PUBLIC ORDER POLICING AND DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE IN CONFLICT-PRONE REGIONS: THE CASE OF WAROPEN REGENCY, PAPUA

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Abstract
When democratic governments face the difficult task of enforcing a balance between the needs of national security and the protection of civil rights in areas prone to conflict, the task becomes even more daunting for law enforcement agencies. This study examines the function of the Waropen District Police (Polres Waropen) in upholding security and public order in Papua, Indonesia, specifically with the oversight of non-violent political factions promoting self-determination. This research examines the persistent conflict between securitized policing methods and the tenets of democratic policing in an area marked by historical grievances, political strife, and socio-economic disparities. Data were gathered through in-depth interviews with police officials, community leaders, religious figures, political actors, and civil society members, employing a qualitative descriptive design. The findings indicate that policing operations in Waropen are predominantly shaped by a security-oriented perspective that frequently categorizes nonviolent political activities as potential threats to national integrity. This perspective has led to difficulties in applying human rights standards, accountability systems, organizational neutrality, and conflict-sensitive policing. The study reveals that community-oriented policing and soft-approach techniques have yielded favorable results by fortifying police-community connections, augmenting public trust, and diminishing the sway of political criminal organizations without exacerbating tensions. This study enhances the democratic policing literature by offering actual evidence from Papua and suggesting a contextual governance framework that incorporates human security, democratic accountability, and community collaboration. The findings indicate that police reform in conflict-affected areas must emphasize human rights capacity building, institutional oversight, and participatory security governance to promote lasting peace and democratic legitimacy.

Keyword : Democratic policing; Conflict governance; Community policing; Human rights; Security governance; Papua.

1. Introduction

A sense of security is a fundamental need for every individual and a key prerequisite for the creation of a stable and prosperous society (Alkire, 2003; Tadjbakhsh & Chenoy, 2007; Sabino & Pulhin, 2021). In the context of modern states, ensuring public safety is the government's primary responsibility, carried out through the police as the frontline institution in maintaining order and protecting the public (Margaliyeva & Karsambayeva, 2025). Unlike militaristic approaches, the police place greater emphasis on a civilian approach aimed at creating a sense of security without exacerbating the escalation of violence, as demonstrated by various studies that critique the negative impact of the militarization of security on civilian society (Blair & Weintraub, 2023; Macias & Zarkin, 2023).

Nevertheless, the challenges in maintaining security become increasingly complex when dealing with politically motivated crimes. One such form is the separatist movement, which is not always manifested through violence but also through nonviolent activities such as mobilizing public opinion, propaganda, and international advocacy (Kindratets, 2020). This phenomenon is evident in the context of Papua, particularly in Waropen Regency, where civil society groups are advocating for independence through peaceful means. The existence of such groups presents a dilemma for security forces: on the one hand, they must maintain national stability; on the other hand, they must respect democratic principles that guarantee freedom of expression and opinion.

In a democratic system, the existence of groups with alternative political aspirations—including pro-independence movements—is not an anomalous phenomenon. Comparative studies show that similar movements have also emerged in various democratic countries such as Spain (Catalonia), Canada (Quebec), and the United Kingdom (Scotland), where they have been accommodated within the democratic framework as long as they are carried out peacefully (Encarnation, 2020; Martí, 2021). This perspective aligns with Mouffe's theory of agonistic democracy, which emphasizes the importance of space for ideological differences and conflict within a democratic society. Therefore, a repressive security approach toward nonviolent groups has the potential to contradict the principles of democracy and human rights.

Nevertheless, practices on the ground indicate that the security approach in Papua remains dominated by a securitization paradigm, in which the activities of civil society groups are often viewed as a threat to national integrity. This approach frequently legitimizes the use of repressive and even militaristic measures in its implementation (Balzacq et al., 2016; Otukoya, 2024; Soelya et al., 2025). Empirical data indicate that various forms of violence against civilians continue to occur in the context of security enforcement, which in turn risks eroding public trust in police institutions and worsening state–society relations.

In response to these challenges, the concept of democratic policing offers an alternative approach that emphasizes accountability, respect for human rights, and a public service orientation (Mutingh et al., 2021; Lum et al., 2017). This approach shifts the role of the police from merely a tool of control to an institution that serves the public fairly and responsively. Integrating the principle of public service into security functions is crucial, particularly in the context of dealing with non-violent political criminal groups, so that security can be achieved without sacrificing civil rights.

Although a number of studies have discussed democratic policing and securitization, there remains a lack of research that specifically examines how these two approaches are implemented in complex local contexts such as Papua, particularly at the district police level. Therefore, this study aims to analyze how the Waropen District Police carry out their security and public order maintenance functions in dealing with non-violent political criminal groups, by examining the extent to which the principles of public service and democratic policing are implemented in practice. This study is expected to provide a theoretical contribution to the development of democratic policing studies as well as a practical contribution to the formulation of more humane and context-sensitive security policies.

2. Method

2.1 Design of Methods

This study employs a qualitative approach with a descriptive design to explore the role of the Waropen District Police (Polres Waropen) in maintaining public security and order, particularly in addressing politically motivated criminal group activities. A qualitative approach is appropriate for capturing and interpreting social phenomena through the meanings constructed by participants (Creswell, 2016). The descriptive method is used to systematically examine social facts and narratives expressed by informants, enabling the researcher to draw contextualized conclusions (Sedarmayanti & Syarifudin, 2003).

The selection of this approach is based on the need to obtain an in-depth and comprehensive understanding of policing practices, institutional responses, and community interactions in the context of political criminality in Waropen Regency. This design allows the researcher to explore perspectives, experiences, and interpretations from key actors directly involved in or affected by security governance.

2.2 Data and Analysis Design

Informants were selected using purposive sampling, a technique that identifies participants based on predefined criteria relevant to the research objectives (Suharsaputra, 2012). This method ensures that selected individuals possess adequate knowledge, experience, and involvement in issues related to public security and the handling of politically motivated criminal groups.

The primary informants consist of key police officials who hold strategic roles in maintaining security and public order in Waropen Regency, including:

1. Chief of Waropen District Police (Kapolres Waropen)
2. Head of Intelligence and Security Unit (Kasat Intelkam)
3. Head of Community Development Unit (Kasat Binmas)
4. Head of Sabhara Unit (Kasat Sabhara)

These informants were selected due to their institutional authority and operational involvement in security management, making them critical sources for understanding policing strategies and responses.

In addition to institutional actors, the study also includes secondary informants from civil society to capture broader social perspectives. These include:

1. Community, traditional, and religious leaders
2. Members and leaders of local community organizations
3. Local political figures

These participants were chosen because they directly experience and observe the impact of policing practices and political criminal activities. Their inclusion allows for triangulation of perspectives, enhancing the validity and richness of the data.

3. Findings and Discussion

3.1 The Origins of Conflict in Papua Province and the Police's Security Approach to Dealing with Political Criminal Groups

The conflict in Papua, Indonesia, is a complex issue rooted in historical, sociopolitical, and economic factors. This conflict is characterized by the struggle for independence by the indigenous Papuan people, who feel marginalized and oppressed under Indonesian rule. Despite various government efforts, including special autonomy and development programs, the conflict persists due to unresolved grievances and systemic issues. The root causes of the Papua conflict, as shown in Figure 1, can be categorized into economic, cultural, and sociopolitical dimensions of inequality, each of which requires targeted interventions to achieve sustainable peace.

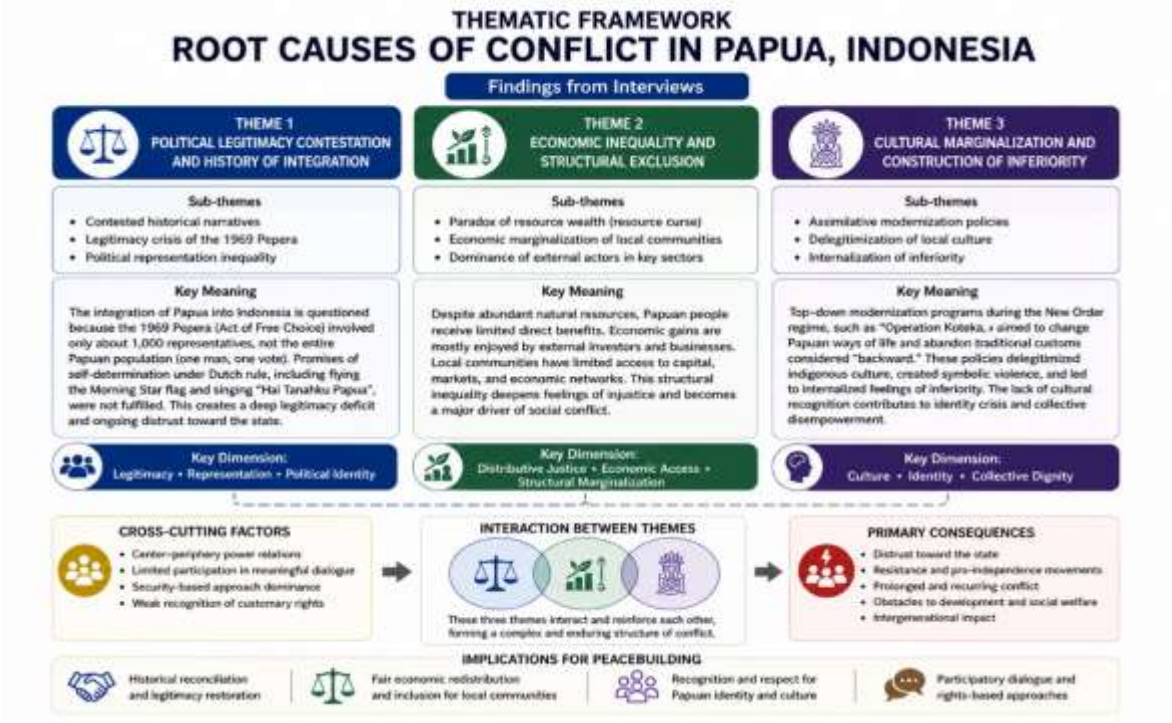


Figure 1. Thematic Framework Conflict in Papua

Figure 1 shows that the conflict in Papua cannot be separated from various historical, political, and socioeconomic grievances that have shaped the local community's perception of the central government. The combination of dissatisfaction among Papuan indigenous communities and the use of repressive measures during the New Order regime to maintain public security and order contributed significantly to rising tensions (Sugandi, 2008). These conditions fueled the emergence of pro-independence narratives in Papua, driven by perceptions of injustice and marginalization (Wood, 2010). The state's reliance on a militaristic approach in responding to dissent not only resulted in significant loss of life but also deepened mistrust and prolonged the cycle of conflict (Rahab, 2006; Wangge, 2023). Instead of addressing structural issues such as poverty and social inequality, the government at that time prioritized coercive strategies, which ultimately strengthened resistance and solidified the grassroots political movement demanding Papuan independence.

From an analytical perspective, the conflict in Papua can be categorized into vertical and horizontal dimensions. Vertical conflict refers to the antagonistic relationship between pro-independence groups—including politically motivated armed groups—and the Indonesian government. In contrast, horizontal conflict occurs within Papuan society, particularly between pro-independence supporters and individuals or groups that oppose the separatist agenda. The primary political goal of pro-independence actors is to push for a referendum, reflecting their belief that Papua's integration into Indonesia lacks legitimacy, particularly regarding the Act of Free Choice (Pepera) of the 1960s. This perception has reinforced the claim that Papua should not be considered an integral part of Indonesia.

To advance their political agenda, pro-independence groups employ various strategies. These strategies include public demonstrations aimed at mobilizing support and reinforcing political demands, as well as propaganda campaigns that disseminate narratives regarding human rights violations, perceived injustices in national development projects, racial discrimination, and state repression. In addition, efforts to secure international recognition and support have become increasingly prominent, involving collaboration with international non-governmental organizations and foreign actors to exert external pressure on the Indonesian government. Comparative experiences, such as the Catalan independence movement, highlight the importance of international legitimacy, particularly given the limited success of unilateral referendum efforts without broad external support (Widodo & Nugrahani, 2022; Khoirunnisa & Jubaedi, 2025). Although these activities employ nonviolent strategies, the state often frames them through the lens of securitization, positioning them as threats to national integrity.

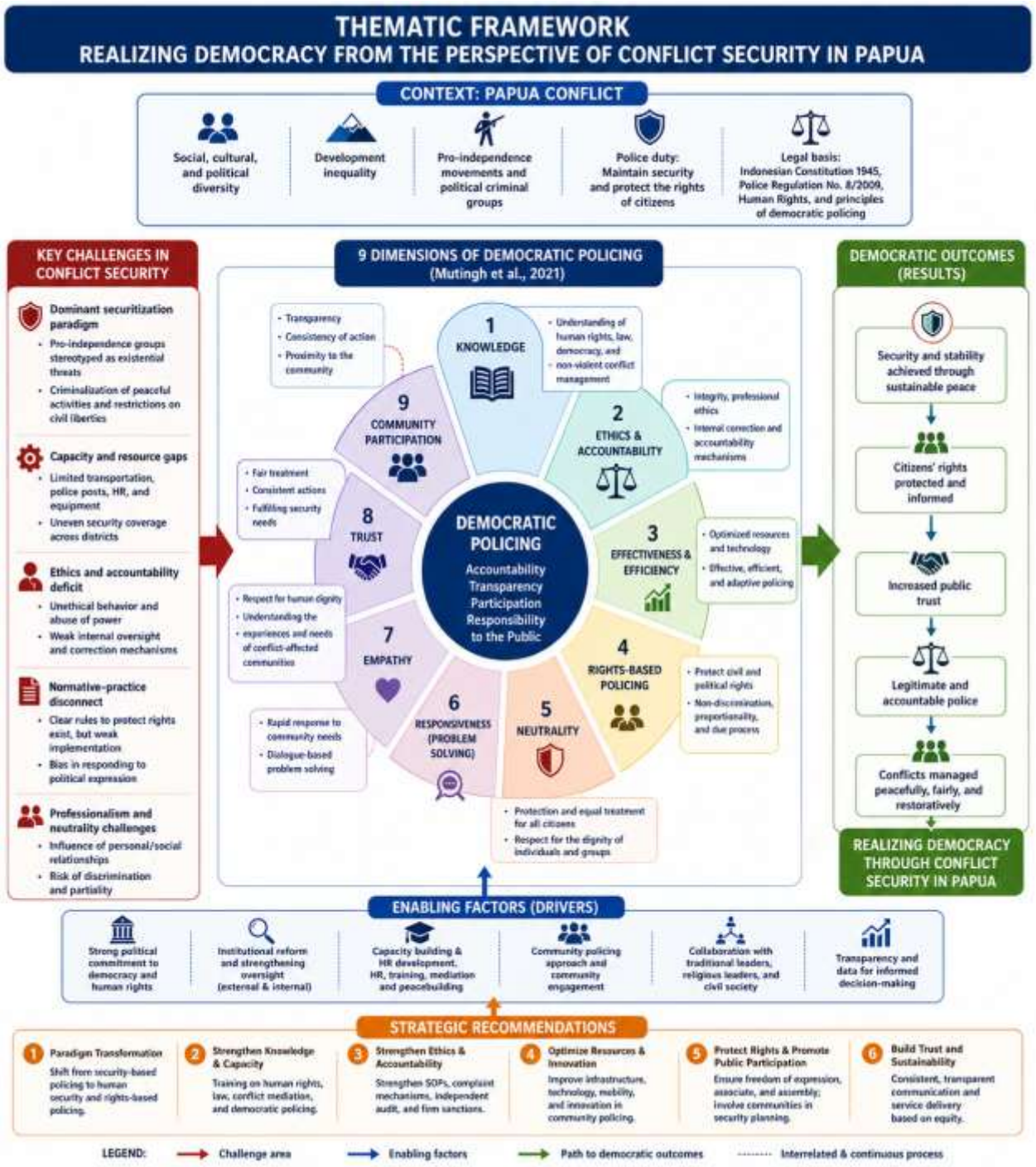
In response to these conflicts, Indonesian law enforcement authorities have adopted a dual-track approach combining hard and soft strategies. The hard approach emphasizes law enforcement through security operations, often involving collaboration between the police and the military, as in Operation Damai Cartenz. Although this approach is intended to maintain order, it carries a high risk of triggering further resistance due to its coercive nature. Conversely, the soft approach is implemented through "cooling-off" strategies rooted in the principles of community-based policing. This approach prioritizes collaboration with local communities, trust-building, and proactive engagement in addressing social issues (Weerawardhana & Wijewardhana, 2024).

However, the implementation of these strategies requires critical reflection. Overreliance on repressive measures risks exacerbating tensions and eroding public trust, particularly when incidents of excessive use of force occur. Empirical evidence from local contexts, such as in Waropen, indicates that coercive interventions can damage police-community relations and reinforce existing grievances. Conversely, community-based policing has demonstrated greater potential for reducing the influence of pro-independence groups by strengthening trust and communication between authorities and local communities (Maulana & Harapah, 2024; Hanafi, 2023; Nigel, 2002). However, structural constraints such as the limited number of community-based police officers relative to the number of villages pose significant challenges to the effective implementation of this approach.

3.2 Democracy from the Perspective of Conflict Mitigation

In analyzing conflict security operations in Papua, particularly in Waropen Regency, a public service approach alone is insufficient to capture the complexity of policing practices. The perspective of democratic policing is essential to complement analyses that tend to be managerial in nature. The managerial approach, as outlined by Haywood, emphasizes the relationship between inputs, outputs, and outcomes in the performance of a police organization. Inputs include resources such as infrastructure, personnel capacity, and standard operating procedures; outputs are measured through operational achievements such as the number of patrols or security measures; while outcomes relate to regional security stability. However, this approach is relatively limited because it does not adequately examine the dimensions of accountability and legitimacy in the exercise of police authority. Therefore, the findings

of this study were analyzed using the nine-dimensional framework of democratic policing proposed by Mutingh et al. (2021), with a specific emphasis on the aspect of accountability as highlighted by Bayley (in Neild, 2001). The results of the analysis indicate that the implementation of democratic policing principles in the security operations targeting political criminal groups in Waropen still faces various structural and cultural challenges.



First, regarding the dimension of knowledge, it was found that the cognitive capacity of police officers in dealing with political criminal groups is not yet fully grounded in the principles of democracy and human rights. Information from

the police indicates that there is currently no specialized training that systematically equips officers with approaches to handling nonviolent political conflicts. As a result, the peaceful activities of groups such as the NRFPB are still often perceived through the lens of securitization and separatism. This is reflected in the dispersal and arrest of 36 NRFPB members who were holding a peaceful gathering—an action that normatively contradicts the provisions of Police Regulation No. 8 of 2009, Article 5, regarding the guarantee of freedom of assembly and expression. This finding indicates the need for a paradigm shift from a state security approach toward human security.

Second, regarding the ethics and accountability dimension, this study found a deficit in ethical practices and internal oversight mechanisms. The informants' experiences of detention revealed treatment that did not reflect police ethical standards. Furthermore, no institutional evaluation or corrective mechanisms were found to address deviant behavior by officers. This situation points to weak internal accountability, which should be a cornerstone of democratic policing.

Third, regarding effectiveness and efficiency, resource constraints are the primary obstacle. The lack of transportation and the uneven distribution of police stations have resulted in limited security coverage, particularly in remote areas. Nevertheless, the implementation of community policing shows positive potential, as the police build partnerships with the community to maintain social stability. However, this approach remains pragmatic and has not yet been systematically institutionalized.

Fourth, regarding the rights-based approach dimension, there is a tension between the normative framework and on-the-ground practices. Although regulations guarantee civil rights, their implementation remains influenced by a securitization paradigm targeting pro-independence groups. From this perspective, peaceful political activities are often framed as national threats, thereby blurring the line between legitimate political expression and criminal acts.

Fifth, the police as citizens dimension highlights the importance of protecting police officers themselves. Findings indicate that limited operational resources increase safety risks for officers in the field. This underscores that police reform must focus not only on the public as the recipients of service but also on the welfare and safety of officers as the agents carrying out their duties.

Sixth, regarding objectivity, there are still indications of bias in service practices, particularly those influenced by local social relationships such as personal connections or kinship. This has the potential to undermine the principle of impartiality, which is the cornerstone of a democratic police force.

Seventh, in the dimension of responsiveness, the police have demonstrated efforts to act as problem solvers within the community. However, resource constraints once again pose a major obstacle to responding quickly and equitably to security needs across all regions.

Eighth, the dimension of empathy reveals a gap between normative values and empirical practices. Cases of violence against individuals involved in unarmed political criminal groups indicate that a humanistic approach has not yet been fully internalized in officers' behavior.

Ninth, regarding the dimension of trust, this study found that the public's level of trust in the police remains relatively intact. This is supported by the police's active role in addressing community needs. However, this trust is fragile and heavily dependent on the consistency of officers' behavior in upholding the principles of justice and accountability.

Overall, these findings indicate that conflict management practices in Papua, particularly in Waropen, remain in a transitional phase between traditional security approaches and the principles of democratic policing. The transformation toward a democratic police force requires reforms that are not merely technical but also address aspects of paradigm, organizational culture, and institutional accountability systems.

4. Conclusion

Based on the research findings, it can be concluded that efforts to address political criminal groups as part of maintaining security and order cannot yet be considered optimal from the perspective of public service and democratic policing. This is due to the continued reliance on a heavy-handed approach in dealing with unarmed political criminal groups, coupled with persistent violent behavior by police officers when confronting members of these groups.

On the other hand, a soft approach has effectively curbed the influence of political criminal groups in Waropen Regency because this approach draws on the values of community policing which emphasizes cooperation, mutual aid, and open communication between the police and the public thereby maintaining public trust in the police and enabling them to mitigate the influence of political criminal groups. However, in its implementation, the police face challenges such as limited personnel, facilities, and infrastructure, as well as an uneven understanding among officers

regarding democratic values and human rights, leading to ongoing human rights violations. Additionally, the persistence of a securitization mindset when viewing political criminal groups can hinder the police's ability to uphold democratic principles and human rights. From the perspective of public service, aspects such as professionalism, supporting facilities, and officer conduct still need to be optimized to ensure the delivery of high-quality security services. Likewise, there is a need to instill an understanding of democracy and human rights in every police officer. Furthermore, oversight of the police institution must be strengthened to ensure the delivery of high-quality services and the upholding of democratic values and human rights in the performance of police duties.

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