
POLITICAL HEGEMONY AND THE EMERGENCE OF A SINGLE CANDIDATE IN THE 2024 NORTH ACEH LOCAL ELECTION: A GRAMSCIAN PERSPECTIVE

Sudirman¹, Sahrudin Lubis², TB Massa Dja'far³, Safrizal Rambe⁴, Alfa Khalil Ikram⁵

^{1,2,3,4,5} Universitas Nasional Jakarta, Jakarta, Indonesia

*Corresponding Author: t.hajjuma@gmail.com

Abstract

The increasing occurrence of single-candidate local elections in Indonesia raises important questions about the quality of local democracy, particularly in post-conflict regions such as Aceh. While previous studies mainly explain this phenomenon through institutional factors, they pay limited attention to how political dominance acquires social legitimacy. This study examines how the political hegemony of the Aceh Party generated elite consensus and produced a single-candidate election in the 2024 North Aceh local election. Using a qualitative case study approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews and documentary analysis, then analyzed thematically and interpreted through Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony. The findings show that the single-candidate election resulted not from institutional arrangements or political pragmatism alone, but from a gradual process of hegemonic consolidation involving historical legitimacy, ideological leadership, elite accommodation, and the production of social consent—mechanisms that transformed political dominance into electoral consensus while formally preserving democratic procedures. This study extends Gramscian theory by showing that hegemonic political practices may develop within formally democratic systems through legitimacy and voluntary consent rather than coercion, contributing to the literature on political hegemony, dominant-party politics, and local democracy in post-conflict societies.

Keywords: Political Hegemony; Single-Candidate Election; Aceh Party; Electoral Consensus; Local Democracy; Gramsci; Post-Conflict Aceh.

INTRODUCTION

The increasing prevalence of single-candidate elections has emerged as a significant challenge to the quality of democracy in both established and emerging democratic systems. Democratic theory assumes that elections provide citizens with meaningful political alternatives and enable electoral accountability through political competition (Mietzner, 2020). Accordingly, electoral competition is regarded as a fundamental component of representative democracy because it promotes elite circulation, strengthens government accountability, and allows citizens to influence public policy through electoral choice (Ingham, 2022). However, increasing political cartelization, elite collusion, and strategic coalition-building have contributed to the growing occurrence of uncontested elections, thereby weakening democratic competitiveness in many countries (Oyugi, 2024).

The phenomenon of uncontested elections has attracted increasing scholarly attention because it demonstrates that democratic procedures may continue to function even when substantive political competition is significantly reduced. Rather than reflecting broad democratic consensus, single-candidate elections often emerge from political arrangements that concentrate power among dominant elites and limit opportunities for electoral alternatives (Muhammad et al., 2026). Consequently, scholars argue that the quality of democracy should be assessed not only through procedural compliance but also through the

extent to which elections provide meaningful political competition and genuine electoral choice (Wessels & Schmitt, 2008).

Indonesia has experienced a growing number of single-candidate local elections since the Constitutional Court legalized elections involving one candidate competing against an empty ballot. What was initially regarded as an exceptional electoral arrangement has gradually become a recurring feature of local democracy. Existing studies generally explain this phenomenon through institutional factors, including political party pragmatism, coalition-building, weak party institutionalization, incumbency advantages, and the concentration of political resources among dominant candidates (Rohman et al., 2022; Safa'at, 2022). Nevertheless, these explanations do not fully account for why political parties voluntarily consolidate behind a single candidate or why such political arrangements are broadly accepted by local communities as legitimate democratic outcomes.

Aceh provides a distinctive context for examining this phenomenon due to its special autonomy and post-conflict political system following the 2005 Helsinki Peace Agreement. The establishment of local political parties enabled the Aceh Party (*Partai Aceh*), founded by former members of the Free Aceh Movement (*Gerakan Aceh Merdeka*—GAM), to emerge as the province's dominant political force. Benefiting from its historical legitimacy, extensive grassroots networks, and enduring relationships with political, customary, and religious elites, the party has maintained considerable influence over local political dynamics (Aspinal, 2020; Crouch, 2010). North Aceh, one of the party's strongest electoral strongholds, therefore represents an important setting for examining the interaction between historical legitimacy, Acehese political identity, religious authority, and elite political networks in shaping local democratic processes.

The 2024 North Aceh local election provides an important empirical case for examining the relationship between political dominance and democratic competition in a post-conflict society. In this election, the candidate supported by the Aceh Party competed only against an empty ballot after receiving endorsements from nearly all political parties represented in the North Aceh Regional House of Representatives (DPRK) (KIP Aceh Utara, 2024; KPU RI, 2025). Although the election complied with Indonesia's electoral regulations, the absence of competing candidates raises important questions regarding the quality of local democracy (Safa'at, 2022). Rather than viewing this phenomenon solely as the result of institutional arrangements or coalition strategies, scholars have increasingly suggested that dominant political actors may also construct legitimacy through broader processes of political leadership, consent, and elite accommodation (Gramsci, 2020; Trantidis, 2022). These considerations make the North Aceh election an important case for examining how political hegemony may shape elite consensus and public legitimacy within Aceh's post-conflict political landscape.

Despite the growing body of literature on dominant-party politics and uncontested elections, existing studies have largely approached these phenomena from different analytical perspectives. One stream of research emphasizes authoritarian consolidation. Trantidis (2022), for example, argues that political domination is sustained through three interconnected mechanisms: public legitimation, institutional reform, and large-scale co-optation. Comparing Belarus and Slovakia, he demonstrates that political co-optation enables incumbent elites to consolidate power while simultaneously weakening democratic

resistance. Similarly, Abbink (2017) conceptualizes elections in Ethiopia not as genuine democratic competition but as a hegemonic performance, where elections primarily serve to reproduce the legitimacy of the ruling party rather than to facilitate meaningful political contestation. These studies highlight the importance of legitimacy and elite co-optation in maintaining political dominance, although they focus primarily on authoritarian or semi-authoritarian regimes rather than democratic local elections.

Another body of scholarship examines dominant-party politics through organizational and clientelist perspectives. Croke (2017), studying Tanzania, finds that long-term political dominance is maintained through extensive neighborhood party networks, systematic political monitoring, and clientelist exchanges that encourage citizens to conceal opposition preferences. Likewise, Gomez (2016) demonstrates that Malaysia's long-standing Barisan Nasional coalition survived electoral challenges through coalition management, patronage distribution, and the monetization of politics despite increasing public dissatisfaction. At the internal organizational level, Amundsen (2016) argues that weak intra-party democracy, centralized leadership, and elite-controlled decision-making processes facilitate the persistence of dominant political parties by limiting internal political competition. Collectively, these studies suggest that political hegemony is reproduced not only through formal institutions but also through organizational structures, elite networks, and patron-client relationships.

Within the Indonesian context, recent studies have begun to examine the growing phenomenon of single-candidate elections. Prianto & Yusraini (2024) argue that political pragmatism has encouraged local political parties to prioritize electability, financial resources, and elite acceptability over ideological considerations when selecting candidates. Consequently, candidate recruitment increasingly reflects rational-choice calculations that contribute to democratic backsliding and uncompetitive local elections. While this study provides an important institutional explanation for the emergence of single-candidate elections, it primarily interprets political parties as rational actors responding to electoral incentives and pays relatively little attention to broader processes of ideological domination and social legitimacy.

A different perspective is offered by Duile (2021), who applies Antonio Gramsci's concept of common sense to analyze the Nurhadi–Aldo phenomenon during Indonesia's 2019 presidential election. Rather than focusing on formal electoral institutions, Duile demonstrates how hegemonic political discourse shapes citizens' political imagination by defining what constitutes legitimate political participation. His analysis illustrates that hegemony operates through culture, language, and symbolic representation rather than through coercion alone. Nevertheless, the study concentrates on electoral discourse in social media and does not explain how hegemonic processes shape elite coalition-building or produce uncontested local elections.

Taken together, previous studies have substantially enriched the understanding of dominant-party politics, authoritarian durability, clientelism, political pragmatism, and electoral hegemony. Nevertheless, these studies also suggest that political dominance may emerge through different mechanisms depending on the political context. While political hegemony has largely been examined in authoritarian regimes or dominant-party systems, studies on Indonesia's single-candidate elections have primarily emphasized institutional

arrangements, party pragmatism, and electoral incentives. This indicates that there is still considerable room to explore how political dominance is constructed when democratic institutions formally remain in place but electoral competition becomes increasingly limited.

These questions are brought into sharp focus by the 2024 North Aceh local election, in which the Aceh Party-backed candidate faced only an empty ballot after securing endorsements from nearly all parties represented in the North Aceh Regional House of Representatives (DPRK), raising the question of how such elite consensus was formed and came to be perceived as legitimate by the wider community. Against this background, Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony provides a valuable analytical framework for understanding the relationship between political dominance, elite consensus, and democratic legitimacy (Gramsci, 2020). Rather than viewing a single-candidate election merely as the product of institutional constraints or strategic political calculations, Gramsci's perspective offers an opportunity to examine how leadership, legitimacy, and social consent interact in shaping electoral outcomes (Gramsci, 2020; Trantidis, 2022). Employing this theoretical perspective, the present study investigates the political dynamics surrounding the 2024 North Aceh local election in order to contribute to broader debates on political hegemony, electoral competition, and local democracy in post-conflict societies.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony provides one of the most influential frameworks for explaining how political power is established, maintained, and reproduced beyond the exercise of coercive state authority. Unlike classical Marxist perspectives that primarily associate domination with economic control and coercion, Gramsci argues that the durability of political leadership depends largely on the ability of dominant groups to secure the voluntary consent (*consent*) of subordinate groups through ideological leadership and the construction of legitimacy (Gramsci, 2020; Simon & Hall, 2002). Political authority therefore becomes sustainable not simply because of institutional capacity or legal power, but because dominant political actors successfully shape public beliefs, values, and collective understandings so that their leadership is perceived as natural, legitimate, and beneficial to society.

A central distinction within Gramsci's theoretical framework is that between domination and hegemony. Domination refers to the exercise of power through coercive mechanisms, including legal authority, military force, and state institutions. Hegemony, by contrast, operates through persuasion and consent, whereby subordinate social groups voluntarily accept the leadership of dominant actors because such leadership has been socially legitimized (Gramsci, 2020). In this sense, political power is reproduced not merely through coercion but through the internalization of dominant ideas and values by society. As Simon & Hall (2002) argues, hegemony represents a form of political leadership in which ideological influence becomes more effective than direct coercion because it transforms particular political interests into broadly accepted collective interests.

Gramsci further explains that hegemonic leadership is produced through the interaction between political society and civil society. Political society consists of formal state institutions such as governments, legislatures, courts, and security apparatuses that possess coercive authority. Civil society, on the other hand, includes educational institutions, religious organizations, customary institutions, political parties, community associations, and the media, all of which function as arenas for producing and disseminating dominant ideas

(Gramsci, 2020). Through the continuous interaction of these institutions, hegemonic ideas gradually become embedded within everyday social life and evolve into what Gramsci calls common sense, namely a set of assumptions and beliefs that are widely accepted as self-evident despite reflecting the interests of particular political groups (Thomas, 2009). Consequently, political leadership becomes stabilized because society comes to perceive the existing political order as both legitimate and inevitable.

Another fundamental concept within Gramsci's theory is the historic bloc, which refers to the alliance between political institutions, social groups, and ideological forces that collectively sustain hegemonic leadership (Gramsci, 2020). Rather than exercising authority independently, dominant political actors establish broad coalitions involving political elites, economic interests, religious leaders, intellectuals, and other influential social actors in order to reinforce political legitimacy and maintain social stability. The strength of a historic bloc lies in its capacity to integrate diverse interests into a coherent political project capable of generating broad social consent. As Thomas (2009) notes, hegemonic stability is achieved not merely through institutional dominance but through the successful articulation of political, cultural, and ideological alliances that make existing power relations appear legitimate and broadly acceptable.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a qualitative approach using a single-case study design to examine the political hegemony underlying the emergence of a single-candidate election in the 2024 North Aceh local election. A qualitative case study was considered appropriate because the phenomenon involves complex interactions among political actors, institutional arrangements, historical experiences, and socio-political contexts that cannot be adequately explained through quantitative approaches (Creswell & Poth, 2016). North Aceh Regency was selected as the research site because it has historically been one of the strongest political bases of the Aceh Party following the 2005 Helsinki Peace Agreement and because the 2024 local election resulted in a single-candidate contest supported by almost all political parties represented in the Regional House of Representatives (DPRK).

Data were collected through in-depth interviews and document analysis. In-depth interviews served as the primary source of data and were conducted using purposive sampling to obtain comprehensive information from informants directly involved in or knowledgeable about the 2024 North Aceh local election. The informants included the elected Regent of North Aceh, leaders of the Aceh Party and other local and national political parties participating in the electoral coalition, commissioners of the Independent Election Commission (KIP) of North Aceh, members and experts of the Election Supervisory Committee (Panwaslih), political observers, academics, community leaders, village leaders, representatives of civil society organizations, and officials from security institutions involved in maintaining the electoral process. The interviews explored the process of coalition formation, political negotiations, the emergence of elite consensus, the role of historical legitimacy, and public acceptance of the single-candidate election.

Secondary data were obtained through document analysis to complement and verify the findings from the interviews. Documentary sources included official documents issued by political parties, reports and decisions of the Independent Election Commission (KIP) and the Election Supervisory Committee (Bawaslu/Panwaslih), candidate nomination data, official

election results, and relevant regulations concerning the 2024 local election. In addition, news reports published by local and national media, previous academic studies, and scholarly literature on Aceh's post-conflict politics, local democracy, and the Aceh Party were analyzed to reconstruct the political dynamics surrounding the emergence of the single-candidate election.

The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis following the interactive model proposed by Miles et al. (2019) which consists of data collection, data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing. Interview transcripts and documentary evidence were systematically coded to identify recurring themes related to coalition-building, elite consensus, political legitimacy, historical narratives, religious authority, political identity, and democratic competition. These themes were subsequently interpreted using Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony to explain how political dominance was transformed into broadly accepted social consensus within the post-conflict political context of Aceh. To enhance the credibility of the findings, this study employed data triangulation by comparing information obtained from interviews with documentary evidence and media reports. Member checking was also conducted with selected informants to ensure the accuracy of the interpretation and minimize researcher bias.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The emergence of a single-candidate election in the 2024 North Aceh local election represents one of the most significant political developments in Aceh's post-conflict democracy. Unlike competitive elections characterized by the presence of multiple candidates offering alternative political platforms, the North Aceh election concluded with only one candidate pair competing against an empty ballot. Although this electoral configuration formally complied with Indonesia's electoral regulations, it simultaneously raised important concerns regarding the quality of democratic competition and citizens' opportunities to exercise meaningful political choice. Within the broader context of post-conflict Aceh, where political competition remains closely intertwined with historical memory, local identity, and the legacy of the Free Aceh Movement (GAM), the emergence of a single-candidate election reflects political dynamics that extend beyond procedural electoral arrangements and deserve closer scholarly examination (Budiatri, 2022; Safa'at, 2022).

Previous studies have generally explained the emergence of single-candidate elections through institutional factors, including nomination thresholds, coalition strategies, political pragmatism, weak party institutionalization, and the limited availability of competitive candidates (Prianto & Yusraini, 2024). While these studies provide valuable insights into the institutional foundations of uncontested elections, they offer only a partial explanation for the North Aceh case. They pay limited attention to how political dominance is socially constructed through elite consensus, historical legitimacy, and the acceptance of political authority within post-conflict societies. Consequently, the existing literature has yet to adequately explain why almost all political parties voluntarily converged behind a single candidate despite having constitutional opportunities to nominate alternative candidates, and how such political arrangements became widely accepted by both political elites and local communities.

The findings of this study indicate that the emergence of the single-candidate election in North Aceh was not merely the outcome of institutional regulations or electoral pragmatism. Rather, it resulted from a gradual process of political consolidation led by the Aceh Party, which successfully built an extensive coalition involving both local and national political parties before the official nomination period. This coalition was supported not only by the Aceh Party's dominant position within the Regional House of Representatives

(DPRK), but also by its long-established political networks extending to former GAM commanders, religious leaders, customary institutions, village elites, and influential community figures. As a consequence, the nomination process gradually eliminated the possibility of alternative candidates, leaving only one candidate pair to compete against the empty ballot. These findings demonstrate that the absence of electoral competition reflected a broader process of elite consensus rather than simply the legal consequences of Indonesia's electoral system, a pattern that is also highlighted in the thesis findings.

From the perspective of Antonio Gramsci's theory, these findings illustrate that the Aceh Party's political dominance was maintained not solely through institutional power or electoral resources, but through hegemonic leadership that combined political authority with the production of social consent (Gramsci, 1971). The broad coalition supporting the single candidate represented what Gramsci describes as a historic bloc, in which political leadership, ideological legitimacy, and social alliances converge to produce a widely accepted political order. Rather than relying on coercive mechanisms alone, the Aceh Party successfully transformed its historical legitimacy as the political successor of the Aceh peace process into a source of political authority that encouraged voluntary accommodation among other political parties. This finding supports Trantidis' (2022) argument that political hegemony is sustained through the construction of legitimacy and elite accommodation rather than through coercion alone. However, unlike Trantidis' analysis, which primarily examines authoritarian contexts, the North Aceh case demonstrates that hegemonic political practices may also emerge within formally democratic institutions, where electoral procedures remain intact but meaningful political competition becomes substantially constrained.

The interview findings further support the argument that the emergence of a single-candidate election in North Aceh resulted from a deliberate process of political consolidation rather than merely institutional arrangements. Informants from the Aceh Party and several coalition parties consistently explained that political negotiations had taken place long before the official nomination period, with discussions focusing on maintaining regional political stability and preserving the post-conflict peace process. According to M. Jhony, Chairman of the Aceh Party (DPW PA) of North Aceh, the formation of the grand coalition reflected a shared political commitment among local parties rather than coercive political intervention. He explained:

"The coalition was not formed because the Aceh Party pressured other political parties. Instead, all parties shared the same understanding that maintaining Aceh's peace and political stability was more important than creating unnecessary political competition. Therefore, supporting a single candidate became a collective political agreement." (M. Jhony, Interview, 15 January 2025).

This statement illustrates that the broad political coalition emerged through voluntary elite accommodation based on shared political interests. Similar views were expressed by leaders of coalition parties and election administrators, who acknowledged that although the nomination process complied with electoral regulations, political consensus among competing parties had effectively been established before candidate registration officially commenced. These interview findings demonstrate that elite consensus substantially reduced opportunities for alternative candidates to emerge, reinforcing the argument that the single-candidate election reflected a process of hegemonic political consolidation rather than merely the legal consequences of Indonesia's electoral system.

These findings both support and extend previous studies on single-candidate elections. Prianto & Yusraini (2024) argue that the emergence of single-candidate elections in Indonesia is largely driven by institutional arrangements, political pragmatism, and broad coalition strategies. Similarly, Ayodele et al. (2026) highlights weak party recruitment, high political costs, and elite pragmatism as the principal factors limiting electoral competition.

The North Aceh case confirms that coalition formation and political pragmatism were indeed important elements in producing a single-candidate election. However, this study demonstrates that these institutional explanations remain insufficient when applied to post-conflict Aceh. Beyond political pragmatism, the findings reveal that elite consensus was reinforced by historical legitimacy, symbolic authority, and long-standing social relationships that enabled the Aceh Party to transform political dominance into broadly accepted leadership. Consequently, the North Aceh case expands existing scholarship by integrating institutional explanations with a Gramscian perspective on political hegemony.

Beyond the principal finding concerning elite consensus, this study also identifies several contextual factors that strengthened the emergence of a single-candidate election. The historical legacy of the Aceh conflict and the political symbolism of the Aceh Party continued to shape public perceptions of legitimate political leadership. Religious leaders, customary institutions, former GAM networks, and influential community figures functioned as important intermediaries in disseminating narratives emphasizing unity, political stability, and regional solidarity. Under these conditions, the empty ballot failed to develop into a meaningful political alternative because it lacked organizational support, symbolic legitimacy, and grassroots mobilization. These additional findings indicate that electoral competition in North Aceh cannot be understood solely through institutional analysis but must also consider the interaction between political culture, historical memory, and local social structures in shaping electoral behaviour.

Taken together, these findings suggest that the emergence of a single-candidate election in North Aceh cannot be adequately explained through institutional regulations, nomination thresholds, or political pragmatism alone. Instead, the case demonstrates how political hegemony operated through the interaction of elite consensus, historical legitimacy, ideological influence, and social consent, enabling the Aceh Party to consolidate political dominance within a formally democratic electoral process. This study therefore extends the literature on single-candidate elections by demonstrating that, in post-conflict societies, uncontested elections may represent not merely the absence of electoral competition but the successful institutionalization of hegemonic political leadership. In doing so, the study contributes to the broader debate on political hegemony, democratic legitimacy, and local democracy by providing empirical evidence from Aceh, a post-conflict region that has received limited attention within the comparative literature on hegemonic politics and electoral competition.

The Construction Of Political Hegemony By The Aceh Party

The emergence of a single-candidate election in North Aceh cannot be fully understood without examining the broader process through which the Aceh Party established and maintained its political hegemony. While the previous section demonstrates that the absence of electoral competition resulted from extensive elite consensus, this section explains how such consensus was gradually constructed through political leadership, historical legitimacy, ideological influence, and the formation of strategic alliances. Rather than relying solely on electoral strength or institutional authority, the Aceh Party successfully transformed its historical role in the Aceh peace process into a source of political legitimacy that enabled it to become the dominant political force in North Aceh.

Following the Helsinki Peace Agreement in 2005, the Aceh Party emerged not merely as another local political party but as the principal political representative of former Free Aceh Movement (GAM) combatants and a large segment of Acehnese society. Over time, the party expanded its political influence beyond former combatant networks by establishing close relationships with religious leaders, customary institutions, village elites, youth organizations, and local community leaders. These social networks strengthened the party's

legitimacy and enabled it to shape public perceptions regarding legitimate political leadership. Consequently, the Aceh Party's dominance was reinforced not only through electoral victories but also through its ability to integrate political authority with socially accepted leadership within Aceh's post-conflict political order.

Unlike conventional explanations emphasizing coalition pragmatism, the findings reveal that the construction of political hegemony was closely associated with the gradual normalization of the Aceh Party's leadership among competing political actors. Rather than perceiving the party as an electoral competitor, many political elites increasingly accepted its leadership as the most legitimate vehicle for preserving political stability, maintaining post-conflict reconciliation, and protecting Aceh's special autonomy. Under these circumstances, supporting the Aceh Party gradually became viewed as a rational and politically acceptable decision rather than as an act of electoral submission.

From Gramsci's perspective, this process illustrates the transformation of political dominance into hegemony through the production of consent (Gramsci, 2020). Hegemony operates when subordinate groups voluntarily accept the leadership of a dominant political force because its authority is perceived as legitimate and consistent with collective interests. Rather than imposing political control through coercion, the Aceh Party constructed ideological leadership by promoting narratives of peace, unity, and regional solidarity that resonated with Acehnese political identity. As these narratives became increasingly institutionalized within local political discourse, they gradually evolved into what Gramsci describes as common sense-shared assumptions accepted without substantial political contestation.

The interview findings reinforce this interpretation by demonstrating that political support for the Aceh Party was generated through widespread acceptance rather than explicit political coercion. Zubir HT, Chairman of the North Aceh Branch of the NasDem Party and one of the initiators of the Aceh Utara Maju coalition, explained that attempts to establish an alternative political coalition ultimately failed because most political parties regarded cooperation with the Aceh Party as the most realistic political option. This decision reflected not only electoral calculations but also recognition of the party's historical legitimacy and broad public acceptance. He stated:

"From the very beginning, it was evident that political support for the Aceh Party was overwhelmingly strong. Nearly all political parties had already determined their positions before the nomination process officially began. Under such circumstances, forming an alternative coalition was theoretically possible, but the chances of winning were extremely slim." (Zubir HT, Interview, 29 December 2025).

This statement illustrates that political parties did not simply respond to institutional constraints but adjusted their political strategies according to the Aceh Party's already established political legitimacy. Once broad political support had been consolidated, the possibility of constructing an alternative coalition became increasingly unrealistic despite remaining legally permissible. The acceptance of the Aceh Party's leadership therefore reflected a process of political accommodation based on shared expectations regarding electoral outcomes rather than direct political pressure.

These findings closely correspond to Gramsci's concept of the historic bloc, in which political leadership is sustained through the integration of political institutions, civil society, and dominant ideological narratives (Gramsci, 2020). In North Aceh, the Aceh Party successfully connected formal political institutions with informal networks involving former GAM elites, religious authorities, customary leaders, village governments, and influential community organizations. These interconnected alliances generated broad social legitimacy that extended beyond electoral institutions and significantly reduced incentives for political

actors to organize meaningful opposition. Consequently, hegemonic leadership became embedded within both formal and informal political structures.

The findings also expand previous studies concerning coalition politics and uncontested elections. Existing scholarship generally argues that single-candidate elections emerge because of nomination thresholds, coalition pragmatism, weak party institutionalization, and strategic calculations among political elites (Ayodele et al., 2026; Prianto & Yusraini, 2024). While these explanations remain relevant, the North Aceh case demonstrates that coalition formation cannot be understood solely through institutional incentives. Political accommodation was equally shaped by the Aceh Party's historical legitimacy, symbolic authority, and extensive social acceptance, which encouraged competing parties to perceive coalition-building as both politically rational and socially legitimate. This finding therefore extends existing literature by demonstrating that hegemonic political leadership may substantially influence coalition behaviour even within formally democratic electoral systems.

Beyond elite accommodation, the construction of political hegemony was further reinforced through the continuous reproduction of political narratives emphasizing peace, stability, and regional unity. Former GAM networks, religious figures, customary institutions, and local community leaders collectively disseminated these narratives across society, strengthening public perceptions that political continuity under the Aceh Party represented the most desirable path for safeguarding Aceh's post-conflict development. As these ideas became increasingly normalized within public discourse, political competition gradually lost its legitimacy as the primary mechanism for democratic representation.

Taken together, these findings demonstrate that the Aceh Party's political dominance was constructed through a multidimensional process involving historical legitimacy, ideological leadership, elite accommodation, and extensive social alliances. Rather than relying primarily on institutional power or electoral coercion, the party successfully generated voluntary political consent among competing elites and broader society. Consequently, political hegemony became institutionalized as the dominant form of political leadership in North Aceh, providing the social and political foundation for the emergence of the single-candidate election examined in the previous section.

MANUFACTURING ELECTORAL CONSENSUS: A GRAMSCIAN ANALYSIS

The construction of political hegemony by the Aceh Party raises a broader question concerning how electoral consensus was successfully manufactured within a formally democratic political system. Although the 2024 North Aceh local election formally complied with Indonesia's electoral regulations, the convergence of almost all political parties behind a single candidate suggests that consensus was not merely the product of institutional arrangements. Instead, the electoral process reflected a broader transformation of political competition into a shared political understanding in which the Aceh Party's leadership became widely accepted as the most legitimate and rational political alternative. Consequently, the production of electoral consensus represents the central mechanism through which political hegemony was reproduced within North Aceh's post-conflict democracy.

Existing studies generally explain political consensus through institutional incentives, coalition pragmatism, clientelistic exchange, or dominant-party strategies. Prianto & Yusraini (2024), for example, argue that single-candidate elections in Indonesia primarily emerge from pragmatic calculations among political elites, particularly concerning electability, financial resources, and coalition incentives. Likewise, Gomez (2016) demonstrates that dominant parties sustain electoral control through coalition management and patronage networks, while

Croke (2017) emphasizes the role of local party organizations and informal political monitoring in preserving long-term political dominance. Although these explanations successfully identify important institutional mechanisms, they pay relatively limited attention to how political legitimacy is socially constructed and voluntarily accepted by competing political actors. Consequently, the existing literature provides only a partial explanation for why political competitors willingly abandoned electoral competition even when institutional opportunities for contestation remained available.

The findings of this study indicate that electoral consensus in North Aceh emerged through a gradual process of ideological accommodation rather than through formal political coercion. Political parties increasingly viewed the Aceh Party not merely as an electoral competitor but as the legitimate political representative of Aceh's post-conflict order. Historical legitimacy derived from the Helsinki Peace Agreement, the symbolic legacy of the Free Aceh Movement (GAM), and the party's extensive relationships with religious leaders, customary authorities, village elites, and former combatant networks collectively strengthened this perception. As these sources of legitimacy became deeply embedded within local political discourse, electoral competition itself gradually lost its political attractiveness. Consequently, coalition formation reflected not only rational electoral calculations but also the internalization of the Aceh Party's political leadership as an accepted political reality.

From Gramsci's perspective, these findings illustrate the successful production of consent as the foundation of political hegemony (Gramsci, 1971). Gramsci argues that hegemonic leadership is sustained not primarily through coercion but through the capacity of dominant groups to transform their political interests into widely accepted social values and collective aspirations. In North Aceh, the Aceh Party accomplished this transformation by continuously promoting narratives of peace, regional stability, Acehnese identity, and the protection of special autonomy. These narratives gradually evolved into what Gramsci describes as common sense—shared political assumptions accepted by both elites and society without requiring continuous political contestation. Electoral consensus therefore represented not simply agreement among political parties but the successful institutionalization of the Aceh Party's ideological leadership within the broader political culture.

The interview findings further reinforce this interpretation by demonstrating that electoral consensus had largely been established before the formal nomination process commenced. Hidayatul Akbar, Commissioner of the North Aceh Independent Election Commission (KIP), explained that although the nomination process was conducted in accordance with electoral regulations, political agreement among major political parties had already been consolidated prior to candidate registration. He stated:

"Before the official nomination period began, it was already apparent that most political parties had aligned themselves behind the same candidate pair. From the perspective of the election commission, the nomination process complied with all legal procedures. However, politically, the consensus had effectively been formed long before candidate registration was opened." (Hidayatul Akbar, Interview, 30 December 2025).

This statement suggests that electoral consensus was not merely the outcome of procedural electoral arrangements but reflected a broader political process through which elite accommodation had substantially narrowed the space for electoral competition. Although democratic procedures remained formally intact, the convergence of political support before the nomination stage significantly reduced the possibility for alternative candidates to emerge. This finding illustrates how hegemonic political leadership can operate through voluntary political accommodation rather than direct institutional coercion.

These findings both support and extend previous scholarship on political hegemony and dominant-party politics. Trantidis (2022) argues that hegemonic regimes consolidate power by combining public legitimacy, elite co-optation, and institutional control during

processes of autocratisation. Similarly, Abbink (2017) demonstrates that elections under dominant-party systems may function primarily as performances that reproduce hegemonic political authority rather than as arenas of genuine democratic competition. However, unlike Belarus or Ethiopia, North Aceh represents a formally competitive democratic setting in which electoral institutions remained operational and constitutional procedures were fully respected. The findings therefore suggest that hegemonic political leadership can successfully manufacture electoral consensus even in democratic environments without relying on extensive political repression. Instead, legitimacy, historical memory, and voluntary elite accommodation became the principal mechanisms through which political dominance was reproduced.

Beyond elite consensus, the findings also reveal that electoral consensus was continuously reinforced through broader social institutions operating outside formal political organizations. Religious leaders, customary institutions, former GAM commanders, village governments, and influential community figures collectively reproduced narratives emphasizing peace, unity, and political continuity. These actors functioned as intermediaries connecting formal political leadership with local communities, thereby strengthening the social legitimacy of the Aceh Party. Consequently, the production of electoral consensus occurred simultaneously within political institutions and civil society, illustrating the multidimensional character of Gramscian hegemony.

Taken together, these findings contribute to the literature on political hegemony, dominant-party politics, and democratic backsliding by demonstrating that electoral consensus should not be understood solely as the outcome of coalition pragmatism or institutional incentives. Instead, the North Aceh case illustrates that political consensus may be actively manufactured through the interaction of historical legitimacy, ideological leadership, elite accommodation, and civil society networks. By integrating Gramsci's concept of consent with empirical evidence from a post-conflict democratic region, this study extends existing scholarship beyond authoritarian contexts and demonstrates that hegemonic political practices may also develop within formally democratic electoral systems where electoral competition remains procedurally intact but substantively constrained.

Implications For Local Democracy

The emergence of a single-candidate election in North Aceh raises broader questions concerning the quality of local democracy in post-conflict societies. Although the election was conducted in accordance with Indonesia's electoral regulations and therefore fulfilled the procedural requirements of democracy, the absence of electoral competition substantially reduced citizens' opportunities to evaluate alternative political platforms and leadership options. Consequently, the North Aceh case illustrates that democratic quality cannot be assessed solely through procedural compliance but must also consider whether electoral competition remains meaningful in practice.

Existing studies on local democracy in Indonesia have largely interpreted single-candidate elections as the consequence of institutional regulations, political pragmatism, and coalition strategies that weaken electoral competition (Ayodele et al., 2026; Prianto & Yusraini, 2024). While these studies successfully identify the institutional origins of uncontested elections, they devote relatively little attention to their broader implications for democratic representation, political accountability, and citizen participation, particularly within post-conflict societies. As a result, existing scholarship has yet to fully explain how the consolidation of political hegemony may reshape democratic practices despite the continued operation of formal electoral institutions.

The findings of this study indicate that the implications of the single-candidate election extend beyond the absence of electoral competition itself. The broad political

consensus surrounding the Aceh Party significantly narrowed opportunities for political contestation, limiting the emergence of alternative leadership and reducing incentives for political parties to perform their representative function. While political stability was successfully maintained throughout the electoral process, democratic competition became increasingly constrained as political actors voluntarily accommodated the dominant political order. Consequently, electoral legitimacy was strengthened procedurally but simultaneously weakened substantively through the declining availability of meaningful political alternatives.

From a Gramscian perspective, these findings illustrate that democratic institutions may continue to function procedurally while political hegemony reshapes the substance of democratic competition through the production of consent (Gramsci, 2020). Rather than suppressing opposition through direct coercion, hegemonic leadership encourages competing actors to internalize the existing political order as both legitimate and desirable. Under these conditions, elections continue to perform their constitutional function, yet their democratic significance gradually shifts from facilitating political competition to reaffirming an already established distribution of political power. Democratic stability therefore coexists with increasingly limited electoral pluralism.

The interview findings further demonstrate that concerns regarding democratic quality were recognized even among actors outside political parties. Mukhtar Abdullah, Head of Alue Bili Geulumpang Village, observed that the absence of competing candidates reduced public political engagement because many citizens perceived the election outcome as largely predetermined. He explained:

"When only one candidate was contesting the election, many people felt there was little political debate left. The election proceeded peacefully, but public enthusiasm was not the same as in previous elections because people already believed they knew who would win." (Mukhtar Abdullah, Interview, 27 December 2025).

This observation suggests that the consequences of hegemonic politics extended beyond elite negotiations and influenced public perceptions of electoral relevance. Although citizens continued to participate in the election, political competition no longer functioned as an arena for comparing competing policy visions or leadership alternatives.

These findings both support and extend previous scholarship concerning dominant-party politics and democratic quality. Abbink (2017) argues that elections under dominant-party systems often function as performances that reinforce existing political authority rather than mechanisms for meaningful democratic competition. Similarly, Gomez (2016) demonstrates that dominant political coalitions may preserve electoral legitimacy while simultaneously limiting opportunities for political alternation. The North Aceh case supports these arguments but also reveals an important distinction. Unlike the dominant-party systems examined in Ethiopia or Malaysia, political dominance in North Aceh was reproduced primarily through voluntary elite accommodation, historical legitimacy, and broad social acceptance rather than through systematic political repression or extensive clientelistic control. This finding demonstrates that democratic backsliding may emerge through consensual political processes operating within formally democratic institutions.

Beyond electoral competition, the findings also reveal broader implications for the future development of local democracy. The concentration of political support around a single dominant actor weakened incentives for political parties to recruit alternative leaders, formulate competing policy agendas, and strengthen internal party institutionalization. Over time, these conditions may reduce political innovation, discourage electoral participation, and increase public dependence on a single dominant political organization. Consequently, the long-term challenge for local democracy lies not only in preserving electoral stability but also in maintaining political pluralism capable of generating effective democratic accountability.

Taken together, these findings contribute to the broader literature on local democracy, political hegemony, and post-conflict governance by demonstrating that democratic decline may occur even when electoral procedures remain constitutionally intact. Rather than conceptualizing democratic backsliding solely as the erosion of formal institutions, this study shows that hegemonic political leadership can gradually reshape democratic practice by narrowing political competition through legitimacy, elite consensus, and voluntary social consent. By integrating Gramsci's theory of hegemony with empirical evidence from Aceh, this study extends existing scholarship on local democracy and highlights the importance of examining both the procedural and substantive dimensions of democratic governance in post-conflict societies.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the emergence of the 2024 single-candidate local election in North Aceh through Antonio Gramsci's theory of political hegemony. The findings demonstrate that the uncontested election cannot be adequately explained solely by institutional regulations, nomination thresholds, or political pragmatism. Instead, the emergence of a single-candidate election resulted from a gradual process of hegemonic political consolidation in which the Aceh Party successfully transformed its historical legitimacy, ideological leadership, and extensive social networks into broad political consent. The party's dominance was reproduced through the interaction of elite accommodation, historical memory, religious and customary institutions, and former Free Aceh Movement (GAM) networks, enabling electoral consensus to emerge before the formal nomination process commenced. Consequently, the absence of electoral competition reflected not merely institutional constraints but the successful institutionalization of hegemonic political leadership within Aceh's post-conflict democratic setting.

The study also extends Gramsci's concept of hegemony by demonstrating that political dominance can be reproduced within a formally democratic electoral system without relying primarily on coercion or authoritarian repression. Unlike previous studies that emphasize coalition pragmatism, dominant-party institutions, or electoral authoritarianism, this research shows that electoral consensus may be actively manufactured through the production of consent, historical legitimacy, ideological narratives, and voluntary elite accommodation. In the North Aceh case, democratic procedures remained constitutionally intact; however, substantive electoral competition became increasingly constrained as political actors and broader society internalized the Aceh Party's leadership as the most legitimate political alternative. These findings contribute to the literature on political hegemony, dominant-party politics, democratic backsliding, and post-conflict governance by demonstrating that hegemonic political practices may develop within competitive democratic institutions without requiring overt political coercion.

From a practical perspective, the findings suggest that preserving procedural elections alone is insufficient to ensure the quality of local democracy. Strengthening internal party democracy, promoting competitive candidate recruitment, encouraging political pluralism, and safeguarding meaningful electoral competition remain essential for maintaining democratic accountability in post-conflict regions. This study is limited to a single case study of North Aceh and therefore does not seek to generalize its findings to all Indonesian local elections. Future research may employ comparative analyses across multiple post-conflict regions or dominant-party systems to examine how different configurations of historical legitimacy, elite consensus, and civil society networks shape the production of political hegemony and the quality of democratic competition.

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