

Coercive Social Capital in Democratic Processes: A Study of Strongman Politics in Indonesian Village Elections

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ABSTRACT

Village head elections represent a fundamental expression of grassroots democracy, yet informal power networks increasingly exploit electoral processes through mechanisms that subvert democratic principles. This study examines how premanisme (thuggery) operates as social capital in village head elections, specifically analyzing the 2023 election in Sinjai Regency, South Sulawesi, Indonesia. Employing a qualitative case study approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews with community leaders, village officials, candidates, civil society organization members, and villagers, complemented by participatory observation and documentary analysis. The findings reveal that informal power networks systematically appropriate the three structural components of social capital—networks, norms of reciprocity, and trust—to manipulate electoral outcomes. First, multi-layered network architectures penetrate existing social structures, enabling comprehensive voter surveillance, coordinated mobilization, and systematic coercion that constrain genuine political competition. Second, cultural expectations of reciprocity are transformed into binding political obligations enforced through social ostracism, economic sanctions, and physical intimidation, converting electoral participation into debt fulfillment rather than democratic citizenship. Third, bifurcated trust structures—characterized by high particularized trust in patronage networks alongside pervasive institutional distrust—generate self-reinforcing dynamics that entrench clientelistic relationships while delegitimizing democratic alternatives. These findings demonstrate that bonding social capital, when mobilized within asymmetric power relations, produces "dark social capital" that undermines rather than enhances democratic governance. The study contributes theoretical insights regarding the intersection of informal power structures with formal democratic institutions, while providing practical recommendations for strengthening electoral integrity through disrupting patronage-based networks, reducing community economic dependence, and rebuilding institutional trust through transparent governance mechanisms.

Keywords: *Coercive social capital; village election; informal power networks; electoral manipulation; grassroots democracy*

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INTRODUCTION

Village head elections (*Pilkades*) represent a fundamental expression of grassroots democracy in Indonesia, enabling rural communities to directly participate in selecting their local leaders. Since the enactment of Law No. 6 of 2014 on Villages, the role of village heads has transcended mere administrative functions to become strategic actors in development planning, budget allocation, and local policy determination (Antlov et al., 2016; Diprose et al., 2023). This legislative framework, which has transferred over US\$38 billion to Indonesia's 74,961 villages since 2015, has significantly elevated the political and economic stakes of village leadership positions (World Bank, 2021). However, this democratization at the grassroots level has paradoxically created new opportunities for informal power networks to infiltrate and manipulate electoral processes, challenging the fundamental principles of free and fair elections that the Village Law was designed to promote.

The implementation of village democracy in Indonesia operates within a complex socio-political landscape where formal democratic institutions coexist with deeply entrenched informal power structures. Research by Haryanto et al. (2024) demonstrates that village head elections often generate intense political competition characterized by ethnic and religious cleavages, leading to affective polarization that subsequently affects the selective distribution of government benefits. This phenomenon aligns with broader patterns of democratic decline in Indonesia, where the Economist Intelligence Unit has consistently classified Indonesian democracy as "flawed democracy" due to weaknesses in governance, underdeveloped political culture, and low levels of political participation (Al-Hamdi et al., 2025). The intersection of formal electoral mechanisms with informal power dynamics creates a governance environment where the quality of democracy becomes highly dependent on

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local power configurations rather than institutional frameworks alone.

Table 1. Thuggery-Related Criminal Cases in Indonesia by Region, 2024

Regional Police Authority	Number of Cases	Percentage of Total
Metro Jaya (Jakarta Area)	497	11.8%
East Java	450	10.7%
West Java	393	9.3%
South Sulawesi	362	8.6%
North Sulawesi	264	6.3%
South Kalimantan	258	6.1%
Other Regions	1,983	47.2%
Total	4,207	100%

Source: Criminal Information Center (Pusiknas), National Police Criminal Investigation Agency, 2024

The phenomenon of *premanisme* (thuggery) in Indonesian politics represents a historically embedded practice that has evolved from colonial-era power brokering to contemporary electoral manipulation. Wilson (2015) documents how *preman*—a colloquial term derived from the Dutch *vrijman* meaning "free man"—has become synonymous with intimidation, coercion, extortion, and political violence in Indonesian political culture. During the New Order period (1966-1998), gangs and local thugs were systematically subcontracted to execute violence on behalf of state and elite interests in exchange for legal immunity and patronage opportunities (Bakker, 2021). This historical legacy has not dissipated with democratization; rather, it has adapted to the decentralized political environment, where local strongmen can establish themselves as powerful patrons operating through informal networks of loyalty and coercion. Table 1 illustrates the contemporary prevalence of thuggery-related crimes across Indonesian regions, with South Sulawesi—the location of this study—ranking among the provinces with highest incidence rates.

The transformation of *premanisme* from overt criminal activity to sophisticated political strategy represents a critical challenge to Indonesian village democracy. Contemporary research reveals that *preman* networks no longer operate solely through visible intimidation but have evolved to function as social capital within electoral contexts (Kompas, 2025). These networks utilize kinship ties, patronage relationships, and community-based social structures to mobilize voters, control information flows, and create political environments favorable to specific candidates. In Sinjai Regency, South Sulawesi, the involvement of civil society organizations such as *Gerakan Rakyat Indonesia Bersatu* (GRIB) exemplifies this transformation, where members operate through personal networks and family connections rather than formal organizational structures, thereby maintaining influence while avoiding detection as organized political actors. This adaptive strategy enables the preservation of social control through patronage and solidarity-based mechanisms that align with local cultural practices.

The theoretical framework of social capital provides a valuable lens for understanding how *premanisme* operates within village electoral politics. Bourdieu (1986) conceptualized social capital as resources derived from membership in durable networks characterized by mutual recognition and obligation—a definition that encompasses both legitimate civic associations and coercive informal networks. While Putnam's (1993, 2000) influential work emphasized the positive democratic functions of social capital through civic engagement and generalized trust, scholars have increasingly recognized the "dark side" of social capital, where strong bonding ties within exclusive groups can facilitate collective action for anti-social purposes (Portes, 1998; Siisiäinen, 2000; Strindlund et al., 2021). In the context of Indonesian village politics, *preman* networks function as repositories of dark social capital, providing candidates access to voter mobilization, campaign logistics, and electoral security while simultaneously undermining democratic principles of freedom, equality, and fair competition.

The utilization of *premanisme* as electoral social capital generates profound implications for the quality of village democracy. Field evidence from various Indonesian regions documents practices including voter intimidation, coercive mobilization, information manipulation, and the distribution of selective benefits to supporters (Hadiprayitno, 2024; Transparency International Indonesia, 2024). In Saotenga Village, Sinjai Regency, researchers have documented specific incidents such as livestock theft targeting political opponents, verbal threats, restricted access to political information, dissemination of hoaxes, and coerced attendance at campaign events. These practices indicate that village head elections do not operate solely within formal institutional frameworks but are significantly shaped by informal power networks functioning as political capital. The transactional relationship between political elites and *preman* networks—where political support is exchanged for access to resources, projects, and strategic positions—perpetuates a patronage democracy that privileges personal connections over programmatic politics (Berenschot, 2018; Habibi, 2021).

Table 2. Forms of Electoral Manipulation Through Informal Networks in Indonesian Villages

Type of Manipulation	Description	Democratic Principle Violated
Voter Intimidation	Threats of physical, economic, or social harm to voters or their families	Freedom of choice
Coercive Mobilization	Forced attendance at campaign events; pressure to publicly declare support	Voluntary participation
Information Control	Selective dissemination of political information; blocking access to opposition messaging	Informed consent
Disinformation Campaigns	Spreading hoaxes about candidates; character assassination through false narratives	Truthful public discourse
Economic Coercion	Threats to withdraw economic benefits; conditional distribution of resources	Equal treatment
Social Exclusion	Ostracism of opposition supporters from community activities and networks	Social cohesion

Source: Compiled from field research literature (2020-2024)

Despite growing scholarly attention to patronage politics and electoral manipulation in Indonesia, significant gaps remain in understanding how *premanisme* specifically functions as social capital within village-level democratic processes. Previous research by Aspinall and Sukmajati (2016) comprehensively documented money politics and clientelism at the grassroots level, focusing primarily on legislative elections and the role of vote brokers in distributing material benefits. Similarly, Berenschot's (2018) comparative study of Indonesian patronage democracy examined district-level variations in clientelistic practices but did not specifically address the role of *preman* networks as social capital in village contexts. This study addresses these gaps by examining how *premanisme* operates as a form of dark social capital in village head elections, specifically analyzing the mechanisms through which informal power networks influence electoral outcomes in Sinjai Regency, South Sulawesi, during the 2023 elections. The research aims to contribute theoretical insights regarding the intersection of informal power structures with formal democratic institutions, while providing practical recommendations for electoral authorities, civil society organizations, and policymakers seeking to strengthen the integrity of village democracy in Indonesia

METHODS

This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach using a case study method to comprehensively examine the phenomenon of *premanisme* as social capital in village head elections, an approach selected for its capacity to capture the complex social networks, norms, and trust relationships that characterize informal political dynamics (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Yin, 2018). The research was conducted in Saotenga Village, Tellu Limpoe District, Sinjai Regency, South Sulawesi Province, Indonesia—a location purposively selected due to its distinctive local political characteristics, particularly the documented involvement of civil society organizations such as Gerakan Rakyat Indonesia Bersatu (GRIB) in the 2023 village head election. The fieldwork was carried out from January to June 2025, encompassing observation, data collection, and

preliminary analysis phases. Data collection utilized multiple techniques to ensure methodological rigor: first, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with key informants including community leaders, village officials, village head candidates, GRIB members and sympathizers, and villagers who participated in the electoral process; second, participatory observation was employed to directly examine political dynamics, campaign activities, and social interactions involving informal actors; and third, documentary analysis was performed on official election documents (minutes, voter lists, election results), civil society organization archives, local and national media coverage, and relevant academic literature on social capital theory and political thuggery. The study employed both primary data gathered through fieldwork and secondary data from archival and media sources. Data analysis followed a thematic analysis approach informed by grounded theory principles (Braun & Clarke, 2021), proceeding through three systematic stages: data reduction, wherein collected information was filtered and categorized according to primary themes including social networks, loyalty norms, trust relationships, and informal political practices; data display, presenting findings through narrative descriptions, interview quotations, and thematic matrices to facilitate interpretation; and conclusion drawing with verification, wherein interpretations were constructed based on Putnam's social capital framework while triangulation across interview, observation, and documentary sources was conducted to ensure data validity and minimize researcher bias. Ethical considerations were maintained throughout the research process, with informed consent obtained from all participants and anonymity guaranteed to protect informants given the sensitive nature of the research topic.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Social Networks

The informal power networks operating within the 2023 Saotenga Village head election demonstrated sophisticated structural configurations that transcended conventional

political mobilization patterns. The GRIB-affiliated network functioned through a multi-layered architecture comprising core actors (individuals with direct organizational ties), peripheral members (sympathizers connected through kinship), and extended associates (community members bound through economic dependency). This hierarchical yet flexible network structure enabled rapid information dissemination, coordinated voter mobilization, and systematic monitoring of electoral behavior across the village's seventeen hamlets (*dusun*). The network's operational effectiveness derived from its integration with pre-existing social structures, including traditional neighborhood associations (*rukun tetangga*), religious study groups (*pengajian*), and informal economic cooperatives, thereby creating an omnipresent political infrastructure that permeated daily village life.

electoral influence. Key GRIB-affiliated individuals occupied critical intermediary positions between formal village institutions and grassroots community organizations, enabling them to function as information gatekeepers and resource brokers. This structural positioning facilitated control over the flow of political information, selective distribution of development program benefits, and mobilization of collective action during the campaign period. The network's embeddedness within village administrative structures created asymmetric power relations wherein ordinary villagers faced substantial barriers to accessing political information and resources independent of network-mediated channels. Such structural arrangements effectively constrained genuine political competition by limiting the capacity of non-affiliated candidates to reach potential supporters through conventional campaign mechanisms.

The strategic positioning of network members within village governance structures significantly amplified their

Table 3. Network Structure and Electoral Functions in Saotenga Village Head Election 2023

Network Layer	Composition	Primary Electoral Functions	Coverage Area
Core Network	GRIB members, local strongmen, candidate's inner circle	Strategic planning, resource allocation, conflict resolution	Village-wide coordination
Secondary Network	Extended family members, close associates, loyal supporters	Voter identification, campaign logistics, vote monitoring	Hamlet-level operations
Peripheral Network	Community organization members, economic dependents, religious group participants	Mass mobilization, information dissemination, social pressure application	Neighborhood-level (RT/RW)
Extended Network	Casual acquaintances, program beneficiaries, indebted individuals	Vote delivery, election-day monitoring, result verification	Individual household targeting

The network's capacity for coercive mobilization manifested through both overt intimidation and subtle social pressure mechanisms. Documented instances included livestock theft targeting opposition supporters, systematic social exclusion from community activities, and economic reprisals against non-compliant voters. These coercive practices operated within a context of plausible deniability, wherein network actors could attribute harmful actions to coincidental occurrences or unrelated conflicts. The combination of positive inducements (patronage distribution, protection provision) and negative sanctions (social ostracism, economic harm) created a comprehensive control mechanism that shaped voter behavior beyond individual preference formation. Network members monitored voting intentions through systematic household visits, community event attendance, and social media surveillance, creating an environment wherein electoral choice became a matter of public accountability rather than private decision-making.

The network configuration observed in Saotenga Village exemplifies what Putnam (2000) characterized as *bonding*

social capital—the strong ties within homogeneous groups that reinforce exclusive identities and facilitate in-group solidarity. However, the research findings reveal a fundamental perversion of Putnam's conceptualization: rather than fostering democratic civic engagement and generalized social trust, the GRIB-affiliated network operated as an instrument of political exclusion and electoral manipulation. Putnam (2000, p. 22) defined social capital as "connections among individuals—social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them," emphasizing its potential for generating public goods through cooperative action. The Saotenga case demonstrates that identical network structures can produce diametrically opposed outcomes depending on the purposes toward which they are mobilized. The dense, multiplex networks that Putnam associated with civic virtue functioned in this context as mechanisms for voter coercion, information control, and political domination—confirming Portes's (1998) warning about the "dark side" of social capital wherein strong group ties facilitate collective action for anti-social

purposes. Strengthening electoral oversight mechanisms and promoting cross-cutting civic associations that transcend patronage-based networks represents an essential intervention for mitigating the coercive deployment of bonding social capital in village elections (Degli Antoni & Grimalda, 2024; Haryanto et al., 2024).

Norms of Reciprocity

The normative framework governing political exchange in Saotenga Village operated through deeply embedded cultural expectations of reciprocity that blurred distinctions between legitimate social obligation and coercive political extraction. The GRIB-affiliated network strategically cultivated long-term reciprocal relationships with community members through systematic provision of material assistance, conflict mediation services, and protection against external threats. These accumulated obligations created binding expectations that electoral support constituted an appropriate form of reciprocation for previously received benefits. The temporal dimension of these relationships proved particularly significant: network members invested substantial resources in community relations during non-electoral periods, establishing debt relationships that could be activated and monetized during elections. This pattern transformed

electoral participation from an exercise of democratic citizenship into a fulfillment of social obligation, fundamentally altering the normative foundation of village political culture.

The reciprocity norms exhibited hierarchical characteristics wherein the nature and magnitude of expected returns varied according to the initial provision. Minor assistance (small loans, casual favors) generated diffuse expectations of general political support, while substantial interventions (employment provision, major financial assistance, dispute resolution) created specific obligations for active electoral mobilization, including recruiting additional supporters and monitoring vote delivery. The asymmetric nature of these exchanges—wherein patrons possessed superior resources, information, and coercive capacity—ensured that reciprocity operated primarily as a mechanism for subordination rather than mutual benefit. Community members who failed to reciprocate appropriately faced not merely the withdrawal of future assistance but active social and economic sanctions, transforming ostensibly voluntary exchange relationships into binding political contracts enforced through informal community mechanisms.

Table 4. Typology of Reciprocity Norms and Political Obligations in Saotenga Village

Patron Provision	Client Obligation	Enforcement Mechanism	Violation Consequence
Emergency financial assistance	Active campaign participation, vote delivery guarantee	Social monitoring, public acknowledgment expectations	Social ostracism, loan recall, public shaming
Employment or livelihood support	Family vote bloc commitment, recruitment of additional supporters	Economic dependency, employment termination threat	Job loss, exclusion from economic opportunities
Protection from conflicts/threats	Long-term political loyalty, information provision about opposition	Continued vulnerability to threats, withdrawal of protection	Renewed exposure to conflicts, potential targeting
Access to development programs	Electoral support, attendance at political events	Program benefit conditionality, selective distribution	Benefit reduction, exclusion from future programs
Dispute mediation services	Political endorsement, public statements of support	Reputation management, community standing threats	Unfavorable treatment in future disputes, social marginalization

The institutionalization of coercive reciprocity norms generated self-reinforcing dynamics that perpetuated patronage-based political culture across electoral cycles. Young voters were socialized into accepting material exchange as a normal component of electoral participation, while community sanctions against norm violators deterred experimentation with alternative political behaviors. The network's control over economic opportunities and social resources created structural conditions wherein rational actors concluded that compliance with reciprocity expectations represented the optimal individual strategy, regardless of personal political preferences. This collective action problem—wherein individual deviation from reciprocity norms imposed

disproportionate costs on the deviating individual while providing negligible benefits to democratic governance—ensured the persistence of patronage politics despite formal democratic institutions and voter education initiatives.

The reciprocity norms documented in Saotenga Village represent a systematic distortion of the normative structures that Putnam (2000) identified as foundational to social capital's civic benefits. Putnam (2000, p. 21) distinguished between "specific reciprocity" (simultaneous exchange of equivalent value) and "generalized reciprocity" (the expectation that kindness will eventually be returned, not necessarily by the same person), arguing that the latter form generates broader social trust and

democratic engagement. The Saotenga findings reveal a third category—"coercive reciprocity"—wherein the expectation of return is enforced through explicit sanctions rather than diffuse social expectations, and wherein the exchange relationship serves to consolidate rather than diffuse political power. This coercive reciprocity functions as what Çelik and Özcan (2022) term "dark social capital," generating social cohesion within patronage networks while simultaneously undermining democratic participation and generalized social trust. The transformation of cultural reciprocity norms into instruments of electoral coercion demonstrates how the same normative structures can produce either democratic civic culture or clientelistic political subordination depending on the power relations within which they operate. Breaking the cycle of coercive reciprocity requires systematic interventions that provide alternative sources of economic security and social protection, thereby reducing community dependence on patronage networks and enabling the emergence of genuinely voluntary political participation (Bardhan, 2022; Journal of Ecohumanism, 2024).

Trust

The trust relationships characterizing the Saotenga Village electoral landscape exhibited a bifurcated structure wherein high levels of in-group trust coexisted with systematic distrust of out-group actors, formal institutions, and democratic processes. Community members expressed substantial confidence in GRIB-affiliated network leaders' capacity and willingness to fulfill patronage commitments,

protect supporters from harm, and deliver material benefits. This trust derived from observed patterns of consistent behavior over extended periods, wherein network leaders demonstrably rewarded loyal supporters and sanctioned defectors. The reliability of these informal arrangements—in contrast to the perceived unpredictability of formal government programs and democratic institutions—generated rational bases for community members to invest trust in patronage relationships as mechanisms for securing material welfare and physical security.

The strategic cultivation of trust relationships required substantial investment by network leaders in reputation maintenance, promise fulfillment, and consistent behavioral patterns. Network actors who failed to deliver committed benefits or protect dependent clients faced reputational damage that undermined their capacity for future political mobilization. This accountability dynamic created incentive structures wherein network leaders maintained reliability in fulfilling specific commitments to identifiable individuals, even while systematically undermining collective democratic processes. The personalization of trust relationships—wherein confidence attached to specific individuals rather than institutional roles or abstract principles—ensured that political reliability operated independently of democratic legitimacy, enabling trusted network leaders to exercise substantial political influence regardless of their formal positions or the procedural fairness of their methods.

Table 5. Trust Dimensions and Democratic Implications in Saotenga Village Electoral Politics

Trust Dimension	Object of Trust	Basis of Trust	Democratic Implication
Personalized Trust	Network leaders, local strongmen	Track record of patronage delivery, protection provision	Concentration of political power in informal actors
Network Trust	GRIB organization, affiliated members	Shared identity, collective reputation, mutual obligations	Exclusive political mobilization, out-group exclusion
Conditional Trust	Candidate backed by network	Network endorsement, patronage promises	Vote choice determined by network affiliation rather than policy preferences
Institutional Distrust	Election commission, village government, police	Perceived corruption, elite capture, unreliable enforcement	Reduced faith in formal democratic processes
Generalized Distrust	Non-network candidates, outside observers	Unknown reliability, lack of patronage track record	Resistance to political alternatives, electoral manipulation tolerance

The erosion of institutional trust and generalized social trust represented a particularly concerning dimension of the Saotenga electoral environment. Community members expressed skepticism regarding the fairness of formal electoral processes, the impartiality of election administrators, and the responsiveness of elected officials to constituent needs absent patronage relationships. This institutional distrust created permissive conditions for electoral manipulation by reducing expectations that violations would be reported, investigated, or sanctioned through formal channels. The perception that "everyone

does it" normalized irregular electoral practices while delegitimizing individual resistance as naive or futile. Simultaneously, distrust of non-network actors—including opposition candidates, civil society organizations, and external observers—limited the capacity of democratic reformers to build alternative political constituencies or mobilize collective action against patronage politics.

The trust configuration documented in Saotenga Village reveals fundamental tensions within Putnam's (2000) theoretical framework regarding social capital's relationship to democratic governance. Putnam (2000, p.

137) argued that social trust—the expectation that others will behave reliably and honestly—represents both a cause and consequence of dense civic networks, generating virtuous cycles wherein participation breeds trust and trust enables cooperation. The Saotenga findings demonstrate that high levels of particularized trust (confidence in specific individuals within patronage networks) can coexist with, and indeed reinforce, low levels of generalized trust (confidence in unknown others and abstract institutions). This "trust asymmetry" creates conditions wherein the bonding social capital of patronage networks actively undermines the bridging social capital required for democratic citizenship. Network members trust their patrons precisely because they distrust formal institutions and unknown actors, generating self-reinforcing dynamics that entrench particularistic political relationships at the expense of universalistic democratic norms. The case confirms Fukuyama's (2001) observation that social capital can facilitate collective action for socially destructive purposes when trust operates within narrow, exclusionary networks rather than generating broader civic engagement. Rebuilding institutional trust through transparent governance, consistent rule enforcement, and demonstrable responsiveness to citizen needs constitutes a prerequisite for displacing patronage-based political relationships with democratic citizenship founded on generalized social trust (Higashijima & Chang, 2024; Transparency International Indonesia, 2024).

CONCLUSION

This study examined the deployment of premanisme as social capital in the 2023 Saotenga Village head election, Sinjai Regency, South Sulawesi, revealing how informal power networks systematically appropriated the structural components of social capital—networks, norms of reciprocity, and trust—to manipulate democratic processes at the grassroots level. The findings demonstrate that GRIB-affiliated networks constructed multi-layered organizational architectures that penetrated existing social structures, enabling comprehensive voter surveillance, coordinated mobilization, and systematic coercion that fundamentally constrained genuine political competition. The normative framework governing political exchange transformed cultural expectations of reciprocity into binding obligations enforced through social ostracism, economic sanctions, and physical intimidation, creating conditions wherein electoral participation became an expression of debt fulfillment rather than democratic citizenship. The bifurcated trust structure—characterized by high particularized trust in patronage networks alongside pervasive distrust of formal institutions—generated self-reinforcing dynamics that entrenched clientelistic relationships while delegitimizing democratic alternatives. These findings extend Putnam's (2000) social capital theory by demonstrating that bonding social capital, when mobilized within asymmetric power relations, produces "dark social capital" that undermines rather than enhances democratic governance—confirming theoretical warnings by Portes (1998) and empirical observations by Çelik and Özcan (2022) regarding social

capital's potential for facilitating collective action toward anti-democratic purposes. The research contributes to scholarly understanding of how informal power structures adapt to decentralized democratic frameworks, while providing practical implications for electoral oversight bodies, civil society organizations, and policymakers seeking to strengthen village democracy through interventions that disrupt patronage-based mobilization networks, provide alternative sources of economic security that reduce community dependence on coercive reciprocity relationships, and rebuild institutional trust through transparent, responsive, and consistently enforced governance mechanisms.

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