

## Strategies for Civil Servants to Navigate Local Political Dynamics: A Case Study of X Regency

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### Keywords

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Regional Politics;  
Bureaucrats Coping Mechanism;  
Clan;  
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### ABSTRACT

The phenomenon of the vulnerability of the career of State Civil Apparatus (ASN) due to regional political dynamics often creates great pressure that tests their integrity and impartiality, especially because of their position that is vulnerable to informal political practices. This research explored the coping mechanism developed by bureaucrats in Regency X, Papua Province, in dealing with the dynamics of political leadership. Using a qualitative approach with an exploratory case study design, data was collected through in-depth interviews with informants from various levels of position. The results of the study show that civil servants in Regency X develop a hybrid survival strategy by combining administrative adaptation and local socio-cultural forces to ensure their career stability. Bureaucrats control political pressure through a combination of proving loyalty, strengthening professionalism, and withdrawing to avoid the risk of mutation. A significant finding in this study is the emergence of another form of moving against strategy that functions as a "cultural shield", in which clan identities and the collective support of indigenous leaders are used to fortify positions of office from excessive political intervention of leaders.

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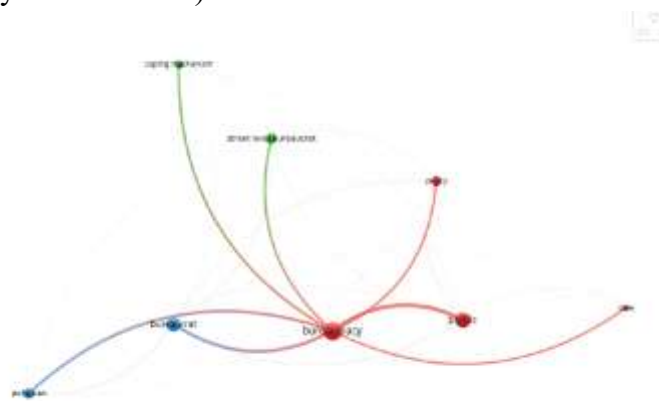
### INTRODUCTION

Bureaucratic neutrality is often just a beautiful narrative on paper that actually clashes hard with the political reality in the region. The need for civil servants to remain impartial in carrying out public policies continues to be tested by the strong pull of political party interests in the frenzy of direct elections (Indianapolis, 2022). In fact, the bureaucracy should serve as a bridge for the interests of the state and the interests of the community (Muksalmina et al., 2024). This attraction of interest is not just speculation, but is evident from the many alleged violations that appear in each election cycle. Throughout the 2024 Regional Elections alone, there were at least 1,158 civil servants who were suspected of not being neutral (Era.id, 2024), while data from *Bawaslu* shows that there are 433 findings and reports of alleged violations of ASN neutrality, of which 314 are designated as violations (Bawaslu, 2024). This phenomenon of non-neutrality is not limited to the momentum of political contestation alone, but is often internalized in bureaucratic routines that are in direct contact with various political dynamics at the regional level. According to Muhammad and Yusuf (2020), the rise of informal political practices is often considered a matter of fairness at the local level, so the number of findings may only illustrate the tip of the iceberg of a much larger reality.

Thus, why is this practice that hurts democracy so difficult to suppress? The root of the problem lies precisely in the dilemma of ASN whose careers seem to be "held hostage" by the

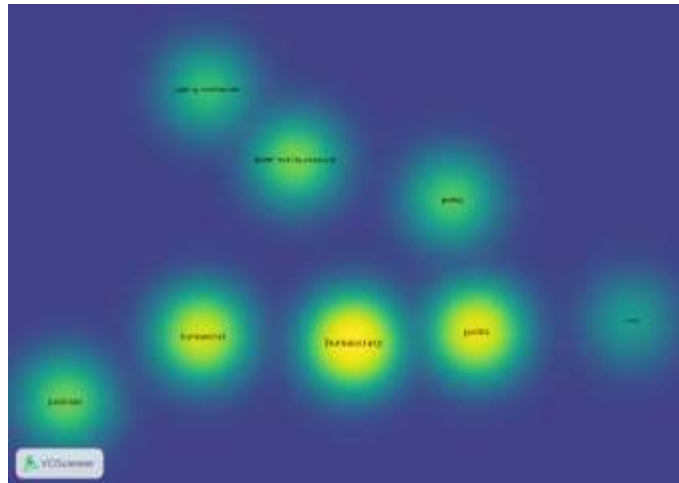
interests of political officials. As a Civil Service Supervisory Officer (PPK), regional heads hold full authority over the administrative fate of their subordinates, starting from appointment, transfer, to dismissal (Indonesia, 2023). This is what ultimately makes the meritocratic system often lose to blind loyalty built to secure positions and career futures alone (Muhammad & Yusuf, 2020). This research was conducted in one of the districts in the northern part of Papua Province (hereinafter referred to as Regency X). The consideration for the selection of this locus is due to the uniqueness of its cultural characteristics, where the social structure of the community is still dominated by primordial ties of tribes and clans that have strong family relationships." In the midst of a special autonomy situation that has experienced many policy distortions in Papua (Setiawan, 2021), primordial sentiments often appear in the form of selfishness of clans, families, and villages which are used as political instruments to rally support through brothers, om, and brothers-in-law (Snanfi et al., 2018). This creates a double burden for local bureaucrats, they not only face administrative pressure from superiors, but are also squeezed by the moral demands and self-esteem of the clan that are at stake in the contest. This layered pressure ultimately encourages civil servants to develop various defense mechanisms (coping mechanisms) as an effort to save themselves in the midst of regional political turmoil that threatens their careers (Braams et al., 2024; Ul'zikri & Satriawan, 2025).

Various strategies to "survive" are finally implemented, where the partiality shown by ASN is often born not because of sincere trust in the leadership, but purely defensive tactics to avoid bad reports or other negative consequences (Djamali et al., 2025; Folarin et al., 2025). Interestingly, this defensive strategy often manifests itself in the form of "symbolic violence", where civil servants feel compelled to affiliate because they see their position and career as big stakes. Unfortunately, a study that dissects in depth the strategies of bureaucrats to "survive" from the political vortex of this region is still relatively minimal. Bibliometric analysis using VOSviewer software was used to map the literature in this study and is presented through two perspectives, namely the keyword linkage network (Network Visualization) and the level of research density (Density Visualization).



**Figure 1. Network Visualization**

Source: Authors' bibliometric analysis using VOSviewer (2026)



**Figure 2. Density Visualization**

Source: Authors' bibliometric analysis using VOSviewer (2026)

Based on the network map in Figure 1, research dominance so far has been divided into only three major groups. The first group (green) focuses on the relationship between coping mechanisms and street-level bureaucrats. The second group (blue) examines the formal relationship between bureaucrats and politicians. Meanwhile, the third group (red) is dominated by general discussions about bureaucracy, politics, policy, and case studies. A clear research gap only becomes apparent when compared to the density map in Figure 2, where the bright yellow area is densely centered around the keywords "bureaucracy," "politics," and "bureaucrat." This demonstrates that these themes of the relationship between politics and bureaucracy have been extensively researched by previous scholars, making the space highly saturated. Conversely, the keywords "coping mechanisms" and "street-level bureaucrat" are in the dim green area, indicating a very limited amount of research. Crucially, there's no single keyword link that points to cultural variables or local informal ties, such as clans, tribes, or the clan system. This visual connection confirms that bureaucrats' defense mechanisms remain fixated on rigid formal organizational rules. This research aims to fill this gap by exploring how civil servants' defense strategies are actually implemented amidst the dynamics of regional politics.

To examine these protective mechanisms in depth, this phenomenon needs to be understood through the lens of power relations within the bureaucracy. Power can be understood as the ability of an individual to influence the behavior of others to act in accordance with their desired goals. In a bureaucratic environment, this power relationship is often manifested through the authority of leaders, which can influence the career prospects of their subordinates. Leaders are viewed as possessing power like "store managers" whose demands must be met, while subordinates, or "employees," fear being "hit" or reprimanded by their superiors, and a desire to remain in the workplace. Consequently, employees tend to employ "defensive" strategies to avoid negative consequences from their superiors (Davidovitz & Cohen, 2022). This power pressure triggers the emergence of coping mechanisms among bureaucrats to minimize career risks.

The theory of defense mechanisms itself originates from psychological studies popularized by Folkman and Lazarus (1984), who viewed them as rational and behavioral efforts of individuals to manage conflict or stressful demands. However, within this scope, it has been narrowed down to a concept specific to the governmental realm, defining coping as behavioral efforts undertaken by bureaucrats to master, tolerate, or reduce external and internal demands in their work routines (Tummers et al., 2015). The concept of coping is also understood as a complex action, as it encompasses the integration of emotions, focus of attention, and individual strategic goals in responding to environmental pressures. Using a hierarchical classification adapted from Skinner et al. (2003), Tummers organizes these behaviors into three broad categories: approaching (moving toward), distancing (moving away), and resisting (moving against).

The first dimension is moving away, which is an individual's attempt to adapt to the desires or needs of others to ensure smooth operations or minimize conflict. The second is moving away, which is the act of withdrawing or avoiding in-depth conversations to avoid stress or unpleasant situations. The final indicator is moving against, which refers to an attempt to confront another party in a rigid or even combative manner to maintain a position or control over a situation. By understanding this definition, we can see how this third dimension is used as a strategy by civil servants to save their careers (Béchar, 2020; Friedman, 2023).

Several studies have examined bureaucratic coping mechanisms and political dynamics, with Davidovitz and Cohen (2022) finding that street-level bureaucrats employ defensive strategies to protect themselves from political pressures, Tummers et al. (2015) identifying three main categories of coping behavior, Muhammad and Yusuf (2020) revealing how informal political clientelism prevails over meritocratic systems, Indianapolis (2022) highlighting tensions between formal neutrality policies and political realities, and Snanfi et al. (2018) demonstrating how primordial ties influence political contestation in Papua.

However, these studies predominantly focus on formal bureaucratic structures or general coping mechanisms without addressing how local cultural variables such as clan systems, tribal identities, and customary leadership shape bureaucrats' survival strategies in regions with strong primordial social structures, leaving the integration of cultural dimensions into coping mechanism analysis underexplored. This research fills that gap by examining the hybrid survival strategies of civil servants in Regency X, Papua Province, identifying a "cultural shield" mechanism where clan identities and customary leadership protect bureaucratic positions from political intervention, and providing empirical evidence of how bureaucrats at different hierarchical levels combine administrative adaptation with local socio-cultural forces to ensure career stability.

This research aims to identify survival strategies across hierarchical levels, analyze the combination of administrative and cultural adaptation, examine the role of clan identity as a cultural shield, and formulate a conceptual framework for understanding hybrid coping mechanisms in primordial social structures. The theoretical benefits include enriching coping mechanism literature by introducing cultural dimensions and providing a framework for analyzing hybrid strategies in politically dynamic environments, while practical benefits extend to civil servants seeking effective survival strategies, policymakers formulating culturally responsive bureaucratic policies, regional leaders developing humane approaches,

and future researchers exploring bureaucratic coping mechanisms across diverse cultural contexts.

## **METHOD**

This research used a qualitative approach with a case study design to examine in depth the phenomenon of ASN strategies in dealing with the dynamics of regional political power in Regency X. is a scientific method for dissecting contemporary phenomena in depth and comprehensively, carried out within specific time constraints and activities in the context of the actual situation (Assyakurrohim et al., 2022; Yin, 2018). The study uses exploratory case studies to gain information on various survival strategies that emerge from the Coping ASN in Regency X in responding to the dynamics of leadership power.

Primary data collection was carried out through semi-structured interviews with three (3) ASN from echelon 2, 3, and 4 positions to obtain detailed and in-depth information at each level, with a list of questions developed based on related literature, especially regarding classification Coping Bureaucracy (Tummers et al., 2015), while secondary data is collected from published data such as journal articles and linear books. According to (Scott, 2010) The subject is selected by Purposive in order to achieve certain research objectives and the data obtained are relevant to the situation to be studied.

Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis techniques, which involved several stages: data reduction to select and simplify relevant information, data display to present findings in a structured manner, and conclusion drawing to interpret patterns and themes emerging from the interviews (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The analysis process was guided by the coping bureaucracy framework developed by Tummers et al. (2015), which categorizes coping behaviors into three main dimensions: moving toward (approaching), moving away (distancing), and moving against (resisting). To ensure the validity and reliability of the findings, data triangulation was performed by comparing interview results with secondary data sources, and member checking was conducted by confirming interpretations with informants to ensure accuracy and credibility of the analysis.

## **RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

### **Loyalty as a Guarantee of Security and Cultural Shield**

At the high leadership level (Echelon II), the defensive strategy is dominated by a pattern of moving towards combined with the use of informal force. After being asked questions about how to adapt to the new leadership, Informant 1 views that the transition of regional leadership is a critical period that requires proof of existence. This strategy is carried out by confirming one's capabilities so that they are still considered relevant by new power holders. This is not just a matter of work, but a matter of "marketing" loyalty through visible performance. As explained by Informant 1:

"... First, I will show performance, show loyalty and show my ability to carry out my responsibilities in one position, especially for example there are activities attended by regional leaders, I must show that I am able to carry out my duties and responsibilities as well as possible so that there is a separate assessment from the leadership that I am able to carry out the position that I have been given."

The statement shows that for high leaders, performance serves as a political bargaining tool. This strategy is in line with the argument of Davidovitz and Cohen (2022) who state that bureaucrats often conduct impression management to secure their positions from the threat of political mutation. However, the real challenge arises when the leader's orders intersect with the boundaries of the rules. In this situation, Informant 1 applies the tactic of "administrative consideration" but still leads to total compliance in order to obtain a guarantee of counter-protection from the leadership:

"... No matter what happens, I will continue to behave because I must be able to serve the leadership as the leader wants, for sure I will give some consideration that I continue to do according to the order but I will ask for other policies as well so that I can be protected from rule errors... The leadership will also definitely protect me because everything is based on the orders of the leadership."

This action reflects the existence of an unwritten "loyalty contract" where compliance is seen as a form of security guarantee, as if bureaucrats are willing to "set up" for the policies of the leadership in the hope that the leadership will also provide similar protection in case of a case in the future (Indianapolis, 2022). This phenomenon shows that at the level of high leadership, administrative safety often depends on the personal authority of the leader rather than on an objective legal system. Furthermore, the most crucial finding in this study is the use of surname as a variable determining position stability. Informant 1 reveals that primordial bonds are often a stronger protector than any staffing rule:

"... The leader if he wants to take a step or wants to change people, he will definitely call the one who is related to him first to be able to be a supporter... The leader will also have a sense that it should not be embarrassing from his clan or his family so that these things can also secure us... Leaders who understand the customary rules in this district, he will definitely listen more from the clan or family to make a decision on his policies."

The power of this clan creates a culturally "reluctant" space for regional heads as PPKs. Here, there is a hybrid coping pattern, where customary identities are used as a negotiation tool so that leaders are not arbitrary in making mutation decisions.

### **Professionalism as a Fortress of Defense**

In contrast to the very political Echelon II strategy, officials at the middle level (Echelon III) rely more on normative strategies. Speakers tend to withdraw from the practical political vortex (moving away) and prefer to fortify themselves with administrative order. For Informant 2, the best way to survive in the midst of regional dynamics is not to be a problematic subject in performance assessment. This was revealed by informant 2 in answering the same question regarding the new leadership transition:

"... The simplest thing may be that we continue to perform our tasks well, continue to show our performance, and we continue to build good communication with our internal environment in the office and also with the external environment... We should not make mistakes or deeds that can give us a bad judgment."

At this level, it can be seen that bureaucrats are trying to build an image that no matter who they lead, they are still reliable but only technically. Belief in the meritocratic system is still quite strong at this intermediate level (Indianapolis, 2022) This strategy seeks to create the perception that the bureaucrat is a "technical machine" that is needed by whoever is in charge. By keeping a clean track record, they mean narrowing the gap between political leaders to find

excuses for dismissal or demotion (Tummers et al., 2015). This belief in professionalism emerged as a rational response to uncertainty. Informant 2 believes that work regularity will provide its own bargaining value:

"... Staying on the principle that we remain professional in our work, I think the new leadership will also see such things. It is impossible for us to work well, work regularly, of course this will be a positive value for the new leadership."

Regarding the issue of clans, informant 2 tends to try to separate tribal identity from their professional work so as not to be squeezed by conflicts of interest. The interviewees viewed the clan as a natural destiny that should not interfere with professional responsibilities as a servant of the state:

"... about certain clans, tribes, or groups... I must be principled that I am a State Civil Apparatus, a civil servant, my duty is to provide services to the community. It means that I won't become burdened with such a thing... Regarding tribes, clans, we can't argue about that, it means it's something commonplace, it means that we are naturally in such a situation."

This statement shows that there is an effort to keep a distance so as not to be trapped in the moral burden of the family which often collides with office rules (Muhammad & Yusuf, 2020). This strategy is important for mid-level officials to maintain emotional and technical stability amid the pull of political interests that often divide local communities.

### **Passive Compliance and Customary Mediation**

At the Echelon IV level, the coping mechanisms that emerge tend to be passive and defensive, which are classified as moving away. This is due to their administrative position being at the lowest point in the leadership hierarchy, so there is a perception that they do not have a strong enough political bargaining power to conduct open negotiations. For the apparatus at this level, the best way to maintain career stability is to minimize self-visibility and simply follow the flow of the leader's policies without much additional movement. Informant 3 explains this survival reality clearly:

"... If we are below, we will work as it is ordered by our superiors. There is no need to comment too much or participate in political talk. If there is an order, we will do it. The important thing is to be absent safely, the task is completed, so that it does not become the target of mutation to distant places."

This phenomenon reflects the condition of bureaucrats who have lost their bargaining power so that they choose to submit completely for the sake of survival. The strategy of "silent" while doing formal main tasks is carried out so as not to provide a gap for the boss to give bad notes. For officials at this level, the threat of mutation to remote areas is a real consequence that is much more feared than a decline in professional integrity (Snanfi et al., 2018). Saving a career like this is often done by avoiding the limelight and simply ensuring that all administrative procedures have been met.

However, a finding that stands out at this level is the emergence of a balancing force through the use of cultural identity when political pressure is considered to be starting to threaten the stability of office. When the bureaucratic legal system is considered weak in providing protection against arbitrariness, then "clan solidarity" becomes the last weapon to exert pressure on political authorities. The use of the influence of traditional leaders as mediators is a very effective external coping strategy here. Informant 3 explained the clan-based protection mechanism precisely:

"In office issues that smell of politics, it can be brought to the customary realm by involving customary leaders or [local customary authorities] or the elders of customs... The clan has influence in decision-making so that political leaders will usually respect family approaches mediated by traditional leaders... If there is unfair treatment, the clan will act as a unit to provide a defense."

This shows that one of the survival strategies of ASN can be twofold: internally their bureaucracy chooses to "disappear" (passive), but externally they rely on the unity of clan identity to ensure justice and guarantee the security of their position from the vortex of regional politics.

## CONCLUSION

This study finds that ASN (civil servants) in Regency X protect their careers through a hybrid strategy combining administrative adaptation with local socio-cultural forces, with the most notable finding being a "cultural shield" mechanism where clan identity and primordial ties backed by traditional leaders often protect bureaucrats from political intervention more effectively than the formal personnel system, echoing Muksalmina's (2024) finding that neutrality in a patronage-influenced bureaucracy is inseparable from career-saving strategies built on loyalty, professionalism, and ethnic solidarity; however, these conclusions are limited by the small number of informants, the single-region focus (which may not generalize to areas with different cultural backgrounds), and the subjective, potentially guarded nature of informants' accounts of political pressure, so future research should expand and diversify the informant pool, compare regions with strong primordial cultures to more urban areas to see whether customary power still protects careers or is being replaced by modern management systems, and combine field data with statistical data on job transfers to better measure the real impact of political pressure on bureaucratic stability.

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