

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Procedural rigidity vs. bureaucratic adaptability: A comparative analysis of formalization in new regions and parent regions

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Abstract

The wave of regional expansion in Indonesia has created new dynamics in the evolution of local government bureaucracy, especially in the balance between procedural formalization and organizational adaptability. This study analyzes the comparison of procedural rigidity versus bureaucratic adaptability between new autonomous regions (DOB) and parent regions in the context of the expansion of Buton Regency. Using a mixed methods design with a comparative case study approach, involving 270 respondents from Buton, South Buton, and Central Buton Regencies. Data were collected through structured surveys, in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis. The results showed that the Buton Regency showed the highest formalization (4.12) but the lowest adaptability (3.52), while both DOBs showed superior adaptability (3.94 and 3.87) with more moderate formalization. The parent region experienced a strong negative trade-off ($r=-0.48$) between formalization and adaptability, while DOB showed a more complex and less linear relationship. As a result, DOB managed to achieve a more optimal balance through fresh start advantage, while the parent region experienced institutional lock-in that hampered adaptability. This finding challenges the assumption that institutional maturity always contributes positively to organizational effectiveness.

Keywords

bureaucratic formalization, organizational adaptability, new autonomous regions, comparative study, development, regional development

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1 | INTRODUCTION

The wave of decentralization in Indonesia since the reform era has changed the structure of state governance. This change has created new regional governments and changed the way regional bureaucracies work. Globally, decentralization means giving power from the central government to regional governments. This includes administrative tasks, political decisions, and budget control (Petrovito et al., 2023; Shrestha et al., 2023). The goal is to bring the government closer to the people and improve public services (Lyu & Singh, 2023). However, decentralization poses challenges. Governments need consistent rules to ensure fairness across regions. At the same time, they must remain flexible to meet the varying needs of the regions (Fang & Hung, 2019; Lele, 2023). Indonesia began decentralization in 1999. The results have been mixed. In Sumatra, regional autonomy increased welfare by 64.78%, indicating success in human development. However, many new regions performed poorly (Hutahaean, 2020; Hutahaean & Pasaribu, 2022). The 2021-2022 government report shows that most of the new autonomous regions formed after 1999 performed poorly. Among the eight new provinces, only Banten and Riau Islands were able to compete with their parent regions. None of the 181 new districts achieved high performance ratings. Some of the Key Problems Found in the Initial Study include, First, Poor Planning, No Detailed Transition Plans When Decentralization Began Second, Institutions, Many Local Governments Did Not Have the Capacity to Handle New Responsibilities Third, Political Motives: Regional Expansion Often Served Political Interests Rather Than Development Goals Fourth, Fragmentation, Formation of Too Many Regions Weakened Overall Effectiveness.

Since 1999, Indonesia has created more than 200 new autonomous regions through regional expansion. This has created a natural laboratory for studying institutional development, particularly how new regions develop administrative systems compared to established parent regions. Organizational theory suggests that new institutions evolve differently from established institutions, affecting the level of formalization and adaptive capacity. New regions face challenges in establishing effective administration while maintaining flexibility for local adaptation. Weber's rational-legal bureaucratic theory emphasizes hierarchy, specialization, and formal rules. However, excessive formalization creates rigidity and "red tape" problems. New autonomous regions must balance procedural accountability with innovation and responsiveness to changes in the local environment. South Buton Regency and Central Buton Regency, which were created from Buton Regency in 2014, present interesting cases for studying the institutional evolution of bureaucracy. These three regions share the same historical roots in the Buton Sultanate since 1610, but are at different stages of institutional evolution. Buton Regency as the parent region has experienced a long bureaucratic journey with an established system but potentially experiencing "institutional inertia". Meanwhile, South Buton Regency (509.92 km², 94,727 people) and Central Buton (958.31 km², 115,121 people) face the challenge of building a bureaucratic system from scratch with the advantage of a "clean slate" but limited institutional capacity.

The main motivation for the expansion is the issue of access to services, where people have to take a complex journey to Pasarwajo. South Buton must go through Baubau first, while Central Buton (located on Muna Island) requires a sea journey to Baubau and then land to Pasarwajo. This accessibility challenge creates an imperative for new regions to develop a bureaucratic system that is closer to the community and responsive to local needs, while balancing between formalization of procedures and flexibility of adaptation according to geographical conditions and limited capacity.

However, geographical proximity alone does not automatically guarantee the creation of a responsive and efficient bureaucracy. The literature on public service delivery shows that bureaucratic responsiveness is highly dependent on institutional design, including the level of formalization of procedures, accountability mechanisms, and organizational adaptation capacity. In the context of new autonomous regions, this becomes even more complex as they must build institutional legitimacy while developing adequate operational capacity. This process often creates pressure to adopt extensive formal procedures as a way of demonstrating professionalism and accountability, but on the other hand can reduce the flexibility needed to adapt to specific local conditions.

The phenomenon of procedural rigidity versus bureaucratic adaptability in regional expansion is increasingly relevant considering that Indonesia's experience over the past two decades has shown mixed results. Some regions have succeeded in innovating in public services, while others are trapped in formalism that hinders effectiveness. This is related to the new public management versus post-new public management debate about the optimal balance between efficiency, accountability, and responsiveness.

Previous studies on Indonesian regional government bureaucracy have generally focused on public service performance or regional innovation (Mboi, 2015; Syafiq, 2019; Syukri, 2024; Tumangkeng et al., 2022), but only a few have examined the dynamics of procedural formalization in the institutional evolution of new autonomous regions versus parent regions. This literature gap is significant considering that the 200+ new autonomous regions are now in the institutional consolidation stage, with their experiences being able to provide lessons for national regional development policies and adaptation of digitalization of public services.

The cases of Buton, South Buton, and Central Buton Regencies offer ideal research setting because: the same historical-cultural roots allow for a focus on institutional evolution; geographic-demographic variations create different environmental pressures; and as a 2014 expansion, they are still in the institutional formation phase for real-time observation. This research is urgent considering that the evaluation of the effectiveness of expansion shows mixed results with criticism of inefficiency and bureaucratic proliferation.

This comparative research has significant academic value and practical relevance for the development of local governance in Indonesia, expected to produce a comprehensive understanding of the factors that influence institutional design choices and recommendations for optimizing the balance of formalization-adaptability in local government bureaucracy.

2 | LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 | Bureaucracy theory and organizational formalization

The concept of modern bureaucracy proposed by Max Weber in the rational-legal bureaucracy theory has become a theoretical foundation in understanding the characteristics of contemporary government organizations. Weber identified six main principles of an ideal bureaucracy including a clear hierarchy of authority, specialization of tasks based on technical competence, a comprehensive formal rule system, impersonality in decision-making, merit-based careers, and separation between positions and individuals occupying them (Ferreira & Serpa, 2019; Waeger & Weber, 2019). In this context, formalization of procedures is seen as an important mechanism to ensure consistency, predictability, and fairness in organizational operations. However, the development of organizational theory in the following decades showed that excessive formalization can cause significant organizational dysfunction.

Williams (2021) in his analysis of bureaucratic personality identified the phenomenon of goal displacement, where achieving procedures becomes the ultimate goal that ignores the substance of service. This concept was later strengthened by Pevneva (2023), who showed that procedural rigidity can reduce the organization's capacity to adapt to changes in the external environment. In a more contemporary context, (Jiang et al., 2023; Van Dijck & Steen, 2023) shown "red tape" as a manifestation of counterproductive formalization, defined as rules, regulations, and procedures that remain in place even though they no longer contribute to the achievement of organizational goals. Contingency theory provides a more nuanced perspective on the relationship between formalization and organizational effectiveness (Liu et al., 2021; Oluwafemi & Ametepe, 2023; Ren et al., 2024; Van Dijck & Steen, 2023). They suggest that the optimal level of formalization depends largely on the characteristics of the organizational environment, with stable environments requiring high levels of formalization for efficiency, while dynamic environments require greater flexibility. In the context of public bureaucracies, this contingency approach becomes even more relevant given the complexity of the demands faced by government organizations, which must balance procedural accountability with responsiveness to societal needs.

2.2 | Institutional Development and Path Dependency

The theory of institutional development developed within the framework of historical institutionalism provides an important perspective for understanding the evolution of bureaucracy in the context of regional expansion that institutions develop through a path-dependent process, where early decisions create momentum that influences future choices. In the context of government bureaucracy, this means that parent regions that already have an established administrative system tend to experience institutional lock-in that can hinder adaptation to environmental changes (Churampi-Cangalaya et al., 2023; Moussa et al., 2022; Patil, 2023).

Meanwhile, path dependency by identifying four main characteristics: increasing returns, self-reinforcing processes, lock-in effects, and the importance of timing and sequence. In the context of new autonomous regions, the absence of institutional legacy can create a critical juncture that allows the adoption of different institutional arrangements (Kauppi & Luzzini, 2022; Moussa et al., 2022; Mzembe et al., 2023). However, capacity constraints and uncertainty can also encourage mimetic isomorphism, where new organizations tend to imitate the practices of established organizations without considering contextual suitability.

Institutional isomorphism theory identified three mechanisms that drive organizational homogenization: coercive isomorphism through formal and informal pressures, mimetic isomorphism as a response to uncertainty, and normative isomorphism through professionalization (Anlesinya et al., 2023; Codagnone et al., 2015; Putri Pertiwi et al., 2022). In the context of new autonomous regions, these three mechanisms can operate simultaneously, with the regulatory framework of the central government creating coercive pressure, institutional uncertainty encouraging mimicry towards the parent region, and professional networks within the bureaucracy promoting the adoption of best practices that are considered legitimate (Purna & Didin, 2022).

2.3 | Rigidity versus adaptability in public organizations

The debate on the balance between stability and flexibility in public organizations has been one of the central themes in public administration literature. Yean et al. (2022) argued that organizations face a fundamental dilemma between the need for efficiency through routinization and the need for effectiveness through adaptation. In the context of public bureaucracy, this dilemma becomes even more acute due to the demands for high accountability and transparency (Cabrera et al., 2023; Handayani et al., 2023; Lu et al., 2024).

Jang & Valero (2022) and McDonald-Kerr & Boyce (2024) show the transformation of bureaucracy from rule-driven to more mission-driven and results-oriented. The New Public Management (NPM) approach they promote emphasizes the importance of flexibility, innovation, and customer orientation in public organizations. However, the implementation of NPM in various countries has shown mixed results, with some critics highlighting the potential for undermining traditional bureaucratic values such as equity, due process, and democratic accountability (Blaskovics et al., 2023; Borchard et al., 2022; Sarwar et al., 2023).

In a more recent development, a new perspective on how information technology can facilitate the combination of standardization and customization in public services was offered (Aristovnik et al., 2024; Bahn et al., 2021; Chernova et al., 2023). The concept of agile governance that is developing in contemporary literature also emphasizes the importance of organizational learning and continuous adaptation as a response to complexity and uncertainty in the governance environment.

3 | METHODS

This study uses a mixed methods design with an embedded concurrent design approach, where quantitative and qualitative data are collected simultaneously to understand procedural rigidity versus bureaucratic adaptability. The comparative case study approach is applied to three districts: Buton (parent), South Buton, and Central Buton (new autonomy), which were purposively selected based on similarities in historical roots and differences in stages of institutional evolution. The units of analysis are 27 echelon II–III SKPDs that handle major public services, such

as Disdukcapil, DPMPSTP, and Inspectorate. A survey was conducted on 270 employees using an adapted instrument from Hage & Aiken (1967, in Ntale et al., 2020), with a stratified random sampling technique to measure five dimensions of formalization and five dimensions of organizational adaptability. Qualitative data were obtained from semi-structured interviews with 8 key informants, participant observation for three months, and analysis of 180 policy documents. Quantitative analysis included ANOVA, Pearson correlation, and multiple regression using SPSS 26, while qualitative data were analyzed using inductive coding using NVivo 12. Triangulation and member checking were conducted to increase the validity and credibility of the findings.

4 | RESULT

4.1 | Respondents' profile and organizational characteristics

This study successfully collected data from 270 respondents spread across three districts with details including Buton Regency (108 respondents), South Buton Regency (81 respondents), and Central Buton Regency (81 respondents). The composition of respondents based on job level showed a representative distribution with 15.2% echelon IV officials, 28.9% specific functional, and 55.9% implementers. The average length of service of respondents was 8.4 years for Buton Regency, 4.2 years for South Buton Regency, and 4.6 years for Central Buton Regency, reflecting significant differences in institutional experience between the parent region and the new autonomous region. The level of education of respondents showed that 67.8% had a Bachelor's degree, 18.5% a Master's degree, and 13.7% a Doctorate, with a relatively homogeneous distribution between the three districts.

4.2 | Analysis of the procedural formalization level

The results of measuring the level of formalization using a Likert scale of 1-5 showed significant differences between the three districts. Buton Regency as the parent area had the highest formalization score with an average of 4.12 ($SD=0.68$), followed by Central Buton Regency with a score of 3.84 ($SD=0.72$), and South Buton Regency with a score of 3.61 ($SD=0.79$) (Fig. 1). The ANOVA test showed a statistically significant difference ($F=18.34$, $p<0.001$) with a substantial effect size ($\eta^2=0.12$). Analysis per formalization dimension revealed that Buton Regency excels in standardization of procedures (4.28 vs 3.45 for South Buton and 3.67 for Central Buton) and complexity of internal regulations (4.35 vs 3.52 and 3.78). However, in terms of flexibility in interpreting the rules, the two new autonomous regions showed higher scores, with South Buton Regency reaching 3.89 and Central Buton 3.92, compared to Buton Regency which only scored 3.24.

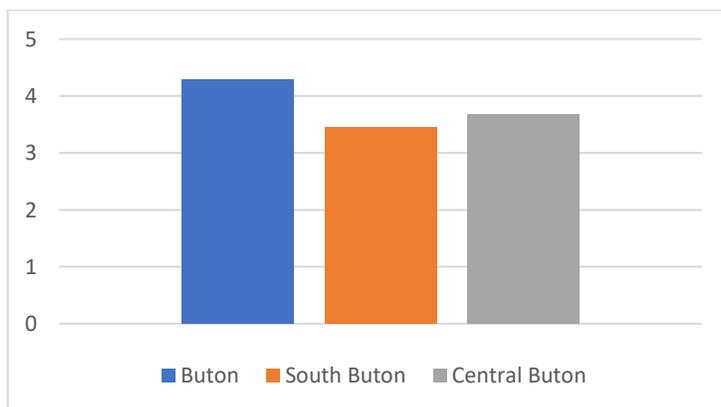


Fig. 1. Level of formalization and procedure between regencies

An interesting finding emerged from the analysis of employee discretion levels, where South Buton Regency showed the highest score (3.76), followed by Central Buton (3.58), and Buton Regency (3.12) (Fig. 2). This difference was statistically significant ($p<0.05$) and indicated that the new autonomous regions provide greater room for employees to use judgment in situations that are not explicitly defined in formal procedures. Document analysis supported this finding by showing that Buton Regency had 147 very detailed formal SOPs, while South Buton Regency only had 89 SOPs and Central Buton 92 SOPs that tended to be more flexible in their formulation.

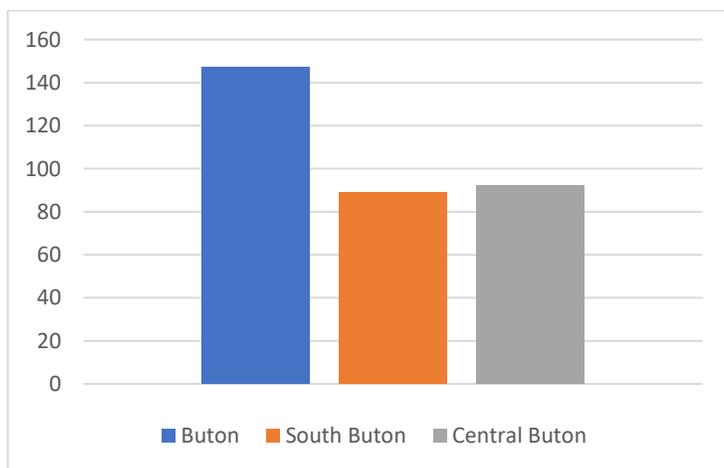


Fig. 2. Number of formal SOPs

4.3 | Organizational adaptability capacity measurement

Organizational adaptability measurement yielded a different pattern from formalization. South Buton Regency showed the highest adaptability score with an average of 3.94 ($SD=0.71$), followed by Central Buton Regency with 3.87 ($SD=0.74$), and Buton Regency with 3.52 ($SD=0.83$) (Fig. 3). This difference was statistically significant ($F=12.67, p<0.001$) with a moderate effect size ($\eta^2=0.09$). The responsiveness to change dimension showed the most prominent advantage in the new autonomous regions, with South Buton Regency achieving a score of 4.15 and Central Buton 4.08, compared to Buton Regency which was only 3.42. This was confirmed through interviews which revealed that the average implementation time for new policies in the new autonomous regions was 2.3 months, while in Buton Regency it took 4.1 months

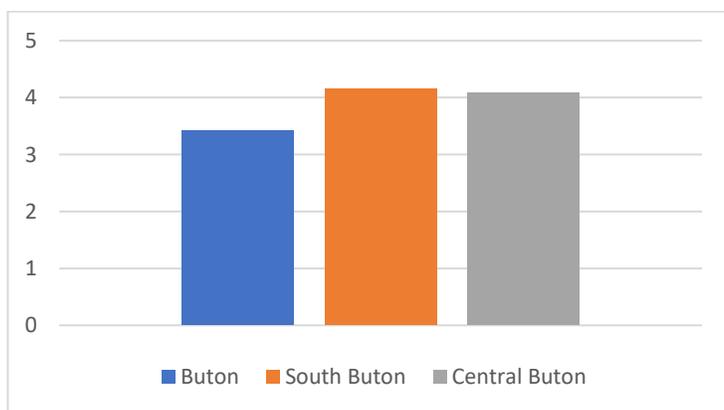


Fig. 3. Time of implementation of new policies and SOPs

Organizational learning capacity also shows a similar pattern, where both new autonomous regions excel with scores of 3.89 (South Buton) and 3.82 (Central Buton) compared to 3.35 (Buton Regency) (Fig. 4). However, in the dimension of procedural innovation, Buton Regency shows better performance (3.76) than South Buton (3.68) and Central Buton (3.71), indicating that despite being less responsive, the parent region has a better capacity to develop systemic innovation. Further analysis reveals that Buton Regency has implemented 23 service innovations in the past five years, while South Buton has implemented 18 innovations and Central Buton has implemented 16 innovations.

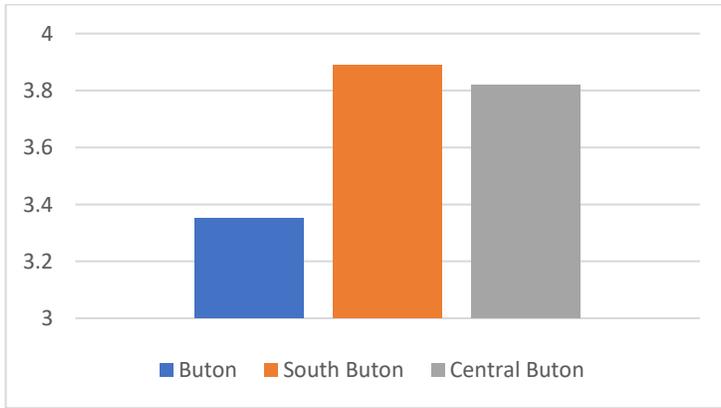


Fig. 4. Organizational adaptability measurement

4.4 | Relationship between formalization and adaptability

Correlation analysis reveals a complex relationship between formalization and adaptability that varies across districts. In aggregate, the correlation between total formalization and total adaptability is negative but weak ($r=-0.23, p<0.05$), indicating a limited trade-off between the two constructs. However, analysis per district reveals a different pattern: Buton District shows a strong negative correlation ($r=-0.48, p<0.01$), South Buton District shows an insignificant correlation ($r=-0.12, p>0.05$), and Central Buton District shows a weak positive correlation ($r=0.19, p<0.10$). These findings suggest that in established parent districts, high formalization tends to hinder adaptability, while in new autonomous regions, the relationship is more complex and contextual.

Multiple regression analysis with adaptability as the dependent variable and various dimensions of formalization as predictors yielded a significant model ($R^2=0.34, F=21.89, p<0.001$). Standardization of procedures was a significant negative predictor ($\beta=-0.28, p<0.01$), while flexibility of rule interpretation was a strong positive predictor ($\beta=0.41, p<0.001$). The level of employee discretion was also positively correlated with adaptability ($\beta=0.32, p<0.01$), confirming the importance of providing room for employees to use professional judgment in dynamic situations.

4.5 | Qualitative findings on institutional mechanisms

Fig. 5 shows the qualitative findings on institutional mechanisms. Open Coding is the initial stage where researchers identify basic categories from the interview data. Four main categories emerged: crisis response patterns that show how organizations react to emergency situations, institutional legacy effects that reflect the influence of organizational history, political legitimacy pressures that drive certain behaviors, and differences in organizational structures between new and parent regions. Axial Coding develops relationships between categories by placing the formalization-adaptability balance as a central phenomenon. Causal conditions such as institutional age and resource constraints influence organizational action strategies, which then produce consequences in the form of differences in response time and service quality between new and parent autonomous regions.

Selective Coding integrates all categories into a core theory of "Institutional Evolution Stage-Based Adaptation Strategy." Three main mechanisms are formed: learning from crises that drive innovation in new regions, institutional memory that creates resistance to change in parent regions, and different political legitimacy pressures between the two. Quantitative evidence shows that new regions have a simpler hierarchy (2.4 levels) than parent regions (3.7 levels), allowing for faster and more adaptive responses

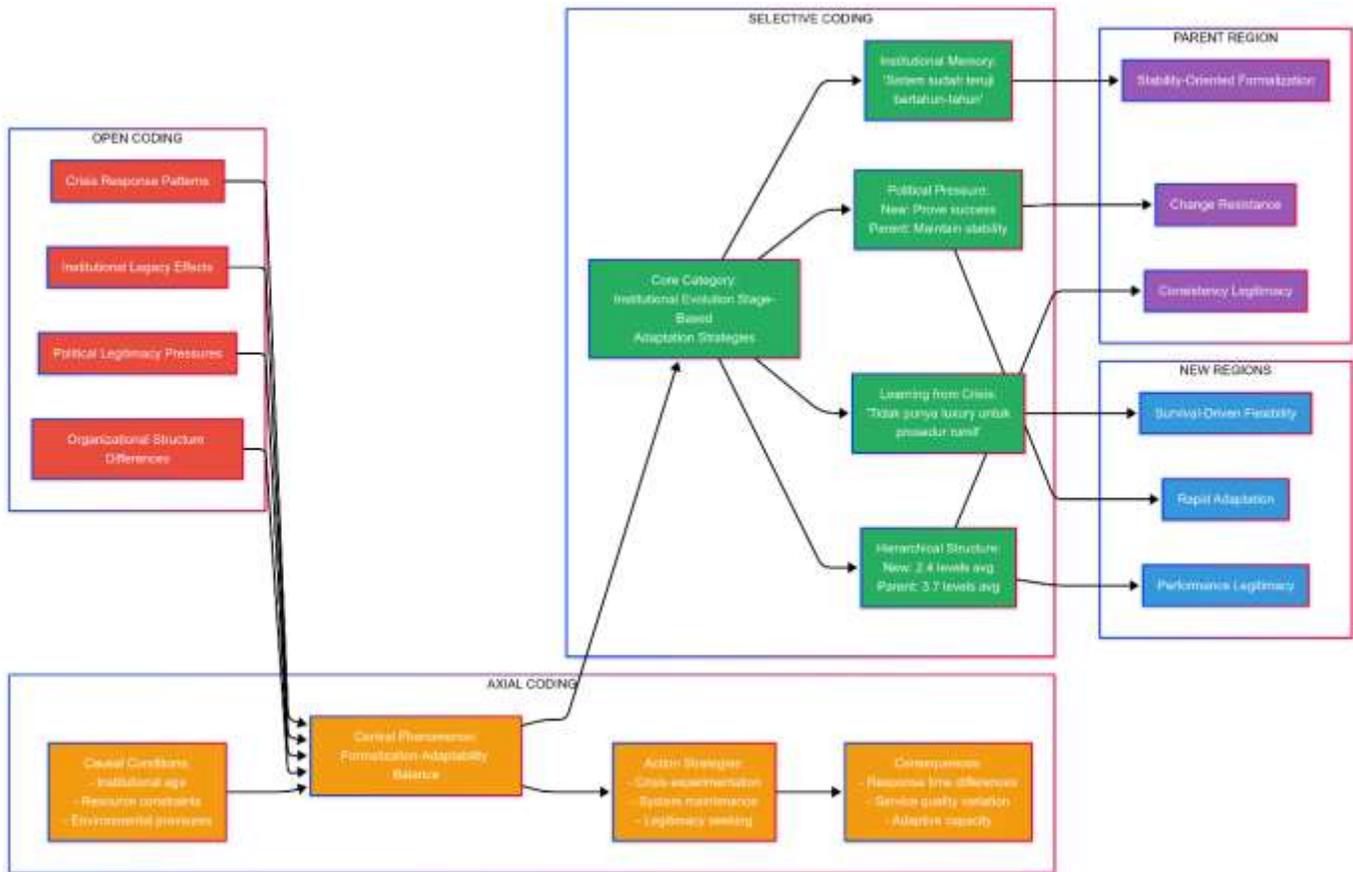


Fig. 5. Coding process

In-depth interviews revealed three main mechanisms that influence the formalization-adaptability balance. First, more intensive “learning from crisis” occurs in new autonomous regions because limited experience encourages experimentation and rapid adaptation. As expressed by a Head of Department in South Buton Regency: “We don’t have the luxury of following complicated procedures when people need fast service. We have to learn as we go and create practical solutions.” Second, strong “institutional memory” in Buton Regency creates resistance to change due to the large investment in existing systems. A senior official explained: “Our systems have been tested for years. Changing them risks destroying the stability that has been built.” Third, “political pressure for legitimacy” differs between parent regions and new autonomous regions. New autonomous regions face pressure to demonstrate superior performance to prove the success of expansion, while parent regions focus more on maintaining reputation and stability. This finding is supported by observations showing that decision-making processes in new autonomous regions involve fewer hierarchical levels (average 2.4 levels) than in parent regions (average 3.7 levels), allowing for faster responses to situations requiring adaptation.

4.6 | Triangulation analysis and validation of findings

Triangulation of data from various sources confirmed the consistency of the main findings. Public satisfaction data from independent surveys showed a positive correlation with organizational adaptability scores ($r=0.67$, $p<0.01$), indicating that organizational adaptability contributes significantly to the quality of public services. Document analysis showed that regions with high adaptability had more SOP revisions based on feedback (an average of 3.2 revisions per year) than those with less adaptability (1.6 revisions per year). Member checking with key informants confirmed the researcher’s interpretation of the trade-off between procedural stability and organizational responsiveness, with 89% of informants stating that the research findings reflected the reality they experienced in their daily bureaucratic practices.

4.7 | Main research findings

This study reveals an interesting paradox in the evolution of local government bureaucracy in the era of decentralization, where new autonomous regions (DOB) have succeeded in achieving a more optimal balance between procedural formalization and organizational adaptability compared to parent regions that are already institutionally established. Buton Regency as the parent region showed a significantly higher level of formalization (4.12) compared to South Buton Regency (3.61) and Central Buton (3.84), but paradoxically had the lowest adaptability capacity (3.52) compared to the two DOBs which achieved scores of 3.94 and 3.87. This finding challenges the conventional assumption that mature institutional experience is always positively correlated with organizational effectiveness.

Dimensional analysis revealed that the formalization superiority of Buton Regency lies mainly in the standardization of procedures (4.28) and the complexity of internal regulations (4.35), which reflect the institutional legacy of long bureaucratic experience. However, the rigidity of this system actually hampers the flexibility of rule interpretation (3.24) and the level of employee discretion (3.12), which in turn limits the organization's capacity to adapt to the dynamics of the external environment. In contrast, both DOBs showed superiority in dimensions that support adaptability, especially the flexibility of rule interpretation (3.89 for South Buton and 3.92 for Central Buton) and a higher level of employee discretion.

The relationship between formalization and adaptability shows different patterns across districts, confirming that context matters in institutional design. Buton District shows a clear trade-off between formalization and adaptability ($r=-0.48$, $p<0.01$), indicating that institutional lock-in has created rigidity that inhibits change. Meanwhile, the two new autonomous regions show a more complex and less linear relationship, with South Buton District showing an insignificant correlation ($r=-0.12$) and Central Buton even showing a marginal positive correlation ($r=0.19$), indicating that they have managed to avoid a destructive trade-off between formalization and adaptability.

5 | DISCUSSION

5.1 | Path dependency and institutional inertia in established bureaucracy

The finding of superior adaptability of new autonomous regions compared to parent regions can be explained through the lens of path dependency. Buton Regency as the parent region experienced "increasing returns" and "lock-in effects," where large investments in the existing bureaucratic system created self-reinforcing mechanisms that inhibited institutional change. This is in line with the concept of "institutional inertia", where established organizations tend to maintain existing structures and procedures even though the external environment has changed and demands adaptation (Ababneh, 2016; Aksom, 2022).

The high procedural rigidity in the Buton Regency (formalization score 4.12) reflects what Pevneva, (2023) identified as "bureaucratic personality," where adherence to formal rules becomes the ultimate goal that ignores the organization's substantive goals. This phenomenon is reinforced by the finding that the Buton Regency has 147 very detailed formal SOPs, indicating over-formalization that can lead to "red tape" (Jiang et al., 2023; Van Dijck & Steen, 2023). This condition creates a destructive trade-off between formalization and adaptability ($r = -0.48$), which confirms the theoretical prediction that excessive bureaucratization can reduce organizational effectiveness (Crozier, 1964).

5.2 | Critical junctures and fresh start advantage in DOB

The adaptability advantage shown by South Buton and Central Buton Regencies can be understood through the concept of "critical junctures" in (Hwang, 2023; Powell & DiMaggio, 2019). Regional expansion creates what Capoccia and Kelemen (2007) call "formative moments" that allow institutional innovation without the constraints of legacy systems. DOB has what can be called a "fresh start advantage," where the absence of institutional history provides flexibility to adopt more optimal institutional arrangements (Amir Husni et al., 2023).

The finding that DOBs exhibited higher flexibility in interpreting rules (3.89-3.92 vs. 3.24) and greater levels of employee discretion (3.58-3.76 vs. 3.12) reflects what Durose & Lowndes, (2023); Wouters et al., (2023) find as the importance of street-level bureaucracy in service delivery. DOBs appear to have succeeded in developing what Bua & Bussu, (2021) calls a "mission-driven" rather than "rule-driven" organizational culture, which allows for a better balance between accountability and responsiveness.

5.3 | Organizational learning and adaptive capacity

DOBs' superiority in the dimensions of organizational learning and responsiveness can be explained by the organizational learning (Silva & Odelius, 2019). DOBs experience what they call "double-loop learning," where the organization not only improves performance within an existing framework but also questions underlying assumptions and modifies governing variables (Oluwafemi & Ametepe, 2023; Runhaar et al., 2019). In contrast, parent regions tend to be trapped in "single-loop learning" that focuses only on error correction without fundamentally questioning organizational assumptions.

The ability of DOBs to avoid the destructive trade-off between formalization and adaptability confirms the prediction of contingency theory (Schreckenberg et al., 2018) that optimal organizational design is highly dependent on environmental characteristics. DOBs facing uncertainty and legitimacy pressure characterized as "organic" organizational structures that are more flexible and adaptive than the "mechanistic" structures dominant in the parent region.

6 | CONCLUSION

This study reveals a significant paradox in the evolution of regional government bureaucracy, where new autonomous regions (DOB) have succeeded in achieving a more optimal balance between procedural formalization and organizational adaptability compared to established parent regions. Buton Regency as the parent region shows the highest level of formalization (4.12) but the lowest adaptability (3.52), while South Buton and Central Buton Regencies show the opposite pattern with superior adaptability (3.94 and 3.87) despite more moderate formalization. The main findings show that institutional maturity is not always positively correlated with organizational effectiveness. Parent regions experience institutional lock-in that creates procedural rigidity, reflected in a strong negative trade-off between formalization and adaptability ($r=-0.48$). In contrast, DOBs take advantage of the fresh start advantage to develop a more balanced bureaucratic system, with a non-linear and even positive formalization-adaptability relationship. Theoretically, this study enriches the understanding of path dependency in public organizations and confirms the relevance of contingency theory in institutional design. In practical terms, this finding challenges the conventional approach to developing new autonomous regions and suggests the need for a more fundamental bureaucratic reform strategy for parent regions experiencing institutional inertia.

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Disclosure Statement

The author declares that has no relevant or material financial interests that relate to the research described in this paper.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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