversy from the start. Mathius Fakhiri, the former Papua province police chief, had secured endorsements from seventeen political parties. He was expected to run for governor unopposed with his running mate, Aryoko

Rumaropen, a prominent bureaucrat from the Biak islands. A Constitutional Court decision on 21 August 2024, however, lowered the threshold for parties to nominate regional executive candidates, enabling PDIP to back BTM. Nevertheless, the race was still poised to be a lopsided contest, with local media drawing parallels to the biblical tale of David (BTM) versus Goliath (Fakhiri).

A. Appeals to identity

The race took on significant ethnic and religious overtones, with BTM, a Christian native of Jayapura, facing Fakhiri, a Muslim convert from South Papua. BTM ran a polarising campaign, positioning himself as the sole candidate representing the Tabi and Saireri indigenous people.¹ His running mate, Yeremias Bisai, the incumbent bupati of Waropen, reinforced this narrative, claiming that he represented the Saireri constituents. Protestant churches in Papua were heavily involved in BTM’s campaign, disseminating sectarian narratives.² One pastor gave a sermon suggesting that under a Fakhiri governorship, Papua would be transformed from the Land of the Gospel to the Veranda of Mecca, like Aceh.³

The appeals to identity seemed to work. BTM performed strongly in four *kabupaten* (sub-provincial units) with predominantly Protestant and Indigenous voters, including Mamberamo Raya, Sarmi, Supiori, and Yapen, winning over 60 per cent of the vote. BTM also won 58 percent of the vote in Jayapura *kabupaten*, which is heavily Protestant.⁴ The Fakhiri–Rumaropen slate prevailed in areas with significant non-indigenous voters, such as the city of Jayapura, which as the centre of government has civil servants and others from across the archipelago, and Keerom, a centre of transmigration (government resettlement programs) during the Soeharto era.⁵ Fakhiri also won in Waropen, despite the BTM-Bisai slate’s hometown advantage, and in the Biak islands, Rumaropen’s home base.

B. Allegations of fraud before, during and after the election

In the run-up to the elections, both candidates accused each other of fraud. Yeremias Bisai’s opponents accused him of falsifying the letters that all candidates have to submit during the

¹ Tabi and Saireri are the two Indigenous customary zones that make up the rump Papua province today. The Tabi region constitutes the eastern part of the province, including Jayapura, Sarmi, Keerom, and Mamberamo Raya, while Saireri encompasses Yapen and Biak islands and Waropen in the west.

² According to the 2020 census, approximately 63.1 percent of people in Papua identified as Protestant, 25.5 percent as Muslim, 11.1 percent as Catholic, and 0.4 percent Hindu or Buddhist. See BPS Provinsi Papua, “Statistik migrasi Provinsi Papua: Hasil Long Form Sensus Penduduk 2020,” 2023.

³ See Tim Hukum Mari – Yo, “Permohonan Pembatalan Keputusan Komisi Pemilihan Umum Provinsi PAPUA Nomor 250 Tahun 2024 Tentang Penetapan Hasil Pemilihan Gubernur dan Wakil Gubernur Provinsi Papua,” 14 December 2024.

⁴ 81 percent of the population in Kabupaten Jayapura identify as Protestant, followed by Islam at 18 percent.

⁵ According to the 2020 National Bureau Statistics census, estimated 43 per cent of people in Jayapura city and 31 per cent in Keerom are identified as migrants. See “Statistik migrasi Provinsi Papua: Hasil Long Form Sensus Penduduk 2020,” op. cit.

registration process, certifying them as free of criminal charges and eligible to be elected.⁶ They also charged that a member of Papua’s Election Board (KPU Papua) had been involved in the forgery. Fakhiri’s team filed a report to the Election Supervisory Agency (Bawaslu), demanding that it disqualify Bisai. The Jayapura District Court later validated the documents and Bawaslu subsequently dropped the case. Fakhiri’s team saw this as a clear indication of KPU and Bawaslu’s partiality toward its rival.

On the other side, BTM’s supporters reported Christian Solihait, the caretaker mayor of Jayapura and an outspoken Fakhiri supporter, to Bawaslu after an audio recording surfaced shortly before the election in which Solihait was heard instructing local officials to buy and inflate votes to ensure Fakhiri’s victory. Bawaslu summoned Solihait for questioning, but the latter denied the allegation, claiming that his instructions referred to the February 2024 election, not the upcoming one – as if manipulating the February poll was somehow better.⁷ After reviewing the evidence, Bawaslu dropped the investigation, citing insufficient evidence to prove any criminal violation or unlawful interference.

Ballot stuffing emerged as the most common tactic on election day. Local election officials were caught in Sarmi, Mamberamo Raya, Supiori, Yapen and Jayapura allowing multiple voting, permitting minors and unregistered voters to participate, and filling out leftover ballots. KPU Jayapura ordered ten polling stations to conduct new polls after reports of multiple voting, resulting in vote tallies that exceeded the registered voter roll, which was limited to 600 persons per polling station. Fraud was likely more extensive than reported, as monitoring was limited to accessible areas with reliable infrastructure. Despite the provincial Bawaslu recommending revotes at 54 polling stations, the provincial KPU conducted them at only 24, fuelling accusations of bias.

The most serious allegation concerned Mamberamo Raya, one of the most remote kabupaten in Papua, where Fakhiri claimed there was no vote for governor at all and totally fictitious counting.⁸ The *noken* system was common practice. Despite the complaints, KPU Mamberamo Raya announced BTM’s victory with 61 percent of the votes and reported no irregularities occurred during election. Bawaslu’s silence only strengthened suspicions of systematic interference in the isolated region.

In the city of Jayapura, allegations of fraudulent tabulation focused on the Jayapura Selatan subdistrict (*distrik* in Papuan administrative terminology) where local election officials were suspected of inflating Fakhiri’s tally by 9,137 votes, a claim supported by copies of vote tallies (the so-called C-forms) presented by the opposition camp.⁹ Intense debates between KPU

⁶ Yeremias Bisai allegedly forged the certificates with the help of a KPU Papua official to avoid potential legal trouble due to a past corruption charge involving an alleged transfer of Rp.19 billion (US\$1,174,982). However, the case went nowhere, and Bisai was never convicted. See “Bupati Waropen Ditetapkan Tersangka, Pemprov Segera Koordinasi ke Mendagri,” papua.go.id, 7 March 2020.

⁷ “Tidak Memenuhi Unsur Pidana, Bawaslu Papua Hentikan Penanganan Laporan Terhadap Walikota Jayapura,” suarapembaruan.news, 13 November 2024.

⁸ See Tim Hukum Mari – Yo, “Permohonan Pembatalan Keputusan Komisi Pemilihan Umum Provinsi PAPUA Nomor 250 Tahun 2024 Tentang Penetapan Hasil Pemilihan Gubernur dan Wakil Gubernur Provinsi Papua,” 14 December 2024, p. 7.

⁹ These documents indicated Fakhiri’s actual votes totalled 29,063, not 38,100 as reported, while BTM’s tally remained at 21,986. “Pleno Rekapitulasi Alot, Benhur-Yermias Sah Tumbang KIM Plus di Pilgub Papua,” Kompas, 14 December 2024.

officials and the BTM team led to several days’ delay in the counting.¹⁰ KPU Papua finalised the results on 11 December 2024 without revisiting the disputed count, leaving the allegations unresolved and tensions high.

After the election, the competition moved to the legal arena when Fakhiri petitioned the Constitutional Court to redo the vote in Mamberamo Raya, Jayapura, Supiori, and Sarmi, alleging systematic interference by election officials. These were the areas where indigenous Protestant support for BMT was strongest. While some of Fakhiri's claims were supported by substantial evidence, he was the target of allegations himself. On 6 January 2025, BTM's legal team filed a counter-suit, accusing both Fakhiri and Jayapura City election officials of vote inflation in Jayapura Selatan, bringing the case before both the Constitutional Court and the election ethics council (Honorary Council for Election Implementers, DKPP).

C. What determined the results?

BTM’s victory may have been the result of effective use of ethnic politics combined with the pivotal role of the Protestant church in mobilising voters, who constitute the religious majority in Papua but with many, often competing denominations. The fraud inherent in the *noken* system was also a likely factor. BTM’s success was bolstered by another factor that further undermined Fakhiri’s popularity – his police background. Indigenous Papuans tend to have a deep-seated distrust of the police after decades of repressive practices. This distrust intensified after reports of widespread police interference in the February 2024 presidential and legislative elections across the country, where they worked to secure victories for candidates endorsed by then-President Jokowi and his choice of successor, Prabowo Subianto.¹¹ Such actions led to the emergence of a new derogatory nickname for the police – the “Brown Party” (Partai Coklat), referring to the colour of their uniforms.¹²

III. HIGHLAND PAPUA

In Highland Papua, John Tabo, the underdog, defeated Befi Yigibalom, with 56 per cent of the votes. The decisive factor was Tabo’s landslide victory in Tolikara, where he won 96 per cent of the vote using the *noken* system, leading Yigibalom to challenge the results.¹³

A. Building alliances with bupati

¹⁰ Bawaslu intervened, urging the KPU to compare the C-form documents with the total tally from Jayapura Selatan, but the KPU ignored the recommendation. Protests from BTM’s camp continued for days as the vote counting process proceeded to the provincial recapitulation.

¹¹ Police interference was reported in North Sumatra to support governor candidate Bobby Nasution, who is the son-in-law of former president Joko Widodo, as well as in Central Java for governor candidate Ahmad Lutfi, a former provincial police chief. “Tangan Jokowi dan Polisi di Pilkada 2024,” *tempo.co*, 10 November 2024.

¹² “Demo Rekap Pilkada di Jayapura, Warga Bentangkan Spanduk “Partai Coklat,” *Kompas.com*, 9 December 2024.

¹³ The exceptions were Pegunungan Bintang and Yalimo kabupaten, and the subdistricts of Karubaga in Tolikara kabupaten; Jayawijaya, in Wamena; and Tiom, in Lanny Jaya where the standard voting system applied.

The race was expected to be competitive as the two candidates had both served as *bupati* in the region. Yigibalom appeared to have a slight edge. As a two-term bupati of Lanny Jaya and head of the Highland Bupati Association, Yigibalom had built alliances with local political actors across several *kabupaten*, with his campaign gaining particularly strong traction in Jayawijaya, Pegunungan Bintang, and Yahukimo where incumbent bupatis seeking a second term co-hosted rallies and publicly pledged their support.¹⁴

John Tabo, the *bupati* of Mamberamo Raya, had been *bupati* of Tolikara, his home base, in 2007 but then lost twice to the same opponent, Usman Wanimbo, in elections marred by widespread riots and violence. Wanimbo had been backed by then Governor Lukas Enembe and the party of then President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, but by the 2024 elections, Enembe was dead, and Partai Demokrat was long out of power.¹⁵ In 2024, Wanimbo served as Yigibalom’s campaign manager but in a very different political context.

While Yigibalom’s campaign was limited to a few regencies, John Tabo boasted that he had engaged grassroots voters across the new province’s eight kabupaten.¹⁶ He formed a powerful alliance with Athenius Murib, a former district military commander from Wamena who was challenging the incumbent *bupati*, John Banua, Yigibalom’s ally. Through this partnership, Tabo secured agreements from clan leaders across five subdistricts in Jayawijaya to vote for him via noken.¹⁷ His heritage as part of Torajan from South Sulawesi also proved advantageous among migrant communities. During his campaign appearances, Tabo consistently emphasised the protection of “Nusantara” communities – a term referring to non-Papuan residents – and stressed the importance of safeguarding their voting rights.¹⁸

The impact of Tabo’s approach was also apparent in Nduga, where he gained strong local support following the eruption of a tribal conflict between Lani and Nduga communities in September-October 2024 in Jayawijaya.¹⁹ He and Yigibalom supported opposite sides, with Tabo providing humanitarian assistance to affected Nduga families, and Yigibalom helping

¹⁴ Incumbents bupatis who publicly endorsed Befi Yigibalom were Jayawijaya’s John Banua; Yahukimo’s Didimus Yahuli, and Tolikara’s deputy, Dinus Wanimbo. In Pegunungan Bintang, three bupati candidates promised Yigibalom that he would receive all 100,600 ballots allocated to the kabupaten. See “Tiga Calon Bupati Pegunungan Bintang Dukung Befi-Natan,” accessed via Youtube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w17AScQgTbg>.

¹⁵ John Tabo had been elected bupati of Tolikara in 2007 and by all accounts was an effective executive. He lost his second bid against Usman Wanimbo in the 2012 election after the Constitutional Court overturned the result despite Tabo winning the race and widespread allegations of fraud against Wanimbo. He lost again to Wanimbo in 2017. In 2021, he decided to run in Mamberamo Raya, a small kabupaten in Papua province with only 24,000 registered voters and won.

¹⁶ Tabo noted that Befi Yigibalom barely conducted any campaign in rural areas and did not visit several kabupaten, such as Nduga and Mamberamo Tengah. IPAC interview with John Tabo, Wamena, 27 October 2024.

¹⁷ “Pilkada Papua Pegunungan 2024: 5 Distrik ini Nyatakan SIKap 100% Dukung John Tabo-Ones Pahabol dan Athenius Murib-Ronny Elopere,” lintaspapua.com, 10 October 2024.

¹⁸ “Pesan Jhon Tabo ke Relawan di Wamena: Lindungi Hak Pilih Warga Nusantara,” kabarpapua.co, 26 September 2024.

¹⁹ The conflict initially began as a domestic dispute between a husband and wife from Nduga and Lani tribes, but it escalated into a full-fledged tribal war once their relatives became involved.

the ethnic Lani.²⁰ The political impact was clear: a Nduga clan chief in gratitude pledged his people’s collective support to Tabo and barred Yigibalom from campaigning in Nduga.²¹

Both candidates had chosen running mates from kabupaten Yahukimo to secure voters from the most populous area in the province. Tabo’s running mate, Dr Ones Pahabol, served as bupati in Yahukimo from 2005 to 2016. Yigibalom’s running mate, Natan Pahabol (same clan as Ones but not a close relative), was a member of the Papua provincial legislature from 2014 to 2024.

B. Violence and vote manipulation in Tolikara

Widespread riots erupted on election day in Tolikara – a *kabupaten* with a history of violence.²² The crisis began when supporters of John Tabo and his ally, *bupati* candidate Willem Wandik, set up road blockades in the kabupaten capital Karubaga, effectively halting the distribution of election supplies to outlying areas. The mob demanded that all voting and counting be centralised in Karubaga, blatant intimidation tactics to manipulate the electoral process and secure their preferred outcome.

In response to their demands, the kabupaten-level KPU made the controversial decision to relocate hundreds of polling stations from across Tolikara’s 46 subdistricts to Karubaga. The KPU also failed to administer voting and vote-counting processes in several subdistricts resulting in 37,236 registered votes vanishing from the final count.²³ All three defeated candidates asserted that these missing votes were meant to be theirs, claiming KPU Tolikara’s failure was a deliberate tactic to ensure Willem Wandik’s victory. The KPU’s refusal to comply with Bawaslu’s instructions to redo the voting in 24 subdistricts intensified suspicions that it favoured Wandik.

The situation deteriorated further when disagreements erupted between supporters of bupati candidates Dinus Wanimbo and Willem Wandik over ballot distribution. What began as a heated debate between supporters quickly escalated into violent clashes that spread across seven subdistricts.²⁴ As of late January 2025, the number of casualties was still

²⁰ John Tabo reported spending hundreds of millions of rupiah to deliver food stock and humanitarian aid for Nduga communities in Jayawijaya and Nduga. Befi Yigibalom reportedly spent Rp3.5 billion (US\$216,444) in compensation for the victims from the Lani ethnic group. IPAC Interview with a Papuan activist from the Lani community in Wamena by phone, 24 November 2024.

²¹ “John Tabo-Ones Pahabol Kunjungi Masyarakat Nduga&Lani, Aman Tidak Boleh Perang Lagi,” Youtube.com, 3 October 2024.

²² See IPAC, “Rebuilding after Communal Violence: Lessons from Tolikara, Papua,” Report No. 29, 13 June 2016.

²³ All four candidates received zero votes in subdistrict Wugi, Aweku, Kembu, Nunggawi, Air Garam, and Yuneri. See Baharudin Farawowan & Partner, “Perbaikan Permohonan Pembatalan Hasil Keputusan Komisi Pemilihan Umum Kabupaten Tolikara Nomor 349 tentang Penetapan Hasil Pemilihan Bupati dan Wakil Bupati Kabupaten Tolikara tahun 2024,” 16 December 2024.

²⁴ According to the police, voters from *distrik* Bandia whose polling stations were relocated to Karubaga proposed that their ballots to be split equally between Dinus Wanimbo and Willem Wandik. However, communities from Karubaga rejected the proposal, another indication of the confusion and manipulation that the noken system can cause.

unknown as the prolonged road blockades and unrest isolated Tolikara, preventing outside observers from entering or verifying the extent of the conflict.

The governor’s race was marked by even more severe irregularities. Voting and tallying at the subdistrict level were effectively absent, with supporters of John Tabo resorting to violence against Yigibalom's supporters. Targeted violence occurred on 28 November 2024, when Tabo supporters, armed with bows and sharp weapons, assaulted Usman Wanimbo, head of Yigibalom’s campaign team, in Nelawi subdistrict.²⁵ Yigibalom’s supporters who had been assigned to monitor polling stations faced systematic intimidation and expulsion. The situation worsened with reports of abductions, including allegations that Willem Wandik had detained election officials from Kai and Wonda subdistricts in his house, forcing them to register votes in favour of himself and Tabo.²⁶

The election results in Tolikara, which ultimately delivered a crushing defeat for Befa Yigibalom and triumph for John Tabo and Wandik, therefore have to be questioned. Both won their elections, with Tabo winning 96 percent of the votes while Wandik secured 26.6 percent, a plurality in a four-candidate race.²⁷ Yigibalom's allegations of systematic fraud and intimidation by both officials and Tabo’s supporters was substantiated by his receiving zero votes in 32 of Tolikara’s 46 subdistricts – a statistically impossible outcome if direct voting had been applied. The defeated bupati candidates further challenged the legitimacy of the results, with each asserting victory if the missing 37,236 votes had not disappeared from the final tally.

In Jayawijaya, Tabo's ally, Athenius Murib, manipulated the *noken* system to defeat Yigibalom’s ally, incumbent bupati John Banua, whom Indigenous voters perceived as an outsider. (He had run unopposed in 2018.)²⁸ Murib’s success was allegedly achieved through his collaboration with two defeated candidates, Antonius Wetipo and Esau Wetipo. In an illegal manoeuvre, both appear to have agreed to transfer their votes to Murib in eighteen subdistricts during the recounting process to ensure Banua’s loss.²⁹

Clashes between rival supporters also erupted in Lanny Jaya during the vote tallying at the *kabupaten* level. Allegations of vote inflation favouring the winning candidate, Alitinus Yigibalom, sparked outrage among supporters of two rival candidates.³⁰ On 12 December

²⁵ Habel Rumbiak, “Revised – Permohonan Pembatalan Keputusan Komisi Pemilihan Umum Provinsi Papua Pegunungan Nomor 75 Tahun 2024 Tentang Penetapan Hasil Pemilihan Gubernur dan Wakil Gubernur Papua Pegunungan,” 15 December 2024.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ The vote margin between Willem Wandik and the three defeated candidates was roughly 20,000 votes, with Wandik winning 61,925 votes. Dinus Wanimbo, the incumbent Tolikara deputy bupati, secured second place with 45,136 votes, followed by Nus Weya with 42,191 votes, and Irinus Wanimbo with 41,432 votes.

²⁸ John Banua, of the Rouw clan, is a prominent businessman with family from the Yapen Islands, Papua. His brother, Johny Banua Rouw, was a mayoral candidate in Jayapura's 2024 election.

²⁹ In these subdistricts, the number of votes for Antonius Wetipo and Esau Wetipo that were documented on C-forms mysteriously dropped to zero in the recounting. See “Dugaan Penggelembungan Suara Pilkada Jayawijaya, Suara Dua Paslon Dialihkan ke Paslon Lain,” Kompas.com, 16 January 2025. The illegal transfer resulted in Athenius Murib’s victory with 109,954 votes, defeating John Banua’s 95,638 votes.

³⁰ Alitinus Yigibalom was a long-time supporter of Befa Yigibalom (though it remains unclear whether they are directly related). In 2017, while serving as the head of the education department, Alitinus aided Befa’s campaign during the election by distributing envelopes containing Rp5 million to voters and polling station

enraged protesters attacked Yigibalom’s campaign office in Tiom, the *kabupaten* capital, triggering a retaliatory assault by his supporters. The escalation led to one death, 250 injuries, and the destruction of dozens of homes and vehicles.

C. The results

John Tabo’s landslide victory in Tolikara stood in stark contrast to the competitive races in other *kabupaten*. Even in his presumed stronghold of Lanny Jaya, Befala Yigibalom managed to secure only 63 per cent of the vote, falling short of his predicted runaway victory. The remaining regions saw much thinner margins, with victors generally getting between 52 and 55 percent. While Yigibalom prevailed in Pegunungan Bintang, Yahukimo, and Yalimo, Tabo won in Jayawijaya, Mamberamo Tengah, and Nduga.

Nowhere in Highland Papua can one conclude that electoral victories at the provincial or *kabupaten* level reflected the winning candidates’ genuine popularity among voters. The losers may be justified in filing challenges with the Constitutional Court, citing fraud and manipulation, but the noken system makes both much easier.

IV. CENTRAL PAPUA

In Central Papua, former bupati of Paniai Meki Nawipa, emerged victorious by winning six out of eight *kabupaten* in a four-way race. Nawipa’s landslide was tainted with allegations of money politics and illegal interference by biased officials in several *kabupaten*. As in Highland Papua, the region used the noken voting system except in *kabupaten* Nabire and Mimika.

A. Building ethnic alliances

The race for governor in Central Papua reflected the region's complex ethnic dynamics.³¹ Identity politics played a crucial role in enhancing the electability of candidates among various Indigenous voters across eight *kabupaten* in the province. Each candidate carefully selected running mates to appeal to key demographics, targeting the predominant Mee ethnic groups in eastern areas such as Paniai, Deiyai, and Dogiyai; highland tribes such as the Dani in Puncak, Puncak Jaya, Moni in Intan Jaya; and Amungme in Mimika, home to the Freeport copper and gold mine and the largest vote bank in the region.

Willem Wandik, a two-term Puncak bupati, was partnered with Aloysius Giay, a Mee intellectual who had served as head of the Papua provincial health office in 2015. The

officials in the Malagaineri subdistrict. See “Briyur Laporkan Kecurangan Ke Panwas Lanny Jaya,” kedaipena.com, 17 February 2017.

³¹ The Mee ethnic group is predominant in three regencies: Paniai, Dogiyai, and Deiyai (the latter two *kabupaten* were carved out of Paniai in 2008). The Dani/Lani and Damal ethnic groups are the majority in the highland regencies of Puncak and Puncak Jaya, while the Moni ethnic group constitutes the majority in Intan Jaya. Nabire and Mimika have significant migrant populations, with 43 per cent and 34 per cent respectively.

Wandik-Giay slate sought to unite highland constituencies and Mee voters. Meki Nawipa, a Mee politician and former Paniai bupati, employed a similar strategy by selecting Deinas Geley, the incumbent deputy of Puncak Jaya, as his running mate. Puncak Jaya, the second most populous kabupaten in Central Papua, played a pivotal role because it had significant populations of both Mee and Dani.

Natalis Tabuni (former Intan Jaya bupati) and John Wempi Wetipo (former Jayawijaya bupati and Deputy Minister of Home Affairs in Jakarta) both sought Mimika’s support by selecting running mates from the influential Amungme tribe. Tabuni chose Titus Natkime, who had served as Freeport’s vice president and shareholder representing the Amungme people. Wetipo initially joined forces with Ausilius Youw, who had previously served as Mimika caretaker bupati in 2014. Youw’s untimely passing on 18 October forced Wetipo to select Agustinus Anggaibak, an Amungme politician and the head of Central Papua People’s Council (MRP), as the replacement.

Despite polling as a frontrunner, Wandik faced strong competition from Nawipa, who gained popularity among Indigenous communities for opposing controversial national policies like transmigration.³² Both candidates held significant advantages through their connections to election officials – Wandik through family ties to the head of Central Papua KPU, Jennifer Tabuni, and Nawipa through several relatives in provincial and Paniai election boards.³³

In contrast, John Wempi Wetipo was widely unpopular among Indigenous Central Papuans because he was born in Jayawijaya and thus perceived as an outsider. Local communities barred Wetipo from campaigning in Dogiyai, Deiyai, and Paniai.³⁴ Despite these setbacks, Wetipo’s national prominence made him a notable contender. He was expected to appeal to non-Indigenous voters, particularly in Nabire and Mimika, where they constitute 49 percent of the population. Meanwhile, Natalis Tabuni was barely known, even within his kabupaten. His electability was hampered by reports of underperformance and absenteeism throughout his decade-long tenure in Intan Jaya.

B. Electoral Manipulation and Money Politics

The voting process in Central Papua proceeded relatively peacefully, except in Puncak Jaya, where clashes erupted between supporters of rival bupati candidates over allegations of ballot theft. The trouble began when supporters of Miren Kogoya demanded to distribute the ballots themselves. When the Election Commission (KPU) rejected their request, Kogoya’s

³² “Survei Indo Barometer: Willem Wandik unggul di Pilkada Papua Tengah,” Antara, 20 June 2024; “Survei: Willem-Giyai Unggul Jauh di Pilgub Papua Tengah,” metrotvnews.com, 23 November 2024.

³³ “Ketua KPU Papua Tengah Masih Saudara dengan 3 Kandidat di Pilkada, Siapa Saja?” suara.com, 8 October 2024.

³⁴ John Wempi Wetipo’s petition for the Constitutional Court claimed that his campaign team was extorted to pay Rp1 billion (US\$61,868) if they wished to pass the main road in Dogiyai that connects to Paniai and Deiyai. See Hendrik Tomaso & Associate, “Permohonan Perselisihan Hasil Pemilihan Kepala Daerah Gubernur dan Wakil Gubernur Provinsi Papua Tengah Tahun 2020,” 24 December 2024.

supporters forcibly seized ballot boxes from four districts.³⁵ This act provoked retaliation from the supporters of his opponent, Yuni Wonda, who launched attacks against Kogoya's group. The conflict escalated, leaving 40 buildings destroyed and 94 people injured.

The Central Papua election process faced two significant challenges: widespread money politics and *noken* voting. While the national KPU has implemented several measures in an attempt to safeguard the integrity of noken votes, these efforts fall short in practice – the practice is so flawed that no regulation is going to make it fair. One supposed safeguard was the requirement of a written agreement, which allowed candidates to negotiate collective voting arrangements with local communities during the campaign period. To formalise these agreements, the KPU recommended that candidate representatives and community members record them in a designated form (C-form for special events) provided at polling stations. Additionally, KPU mandated that only local polling station organisers (KPPS), selected from the community, would be authorised to administer the noken system to ensure transparency and fairness in the voting process.

The problem is that negotiations to turn over a substantial number of votes to a local leader is never going to be an accurate representation of voter choice. In many cases, *distrik* election officials (PPD) took over the noken voting at polling stations and manipulated the counting process. Such cases occurred in Deiyai and Puncak Jaya, where the Meki Nawipa team allegedly paid local election officials to alter the results. Natalis Tabuni alleged that Nawipa had spent a total of Rp. 3 billion (US\$185,523), distributed among the heads of PPD in seven *distrik* in Deiyai.³⁶ The officials were instructed to facilitate the voting process and alter existing noken agreements between communities and other candidates on election day by arranging a new deal to support Nawipa. In Puncak Jaya, Willem Wandik accused Nawipa's running mate, Deinas Geley, of paying Rp. 25 billion (US\$1,546,029) to local civil servants and election officials to ensure their victory in the region.³⁷ Meki Nawipa won in Puncak Jaya with 69 per cent and in Deiyai with 53 per cent.

The most severe incident occurred in Paniai. There was no pretence of voting or counting at the *distrik* level at all; instead, the entire vote-counting process was centralised at the kabupaten level. These violations were allegedly orchestrated by relatives of Meki Nawipa, who held positions across local government and election bodies, from the kabupaten down to the village level.³⁸

³⁵ Another version of the story was supporters of Miren Kogoya stole the ballots after realising her slate had lost in Irimuli subdistrict. “Kronologi konflik Pilkada di Puncak Jaya, dari saling serang panah hingga pembakaran rumah,” *bbc.com*, 30 November 2024.

³⁶ Badan Advokasi Hukum Partai Nasdem, “Permohonan Pembatalan Keputusan Komisi Pemilihan Umum Provinsi Papua Tengah Nomor: 461 Tahun 2024 tentang Penetapan Hasil Pemilihan Gubernur dan Wakil Gubernur Provinsi Papua Tengah Tahun 2024,” 20 December 2024.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ The Willem Wandik petition identified dozens of election officials who were directly related to Meki Nawipa or belonged to the same clan. These figures include the head and members of KPU Paniai, namely Sem Nawipa, Petrus Nawipa, Sisilia Nawipa and Julimince Nawipa, and eighteen subdistrict officials who shared the same surname serving in nine out of 24 subdistricts in Paniai. See Yuliant & Associates, “Permohonan Pembatalan Keputusan Komisi Pemilihan Umum Provinsi Papua Tengah Nomor 461 Tahun 2024 tentang Penetapan Hasil Pemilihan Gubernur dan Wakil Gubernur Patua Tengah Tahun 2024,” 20 December 2024.

Efforts to inflate votes for Meki Nawipa sparked days of protests, delaying the announcement of election results in Paniai. The involvement of Nawipa’s family members became more evident when Sem Nawipa and Sisilia Nawipa, head and a member of KPU Paniai, respectively, were caught attempting to bribe Paniai Police Chief Deddy Nuhiri with Rp. 200 million (US\$12,368) on 11 December.³⁹ The bribe aimed to secure police protection during the counting process and to disperse demonstrators. Sem and Sisilia Nawipa were detained for a night and resumed their duties the following day.

Tensions reached a boiling point on 13 December 2024 when clashes broke out in Enarotali, Paniai’s capital, between supporters of three rival candidates and those of Meki Nawipa.⁴⁰ The unrest underscored the deep divisions and frustration over the election process. Amid this chaos, the Paniai KPU declared the final results, handing Meki Nawipa a staggering 96 percent of the vote.

C. A controversial win

The Central Papua election concluded with a decisive victory for Nawipa, who secured 45 per cent of the votes, placing him nine points ahead of runner-up Willem Wandik, with 34 per cent. Natalis Tabuni and John Wempi Wetipo trailed with 11 and 10 per cent of votes, respectively. Nawipa’s strong performance in predominantly Mee regions and Puncak Jaya was expected, but he delivered a surprising upset in Natalis Tabuni’s stronghold, Intan Jaya, securing 36 per cent of the votes compared to Tabuni’s 33 per cent. Nawipa’s only defeats came in Puncak, where Wandik dominated with 90 per cent of the vote, and in Mimika, where Wandik tied with Wetipo at 33 per cent, despite the latter’s alliance with a prominent local politician.

All losing candidates have petitioned the Constitutional Court to overturn the results. Additionally, the election ethics council (DKPP) has summoned Sem Nawipa, Sisilia Nawipa, and two other members of the KPU Paniai, along with seven subdistrict election members, over accusations of vote inflation in the bupati election.⁴¹ According to the complaints, these officials deliberately withheld voting results from multiple subdistricts and illegally transferred the votes meant for three bupati candidates to Yan Piet Nawipa, who ultimately claimed victory with 47 percent of the votes.⁴² In the first court hearing on 17 January, the plaintiffs claimed that KPU Paniai had ignored the Bawaslu’s instruction to redo the voting, but the provincial Bawaslu denied it had ever issued such an order.⁴³

³⁹ “2 Komisioner KPU paniai Ditangkap Terkait Dugaan Upaya Suap APH Rp 200 Juta,” detik.com, 11 December 2024.

⁴⁰ “Kapolres Paniai: Keributan di Paniai Terkait Pleno Pemilu, Lokasi dipindahkan,” nabire.net, 14 December 2024.

⁴¹ “DKPP Akan Periksa Sebelas Penyelenggara Pemilu Kabupaten Paniai Pada 17 January 2025,” dkpp.go.id, 16 January 2025.

⁴² Other than sharing the same surname, the relation between Yan Piet Nawipa and Meki Nawipa is unclear.

⁴³ “Robby-Hengky Dalilkan Tak Ada Pemungutan Suara Pilbup Paniai,” mkri.id, 13 January 2025.

V. CONCLUSION

The November 2024 regional elections in Papua’s three most populous provinces exposed persistent challenges to electoral integrity while underscoring evolving political dynamics. The rise of dark horse candidates—Benhur Tomi Mano in Papua, John Tabo in Highland Papua, and Meki Nawipa in Central Papua—illustrated how ethnic politics and local alliances could overcome established political machinery and appeal to a diverse voter base – as long as noken voting and money are widely used.

The answer is not to revert to indirect elections, as the Indonesian government under President Prabowo Subianto has proposed. This would merely shift the locus of manipulation from KPU and Bawaslu to local legislatures (DPRD), which would then have the mandate to select regional leaders. Such a system would not guarantee reduced intercommunity tensions. On the contrary, completely disenfranchising communities from the electoral process might exacerbate conflict. The fraud engendered by the noken system, itself an indirect voting practice, serves as a warning about what happens when the principle of one person, one vote is ignored.

Papuans should have the same rights as other Indonesians to choose their leaders. By legitimising the noken “system”, which is not a system at all, the Indonesian government is relegating Papua to second-class status and allowing the perpetration of fraud on a scale that it could not get away with on Java. Indonesia needs to invest in a better electoral system throughout Papua. This means a determined effort to undertake a realistic census; clean up voter rolls; ensure transport and security for poll watchers; allocate sufficient funds for voter education; ensure better oversight of local election commissions; and punish fraud. It would also help to extend electricity and secure Internet connections to remote areas.

All eyes are now on the Constitutional Court, once a pillar of Indonesian democracy, now a sad shadow of its former self. But its upcoming decisions on the electoral challenges will be crucial in determining not just the political leadership of these provinces but also the credibility of democratic processes in Papua.

APPENDIX I

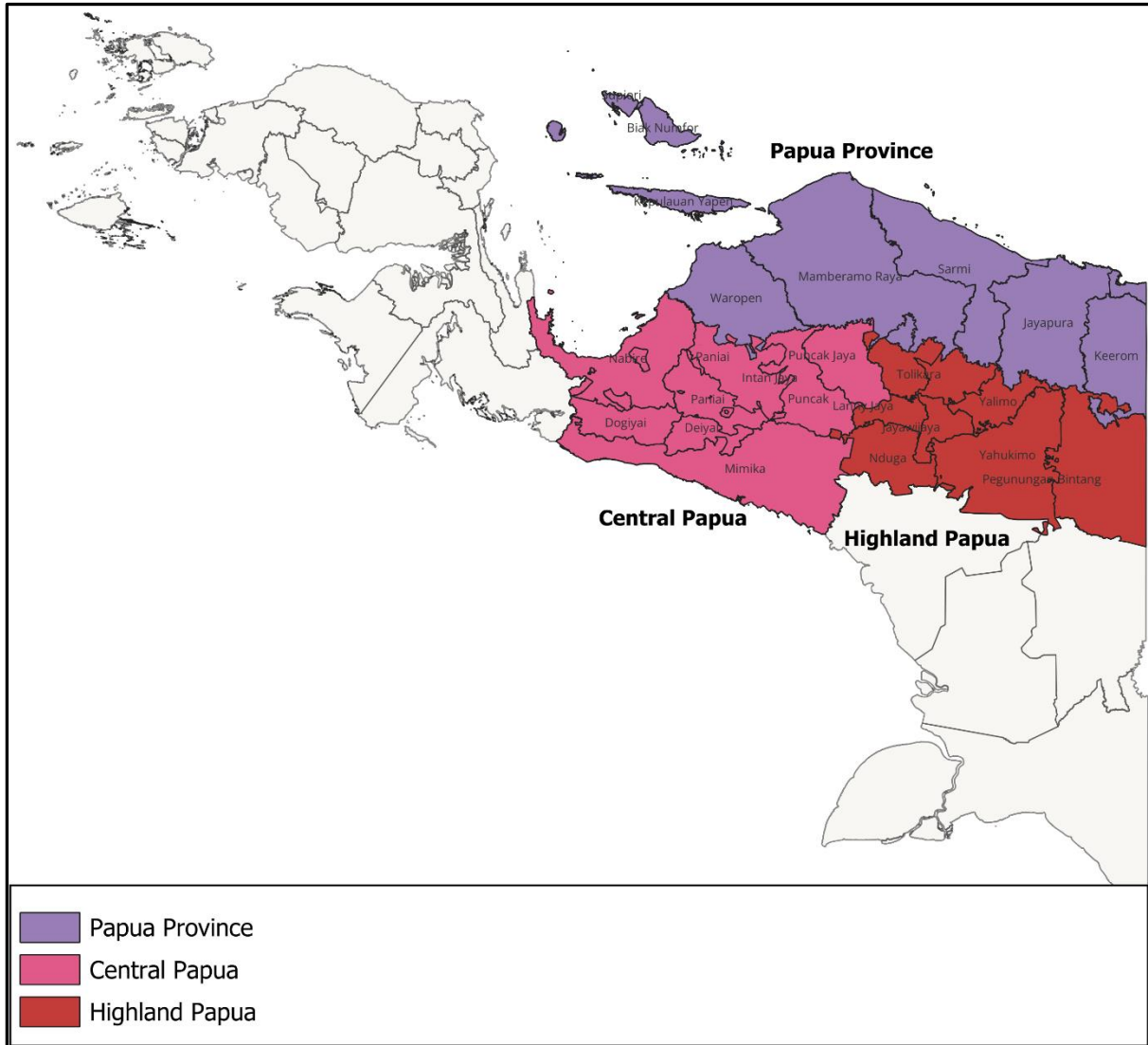
2024 Gubernatorial Election Results in Three Papuan Provinces⁴⁴

Papua								
No	Kabupaten	Benhur Tomi Mano	Mathius Fakhiri	Registered votes	Voter rolls	Turnout rate		
1	Jayapura	46,108	33,087	81,275	131,936	61.60%		
2	Yapen	34,985	20,237	56,018	77,875	71.93%		
3	Biak Numfor	29,571	34,908	65,860	100,874	65.29%		
4	Sarmi	13,536	8,140	22,124	28,126	78.66%		
5	Keerom	20,341	24,187	46,072	52,946	87.02%		
6	Waropen	9,679	12,040	21,976	25,473	86.27%		
7	Supiori	8,993	5,679	14,998	17,339	86.50%		
8	Mamberamo Raya	15,898	10,228	26,330	26,939	97.74%		
9	Jayapura City	90,859	114,271	211,226	289,451	72.97%		
10	Total	269,970	262,777	545,879	750,959	72.69%		
Highland Papua								
No	Kabupaten	John Tabo	Befa Yigibalom	Registered votes	Voter rolls	Turnout rate		
1	Jayawijaya	122,234	103,875	226,110	227,638	99.3%		
2	Pegunungan Bintang	43,968	53,316	97,311	97,313	100%		
3	Yahukimo	156,906	169,304	326,211	326,211	100%		
4	Tolikara	217,160	8,660	232,736	232,736	100%		
5	Mamberamo Tengah	19,651	18,316	37,967	37,967	100%		
6	Yalimo	37,693	51,118	88,813	88,813	100%		
7	Lanny Jaya	69,082	115,940	185,022	185,023	100%		
8	Nduga	54,231	43,751	97,982	97,982	100%		
9	Total	720,925	564,280	1,292,152	1,293,683	99.9%		
Central Papua								
No	Kabupaten	John Wetipo	Natalis Tabuni	Meki Nawipa	Willem Wandik	Registered votes	Voter rolls	Turnout rate
1	Nabire	27,369	18,621	40,519	28,491	120,269	124,913	96.28%
2	Puncak Jaya	11,126	4,284	135,941	45,530	196,881	196,881	100%
3	Paniai	50	3,342	110,947	1,085	115,424	115,424	100%
4	Mimika	64,911	32,529	48,584	64,517	220,436	224,514	98%
5	Puncak	1,753	1,235	13,849	150,539	167,376	167,376	100%
6	Dogiyai	5,710	4,337	66,715	19,318	96,080	96,080	100%
7	Intan Jaya	4,010	41,170	44,598	35,216	124,994	124,994	100%
8	Deiyai	7,317	1,146	41,471	29,025	78,959	78,959	100%
9	Total	122,246	106,664	502,624	373,721	1,120,419	1,129,141	99.23%

⁴⁴ Source: <https://pilkada2024.kpu.go.id/pilgub/papua>; <https://pilkada2024.kpu.go.id/pilgub/papua-pegunungan>; <https://pilkada2024.kpu.go.id/pilgub/papua-tengah>

APPENDIX II

Regional Elections in Papua, Highland Papua, and Central Papua



@QGIS Geographic Information System, November 2024; amended by IPAC

INSTITUTE FOR POLICY ANALYSIS OF CONFLICT (IPAC)

The Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict (IPAC) was founded in 2013 on the principle that accurate analysis is a critical first step toward preventing violent conflict. Our mission is to explain the dynamics of conflict why it started, how it changed, what drives it, who benefits and get that information quickly to people who can use it to bring about positive change.

In areas wracked by violence, accurate analysis of conflict is essential not only to peaceful settlement but also to formulating effective policies on everything from good governance to poverty alleviation. We look at six kinds of conflict: communal, land and resource, electoral, vigilante, extremist, and insurgent, understanding that one dispute can take several forms or progress from one form to another. We send experienced analysts with long-established contacts in the area to the site to meet with all parties, review primary written documentation where available, check secondary sources and produce in-depth reports, with policy recommendations or examples of best practices where appropriate.

We are registered with the Ministry of Social Affairs in Jakarta as the Foundation for Preventing International Crises (Yayasan Penanggulangan Krisis Internasional); our website is www.understandingconflict.org.
