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Center Region Relations and National Cohesion in Indonesia

Slamet Riyanto^{1*}, Ahmad²

¹Universitas Muhammadiyah Palembang
Jl. Jend. A. Yani, 13 Ulu, Kec. Seberang Ulu II, Kota Palembang, Sumatera Selatan.
²Universitas Muhammadiyah Tangerang

* Correspondence email: riyanto.75sr@um-palembang.ac.id

ABSTRACT. This article examines the long term challenge of national integration in Indonesia through the historical development of constitutional arrangements and their interaction with contemporary governance practices. It explains how federalism, unitarism, and center region relations continue to influence political stability and national cohesion. The study applies normative legal research supported by historical and conceptual analysis. Primary materials include constitutional documents and state policies, while secondary materials cover scholarly works on decentralization, separatism, governance, and disaster management. The findings show that Indonesia's integration problems are rooted in structural inequality, unresolved historical legacies, and governance practices that reinforce perceptions of regional marginalization. The article also finds that federalism operates less as a realistic constitutional alternative than as a symbolic political discourse that re-emerges during crises, including the 2025 hydrometeorological disaster in Sumatra. It concludes that constitutional design alone is insufficient to sustain national integration without inclusive governance, equitable development, institutional responsiveness, and stronger public trust.

KEYWORDS: national integration; federalism; unitarism; center region relations; governance

INTRODUCTION

Since the proclamation of Indonesian independence in 1945, national integration has remained a central issue in the country's constitutional and political development. Indonesia is an archipelagic state characterized by extensive territorial dispersion and deep diversity in ethnicity, language, religion, and socio-economic conditions. This diversity constitutes both a strategic national asset and a continuing source of vulnerability. As a result, national integration in Indonesia should not be understood as a fixed achievement, but as an evolving political process shaped by historical experience, institutional arrangements, and contemporary governance practices.

Early post-independence Indonesia revealed how fragile national cohesion could be. Ideological conflict and regional rebellions such as Darul Islam/Tentara Islam Indonesia (DI/TII), the Republic of South Maluku (RMS), and PRRI-Permesta reflected the absence of a fully consolidated national consensus. Over time, these tensions evolved into more complex forms. During the New Order and Reformasi periods, the challenge of integration shifted from overt rebellion toward a wider combination of separatist sentiment, social polarization, identity politics, and digital fragmentation. Contemporary scholarship indicates that separatist movements in Aceh and Papua cannot be separated from historical grievances, socio-economic inequality, and cultural marginalization. In this regard, integration is not merely a territorial issue, but also a matter of justice, participation, and legitimacy.

Despite a range of policy responses, the fundamental problem remains unresolved. The central issue lies in the persistent imbalance between central authority and regional autonomy. Historically, this imbalance has generated dissatisfaction because regions often

perceive development, representation, and resource distribution as unfair. The repeated re-emergence of federalism discourse in Indonesian politics illustrates that the debate is not simply about choosing between a federal or unitary state. Rather, it concerns the search for an institutional arrangement capable of preserving unity while ensuring fairness and meaningful regional inclusion.

Recent large-scale disasters have further exposed the structural weaknesses of center–region relations. Empirical studies on disaster governance show that highly centralized decision-making often produces delayed responses, administrative inefficiency, and public dissatisfaction. The hydrometeorological disaster in Sumatra in late 2025 demonstrates how inadequate crisis response can trigger criticism of the central government and revive broader political narratives concerning autonomy, justice, and federalism. In this context, disaster governance becomes not only an administrative matter, but also a political lens through which regional communities assess the legitimacy and responsiveness of the state.

Previous studies provide important foundations for understanding these issues. Historical analyses of the Republic of the United States of Indonesia (Republik Indonesia Serikat or RIS) show that Indonesia’s brief federal experience was largely shaped by Dutch colonial strategy and lacked strong sociological legitimacy. Other studies demonstrate that the federal arrangement created fragmented authority and administrative inefficiency, thereby encouraging a return to the unitary state in 1950. Meanwhile, scholarship on the New Order highlights how excessive centralization weakened regional autonomy and deepened perceptions of inequality. More recent work on decentralization suggests that although regional autonomy can strengthen participation and responsiveness, it does not automatically resolve structural inequality if not accompanied by accountability and inclusive governance.

At the same time, literature on disaster governance, national identity, and public trust shows that ineffective state responses to crises can reinforce narratives of structural injustice. In regions with histories of marginalization, governance failure may intensify demands for stronger autonomy or alternative institutional models. However, despite the growing body of literature on federalism, centralization, decentralization, and regional dissatisfaction, relatively few studies integrate these historical and contemporary dimensions into one analytical framework. This gap is particularly relevant in the post-2025 Indonesian context, where disaster governance has become increasingly important in shaping political perceptions and constitutional discourse.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs normative legal research supported by historical and conceptual approaches. Normative legal research is selected as the primary method because the study focuses on constitutional principles, legal structures, and institutional arrangements governing the relationship between the central government and regional authorities. Through this framework, the article critically examines how constitutional design and governance models influence the broader issue of national integration. This approach is consistent with the nature of normative legal scholarship, which conceptualizes law as a system of norms to be analyzed systematically and prescriptively (Ahmad et al., 2024) (Degdo Suprayitno, 2024).

The research design is both analytical and historical in nature. It traces the evolution of Indonesia’s constitutional system, beginning with the 1945 unitary state, transitioning to the federal structure under the Republic of the United States of Indonesia (RIS) in 1949, and subsequently returning to a unitary system in 1950. The analysis further encompasses the New Order era, characterized by centralized governance, as well as the Reformasi period, which introduced decentralization and expanded regional autonomy. These phases are

examined to identify patterns of continuity and transformation in the dynamics of center–region relations.

This study utilizes both primary and secondary legal materials. Primary sources include constitutional texts, foundational state principles, and regulatory frameworks related to decentralization and governance. Secondary sources consist of academic books, peer-reviewed journal articles, and research reports addressing themes such as federalism, unitarism, regional disparities, identity politics, separatism, and disaster governance in Indonesia. The use of diverse legal materials is essential to ensure analytical depth and strengthen the validity of the study's arguments (Ahmad et al., 2024) (Degdo Suprayitno, 2024).

The analytical framework integrates statutory, conceptual, and historical approaches. The statutory approach is applied to examine the formal constitutional basis of Indonesia's state structure. The conceptual approach is used to interpret key notions such as national integration, decentralization, justice, and institutional responsiveness. Meanwhile, the historical approach provides an explanatory lens to understand how past constitutional configurations continue to shape contemporary legal and political discourse.

In addition, the study adopts a qualitative interpretive method to bridge legal norms with socio-political realities. This approach is crucial, as constitutional arrangements cannot be fully understood solely through textual analysis but must also be evaluated based on their practical implications in governance, particularly in times of crisis. Accordingly, the study places specific emphasis on disaster governance as an empirical context for assessing the effectiveness and resilience of center–region relations.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Historical Trajectories and Contemporary Challenges in Center–Region Dynamics

The historical development of Indonesia's constitutional framework illustrates a persistent tension between centralized authority and regional aspirations, shaping the trajectory of national integration from independence to the present era. Archival records, scholarly analyses, and empirical findings demonstrate that changes in governance structures have been deeply intertwined with broader socio-political contexts. The transition from the unitary system established in 1945 to the federal Republic of the United States of Indonesia (RIS) in 1949, and the reversion to a unitary structure in 1950, reflected not only constitutional experimentation but also competing political forces within and beyond Indonesia. Scholars have shown that the establishment of RIS was largely a product of Dutch colonial strategy rather than an indigenous constitutional preference, as evidenced by archival analyses highlighting the absence of sociological legitimacy for the federal arrangement (Rahadian, 2020). The RIS system generated administrative fragmentation, overlapping authorities, and coordination barriers that impeded state consolidation, ultimately reinforcing political consensus for returning to a unitary system (Wibawa & Larasati, 2021). This early constitutional turbulence laid the foundation for continued debates about balancing unity and diversity.

During the New Order era, these tensions deepened as the government adopted a highly centralized governance model, interpreting the unitary state as synonymous with strict central control. Empirical studies show that New Order centralization constrained regional autonomy and limited the capacity of regional governments to participate meaningfully in policymaking (Mulyadi, 2019). Evidence from archives and interviews with former bureaucrats reveals that development planning was dominated by top-down mechanisms, with little accommodation for regional priorities (Nuraini & Pramudya, 2020). This centralization widened disparities between the central government and resource-rich

regions such as Aceh, Riau, and Papua, where communities perceived injustice in resource distribution and administrative authority. Research on late New Order political dynamics demonstrates that grievances over centralization stimulated the resurgence of federalism discourse, expressed as a protest against inequality rather than a call for fragmentation (Hendrawan, 2021). Thus, centralized governance practices intensified regional dissatisfaction and contributed to the persistence of disintegration narratives.

The Reformasi era brought significant political change, enabling greater democratization, regional autonomy, and public participation. Nonetheless, the liberalization of political expression also introduced new risks to national cohesion. Contemporary studies reveal the rise of identity politics, social polarization, and digital fragmentation as prominent forms of disintegration threats (Rozi, 2022). Separatist movements in Aceh and Papua continued to draw strength from historical grievances and socio-economic disparities, illustrating that decentralization alone could not address deep-rooted structural inequities (Danugroho et al., 2023; Li & Zheng, 2024; Zulham, 2022). National integration thus became not only a matter of territorial management but also of cultivating public trust, social justice, and collective identity in a democratizing society. Regional inequality persisted, particularly in eastern Indonesia, where limited access to infrastructure, education, and health reinforced perceptions of institutional neglect (Tifa Foundation, 2022). These findings suggest that political reforms must be accompanied by improvements in governance, equity, and inclusion.

Further understanding of center–region relations emerges from analyses of disaster governance. Evidence indicates that the central government’s responses to major crises strongly shape public perceptions of state legitimacy. Case studies show that disaster responses during the late New Order and early Reformasi periods were characterized by procedural rigidity and excessive centralization, restricting regional governments’ capacity to act effectively. Research on disaster events in Aceh during the 1990s shows that delays in emergency assistance and bureaucratic obstacles reinforced local perceptions of structural injustice, strengthening support for local political movements (Mahyuddin, 2019). Similar patterns were documented in disaster responses in North Sumatra and West Sumatra, where centralized procedures hindered rapid relief mobilization and generated widespread dissatisfaction (Yulismar & Damanik, 2021; Rasyid, 2020). These findings underscore that crisis mismanagement can exacerbate tensions in center–region relations, especially in regions with histories of contestation.

The hydrometeorological disaster that struck Aceh, North Sumatra, and West Sumatra in late 2025 provides a contemporary illustration of how governance failures intersect with political narratives on autonomy and federalism. Reports indicate that the central government’s reluctance to designate the event as a national disaster prompted significant public criticism and heightened perceptions of administrative insensitivity (Antara News, 2025). Delayed and uneven distribution of relief resources fueled frustration, particularly in already vulnerable communities. In Aceh, where memories of marginalization remain strong, the inadequate response reignited debates over the need for greater regional autonomy, mirroring earlier periods where governance failures intensified calls for alternative state configurations. These developments highlight how contemporary crises revive historical grievances and reinforce broader narratives of justice, recognition, and inclusion.

The analysis shows that Indonesia’s national integration remains most vulnerable at the intersection of historical grievances, structural inequality, and governance shortcomings. Literature on national identity, conflict, and integration emphasizes that inclusivity, dialogue, and justice are essential for sustaining cohesion (Ulil Albab Institute, 2023; Journal Unnes, 2024). When state policies are perceived as unresponsive or unjust especially during crises public dissatisfaction can intensify demands for autonomy or alternative governance structures. The 2025 disaster response illustrates that governance

lapses are not isolated administrative issues but are deeply linked to long-standing socio-political dynamics.

Although decentralization during the Reformasi era aimed to correct inequities of New Order centralization, structural tensions persist in Indonesia's governance framework. Public perception surveys reveal that while the unitary state continues to symbolize stability and national identity, centralized practices raise concerns regarding fairness and equality (Dini & Astana, 2023). Thus, the challenge lies not in choosing between a unitary or federal system but in developing governance mechanisms that balance national cohesion with meaningful regional autonomy. This requires institutional reforms alongside improvements in responsiveness, accountability, and participatory governance.

Overall, the findings suggest that Indonesia's integration challenges endure due to entrenched structural inequalities, unresolved historical legacies, and governance practices that have not fully adapted to contemporary realities. These factors continue shaping public perceptions and political discourse, especially during crises. Linking historical analysis with contemporary events such as the 2025 disaster provides a comprehensive understanding of the enduring forces influencing Indonesia's national integration.

Decentralization, Federalism Discourse, and the Challenge of National Cohesion

The findings of this study position Indonesia's national integration challenges within a comprehensive historical, institutional, and socio-political framework spanning from the early post-independence period to the present. This discussion contextualizes these findings by engaging with recent theoretical debates on state formation, decentralization, and identity politics, prioritizing literature published within the last five years for journal articles and the last decade for scholarly books. The enduring tension between central authority and regional actors reflects not only the legacy of colonial constitutional engineering but also an ongoing struggle to reconcile unity and diversity in a pluralistic society.

Recent scholarship on federalism and state formation underscores that the sustainability of federal systems depends on internal legitimacy and negotiated political consensus rather than external imposition (Burgess, 2020; Hueglin & Fenna, 2015). Indonesia's experience with the Republic of the United States of Indonesia (RIS) supports this theoretical argument, as historical and archival analyses indicate that the federal structure lacked sociological legitimacy and was significantly shaped by colonial intervention (Rahadian, 2020). Furthermore, contemporary studies suggest that externally imposed or failed federal systems tend to produce long-term political stigma, reinforcing public skepticism toward federalism as a viable governance alternative (Erk & Anderson, 2019). This perspective helps explain why federalism in Indonesia persists primarily as a symbolic political discourse rather than a practical constitutional option.

The centralization of authority during the New Order period can be examined through contemporary theories of developmental states and centralized governance. Studies over the past decade demonstrate that while centralized systems may generate short-term political stability, they often result in long-term regional inequality and governance inefficiencies (Kohli, 2012; Slater, 2018). Empirical evidence from Indonesia aligns with these theoretical insights, indicating that excessive centralization limited regional participation and intensified grievances in resource-rich regions (Mulyadi, 2019; Hendrawan, 2021). More recent governance literature further highlights that centralization without adequate accountability mechanisms can erode institutional trust and amplify perceptions of injustice (Grindle, 2017). These findings reinforce the argument that the New Order's governance model contributed to the structural conditions underlying renewed

federalism discourse and persistent regional dissatisfaction.

In the Reformasi era, decentralization policies were introduced as a corrective response to centralized governance. However, contemporary research indicates that the outcomes of decentralization are highly contingent upon institutional quality and local political dynamics (Faguet, 2014; Hadiz, 2010). Recent studies reveal that decentralization in Indonesia has produced uneven results, with some regions benefiting from increased autonomy while others experience elite capture and persistent developmental disparities (Buehler, 2016; Aspinall & Berenschot, 2019). These findings are consistent with this study's results, which demonstrate that decentralization alone is insufficient to resolve structural inequalities and historical grievances. Without robust accountability systems and inclusive governance mechanisms, decentralization may reproduce inequalities at different administrative levels.

The persistence of separatist sentiments in regions such as Aceh and Papua underscores the importance of addressing underlying socio-economic and identity-based grievances. Recent conflict literature emphasizes that sustainable peace requires not only institutional arrangements but also recognition of local identities, equitable development, and inclusive political processes (Mac Ginty, 2016; Richmond, 2020). Empirical studies on Aceh and Papua indicate that infrastructure development alone cannot address long-standing grievances related to marginalization, identity, and historical injustice (Li & Zheng, 2024; Zulham, 2022). These findings reinforce the argument that national integration must extend beyond administrative reforms to encompass broader socio-political dimensions.

The significance of disaster governance as a driver of political dissatisfaction has gained increasing attention in recent scholarship. Studies published in the last five years emphasize that disaster response serves as a critical test of state capacity and legitimacy, particularly in decentralized and developing contexts (Tierney, 2019; Pelling, 2021). Ineffective disaster management can exacerbate existing inequalities and reinforce perceptions of marginalization, especially in historically contested regions (Kelman, 2020). The findings of this study, particularly those related to the 2025 disaster in Sumatra, support this perspective by demonstrating that delayed or inadequate responses can intensify distrust toward central authorities (Antara News, 2025; Mahyuddin, 2019; Yulismar & Damanik, 2021; Rasyid, 2020).

Moreover, recent governance literature highlights that public trust is shaped not only by institutional arrangements but also by the effectiveness and responsiveness of policy implementation (Rothstein, 2021). In Indonesia, failures in disaster response are often interpreted not merely as administrative shortcomings but as indicators of broader structural injustice. This perception is particularly pronounced in regions with historical grievances, where governance failures can rapidly translate into political narratives advocating greater autonomy or systemic transformation.

The resurgence of federalism discourse following the 2025 disaster can also be interpreted through contemporary theories of political identity and narrative construction. Scholars argue that political discourse is shaped by collective memory and historical narratives, which are often reactivated during periods of crisis (Anderson, 2016; Smith, 2016). In the context of Aceh, historical experiences of resistance and autonomy continue to inform present-day political narratives, making federalism a recurring theme during periods of dissatisfaction (Zulham, 2022). This indicates that political narratives are dynamic, evolving in response to current conditions while remaining rooted in historical experiences.

Recent studies on decentralization and regional governance in Southeast Asia further emphasize that effective center–region relations depend on balancing fiscal autonomy, administrative capacity, and political inclusion (OECD, 2020; World Bank, 2022). Indonesia's experience demonstrates that while decentralization has enhanced administrative flexibility, significant challenges remain in achieving equitable resource

distribution and effective intergovernmental coordination. These structural issues continue to influence regional perceptions of inequality and shape political behavior.

This discussion also identifies a critical gap in existing literature: the limited integration of historical analysis with contemporary governance challenges in explaining national integration dynamics. While many studies focus either on historical constitutional developments or on modern governance issues, relatively few integrate these perspectives to provide a comprehensive understanding of how past and present interact. This study contributes to addressing this gap by demonstrating that contemporary phenomena, such as disaster governance, cannot be fully understood without considering historical legacies of centralization, federalism, and regional inequality.

Overall, the discussion confirms that Indonesia's national integration challenges are deeply embedded in structural inequalities, historical legacies, and evolving governance practices. Contemporary scholarship supports the view that effective integration requires not only institutional reform but also improvements in governance quality, social justice, and political inclusivity. By aligning empirical findings with current theoretical perspectives, this study offers a more comprehensive framework for understanding national integration as a dynamic and multidimensional process in Indonesia.

CONCLUSION

This article concludes that Indonesia's national integration problem is shaped by the continuing interaction of historical constitutional legacies, structural inequality, and contemporary governance practices. The long-standing tension between federalism and unitarism remains relevant because it reflects deeper questions about justice, participation, and the distribution of power between the center and the regions. Although Indonesia has maintained a unitary constitutional structure, centralized governance practices have repeatedly generated dissatisfaction and strengthened symbolic federalism discourse, particularly in regions with memories of marginalization.

The study also shows that decentralization has improved regional autonomy in formal terms, but it has not fully resolved the substantive inequalities that affect public trust and political cohesion. In this regard, the 2025 hydrometeorological disaster in Sumatra serves as a contemporary example of how governance failure can revive historical grievances and intensify demands for greater autonomy. National integration therefore depends not only on constitutional form, but also on the quality of governance, the fairness of development, and the responsiveness of institutions.

A durable strategy for Indonesian national cohesion must go beyond the formal defense of the unitary state. It requires inclusive governance, equitable center-region relations, stronger institutional trust, and policy responsiveness during both ordinary administration and crisis situations. Future studies may extend this discussion through comparative regional analysis or by exploring how digital political mobilization reshapes contemporary disintegration narratives.

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