



Research Article

# Shifting Village Democratization within Patron–Client Relationships: Evidence from the 2022 Simultaneous Village Head Elections in Semarang Regency

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**Abstract:** This study examines the shift in village democratization through the phenomenon of simultaneous village head elections (Pilkades) in Semarang Regency in 2022, with a particular focus on patronage relationships between village heads and the community. The research is motivated by the failure of 13 out of 24 incumbent village heads to secure re-election, indicating changes in electoral dynamics at the village level. Using a qualitative case study approach, the research was conducted in three villages—Mlilir, Banyubiru, and Bringin—that participated in the 2022 simultaneous Pilkades. Informants were selected through purposive sampling, and data were collected via interviews and documentation. Data validity was ensured through data and method triangulation, while analysis employed interactive qualitative techniques. The findings reveal that material incentives in transactional forms, such as money, goods, services, and other economic benefits, remain effective in mobilizing voter support. Conversely, non-material or spiritual sources of authority are no longer decisive factors in electoral success, as reflected in the defeat of incumbents. The study also identifies prolonged post-election conflicts involving families, relatives, and informal community leaders. Additionally, a dual pattern of patronage is evident: between village elites and voters, and between political party elites and elected village heads as rewards for prior political support. These findings highlight the persistence and transformation of patronage politics in village-level democracy.

**Keywords:** Local Democracy; Patronage; *Pilkades*; Political Clientelism; Village Democratization.

## 1. Introduction

This study aims to describe the shift in village democratization in the simultaneous Village Head Elections (Pilkades) and to analyze patronage relationships between village head candidates and local communities in three villages in Semarang Regency in 2022. This phenomenon is noteworthy following the simultaneous Pilkades held on October 30, 2022, in which 11 incumbents were re-elected while 13 incumbents failed to secure another term (Pradana, 2022). Through the Pilkades, it is possible to examine sources of power based on the traditional values of village head candidates in influencing voters. Aspinall and Rohman explain that the use of material inducements in the form of patronage such as the provision of money, goods, services, and other economic benefits has proven effective in attracting voter support for candidates (Aspinall & Rohman, 2017). More broadly, patronage is also closely associated with money politics and party identification (party ID), whereby low levels of party ID contribute to the prevalence of money politics at the mass level (Muhtadi, 2013).

According to Wasistiono (1993), village head elections cannot be separated from the evolving dynamics of village politics. These elections are not merely contests for power or campaign strategies aimed at securing support, but also involve issues of prestige, self-esteem, and honor. Consequently, they frequently give rise to conflicts, as found by Fantastis (2007), which are triggered by coercion, threats, physical violence, vote-buying practices, supporter

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fanaticism, and the political interests of the candidates (Muafiah, 2019).

The complexity of village head elections (Pilkades) also involves non-material or spiritual sources of power. Some rural communities continue to believe that non-material power derives from mystical or supernatural energy, which provides self-confidence as well as victory (Hidayat et al., 2019). Since the New Order era, the authority of village heads has been consolidated through locally privileged positions by functioning as part of the bureaucratic apparatus and patronage networks centered on the state. In the post-reform era, in addition to benefiting from patronage ties with government officials, village heads also possess bargaining power in the form of providing access to officials during general elections. Under such conditions, incumbents are logically more likely to win electoral competition with relative ease.

This study was conducted in Mlilir Village, Bandungan District; Banyubiru Village, Banyubiru District; and Bringin Village, Suruh District, Semarang Regency, all of which held simultaneous village head elections (Pilkades) in 2022. The three villages were selected because the incumbent candidates successfully won the simultaneous village head elections. The research addresses the following questions: (1) how has village-level democratization shifted in the 2022 simultaneous village head elections in Semarang Regency?; and (2) what patterns of patron–client relationships emerged in the 2022 simultaneous village head elections in Semarang Regency?

Anderson explains four concepts of power in Javanese culture. First, power is concrete in nature: it truly exists, and its existence is believed to be bestowed by *Hyang Murbeng Dumadi*. In contrast, Western conceptions of power are abstract, understood as the result of abstraction from formulations of social interaction patterns that emphasize causal relationships between individuals or groups and others. Second, power is homogeneous: it possesses a single type and originates from the same source. Western concepts of power, by contrast, are heterogeneous, encompassing wealth, social status, intelligence, and other forms of resources. Third, the total amount of power in the universe is considered fixed, because it is an expression of reality and derives from a common source. Fourth, power does not hinge on questions of legitimacy, since it originates from a single, unified, or homogeneous source (Wicoyo, 1991).

Patronage constitutes a pattern of political–cultural relations that is individual in nature between patrons and clients. The interactions established are reciprocal, involving the exchange of power, status, and official positions for labor, support, material benefits, and loyalty. The patron, as the protective party, provides shelter and protection to the client, while the client offers loyalty and obedience to the patron in return. This relationship is inherently asymmetric and becomes increasingly complex depending on the influence, social position, or other attributes being exchanged. Patron–client relationships are commonly found in Third World countries; however, Lande explains that such relationships exist across all levels of society, whether modern or traditional, democratic or authoritarian. Brinkerhoff and Goldsmith characterize patron–client relations as informal systems that undermine democratic institutions, foster money politics and corruption, and increase inefficiency in bureaucracy and public service delivery. In contrast, O'Donnell emphasizes the importance of informal political systems, arguing that they exert greater influence in shaping political institutions than formal political systems (Muhtadi, 2013).

Village democratization encompasses four key elements. First, social relations in villages are built upon long-standing, personal social interactions among residents that have been inherited across generations, forming patterns of behavior and social norms characterized by strong kinship ties. Second, the relationship between the village and space operates with high intensity. Attachment to space is not merely economic in nature as a source of livelihood but is perceived as something living and animated. Third, prolonged and intensive social interactions, embedded in a dynamic and living relationship with space, give rise to rural socio-cultural patterns in which lineage or descent serves as a reference for determining an individual's legitimacy as a village head. Fourth, solidarity is mechanical in nature and strongly imbued with collectivistic values (Muhtadi, 2013). Rural communities thus constitute a distinct subjective category, bound together by a sense of togetherness and mutual assistance (Amanulloh, 2015)

Kinship has been one of the preferences and subjective reasons influencing candidate selection; however, democratic reforms, the diversification of the rural economy, and the increasingly competitive nature of village head elections have transformed this dynamic. As a result, the village, as an autonomous administrative unit, has become an open arena for local political contestation, characterized by the expansion of spaces for political participation (A

Upe, 2008).

For several decades, the position of village head has been inherited through familial succession, leading to the formation of political dynasties. Political dynasties are understood as a condition in which a single elite group dominates political processes and governance. This political dynasty takes a prismatic form, in which the dynasty functions as the governing elite that maintains patron–client relationships with various actors, particularly informal leaders who possess socio-political and socio-cultural influence within society (non-governing elites), as well as with the general public (non-elites) (Aryono, 2022).

The unequal distribution of political power reflects imperfections in democratic representation within politics. In relation to this condition, Mosca explains that every class exhibits a tendency to become hereditary; even when political positions are formally open to all, ruling families tend to enjoy structural advantages (Susanti, 2018). Mosca's argument is reinforced by Carmack (2019), who asserts that kinship-based politics can be found in almost all societies where genealogical lineage is employed to determine systems of communal leadership (Ambo Upe et al., 2022). Sociologically, this traditional pattern perpetuates political power among family members who portray themselves as figures characteristic of godfatherism (Thomas et al., 2022)

A culture of power domination by a small political elite has tended to result in the abuse of procedures intended to ensure free and fair elections. One such manifestation is the practice of *godfatherism*, which continues to persist in Nigeria. This refers to a situation in which political elites and their associates mobilize their sources of power such as wealth, political influence, and patronage to support their preferred candidates and secure their victory in elections. In practice, these elites do not hesitate to take religious and ethnic considerations into account when appointing and promoting individuals to specific positions (Thomas et al., 2022)

The difference between this study and previous research lies in its focus. While earlier studies examined village head elections (Pilkades) in relation to campaigns involving money politics, local political dynasties, oligarchic political practices, and the conflicts surrounding Pilkades, this study introduces a novel perspective by analyzing the dualism of patronage relationships. This dualism refers to, first, the relationship between the village head (as patron) and the community (as clients) as voters during the Pilkades, and second, the relationship between political party elites (as patrons) and the elected village head (as client) as a form of reciprocity for serving as part of the campaign team in legislative or regional elections (Pemilu or Pilkada).

## 2. Methods

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design (Bungin, 2015) dengan metode studi kasus. Denzin dan Lincoln (2017) using a case study method. Denzin and Lincoln (2017) explain that qualitative research is a situated activity that places the observer in the world. According to Yin (2008), the case study method involves an in-depth investigation of a case within its real-life context (Creswell, 2015). his approach was selected because it: (1) offers greater flexibility, (2) allows for direct presentation of data, and (3) is adaptable and sensitive to phenomena encountered in the field.

The research was conducted in Mlilir Village, Bandungan Sub-district; Banyubiru Village, Banyubiru Sub-district; and Bringin Village, Bringin Sub-district, Semarang Regency, Central Java. These three villages were selected because, in the 2022 village head elections, the incumbents won, and the villages continue to strongly uphold traditional values, such as *slametan*, *bersih desa*, and *merti deso* rituals. The unit of analysis concerns the definition of what constitutes a case in this study, namely village democratization as it relates to patterns of patron–client relationships in the simultaneous village head elections in Semarang Regency in 2022.

Qualitative research requires a clear focus, as it is closely related to context. Context encompasses place and time, actors or participants, as well as significant events that constitute the research setting. This study is centered on three villages that conducted village head elections (*Pilkades*) in 2022 in Semarang Regency. The research focus includes: (1) shifts in village democratization in the simultaneous village head elections in Semarang Regency in 2022; and (2) patterns of patronage relationships in the simultaneous village head elections in Semarang Regency in 2022.

This study employed purposive sampling and snowball sampling techniques. Community members who served as respondents were selected purposively based on predetermined criteria (Creswell, 2015)

Research data were collected through interviews and documentation. In this study, the interviews were conducted in an unstructured manner, namely open-ended interviews in which the researcher did not use a systematically and comprehensively prepared interview guide, but rather relied on the main outlines of research questions aligned with the research problems. The instruments used by the researcher included field notes and a mobile phone. The documentation comprised village monographs, documents from the Semarang Regency Office of Community and Village Empowerment, as well as journals, articles, websites, and mass media sources.

The collected data were tested for validity using triangulation (Miles, 1992) namely: (1) data triangulation, conducted by collecting data over time and from different individuals or sources at the research site; and (2) methodological triangulation, carried out by employing different data collection methods in relation to the same unit of analysis or research focus. The collected data were processed and analyzed using interactive qualitative data analysis techniques, in which the analytical process followed a cyclical pattern. This required the researcher to move back and forth throughout the data collection process (data obtained from interviews and documentation were recorded in field notes consisting of two parts: descriptive and reflective). The cycle involved activities of data reduction, data display in the form of written narratives, images, tables, and graphs that illustrate the phenomena under study, as well as conclusion drawing and verification. This qualitative data analysis is a continuous process that requires ongoing reflection on the data, the formulation of analytical questions, and the writing of brief analytical notes throughout the course of the research.

### 3. Results And Discussion

#### Results

The village head elections (*Pilkades*) in Semarang Regency were conducted simultaneously on 30 October 2022 in 24 villages across Semarang Regency. In accordance with the stages of the *Pilkades*, the elected village heads were reported by the election committees to the Village Consultative Body (*Badan Permusyawaratan Desa / BPD*) and subsequently submitted to the Regent through the sub-district head (*camat*). The determination of the elected village head candidates was formalized through a Regent's Decree, namely the Decree of the Regent of Semarang No. 141/0590/2022 concerning the Determination of the Schedule and Stages for the Simultaneous Village Head Elections in Semarang Regency in 2022. The inauguration of the elected village heads by the Regent of Semarang Regency was held on 6 December 2022. As stated earlier, the *Pilkades* in Mlilir Village, Bandungan Sub-district; Banyubiru Village, Banyubiru Sub-district; and Bringin Village, Bringin Sub-district, Semarang Regency, Central Java, were won by the incumbent candidates.

Semarang Regency is one of the 29 regencies and 6 municipalities in Central Java Province. It is geographically located between 110°14'54.74"–110°39'03" East Longitude and 7°07'30.0" South Latitude. The total area of Semarang Regency is 95,020.674 hectares, representing approximately 2.92% of the total area of Central Java Province. Land use in Semarang Regency is classified into three categories: paddy agricultural land, non-paddy agricultural land, and non-agricultural land. The dominant land use in the regency is agricultural land, consisting of both paddy and non-paddy fields, while the remaining area is used for non-agricultural purposes. Paddy agricultural land covers 23,919.51 hectares (approximately 25.17%), non-paddy agricultural land occupies 36,360.07 hectares (38.27%), and non-agricultural land accounts for 34,741.09 hectares (36.56%). Based on these data, non-paddy agricultural land constitutes the largest proportion of land use in Semarang Regency.

Based on the recapitulation of the 2022 Village Head Elections, the elected village heads from the three villages in Semarang Regency were incumbents, namely Sri Anggoro Siswaji (Banyubiru Village, Banyubiru Subdistrict), Yamyuri (Bringin Village, Bringin Subdistrict), and Jamhari (Mlilir Village, Bandungan Subdistrict), Semarang Regency.

The elected Village Head of Mlilir Village, Bandungan Subdistrict, is the incumbent, Mr. Jamhari. Mlilir Village is a center for various vegetable commodities, with celery as its flagship product. Another incumbent is Mr. Zamhari, who serves as the Village Head of Bringin Village, Bringin Subdistrict, Semarang Regency. Both villages are characterized by communities predominantly engaged in agriculture, as is typical of rural communities in general. The third village selected as the research site is Banyubiru Village, Banyubiru Subdistrict, Semarang Regency. The elected village head is also an incumbent, namely Sri Anggoro Siswaji.

Among the villages that conducted village head elections (*Pilkades*) in 2022, Banyubiru

Village stood out as the most unique. This was due to the fact that the electoral contest involved a married couple competing against each other, while at the same time the village demonstrated highly commendable achievements. In 2022, Banyubiru Village, located in Banyubiru Sub-district, received first place in the Anti-Corruption Village Award organized by the Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK) of the Republic of Indonesia. On this basis, it is not an exaggeration that ultimately no other candidates expressed interest in running as challengers to the incumbent. The incumbent was perceived as possessing capabilities that were difficult to rival, having successfully led Banyubiru Village to achieve recognition at the national level.

Discussions concerning simultaneous village head elections (*Pilkades serentak*) are consistently of considerable interest. *Pilkades* constitutes a long-standing tradition practiced by rural communities as an implementation of village autonomy, whereby villages are authorized to regulate and manage their own governmental affairs insofar as they do not conflict with higher levels of government. The notion of “not conflicting” refers to conformity with fundamental principles of village governance and development planning, including representation, transparency, accountability, and participation.

At present, issues surrounding village head elections (*Pilkades*) are no longer limited to the involvement of village elites and local communities, but have expanded in accordance with the provisions of the Regulation of the Minister of Home Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia Number 65 of 2017 concerning Amendments to the Regulation of the Minister of Home Affairs Number 112 of 2014 on the Election of Village Heads. Under this regulation, the Regent/Mayor, as the highest authority at the regional level, is vested with the power to establish an election committee at the regency/municipal level to administer the stages of the village head election. This phenomenon cannot be separated from Law Number 6 of 2014 on Village Governance, which stipulates that villages constitute administrative units of government under the authority of regional governments.

## Discussion

Linking the implementation of village-level democratic processes as manifested in village head elections (*Pilkades*) is a highly compelling subject. Competition for leadership positions at the village level typically associated with rivalry takes place within a village community typology characterized by homogeneous social structures, grounded in principles of kinship and togetherness, oriented toward tradition and status, marked by social isolation that results in relative social stagnation, strong cultural unity and cohesion, the presence of numerous rituals and sacred values, as well as a pronounced orientation toward collectivism.

The behavioral characteristics of homogenous rural communities have implications for the community's capacity to strengthen collective bonds. Within homogeneity, understanding a social group is equivalent to understanding the self, by positioning shared values as the ultimate goal. Homogeneity becomes a defining characteristic of rural communities that develop within the same belief systems as an implication of such uniformity (Luthfia, 2013). These homogenous communities consistently adopt an inward-looking orientation, resulting in cultural products that are invariably embedded with local values.

Semarang Regency has been known for the slogan *Intanpari*, which stands for industry, agriculture, and tourism, since the 1990s. In addition to the agricultural sector, which continues to serve as the backbone of the local economy, the region is also supported by the presence of industrial activities and the development of tourism. In line with this slogan, the majority of the rural population relies on agriculture for their livelihoods, while the remainder is engaged in industry and tourism. Consequently, one manifestation of social homogeneity in the region lies in the similarity of occupational patterns, in addition to shared religion, customs, and socio-cultural characteristics.

As rural communities that continue to adhere to traditional agricultural practices, there exists a strong sense of interdependence among community members, manifested through mutual assistance and collective cooperation (*gotong royong*) in the process of cultivating traditional agricultural land. Within these activities, mutual help, social solidarity, cohesiveness, and unity emerge as prominent characteristics of rural communities in Semarang Regency. In addition, rural communities tend to share similar traits, including common experiences, work patterns, and work culture, as well as interpersonal relationships that are informal in nature and not based on formal social contracts or agreements.

As a process of democratization, *Pilkades* (village head elections) have undergone shifts over time. One of these changes is associated with the involvement of external actors, who have even succeeded in dominating the political behavior of rural communities. The entry of actors from outside the village community is inseparable from modernization, which has

gradually eroded traditional social principles, such as lifestyle patterns, values of togetherness, simplicity, and interpersonal intimacy among community members. In several rural areas of Semarang Regency, many rituals, sacred values, and collective activities have now been abandoned for reasons of practicality and economic considerations. The values of togetherness and mutual cooperation have increasingly weakened, ultimately shifting social values toward the dominance of economic factors that are materialistic in nature. This condition helps explain why incumbents are sometimes defeated by new candidates who employ strategies emphasizing political transactions in the period leading up to the *Pilkades*.

Indeed, the indicators of a democratic village head election (*Pilkades*) process are closely related to issues surrounding patron–client relationships within society. In traditional rural communities, patron–client relations are commonly described as reciprocal relationships between wealthy farmers (patrons) and poor farmers (clients), which are fundamentally mutually beneficial. However, the increasing heterogeneity of livelihoods in contemporary rural society has shifted this definition, so that patron–client relations are no longer limited to class-based relationships among farmers. Instead, they are also linked to the control of other resources that generate dependency relationships resembling patron–client dynamics, such as those between village heads and political elites at the regency or municipal level.

The relationship between prospective village head candidates and regency/municipal political party elites originates from the Regional Head Elections (*Pemilihan Kepala Daerah*, *Pilkada*) and Legislative Elections (*Pemilihan Legislatif*, *Pileg*). During *Pilkada* or *Pileg*, village head candidates who possess a latent mass base are informally positioned as members of campaign teams to mobilize votes at the village level. In return for the support provided, the elected regional head and/or political parties assist these village head candidates in winning the village head election (*Pemilihan Kepala Desa*, *Pilkades*). Such assistance may take the form of economic resources (financial support), electoral backing, and regulatory support, including Regional Regulations (*Peraturan Daerah*, *Perda*) and Regent Regulations (*Peraturan Bupati*, *Perbup*). It is through this process that new patron–client relationships are formed.

From a political perspective, the relationship between patrons and clients tends to disproportionately benefit the patron. This condition results in clients namely, the community having limited autonomy in making choices. Patron–client relationships that initially emerge from economic circumstances gradually shift toward the political legitimization of the patron by the client.

A concrete manifestation of the shift in village democratization can be observed through political patronage involving the exchange of goods and services. In general, the phenomenon of patronage is understood as a political activity in which a politician provides material benefits, in the form of goods or services, to prospective voters, either individually or to specific groups. The patronage relationship between patron and client is personal in nature, whereby the exchange of economic goods is reciprocated with political support.

In relation to the success of incumbents in retaining their positions, three key aspects can be identified as being closely linked to the patterns of patronage operating in the three villages. First, patronage constitutes an activity oriented toward the distribution of material resources or other forms of benefits by politicians to voters or their supporters. Patronage relations that emerge in political events represent a series of efforts by the involved patrons to maintain the legitimacy of a political actor who, at a later stage, is expected to provide benefits both material and non-material to the actors participating in the patronage network. Material benefits typically take the form of money or goods, while non-material benefits are commonly obtained in the form of access to village-level development projects or the reinforcement of the supporting patrons' positions as influential actors within the village community.

In this study, in addition to patronage, which still predominantly influences voters' electoral decisions, the capabilities possessed by candidates also constitute an important source of voter appeal. An illustrative example is Sri Anggoro Siswaji, who has served as village head for a third term in Banyubiru Village, Semarang Regency. One of Sri Anggoro Siswaji's notable achievements is his success in positioning Banyubiru as an anti-corruption pilot village selected by the Corruption Eradication Commission (Komisi Pemberantasan Korupsi, KPK). This achievement includes the successful implementation of an online public service system, which minimizes the occurrence of unauthorized fees beyond existing regulations. Moreover, this online service system is easily accessible via smartphones, thereby enhancing the convenience of public service delivery for the community.

Based on the results and discussion of the study above, several conclusions can be drawn. First, the use of material resources as a form of transactional exchange such as money,

goods, services, and other economic benefits has proven effective in attracting voter support for village head candidates. Second, the belief that non-material or spiritual sources of power are the primary determinants of a candidate's victory is not entirely accurate, as evidenced by the defeat of an incumbent in the 2022 village head election. Third, electoral defeat in village head elections often leaves behind prolonged conflicts involving family members, relatives, and even informal community leaders who support the candidates. This phenomenon tends to persist over time, and the leadership of the elected village head plays a crucial role in determining whether conflicts among supporters are resolved. Fourth, there has been a shift in patronage relationships, from those previously limited to village elites and the community to relationships between political party elites and village head candidates, functioning as a form of reward for serving as campaign teams in previous legislative or regional elections.

Patterns of patronage relations in the simultaneous village head elections (*Pilkades*) in Semarang Regency in 2022. Referring to the types of rewards that clients may provide to patrons, client dependence on patrons occurs due to several factors. First, the provision of goods needed by clients from patrons generates a sense of indebtedness among clients toward their patrons. Moreover, it is widely acknowledged that the continued practice of money politics in village head elections further reinforces these dependency relationships. Second, clients may become instruments of the patron's political interests and are even willing to act as agents on behalf of the patron. In the 2022 *Pilkades*, village head candidates functioned as patrons; however, in other political contexts such as regional head elections and legislative elections the elected village heads assume the role of clients to regional head candidates and political party elites.

The pattern of patronage relationships in the simultaneous village head elections (*Pilkades*) in Semarang Regency in 2022 can be described as follows.



**Figure 1.** The Pattern of Patronage Relationships in the Simultaneous Village Head Elections in Semarang Regency, 2022.

Figure 1 illustrates two forms of patronage relationships. The first occurs between district-level political elites acting as patrons and village heads as clients. The second form positions village heads as patrons, while village communities function as clients. The relationship between party elites and elected village heads represents a mutually beneficial arrangement, in which elected village heads serve as members of the district political elites' campaign teams. In return, during village head elections, party or political elites at the district level provide support to village head candidates who are part of their campaign teams in order to secure electoral victory. On the other hand, through the distribution of goods and money, village communities are positioned as clients of village head candidates, aimed at increasing the candidates' chances of winning the election. This reciprocal relationship constitutes a patronage pattern that continues to persist at the village level to the present day.

#### 4. Conclusion

The concrete manifestation of shifts in village-level democratization can be observed through political patronage manifested in the exchange of goods and services. Patron-client relations are personal in nature, wherein the exchange of economic goods is substituted with political support. Patterns of patronage in the simultaneous village head elections (*Pilkades*) in Semarang Regency in 2022 comprised two main forms: first, relationships between village political elites and village residents; and second, relationships between village political elites and political party elites at both the regency and provincial levels. In the 2022 *Pilkades*, village head candidates acted as patrons; however, in other electoral contexts such as regional

executive and legislative elections elected village heads functioned as clients of regional head candidates and political party elites. The involvement of political party elites in the selection of village heads should therefore be minimized, among other measures, by involving third parties such as higher education institutions. This approach is expected to ensure that village elections produce leaders of high quality and integrity. Prolonged conflicts arising from village head elections only serve to undermine kinship and familial relationships within the community. Consequently, elected village heads are expected to demonstrate optimal performance throughout their tenure and to embrace conflicting parties in order to collaboratively promote village development.

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