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# The Practice of Local Bossism: Implementation of Local Boss Strategies in Mobilising Political Support

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## Abstract

*This study examines the relationship between politics and business through the case of Agus,[2] a tobacco middleman in Bukit Hijau regency.[3] Agus plays a pivotal role as a local boss, maintaining his position as a member of the District Regional House of Representatives (Dewan Perwakilan Rakyat Daerah) in the regency. Employing a qualitative research design with a phenomenological approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews. The study finds that Agus's crucial position in the local tobacco trade system enabled his transformation into a local boss, or a local political figure, through two mobilisation channels: (1) the tobacco trade network, which he successfully converted into an electoral political network, and (2) religious networks, evidenced by his affiliation with the Nusantara Social Party (Partai Sosial Nusantara/PSN).[4] These forms of mobilisation are analysed through six strategic frameworks for local bossism. The limitation of local bosses arises from the fact that the influence of local bosses is constrained by political party structures. The institutional system of political parties limit the full consolidation of power within the party. In conclusion, while local bosses such as Agus successfully mobilised political support through local boss strategies, their power remains incomplete and subject to institutional limitations.*

***Keywords:*** *Local bosses; political mobilisation; religious networks; business and politics*

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2 Not a real name

3 Not the actual name of the regency

4 Not the actual name of the political party

## Introduction

Discussions of local bossism are closely tied to the use of resources and coercive mechanisms that enable such actors to exert influence over local politics (Sidel, 1997). Sidel (1997) notes that the economic base of local bosses is typically came from direct state intervention, encompassing assets such as land ownership, industrial plants, transport infrastructure, illegal logging, and agricultural processing. In the Indonesian context, tobacco emerges as a key economic resource for local bosses to control the local political configuration. Based on the pre-research of this study, tobacco middlemen earn billions of rupiah per harvest season, while farmers receive as little as IDR 50 million (Putri et al., 2018). This disparity is unsurprising given the prevalence of fraudulent practices in the tobacco trading system, particularly in price negotiations and weighing mechanisms (Wicaksono, 2020).

For local bosses, tobacco functions as more than just a source of wealth. It serves as a vehicle for consolidating power across economic, socio-religious, and formal political aspects. Economically, local bosses establish more than patron-client relationships with both farmers and cigarette factories, resulting in the dependence of farmers on local bosses. Socio-religiously, they capitalise on affiliations with religious leaders and institutions, often channeling government aspiration funds as political incentives. In formal politics, they engage in vote-buying strategies financed by profits from the tobacco trade. These methods solidify political power and demonstrate dominance within the community.

Nevertheless, despite their entrenched positions in the economic, socio-religious, and political arenas, local bosses face significant limitations. Drawing a comparison with the Philippines, Sidel (1997) notes that local bosses in that context rely heavily on state patronage to sustain their influence. When these ties to national political power weaken, so too does their dominance. This was a harbinger of the local bosses' collapse due to their detachment from state patronage. The weakening of the state's support base opens the door for rival elites with stronger patronage to overthrow entrenched local power (Sidel, 1997).

However, the constraints faced by local bosses in this study diverge from the patterns typically observed in the literature. Limitations do not come from the state mechanisms such as regulations or loss of national patronage. Instead, they are internal to the 'structural' in nature, arising from the institutional logic of political parties. Material wealth, control of networks, and political positions (e.g., as a local parliament member) are insufficient to guarantee authority within the party system. In the case of Agus, the power of political parties makes local bosses lose their positions within the party. While he enjoyed electoral popularity at the regency level, he lacked decision-making authority within the provincial-level party hierarchy.

Therefore, this study aims to describe how Agus, a local boss who is both a tobacco middleman and a local parliament member, mobilises political support through two channels: trade and religion. The subsequent analysis breaks down his strategy into key components that define the modus operandi of local

bosses. Equally important is how institutional limitations have managed to destabilise the power of local bosses within political parties. This represents an important contribution to the broader theory of local bossism in Southeast Asia. Although this study is limited by its lack of data from provincial-level party elites, it nonetheless offers valuable insights not previously explored in existing literature. Employing a qualitative methodology with a phenomenological approach, this study gathers empirical evidence through in-depth interviews. All names of informants and locations in this article have been anonymised to protect the privacy and confidentiality of research participants. The interviewees were either directly or indirectly involved in the political practices discussed. Anonymisation has been applied consistently throughout the article, including in interview quotes, place names, and local institutions.

## Conceptual Framework

The concept of local bossism, according to Sidel (2005), refers to the phenomenon of local strongmen who sustain long-established political networks to monopolise economic resources and coercive power within their territories (Sidel, 2005). Bossism in this study emphasises the conditions that give rise to local bosses and their practices, while not excluding the coercive dimensions of their authority. Furthermore, local bossism is analysed through three aspects: control of economic resources, socio-religious networks, and formal political institutions.

Economic control plays a vital role in sustaining the existence of local bosses, serving both as a political power and a mechanism

for generating political loyalty. In the case of the tobacco trade, the capacity to control market flows allows local bosses to accumulate wealth, which is subsequently utilised to fund costly democratic activities—such as campaigning and vote buying (Sidel, 1997). Additionally, these economic resources create patronage ties, where the boss serves as a key intermediary between tobacco farmers and cigarette manufacturers. As a middleman, the local boss is present as a market provider for tobacco farmers who connect farmers and the industry. These patronage-based relationships foster not only material dependence but also emotional loyalty, which often translates into political support, electoral votes, and social stability.

Control over socio-religious aspects enables local bosses to expand their political support mobilisation and political career. In this study, local bosses initially build a support base through their economic network, primarily trade, while seeking to expand their influence into non-aligned social groups, including religious and art groups which have helped local bosses' in their earlier political careers. Strategic alliances with religious leaders enhance the legitimacy and social reach of local bosses, increasing their capacity to mobilise voters (Suaib & Zuada, 2015).

Control of the formal political aspects provides institutional legitimacy. Through legitimate mechanisms of democracy, local bosses could occupy formal positions such as members of local parliament and direct access to state resources. These include aspiration funds and development programmes. Holding such positions also boosts social prestige and enhances credibility among constituents, particularly among

tobacco farmers who perceive these positions as indicators of power and reliability. Meanwhile, participation in electoral politics in Indonesia necessitates affiliation with a political party, making parties essential vehicles for political advancement and delivering local bosses to strategic positions.

The next concept elaborates three aspects of local bosses in political mobilisation, especially on the conversion of trade and socio-religious networks into political networks. This study draws on Nedelmann's (1987) definition of mobilisation as the key process of integrating individuals into the political system, particularly through their engagement in institutionalised political channels, such as voting. In the case of local bosses, this political mobilisation tends to follow a vertical orientation, namely vertical mobilisation—a hierarchical process in which influence is exerted top-down (Nedelmann, 1987).

In terms of voter behaviour, the concept of mobilisation is divided into two strategies: pure political mobilisation and conversion political mobilisation. Pure mobilisation targets passive or low-turnout voters, focusing on re-engaging party loyalists and those with prior exposure to political networks. In contrast, conversion mobilisation targets non-partisan or opposition-aligned individual, with the goal of shifting their allegiance to the mobilising party of candidate (Karp et al., 2008).

Meanwhile, the types of political mobilisation can be divided into three: traditional ties, patron-client relations, and political machines. Firstly, traditional ties tend to be legitimised by cultural, social or religious traditions that have long

been present in society. Second, the patron-client relationship is defined by Huntington & Nelson (1994) as a relationship based on a reciprocal but unequal exchange of benefits. Third, a political machine is a group of people or political party frontmen that distribute material rewards in exchange for electoral support. Such relationships are pragmatic, transactional, direct, and brief (Huntington & Nelson, 1994).

According to Sidel (1999), local bosses may deploy up to ten strategies to consolidate and sustain their political-economic power: (1) placing relatives and cronies in formal positions; (2) establishing political machines that serve as vote brokers; (3) arranging for the placement of local officials; (4) arranging for government projects and aspiration funds; (5) arranging for local regulations; (6) arranging for tax breaks; (7) arranging for loans from the Regional Development Bank; (8) granting contracts or concessions related to economic or development activities; (9) intimidation and political violence; and (10) implementing iron fist policies to resolve land conflicts and weaken labour unions. While this study does not capture all ten strategies in practice, it identifies six that are actively employed by the subject. Nevertheless, these findings are able to contribute to studies that explore the theory of local bossism.

Despite the power wielded by local bosses, they are not immune to institutional constraints, particularly those imposed by political party systems. In Indonesia, political parties are governed by statutes (Anggaran Dasar dan Anggaran Rumah Tangga/AD/ART), which mandate democratic, transparent, and accountable internal decision-making processes (Sajian et al., 2023). However, the

strong institutionalisation of political parties tends to create formal barriers that hinder the consolidation of local bosses' power. Internal political party procedures, such as central control of party leadership in the regions, control over legislative and executive nominations, evaluation mechanisms for public officials, and regeneration in the bylaws are instruments to control party sustainability.

In this case, every party member is forced to comply with party rules. Every party policy must be adhered to, limiting local bosses' room for manoeuvre. The limitations are exacerbated when local bosses occupy lower levels, especially at the regency level. They can only accept centralised policies/decisions that sometimes threaten the survival of the local bosses themselves. This is possible because the provisions in the bylaws give party leaders the authority to determine policy, including influencing the position of local bosses. Therefore, local bosses also experience unequal power relations within political parties and must submit to superordinate power even though they are dominant at the local level.

## Findings

### Transformation to Local Boss

Clan regeneration in the Philippines has similarities with the regeneration of tobacco middlemen in Indonesia, particularly in the intergenerational transfer of economic control. Sidel (1997) notes that the Osmeña clan's reproduction of power takes place through regeneration thus forming a classic "dynasty". Osmeña represented Cebu city for five terms in the national legislature and held many more

prestigious positions. Osmeña's legacy of positions, including control of monopoly franchises, public works contracts, and more enabled the clan to exercise considerable regulatory power over the city's economy (Sidel, 1997).

In the case of Agus, the process began in 1994, with support from his father, a traditional tobacco trader during the New Order era. This exemplifies a broader pattern in Bukit Hijau, where many tobacco middlemen emerge from inherited businesses and maintain dominance in specific localities. This pattern underscores the familial transfer of economic power.

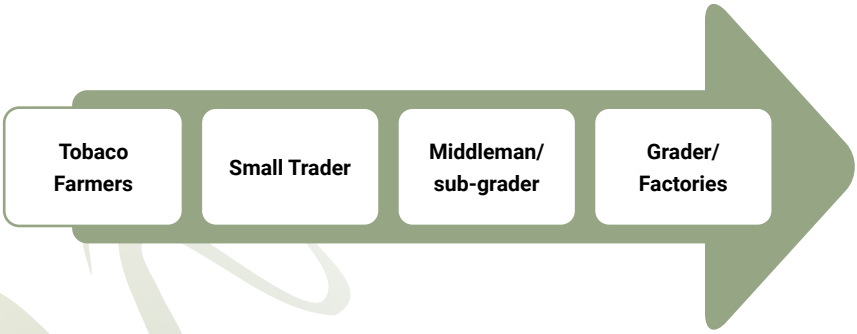
Agus adopted a trading model aligned with PT Intikarya a major cigarette manufacturer, following the partnership framework established by the 2004 Ministerial Decree on Industry and Trade (Surat Keputusan/SK Kemitraan) (Brata, 2012). His entry into the tobacco business was facilitated by a former grader and friend, who introduced him to PT Karyatama a distributor linked to PT Intikarya. As Agus said:

> *"I have a friend, a grader, a Chinese person from Besole [Not the real name of a sub-regency], who works at PT Karyatama. He inherited the role from his father, who also had a good partnership with PT Karyatama. From the past until now, I have remained loyal to PT Karyatama." (Interview with Agus, tobacco middleman, 14 April 2023).*

In this system, Agus holds the position of sub-grader, a level below the grader,[5] a role with significant influence over both farmers' incomes and manufacturers' procurement decisions. Sub-graders are tasked with buying tobacco from farmers and storing it in warehouses, then periodically distributing or selling tobacco from farmers to manufacturers in large quantities. The tobacco supply chain is quite complex and involving multiple intermediaries (small traders, middlemen, collectors), making Agus's role central in ensuring the flow of goods from farmers to manufacturers.

5 Graders are representatives of cigarette factories who are tasked with determining the grade/quality of tobacco based on the colour of the dried tobacco, handle/body, aroma, and dryness. The fate of farmers and the cigarette industry depends on them because graders have the right to determine the price of tobacco based on subjective judgement. See https://distanbun.jatengprov.go.id/v/index.php/blog/detail/210/Pelatihan%20tembakau (accessed on 27 September 2024).

**Figure 1: Tobacco Trade Flow**




*Source: Sari & Rusdjijati, 2015*

Agus supervises several field coordinators, who are responsible for procuring tobacco from local farmers, managing partnerships, and acting as marketing agents. Partner farmers must register through these coordinators to gain access to PT Intikarya's support, which is routed through Agus. These include fertiliser distribution, extension services, and seed provision. This structure positions Agus as a critical intermediary and reinforces his local dominance through personalised patronage and logistical control.

Agus's operation aligns with Sidel's (2005) local boss's criteria, particularly through monopoly control over economic resources. The buying system grants Agus near-total discretion in determining prices, often to the disadvantage of farmers. Middlemen often sell good-quality tobacco at a lower price. For example, A-grade tobacco valued at IDR 75,000/kg may be purchased for only IDR 70,000/kg (Wibisono, 2022). In addition, there are also deductions for basket weight, sampling, and porter fees—further reduce farmers' profits, amounting to 8–13 kg per basket in lost weight alone (Kompasiana.com, 2020).

Farmer are further marginalised by their dependence on the partnership scheme. Without Agus, they would lack access to fertiliser credit and guaranteed sales channels. This relationship is instrumentalised by Agus during elections, translating economic subordination into political mobilisation.

The conditions enabling the emergence of local bosses in this context include: firstly, the concrete and immediate economic necessity. Agus strives for timely payment (different from the non-partner scheme), between 3-5 days at

most. Payments that tend to be quick can be used by farmers for operational costs of tobacco processing. Secondly, the scarcity of access to basic needs. Farmers lack direct access to cigarette manufacturers and rely on intermediaries like Agus for sales.

Thirdly, the governmental failure in welfare provision. For example, an article shows that partnered farmers in PT Intikarya earn above the regency minimum wage of around IDR 8,966,784, largely due to the partnership model's stability, thereby filling a state service gap (Putri et al., 2018). Fourth, the high socio-economic inequality between tobacco farmers and middlemen makes tobacco farmers often face operational capital difficulties. Agus helps bridge this gap through partnership system-linked input provision and credit.

Finally, the state facilitation through legal and democratic mechanisms. Agus has served three consecutive terms as a member of local parliament, even rising to the position of vice chairman and contesting the vice-regency. His campaigns were marked by money politics, as commonly acknowledged in local contests, and supported by both his trade cronies and religious affiliations.

Now Agus has transformed into a local boss, combining networks to accumulate wealth and power, just like local bosses in the Philippines. The birth of Agus's version of a local boss occurs through two mechanisms, namely regeneration from an entrepreneurial background and through the legal mechanism of elections involving the practice of money politics. The characteristics of a local boss become clearer when he becomes a member of

local parliament, which is called the result of the terms "marriage of market and state" (Wicaksono, 2020).

## Local Boss First Line Mobilisation: The Trade Track

The main support for Agus's political mobilisation derives from the tobacco trade route. This pathway describes Agus's process of converting an economic network into a political one. This network accounted for 75% of votes in the election; the religious network contributed 15-20% only, with the remainder stemming from party sympathisers. Indirectly, this shows the scope of Agus's control over the local economy, primarily through his dominance of the tobacco trade. Agus not only controls the trade's economic dynamics but also exerts authority over the subordinate actors who operate within it.

Agus uses trade politics—in this context, referring to the politicisation of the PT Intikarya partnership system—as an effort to maintain his position as a local boss. He utilises at least two mechanisms within the partnership system to initiate political mobilisation. Firstly, Agus leverages the provision of fertiliser credit to partner farmers. PT Intikarya offers fertiliser on credit, but access is exclusively available through Agus, who acts as the distributor. This credit scheme is quite attractive, as most farmers cannot afford to buy large quantities of fertiliser outright. When working with Agus, Rohmat Pitoyo stated that he was granted leniency under the credit arrangement (Interview with Rohmat Pitoyo, tobacco partner farmer,

26 May 2023). Repayment is due after the tobacco harvest, when the farmers are obliged to sell their produce to PT Intikarya through Agus. Since Agus keeps credit records, payments are automatically deducted from the proceeds of the tobacco sales, based on the quantity of fertiliser taken beforehand. This system of access—mediated through Agus—can influence the political outlook of the contracted farmers. Partner farmers and their families often express their gratitude and sense of obligation by supporting Agus during legislative elections.

Secondly, farmers benefit from receiving payment for their tobacco more quickly. This prompt payment is crucial, as tobacco farming requires substantial capital. Rohmat reported that payment is typically made within a week after delivering tobacco samples—an arrangement that made him feel secure in the partnership (Interview with Rohmat Pitoyo, tobacco partner farmer, 26 May 2023). In the end, this efficiency endangers a sense of indebtedness, and many farmers feel compelled to express their appreciation through electoral support.

Agus himself claims that the emotional bond formed through this economic interdependence, stating:

> *"The factory provides fertiliser; I help with cultivation, even give cash support for labour. Naturally, they understand the help they've received. You have to observe them closely... Since tobacco trading relates to income, it resonates more deeply." (Interview with Agus, tobacco middleman, 15 April 2023).*

In additions, Agus deploys village coordinators as informal agents in his political machinery. These coordinators are tasked

with canvassing voters, referred to as *biting* in local parlance, as though operating a grassroots political machine during legislative elections.

Further analysis of Agus's mobilisation practices can be situated within mobilisation theory. Following the framework of Nedelmann's (1987) concept of vertical mobilisation, Agus's partnership system allows him to assert political and economic influence over those below him in the network, namely the village coordinators and partner farmers. His effort to convert an economic network into a political one have proven successful, as evidenced by the evolution of partner farmer coordinators into functional components of his political machinery.

Karp et al.'s (2008) mobilisation theory further supports this analysis. Agus has consistently maintained this trade network for a dozen years, building the loyalty of partner farmers. This loyalty has been successfully converted into political support, aligning with the theory of pure mobilisation. This form of mobilisation relies on sustained engagement with loyal farmers, who in turn extend the influence by encouraging family members to back Agus. Such diffusion of support reflects the grassroots expansion that characterises pure mobilisation.

Some aspects of Agus's strategies reflect a patron-client relationship as described by Huntington and Nelson (1994). Here, Agus assumes the role of patron—providing credit and expedited payment—while farmers reciprocate with political backing. Yet, Agus's domination over pricing and lack of transparency reveal a deeper asymmetry. His control surpasses traditional patronage, marking him as a local boss rather than a mere patron.

Finally, Agus's coordinators play a critical role in vote buying, a key function of political machines. Political machines work by offering people what a candidate can give, then the recipient of the offer is expected to vote for the candidate as instructed. As Jono did, he offered a sum of money to target voters alongside instructions to support Agus (Interview with Jono or Sujono, partner farmer coordinator for one of the villages, 23 May 2023).

Two conclusions can be drawn from the analysis of Agus's political mobilisation through trade channels. First, Agus's use of the tobacco trading system aligns with a vertical mobilisation model, employing a pure mobilisation strategy based on a patron-client basis. Second, his reliance on partner farmer coordinators to mobilise votes reflects a conversion mobilisation strategy, also within the vertical mobilisation model, but grounded in the workings of a political machine.

## Local Boss Second-Line Mobilisation: The Religious Track

Agus's political trajectory remains deeply intertwined with the religious organisation. The religious organisation and its affiliated bodies have serves as stepping stones in Agus's political career. He strategically nurtures his relationships within the religious organisation by providing incentives to maintain his position both as a local boss and as a long-standing local parliament member.

Since first being elected in 2009, Agus has served three consecutive terms. His status as an incumbent affords him to aspiration funds, enabling the use of pork barrel politics as a

means of mobilising political support. He carefully organised the the distribution of these funds to respond to the aspirations of specific constituents. For example, when a *rebana* (Islamic tambourine) group in a hamlet, the majority of which are The religious organisation members, submitted a funding proposal through the formal recess procedure. The *rebana* group held a meeting with Agus to discuss the transaction process: recess funds in exchange for support and loyalty.

The next layer of mobilisation involves vote buying, targeting individuals as part of the community who are not affiliated with existing organisations in the community (e.g. farmer groups, arts groups, religious groups, etc.) and community groups that do not have a forum to receive aspiration funds. These vote buying was carried out by Agus's own family members, as well as families of the religious organisation branch administrators, particularly in villages with dense familial networks members/extended families (Interview with Jono, partner farmer coordinator for one of the villages, 23 May 2023).

Meanwhile, Agus leveraged his personal relationship with influental religious organisation clerics (*kiai*). Together with his confidant Imam Sulaiman, Agus frequently visited the these clerics to maintain goodwill, seek spiritual blessings, and request explicit endorsements in the political sphere (Interview with Jono, partner farmer coordinator for one of the villages, 23 May 2023). The deference shown by followers of the *kiai* to their religious leaders makes them highly susceptible to mobilisation via clerical endorsement.

The mobilisation above are successful due to the effectiveness of the work

of both formal and informal political machines formed by Agus. Imam plays a pivotal role in this operation, acting as the sub-regency team coordinator, responsible for coordinating teams in the village-level. He describes his role as follows:

> *"I act as a bridge between the team in the village, the residents, and Mr Agus. Mr Agus instructed me, 'Go to Mr Imam now.' Everything is scheduled by Mr Agus. The areas that haven't been worked on yet are Banyubiru and Soranan. Once Mr Agus gives the order, I take action." (Interview with Imam, Agus's trusted aides, 17 May 2023).*

The quote above illustrates Imam's duties as a sub-regency level coordinator within a political party. He initiated meeting that paved the way for Agus's mobilisation of political support through pork barrel political practices.

Agus's mobilisation can be classified as vertical mobilisation based on the direction of movement. According to Nedelmann's (1987) theory of mobilisation, the flow of aspiration—from grassroots groups (such as *rebana* members) to political elites (Agus or his party)—exemplifies vertical mobilisation. This is evident in the involvement of family members of PSN branch administrators at the village level. Agus himself remains at the top of this structure, issuing instructions either directly or through trusted intermediaries such as Imam. Likewise, the mobilisation strategy of seeking *kiai* endorsements reflects a vertical mobilisation,

as the *kiai* are highly respected religious figures positioned higher than his followers in the social hierarchy.

The analysis can be further refined using the strategic perspective of mobilisation theory by Karp et al. (2008). The mobilisation of the religious organisation-affiliated constituents represents a case of conversion mobilisation, which is applied when a party or candidate already has a fixed voter base. In Agus's case, 75% of political support cames from the tobacco trade network, while 15-20% is derived from the expansion of religious networks, including *rebana* groups, local PSN branch administrators, and followers of influential *kiai.*

Agus's mobilisation through religious lines also aligns with Huntington and Nelson's (1994) mobilisation platform. The involvement of rebana groups, for instance, closely resembles a patron-client relationship**.** These groups are financially dependent on Agus's assistance (albeit sourced from aspiration funds) to operations and equipment purchases. The inequality in this reciprocal relationship is evident: in exchange for aid, the *rebana* group offer electoral support.

Secondly, Agus employs the party's political machine at the village level. Some parts of Agus's political machine lie in the involvement of Agus's extended family, family members of PSN branch administrators, and trusted allies such as Imam. These actors also act as vote-buying agents, distributing material incentives in return for electoral loyalty. This reflects a pragmatic form of voter engagement, where the electorate prioritises tangible benefits over political programmes.

Thirdly, Agus relies on traditional ties by involving the religious organisation clerics

and activist figures in PSN. These traditional actors have the authority to control their small groups, where respect and deference are often granted by default, regardless of any personal or material benefit received from the leaders themselves.

The analysis above shows the mobilisation of political support by Agus correspond to the vertical direction mobilisation model, implemented through conversion mobilisation strategy grounded in three foundational mechanisms: traditional ties, patron-client relations, and political machine operations.

## Strategies and Practices to Become a Local Boss

### 1. Placing Family Members in Legislative Positions

The political involvement of Siti Yumiyati, Agus's wife, stems from the implementation of the 30% female representation policy. General Election Commission (Komisi Pemilihan Umum/KPU) Regulation No. 7/2013 reinforced Law No. 8/2012, which mandated that at least 30% of legislative candidates for the parliament be women, equivalent to one female candidate for every three nominees.

During this period, Agus had begun to wield considerable influence within the Bukit Hijau regency branch of the PSN. He proposed his wife to fulfil the gender quota requirement. Siti was positioned as a legislative candidate in a different electoral regency from Agus. Her candidacy proved successful: she was elected as a member of the Bukit Hijau local parliament for two consecutive periods, 2014-2018 and 2019-2024.

Siti Yumiyati's success is inseparable from Agus's intervention. Agus consistently accompanied his wife in

engaging with grassroots constituents (Interview with Agus, tobacco middleman, 8 August 2023). The mobilisation strategies employed were similar to those previously used by Agus himself. Siti Yumiyati also had trusted aides assigned to engage and organise community groups. The political transactions are also similar, ranging from group assistance to vote buying.

Agus gained multiple advantages from his wife's legislative placement. Firstly, she provided a mobilisation base during his bid for the 2018 regional elections as a candidate for deputy regent. Her electoral success in Bukit Hijau created a dependable mass support base. Secondly, it facilitated the expansion of the tobacco business. A significant portion of residents in this electoral regency are tobacco farmers. The joint status of Agus and his wife as local parliament members increased their political credibility and enhanced the perception of security and reliability, persuading farmers to sell their tobacco through Agus's network. Theoretically, Agus's actions align with Sidel's findings where the placement of local boss families in formal political positions aims to secure control over economic resources.

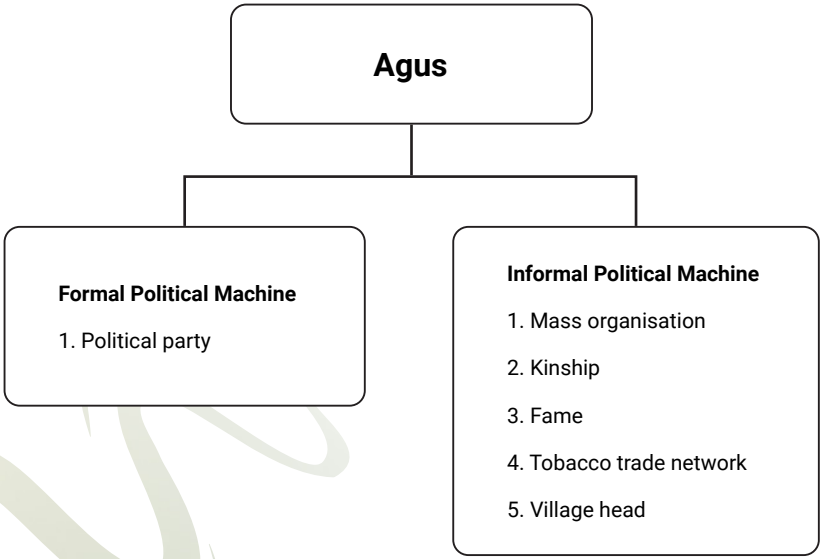
**2. Establishment of a Political Machine as a Vote Broker**

The existence of political machines not only in theoretical framework on the mobilisation of political support but also in the literature on local bossism. This overlap between the two frameworks is a key analytical point in this research. Therefore, this section focuses specifically on Agus's use of political machines and presents concrete examples, particularly

involving village heads. The broader mechanisms of two-way mobilisation are elaborated elsewhere.

Agus mobilised numerous actors in his vote-gathering efforts through an expansive political machine network. These machines operated at both formal and informal levels. The formal political machine involves the political party structure itself. Meanwhile, the informal political machine was made up of mass organisations, familial ties, public reputation, and tobacco trade network.

**Figure 2. Agus's Political Machine Chart**



One central actor in this informal machinery is the village head, often regarded as a senior and respected figure (some of them are formed due to the tobacco trade network). Instructions from these figures are generally obeyed by the entire village community, including electoral directives. This influence is exercised through a transactional agreement. Agus provides aspiration funds to village heads, who in turn formally allocate these funds to the villages through programmes resembling official government initiatives. These allocations, however, come with consequences: the village community is converted into a vote bank for Agus. In return, village heads not only receive political and financial banking but also benefit materially from these arrangements.

Reflecting on Sidel's (2005) theoretical framework, the establishment of a political machine to broker votes for local bosses is similar to what happened in Thailand. There, *chao pho*—local political mafias and businessmen—play a crucial role in vote mobilisation. They act as brokers for members of parliament, leveraging their influence in exchange for protection and access to illegal businesses such as mining and gambling (Sidel, 2005). While Agus's case does not explicitly involve illegal enterprises, a similar mechanism is evident: partner farmer coordinators who assist in political mobilisation are rewarded with easy access to sales of partner farmers' tobacco commodities.

### 3. Government Project Arrangements and Aspiration Funds

Like many local bosses, Agus has discretion over government project arrangements and aspiration funds allocations. As a member of the local council, Agus is formally tasked with accommodating community aspirations and channeling them into tangible outcomes through these funds. The management of these funds is typically based on the number and prioritisation of proposal received. In principle, Agus accepts almost all aspirations from his constituents. Given the geographical dispersion of his supporters, he prioritises those who have not previously received support. Constituents who have already benefited are promised future allocations, typically in the following financial year after submitting new proposals.

An unrevealed variation of this practice is the distribution of aid to arts groups and village heads in two specific sub-regencies. In Kebonagung village, Agus reached out to the *kuda lumping* traditional dance group, facilitated by Jono, a coordinator of partner farmers and a member of the arts group. In this case, the aspiration fund was directed towards purchasing performance equipment according to the group's needs (Interview with Jono, partner farmer coordinator for one of the villages, 23 May 2023).

The ability to leverage aspiration funds in this way is a privilege afforded predominantly to incumbents. The existence of aspiration funds reduce the political costs associated with securing office. In general, a candidate must invest between IDR 750-900 million ton secure a local parliament seat. Meanwhile, for incumbents like Agus,

the costs significantly lower (Interview with Imam, Agus's trusted aides, 17 May 2023). The state also facilitates incumbents for image-building and mobilising political support. Although aspiration funds are technically meant for public benefit, those acting as intermediaries often derive political capital from their distribution.

The statement above shows that Agus exerts a subtle monopoly over his constituents. He organises the allocation based on strategic political considerations; it can be priorities for the interests of constituents or priorities for personal interests, even he is able to distribute aspiration funds based on momentum, for example approaching the elections. Nevertheless, this monopoly operates within the bounds of legality, as Agus consistently coordinates with local government authorities during the disbursement process.

### 4. Local Regulation Setting

This section draws upon the case of a demonstration by tobacco farmers protesting the proposed classification of tobacco as a narcotic substance. It highlights Agus's role as a legislator and his actions—whether implemented or not—in response to this policy threat.

Tobacco farmers, organised under the Indonesian Tobacco Farmers Association (Asosiasi Petani Tembakau Indonesia/ APTI) in Bukit Hijau regency, held a peaceful action to oppose Article 154, Paragraph 3 of the draft Health Bill. The article proposed by the central government equates tobacco with narcotics, psychotropic substances, alcoholic beverages, and other addictive substances.

According to tobacco farmers, such a regulation would torment their livelihoods by negatively affecting the economy (Suyitno, 2023).

As a representative of the people and chairman of Commission B, which deals with agricultural and economic affairs, Agus was compelled to respond this issue. Although legislative authority over the bill rests with the national parliament, Agus and his colleagues at the regency level pledged to review the article and communicate their concerns.

Beyond the Health Bill, the increase in tobacco excise tax has also generated unrest. Farmers rallied outside the Ministry of Finance to urge a reassessment of the policy (Siregar, 2022). In this case, Agus sought to influence the Ministry's decision by advocating for a rational approach to the tax increase. He also coordinated with major cigarette factories who purchase tobacco from Bukit Hijau, urging them to maintain prorecurement and ensure fair prices from farmers. Essentially, the tax increase on tobacco products affects the absorption of tobacco by factories, hence that it potentially reduce the level of cigarette consumption.

The above case signals a very real threat to Agus's political-economic base, which is rooted in the tobacco trade. Unwilling to remain passive, he actively leveraged his legislative position to shape policy outcomes and issue recommendations. Agus's actions are considered as efforts to defend the interests of tobacco farmers and maintain access to economic resources, although operating at the regency-level. In effect, these actions are consistent with the behaviour of local bosses who utilise formal political authority to protect strategic sectors.

## 5. Awarding Contracts or Concessions Related to Economic or Development Activities

Back in 2004, the government issued a Decree of the Minister of Industry and Trade (SK Menperindag) (Brata, 2012), as a solution to falling tobacco prices. The regulation introduced a partnership system between cigarette manufacturers and farmers. Companies such as PT Intikarya, along with intermediaries like Agus, implemented this system to stabilise tobacco production and prices.

In this arrangement, as a sub-grader, Agus directly or indirectly plays a role in providing concessions related to tobacco trading activities to partner farmers. Farmers seeking to join the partnership must go through Agus. In other words, Agus directly provides forms of partnership from PT Intikarya to farmers. Meanwhile, Agus also plays a role in providing concessions indirectly through PT Intikarya compliance's to the Partnership Decree. However, Agus as middleman is not a formal part of PT Intikarya's structure. This logic leads to the conclusion that Agus also plays an indirect role in giving concessions.

Concessions related to economic activities have similarities to the form of local bossism that occurred in Indonesia during the New Order era. At that time, military officials in local government naturally adhered to centralised programmes such as school funding or healthcare development, while using them to issue contracts to facilitate the business operations of entrepreneurs or even for personal enrichment

(Sidel, 2005). In similar fashion, Agus has leveraged the Partnership Decree to facilitate his tobacco trading business.

### 6. Intimidation and Political Violence

Agus has employed both direct and indirect methods of intimidation and political violence. The attributes of power attached to him allow Agus to control local bureaucracies and coercive forces. One such example occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic. In Kebonagung village (home to many of Agus's constituents), a thanksgiving event was planned, but the local police initially denied the permit in accordance with health regulations. This is where Agus's role emerges, which is described by Jono as follows:

> *"At that time, Mr Agus directly called the police station, saying 'That's my event—don't interfere.' The point is, Mr Agus told the police not to disband the event." (Interview with Jono, partner farmer coordinator for one of the villages, 23 May 2023).*

By involving Agus's control of coercive power, the event was successfully held without the intervention of the authorities.

The effort to control the local apparatus framed as care for his constituents. This ultimately builds political loyalty. His ability to guarantee such events not only protects the social fabric of rural communities but also secures his political base—particularly among partner farmers.

Agus has also resorted to more covert methods of intimidation. During the 2014 legislative elections, some of his political opponents removed and discarded his campaign posters. The perpetrator was linked to a subordinate organisation of one of the parties. To address

this situation, Agus contacted his subordinate, a known village thug, to intimidate and terrorise the individual responsible. The thug reportedly issued threats, including the possibility of kidnapping, as a deterrent to future sabotage.

This form of control over the coercive apparatus of the state and the profitable illegal economy has become an important instrument for the accumulation of capital and political power (Sidel, 1997). In this case, control over the coercive apparatus has an impact as Agus's efforts to protect the partner farmers are the same as Agus keeping economic control on track.

This phenomenon also echoes the longstanding practice of thuggery in Indonesian politics, most notably institutionalised during the New Order through organisations like Pemuda Pancasila (Sidel, 2005). The bottom line remains the same; thuggery transforms into electoral services that at least provide a way for local bosses to grasp power.

## Local Boss Limitation

The dynamics of the implementation of party bylaws and regulations have become a significant barrier for Agus in maintaining and reproducing his power through party leadership at the regency level. Previously, Agus had served as a chair of the PSN branch management for two periods, both times elected by acclamation. As his final term approached its end, most of the sub-regency-level party administrators supported his re-election. However, despite the outcome of the local deliberation naming Agus as chair, the regional management board in provincial level) substituted his name with another candidate and forwarded the replacement to the party's central board. Finally,

the leadership of the branch was in the hands of another person while Agus served as secretary (Interview with Imam, Agus's trusted aides, 17 May 2023).

The leadership change, although politically significant, was procedurally valid. Party regulations state that district level leaders are elected through sub-district party leadership deliberations, a process that was following in Agus's case. Similarly, the provincial level's alteration of the proposed name did not violate party regulations. Of course, this decision considers the interests of party consolidation.

The abundance of economic resources was unable to maintain dominance, which resulted in the decline of Agus's influence within the party hierarchy. While he continues to serve as branch secretary, Agus no longer has access to key levers of power necessary to control party direction at the local level in line with his interests. His ability to influence decisions has been curtailed by the institutional power of the party. In this regard, political parties play an important role because basically local bosses are born from democratic mechanisms and need political parties as vehicles.

Elements of democracy such as political parties, which should ideally be the cornerstone of local bosses' power, are actually weakening local bosses. The strong institutionalisation of political parties, enshrined in bylaws and other regulations, is an 'iron cage' for local bosses. It is impossible for them to break these rules to advance their political careers. They will only be kicked out of the political party. Switching party affiliation is also futile because other parties apply similar rules. In addition, the party's institutional 'iron cage' have the potential

to 'kill' the existence of local bosses. Stagnant conditions within the party are vulnerable to being shaken by the power of party superordinates–regency to central level leaders–unless they have a patronage network with party officials at the centre.

## Conclusion

This paper concludes that the transformation of local bosses involves three key factors: the monopolisation of economic resources, the mobilisation of socio-religious networks, and control over the formal political sphere. This is evidenced by the experience of Agus, a tobacco middleman who transformed into a local boss by consolidating trade networks, engaging with socio-religious communities, and securing electoral legitimacy through democratic mechanism as a member of the Bukit Hijau parliament. This trajectory confirms the notion that the state, as an institutional framework, can produce and sustain figures like Agus.

Agus successfully maintained his position in the Bukit Hijau parliament by employing classic local boss strategies for mobilising political support. Central to this was his monopolistic control over the the tobacco trade system. Agus, as a middleman, carefully converted tobacco farmers into a dependable electoral base. These trade networks were then reinforced by support from socio-religious networks. Mobilisation was further bolstered by practices such as vote buying and pork-barrel politics, targeting religious organisation members.

In reproducing his power, Agus successfully employed six out of ten strategies commonly associated with local bosses. First, he placed his wife as a member of local parliament,

securing both political and economic benefits. Second, he established a political machine composed of loyalists to act as vote brokers. Third, he organised aspiration funds using pork barrel political tactics. Fourth, he engaged in local regulation-setting by advocating for policies favourable to his economic interests. Fifth, he awarded economic concessions through tobacco farming partnership system. Sixth, he employed both intimidation and violence by controlling the local police and using threats against political opponents.

However, the limitation comes from the political party institutional system, which plays a vital role in consolidating the power of local bosses. The party's institutional system, as enshrined in party regulations, is an iron cage that limits the space for local bosses to maintain dominance within the party. Local bosses' control of economic resources appears futile in the face of superordinate power from party leaders at the provincial and central levels. This proves that local bosses also do not have perfect political control. Thus, this paper is expected to add to the repertoire of knowledge and offering new perspectives both in interpreting strategies employed by local bosses and the institutional constraints that limit their power.

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